

OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD

# OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

The Ancient Myths  
as Medicine for the Hardships  
of Life in Children's  
and Young Adults' Culture

Edited by  
Katarzyna Marciniak



# OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

“OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD” Series

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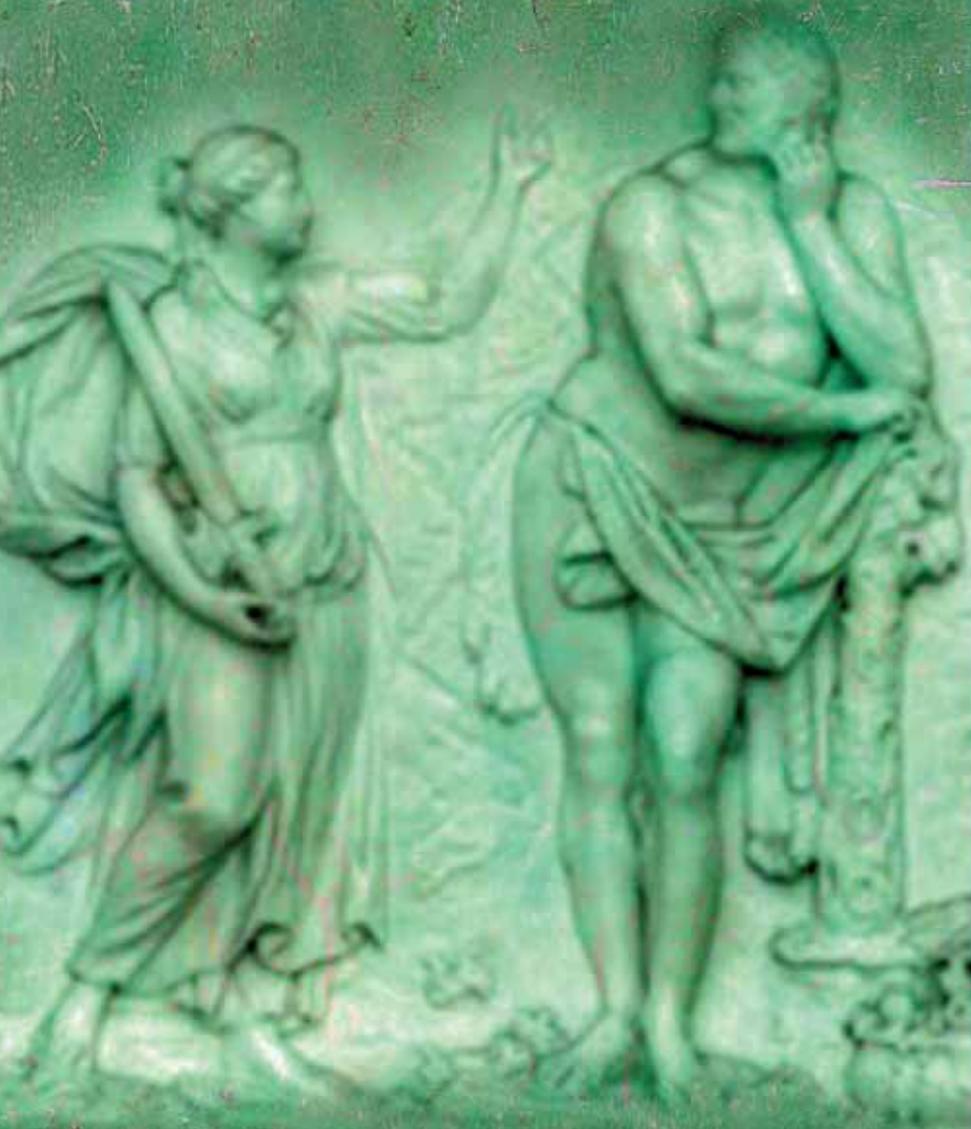
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PART III

Holding Out for a Hero...  
and a Heroine



## HERCULES: BEARER OF HOPE FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN?\*

Childhood is a mythical time: a time where the imagination can run free, a time of adventure, a time when anything might seem possible... Childhood can be a time of hardship, too – a time of not just the “most beautiful” experiences, but also the most terrible. I quote here from the booklet that accompanied the conference *Our Mythical Hope in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture... The (In)efficacy of Ancient Myths in Overcoming the Hardships of Life*, which brought myself and fellow researchers into Classics and children’s culture to Warsaw in May 2017.<sup>1</sup> The experiences of childhood can “provide or deprive us of a supply of Hope for years to come”, as the booklet – authored by the conference organizer, Katarzyna Marciniak – continues. My particular contribution to the conference was a paper on hope as it applies to a particular group of children – autistic

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\* This chapter has its roots in the paper I delivered in May 2017 at the conference *Our Mythical Hope in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture... The (In)efficacy of Ancient Myths in Overcoming the Hardships of Life*. Here, I made an initial case for the potential of Hercules as a topic for the first set of activities I was to create as part of the project *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*. I would like to thank my fellow participants for their comments, both in Warsaw during the conference and subsequently, including Helen Lovatt, Sonya Nevin, Edoardo Pecchini, and everyone who took an interest in my then still-emerging hopes that episodes involving Hercules might become a subject of activities for autistic children. In the years since then, I am thankful for the comments from specialists in areas such as Classics, special and inclusive education, dramatherapy and music education, including Tom Figueira, Katherine Leung, Leda Kamenopoulou, Lisa Maurice, Adam Ockelford, Anna Seymour, and Helen Slaney. Finally, I would like to thank Katarzyna Marciniak for the support and vision that has nurtured and anchored the hopes shared in this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> Katarzyna Marciniak et al., *Our Mythical Hope in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture... The (In)efficacy of Ancient Myths in Overcoming the Hardships of Life: Conference Booklet*, Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, 2017, [http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/files/OMH\\_Conference\\_Booklet\\_9.5.2017.pdf](http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/files/OMH_Conference_Booklet_9.5.2017.pdf) (accessed 15 July 2021).

children.<sup>2</sup> By that time, I had been building up a project on autism and classical myth for almost a decade, and I was in Warsaw to share my progress with a set of activities I was developing as part of a wider five-year project funded by the European Research Council (ERC), *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, which had begun several months earlier, in October 2016, to chart the place of Classics in children's and young adults' culture.

My project started out with a goal to "reach" autistic children through classical myth. This was after I learnt, during a meeting with a Special Needs teacher in a UK secondary school, that autistic children often enjoy classical myth. I began to consider why this might be the case, and whether I could contribute something to existing materials used by teachers: as someone whose interest in classical culture stems from their childhood, and who had been turning classical myth into an area of expertise throughout their career as an academic. I was not sure what that "something" could be at first. Discovering classical myth at the age of about ten was a formative moment in my childhood; it was my refuge, an interest that took me into a world at once vastly different from my own, and yet which "spoke" to me. In the wake of the meeting with the teacher, I began to wonder whether I could harness in some way my love of myth as something with many patterns, even rules, and yet as something elusive. I started contacting academics in several disciplines, including psychology and education, and also professionals working in various ways with autistic children, and I kept being encouraged to push forward. I started a blog, *Mythology and Autism*,<sup>3</sup> in early 2009 to report on my progress. I decided to begin blogging because I was aware that I had many other projects ongoing, but also that, through this medium, I could at least report sporadically on my progress while opening up my ideas to the ongoing self-critique that blogging fosters. In the first few years after 2009 – until the ERC-funded project began in 2016 – I did, indeed, blog only occasionally, often with lengthy gaps between

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use terms such as "autistic children" and "autistic people" rather than "children with autism", etc. I note the arguments in favour of descriptions which put the child first, before any condition, but terms such as "autistic child" convey better the conviction expressed in this chapter that autism cannot be separated from a person but is key to how they relate to, and experience, the world. On ways of talking about autism, see 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; "What Is Autism?", National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asd.aspx> (accessed 16 March 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Susan Deacy, *Mythology and Autism*, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.co.uk> (accessed 8 May 2020).

postings. But, what happened, too, was that specialists started to make contact with me and, by the time the funding bid to the ERC began, I had made valuable, and valued, contacts. I had also written around 20,000 words around aspects of autism, myth, and disability studies, including on the possibility of viewing stories associated with Perseus through an autistic lens, on the potential for the Aristotelean theory of catharsis in relation to autism activities, and on how the hero/monster metaphor might inform the quest for disruptive pedagogies in higher education. During this time, I also became a Departmental Disability Co-ordinator at the institution where I work, the University of Roehampton, London. The blog provided a forum for reporting on this new direction in my practice, including a role in organizing training for colleagues in supporting autistic students.

This current chapter develops the hope-themed exploration of autism and myth that I began in Warsaw in 2017. At that time, I had recently decided on the focus for a set of activities: the figure and adventures of Hercules.<sup>4</sup> Since then, I have been developing the activities, for children aged from approximately seven to eleven, of all levels of “functioning”,<sup>5</sup> though they can be adapted for other children. I have also been consulting with specialists and trialling the activities in pilot studies with children at a primary school with an autism unit. At the time of writing, I am continuing to share my unfolding ideas via my blog while also writing a book which presents the activities.<sup>6</sup> During the time I have been planning and developing the activities, my approach has been shifting from exploring how myth might “reach” autistic children to questioning what it, in fact, means to “reach” autistic people.

In this chapter, I shall explore the role of hope in the activities against a background of what hope, and specifically a “mythical” hope, might signify in connection to autism and to autistic children in particular. I shall also be framing my discussion in relation to the conference’s subtitle by looking at the efficacy of classical myth in dealing with the hardships children encounter. But, taking on board the bracketed “in” before “efficacies” in the title of the conference, I shall discuss whether myth might actually *contribute* to hardships, including myths

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<sup>4</sup> Because my key focus will be an eighteenth-century reception, produced at a time when the Roman name was used over the Ancient Greek “Herakles”/“Heracles”, this chapter will use the name “Hercules”, except where the Ancient Greek figure is specifically being referred to.

<sup>5</sup> On categorizations of autism, see, e.g., Concetta de Giambattista, Patrizia Ventura, Paolo Trerotoli, Mariella Margari, Roberto Palumbi, and Lucia Margari, “Subtyping the Autism Spectrum Disorder: Comparison of Children with High Functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome”, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 49.1 (2019), 138–150.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Deacy, *What Would Hercules Do? Lessons for Autistic Children Using Classical Myth*, ill. Steve K. Simons, “Our Mythical Childhood”, Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, forthcoming.

which involve Hercules, who is among the most problematic figures from classical myth – or perhaps is even *the* most problematic one – to present to children, any children, autistic or otherwise.<sup>7</sup> Hercules is the hero whose career is a career of victimizing others: from beasts in the wilds, to a succession of women in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* who encounter, sexually, his βία (*bía*; force, violence).<sup>8</sup> But, as I shall set out, Hercules is, also, a figure from classical mythology who can particularly “speak” to an autistic experience.

## Hope Lost?

Where hope is brought up in relation to autism, it is often linked to its absence or loss. In his *Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism*, Ron Suskind reflects on the hopes and dreams parents hold for their young children:

Presidents? Nobel Prize winners? Global celebrities? Super Bowl quarterbacks and prima ballerinas? *It could happen*. Or, more soberly, millionaire philanthropists or, at the very least, graduates of the finest colleges, [...] then graduate school stars, most-recognized professionals in their field.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of concerns over the suitability of Hercules for children, see Lisa Maurice, “From Elitism to Democratisation: A Half-Century of Hercules in Children’s Literature”, *Journal of Historical Fictions* 2.2 (2019), 81–101, esp. 86, 89–90, <http://historicalfictionsjournal.org/pdf/JHF%202019-081.pdf> (accessed 17 March 2020). A concern that Hercules might be unsuitable for autistic children was expressed to me by one parent of an autistic child who said that her child, who loves classical myth, dislikes Hercules because he is “mean”. Also, when a colleague mentioned my project to the grandparent of an autistic child, and commented that I was focusing on Hercules, the grandparent responded that she hoped that it would not be including anything violent, like the Hydra’s heads being cut off. However, even the encounter with the Hydra need not be received as something violent. Another colleague, a classicist, who was then working as a teaching assistant with preschool children, has told me that one of her pupils, whose behaviour was commensurate with autism, found the Hydra a reassuring image. After being read a picture book about Hercules’s adventures, she would keep turning between the illustration of the baby Hercules strangling serpents in his cot and the illustration of Hercules cutting off the Hydra’s heads. She regarded the snakes in the cot as little “Hydra babies” and wanted to go back and forth between the two images in order to reunite the babies with “their mummy”. For Hercules’ psychotherapeutic potential, see also Edoardo Pecchini’s chapter, “Promoting Mental Health through the Classics: Hercules as Trainer in Today’s Labours of Children and Young People”, 275–325.

<sup>8</sup> The *bía* of Hercules occurs at several points in this fragmentary work. At 1.22, reference is made to ἡδ’ ὄσσαισι] βίη Ἡ[ρακλῆος (“all those with whom the *bía* of Hercules”), and two named women, Auge (117.9) and Nikippe (133.12), experience this *bía*.

<sup>9</sup> Ron Suskind, *Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism*, London and New York, NY: Kingswell, 2014, 18.

Then he details the loss of such hopes for his son on the day he and his wife enrolled Owen at a school for disabled children and watched him interact with his new peers:

How many of these breathless expectations [...] constitute the traditional allotment? Best way to figure that is to extract them, one by one, and smash them in the corner. The pile is quite high. And that's what we do.<sup>10</sup>

As the autism-rights pioneer Jim Sinclair outlines in a landmark address from 1993, such responses are common:

Parents often report that learning their child is autistic was the most traumatic thing that ever happened to them. Non-autistic people see autism as a great tragedy, and parents experience continuing disappointment and grief at all stages of the child's and family's life cycle.<sup>11</sup>

Such "disappointment" and "grief" felt by parents of autistic children point to a family life seen to be shaped by hardship – hardship for the parents raising an autistic child and for the child themselves. Where hope remains, it is a desperate hope, in spite of the odds that appear to be stacked up against the child and their family. Such is the kind of hope expressed in the conversation Suskind recalls between himself and his older brother concerning the cost of various therapies for Owen:

"Worst case, we'll have to support him for the next fifty years and thirty years after we're dead."

He's already there.

"That worst case or likely case?"

"Somewhere in between, but we're hopeful."

Hmmm. He's not one to discount hopeful...

"Hope's not nothing," he says, quietly to his reflexively optimistic little brother. "Just tough to run the numbers on it, that's all."<sup>12</sup>

Autism is often discussed in terms of what is lacking on the part of an autistic person with regard to what are seen as deficiencies, and in how they seemingly

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Sinclair, "Don't Mourn for Us", Autism Network International, [http://www.autreat.com/dont\\_mourn.html](http://www.autreat.com/dont_mourn.html) (accessed 21 July 2019; originally published in *Our Voice* 1.3, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Suskind, *Life, Animated*, 26.

fall short in terms of behaviour and skills and in how they process emotions, and understand others. For instance, Lorna Wing, whose research transformed how autistic people have been regarded and supported, set out a “triad of impairments” comprising difficulties that cohere in anyone diagnosed as autistic. To be autistic, as defined by Wing, is to experience difficulties in social and emotional understanding, difficulties in how to communicate, and a lack of flexibility in thinking and behaviour.<sup>13</sup> More recently, among the characteristics of autism detailed in the current – fifth – edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5)*, the go-to handbook for diagnosing and managing psychological conditions, are “communication problems” and “difficulty relating to people, things and events” (emphases added).<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the life of an autistic child is often regarded as one of suffering and hardship. They might find it hard to read what others are feeling or experiencing. I say “might” because while there is a distinctive autistic way of being, each person’s “world” is distinctive, or, in the phrase that might be traceable to the autism advocate Stephen Shore, “[i]f you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism”.<sup>15</sup> For autistic people, the non-autistic “world” can be an alien place, with rules and customs that it takes efforts to understand; one might feel, like Temple Grandin, “an anthropologist on Mars”,<sup>16</sup> or, like Alis Rowe, as an “observer” of a world one can “study [...] but never be [...] part of”.<sup>17</sup> As Sinclair has put it, indeed:

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<sup>13</sup> See, esp., Lorna Wing, “Autistic Spectrum Disorders”, *British Medical Journal* 312.7027 (1996), 327–328, and Lorna Wing, *The Autistic Spectrum: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*, London: Robinson, 2002 (updated ed.; ed. pr. 1996).

<sup>14</sup> “What Is Autism Spectrum Disorder?”, American Psychiatric Association, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/autism/what-is-autism-spectrum-disorder> (accessed 17 January 2020).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., “Understanding Autism”, Autism Empowerment, <https://www.autismempowerment.org/understanding-autism/> (accessed 21 July 2019). On the distinctive learning experiences of each autistic person, see the emphasis on how there can never be a single recipe for how autistic education should be conducted in Stuart Powell and Rita Jordan, “Rationale for the Approach”, in Stuart Powell and Rita Jordan, eds., *Autism and Learning: A Guide to Good Practice*, London: Routledge, 2012 (ed. pr. 1997), 1–12. I return below to the metaphor of the autistic “world”.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, London: Picador, 1995; Steve Silberman, *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter about People Who Think Differently*, London: Allen and Unwin, 2015, 424–432; Temple Grandin and Richard Panek, *The Autistic Brain: Thinking across the Spectrum*, Boston, MA, and New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013; Thomas G. West, *Seeing What Others Cannot See: The Hidden Advantages of Visual Thinkers and Differently Wired Brains*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2017, esp. 69–90.

<sup>17</sup> Alis Rowe, *The Girl with the Curly Hair: Asperger’s and Me*, London: Lonely Mind Books, 2013, 117.

Each of us who does learn to talk to you, each of us who manages to function at all in your society, each of us who manages to reach out and make a connection with you, is operating in alien territory, making contact with alien beings.<sup>18</sup>

An autistic child might find it hard to pick up what others learn instinctively. It might be difficult for them to know what to do or say in any social situation. While their non-autistic peers develop skills at starting or maintaining a conversation, they might well remain silent or give only short or inappropriate responses. With developing a rapport with others being so hard, forming – and retaining – friendships can be a challenge. An autistic child might feel isolated from those around them, even though they might long for the company of others. What is more, alongside finding it hard to communicate with others, and to socialize, come other challenges, including experiencing difficulties in dealing with changes in routine and preferring set, repetitive routines. Making choices can likewise be a challenge for autistic children, whether the decision is over something seemingly big or small. Autistic children might also find it difficult to conceive of the future; as a result, envisaging how a particular thing they do or say might have long-term consequences might prove problematic. Indeed, recognizing that the present impacts on the future can be a difficult lesson for an autistic person. Added to this, for autistic children, understanding the “bigger picture” can be challenging, and they might zoom in on particular details instead.

Added to all the above, an autistic child’s experience of the world might be an intense one, due to heightened sensory experiences and finding it hard – or impossible – to filter out background noise. Being autistic can be like experiencing a recurrent panic attack, including coming out of needing to process lots of information in one go. It can be hard, too, to regulate emotions. An autistic person might not show the “appropriate” emotion, despite what they might be feeling. Indeed, it could be that they are feeling lots of things, and this could lead to an intense response, or a shutdown. The default emotion is often anxiety – and this can mask other emotions, like joy, or happiness. To be an autistic child can be to experience bewilderments, sensory overload, isolation, and frustration, which can, in some cases, lead to moments of violence against oneself or against someone else.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sinclair, “Don’t Mourn for Us”.

<sup>19</sup> On the challenges faced by autistic children, and autistic people more broadly, see, e.g., Powell and Jordan, “Rationale for the Approach”, 1–12. See also, from the perspective of an autistic person looking back on hardships experienced as a child, and on their experiences as a young adult

When an autistic childhood seems so beset with challenges, it is not difficult to see why the hope expressed by parents is often hope for a time when the child's behaviour stops appearing autistic – a time when, indeed, they are divested of autism or even cured. In relation to such a way of viewing autism, activities such as the ones I am developing might be understood as part of attempts to enable autistic children to rise above the hardships they face – to be able to understand others better, or to grasp how the present can turn into the future, for instance, or to manage the sensory overloads that can lead to anxiety, or even, meltdown. And, indeed, I am concerned with all the above – and with others of the hardships dealt with earlier in this chapter. But the activities I am developing are not coming from a view of autism as comprised of deficiencies and as made up of problems in need of solutions. The hope I am seeking is not hope for someone's autism to be made less "severe" or for someone to be somehow recovered from autism. The activities I am developing are geared towards supporting autistic children as they seek to engage with the world around them. The activities are also directed, however, towards exploring what it *is* to experience the world as an autistic child. They are informed by the shift from the "medical model" of disability, which sees disability as a disorder that affects particular individuals, to the "social model", from which perspective it is not disabled people who need to adapt to fit society – it is society which needs to change to accommodate disabled people.<sup>20</sup> Autistic children, when viewed in this way, need to be accommodated by a society which stops regarding them as deficient and as in need of interventions to enable them to "fit in". The hope I am going to explore for the rest of this chapter is for a better future for people who think and behave "differently".

## **“Autistic Kids Are Not Supposed to Do That”**

As Jim Sinclair says in the 1993 address, parents often experience grief when their child is diagnosed as autistic. But, Sinclair also says: "Don't mourn for us". Sinclair's address, delivered to non-autistic people, asks for autism to be

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and adult, Alis Rowe, *The Girl with the Curly Hair: Asperger's and Me*, and Alis Rowe, *The Girl with the Curly Hair: What I Have Learned about Life*, London: Lonely Mind Books, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Thomas Campbell, Fernando Fontes, Laura Hemingway, Armineh Soorenian, and Chris Till, eds., *Disability Studies: Emerging Insights and Perspectives*, Leeds: The Disability Press, 2008; Angharad E. Beckett, "Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy and Disability: Possibilities and Challenges", *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 17.1 (2015), 76–94.

regarded not as something to be treated or cured. A person cannot be divested of autism:

Autism isn't something a person *has*, or a "shell" that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism [...]. 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.<sup>21</sup>

As I said above, it is not easy for autistic people to understand the non-autistic "world". The reverse is true too. But there is hope: for discovery and tolerance and understanding, and for the possibility of fantastic journeys between the two "worlds". To quote Sinclair further:

Push for the things your expectations tell you are normal, and you'll find frustration, disappointment, resentment, maybe even rage and hatred. Approach respectfully, without preconceptions, and with openness to learning new things, and you'll find a world you could never have imagined.<sup>22</sup>

As well as detailing the lost hopes of a future for his son as a football star, lawyer, and so forth, Ron Suskind's memoir is about the hope that was kindled when Suskind realized that he had discovered, via his son's beloved Disney films, a gateway to Owen's "world". When Owen would repeatedly exclaim what sounded to his father like "Juicervose", he was not, as was initially thought, asking for juice, but was quoting the character Ursula's phrase "just your voice" from *The Little Mermaid* (1989). When Owen was seven, Suskind had the idea of picking up Owen's puppet of Iago, the villain's sidekick from *Aladdin* (1992) voiced by Gilbert Gottfried, and begin talking as Iago:

"So, Owen, how ya' doin'?" I say, doing my best Gilbert Gottfried. "I mean, how does it feel to be you!"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sinclair, "Don't Mourn for Us".

<sup>22</sup> On such a "world", cf. Ronnie Young's image of "Planet Asperger [...], where everything seems the same as earth, but nothing actually is" (*Asperger Syndrome Pocketbook*, Hampshire: Teachers' Pocketbooks, 2009, 8).

<sup>23</sup> Suskind, *Life, Animated*, 54.

And Owen responded: "I'm not happy, I don't have friends. I can't understand what people say". As Suskind continues, conveying the significance of this moment:

I have not heard this voice, natural and easy, with the traditional rhythm of common speech, since he was two.

So began a process of discovery for Suskind into what life was like for his son and how he was working through various experiences, including distressing ones, such as being bullied at school. On one occasion, by quoting lines from the sidekick Phil (Philoctetes) from Disney's *Hercules*, Owen showed such emotional awareness that a therapist, taken aback, commented: "[A]utistic kids are not supposed to do that".<sup>24</sup> Autistic children are often thought to be unable to show emotions, let alone to understand the emotions of others, and an ability to quote the words of others is often taken as either "scripting", that is, memorizing and then repeating lines without understanding them, or as echolalia, namely repeating words spoken by someone else, again without understanding their meaning.<sup>25</sup> Rather, via the medium of Disney characters, Owen could understand, process, and manage emotions.<sup>26</sup>

The example of Ron and Owen Suskind's discovery of a means for opening up a portal between the "world" of an autistic child and a non-autistic person eager to communicate with the child resonates with what I am seeking to do with the activities for autistic children. What happened between the Suskinds resonates on a more specific level, too, since one of the Disney characters who offered a means for Owen to communicate with his father and to deal with difficult experiences, was from *Hercules*. I am now going to turn from a sidekick, Phil, to Hercules himself, though retaining a focus not just on Hercules but also on those around him – above all, two women he meets at a strange place at the convergence of two roads.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 183.

<sup>25</sup> On "scripting", see Suskind, *Life, Animated*, 221. On echolalia and autism, see Laura Sterponi and Kenton de Kirby, "A Multidimensional Reappraisal of Language in Autism: Insights from a Discourse Analytic Study", *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 46.2 (2016), 394–405.

<sup>26</sup> On autism and emotions, see, e.g., Rebecca Brewer and Jennifer Murphy, "People with Autism Can Read Emotions, Feel Empathy", *Spectrum*, 12 July 2016, <https://www.spectrumnews.org/opinion/viewpoint/people-with-autism-can-read-emotions-feel-empathy/> (accessed 17 March 2020).

## “That Sounds Like Being Autistic”

For Suskind, the turning point came when he realized that his son had a rich, imaginative “world” as well as a perspective onto that other “world”: the “world” of his non-autistic family members, teachers, and therapists – and what provided that route into Owen’s world were Owen’s beloved Disney characters. The experiences Suskind relates correspond to what Sinclair was saying in the early 1990s, when perceptions of autism were still much more grounded in a “hardship” model and when the concept of an autism activist was a radical one.<sup>27</sup> As Sinclair outlines, there is a rich world of autistic feeling and being; this world might be hidden from others, but it is there and it is vibrant and complex. I now want to turn to where classical myth might be of use in pursuing the goal of providing what Suskind was able to open up, namely, a channel between Owen’s world and his own – not to “cure” his son, but to help foster Owen’s own distinctive experiences and interests, indeed, passions. By doing this I shall also respond to Sinclair’s invitation to approach an autistic “world” respectfully and without preconceptions, because the result will exceed anything “you could [...] have imagined”.<sup>28</sup>

In one regard, Hercules can speak to the aspects of autism I ran through under “Hope Lost?” above. The life of autistic children can be hard, as I have outlined. It can be hard to communicate or to process feelings, for example. To deal with “everyday” things can be anxiety- and, indeed, panic-inducing. If being autistic involves experiencing hardships, and whether a successful autism pedagogy is seen as one that helps children rise to the challenges of autism and function in wider society, then Hercules looks to be an eminently suitable figure for autistic children – one who can “speak” to the challenges they might face on a daily basis. For Hercules is typically the hero who does not quite “fit”. When he is in his own space, the space beyond society, he functions well, so well, indeed, that he achieves things that are beyond the abilities of anyone else. To perform these feats, he often acts alone, or sometimes with the assistance of others, his “sidekicks”, but always on his own terms and through constant hard work. For no sooner has he dealt with a particular challenge – how to defeat a lion whose skin is impervious to weapons, for instance, or how to deal with the Hydra, who grows new heads each time one is removed – he moves on to a new scenario which requires him to develop a completely new set of skills. Thus, the toil

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<sup>27</sup> On Sinclair as a pioneer autism advocate, see Silberman, *Neurotribes*, 432–441, 445–449.

<sup>28</sup> Sinclair, “Don’t Mourn for Us”.

of Hercules is never-ending. The life of the hero involves learning rules only to need to move to different challenges with their own rules.<sup>29</sup>

This aspect of Hercules ever needing to learn a world afresh can speak to an autistic experience of a life of hardship. So, too, can the experiences of Hercules when he moves from the wilds and into settled communities. In the spaces beyond the world of organized society, the world populated by fantastic beasts and divinities, Hercules carries out all he needs in order to succeed. But when he enters civilization, things can go wrong, sometimes terribly wrong. It is when he arrives from his labours to his family home in Argos, for instance, that he performs acts of murderous violence against his family members.<sup>30</sup> When I have shared the above aspects of Hercules with autistic people I have been consulting with, the response has been “that sounds like being autistic”.<sup>31</sup>

The potential for Hercules as a source of interest for autistic children is extensive as a means to address some of the sources of distress they may encounter, including a sense that their actions are beyond their control. What is more, myths of Hercules offer an opportunity for reflecting on how to make sense of the world, not least given that Hercules experiences what might be recognized as emotional distress and overload. Thus, the very acts of extreme violence that, as noted above, might be considered unsuitable in retellings of classical myth for children, can help in the recognition of what leads to emotional overload.

One goal of the activities is to draw from this potential of Hercules for autistic children by offering some ways to help children deal with hardships they might experience. It is this potential to cope with difficulties, indeed, that offers one form of hope, a hope for the alleviation of social pressures and anxiety that autistic children often feel. However, the activities are not only seeking to deal with autistic hardships. They are also seeking to speak to what it is to see and experience the world as an autistic child and to help offer a gateway, for non-autistic people, into that world.

Hercules is many things – there are so many different manifestations of Hercules that the potential uses of this figure are huge; perhaps they are even limitless. Hercules is the most widely represented and clearly delineated character from classical myth – a figure whose labours were the most popular of Ancient

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<sup>29</sup> On hardships faced by Hercules in classical myth, see, notably, Emma Stafford, *Herakles*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2012, 23–78.

<sup>30</sup> As portrayed in, e.g., Eur., *Her.*; Diod. Sic. 4.11.1–2; Apollod. 2.4.12.

<sup>31</sup> See Susan Deacy, “Autism and Classical Myth: Prof. Susan Deacy (Roehampton) Reports on a Public Engagement Project Supported by the ICS”, *Institute of Classical Studies*, 9 May 2019, <https://ics.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2019/05/09/autism-and-classical-myth/> (accessed 8 May 2020).

Greek myths and whose adventures in addition to these labours were extensive. Hercules is the great traveller, from his homeland of the Peloponnese to various other parts of mainland Greece, to the islands of Greece and other islands beyond the world known to humans, and to the world below – and in the end to the world of the gods. Hercules is a violent figure who rids the world of beasts, and also beast-like himself. He is also reflective, as the philosopher’s Hercules.<sup>32</sup> He is also more than solely the action figure. The “brute”, who uses a lyre to kill his music teacher,<sup>33</sup> is a music-maker who, for instance, plays the kithara or the lyre in the company of Athena.<sup>34</sup> And this most masculine of men is one who experiences the world as a woman, when he takes on the clothing and attributes of Omphale for a year, and Omphale, in turn, takes on his own attributes.<sup>35</sup> The classical material, then, offers many different versions of Hercules, including a feminine or a transgender Hercules. So, too, do the many postclassical representations of the hero – a hero who is also divine. As Alastair Blanshard outlines in a book exploring the “life” of this mythological figure, Hercules, who has “exercised a fascination for Western culture ever since the time of the Ancient Greeks [...] stands at the boundaries of our imagination”. What I am going to look at is how far the “we” who respond to Hercules can be autistic people. Blanshard also says that myths of Hercules “do far more than just recount amazing exploits”, for “they take us into the heart of the culture that celebrates them”.<sup>36</sup> Such a culture can be an autistic one. Hercules operates at the “boundaries of the imagination” and between worlds, literal and otherwise, sometimes resting and thoughtful, sometimes showing behaviour gendered as masculine,

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<sup>32</sup> On the philosophical Hercules, see Stafford, *Herakles*, 117–130.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., Apollod. 2.4.9; Ael., *VH* 3.32; Ath. 4.164.

<sup>34</sup> On the musical Herakles in the company of Athena, see Susan Deacy, “Herakles and His ‘Girl’: Athena, Heroism and Beyond”, in Louis Rawlings and Hugh Bowden, eds., *Herakles and Hercules: Exploring a Graeco-Roman Divinity*, Swansea and London: Classical Press of Wales, 2005, 37–50, esp. 40, with references.

<sup>35</sup> On Herakles/Hercules as a mythological figure with an identity that is varied, ambivalent, and paradoxical, see Deacy, “Herakles and His ‘Girl’”; Susan Deacy, “Heracles between Hera and Athena”, in Daniel Ogden, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Hercules*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, 387–394. On mythological flexibility, see, notably, Helen Morales, *Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007; Roger D. Woodard, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Alastair Blanshard, *Hercules: A Heroic Life*, London: Granta, 2005, xvii. See also Stafford, *Herakles*, the final section of which (pp. 201–244) offers glimpses into the rich variety of the post-classical receptions of Hercules. The project *Hercules: A Hero for All Ages*, directed by Stafford, will result in four edited volumes exploring trends in Hercules reception in particular genres, periods, and themes; see the project website: <http://herculesproject.leeds.ac.uk> (accessed 9 May 2020).

sometimes feminine,<sup>37</sup> and sometimes operating in society, sometimes beyond it: in mind or in person. Hercules – the outsider, the insider – can be a “hope bearer” for anyone who wants to understand what being autistic can involve.

And I *mean* anyone, not just someone with knowledge of classical myth. There can be a tendency among classicists to see Classics as some kind of gift for “the public”, including children, to make them better citizens, as though Classics were a privileged space that “we” open up to others. I do not want to perpetuate such a view of Classics. The Choice of Hercules can “speak” to contemporary receivers irrespective of what they might already “know” about classical myth.<sup>38</sup> This potential to speak to receivers of classical myth – regardless of existing knowledge about who or what Hercules is – can also help deal with one of the issues that prevails in receptions of Hercules, who has long been presented to children as a “worthy” topic not least to help impart an awareness of Classics and the “classical heritage”.<sup>39</sup> The world inhabited by Hercules is beyond the ordinary. This world has been much explored, but its rules are alien to everyone, with a result that no one needs to be disadvantaged, or advantaged. Or, because

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<sup>37</sup> As a diversely gendered figure, Hercules can relate not only to boys but also to autistic girls. Meanwhile, the gender fluidity often shown by Hercules is relevant to current research into gender dysphoria and autism. On autism and girls, see Barry Carpenter, Francesca Happé, and Jo Egerton, eds., *Girls and Autism: Educational, Family and Personal Perspectives*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2019. On gender dysphoria, see Elizabeth Hisle-Gorman, Corinne A. Landis, Apryl Susi, Natasha A. Schvey, Gregory H. Gorman, Cade M. Nylund, and David A. Klein, “Gender Dysphoria in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder”, *LGBT Health* 6.3 (2019), 95–100.

<sup>38</sup> On elitism and Classics, see, e.g., Paul Cartledge’s articulation of the issues in the late 1990s, “Classics: From Discipline in Crisis to (Multi-)Cultural Capital”, in Yun Lee Too and Niall Livingstone, eds., *Pedagogy and Power: Rhetorics of Classical Learning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 16–28. See also Frances Foster, “Classics, or, What’s in a Name?”, *Council of University Classical Departments Bulletin* 43 (2014), <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2015/02/Bulletin-43-2014.pdf> (accessed 17 January 2020). On classical reception studies and the move towards a more “democratic” Classics, see, notably, Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison, eds., *Classics in the Modern World: A Democratic Turn?*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013; Luke Richardson, “Teaching the Classical Reception ‘Revolution’”, *Council of University Classical Departments Bulletin* 46 (2017), <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2015/01/RICHARDSON-Revolution-Reception-Revolution.pdf> (accessed 21 July 2019). See, here, esp. Katarzyna Marciniak, “What Is a Classic... for Children and Young Adults?”, in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, “Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity” 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, 1–26. The growing body of literature on this topic includes the chapters in the aforementioned collection by Marciniak; Helen Lovatt and Owen Hodkinson, eds., *Classical Reception and Children’s Literature: Greece, Rome and Childhood Transformation*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> On such a “worthy” Hercules, see Maurice, “From Elitism to Democratisation”, 83–88. Maurice uses the term “worthy” in relation to Hercules receptions for children on pp. 84 and 86.

Hercules can speak especially loudly to an autistic experience, it may well be an autistic person who is especially tooled to explore the terrain of Hercules.

What is more, the key episode on which the activities are based is one that relatively few people know any longer. It was told in Antiquity, but not all that much, and it flourished from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, when it became the most widely represented element depicted in the life of Hercules, including with respect to the education of children, boys at least. Thus, the key focus will be on a moment which all audiences, autistic and non-autistic, will likely be coming to fresh.

## Hercules at the Crossroads

The episode concerns the time when, while on the cusp of adulthood, Hercules enters a strange place where he meets two women, or goddesses, each of whom offers a particular path in life. In the earliest version, in the fourth century BCE *Memorabilia of Socrates* by Xenophon, Socrates tells the story, claiming that he heard it from Prodicus of Ceos. It is possible, though not certain, that Prodicus' actual words are being quoted, or at least paraphrased.<sup>40</sup> Hercules, he says, had reached the point in life when "the young, now becoming their own masters, show whether they will take the path of virtue or vice" (οἱ νέοι ἤδη αὐτοκράτορες γιγνόμενοι δηλοῦσιν εἴτε τὴν δι' ἀρετῆς ὁδὸν τρέψονται ἐπὶ τὸν βίον εἴτε τὴν διὰ κακίας), and "went out to a quiet place and sat not knowing which of the two roads to take" (ἐξελθόντα εἰς ἡσυχίαν καθῆσθαι ἀποροῦντα ποτέραν τῶν ὁδῶν τράπηται). Two "tall [...] women" (γυναῖκας [...] μεγάλας) appear. One, Arete, was "attractive to look at and of free-born bearing" (εὐπρεπῆ τε ἰδεῖν καὶ ἐλευθέριον φύσει). This woman's "body was adorned with purity, her eyes with modesty, her figure with sobriety and she was wearing white clothes" (κεκοσμημένην τὸ μὲν σῶμα καθαρότητι, τὰ δὲ ὄμματα αἰδοῖ, τὸ δὲ σχῆμα σωφροσύνη, ἐσθῆτι δὲ λευκῇ). The other, Kakia, was "grown into plumpness and softness, with her face embellished so that it looked whiter and rosier than

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the possible closeness – or otherwise – to Prodicus, see Daniel W. Graham, ed., *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 860–861; David Sansone, "Heracles at the Y", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 124 (2004), 125–142 (arguing that Xenophon preserves Prodicus' lost words); Vivienne Gray, "The Linguistic Philosophies of Prodicus in Xenophon's 'Choice of Heracles'", *Classical Quarterly* 56.2 (2006), 426–435 (challenging Sansone's arguments and seeing a fit between Xenophon's account of the Choice and sentiments elsewhere in the *Memorabilia* concerning service and honour).

it actually was" (Xen., *Mem.* 2.1.21–22; τεθραμμένην μὲν εἰς πολυσαρκίαν τε καὶ ἀπαλότητα, κεκαλλωπισμένην δὲ τὸ μὲν χρῶμα ὥστε λευκοτέραν τε καὶ ἐρυθροτέραν τοῦ ὄντος δοκεῖν φαίνεσθαι).<sup>41</sup> Hercules is tasked to choose between the women, and the gifts they offer: on the one hand a life full of pleasures and on the other a life of hard work, though with the ultimate reward of enduring fame.<sup>42</sup>

Which option does he choose? Socrates does not actually say. He does not set out how Prodicus ended the story, and he does not give his own view either as to which way the hero chose. The assumption that is generally made, at least by those with some knowledge of myths of Hercules, is that Hercules chooses the life of hard work. The choice is understood in this way, for example, in Roger Lancelyn Green's 1950s retelling for children in which the hero is a cowherd, wondering whether it would be his fate in life to remain as such always. While he is resting, he encounters the two women and is offered a choice between the ways of life that match their personae. He does not hesitate in choosing Virtue's path. Straightaway he sees a lion attacking his cows and, with his quest to kill this lion, so begins his heroic career.<sup>43</sup> In Lancelyn Green's version, then, what Hercules chooses is the path of Virtue – and it is not a choice that causes him much trouble. Nicholas Lezard summarizes the usual way to read the outcome of the choice as follows: "Hercules chooses duty, of course".<sup>44</sup>

This does look like an obvious way to read Hercules' decision. He is, after all, the hero known beyond all others for facing adversity. His is a life of hard work and suffering – no sooner does he complete one labour than another presents itself. Eventually, he earns a respite from his suffering, but this is only when – after death, and apotheosis, on Olympus, with Hebe ("Youth") as his wife – his

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<sup>41</sup> Based on the following edition: Xenophon, *Memorabilia; Oeconomicus; Symposium; Apology*, trans. E.C. Marchant and O.J. Todd, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann, 1923, ad loc.

<sup>42</sup> In Dio Chrysostom's "On Kingship" (1.52–84), meanwhile, Hercules is faced with a choice between Kingship and Tyranny, while Cicero's *De officiis* (1.117–118) introduces the choice as part of a concern with how young men should decide how to live and how to behave, including where conflict comes up between competing obligations. On the hero's choice between opposing paths, see, notably, Emma Stafford, "Vice or Virtue? Herakles and the Art of Allegory", in Louis Rawlings and Hugh Bowden, eds., *Herakles and Hercules: Exploring a Graeco-Roman Divinity*, Swansea and London: Classical Press of Wales, 2005, 71–96.

<sup>43</sup> Roger Lancelyn Green, *Tales of the Greek Heroes: Retold from the Ancient Authors*, Harmondsworth and New York, NY: Puffin, 1958 (and many later editions).

<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Lezard, "Nicolas Lezard's Paperback Choice" (review of *The Choice of Hercules* by A.C. Grayling), *The Guardian*, 27 December 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/27/review-choice-hercules-grayling-lezard> (accessed 29 June 2021).

toils are over. Such a contrast between his life of struggles on Earth and his blessed afterlife is expressed, for instance, in the *Homeric Hymn to Herakles the Lion-Hearted*. In life:

ὄς πρὶν μὲν κατὰ γαῖαν ἀθέσφατον ἠδὲ θάλασσαν  
πλαζόμενος πομπῆσιν ὑπ’ Εὐρυσθέως ἀνακτος  
πολλὰ μὲν αὐτὸς ἔρεξεν ἀτάσθαλα, πολλὰ δ’ ἀνέτλη.  
(vv. 4–6)

He used to roam over unmeasured swathes of land and sea at the bidding of King Eurystheus, and himself performed many deeds of violence and endured many.<sup>45</sup>

Now, however:

νῦν δ’ ἤδη κατὰ καλὸν ἔδος νιφόεντος Ὀλύμπου  
ναίει τερπόμενος καὶ ἔχει καλλίσφυρον Ἥβην.  
(vv. 7–8)

He lives contentedly in the splendid home of snowy Olympus and has neat-ankled Hebe for his wife.

But there is also another Hercules for the Ancient Greeks – a Hercules who embraces the pleasures of life and who would indulge in them as and when he could. His huge appetite for eating and drinking was a mainstay of ancient drama, for example, notably comedy, but also Euripides’ *Alcestis*, where the hero enjoys the hospitality of the house of Admetus, aware that the house is in mourning but unaware that it is Alcestis, the mistress of the house, who has died.<sup>46</sup> The Servant, assuming that the guest is aware of the identity of the deceased, relates his apparently outrageous behaviour:

ἀλλ’, εἴ τι μὴ φέροιμεν, ὥτρυνεν φέρειν.  
ποτῆρα δ’ ἴέν χειρέσσι† κίσσινον λαβῶν  
πίνει μελαίνης μητρὸς εὐζωρον μέθυ,  
ἕως ἐθέρμην’ αὐτὸν ἀμφιβᾶσα φλόξ

<sup>45</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own (S.D.).

<sup>46</sup> On the “inappropriate funeral guest” of the play *Alcestis* as well as the “aggressive or ridiculous” Hercules of comedy, see, now, John Wilkins, “Comedy”, in Daniel Ogden, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, 319–320. See also Michael Lloyd, “Tragedy”, in Daniel Ogden, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, 307–309. See also Stafford, *Herakles*, 87–88, 105–109, on, respectively, *Alcestis* and on the comic Hercules.

οἴνου. στέφει δὲ κρᾶτα μυρσίνης κλάδοις,  
ἄμουσ' ὑλακτῶν: δισσὰ δ' ἦν μέλη κλύειν:  
ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἦδε.

(Eur., *Alc.* 755–761)

If we failed to bring anything, he ordered us to bring it. Then he took a bowl of ivy-wood in his hands and drank unmixed wine, the offspring of the dark grape, until its heat covered and warmed-up his heart, and having garlanded his head with sprigs of myrtle, he sang songs endlessly.

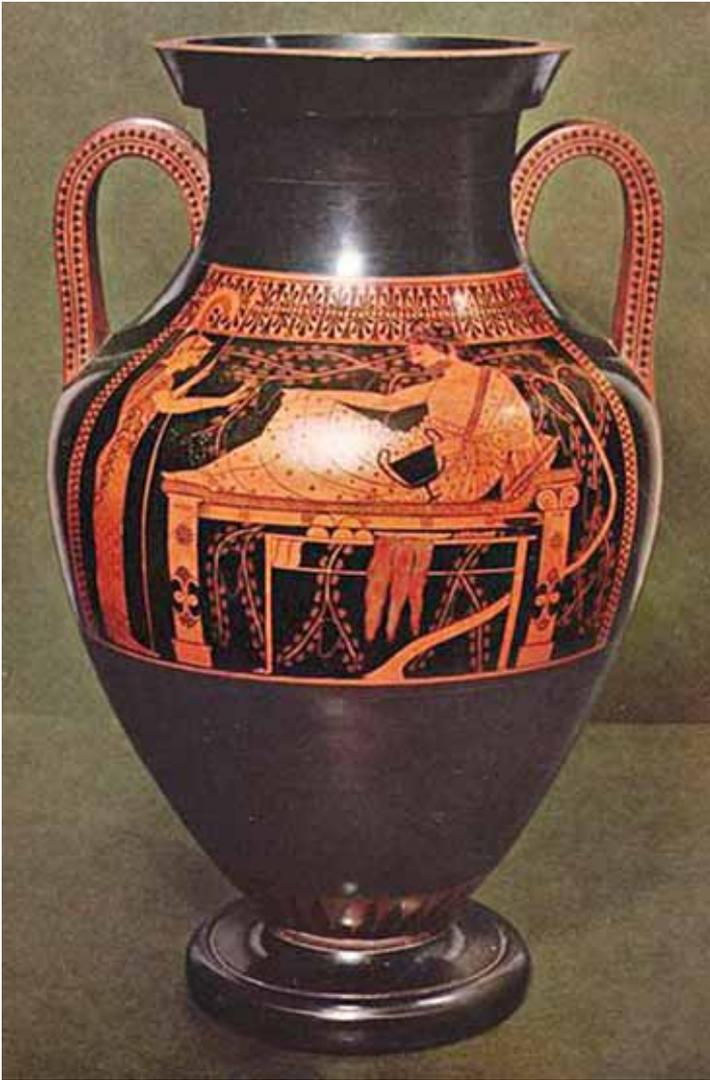
On one side of a “bilingual” amphora (in the sense of black-figure on one side, red-figure on the other), meanwhile, Hercules reclines on a couch, leaning on a cushion. There are vines containing grapes around him, and he wears a grapevine wreath on his head. He is holding a drinking cup – a *κάνθαρος* (*kántharos*) – and to the left there is food, including strips of meat and fruit. Athena, the frequent helper during his labours, and possible model for Virtue, is his companion here as well – holding him a flower (see Fig. 1).

Therefore, there is a pleasure-loving Hercules just as there is a Hercules who endures a life of suffering. It is not vital that we follow Lancelyn Green and others in regarding Hercules as the hero who chooses a virtuous path. His is also the path offered by “Vice”. There are two possible ways to read the outcome of Hercules’ choice – that Hercules chooses the path of Virtue, and that he chooses the other path, of pleasure – of Vice. The choice he faces is set up as a clear-cut one, between two diametrically opposite models of living, but determining the choice he makes is less easy than it might initially appear. As I stated above, for every aspect of Hercules there tends to be an alternative, even contradictory, possibility, and, set against the hero who endures a life of toil, where life is never easy, there is, also, the great lover of pleasures of life.

Just as in the earliest version of the story we are left without an outcome, when the episode came to be depicted from the Renaissance into the eighteenth century, what is depicted is not a certain conclusion, but the difficulty of the choice as experienced by Hercules.<sup>47</sup> It is this lack of a clear outcome that might

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<sup>47</sup> According to A.C. Grayling, it is not in fact necessary to choose, any longer, like Hercules, between the two offered ways of life. Instead, Grayling advocates a life of moderation, which strikes a balance between duty and pleasure; see A.C. Grayling, *The Choice of Hercules: Pleasure, Duty and the Good Life in the 21st Century*, London: Hachette, 2007. In another twenty-first-century version of the story, it is Hercules himself who refuses to choose between the paths offered to him, here those of “Kingship” and “Tyranny”, as presented in Dio Chrysostom. In Tim Benjamin’s oratorio



**Figure 1:** Andokides Painter, *Heracles and Athena*, side A (red-figure) of an Attic bilingual amphora, Vulci, 520–510 BC, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich, inv. no. 2301, photograph from the Yorck Project (2002), Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

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*Herakles*, composed in collaboration with Stafford's *Hercules Project* and premiered at Todmorden Town Hall in 2017, Hercules makes a choice: "In a twenty-first century twist, the choice is framed as one between two extremes which the young everyman Herakles rejects, instead asserting a mortal right to free self-determination" – see "Film Showing of the World Premiere of Tim Benjamin's *Herakles*", *Hercules Project*, <http://herculesproject.leeds.ac.uk/musical-drama/film/> (accessed 9 May 2020).

be what made the story of this choice between two extremes so popular in the eighteenth century, when there was a great deal of concern over how to find the right kind of balance between hard work and pleasure.<sup>48</sup> The story came to stand, in particular, for young men caught between the values of industriousness, represented by "Virtue" and the temptations of pleasure and idleness, represented by "Voluptas" or "Pleasure". Such was how the episode was used, for instance, in the 22 November 1709 edition of *The Tatler*, a periodical which, during its run between 1709 and 1711, was much concerned with contemporary manners in London, including those of young men.<sup>49</sup> Here, Hercules stands for the young men of the city caught between "Virtue" and "Pleasure", each of whom are "making their Court to [him] under the Appearance of two beautiful Women".<sup>50</sup> A few years later, Lord Shaftesbury's *Notion of the Historical Draught, or, Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules* (1713) set out how "the youthful god retired to a solitary place, in order to deliberate on the choice he was to make on the different ways of Life", when he was "accosted by the two Goddesses, Virtue and Pleasure".<sup>51</sup>

My Hercules activities are based around another representation of the Choice from the same period: a panel created by an eighteenth-century workshop of two generations of sculptors, the Carters, and situated in the chimney-piece of a room in Grove House in Roehampton in South West London, now on the campus of the University of Roehampton (see Fig. 2).<sup>52</sup> The objects depicted on the side of Pleasure include bowls of fruit and a drinking vessel. The features of the other side of the panel include boulders, a mountain with a steep, craggy path, a sword, and a helmet fringed by a serpent, or over which a serpent crawls, suggesting the rocky landscape, though also, perhaps, the travails

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<sup>48</sup> On the eighteenth-century British Hercules deliberating between hard work, capitalism, and industriousness as against the temptations of pleasure and idleness, see Michael Charlesworth, "Movement, Intersubjectivity, and Mercantile Morality at Stourhead", in Michal Conan, ed., *Landscape Design and the Experience of Motion*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2003, 263–285.

<sup>49</sup> George Simpson Marr, *The Periodical Essayists of the Eighteenth Century*, London: J. Clarke, 1923, 21–63.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *A Notion of the Historical Draught, or, Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules*, [London]: [n.p.], 1713, available online at Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/anotionhistoric00unkngoog> (accessed 9 May 2020).

<sup>52</sup> On the Carter Workshop, see the discussion of one of the items in the Jamb collection of antique fireplaces and mantels: "G200: A Handsome and Characterful George II Statuary and Sicilian Jasper Marble Column Chimney-piece", Jamb, <https://www.jamb.co.uk/fireplaces/antique-chimney-pieces/georgian/g200/> (accessed 16 March 2020). On the panel in its setting of the Adam Room in Grove House, see Classics Confidential, "Hercules Transplanted to a Georgian House, with Susan Deacy", YouTube, 22 July 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TZemDOjbu4> (accessed 21 July 2019).

of a hero set to face serpentine opponents and, ultimately, immortalization. Hercules is caught in the process of trying to decide, his face turned towards Hard Work, his body towards Pleasure.

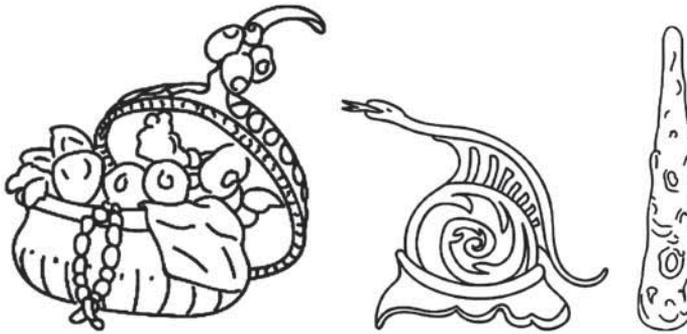


**Figure 2:** *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel, Carter Workshop, late eighteenth century, Adam Room, Grove House, University of Roehampton, photograph by Marina Arcady. Used with her kind permission.

The numerous details in the scene are evident in the line drawings created for the activities by the artist Steve K. Simons, a selection of which are included as Figs. 3–6.



**Figure 3:** *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel redrawn by Steve K. Simons.



**Figure 4:** A bowl of fruit – detail of the *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel redrawn by Steve K. Simons.

**Figure 5:** Helmet with a serpent – detail of the *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel redrawn by Steve K. Simons.

**Figure 6:** The Club of Hercules – detail of the *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel redrawn by Steve K. Simons.

Thus, what we are faced with is an episode relatively unknown today and which involves a choice, which could go either way. The activities engage with decision-making and explore how difficult it can be to choose between anything as big as a career-choice like Hercules faces or something apparently small like what to eat. The activities include tasks based on how Hercules might be responding to the strange place where he finds himself. What can he see, for example? What might he be able to hear? Is he happy to be in the place? What does he think about the landscape? What does he think about the flat, colourful landscape on one side? What does he think about the rocky terrain on the other side? The children will be have an opportunity to think about which part of the landscape they think Hercules – or they themselves – would prefer to occupy. Would it be the lush, green part? Would it be the rocky half? Then the participants will have an opportunity to think about how Hercules is feeling. Is he, for instance, happy? or nervous? or relaxed? or worried? or lonely? Or does he feel several things at once? The children will be encouraged to pay particular attention to the body language of each figure. How is each woman responding to Hercules, for example? What is she doing with her arms, and with her body, her face, and her eyes? As for Hercules, what is he doing with his body? Where is his gaze directed? This aspect of the activities is concerned with the complexities of a particular social situation, including in relation to the body language of Hercules and of the two women, and the eye contact that is variously being made – and refused.

The activities are also concerned with how to gain the attention of someone else, through pointing, for example, or through looking at the other person. There is emphasis, too, upon using language to express what is going on and what characters, and the children themselves, might be feeling. Another purpose of the activity is to think about how the present can turn into the future. The children will have opportunity to think about the impact of what Hercules chooses on his subsequent adventures. If he chooses Pleasure – what might this mean? If he chooses Hard Work, what might *this* mean for his future? The children will be invited to choose between, on the one hand, the helmet, serpent, sword, and woman pointing up the hillside, and, on the other hand, the fruit, flowers and the drinking vessel, and the woman seated in the midst of these features. As there is no “right” choice or “wrong” choice, the episode provides an opportunity for reflecting on how and what to choose, and crucially on what the implications might be in relation to how a course of action can impact on the future. Thus, the episode can help with the conceptualization of causality by enabling autistic people to assess the consequences of an action. The episode can, indeed, be a source of “Social Stories” which, since their development in the early 1990s by Carol Gray, have been key in autistic pedagogy.<sup>53</sup>

In the space of this particular myth of Hercules, then, there are possible courses of action, none right, none wrong. In addition, the activities focus on another aspect of what it means to be autistic, namely, to find it hard to adapt to any new scenario. Hercules, the hero who is always adaptable, here is at an impasse, his expression seemingly calm as he reflects on his course of action. The activities explore what it might be like to explore the strange space on the panel – a space crossed with new experiences, and with two strangers – where he is going through what could be interpreted as a meltdown. The range of potential emotions he is expressing is vast, and this leads me to a second key feature of the activities – after choice-making – namely, around how to recognize, manage, and communicate emotions. The children have an opportunity, both through working independently and via group activities,<sup>54</sup> to create their

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<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., Carol A. Gray and Joy D. Garand, “Social Stories: Improving Responses of Students with Autism with Accurate Social Information”, *Focus on Autistic Behavior* 8.1 (1993), 1–10; Carol Kahan Kennedy et al., “Social Stories for Targeting Behaviors and Developing Empathy in Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Innovative Technology-Assisted Intervention”, in Nava R. Sifton, ed., *Scientific Concepts behind Happiness, Kindness, and Empathy in Contemporary Society*, Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2019, 237–255.

<sup>54</sup> On the role of group work in developing communication skills, see Margaret M. Golding, “Beyond Compliance: The Importance of Group Work in the Education of Children and Young People with Autism”, in Stuart Powell and Rita Jordan, eds., *Autism and Learning: A Guide to Good Practice*,

own stories,<sup>55</sup> and to think about their own experiences of making choices and managing emotions.

## Hope Bearer for All

The activities concern some of the sources of distress for autistic children, but they also seek a model for articulating experience and for making sense of the world: the world of an autistic person and the world of non-autistic people who are eager to interact with their autistic family members or students. I offer Hercules in his extraordinary and rich landscape as a means to enable autistic children to communicate their feelings and experiences. Hercules – this curious figure – the great achiever, the victim – offers hope: hope for the empowerment of autistic children, for space to be autistic and space to explore how to deal with social anxiety. Hercules is utilized as a “gateway” for autistic children to identify and contextualize themselves and others, and a gateway for non-autistic people into an autistic way of being and experiencing.

Hercules is a “hope bearer” – for autistic children, and for all.

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London: Routledge, 2012 (ed. pr. 1997), 40–53. For the role of play in group activities for autistic children, see Rita Jordan and Sarah Libby, “Developing and Using Play in the Curriculum”, in Stuart Powell and Rita Jordan, eds., *Autism and Learning: A Guide to Good Practice*, London: Routledge, 2012 (ed. pr. 1997), 25–39. On putting meaning on “stimuli” in activities for autistic children, see Ami Klin, “Attributing Social Meaning to Ambiguous Visual Stimuli in Higher-Functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome: The Social Attribution Task”, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines* 41.7 (2000), 831–846.

<sup>55</sup> On the role of creating narrative in work with autistic children, see Lisa Capps, Molly Losh, and Christopher Thurber, “The Frog Ate the Bug and Made His Mouth Sad’: Narrative Competence in Children with Autism”, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 28.2 (2000), 193–204; Joshua J. Diehl, Loisa Bennetto, and Edna Carter Young, “Story Recall and Narrative Coherence of High-Functioning Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders”, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 34.1 (2006), 83–98.

The book is to be recommended for academics as well as graduate and post-graduate students working on the reception of Classical Antiquity and its transformations around the world.

David Movrin, University of Ljubljana  
From the editorial review

*Our Mythical Hope* is the latest collection of articles by scholars participating in an ongoing collaboration to ensure that the beauty and profundity of Classical myth remain known, and (hopefully) remain part of our modern culture. The size of this compendium, the sweep of subjects considered, the involvement of leading experts from around the world, all testify to how important and extensive this initiative has become over the last decade. The project's continued commitment to engage all ages, especially the young, and to extend its outreach beyond the Academy merely, makes it a leading model for how research retains its relevance.

Mark O'Connor, Boston College  
From the editorial review



Classical Antiquity is a particularly important field in terms of "Hope studies" [...]. For centuries, the ancient tradition, and classical mythology in particular, has been a common reference point for whole hosts of creators of culture, across many parts of the world, and with the new media and globalization only increasing its impact. Thus, in our research at this stage, we have decided to study how the authors of literary and audiovisual texts for youth make use of the ancient myths to support their young protagonists (and readers or viewers) in crucial moments of their existence, on their road into adulthood, and in those dark hours when it seems that life is about to shatter and fade away. However, if Hope is summoned in time, the crisis can be overcome and the protagonist grows stronger, with a powerful uplifting message for the public. [...] Owing to this, we get a chance to remain true to our ideas, to keep faith in our dreams, and, when the decisive moment comes, to choose not hatred but love, not darkness but light.

Katarzyna Marciniak, University of Warsaw  
From the introductory chapter

