

## **Book Review**

**Title:** *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece*

**Author:** Martha L. Rose

**Publisher:** University of Michigan Press, 2003

Cloth, ISBN: 0-472-11339-9

**Cost:** \$42.50 USD

**Reviewer:** Mark Sherry

Martha Rose analyzes a wide range of Ancient Greek material in *The Staff of Oedipus*, focusing on “physical disability” (but excluding dwarfism and epilepsy). In the first chapter, “The Landscape of Disability”, Rose stresses that although there were terms for specific impairments (such as blindness or deafness), there was no Greek equivalent for the modern overarching term “disability”. People with physical disabilities were not routinely segregated, excluded or marginalized from the community. Chapter Two, “Killing Defective Babies”, challenges the idea that disabled children were regarded as abhorrent and were routinely left to die in Ancient Greece. Rose suggests that there is scant information about such “exposure” of any baby – disabled or not – in Ancient Greece, and that “sweeping conclusions” are unwarranted in the light of this “scant evidence” (p.81).

Chapter Three, “Demosthenes’ Stutter”, discusses speech impairments (including stuttering, communication impairments associated with developmental disabilities and age-related speech impairments). Rose admits that “we have no direct testimony from anyone with a speech disorder” but nevertheless suggests that each case of speech impairment was separately negotiated by the individual and the community. Chapter Four, “Croesus’ Other Son: Deafness in a Culture of Communication” suggests that deafness was not seen as a sensory impairment, but instead an impairment of reasoning and intelligence. The chapter begins with an etiology of deafness, then speculates on the differences in the social experiences of people with mild, severe and pre-lingual hearing loss. In “Degrees of Sight and Blindness”, Chapter Five, Rose argues that the Greek notions of blindness were very different from contemporary understandings. “One saw, even if only a little, or one did not see. Either condition could be reversed in an instant. No one in the Greek world was immune from blindness” (p.92). A brief conclusion highlights three themes: the notion of “physical disability” was foreign to Ancient Greece; physically disabled people were banned from very few social roles, and communities integrated physically disabled people into a wide range of social, economic and military roles.

My main criticism of this book is that Rose occasionally seems to have engaged in precisely the behavior which she often critiques: imposing modern perspectives on the material she analyzes. The most obvious example of this practice is the way she divides experiences of disability into (modern?) diagnostic categories, such as “speech

impairment". But she also blends historical material with ill-fitting contemporary material, such as a contemporary American narrative about the intersection of race and disability, and a modern advertisement from the Stuttering Foundation of America. Nevertheless, the book does illuminate an unexplored area (disability in Ancient Greece) and it will particularly appeal to those interested in disability within historical and cross-cultural contexts.