

# Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity and Classics

---

Volume 1 *Imperial Women*  
Issue 1

Article 8

---

4-24-2007

Review of Garland, Robert. 1995. *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Katrina E. York  
*Macalester College*, [kyork@macalester.edu](mailto:kyork@macalester.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/classicsjournal>

---

## Recommended Citation

York, Katrina E. (2006) "Review of Garland, Robert. 1995. *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.," *Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity and Classics*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/classicsjournal/vol1/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity and Classics* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

Garland, Robert. 1995. *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

*Reviewed by Katrina E. York*

In this ambitious volume, Robert Garland tackles the issue of deformity in the ancient world. He successfully approaches the issue from varied angles, drawing on as many different sources as he can, including poetry, drama, medical treatises, histories, mythology, and art. In his own words,

my primary objective is to analyse how, through public rituals, social institutions, myth, literature and art, the Greeks and Romans utilized deformity for a variety of social ends, and, albeit in a marginal sense, accommodated it within their ranks (xii).

To be certain, despite a lamentable bias against the Romans and a tendency to overlay the present into the past, Garland does an admirable job of addressing a difficult subject. This book is an excellent source for a basic introduction into the realities of the deformed and disabled in the Graeco-Roman world.

The introduction of the work acknowledges the “constraints upon the sophistication and accuracy” of Garland’s study (8). He cites the lack of a solid definition for disability and deformity in ancient sources as a problem, explaining that often the two terms cannot be separated, as one may indicate or even cause the other. The lack of a highly precise vocabulary to describe particular cases of deformity or disability also complicates Garland’s analysis, as often the modern reader is left with only a general impression of what ailment is being discussed by an ancient author. Another complication arises in that the incidents or descriptions of the disabled are often so case specific as to make predictions of general cultural attitudes

problematic. The final constraint reminds the readers that members of the “able-bodied majority” wrote all of the surviving sources, skewing the data to their particular perspective.

Throughout the book, Garland also uses modern statistics and parallels to shed light on ancient conditions. In retrojecting modern statistics onto the ancient world, he is attempting to shed at least a little light on questions regarding the frequency of congenital deformities, the average age of non-congenital disabilities, and other mathematically determined questions. The assumption he is making—that genetic and environmental factors were similar enough in ancient times to make modern statistics viable—is monumental, and not necessarily supported by his text. Nevertheless, his point is valid when he states, “although we lack statistics, we cannot wholly escape their influence on our own thinking” (xi). This is true. To import the number and typology of modern disabilities into the past also risks importing modern perception of those disabilities into the past. When utilizing Garland’s work, the reader must be vigilant enough to ensure that his own perceptions do not become entangled with the interpretation of the ancient sources.

The book is organized into ten chapters, each of which is divided into smaller, essentially discrete sections. Greek and Roman materials are most often separated, reflecting the disparity between the responses of the two groups. Garland notes;

The inclusion of Greek and Roman materials, moreover, is in no way intended to be suggestive of evolution, even though the difference between the two is at times striking. In general, it seems that the Greeks were far less hostile towards, and fearful of, major *terata* [serious deformations] than the Romans (3).

Indeed, throughout the volume Gardner betrays a more sympathetic reading of the Greeks than the Romans. For instance, in a section dealing with the deformed as scapegoats

among the Greeks, he goes to great lengths to explain away evidence stating that the purification ritual ended in the death of the deformed victim (23-26). No such lengthy or creative vindication is ever devoted to a Roman source. Romans are generally characterized as a society that “delighted in inflicting pain on all manner of helpless persons” or “relished witnessing the sufferings and humiliations of others with the same kind of intensity as other societies crave hallucinatory abandon” (58). This blatant bias will cause Romanists to view his interpretations with some suspicion, and justly so. At times the book comes perilously close to the well-established sport of Roman-bashing, especially in the conclusions to the chapters, when he makes the contrasts between his Greeks and Romans most explicit. Often in his desire to portray the Greeks as at least a little nicer than the Romans, he seems to forget that all Greeks were not Athenians, and despite the prevalence of Athenian sources, they cannot be implied as speaking for all Greek cultures.

In his first chapter Garland addresses the issue of the prevalence of disability in the ancient world. He projects modern statistics backward into the Graeco-Roman world to estimate the frequency of infants born with congenital defects in an effort to compensate for the marked lack of evidence of congenital deformities found in archaeological remains. The reasons and procedures for the exposure of such infants are also explored in this chapter. The postnationally deformed and war veterans are discussed separately. Garland notes that in societies where harsh physical exertion was the norm, as were poverty and malnutrition, most people would have experienced some form of disability as they aged. The quality of life after acquiring such an affliction depended largely on the wealth and social status of the afflicted. Scapegoat rituals

among the Greeks are also discussed, and the likelihood of the ugly to be targeted by a community in times of crisis.

Garland discusses the possible lives of the disabled in chapter two. Topics touched upon include social disdain, employment, and familial care. Emperor Claudius and King Agesilaos of Sparta enter briefly into the discourse as notable exceptions to the general trend of social isolation for the deformed. Athenian social security is mentioned as well, being contrasted with the noted absence of any such system in the Roman world, despite a possible allusion by Seneca.

Chapter Three examines the Roman imperial period, exploring the fascination Roman emperors, and Roman elite, exhibited to the deformed. Also addressed is the characterization of the emperor himself as something monstrous—exemplified by the cosmological freckles of Augustus or the dreadful appearance of Claudius. The conclusion of the chapter provides Garland another opportunity to contrast the Greeks and Romans, once more finding the Romans the less humane of the two societies.

Deformity and divine will are explored in the fourth chapter. Garland delves into the ideas of divine punishment, the exclusion of the deformed from religious participation, and the perceived importance of birth omens among both the Greeks and Romans. The presence of the lame god Hephaestus sparks a short discussion, highlighting the outcast nature of the divine artisan and the ways in which his conception, birth, and exposure are manifestations of philosophy.

Garland considers the humor attached to the marginalized in society in his fifth chapter. The section opens with a discussion on theories of laughter, finding that in both modern and ancient society laughter is often centered on the derision of a group, and spawned by fear or a desire to oppress. Garland addresses the actual propriety of these jokes in several sections

through the chapter, finally concluding that the humor against the disabled was a form of drunken mirth, and likely frowned upon as bad taste when the parties were sober.

The equation of deformity/disability with some form of moral failing is observed in chapter six. Rather than a cohesive overview of all instances where immorality and physical imperfections are equated, the chapter is comprised of a series of case studies. For example, Garland analyzes Polyphemus as he appears in Homer, Theokritos, and Ovid, finding his characterization to vary between comic, pathetic, and frightening, depending on the inclination of the narrative.

Chapter seven focuses on images of the deformed. Garland finds very few images of even minor disabilities in large-scale sculptural works, but a plethora of the genre in small works such as vases or grotesques. He separates categories, such as obesity, gibbosity, and cyclopean deformity, discussing each separately. His reading of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite sculpture is perhaps one of the finest passages in the book (119-120). Garland describes the figure as a sort of trick played on the viewer, arousing from one side the interest displayed towards a female figure, while evoking surprise, confusion, and revulsion as the viewer moves to the front of the work and discovers the deformity.

Ancient medical treatment of deformities and disabilities are described in the eighth chapter. Garland asserts that, for the majority of cases, Graeco-Roman medical writers had no interest in treating the deformed or disabled. He does, however, find evidence for the treatment of some ailments, such as clubfoot, hunchbacks, male pseudo-hermaphroditism, and unsightly blemishes. Three illustrations in the chapter help to clarify procedures that are difficult to comprehend in the written text. This is perhaps the most fascinating chapter of the book, as it

addressing in detail a subject and corpus of works not always well explored in most introductory courses to the Roman world.

Evidence of *teratology*, a study of the deformed, among the ancient scholars is sought in chapter nine. Garland finds that the study of the deformed was not valued in and of itself in antiquity, most often occurring as a side note in a larger discussion of a subject such as natural history or divination. He cites heredity and parental age as being seen as factors in the health of the offspring, so that slaves can never produce free children and young parents will produce defective and female infants. Other non-biological factors include environment, trauma, and the state of mind of the mother at conception. Garland devotes a large section to Aristotle's work on animals, seeing it as the most complete discussion of *teratology* in ancient times.

As he considers racial deformity as a phenomenon separate from discussions of actual deformities in ancient works, Garland addresses it in his final chapter. Analyses of different authors from Homer to St. Augustine comprise discrete sections as Garland explores the various attitudes towards and uses of the ethnically deformed throughout antiquity. According to Garland,

In antiquity reports of monstrous races served to justify and strengthen the already deep-rooted tendency towards ethnocentricity which the Greeks and Romans exhibited in their dealings with other races (179).

For similar reasons, Garland notes that women often are categorized as disabled in antiquity. He states that Greeks and Romans occasionally characterized themselves as deformed, most often in contrast to the mythical past or in effort to explain such things as the origin of the sexes. The conclusion of this volume works to connect modern attitudes towards the disabled with those of the Greeks and Romans. Citing eugenics, religion, and rehabilitation, Garland comes to the conclusion

[that] we live in a society which, if it no longer tends to regard its disabled either as portents or as objects of amusement, continues to view them as a problem, the curing of which is their final elimination. . . . Inasmuch as we still equate Truth with Beauty and Beauty with Truth, we lie in direct descent from our classical forebears (182).

This book is well suited for a wide audience. The sixty-four black and white plates provided by the author are immensely helpful in understanding what is, at times, a very visually centered argument. Undergraduate students with a basic knowledge of Graeco-Roman society will find Garland's explanations clear and helpful, although a lay reader may find themselves confused as to the nature or significance of certain terms. Medical terminology utilized for Greek, Latin and modern terms are listed in a helpful glossary before the endnotes, a fortunate concession to the frequent usage of such terms in the text. It is not so pedantic, however, that graduate and specialized scholars cannot enjoy the complexities of the argument. So long as the reader is willing to acknowledge the presence of a pro-Greek bias, this book would be an excellent source for a student wishing a basic introduction to ancient Graeco-Roman attitudes on deformity. For a scholar looking to do more in depth work on a specific condition, the questions raised in this volume will be very helpful in directing further inquiries.