

THE POSSIBLE DREAM – OR, A FOREWORD BY THE SERIES EDITOR

This is my quest,
To follow that star...

Mitch Leigh and Joe Darion,
"The Impossible Dream (The Quest)"
from the Broadway musical
Man of La Mancha, 1965

In his dialogue *De officiis* [On Duties], Cicero reveals a paradox that is still part and parcel of the life experience of each and every one of us – despite the passage of over 2,000 years, the uncounted reforms of education, and the ever new concepts of child rearing:

Ineunte enim adulescentia, cum est maxima imbecillitas consilii, tum id sibi quisque genus aetatis degendae constituit, quod maxime adamavit; itaque ante implicatur aliquo certo genere cursuque vivendi, quam potuit, quod optimum esset, iudicare. (1.117)

For it is in the years of early youth, when our judgment is most immature, that each of us decides that his calling in life shall be that to which he has taken a special liking. And thus he becomes engaged in some particular calling and career in life, before he is fit to decide intelligently what is best for him.¹

What is more, this very experience was also shared by the greatest hero of classical mythology – Hercules. Cicero recalls – after Xenophon of Athens, who in turn was recalling Prodicus of Ceos – that Hercules, when he "was just coming into youth's estate [...], went out into a desert place". The Latin term for "coming into youth's estate" – "pubesceret" ("cum primum pubesceret [...],

¹ All the quotations from this dialogue in the present text have been taken from M. Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller, "Loeb Classical Library Foundation", Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1913, ad loc. via Perseus Project.

exisse in solitudinem”) – suggests a boy who is fourteen to sixteen years old.² At this point another paradox should be revealed – one resulting from Cicero’s observation in the same part of the dialogue. For even though he admits that the human mind is indeed immature at such an age, he also notes that Nature has appointed this precise age “for choosing the path of life on which [we] would enter” (“quod tempus a natura ad deligendum, quam quisque viam vivendi sit ingressurus, datum est”; Cic., *Off.* 1.118).

The emphasis on the power of Nature is of great importance here. Today, rich in the experience of many epochs of human culture, we may be inclined to think we can moderate the maturation process of children. But if so, then only to a limited degree, and our interventions are not guaranteed to bear good fruit, as that same rich experience has amply shown. Nonetheless, it still happens that, guided by the idealistic belief in a carefree childhood, we hope to protect the young by trying to postpone their entrance into the adult world. Yet childhood has never been fully carefree and the world is calling, just as it always has. At this point in his dialogue, Cicero makes us aware of transformations beyond our control. That is why, even after the passage of so many centuries, it is good to come back to the Classics in order to recall our limits and in consequence to limit our *hubris*. Young people will choose their own way of life, no matter how premature their decision might seem to older generations. They will make their choice because they want to and because they have to, just as each of us also once did.

The Cicero/Prodicus/Xenophon myth of the Choice of Hercules tells about the two life paths we can take – that of Pleasure and that of Virtue. We know the story, as it has accompanied us as a frequent allegorical motif in nearly all periods of art (see, for example, Fig. 1). These two paths are represented in mythology by two women who reveal before Hercules alternate visions of the journey ahead. Pleasure, of course, is sensual and showers the young man with her promises of luxurious joys, while Virtue is austere and offers him a life full of hardships, but crowned with immortality among the stars (on Mount Olympus) as a reward for all his sacrifices in making the world a better place.

So goes the full version of this myth we know from its countless textual and iconographic elaborations, yet not from the quoted fragment of Cicero’s dialogue *De officiis*. Here you would search in vain for the two women’s famous bids for Hercules’ fate (or maybe even for his soul). Cicero dedicates to them but bare

² See, e.g., Mark Eric Vesley, *Youthful Misbehavior in the Early Roman Empire*, PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1996, 35. For Susan Deacy’s approach to chronology within the Choice myth in relation to the artefact she (*nomen omen*) chose for the base of her volume (a chimneypiece panel from the University of Roehampton), see her comment on p. 105.

mention (“the path of Pleasure and the path of Virtue” – “unam Voluptatis, alteram Virtutis”), unexpectedly deciding to tell this myth from a different angle. He does so for several important reasons, I believe. His desire not to tire readers with a repetition of the well-known motif might be one of them, but surely that was not the chief reason. For the very idea of a duel of words and promises waged between Pleasure and Virtue and the potential of such a scene must have been appealing to Cicero as the master of rhetoric. That he resigned from this scene is meaningful and makes the alternative he, *nomen omen*, chose all the more prominent. This alternative consisted in his placing all the focus on Hercules’ role in making a choice: “[H]e debated long and earnestly which one it were better for him to take” – “[D]iu secum multumque dubitasse [...] utram ingredi melius esset”. In this way Cicero emphasized the young hero’s deep inner reflection that was to result in the final triumph Hercules achieved at the end of his life.

We are again confronted with a paradox here. As if undercutting Cicero’s comment on the “most immature” judgement of young people who are not “fit to decide intelligently”, what we observe is the decision process of a boy who turns out to be perfectly capable of making the right choice. Of course, Cicero may have relied on the image of Hercules as a philosopher. However, given the young age of the hero and the link created between him and the dialogue’s readers, we can assume that Cicero indeed expressed here his faith in the young and their ability to choose wisely.

Furthermore, an unexpected turn of events should be emphasized. Having built a solemn tension around the hero’s choice, Cicero suddenly dismisses the



Figure 1: Annibale Carracci, *The Choice of Hercules* (*Erocle al bivio – Hercules at the Crossroads*, 1596), Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

mythical component of the scene. He jokingly states that a meeting with Pleasure and Virtue “might, perhaps, happen to a Hercules, ‘scion of the seed of Jove’; but it cannot well happen to us” (“hoc Herculi, ‘Iovis satu edito’ potuit fortasse contingere, nobis non item”). And here a paradox again manifests itself. For we all do in fact experience such confrontations – confrontations between the easy and difficult paths in life. This occurs in a metaphorical sense, of course – but we keep on repeating Hercules’ choice over and over, and not only in adolescence (though that is when we set our headings), and Cicero clearly points this out in each of the three books of *De officiis*. It seems to me that his dismissal of the divine personifications of Pleasure and Virtue here, in favour of his emphasis on the long, painful, and rather mundane decision process of the young not-yet-hero (“diu secum multumque dubitasse”), serves precisely this aim – to make us aware of our choices, our “Herculean” moments. Cicero’s joking tone, in turn, dispels the scene’s divine and unrealistic layer along with its pathos, too “stiff” as much for his ancient audience as for readers in our own times.

Indeed, the whole dialogue *De officiis* is built at a crossroad – a fork with two signs: *honestum* and *utile*. Cicero offers guidance on what to choose in face of the apparent conflict between what is honest and what is useful, and he tries to prove that in essence (another apparent paradox) there is no conflict between them, for only honest things can be beneficial to us.

The powerful sincerity of this message strikes us even more strongly when we remember that Cicero wrote *De officiis* as an elderly man who had made many choices, many wrong ones included. He wrote the dialogue in extremely difficult political circumstances, for in the middle of the civil war to which he had lost some of his closest friends, and when the Roman Republic was falling apart. He worked on it throughout the last period before his death (he was murdered on the order of his adversaries, as in the end he made the choice not to leave his beloved motherland). He meant *De officiis* to become, in personal terms, a guide for his son, and, in a broader context, a kind of last will for all of his wider audience – and so, also for us. Cicero meant to bequeath a message on how to prepare youth for their life choices – a quest underway for centuries in ever new settings and aspects.

Prof. Susan Deacy in her book *What Would Hercules Do? Lessons for Autistic Children Using Classical Myth* continues this quest in many ways.³ First, even

³ It is worth emphasizing that Prof. Deacy referenced Cicero’s *De officiis* during the Ciceronian Congress *Cicero, Society, and the Idea of Artes Liberales* that took place at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw (organized jointly with the Société Internationale des Amis de Cicéron), in December 2019 (<http://www.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/en/cicero-congress>; all sites mentioned in this text were accessed on 15 July 2022, unless stated otherwise).

if her book is not a dialogue as such, it originates from several years of “dialogic experiences”, as we may call her involvement in building an inclusive milieu where the standpoints of all its members are heard and addressed in a positive way. A Professor of Classics and Disability Coordinator, linked to the University of Roehampton for nearly twenty years, she has created a hub of educational initiatives for undergraduate and PhD students with a particular emphasis on neurodivergence, which she embraced not as an obstacle to learning, but, on the contrary, as a power enabling neurodivergent students to look at the ancient heritage from a new angle, and she encouraged them to share this fresh insight with all.⁴ The resulting reciprocal inspirations within her courses, groups, and among her trainees are another manifestation of her dialogic method at work. Prof. Deacy has also been appointed National Teaching Fellow and Advance Higher Education Principal Fellow and she has conducted numerous workshops for children at schools with autism bases. Her contacts with pupils, their teachers, parents, and tutors contributed further to enhancing the dialogic background of this book. If you lend an ear, you will hear the polyphony and discover an aural memory of their voices. Prof. Deacy follows them with utmost respect in developing a unique research approach that could be called the Humanities of Empathy – the future of our discipline.

Second, the main idea behind this book also brings us back to Cicero, for he understood that it is impossible to protect young people from the world by isolating them from challenges. Instead, he desired to offer them training – among other tools, through *De officiis* – so that, when called up by Nature, they could make their choices wisely, with a free mind, and with sensitivity to the world. Prof. Deacy focuses on autistic children,⁵ but I have no doubt that all her readers, irrespective of their age and life situation, can profit from her reflections (inclusivity in practice!) and learn with Hercules how to cope with the path “per aspera ad astra” – “through hardships to the stars”.

Third, this hard path does not exclude pleasures along the way. For just as Cicero rejected the contradiction between *honestum* and *utile*, so Prof. Deacy observes that joys may, and even *must*, accompany hardships. The exercises

⁴ See Prof. Susan Deacy’s blog post “Roehampton Students on Classics and Neurodiversity: Poppy and Lucy!”, *Autism and Classical Myth*, 11 July 2022, <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/2022/07/roehampton-students-on-classics-and.html>.

⁵ This term is used in line with the autistic people’s self-definition; see, e.g., Amy Marschall, “Should You Say ‘Person with Autism’ or ‘Autistic Person?’”, *verywellmind*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/should-you-say-person-with-autism-or-autistic-person-5235429>, and CaptainQuirk, “The Autistic Not Weird Autism Survey”, *Autistic Not Weird*, 23 March 2022, <https://autisticnotweird.com/autismsurvey/>. I am grateful to Milena Pszczolińska for consultation.

contained in this book have been created by her upon this very premise: “docere, movere, delectare” – “to teach, to move, to delight”. We need quite a number of pleasures to continue recovering our strength and to cope with adversities in order to complete the quest and to make the impossible dream, so beautifully presented in Don Quixote’s song in the Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha* by Mitch Leigh and Joe Darion, indeed *possible* – despite all the odds (and despite some twists of Don Quixote’s story).

And we have hard evidence that dreams do come true: for instance, the mythical journey we started in 2013, after I had shared, via a mailing list managed by N.J. Lowe, a portion of the results of my cooperation with my colleagues and students within the Loeb Classical Library Foundation Grant for the project *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Children’s Literature between East and West* (2012–2013). This was a catalogue of Polish literature for children and young adults inspired by Classical Antiquity.⁶ It is meaningful that Prof. Deacy was attracted to that work – where the entries had been prepared by students performing their first research tasks in a scholarly community. We exchanged emails, and, with her typical empathy, Prof. Deacy also made me aware of the groundbreaking animations based on Greek vases by her University of Roehampton colleague Dr Sonya Nevin and Steve K. Simons, who together form the Panoply Vase Animation Project. Shortly after our first contact, all three joined our mythical team, and thus it is no coincidence that the present book contains a set of illustrations created by Steve K. Simons.

We accomplished an important stretch of our journey owing to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Alumni Award for Innovative Networking Initiatives for the project *Chasing Mythical Beasts... The Reception of Creatures from Graeco-Roman Mythology in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture as a Transformation Marker* (2014–2017),⁷ and immediately thereafter we took yet another, particularly challenging, path with the support from a European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant for the project *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception*

⁶ See Katarzyna Marciniak, Elżbieta Olechowska, Joanna Kłos, and Michał Kucharski, eds., *Polish Literature for Children & Young Adults Inspired by Classical Antiquity: A Catalogue*, Warsaw: Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, 2013, available online: https://obta.al.uw.edu.pl/omc_catalogue.

⁷ See the project’s website: <http://mythicalbeasts.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/>, and the page of the joint (ERC and Humboldt projects) publication in Open Access: Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture*, “Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children’s and Young Adult Literature” 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, https://www.winter-verlag.de/en/detail/978-3-8253-7874-5/Marciniak_Ed_Chasing_Mythical_Beasts_PDF/.

of *Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* (2016–2022), which enabled us to develop our cooperation.⁸ Prof. Deacy contributed with her years-long dream she indeed made possible, as her results within the project attest – namely, her research on classical mythology in the context of autism. She noticed an interesting paradox: mainly, that ancient myths have a seemingly fixed and, hence, reassuring nature and are at the same time endlessly flexible. Thus she decided to exploit their potential in the process of helping autistic children develop social understanding, social cognition, and affective engagement – all necessary to make life choices.⁹

Over the last couple of years, Prof. Deacy explored this field in depth, and elaborated several sets of materials (some of which were also presented “in real time” on her blog to enable their immediate use).¹⁰ She also led workshops in the aforementioned schools in the United Kingdom and in the Polish café *Życie jest fajne* (Life Is Cool) – the only place in Warsaw where the staff is autistic. Last but not least, within the Cluster “The Past for the Present – International Research and Educational Programme”, she founded, together with our team member Prof. Lisa Maurice from Bar-Ilan University, the network ACCLAIM: Autism Connecting with CLAssically-Inspired Myth – a vibrant milieu of scholars and students ready for the quest to promote inclusive education. The polyphony and the dialogical method I have already indicated as typical of Prof. Deacy's book, contain also their voices, as well as the voices of all our friends and colleagues in *Our Mythical Community* from Universities all over the world. I wish to thank them for their kind engagement.

The ERC Consolidator Grant project has resulted in some specific tasks complementing each other, like the “Animating the Ancient World” contribution by Dr Sonya Nevin and Steve K. Simons;¹¹ Prof. Lisa Maurice's pioneering volume on the use of classical mythology in education,¹² as well as her and her

⁸ See, e.g., the project's website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/>.

⁹ For all the stages of Prof. Deacy's research, see her blog, *Autism and Classical Myth*, established as early as 2009: <https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/>.

¹⁰ For details, see, e.g., the “Autism and Mythology” section of the *Our Mythical Childhood* website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-autism>.

¹¹ See, e.g., the “Animating the Ancient World” section of the *Our Mythical Childhood* website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/animating-the-ancient-world>, and the Panoply Vase Animation Project website: <https://www.panoply.org.uk/>.

¹² For details, see, e.g., the “Our Mythical Education” section of the *Our Mythical Childhood* website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/our-mythical-education>, and the volume in Open Access: Lisa Maurice, ed., *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education, 1900–2020*, “Our Mythical Childhood”, Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.31338/uw.9788323546245>.

Bar-Ilan University colleague Dr Ayelet Peer's course for autistic children in Israel;¹³ a guide through children's literature with classical references prepared by Prof. Elizabeth Hale and Dr Miriam Riverlea from the University of New England in Australia;¹⁴ and the studies on African and Ancient Greek myths in a comparative approach by Prof. Daniel A. Nkemele, Prof. Divine Che Neba, and Prof. Eleanor Anneh Dasi from the University of Yaoundé 1 in Cameroon.¹⁵ I am deeply grateful to all of them that we can make this mythical journey together. My gratitude also goes to the ERC Executive Agency staff and in particular to our project officers: Ms Sandrine Barreaux, who took amazing care of the grant at its first stage, and Ms Katia Menegon, who guided us with great dedication through the next stages, including the challenging period of the pandemic.

It is my honour and pleasure to also thank the reviewers – the theoretical experts and at the same time accomplished practitioners in the field of inclusive education: Dr Nicola Grove from the University of Kent and Prof. Nicola Martin from London South Bank University – for all their inspirational remarks.

I am full of gratitude, as always, to Prof. Jerzy Axer and Prof. Jan Kieniewicz from the Faculty of "Artes Liberales", University of Warsaw, for their faith in the *Our Mythical Childhood* programme ever since its very beginning.

I hold in high regard the collaboration with our publisher – the University of Warsaw Press: its Director, Ms Beata Jankowiak-Konik, the Acting Editor-in-Chief, Mr Szymon Morawski, and the outstanding Editorial Team: the commissioning editor – Mr Jakub Ozimek, the copy editor – Ms Ewa Balcerzyk-Atys, Mr Zbigniew Karaszewski – a graphic artist and the designer of the present series and its covers, and Mr Janusz Olech – a master of the art of layout. I wish to thank Ms Małgorzata Sudół – an attorney-at-law and specialist in international cooperation and copyright, who kindly offered her most precious expertise also in regard to this publication. I also acknowledge with gratitude the help from the "Artes Liberales Institute" Foundation that supports path-breaking educational initiatives of the University of Warsaw. I thank my colleagues from the University of Warsaw who are part of the *Our Mythical Childhood* team for their help with this volume: Dr Elżbieta Olechowska, Ms Maria Makarewicz, and Ms Magdalena

¹³ See, e.g., Lisa Maurice's lecture *Mythology in the Israeli Autistic Classroom* at the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies 2021: IsraelClassicStudies, "ISPCS 2021 Session 2 Lisa Maurice", YouTube, 7 June 2021, <https://youtu.be/w98T4ifofTA>.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Hale and Miriam Riverlea, illustrations by Steve K. Simons, *Classical Mythology and Children's Literature... An Alphabetical Odyssey*, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.31338/uw.9788323557296>.

¹⁵ For details, see, e.g., the "Myths from Cameroon" section of the *Our Mythical Childhood* website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myths-from-cameroon>.

Andersen. Last but not least, a particular expression of gratitude goes to Ms Marta Pszczolińska, who attentively read the first proofs and checked the classical references, and to Ms Olga Strycharczyk, who helped edit the bibliography and the list of figures – *gratias ago!*

Despite the most intensive research from the very beginning of the project, Prof. Deacy's book is its unexpected result, in that we had not planned it in the grant's "Description of Action". This book was one of those seemingly impossible (and even unspoken) dreams we all have as researchers and as people, working on which we have taken "a special liking" ("quod maxime adamavimus"). And yet it came into being, and in a natural way, to evoke Cicero's vision of Nature calling in the context of Hercules' Choice.

One of the impulses that made us aware of the necessity to publish Prof. Deacy's exercises in book form, was of course the Covid-19 pandemic, which – especially in its first year – made the development of inclusive education particularly difficult. There is also the issue of "the Humanities at the Crossroads" – a global discussion around why we need or (a sadly more frequent formula¹⁶) why we do not need "those branches of knowledge" that educate young people "for maintaining a healthy democracy, for fostering a deeper understanding of human concerns and values, and for enabling students to rise above parochial perspectives and 'the bondage of habit and custom' to become genuine citizens of the world".¹⁷ As this would be a theme for a much too long chapter – so, if the above definition (based on Martha Nussbaum's oeuvre) from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is not enough as the answer in itself, I will put it briefly for the time being. We need the Humanities to have such results as Prof. Susan Deacy's *What Would Hercules Do? Lessons for Autistic Children Using Classical Myth*. The results that support the quests of many parents and tutors who try to reach with their children for the unreachable star – no matter how far their aim is and no matter how weary their arms are. And this is not a Quixotism detached from reality. Quite the reverse, "the world will be better for this", as the lyrics of "The Impossible Dream (The Quest)" go and as so many people affected by various kinds of rejection along with their near and dear could tell you.

To make the world a better place is also something "in accord with Nature", to quote Cicero again – "est secundum naturam". For even if he was sceptical

¹⁶ Prof. Deacy experienced it personally in the last stage of her work on this book; see her article "Roehampton Staff Are Fighting for the Future of Education", *Tribune*, 16 July 2022, <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/06/fighting-for-higher-education-university-cuts>.

¹⁷ See the entry "humanities/scholarship" at *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanities>.

about the chances of us mortals, not demigods, meeting Pleasure and Virtue in their divine persons, he was certain that our natural choice is "to emulate the great Hercules and undergo the greatest toil and trouble for the sake of aiding or saving the world, if possible" ("pro omnibus gentibus, si fieri possit, conservandis aut iuvandis, maximos labores molestiasque suscipere imitantem Herculem"; Cic., *Off.* 3.25).

So what at first appeared to be a pile of paradoxes, we can now see as a deeply wise order of Nature – "rerum Naturae": "it is in the years of early youth, when our judgment is most immature, that each of us decides that his calling in life shall be that to which he has taken a special liking". Nature makes us choose in the period when indeed our *logos* is not the sharpest (for the obvious reason: it is not fully developed for the lack of experience), but when our heart is strong (maybe even the strongest with the child-like naivety in the best meaning of the term) – "quod maxime adamavit". This is not a coincidence that Cicero uses the verb "adamare" here, with the root in the word "love" – "amor". Indeed, one needs a lot of passion to "undergo the greatest toil and trouble for the sake of aiding or saving the world".

Cicero mentions also the reward – once again with a certain distance by hiding himself behind the common version of Hercules' myth: "out of gratitude for his services, popular belief has given him a place in the council of the gods" ("hominum fama beneficiorum memor in concilio caelestium collocavit"; Cic., *Off.* 3.25), among the stars, as expressed symbolically also on the book cover of the present publication. Let us notice that this time, despite his slight scepticism, Cicero does not joke that such an award is the lot only of demigods. It may also be human – in terms of grateful memory that builds a whole constellation, where each star is a reminiscence of the people who have inspired us: parents, teachers, friends, well-known (or known only to us) authorities, etc. We need the stars to brighten the way. For not only the aim, but also the path we choose matters. And in the end the initially impossible dream can prove to be quite possible after all, as this very book testifies. May it be one of the guiding stars for you, Our Mythical Reader, on your quest.

Warsaw, July 2022