

Autism and Classical Myth: Choosing with the Froebel College Hercules

by Professor Susan Deacy, Professor of Classics, School of Humanities

Readers of this newsletter who are current or future students or staff at Roehampton may have been in the Adam Room at some point. The Adam Room is one of the showpiece eighteenth century rooms in Grove House, the neoclassical villa on the Froebel campus – the campus which is also the home of the School of Education.

If you have been in the room – for a reception perhaps, or a meeting – you may have noticed the chimneypiece, which includes a panel depicting an intriguing scene. It's a scene which is packed with details, more details than any one view might be able to take in on first glance. There are two women on either side of a man who is leaning on a large club. Behind the women and the man, there is a mountain with a steep path going up it. On the side of one woman, there is a rocky landscape. On the other side, there is abundant fruit and vegetation. The man has his body turned towards one woman and his head towards the other woman. Look closer and the viewer might spot drinking vessels and a helmet which has a snake on top of it. As for the man, he is wearing the skin of a lion whose face is draped over the club on which he is leaning.

I have not run through everything that is depicted on the panel. If you are ever passing the Adam Room, see if you can go in and take a look. For now, here is a photo of the panel, taken by Marina Vorobieva and here, also, is one of a series of drawings of the panel produced by the Steve Simons.



Fig. 1: Choice of Hercules chimneypiece panel, Carter Workshop, late eighteenth century, Adam Room, Grove House, University of Roehampton, phot. Marina Vorobieva.

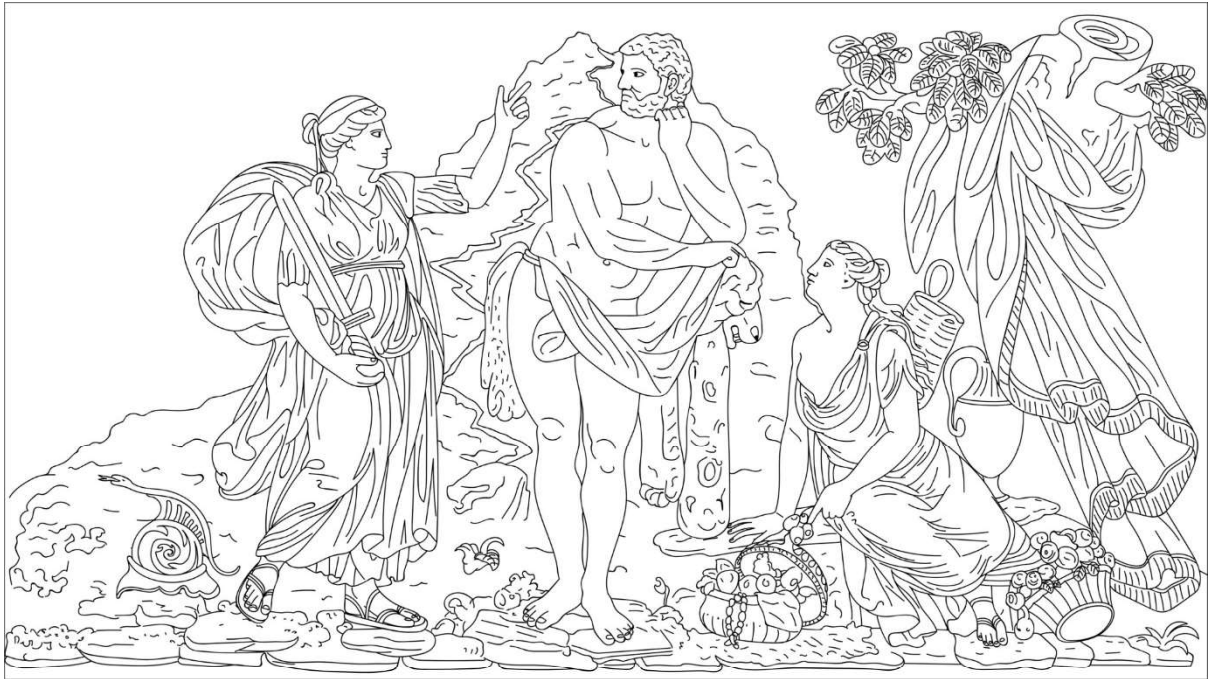


Fig. 2: *Choice of Hercules* chimneypiece panel redrawn by Steven Simons

The artwork by Steve has been produced with a particular goal in mind, namely to accompany a series of activities I have been developing for a few years now for autistic children. The February edition of this newsletter included the abstract for a talk I was going to give in March to CIRSIE: Roehampton's Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Special and Inclusive Education about the activities. The talk was cancelled due to Covid and I am honoured to have this opportunity to say something here about my project.

It was in around 2009 that my two interests of classical myth and autism came together – when I learned in a meeting with a Special Needs teacher that in her experience, and that of her colleagues, autistic children often enjoy classical myth. Hearing this started me thinking about why this might be the case, and what it might be about classical myth that can “speak” to autistic children. A key turning point in my progress came when, along with colleagues in several institutions (in Australia, Cameroon and Israel, and in Poland where we are headquartered), I became involved – as Roehampton's lead, in the project [*Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*](#), funded by the European Research Council. This project, which started in 2016 and will run until 2021, is exploring the place of classics in children's and Young Adult culture.

My key role for the project concerns the place of classics in autistic children's culture. After exploring the potential of several classical mythological stories and figures to give a focus for the activities, I decided on Hercules. Specifically, I decided on an episode where, on reaching a strange place, he encounters two women, Hard Work and Pleasure, each of whom offers him a particular kind of path in light, signalled by her name.

And it is here that the Adam Room panel comes in! The panel is an eighteenth-century representation – trying to look classical – of Hercules as he is trying to choose between the two women and the paths they offer him. It is this panel, via Steve's drawings, that will be focus of the activities. One reason is that the image can be of interest to children who already know and like classical myth. But it can also “speak” to those who have never previously encountered anything classical. Indeed: it is possible to respond to the scene without being concerned with who the other figures are.

I have opted for an episode involving Hercules because this is a figure who, as one who – for all his unique abilities finds engaging with others difficult – can speak to what it “is” to experience the world as an autistic person. I have opted for the specific episode because it provides rich opportunities for exploring issues of relevance for autistic children, including making choices, processing emotions and considering how the present can impact on the future.

To take part in the activities, a knowledge of who Hercules is might be brought to bear, but it does not need to be. To date, I have piloted an early version of the activities with classes of children aged 8-11 in one of Roehampton’s Partner Schools with an Autism Base. Most of the children had never heard of Hercules. Some wanted to find out more about him. Others were interested in how he might be feeling. One pupil imitated his pose and said that she felt worried.

The children enjoyed thinking about which path – easy or hard – Hercules would choose. When I have asked classicists what Hercules chose, they answer Hard Work, because of their knowledge of the myth of the suffering and labouring hero. But – in fact – ancient versions of the story do not make it clear which path Hercules chose, and it is just as correct to say that he chose the way of Pleasure, for as well as a great performer of labours, Hercules is a great lover of various pleasures of life.

The children said unanimously that Hercules picked Pleasure. Each of them said that they would prefer a piece of fruit or a drink from one of the vessels than a sword or a helmet.

I write regularly about the activities on a blog called Mythology and Autism and I am currently writing a book which presents the activities, for submission in December 2020. I would be very happy to talk about the activities with anyone who is interested! I would indeed love to do some more pilot studies if anyone would be interested, and if social distancing allows.

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