

## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – OR, ON REACHING A FORK AND TAKING IT

The late baseball player and coach Yogi Berra is known for his wisdom. His was a sideways wisdom, one worthy of the Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, where impossibilities exist in one another. As Berra once said, “when you come to a fork in the road, take it”.<sup>1</sup>

This book is concerned with a scenario that might seem to involve a different kind of perspective about what to do on reaching a fork in the road, namely to choose just one path and then stick to it – consistently and for always. But, in fact, the path taken in the scenario in question is not clear. The pathfinder, the Ancient Greek hero – and/or god – Hercules, took one path. He took the other path too. In short, as though a pre-echo of Yogi Berra, he came to a fork, and took it.

On one way of reading what happened at the fork, Hercules’s choice was made without much deliberation. Alternatively, the process of choosing leaves him caught in indecision and even in impending meltdown. For this reason, and more, Hercules and his choice are the focus of this book presenting lessons for autistic young people.

When I was running a session for autistic children and their families – held online in 2020 while the world was in the midst of the Covid pandemic – I asked the participants to consider what Hercules might be experiencing at his crossroads. “He is thinking of something”, one participant suggested. Another suggested, meanwhile: “He doesn’t know what is going on”. It is just such a confused Hercules, and just such a bewildered Hercules, that this book presents. It is a Hercules that – I propose – can serve as a prism through which to explore being autistic and in particular being an autistic young person – who might have intense interests, who might experience strong emotions, or who might find routines comforting and change unpleasant.

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<sup>1</sup> Yogi Berra, *The Yogi Book: I Really Didn’t Say Everything I Said*, New York, NY: Workman Books, 2010, 48.

It is a book that has come out of several paths including my own childhood as someone who, around the age of ten, developed an intense interest in classical myth the moment I opened Roger Lancelyn Green's *Tales of the Greek Heroes*.<sup>2</sup> It had taken me a while to open the book. Curious though I was about its cover, depicting a young man preparing to club a leaping lion, I had no clue who or what "the Greek Heroes" might be and was nervous about what might be inside. But once I had finished the remaining school stories (Enid Blyton, Angela Brazil...) on my shelf, I started reading it and was immediately engrossed in the strange world I discovered there.

When this new interest matched up with my existing interest in astronomy, my quest to delve into the world of Greek myth deepened still. This was thanks to a book my Grandfather bought for me at a library sale: *Legends of the Stars* by the astronomer and television presenter and, it turned out, mythographer, Patrick Moore.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly thirty years on, still wandering the paths of classical mythology, I heard something from a special needs teacher that led me to begin the project – tentatively at first, and from 2016 onwards in earnest – that has generated the present book. On hearing that I was a classicist who works especially on classical mythology, the teacher mentioned something that she and her colleagues had been struck by, namely that autistic children often love myth. I began to wonder why, and also to wonder whether I could turn my own love of myth towards an experiential application of classical myth for autistic children. I began the blog *Autism and Classical Myth* (<https://myth-autism.blogspot.com>) to share my initial tentative ideas and, encouraged by feedback, including from practitioners, such as dramatherapists and teachers, I spent several years building up my knowledge about autism while contemplating which aspects of classical mythology to focus on.<sup>4</sup> During this time I even, as a disability coordinator

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Lancelyn Green, *Tales of the Greek Heroes: Retold from the Ancient Authors*, ill. Betty Middleton-Sandford, Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Moore, *Legends of the Stars*, ill. Mike Codd and Richard Hook, London, New York, NY, Sydney, and Toronto: Hamlyn, 1973 (ed. pr. 1966).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Susan Deacy, "Classical Myth and World Autism Awareness Day", *Autism and Classical Myth*, 2 April 2015, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2015/04/classical-myth-and-world-autism.html> (accessed 14 July 2022), with further reflections on the potential for a focus on Perseus, Medusa, and Athena; and Susan Deacy, "Autism, Asperger Syndrome, Perseus and Athena", *Autism and Classical Myth*, 23 March 2011, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2011/03/autism-asperger-syndrome-perseus-and.html> (accessed 14 July 2022), on the potential for a focus on Perseus, Medusa, Athena, and Jason.

at my university, led workshops, and organized training on supporting autistic students.<sup>5</sup>

Then, one day while I was checking emails in 2013, I saw a notice on an email list for classicists about a project looking at twentieth- and twenty-first-century Polish literature through the prism of children's engagement with Classical Antiquity. The project looked so intriguing and innovative that I wrote to its director, Katarzyna Marciniak of the University of Warsaw, whom I did not then know, to express my enthusiasm. I shall say something later about how much a presence – an inspirational and hope-inspiring presence – Katarzyna has been ever since that initial contact. For now, I shall highlight the thing that grew out of that first contact that has led to this specific book, though really everything about that first contact and subsequent collaboration has inspired and enabled the book.

As we began discussing our mutual interest in Classics and children's culture, we started contemplating a possible collaboration and one that could reach across disciplines, involving academics and practitioners, and children. Together, we became involved in a funding bid for the most ambitious project I had been involved in, along with academics in Australia, Cameroon, and Israel. We developed an application to the European Research Council, to fund the project *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*. This project would encompass such areas as myth in school curricula, Classics in works of children's culture, myths from Cameroon, vase animations – and, this being where the growing, but still tentative project I was planning came in – classical myth in autistic children's culture. As we were developing the bid, we were advised that the project was so ambitious that it might be a long shot, but – perhaps precisely because it was so ambitious – we won the funding. I remember the feeling of excitement combined with a bit of dread at the moment of finding out that the dream of making an experiential application of classical research for autistic children had become very real, with set deadlines stretching over a period of five (and as it turned out six; see below) years.

My plan had initially been to develop three sets of activities, and to make these available via my blog as part of ongoing blogging about my progress. I embraced this opportunity to provide immediate dissemination of my progress

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., Susan Deacy, "Making Learning Happen for a Student with Asperger Syndrome", *Autism and Classical Myth*, 17 April 2019, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2009/04/making-learning-happen-for-student-with.html> (accessed 14 July 2022).

rather than, as is the norm in academia, to build to a final product of an article, book chapter, or monograph. Initially I had planned to develop sets of lessons based on three particular mythological characters, starting with Hercules, then moving potentially to Medusa and then to another choice-maker: Pandora. But the more I investigated the potential of Hercules as a focus for the lessons, the more I zoned in on this figure, eventually deciding to concentrate on a particular artwork, one that had been close to me – including literally close – since, soon after joining the University of Roehampton in 2004, I was in a health and safety training session for new staff in the Adam Room in Grove House, an eighteenth-century villa on the Froebel campus.

At that time, I was completing a book chapter on this figure, looking especially at how far opposites cohere and collide but perhaps are dissolved around his persona and his interactions with others.<sup>6</sup> During the session, I realized, to my surprise, that I was sitting in front of a chimneypiece panel depicting just such a contradictory Hercules, one caught between two extremes of, on the one hand, Virtue and, on the other, Vice – or, as I came to discover, Pleasure. In the years that followed, I began finding out about the panel, and it provided a route for me into classical reception and into how, specifically, the eighteenth century repurposed the contradictions that cohere and collide around Hercules to resonate with what it was to negotiate a changing, industrializing society and to seek a suitable balance between the “virtues” of hard work and the “pleasures” or “vices” of leisure. I presented my research on the panel at several seminars and conferences while using the panel, its surrounding chimneypiece, and the Adam Room and Grove House – and Georgian Roehampton more broadly – as a means for students not just to study on a historical campus but to use the campus’s artefacts as a learning opportunity.<sup>7</sup>

During this time, I embraced any opportunity to incorporate the panel into the various aspects of my practice. For example, Hercules’ interaction with two people, each of whom are seeking to persuade him to follow a particular course of action, was used as a discussion point at a workshop in the Adam Room on combatting bullying and harassment which I co-organized with my Roehampton

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Classics Confidential, “Hercules Transplanted to a Georgian House, with Susan Deacy”, YouTube, 22 July 2014, <https://youtu.be/4TZemDOjbu4> (accessed 30 June 2022).



**Figure 2:** *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel, workshop of the Carter family of sculptors, late eighteenth century, the Adam Room in Grove House, Roehampton, London, photograph by Marina Arcady. Used with kind permission.

colleague Fiona McHardy.<sup>8</sup> Another session in the Adam Room, this time with young women from London schools who were on campus to take part in activities put on by the Humanities Department at Roehampton in 2016, showed just how far the panel could resonate with younger viewers too. As a classicist, and one interested in Hercules at that, my eye had always been drawn to the man in the middle, to Hercules. But the gaze of the girls, none of whom had any background in studying Classics, was drawn instead to the two women, especially to how each was making a play for the man between them. When I gave some of the mythological background, the girls became especially interested in the topic of choice-making, with one going so far as to comment in her

<sup>8</sup> See Susan Deacy, "Event Report: Bullying and Harassment in UK Classics Departments. Finding Solutions", *Women's Classical Committee United Kingdom*, 16 October 2017, <https://wcc-uk.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2017/10/16/event-report-bullying-and-harassment-in-uk-classics-departments-finding-solutions/> (accessed 13 July 2022).

Bullying and Harassment in  
the UK Classical Workplace  
Finding solutions

Women's Classical  
Committee Workshop

September 11th 1-5 p.m.  
University of Roehampton, London

University of  
Roehampton  
London

Supported by the Women's Classical Committee UK and by the award  
money from a National Teaching Fellow 2015  
<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/person/dr-susan-deacy>  
(The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme is funded by the three funding  
councils for England, Northern Ireland, and Wales and administered by  
the Higher Education Academy)

**Figure 3:** Poster from the 2017 event *Bullying and Harassment in the UK Classical Workplace: Finding Solutions*, created by José Magalhães using a photograph of the *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel in the Adam Room in Grove House, Roehampton, London, by Susan Deacy. Used with kind permission.

evaluation form that the Adam Room Hercules had stimulated her to think about choices she would go on to make in life.<sup>9</sup>

Fuelled by these experiences, above all those with the girls in 2016, the idea – tentative at first – to centre a series of lessons around the panel began to take root. I drafted an initial set of lessons as summarized in Chapter 6 of this book in 2018. I also ran a consultation session with autism researchers and practitioners that year, including Nick Hodge, Professor of Inclusive Practice and a Co-Director of the Sheffield Hallam Autism Research Partnership (SHARP), the autistic author and academic Damian Milton, who has been instrumental in the development of the “double empathy” theory of autism discussed in this book, and Nicola Grove and Rita Jordan, two of the authors whose work had been informing and inspiring my own practice.<sup>10</sup>

It was at this event that I became further confirmed in my thinking that Hercules could resonate with being autistic. This was when the participants quizzed me on why I was developing lessons based on classical myth, and Hercules in particular, beyond the fact that I myself am enthusiastic about these topics. Would other sets of stories do just as well, they asked, for example those



**Figure 4:** The author in the Adam Room in Grove House at the University of Roehampton in 2016 discussing the *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel with Year 10 (aged fourteen to fifteen) students from schools in London, photograph by Rhianwen Deacy. Used with kind permission.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Deacy, “How Children Teach Us about Classics”, *Antipodean Odyssey*, 26 December 2017, <https://antipodeanodyssey.wordpress.com/2017/12/26/how-children-teach-us-about-classics/> (accessed 13 July 2022).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., (on Nicola Grove) Susan Deacy, “*Odyssey NOW* – and *The Greatest Hero of Them All* in Autistic Perspective”, *Autism ad Classical Myth*, 6 February 2017, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2017/02/odyssey-now-and-greatest-hero-of-them.html> (accessed 13 July 2022); and (on Rita Jordan) Susan Deacy, “Autism & Mythology: Learning Good Practice”, *Autism and Classical Myth*, 1 November 2016, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2016/11/autism-mythology-and-learning-good.html> (accessed 13 July 2022).

about Winnie the Pooh? My answer was along the following lines. I described Hercules as one who is at home in the wilds – his own space – where he is capable of things that others cannot manage. I summarized how he needs to learn the rules of each new scenario he experiences. I explained how while when he is in the wilds, he invariably manages to overcome obstacles, when he gets to civilization, something goes wrong, often terribly wrong. The response of one of the participants, the autistic academic Damian Milton, was: “That sounds like being autistic”.<sup>11</sup>

After that, I began honing the lessons, while trialling them, and reporting my progress at various events, including online events during the Covid pandemic. These are reported in my blog and on the website for an initiative that has grown out of the *Our Mythical Childhood* project, namely, ACCLAIM (Autism Connecting with CLAssically-Inspired Myth), a network launched by Lisa Maurice and myself in 2019, within the Cluster “The Past for the Present”, for anyone interested in where classical mythology meets autism, and vice versa.<sup>12</sup> Connecting as it does mythologically leaning autistic people and allies, the ACCLAIM network exemplifies a feature of my progress towards the present book that I would now like to run with: namely that it has taken place in the company of others.

Working among colleagues in the *Our Mythical Childhood* project has been thrilling as we have strived together to expand the frontiers of research across several disciplines and across the world while also managing to expand our own horizons including in ways we did not imagine when we embarked on our shared journey. Of these colleagues, Katarzyna Marciniak’s blend of vision, positivity – sometimes in the face of what has felt like Herculean odds – rigour, humour, and efficiency has supported and inspired my progress at each turn. It was Katarzyna, indeed, who saw the potential for this present book, to augment the planned dissemination of my research on my blog.

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted with the kind permission of Damian Milton. On the event, see, further, 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 2 August 2022).

<sup>12</sup> See Susan Deacy, “ACCLAIM: Autism Connecting with CLAssically Inspired Myth – Revealing a Mythical Surprise”, *Autism and Classical Myth*, 25 May 2019, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2019/05/acclaim-autism-connecting-with.html> (accessed 15 July 2022). The ACCLAIM site also includes Adam Soylar’s interview with me about my practice: Adam Soylar, “ACCLAIM Interviews: Prof. Susan Deacy”, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* [Project’s website], <http://www.omic.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/interview-susan-deacy> (accessed 20 July 2022).



Other *Our Mythical Childhood* colleagues have been constant sources of support, including in ways that have directly impacted on the current book, among them Robin Diver, Anwen Hayward, Lisa Maurice, Dorota Mackenzie, Anna Mik, Ayelet Peer, Elżbieta Olechowska, Edoardo Pecchini, Daniel A. Nkemele, Sonya Nevin, Danielle Shalet, Steve K. Simons, Hanna Paulouskaya and Elizabeth Hale. For example, the skills of the artist and animator Steve K. Simons have been turned to the creation of the high-quality vector drawings in this book as well as the animations of the *Choice of Hercules* panel which are used in two of the lessons (8 and 9). Also, the initial prompt for the lesson involving paper fortune tellers was inspired by a workshop led by Elizabeth Hale at one of the project gatherings in Warsaw. Meanwhile, Edoardo Pecchini's use of Hercules in his psychiatry practice has let me recognize further the potential for Hercules to resonate with contemporary people's experiences.<sup>13</sup> And, in an example of the cooperation fostered by the project, after reading the initial set of lessons I created in 2018, Lisa Maurice and Ayelet Peer teamed up with an autism specialist in Israel to create a series of myth-based games for autistic children. The leading themes of these games, centred around specific facets of autism, inspired me, in turn, to sharpen the focus of the lessons for the present book around particular dimensions of autism.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, I would like to offer my very warm thanks to the students at Roehampton University who took part in autism and myth workshops over several years, and to those who did work experience with the ACCLAIM network and the *Our Mythical Childhood* project: Amber Cann, Lucy Head, Harry Rao, Poppy Robbins, Erika Ruminaitė, and Adam Soyler. I would also like to thank the many current and past colleagues at Roehampton who encouraged the work that has led to this book, among them: Anna Seymour (Professor of Dramatherapy), Adam Ockelford (Professor of Music and Director of the Applied Music Research Centre), and the archivist and heritage officer Gilly King, whose knowledge about the history and heritage of the University and its college is unrivalled. My thanks, too, to the classicist and former Research Facilitator for Humanities at Roehampton, Helen Slaney, including for the camaraderie she provided

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<sup>13</sup> Edoardo Pecchini, "Promoting Mental Health through the Classics: Hercules as Trainer in Today's Labours of Children and Young People", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Hope: The Ancient Myths as Medicine for the Hardships of Life in Children's and Young Adults Culture*, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2021, 275–325.

<sup>14</sup> See Manchester Classical Association, "S Deacy & L Maurice Hercules & Classical Myths for Autistic Children ACCLAIM Autism and Myth", YouTube, 11 August 2021, <https://youtu.be/RIuLX-q3M6Jk> (accessed 27 July 2022).



**Figure 5:** The *Our Mythical Childhood* community gathered under Hercules on the stairwell of Tyszkiewicz-Potocki Palace, University of Warsaw, May 2017, photograph by Mirosław Kaźmierczak. Used with kind permission.

during the event for practitioners and experts mentioned earlier in this Foreword as I presented my still-nascent experiential applications. In turn, I would like to thank those who took part in that event: Chris Goodey, Nicola Grove, Nick Hodge, Rita Jordan, Nicola Martin, Damian Milton, and Marion Leeper. The project has never been the same since. I am deeply grateful, too, to Effrosyni Kostara for her work as Research Assistant for two periods, in 2018 and then 2022. Effrosyni's insights as a classical philologist and inclusive education practitioner have been invaluable, and continue to be at the time of writing, as we plan a range of activities for museums, gardens, and heritage sites which are growing out of the present book.

My very warm thanks, too, to the funding bodies who have made this book possible and/or enriched its contents. It is due to the European Research Council's funding for *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* (originally for 2016–2021, then extended for a further year in response to the challenges posed by the Covid pandemic) that I have been able to develop the real-world applications of classical myth presented in this book. The Institute of Classical Studies at the University of London funded the event for external partners mentioned above with a public engagement grant. The University of Roehampton funded the 2018 Research Assistantship of Effrosyni Kostara. Steve K. Simons's animation of Hercules choosing was enabled by funds from the award accompanying my 2015 National Teaching Fellowship from the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE).

The final version of the book has been informed by the incisive encouragement in the reports of the two peer reviewers of the penultimate version: the Professor of Social Justice and Inclusive Education Nicola Martin and the learning disabilities specialist and author Nicola Grove. I have prepared the book with wonderful support at Warsaw: from Katarzyna and her colleagues at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" and at the University of Warsaw Press, including Maria Makarewicz, Ewa Balcerzyk-Atys, Marta Pszczolińska, and Olga Strycharczyk.

Finally, I extend my deep thanks to everyone who has been involved in sessions trialling lessons in this book: to the teachers and classroom assistants and to the students – each "star".

And so – to the book: to stars, to constellations, and, first, to a quiet place and what happened there...

London, July 2022 – with some amendments,  
Guildford, June 2023

## **Update to the Acknowledgements**

As I was working through the proofs of this book, I sent them to two colleagues in the *Our Mythical Childhood* community and ACCLAIM network: Robin Diver and Anwen Hayward. The feedback from Robin and Anwen, as neurodivergent classicists specializing in classical myth in children's culture, has been deeply valuable including as they look back to their own childhoods prompted by some of the things in the manuscript.

Anwen comments, for example, on the usefulness of turning “the focus on approaching autism away from ‘deficit models’” and of the focus in the book on the choice between Hard Work and Pleasure “which doesn’t have an obviously ‘right’ answer, which is the sort of decision-making that a lot of autistic people find most difficult”.

Robin comments meanwhile:

A lot of these lessons would have been really helpful to me as a neurodivergent child, even as one with a different diagnosis.

In particular, when I was in school, neurodivergent behaviours were never discussed or explored like in your lesson plans, you were just told they’re bad with no explanation. I’ve discussed this with neurodivergent friends in adulthood, that it was upsetting and confusing being told off for being enthusiastic in class with no explanation when we thought we were contributing or being helpful. We now realise in some cases we were probably making it hard for other kids to get a word in edgeways or contribute or concentrate, but that was never explained so we were just always confused.

I love phrases like: “Just as he could perform tasks better than anyone else, he could sing louder than anyone else and eat and drink more than anyone else” [p. 119, in the current book]. To me, one of the dominant feelings of being a neurodivergent child was that everything I did, whether happy or sad, learning or having fun, was seen as just too much, too loud, too intense for my school, so I think I would have identified with this, and the advantages but also issues of being like this would have been a really good discussion.

[Responding to Lesson 2] I didn’t even know I had issues with arriving at new places and adjusting to the new sensory environment until I was an adult, it was never presented to me as something people \*could\* have issues with, so discussing that in classrooms would have been a huge step forward!

As noted in the relevant places below, I have also made some final adjustments to the manuscript based on the feedback from Anwen and Robin.

Bristol and Leicester, August 2023