



Introducing *Asterion*: a new initiative celebrating Neurodiversity in Classics.

by Dr Cora Beth Fraser

When you write, do you structure your piece to build up to a point at the end? Do you put your reasoning first, before your conclusions? Do you hate writing abstracts because they force you to give away your punchline?

Increasingly I'm inclining towards the Columbo approach myself: revealing the murderer first, before the process of catching them. Partly this is because I'm autistic and I value directness (also I love a rumpled detective). But really the culprit is probably my ADHD-related short attention span.

So here is my punchline, for anyone else who struggles to get to the end of an article without wandering off to make multiple cups of tea and check their emails... Together with colleagues and friends from all over the UK and beyond, I'm setting up an organisation to represent and celebrate neurodiversity in Classics. Its name is *Asterion*. You can find it online at asterion.uk and on Twitter [@AsterionHub](https://twitter.com/AsterionHub), and you can contact us by email at enquiries@asterion.uk. Please share widely with students, colleagues, schoolchildren and anyone you think might benefit, whether they are neurodivergent themselves or simply have an interest in inclusion and pedagogy.

You don't really need to read any more now: that was the essential bit! But just in case you're interested, there's a back-story to this which is important, difficult and quite distressing. So please consider this a Content Warning, for information which might upset you. It certainly upset me.

I'm a classicist, a teacher and a parent, and a year ago I was diagnosed with autism. This was the culmination of a long process of realisation which began when my son was diagnosed with autism in 2016. I had always struggled with understanding social rules, with obsessional interests and with 'quirks' - but I was a quiet, high-achieving girl and so autism was never mentioned. Why would it be? When I was growing up, autism was Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*.



It wasn't until my son was born, and I started finding out everything I could about autism, that I came to understand how profoundly my life had been affected by stereotypes and misconceptions. The diagnostic process for me was eye-opening, and explained so much in retrospect. It was entirely a positive thing, and a tremendous relief: but the more I read, the more that relief turned to shock.

Let me throw some statistics at you. [42% of autistic children](#) have an anxiety disorder, compared to 3% of non-autistic children. The figures for adult anxiety and depression are estimated to be considerably higher. Autistic adults are nine times more likely than non-autistic adults to [die by suicide](#). The problem is so acute that my own life expectancy, as an autistic adult without any learning disabilities, [is estimated at 54](#) - not because of health conditions but because of the shocking autistic suicide rate.

On the plus side, I'm now less inclined to worry about that hole in the universities' pension fund.

It is also worth mentioning how the treatment of autistic people fits into this picture. In the US there is a school which has [recently regained the legal right](#) to 'treat' autistic children with electric shocks to make them more compliant. This treatment was [pioneered by the same man](#) who was involved in developing gay conversion therapy. As you can imagine, it works: the children *do* learn to behave in the approved manner, and their parents are delighted. However, the trauma it leaves behind is significant, and the message it sends to autistic people is clear: we are expected to fit in, no matter what the cost in pain and distress.

But that's just one school in the US. Maybe things are better in the UK...?

Well, not really. In the UK we have what the BBC recently referred to as a '[national scandal](#)', a situation in which autistic people can be sent to mental health hospitals because there is a shortage of community support, or because they mention that they're feeling depressed, or because their families ask for respite care. This doesn't sound terrible: but the sting in the tail is that they can't be let out until sufficient support is in place in the community – and naturally, that is under-resourced. In consequence, some autistic people have been confined for well over a decade, against their will and despite protests and legal challenges from their families.

The situation is horrific and Kafkaesque. It *should* be a national scandal. However, you probably haven't noticed it, because autistic people aren't very much in the public eye. All our training in blending in makes us easy to ignore.

Our erasure continues in the scientific community. Scientific studies regularly set out to target the genetic roots of our autism, with the goal of making it possible to [eliminate people like us entirely](#). This is not a comfortable thought. Autistic people struggle tremendously; but we're also creative, caring, tenacious, unconventional and occasionally brilliant. The idea of erasing people like us from existence seems like a bizarre and



destructive over-reaction - and it says a lot about how society views us. Autistic people are [fighting instead](#) for improvements to our quality of life and to public understanding of autism, because these are areas where real gains could be made.

There's an obvious pipeline here. Autistic children become anxious and have [suicidal thoughts](#) due to the stress of trying to figure out a world that wasn't designed for them. They develop the ability to mask and mimic, driven by pressure to conform and by their awareness that people like them are not valued. But [masking is exhausting and traumatic](#). At some point it all becomes too much, and they [burn out](#). Perhaps they are committed to an institution; or their suicidal thoughts lead to action; or they fall into substance abuse; or they somehow manage to patch things back together, but they're never quite the same. That's not a world in which I want my son to grow up.

But surely there is support, or research that could help?

Well, matters are pretty grim there too. Charities are often suspect; one in particular, in the US, is seen by autistic people as a hate group, because it promotes a narrative of autism as a terrible burden to families and because it advocates behavioural training to make children hide their autistic traits. Support is patchy and inconsistent, and sometimes makes things worse.

Research in this area is highly controversial, because much autism research is conducted, reviewed and replicated by non-autistic researchers. An interesting example of this is the so-called '[double empathy problem](#)'. For a long time, researchers have accepted the idea that autistic people lack 'Theory of Mind': apparently we can't empathise, to the extent that we can't even recognise the existence of other people's minds and emotions. More recently, researchers have begun to acknowledge that there is a 'double empathy problem': that in fact non-autistic people are at least as bad at empathising with autistic people as autistic people are at empathising with them. But the research has been skewed by the fact that the non-autistic researchers were the ones with the louder voices - and the Theory of Mind model is still replicated across training materials, textbooks and websites written for anxious parents. The term that was coined for us, if you're curious, is '[mindblind](#)'.

The result of all of this is that it's very difficult for autistic people to know who to trust. Support services can pose a danger; charities can promote a damaging mindset; research is riddled with decades of bias and misconceptions. Most of us today find our information through social media, connecting with other people who have experienced the same problems and are sharing their solutions - but social media of course brings its own hazards and mental health challenges, particularly for those of us who are by nature blunt and socially awkward.

That's where *Asterion* comes in. I wanted to develop a hub for people like me in Classics - a safe and trusted space full of resources and sources of information which have been developed or recommended by autistic people themselves.



But once I started thinking practically about this safe space, it became apparent that the problems I was seeing around me weren't unique to autism. ADHD, bipolar, OCD, dyspraxia, dyslexia, dyscalculia, Tourette's... for all of them, support is variable, understanding is lacking, and representation in Classics is rare. *Asterion* needed to cover them all.

Luckily I haven't been alone in this. I already knew a few extraordinary autistic and ADHD people in Classics, and they agreed to join me; and as word spread, more and more neurodivergent classicists have contacted us. Now we have a group of [over 30 neurodivergent writers](#), editors and content developers (uncompensated for now, but hopefully not forever), and we're keen to hear from anyone else who would like to work with us. So if you're neurodivergent in Classics, do [get in touch with us](#); or if you know someone who might be interested, please do pass the word on!

Our neurodivergent writers and editors at *Asterion* will be creating Classics-focused resources and training materials, and sharing their own stories. But perhaps most importantly, they're happy to be known as neurodivergent in Classics. We hope that this will help to break down the stereotypes and build a sense of community, to send out a message that being neurodivergent is a form of difference, not a source of shame. *Asterion* will give us a space to explore the implications of diversity, looking at what it means to experience the study of the ancient world in different ways. In the process we hope to make Classics a more interesting discipline, as well as a more welcoming one!

Community is important to us at *Asterion*; but that community can't be a closed one. If it is, we risk developing our own Classics version of the 'double empathy problem'. What we need for *Asterion* to succeed is the involvement of everyone in UK Classics: to read our stories, to think about the adjustments we suggest, to talk about our ideas in departmental meetings, and to take seriously the problems we highlight.

So as well as looking for neurodivergent writers, we're also looking for partner organisations and departments to spread awareness of our initiative. Invite us to events and to give talks; put up [our posters](#) in your department; pitch us your ideas for inclusion! *Asterion* also offers scope to develop and promote [pedagogical research projects](#), with neurotypical and neurodivergent participants working together to develop and trial new ways of working - so we would love to hear from anyone with an interest in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Please do get in touch with us, whether you're a representative of an institution or an individual looking to make a difference, whether you work in a school or in the university sector or in the community. We need all the help we can get!

I hope you'll be hearing a lot about *Asterion* in the coming years - because if we're going to change things, we have to reach everyone who needs us. My hope is that eventually Classics will become a model of neurodiversity acceptance which other disciplines will want to follow. We've got a head start, after all. How many times have you heard about Classics professors who are weird, awkward or obsessional, with their own strange rituals or [peculiar quirks](#)? We've been accepting and supporting neurodiversity for a very long time in Classics, without ever really discussing it. *Asterion* gives us a chance to build on that, by



Bulletin 50 (2021) <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/bulletin/>

making acceptance part of Classics at every level.

That's why we chose the name *Asterion*, after the Minotaur of myth. Where others might see a monster, in Classics we see a monsterring: a mythical lineage of hate, self-interest and conflict, bound up with issues of power, culture and identity. We're trained to be attentive to nuance, bias and the question of who gets a voice. Maybe we can use that training to make the world around us just a little bit better for those who suffer most from contemporary monsterring.

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