1. Introduction

When, as historians of the ancient past, we try to decipher or classify the medical and psychological descriptors of disparate human characteristics, we find that we are clumsy foreigners, disoriented and barely literate. We only become nimble on the terrain—more familiar to us—of methodologies of discrimination: it is political, social and economic status, as always, that shapes categorisation.

Disparate embodiment was perceived in the Graeco-Roman world more in terms of one's station in life, represented ritually by one's place at the dinner table, than by the medical categorisation of disability of twenty-first century perception. The writings of the early imperial Roman satirists Juvenal, Martial and Petronius provide a vantage point from which to observe embodied disparity, especially when put side-by-side with their contemporaries (for our purposes, Pliny and Suetonius) and especially in terms of Roman receptions of Greek perceptions. These first- and second-century Latin works offer plentiful references to physical markings of disparity and to the framework of concepts expressed and exaggerated in the portrayal of satirical bodily disparity. Underlying concepts of disparity are also seen in Greek literature that preceded and followed the Latin satirists. If we imagine a simple timeline drawn from left to right, the Latin writings of the early imperial period mark the centre, and on each side of our focal point are two earlier and two later markers, all Greek. On the far left are the Homeric writings, followed by the fourth-century philosophical works. The right of the Latin focal point is marked on the timeline by two later points: the Greek philosophical compilations of the middle Roman Empire, and, finally, on the far right, the writings of the pagan Themistius, who was in the service of the Christian imperial court in the early fifth century. It comes as no surprise that we find both continuity and change regarding the perception of the mind/body
system between the eighth century BCE and the fifth century CE. Where continuity is concerned, the derision that any given term of insult evokes, as well as the broader ancient cultural context of disparity, rests on the underpinnings of the traditional Greek portrayal of the body and mind as one inseparable system. Therefore, we begin this historical overview with the Homeric writings, in which the φρυμν, or intellectual complex located roughly in one’s torso, could go awry and wreak havoc, causing temporary or permanent disparity. We then note that no major discernible conceptual shift had taken place in the Greek philosophical writings of the fourth century BCE. Next, we show that the conditions of parity and disparity were formed by flexible criteria, as seen clearly in Roman satire. Satire, in general, magnifies the amplitude of any given issue, leveraging a large amount of mockery from a seemingly small situation. Petronius, in his Satyricon, for example, evokes economic corruption, obsequiousness, and boorishness by referring to a natural defect, and he uses the same term for battle-ravaged legs. Eight centuries earlier, in the Iliad, Thersites was mocked for being mere infantry (a ‘private,’ as the English term it—evoking the ἰδιότη who lacks public status), had been given bandy legs and stooped shoulders along with clumsy social behaviour, all of which went with his reluctance to follow his superiors into battle and justified his beating, to the amusement of his fellow soldiers. Odysseus’s wiliness was enhanced by the naïveté of his sidekick Elpenor (“a young man, not too brave in war and not entirely sound of mind”), a crewman who, in crude slapstick, after being intoxicated, fell to his death from the roof on which he was sleeping. In the case of both Thersites and Elpenor, only context reveals the meaning of the defect. By the same token, any given defect of body, behaviour or cutlery mirrors social context.

A century after Petronius had died, Galen’s second-century treatises codify the concept of mind/body unity in scientific terms, explaining intellectual and moral defects as organic to the brain and body, and the second- to third-century Alexander of Aphrodisias codified the concept of the ἰδιότη and its relation to that of natural impairment in such a way that only he and his circle measured up in every way. Indeed, in all cases, the criteria of the literate elite—and, often, only of one’s own coterie within it—served as the standard measurement, determining the degree of everyone else’s political, social, or

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1 Homer, Iliad 2, 211–320. Here and throughout, we attribute the Iliad and Odyssey to a single author, Homer, as a matter of convention.

2 Homer, Odyssey 10, 552–560. See especially 552–553 for an assessment of Elpenor’s behaviour.