

What Would Hercules Do? Turning Classical Myth into a Learning Opportunity  
for Autistic Children

Elitism runs deep in classics. Yet classics is changing, including through the work of democratically-minded classicists who are seeking to surmount the structural and historical factors that perpetuate classics as a subject that excludes particular groups. This paper will concern a project I have developed to bring classics to a particular public: autistic children.

I shall briefly introduce the rationale behind my project, which I began after a meeting in 2008 with a Special Needs teacher who told me that, in the experience of herself and her colleagues, autistic children engage especially well with learning about an aspect of the classical world, namely its myths. I began thinking that this might be the case, and, then, started to wonder how I could contribute as a classicist whose key interest is in classical myth. My academic life was transformed from this moment, leading, for instance to a role as a disability co-coordinator and a blogger: <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/>. Indeed, my paper will include a brief recommendation of blogging: for immediate dissemination of research, for reaching a wider public, and for the opportunity to develop a more reflective voice to complement the traditional, results-focused, voice that dominates academic writing.

Above all, I shall discuss the first of three sets of activities that I have developed to encourage autistic children to negotiate issues that, challenging for any child, can be especially difficult for those with autism. These activities center around Hercules, a figure who, I shall show, has particularly rich potential to engage autistic ways of thinking and being. The activities are part of a European Research Council-funded project *Our Mythical Childhood: The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/> (2016-2021).

The activities center on the choice that Hercules is invited to make at a crisis point, when, on arriving at a strange place, he encounters two women who represent divergent paths in life. As I shall show, the activities (eight in total) take the user through the episode: from the arrival at a strange place, to noticing certain things about the place, to noticing the two women. There are activities where users reflect on what the hero might be experiencing in his interactions with each woman. There are also activities which shift the perspective to the two women – and on how *they* seek to engage *him*. Then, finally, users move to the hero's choice. As I shall show, Hercules chooses one path – yet he considers the other path as well. There is rich potential here for exploring different perspectives on a given issue.

Each path, as I shall show, will lead to a particular kind of future, one involving a life of pleasure, the other a life of struggle. Each user of the resources can choose a particular path – and they can do this by thinking about what Hercules would do, potentially helping themselves develop a theory of mind. Or they can make their own choice, and thus think about how their present can turn into the future.

As I shall set out, each activity is accompanied by educational goals which will help teachers decide which activity to use according to their goals and their students' abilities. These are divided in relation to the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy of 'cognitive,' and 'affective,' goals, while a third part deals with the students' social skills and how these are promoted through the activities.

I shall then share the outcome of a workshop, held autumn 2018, with specialists in autism research to seek expert feedback on the activities. When I come to market these resources more widely, the collaboration and endorsement of these professionals will be integral. I hope, too, that they will take up these resources for use in a therapeutic context.

Finally, I shall discuss a pilot study of the activities with pupils aged 5-11 in a specialist autistic unit in a London state primary school. I shall end by outlining my plans for further pilot studies, including in Greece and Turkey.

The Hercules activities I have developed are intended to be inclusive and thought-provoking – and fun. They offer an opportunity for autistic children to think about such matters as how to cope with new scenarios and change, and how to engage in decision-making. They also offer a gateway to classics for those whose access to shared aspects of culture can be particularly challenging.

#### Bibliography

Anderson, L.W. et al. (ed.) 2001. *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. Pearson.