

STONES TO STARS: AUTISM AND THIS BOOK

If you know that your students are not neurotypical and you learn how to work with them then it could open up a world of opportunities.

Poppy Robbins, undergraduate student speaking on neurodiversity in Classics in March 2022¹

The present chapter is the first in a pair of chapters that build from the Introduction's broad outline of the scope and purpose of the book. It examines further the model of autism that the book follows. Its paired chapter (Chapter 3) then turns to how and why autistic children can relate to characters and episodes from classical myth, including – or especially – Hercules and his experiences. Teachers, or other professionals, who do not have time for a deeper dive, or who are already knowledgeable about autism, might skip to the next chapter. However, I would recommend at least a quick read of what follows, if only to enable readers to gain a sense of the concepts and perspectives that are shaping the lessons.

Introduction

Autism has been envisaged recently as “like a stone in the woods” which “few people bother to look under”.² For others, meanwhile, the analogy is not

¹ Susan Deacy, “Roehampton Students on Classics and Neurodiversity”, featuring Poppy Robbins and Lucy Head, *Asterion: Celebrating Neurodiversity in Classics*, April 2022, <https://asterion.uk/index.php/home/neurodiverse-classics-constructive-connections> (accessed 4 July 2022).

² Debbie Riall, *The Autism Resource Manual: Practical Strategies for Teachers and Other Education Professionals*, Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2022, xv, quoting Jamie, an autistic student aged fourteen.



Figure 15: Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Origin of the Milky Way* (ca. 1575), The National Gallery, inv. no. NG1313, photograph from The Yorck Project (2002), Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

of a world beneath, but above, to the stars – where each autistic person is a star in a multidimensional constellation.³

This book is concerned with how classical myth can resonate with the “stars” in this “constellation”, though it will return to the “stone” image as well. It presents lessons addressing particular dimensions of the autism constellation by focusing on Hercules. This character is one of the many “stars” in the “universe” of classical myth. He stands as an excellent image for the constellations

³ E.g., Caroline Hearst, “Does Language Affect Our Attitudes to Autism?”, *Autism Matters*, 8 January 2015, <https://www.autismmatters.org.uk/blog/does-language-affect-our-attitudes-to-autism> (accessed 27 April 2022); Fletcher-Watson and Happé, *Autism*, 40; Patrick Dwyer, “The Autism Constellation”, *Autistic Scholar*, 2 October 2020, <http://www.autisticscholar.com/the-autism-constellation> (accessed 28 April 2022).

metaphor for autism in view of his many astral connections, including his accidental creation – as a baby – of the Milky Way (from the Ancient Greek γαλαξίας [*galaxías*; galaxy], derived from γάλα [*gála*; milk]). According to a story told about the baby Hercules by the first-century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (*Historical Library* 4.9.6), the infant bit so hard on the nipple of the goddess Hera as she was nursing him that she pulled away in pain. As re-envisioned in Tintoretto's *The Origin of the Milky Way* of around 1575, the spurts of milk that Hercules did not manage to drink became the Milky Way (see Fig. 15). How Hera – who, as we shall see, is a dedicated enemy of Hercules – came to be nourishing him with her divine milk I shall come to later but suffice it to say that the story illustrates just one of the ways that this figure can appeal to what it can be like to experience life as a neurodivergent person.

The current chapter sets out the autistic dimensions I shall be covering. It explains the approach I shall be taking, and makes clear, too, what approaches I shall be steering away from.

Autism as Problem: Deficit Models

In short, I shall be steering away from approaches which see autism as posing a problem:

- ★ Sometimes, the problem is presented as lying with autistic people (“medical model”).
- ★ Sometimes the problem is said to be with society (“social model”).

Either way, there is thought to be something that needs to be made better, or even cured, autistic people⁴ or society, to make it more accepting of autism.⁵

When I began contemplating making contributions to autistic children's education in 2008 (please see the Foreword above for an account of why and how I started on this path), these two models above were prevalent. It was hard to think beyond them when the literature on autism tended to be framed

⁴ E.g., Steven K. Kapp, “How Social Deficit Models Exacerbate the Medical Model: Autism as a Case in Point”, *Autism Policy & Practice* 2.1 (2019), 3; Alan Jurgens, “Neurodiversity in a Neurotypical World: An Enactive Framework for Investigating Autism and Social Institutions”, in Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Nick Chown, and Anna Stenning, eds., *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*, Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020, 73.

⁵ E.g., Kapp, “How Social Deficit Models Exacerbate the Medical Model”, 4; Jurgens, “Neurodiversity in a Neurotypical World”, 73–74.

in terms of how hard life is for autistic people, and those around them. At this time, the emphasis tended to be on helping to reduce, or cure, certain behaviours and on where autistic people were supposedly deficient – for example, through being apparently unimaginative, lacking empathy, or incapable of feeling emotions.⁶ At this time, there was a sense as well of autism as:

- ★ **a disorder** from which someone suffers, as in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD);
- ★ **something a person has – and from which they might be divested:** as in “person with autism” or “child with autism”;
- ★ **a spectrum** into which all can be fitted – whether they are labelled “low functioning”, “middle functioning”, or “high functioning”, or whether they are considered to display traits commensurate with “classical autism” or with “Asperger’s Syndrome”;⁷ from such a perspective, to help an autistic person, a key step would be to work out how “autistic” they appear to be.⁸

One effect of the deficit models was that those autistic people, often girls and women, who were adept at putting on what the autistic author, musician, and entrepreneur Alis Rowe terms the “normal mask”⁹ – for example by masking autistic behaviours, or copying neurotypical behaviours – went undiagnosed.¹⁰

Such views are still present, as may be demonstrated by programmes geared towards improving autistic people’s behaviour. One such programme has been developed, using improvised theatre, by the director, producer, and actor Gary Kramer and the special education practitioner Richie Ploesch. Their book instructs practitioners and parents how to run the programme. It is full of imaginative games, including one where students create superheroes and others where they are encouraged to express their emotions. But it is still grounded

⁶ See Kapp, “How Social Deficit Models Exacerbate the Medical Model”.

⁷ Hearst, “Does Language Affect Our Attitudes to Autism?”; Lorcan Kenny, Caroline Hattersley, Bonnie Molins, Carole Buckley, Carol Povey, and Elizabeth Pellicano, “Which Terms Should Be Used to Describe Autism? Perspectives from the UK Autism Community”, *Autism* 20.4 (2016), 442–462.

⁸ Fletcher-Watson and Happé, *Autism*, 40.

⁹ Alis Rowe, *The Girl with the Curly Hair: Asperger’s and Me*, London: Lonely Mind Books, 2013, 37–41.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Cora Beth Fraser, “Introducing *Asterion*: A New Initiative Celebrating Neurodiversity in Classics”, *CUCD Bulletin* 50 (2021), <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2021/09/CUCD-Introducing-Asterion.pdf> (accessed 2 September 2021). Roehampton student Lucy Head discusses her diagnosis as an adult in Deacy, “Roehampton Students on Classics and Neurodiversity”. On girls and autism, see also Susan Deacy, “Best... Panel... Ever: Gendering Classical Myth for Children, Including Using Hercules – at FIEC 2019”, *Autism and Classical Myth*, 9 July 2019, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2019/07/best-panel-ever-gendering-classical.html> (accessed 30 June 2022).

in a deficit model of autism designed, in the authors' words, to "help individuals with social skills *deficits*".¹¹

Being diagnosed as autistic continues, too, to be regarded as something unfortunate – as a tragedy no less – for an autistic person and for their family.¹² As Danielle Shalet – an Education lecturer, Disability Coordinator and ACCLAIM network member – has commented:

[M]y partner was just diagnosed with ASD and his parents were no help at all during his assessment because they refused to accept that the child THEY raised could be autistic. [...] [T]o a parent having an autistic child can be seen as either their fault or a tragedy.

We suspect that our three year old may also be slightly autistic but whenever you tell a neurotypical person this may be the case all you get it "I'm so sorry." To us, it's not a tragedy.¹³

But – as the final words of Dani's comment illustrate – there are other potential responses too.

“Not a Tragedy”: The Neurodiversity Movement and the Autism “Constellation”

As long ago as the 1990s, the autistic self-advocate and academic Jim Sinclair was defining autism as a particular kind of world, one alien to non-autistic people but capable of being discovered if neurotypical people approach “without preconceptions” and “with openness”:

Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person – and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with. [...] Push for the things your expectations tell you are normal, and you'll find frustration, disappointment, resentment, maybe

¹¹ Gary Kramer and Richie Ploesch, *Improvised Theatre and the Autism Spectrum: A Practical Guide to Teaching Social Connection and Communication Skills*, Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2022, 1, emphasis added.

¹² See here Deacy, "Hercules: Bearer of Hope for Autistic Children?", 254–258.

¹³ Quoted in Susan Deacy, "Autism: It's NOT a Tragedy", *Autism and Classical Myth*, 30 March 2020, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2020/03/autism-its-not-tragedy.html> (accessed 18 July 2022).