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In May 2022, the Barcelona-based artist Manuel de Aguas was fired from his job. He was fired because his sensory organs – which he understood to be an integral part of his own body – were visible at work. The organs were ‘Weather Fins’ which he had been developing at the Cyborg Foundation since 2017, and had had transplanted into his body in 2020. The Weather Fins allowed him to transmit variations in temperature, humidity and atmospheric pressure into his skull – a form of sensory experience. The dismissal of de Aguas from his job was not against the law. There is currently no protection in the law for those who use new sensory organs (sometimes called ‘synthetic organs’) to augment their senses.

But the law does protect some users of synthetic organs. In the UK, Neil Harbisson wears a device that he calls ‘Eyeborg’. Harbisson lives with a condition known as achromatopsia, a form of what is more commonly called ‘colour-blindness’ which means he sees in shades of grey. Eyeborg, a device he has implanted into his body, converts colours into soundwaves and transmits them to his inner ear as a series of vibrations. “Each colour has a specific frequency that I can hear because of the Eyeborg,” he explains (Newitz, 2013, non pag). Unlike de Aguas, Harbisson does have a kind of legal protection – in some circumstances – around wearing his synthetic organs. He is wearing them visibly in his passport photo, having won a campaign in 2004 to have his cyborg rights recognised after the Home Office originally denied his passport application on the basis that his Eyeborg was visible.

We might compare these two examples of synthetic organs to the two mythological examples of assistive technology that bookend Jane Draycott’s *Prosthetics and Assistive Technology in Ancient Greece and Rome*. The first recorded ancient Greek example of prosthesis is, Draycott points out in the introduction to her book, the ivory shoulder that the gods craft for Pelops after he is pieced back together from the stew that his father Tantalus has made out of his body. And the book closes with another example of a body part crafted in a myth: the wings that Icarus uses to fly too close to the sun and by means of which he meets his untimely death. The ivory shoulder, in Draycott’s argument, is an example of prosthesis, because it serves to restore a functional limitation that results from an impairment (in this case, the fact that Pelops’ shoulder is missing because it has been eaten by Demeter, the only one to partake in the stew that Tantalus served). Icarus’ wings on the other hand serve to *augment* his body, making it capable of something that normate human bodies are not usually capable of – flying. Like Harbisson’s Eyeborg, Pelops’ new body part serves to counteract a functional limitation, whereas Icarus’ wings – like de Aguas’ Weather Fins – serve to augment a body that is otherwise functioning “normally”.

I place the word “normally” into inverted commas here, because I want to highlight the fact that disability studies usually gives this term a wide berth, preferring instead the term ‘normate’ which carries within it the notion that the conditions for normality are socially constructed (and temporally, as well as societally, specific). Draycott is cautious about this constructed normality too, citing Emma-Jayne Graham’s well-made point that the “normal body of the Roman world was one that was far from completely able, far from modern concepts of ‘normal’... disparity was actually the norm” (Graham, 2013, 258) early on in her first chapter (44). But by the end of the book she enforces the distinction between the kind of assistive technology Pelops uses and the kind that Icarus uses, with one recovering for Pelops the normate function of his body and the other providing Icarus with a non-normate ability (or a super-ability).¹

¹ See Schalk (2016) on the ‘super-crip’ trope for further context here.

The question that drawing this distinction poses is, in my view, a fascinating one. Is there a meaningful difference between functional limitations that come about through disablement and those that result, to use the terms Draycott uses of Icarus, from “natural limitations (175)? Is disability somehow an *unnatural* limitation? In almost every chapter, Draycott makes reference to the fact that many prostheses were buried with their wearers, indicating that they were considered not simply a grave good but an integral part of the deceased human’s body. Do prostheses assist their users in restoring ‘normal’ function – as the distinction between Pelops’ shoulder and Icarus’ wings seems to suggest – or in becoming integral to the bodies of their wearers, can assistive technologies query whether there really is such a thing as a ‘normal’ body?

I begin with this provocation not because I intend it in any way as a slight on Draycott’s monumental achievement in this book. Had I been concerned to *prove* to readers that they ought to engage with this work, I would perhaps have started more conventionally by singing the book’s praises. And those praises would have been plentiful. Draycott’s study is wide-ranging, encompassing an ancient world that goes beyond the traditional temporal and geographic boundaries of Greece and Rome and fills a gap in scholarship that has gone unexplored for far too long. But I doubt that readers will need any encouragement to read what is a fascinating study, meticulously carried out, and written with a keen sensitivity for future research and pedagogical uses (with a series of tables, for instance, collecting examples of prosthesis – pages 32-36 – that are astonishing in their generosity to future researchers on this topic). I begin with a reflection on this question about the persistence of ideas of normalcy because I think Draycott’s book highlights something that ancient disability studies is continuously grappling with: is it possible for ancient disability studies to avoid defaulting to positioning the normate body at the centre of its investigations?

This is the first of two big questions that I think Draycott’s volume usefully poses. The second is to do with the problem of evidence. A refrain throughout the book is that there is very little bioarchaeological, material or textual evidence for prosthesis in ancient Greece and Rome (though the evidence for amputation is more abundant). There are mythical narratives that engage with ideas of prosthesis and living prosthesis – like the example of the girls / robots with which Hephaistos augments his body’s functionality – but these have very limited uses for the study of prosthesis in the real lives of ancient people.

And where myth outweighs real-life evidence, bodies start to speak symbolically, with dangerous consequences. We begin to attribute narrative to physical difference as *if* we were interpreting myth. The amputated thumb of Theron of Thessaly becomes proof of how deeply he felt his feelings of desire for his beloved. Dionysius Skytobrachion (‘with an arm of leather’) becomes someone named for the fact that he wrote so much, rather than for the simple fact that he wore an arm made of leather. Facial difference becomes the telling detail that informs us that a young man has been visited – and had his sensory organs stolen – by a passing band of witches. It is easy to see how these narrative readings of bodies could encourage stigma to be directed at those who live with disabilities and physical differences. One of the enduring difficulties of *doing* ancient disability studies is that so many of us who do it have been trained as readers of myths – which also form some of our most abundant bodies of evidence. How do we guard against importing mythical logics into our attempts to imagine the lives of real ancient people? How do we stop what we have learnt from myth from continuing to influence the way that bodies are made meaningful in the present?

The problem of scant evidence also produces a strange kind of paradox. As Draycott points out, gaps in the source material of antiquity point in two completely opposing directions. They suggest *either* that prostheses and assistive technology were so common and unremarkable that they were not worth commenting on, *or* that they were so seldom used that they did not form part of many ancient people’s lived realities. It is

easy to imagine that in the ancient world, where the idea of a 'normal' body might not have been held up as desirable the way that it has been in more recent history, prosthetics and assistive technology might not have seemed worth commenting on because they were simply a much more mundane aspect of everyday life. But it is much more difficult, having read Draycott's excellent book, to imagine a situation where scholars in the modern world could return to considering this topic not worth investigating ever again.

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