From Heritage to Neurodiversity
A Quest through Popular Culture

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Introduction: Popular Culture and Religion

If you're a normal kid, reading this because you think it's fiction, great. Read on. I envy you for being able to believe that none of this ever happened. (Riordan 2006, 1)

In our modern Western civilization we see new religious movements emerging out of topics issued from popular culture such as 'The Church of Jediism' (n.d.), a religious movement founded by Daniel Morgan Jones, and his brother in 2007, that follows a philosophy based on the teachings from George Lucas' *Star Wars* universe. 'The Forecastle of Isaluntë Valion' (n.d.), and their gnostic approach to the work of J.R.R Tolkien is another such example, or searching in more recent years, and turning towards the podcast world, we find shows such as *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* which illustrates well the deep link shared by religion and popular culture. Indeed, Carole M. Cusack investigates how the authors of the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast series uses mediaeval Christian techniques of reading sacred texts such as *lectio divina*, as well as using extract compilation method to form 'florilegium', but she also notes the presence of Jewish techniques of reading the sacred texts such as 'havruta', and the interpretative textual method 'PaRDeS' (Cusack 2019). Therefore, it seems evident that, as a student of religious studies, one should keep an eye out for development in popular culture, however this is far from being true.

Popular culture studies is a relatively recent field of study, often understudied and/or underappreciated compared to more established areas of academic endeavour, and academics and journals have been trying in recent decades to overcome this stigma. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, founded in the 1960s, is such a platform which tries to fill in the gap left by this lack of studies, and 'break down the barriers between so-called "low" and "high" culture' (The Journal of Popular Culture n.d.). To ignore this area within religious studies is to ignore to a large degree how a lot of people interact, invent, re-invent, and share around religious topics. Santana and Erickson remark, looking at Americans and American popular culture, that the decline in the knowledge of the religious text, namely the Bible, meant that more and more of the framework associated with it to interpret religion, but also one's own life problems, was replaced by the prism offered by popular culture rather than the religious text itself. They label this phenomenon as popular culture 'rescripting the sacred texts' (Santana and Erickson 2008, 25). Maybe more importantly, Santana and Erickson see popular culture as offering a nuanced version of religion (*Ibid*, 203-204) which only reinforces the place that popular culture studies should play within the religious studies if we truly endeavour to comprehend this phenomenon in our modern times. Indeed, Terry Ray Clark remarks that religious events happen within a specific cultural context and are thus interrelated with these events (Clark 2023, 10). Therefore, popular culture can be seen as a platform that vehicles, influences, and is influenced by modern ideological and religious currents, it acts as a platform for social and religious debates among other things.

The highly receptive nature of popular culture to social issues is what make it an interesting, and relevant topic to study with scholars such as Sophia Rose Arjana covering subjects in *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture* (2018) intersecting gender studies, religious studies, and popular culture studies, and she notes that 'popular culture is a powerful tool that helps to form personal identity, ideals of nationhood, and beliefs about cultures and communities outside our own' (*Ibid*, xvii).

This characteristic of popular culture is not only recognised by individuals and groups of scholars but also by European institutions when starting the project *Invisible Lines* which is co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union and that tackle the task of representing invisible notions, such as the 'sense of belonging' or 'spirituality', through the use of comics, graphic novels, and illustrations. While this project aimed at promoting the circulation of the medium itself in Europe, it also endeavoured to 'safeguard and promote European cultural diversity through the medium of Comics and Illustration' (Invisible Lines n.d.).

Moreover, popular culture, and specifically genres often linked to it such as fantasy, are becoming more relevant to study each year because of the rise in popularity it is experiencing in recent times with movies such as *The Lord of the Rings* directed by Peter Jackson (2001-2003), and books such as George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present) becoming immensely popular which prompts the question *why*? While tracking the exact reasons behind this rise in popularity of products that were considered for a long time, and by many, as 'low' culture is outside of the scope of this paper, Maria Sachiko Cecire offer the beginning of an answer in what she calls the 'Oxford School of Children's fantasy literature' (Cecire 2019, 4) which includes J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Philip Pullman, Susan Cooper, Diana Wynne Jones, and Kevin Crossley-Holland. These are twentieth century authors who contributed greatly to the genre of children's fantasy and who were influenced by the evolution of fantasy as a genre in the earlier eighteenth and nineteenth century, a time that sees a 'golden age of children's fantasy' in Victorian England alongside the intolerant reception towards the genre in adult literature (Wolfe 2012, 14), thus leaving childhood and children's literature as the last refuge of fantasy (Cecire 2019, 16-17). In *Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Cecire 'argue[s] that the growing cultural significance of childhood throughout the twentieth century, particularly the widely accepted role of one's own childhood in the formation of the self, has been crucial to the growing acceptability of medievalist fantasy in adult discourse by the start of the twenty-first century' (*Ibid*, 24-25). Moreover, she also points towards the counter-nature that Tolkien's and Lewis' children's fantasy represented in the face of growing secularism in Western societies in the early twentieth century. It seems that fantasy has had an intrinsic nature to oppose norms, and present differences as early as the foundational texts of our modern fantasy literature. However, this status also exacerbates intrinsic discriminatory behaviours of our Western societies because of the 'inequalities built into its structures as a result of its emergence from white, imperial, masculinist, ableist, heteronormative institutions' (*Ibid*, 261).

Therefore, and because I am personally interested and invested in both heritage studies and the potential of popular culture to represent non-normative discourses in its various media, I have chosen to centre my research around a specific representation of a minority group, namely people with neurodivergent traits. What interests me most is to understand *how popular culture represents neurodiversity through its appropriation and re-imagination of ancient myths?* As it is a rather large area of inquiry, I will focus on one specific case study, namely *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan 2006), for the role it played and still is playing in the fields of popular culture, fantasy, and neurodiversity through the extended work of Riordan but also because of the plethora of adaptations as movies and series, as well as the ever growing and active communities of fans that his works has. Moreover, I will break out my research into subtopics. What parts of ancient myths are transcribed and what is left out? What is modified and why? Does the appropriation of these myths constitute 'fake' heritage or is it in itself a

heritage practice? How is neurodiversity dealt with within this narrative? What is the public reception of this depiction of neurodiversity?

My goal is to understand how, today, popular culture can be used as a tool to reach out to marginalised groups of people through a common religious heritage. To be more specific, I wish to explore how the story of Percy Jackson, *The Lightning Thief*, pictures neurodiversity throughout its narrative. I would like to look into how the integration of popular culture within our understanding of our cultural heritage can be used as a motor to vehicle topical ideas surrounding broader social issues. In short, my primary objective is to understand not only how popular culture represents neurodiversity but how it makes use of the religious heritage landscape to convey a specific depiction of neurodiversity. The idea is to nuance the debate surrounding popular culture, to move away from a binary understanding of the topic as either 'good' or 'bad', 'positive' or 'negative'. It is a continuum, and a lot can be said about it in any direction, however I would like to show the intrinsic potential it has if willing to use it. It should be seen as a tool, neutral in nature, the outcome entirely dependent on how one wields it. Thus, popular culture, and genres associated with it such as fantasy, are far from being 'low' culture, or for that matter, 'high' culture but rather just culture and heritage in the making.

In Chapter 1, I will go over the important theoretical background necessary to understand the world of Rick Riordan, and his use of fantasy as a tool to talk about heritage and neurodiversity. Moreover, the structure of Campbell's 'monomyth' (Campbell 1972) will be used as a handy tool to separate the different worldviews depicted in *The Lightning Thief*, and how the narrative's hero moves from one to the other. Theories on the concepts of neurodiversity and the neurodiversity paradigm will be introduced.

In Chapter 2, I will briefly introduce the story of *The Lightning Thief* as well as applying the structure of the monomyth to it. It will become clear that Riordan's narrative fits to a large degree to what is expected from a myth-narrative but also that the mythical world travelled by our hero Percy Jackson can be viewed as a world where the neurodiversity paradigm has replaced our current pathology paradigm.

In Chapter 3, I will investigate a specific aspect of ancient Greek mythology, namely the Underworld's representation, used by Riordan in his narrative. While showing obvious discrepancies between the 'original' narrative and *The Lightning Thief*, I will show that it can still be understood as quite conservative in nature. Indeed, by looking at heritage as a process, as intangible in the first place, I argue that Riordan's use of Greek heritage inscribed itself in the ever moving process of heritagisation, and that notion such as 'original' and 'authentic' represent more an external and materialistic understanding of the object or narrative.

In Chapter 4, I will focus on the neurodiversity representation within *The Lightning Thief* and show, through the various concepts explored so far, that this narrative can be used as a powerful tool to discuss this complex subject. Exploring briefly the reception of Riordan's work by its fanbase will show that positive and negative effects are produced which can be explained by the various representations that traits such as ADHD and dyslexia can take in the life of someone. Moreover, links between our understanding of heritage in the Western world and the problems it raises for minorities will be paralleled to those experienced by the neurodivergent communities.

However, before starting with Chapter 1, I would like first to take the time to explain my use of references and names in the parts that follow. Given that I am using translations of older texts in Chapter 3, I will incorporate in the usual form of these references an extra element which indicates the original

text and verse where it can be found on top of the source I am using. I hope that in this way readers can either use the same source of translation or find the verses themselves in any book or translation of their choice. Moreover, regarding names issued from ancient Greek or Roman mythologies, I made the decision to use their Greek forms throughout this paper in order to homogenise the use I make of them. One will remark that Riordan, in his novels, does not pretend to do such a thing, but rather mixes and matches names spelling from both ancient Greek and Roman mythology.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

Young readers especially like to escape reality and slip into a fantasy world. It's easier to read about people doing amazing things like casting spells and riding dragons than about people doing mundane things like going to school. Kids already know that life. It's nice to pretend you are someone else once in a while. (Rick Riordan n.d. a)

Fantasy

I believe it is important that I foreground my analysis of *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan 2006) by talking about fantasy and the fantasy *genre* in the first place. Riordan's narrative makes use of a genre that is in itself loaded with 'negative' and 'positive' traits, which I will define and develop later in this research, and which in turn enable him to vehicle his narrative and meaning. Fantasy itself is an extremely potent literary genre and expectations are built around what it can and should do. More importantly, in the context of our discussion of learning disabilities and heritage narratives, fantasy presents itself as a prime contender for the ideal medium to create real-life social impact.

In 'Fantasy from Dryden to Dunsany', Gary Wolfe tracks the evolution of the term 'fantasy' and its associated genre in the debates emerging from the eighteenth century, where it arose as part of the distinction and meaning behind the notions of 'fancy' and 'imagination', two concepts that would develop in that century. These notions would further develop in the following century, up until what can be considered, at least to some degree, the origin of our modern fantasy literature in the 'Inklings', a group that counted famous twentieth century authors of children's fantasy such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (Wolfe 2012). However, it is the nineteenth century notion of Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the distinction of the 'fancy' and 'imagination' and the critical debates that followed which can be thought as the birth of our modern fantasy literature. This notion was picked up and further developed by later authors such as George MacDonald, a Scottish writer and poet, who redefined the terms by associating 'Imagination' to the act of taking old meanings conveyed under a new guise, while associating 'fancy' with invention (*Ibid*, 8-9). Wolfe points towards the idea that the fantasy genre is an outgrowth of these eighteenth and nineteenth century debates with elements of that genre which can be traced back to the literary traditions of the 'private histories', the 'gothic romance' and the 'folk and fairy tales' (*Ibid*, 12). However, it is important to note that it is understood in a Western sense of what is fantasy, and thus not a universal one, leading to complex debates when considering the definition of 'fantasy' as a universal concept.

The notion of 'fantasy' as a genre is not easily defined, and usually acts as a miscellaneous category which groups narratives that deal with the non-real. Brian Attebery (2022) notes that realism, as opposed to fantasy, is often equated to the familiar when in reality narratives have both elements of realism and fantasy to various degrees (*Ibid*, 25). The idea that realism represents the true world while fantasy is equated to falseness does not take into account the vast and varied imagery that we use in our daily life to represent the real. Attebery's statement is even more powerful when looking at fantasy as the 'unfamiliar'. This is what makes it so difficult to define, and why we see under the same umbrella term worlds such as George R.R. Martin saga *A song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present), which set characters

in a pseudo mediaeval environment of knights, dragons, and magic, side-by-side with *The Invisible Life of Addie Larue* written by Victoria E. Schwab (2020), which is set in our world and retells the story of a girl who gained immortality for the price of being remembered by none. These two works could not be more distinct in every aspect ranging from the set to their target audience and are only linked by the physical impossibility of the story. The fact that some stories rely on the fantastic element as anchored in everyday life, and thus as an alien and novel element in the life of its protagonists, or on the opposite, as anchored in another world where it is seen as the norm, should make us aware of the erroneous categorisation they fall under. Indeed, Kim Wickham attributes this confusion to the failure of differentiating 'fantastic' from 'fantasy' (Wickham 2023, 19). This is probably what hurts fantasy as a genre for a large audience which only views it as being childish. It cannot and should not be taken as a whole, but rather it should be seen as a medium which can convey any meaning in its narration. To say that one likes or does not like fantasy does not give us any information on what people are actually referring to. Looking at subgenres of fantasy is already more helpful and more informative, such as mediaeval-fantasy, dark-fantasy, contemporary-fantasy, historical-fantasy, etc. Therefore, in the rest of this work, I will not try to define fantasy, but rather I will focus on what it can do. However, it might be important to start by demystifying the genre as a whole.

Fantasy is much too often associated with two negative characteristics, namely that it consists of childish narratives and that it is a form of escapism. However, as David Butler pointed out in his book *Fantasy cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen* (2009), escapism actually implies two things. The first being that it is a negative concept and the second being that one escapes to a better world. Both are quite wrong in their understanding of fantasy and go back to the erroneous notion that fantasy as a genre can be framed under a monolithic concept rather than the heterogeneous landscape it actually depicts. As a matter of fact, escapism has the potential to create an outlet for the reader to deal with real world problems (*Ibid,* 101-108), a notion that will be further expanded in Chapter 4. Therefore, while I said I would not attempt to define the genre as a whole, I think it relevant to us to take a look at Rosemary Jackson in her quotation of Willian R. Irwin when writing that '[a] fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an over violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into "fact" itself' (Jackson 2003, 14). This is most interesting to me because this is not solely about fantasy being about the 'non-real' but rather about the 'non-factual'. Therefore, as duly noted by Jackson in the same passage, it has the potential to defy the accepted facts, and norms. Gerold Sedlmayr and Nicole Waller (2014) even present fantasy as a replacement of the mythical tales of old as they propose a vision of another world from which to judge our own behaviours (*Ibid,* 3), thus echoing the notion of Santana and Erickson on 'rescripting the sacred texts' (Santana and Erickson 2008, 25). This is an interesting take on the genre itself because it shows that fantasy is an adequate medium to create a story around taboos, non-normative behaviours, or simply presenting other social paradigms in a convincing manner.

The importance of the idea of 'fantasy' as a medium to deal with taboos and norms also implies that a text needs to be understood in its socio, cultural, and political context because these define the norms the text challenges. This also contributes to the difficulty of framing fantasy as a genre under a universal definition as what the writer considers fantasy writing might not be so for another or some of his or her readers (Gomel and Gurevitch 2023). Intrinsic social debates and taboos might be clouded or misrepresented completely by any reader of a text because of his or her geographical and/or temporal

distance from the author and his or her original meaning. However, Sedlmayr and Waller, drawing on Frederic Jameson's work, propose that fantasy can be used as a 'traveling theory' in discussions of 'race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, national affiliation, or religion' (Sedlmayr and Waller 2014, 7). Therefore, the use and artistic choice made by Riordan to depict classical narratives in a revamp form with contemporaneous symbols only strengthens the role it plays at being relevant to modern issues. More importantly, it makes it more relevant towards minorities who have to deal to some degree with their life being, at least partially, anchored in non-normative and non-conform behaviours, those 'whom society itself might consider unwelcome' (Armitt 2020, 170). Lucis Armitt also emphasises the power of fantasy, in a popular environment, to bring back old and classic narratives to young audiences (*Ibid,* 171-172) with works such as *The Lightning Thief* being a prime example of that. A notion, once again, very close to that classically ascribed to religious texts.

Indeed, as demonstrated by Santana and Erickson, and their idea of 'rescripting the sacred texts' (Santana and Erickson 2008, 25), these works of fantasy can be understood as inscribing themselves in a process of 'heritagisation', which we can understand as a process in itself that takes functional objects of the past and the factuality of its events, and displays, exhibits it in the present in a transformed manner (Harrison 2013, 69). A process that used to be monopolised by institutional religions and that can also be ascribed to more material means, such as the role of monuments in nations, where one links to the past and forms ideas of personal or group identity in the present. As a matter of fact, Mathilde van Dijk (2023) notes the tendency for medievalist fictions to stress the 'otherness' of the Middle Ages, while heritage discourses tend to rely on the 'sameness' of the period. An interesting point in itself, but that links nonetheless to the same process of using texts or discourses, factual or fictional, to link to a shared past. Riordan's work is interesting in this regard given that he not only based his work on primary sources, thus giving us to some degree a retelling of these ancient Greek stories, but also plays with it by picking and choosing the versions he prefers (Rick Riordan n.d. b). In some cases, he totally bends their meaning with the most striking example concerning the presence of Athena's children in *The Lightning Thief* (Rick Riordan 2007) where, because he simply wanted Athena to have children, invented a way that would be possible and 'logical' by parallelling the births of her children with Athena's own birth. *The Lightning Thief* seems, at times, to titter at the brink of othering ancient Greek mythology, while reminding us how alike they are in the end. As a matter of fact, this discussion illustrates well Laurajane Smith's view of heritage as a social and cultural process, heritage as a mediator of change, which engages with the past but also with the present, and future (Smith 2006).

This all can be encapsulated in a quote of Zoe Charalambous written in her work *Writing Fantasy and the Identity of the Writer: A Psychological Writer's Workbook*.

We are not made of letters and yet letters can both liberate and oppress us. (Charalambous 2019, 1)

Myth Criticism

An important aspect, other than fantasy, necessary to understand *The Lightning Thief*, and the following analysis I make of it, is the concept of 'myth criticism'. The main idea behind a text-oriented approach such as myth criticism is to recognise intrinsic patterns and structures common in various myths and texts (Klarer 2013, 108). In the present case, to relate myths of old with their current instalment in *The*

Lightning Thief. How the Greek myths appropriated by Rick Riordan are shaping his narrative, but also how his own narrative goals are re-shaping the myths therein.

The twentieth century saw various generations of mythologists which have contributed to their field in different aspects. The work of Glen Robert Gill, *Northrop Frye and the Phenomenology of Myth* (2016)*,* comes in handy in comparing the theories behind four major mythologists of that century, namely Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Northrop Frye. While Gill's argumentation is built around the supremacy of Frye's phenomenological approach to myths, it also describes it as a merging and completion of the other approaches, with a four-part structure build around a fall, a struggle, a divine redemption, and an apocalypse (*Ibid*, 144) which reflects each of the mythologists theories in some ways but that places Frye's own structure as the culminating point. However, it is important to state now that the present study of *The Lightning Thief* is not a study of the myths themselves and their genesis, but rather a study on the uses made by the author of the book. Therefore, using the framework laid out by some of these theorists to unravel patterns and structures become invaluable to our work, regardless of the inherent drawbacks that their approaches imply. As a matter of fact, this is better shown through Gill's critical view of Campbell's work and the structure of the 'monomyth'. While various critics of Campbell's monomyth see it as unrigorous and lacking, it nonetheless shows various patterns which might be more relevant for an analysis of a popular text. Indeed, Gill, quoting Alan Dundes (*Ibid*, 90), warns of the pitfalls of the monomyth as an artificial structure which does not fit perfectly any one myth. Gill remarks that it tends to better fit popular narratives written *after* the publication of Campbell's work, pointing towards the conscious act of applying Campbell's structure to one's own narrative rather than the opposite. Therefore, given the popularity of Campbell's work in popular culture, and its large influence on various works which have impacted successive generations, the monomyth and the archetypical Campbellian hero become a relevant tool to use in our study.

In the twentieth century, Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth'[1] gained a very large popularity outside of the academic field thanks to his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* first published in 1949 (Campbell 1972)*,* as well as two famous documentaries series *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* first aired in 1988 on PBS, and *Transformations of Myth through Time* first aired in 1990 on PBS. The worldwide fame of his theory impacted popular culture to a great extent, with directors such as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg citing the monomyth as the pivotal theory behind the writing of *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* (Schechter 2001, 126-127)*.* The monomyth is best described in Campbell's own words as:

> *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.* (Campbell 1972, 30)

The monomyth is built on the tripartite form of the rite of passage, separation-initiation-return, which is dubbed by Campbell as the 'nuclear unit of the monomyth' (*Ibid*, 30) and that can be further subdivided.

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[1] It is important to note the relation between Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung respective work on myths. While Campbell is indebted to Carl Jung's work when it comes to his views on myths and the roles of 'the unconscious' and 'archetypes' in their analysis, it differs in many other ways. While the identification of 'archetypes' triggered the beginning of Jung's analysis of myth, it signalled the end of Campbell's own (Segal 1987).

The first stage is the separation stage, and it is composed of 'The Call to Adventure', the 'Refusal of the Call', the 'Supernatural Aid', 'The Crossing of the First Threshold', and 'The Belly of the Whale'. These various steps trigger the hero's adventure where he or she is called away from his or her normal life to another world. The second stage is the initiation stage and it is composed of 'The Road of Trials', 'The Meeting with the Goddess', the 'Woman as the Temptress', 'Atonement with the Father', 'Apotheosis', and 'The Ultimate Boon'. This stage in our hero's adventure recounts the various hardships and challenges one must face in order to grow and gain the right to come back home with the reward. The third and final stage is the return which is composed of the 'Refusal of the Return', 'The Magic Flight', the 'Rescue from Without', 'The Crossing of the Return Threshold', the 'Master of the Two Worlds', and the 'Freedom to Live' (*Ibid*, 36-37). These last steps recount the return of the hero to the regular world and the consequences of the whole journey.

However, this division is not meant to be taken as equal nor constant. Different stories will put emphasis on different aspects of the monomyth or even put into play several iterations within a single play. Campbell also points towards the nature of archaic traits to disappear over time to fit local understanding of the myths and the way a secondary interpretation is given to aspects that have lost meaning in current context (*Ibid*, 246-247). He is aware that there are differences between myths, but he chooses to focus on the similarities arguing they are greater than the differences. Omission in the general pattern of the monomyth is seen as purposeful by Campbell, and thus meaningful in itself (*Ibid*, 38).

Therefore, given the rich nature of *The Lightning Thief* when it comes to borrowing from Greek myths in order to put into play characters, places, concepts, or objects, the monomyth gives us the possibility to divide the story into piecewise elements that we will compare directly with the corresponding elements of Greek mythology referred to in the story. This will display the intrinsic differences between old myths and this popular narrative.

Neurodiversity, Neuroqueering and the Neutral-Value Model of 'Disability'

The final element necessary to understand the puzzle constituted by *The Lightning Thief*, is the concept of 'neurodiversity'. Indeed, Rick Riordan's depiction of ADHD and dyslexia in his book can be understood through the lens of neurodiversity and the neurodiversity paradigm instead of the systematic pathologization of these neurodivergent traits. Therefore, it is important to define the difference between these two paradigms, as well as the appropriate terminology to talk about neurodiversity.

The neurodiversity movement is a recent political movement originating in the 1990s, and aims at a paradigm shift away from the prevalent pathology paradigm, which defines neurological traits such as ADHD and dyslexia as pathology with corresponding treatments to cure or alleviate the negative effects implied, to the neurodiversity paradigm which recognises these traits as part of a broader neurological landscape rather than pathologies. This forms a basic distinction that boils down to seeing these traits either as a pathology that needs to be cured or an aspect of the natural neurodiversity of humanity, which relegates them as neuro-minorities, rather than disabilities.

Nick Walker has been an early and ardent creator, influencer, and defender of the neurodiversity paradigm and movement. We will be using her definition of these terms in the present paper:

Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

Neurodivergent, sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of "normal." (Walker 2014)

Moreover, *The Lightning Thief* and the extended work of Riordan can be considered as neuroqueer books. 'Neuroqueer' is a term coined by Walker in 2008 (Walker 2021), which she and other scholars developed over the years. Applied to literary works, it describes those writings that engage with neuroqueer experience and aim at a cultural shift in the representation of neurodiversity and neurodivergent people. As a matter of fact, as we will investigate in the following sections, the dual nature of Percy Jackson's world, the real world and the myth world, leads to a representation of both paradigms which greatly influence the potential of our heroes. Therefore, while *The Lightning Thief* foregrounds the coinage of the term 'neuroqueer' by Walker, it can be seen as engaging with neuroqueer practices.

Robert Chapman notes that the social-model of disability underlies the neurodiversity paradigm and using a specific variation on the model, namely the 'natural human variation model' as defined by Scotch and Schriner, shows that the disabling effect felt by neurodivergent people is mainly due to the inadequacy of social institutions to cater to neuro-minority groups (Chapman 2019, 375-376). However, according to Chapman (Chapman 2020, 62-64) the social-model, while being an improvement on the medical-model, has its own limitations. It runs into either of two outcomes. On the one hand, the model's idea of impairment, rather than intrinsic pathology, and the associated disabling effect created by the failure of the societal context to accommodate neurodivergence, leads to the same pitfalls of the medical-model by defining a norm to which one can compare the 'normal' to the 'impaired'. On the other hand, holding the ideological concept of neurodiversity as the norm as a whole, as opposed to the medical-model, runs the risk of denying actual harm and hardships encountered by people with neurodivergent traits by portraying them as normal. In that regard, Chapman introduces the work of Elizabeth Barnes in *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (2016) and her 'Neutral-Value Model of disability' as a natural solution to these issues.

Barnes' model is only defined for physical disability as she does not investigate its application to a broader context, however Chapman (2020, 64) argues that it can in fact easily be broadened to the mental realm. The main idea behind the Neutral-Value Model of disability is to see disability as intrinsically neutral. Therefore, we do not see being disabled as intrinsically bad or good to the person, but rather as the interaction with contextual elements, internal and external, that will lead to a worsening or improving of well-being for the neurodivergent. However, I should first define what I understand by the use of the terms 'negative', 'positive', 'bad', and 'good', or rather I will follow Barnes' definitions of those concepts (Barnes 2016, 79-82). A feature has a 'negative' effect on someone's well-being if that same person, without the feature, would experience a higher level of well-being. If instead that same person's well-being would lower as a consequence of the removal of the feature then that feature would be positive on the well-being. From these definitions of 'negative' and 'positive' effects we can define that a feature is 'bad' for you if it has a 'negative' effect on your well-being, and the

feature is 'good' for you if it has a 'positive' effect on your well-being. These terms do not carry any moral judgement but simply reflect a lower or higher well-being.

Lastly, it is important to realise that the Neutral-Value Model of disability does not deny any hardships incurring in the life of a person but only recontextualizes the labelling on the disability itself. What Barnes defines is the idea of a local and global context, where the neurodivergent might experience worsening or improving of his or her condition depending on external and/or internal features. Therefore, what might be locally bad, with respect to a feature or a time period, could result in a global improvement of one's own situation overall, or *vice versa*. In essence, the model does not deny any hardships, it simply mitigates the view of the medical-model which would categorise two individuals with the same disability as having a lower well-being. Moreover, it also mitigates the idea of the social-model concerning any impairment caused by the societal context by positing the presence of an internal context. It simply allows for a perspective where various local features are put side by side and form a global behaviour. It does not deny the potential harmful effects a condition can have on an individual, but also it does not deny any potential gain someone with the same condition can have. It sees it as neutral intrinsically. It does not need to define a norm in any way as well-being is investigated on an individual level. Therefore, two individuals with similar neurodivergent traits, and possibly part of the same neuro-minority may have different global levels of well-being. This is quite important for our analysis of *The Lightning Thief* given that Riordan creates two different worlds in his narrative, that of the real world (pathology paradigm) and the myth world (neurodiversity paradigm). Two very different contexts which will influence the way ADHD and dyslexia is perceived by Percy Jackson on his well being.

Chapter 2: The Lightning Thief

"They don't have souls, like you and me. You can dispel them for a while, maybe even for a whole lifetime if you're lucky. But they are primal forces. Chiron calls them archetypes. Eventually, they re-form." (Riordan 2006, 86)

A Brief Introduction

The Lightning Thief, first published in 2005, is a fantasy novel written as part of a larger fictitious world created by its author, Rick Riordan. The concept behind his fantasy novels relies on assuming that the myths and gods of various cultures are real, and characters within this world are usually direct descendants of these mythical creatures. The Percy Jackson series, focussing primarily on ancient Greek and Roman myths, encompasses three distinct cycles composed of five books each, namely *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (Riordan 2006-2009)*, The Heroes of Olympus* (Riordan 2010-2014), and *The Trials of Apollo* (Riordan 2016-2020). For the purpose of this research, I will focus solely on *The Lightning Thief*, the first book of the saga and make only brief comments about the sequels if necessary. However, it is important to understand that these three cycles continue, and fulfil, the initiatory monomyth structure started within *The Lightning Thief*. Indeed, in the third saga, Percy Jackson is only present sporadically and he is not actively participating in the ongoing adventure, but rather he is seen as living a relatively normal life.

The Lightning Thief depicts the gods, characters, and myths of ancient Greek mythology as real historical events and still present in the twenty-first century. Ancient Greek heritage is presented as the heart of Western civilization, and thus follows it as time moves on, with the USA being the current seat of power of the Olympians. Mount Olympus is now located above the Empire State Building, and all the mythological places of ancient Greece can be found around the USA which sets the stage for our current adventurers. The hero Percy Jackson is a demigod, son of Poseidon and a mortal woman, who will meet famous mythological characters throughout quests that have their counterparts in Greek mythology. The story narrates how heroes of old handled quests and challenges, while giving us a modern-day version of them through our main characters. It is interesting to see how these ancient narratives are (re)shaped to fit within our current values and our identities. The idea of the perfect and monotheistic god is challenged by the representation of imperfect gods with modern attributes such as the god of war Ares being represented with modern fire weapons in place of a sword and a bullet proof jacket in place of a shield. Moreover, the goal of Rick Riordan throughout his stories is to create a fictional world that would give a place for marginalised children. Percy Jackson, the main character and to a broader extent all demigods, has ADHD and is dyslexic. However, this is explained as the result of their ancient divine parentage with ADHD giving them accrued reflexes for battles against monsters and dyslexia being caused by their brain being naturally wired to read ancient Greek. Therefore, what we are witnessing is not so much an attempt at creating a whole new world where previously marginalised groups of people are now seen as normal but rather, it is about building upon our religious heritage: re-inventing and re-interpreting it to give a place to these groups.

The story starts by presenting us a child that has been kicked out of several schools who is now facing his last chance. Indeed, Percy Jackson is a troubled kid who cannot find his place in society. His

difficult family situation, mingled with his ADHD and dyslexia which make it hard for him to behave in the way society wants him to, create a depressing environment for our young hero. The only light being his mother, a warm and protective figure in his life, who is contrasted by his stepfather being depicted as the most horrible human being possible. However, all will come to a halt during a school field trip to the museum, where Percy will be attacked by one of his teachers transformed into a mythological beast. Our hero will discover not only that monsters and gods of ancient Greek mythology are very much real, but that he *himself* is the son of the god Poseidon marking him as a demigod.

The main plot line of the book consists of the theft of Zeus' symbol of power, his lightning bolt. Poseidon becomes the primary suspect in the case but, as gods are not allowed to steal *directly* from each other, the suspicion falls on the only demigod son of his, namely Percy Jackson. In an effort to clear his name, he will take up the quest to retrieve the bolt from the real thief by crossing the USA alongside Annabeth, a daughter of Athena, and the satyr Grover to reach the entrance of the Underworld in Los Angeles where Hades, the main suspect, resides. However, it will become apparent during their adventure and their climactic meeting of Hades in the Underworld that everything, including the theft of the lightning bolt, was orchestrated from the shadows of Tartarus by the titan Kronos. This is the set-up to the first cycle *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* but also foreshadows the events of the second and third cycles.

Monomyth Structure

The structure of *The Lightning Thief* can be understood through the lens of Campbell's work on the monomyth. Riordan makes use of the intrinsic nature and presence of mythical narratives in our common world[2], from buildings to texts, where the myths, patterns, monsters, and heroes never truly die but rather come back over and over again in an eternal cycle of death and birth. The fictional character of Chiron goes as far as calling monsters 'archetypes' (Riordan 2006, 86), a very familiar term among mythographers, that usually refers to some object recurring in its basic form through narratives across space and time. The notion of archetype has different definitions depending on which scholarly trend we choose to follow, but it retains an essential form as a basic unit of myth. Indeed, Gill notes that the four prominent mythologists of the twentieth century, namely Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Northrop Frye, recovered and revived this notion of the 'archetype' from the past (Gill 2016, 13). It can be traced back to Plato's concepts of 'Ideas' or 'Forms'. They refer to transcendental, universal, and absolute notions imbuing our world of their meaning (Jung Society of Washington 2022) echoing the familiar concepts of repetition and universality that archetypes would end up representing in the twentieth century. Eliade's notion of the 'archetype' tends to see the repetition of the pattern as an embodiment of a primaeval sacred model where the ritual archetype not only repeats the origin, but *is* the original ritual (Gill 2016, 24-25). On the other hand, Jung's idea of the 'archetype' is linked to his concept of 'collective unconscious' where 'archetypes' are parts, integrated elements, of this collective unconscious (*Ibid*, 47) pointing to intrinsic patterns that comes back in all cultures as a universality, something integral to the 'collective unconscious'. The Jungian concept of archetypes also manifest

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[2] The notion of a 'common world' needs to be understood as limited and not as an universal world encompassing the whole of humanity. The world presented as common in both Riordan's narrative, as well as the following paper, refers exclusively to that connected to the Western civilization.

through the structure of myths where Gill quoting Jung notes that '[a]rchetypes "are to be found in the myths and legends of all peoples and all times," Jung writes, "as well as in individuals who have not the slightest knowledge of mythology" [...]' (*Ibid*, 53). Therefore, while Campbell is indebted and influenced by these definitions of archetypes, he developed his own working definition where he brought 'the archetypes of myth into consciousness as actual phenomenological objects, but also re-literalize[d] their metaphysical basis' (*Ibid*, 76) which would eventually result in his theorisation of the monomyth structure as a predefined pattern, as an assemblage of different archetypes, to form the familiar structure of the monomyth (*Ibid*, 90). In that sense, Rick Riordan, through his story of *The Lightning Thief*, posits that places, characters, and monsters of old, such as the Minotaur encountered by Percy and his friends, are the basic unit of Western civilization, or 'archetypes', and cannot die unless the civilization itself collapses. Monsters can be killed for a finite period of time but they will always come back under a new guise, repeating the same old patterns.

Riordan's narrative follows a classical structure in various respects while omitting some important aspects that hint towards the author's goals in writing the adventures of Percy Jackson. Riordan creates two worlds, one that will be familiar to the reader as it represents our perceived, everyday world, and another that is built upon the narratives of Greek mythology that will be referred to as the 'myth world' in the rest of this paper. An important aspect that distinguishes these two worlds, other than the presence of mythical beings, is the understanding of neurodivergence where the mythical world seems to be following the neurodiversity paradigm while the common world is based on the pathology paradigm. The distinction between these two paradigms will shape the threshold that is crossed by our hero as well as the trials faced and the reward obtained. Ultimately, the quest narrated in *The Lightning Thief* exposes the struggle of a young hero alienated by the common world because of his neurodivergence and his subsequent descent into the myth world where he is reborn as a hero before coming back to his normal life with a renewed self, fully embodying his divergent part.

The structure of the monomyth is a tripartite structure that resembles a rite of passage, where our hero will be called away from the common world into the depth of a mythical realm that will issue challenges and rewards before his reemergence into the common world as a master of both realms. The first part of the cycle of the Campbellian hero is the departure that is characterised by the death of the hero's old self, thus initiation a cycle of rebirth that will be composed of trials, until his return where the hero crosses back to the common world with his reward that will make him master of both worlds by assimilating into his new self his old life. Riordan's understanding of what this 'self' represents is partly built upon the societal representation of ADHD and dyslexia where Percy's old self represents himself as viewed by our Western civilization, and his new self in the mythical realm is viewed as distinct and normal within this new world. Percy's self-image effectively moves away from one representation of his person, as a dysfunctional member of society, to being a 'normal' human being through a paradigm shift, away from a pathological understanding of ADHD and dyslexia.

Two Worlds, Two Paradigms

The monomyth is built upon two different worlds each with different rules that are characterised by a threshold which is crossed by a hero. The act of crossing from one realm to the other means the death of oneself and the birth of a renewed self. Understanding this twofold structure in *The Lightning Thief*

reveals Riordan's goals and expectations when writing his saga. The whole premise of Percy's universe is the link between a society to its heritage, where civilizations are defined by their myths and *vice versa*. While these two worlds are distinct to some degree, they are identical in the physical realm, both humans and gods inhabit it, however what sets them apart is how neurodivergence and physical disabilities in a broader sense are perceived. The myth world reverses not only how these traits are perceived but also how they affect the world. ADHD and dyslexia are seen as pathology in the common world, but they become skills in the myth world where they are seen as useful mental abilities where ADHD enhances one's awareness and reflexes in combat while dyslexia is actually a side effect due to demigods' brain naturally wired to read Ancient Greek. This is a clear shift from disabling traits towards empowering ones and can be seen all throughout Riordan's narrative as other characters' disabilities are reversed in the myth world. The character of Chiron is also handicapped in the real world, being in a wheelchair with no possibility to use his legs, however this is reversed when his true nature as a centaur his revealed, where the perception of his legs with respect to normal human being goes from a handicapping to an enhancing trait. The same idea can be applied to Grover who is described as having a muscular disease where his legs are seen as awkwardly shaped and limping but which is reversed in the myth world where the revelation of his goat legs gives him an accrued physical experience rather than the opposite. Another good example is Anaklusmos, Percy's magical sword, which has the power to kill monsters and cast them away but has no effect on humans, revealing Percy's helplessness to have any effect in the common world. This reversal and helplessness will be exacerbated throughout Percy's adventure where every single of his heroic deeds in the myth world will be interpreted as evil in the common world.

An important aspect of these abilities as seen in *The Lightning Thief* is that they are not superpowers. They are normal traits, which are also present in normal humans in the common world, but which are perceived differently, under a different paradigm. Moreover, even within the confines of the myth world these are normal abilities that many possess. Therefore, what Riordan depicts is not superheroes who affect the world in unprecedented ways but rather the positive consequences and the inherent power gained from perceiving these traits as part of a broader array of emotional and sensory perception.

The Monomyth

Separation

The first part of the monomyth is the separation stage where the hero is called to adventure in another realm that will act as the ground for his subsequent rebirth into the common world. The hero is usually taken away in a place that acts as the 'womb' of rebirth such as can be found in the stories of 'Jonah and the Whale', but also in other examples of the same pattern given by Campbell himself. The hero Raven being gulped by a whale in the 'Eskimo of Bering Strait', or the two children, their mother, and the elephant from Zulu myths, or even Finn MacCool in Irish myths being swallowed by a *peist* (Campbell 1972, 90-96). The separation stage narrates how the hero is called, who will help him or challenge him, and most importantly it narrates the moment our hero's journey begins as he crosses the threshold between both realms symbolising the death of what is his 'old' self. The symbolic death of the hero is

probably the most important part of this stage as without it there would be no rebirth, and Riordan's representation of this separation is very classical and close to the monomyth pattern.

Every adventure starts by an element that disturbs and breaks the normal rhythm of life for the Campbellian hero, where a herald issues a summoning to the hero drawing him towards his forthcoming adventure. It is a very important aspect of the monomyth triggering the entire cycle of rebirth of the myth. Percy Jackson is exposed to the call while on a field trip to the museum, when Mrs. Dodds, his pre-algebra teacher, transforms herself into an Erinys (a Fury) and attacks Percy. This is the first tangible sign that our hero receives that breaks the rhythm of his old life, and it is a call that cannot be refused. Some heroes have a choice when it comes to their calling, they can either accept or refuse it, setting a different stage for their forthcoming adventure, however Percy is thrown against his will into the deep end.

Supernatural aid usually comes under the guise of a teacher and is represented by Mr. Brunner, a.k.a. Chiron, a fitting role for the one that has been known throughout Greek mythology to be the guide, mentor, and trainer of the best heroes. Chiron has been present over the course of Percy's academic year to protect and observe him, and when Percy's summon is issued, Chiron steps forward and gives him his most valuable tool in his adventure: his sword Anaklusmos, known as Riptide. Invested in a new found power, Percy slays the monster and goes back to the affairs of the common world but things have been put into motion, and it is only a matter of time before the whole of his world tips forwards in an unprecedented scale.

The ensuing events pave the way towards the threshold of the myth world which culminate in a pursuit with the Minotaur, the very same beast of Greek mythology, born from Minos refusal to sacrifice his best bull to the god Poseidon who, in turn, punished him by casting a spell on his wife Pasiphae who, infatuated with a bull, conceived the beast part bull, part human (Hard 2020, 288-290). The Minotaur acts as a guardian to the passage, and will need to be defeated in order to pass the threshold. The death of Percy's ego is embodied in the death[3] of his mother which represents the only thing attaching him to this world. This ego death was actually foreshadowed earlier in the encounter between Percy and the Moirai (Riordan 2006, 26) where he witnesses them cutting what appears to be his own life line. This is worrisome as the Moirai are known in Greek mythology as the Fates that allotted every mortal with the length of their life, and thus determined one's time of death (Hard 2020, 59). However, one will remark that at no point does Percy die, at least not physically. This scene actually points towards the upcoming symbolic death of his old self on the threshold of the mythical realm.

The crossing of the threshold is represented by the magic boundary of camp Half-Blood, a safe place for demigods which acts for Percy as the entryway into this new world but also protects him from the intrusion of both monsters and humans. This part is known as the belly of the whale in the monomyth and is really important as it sets the 'womb' of rebirth. In this case, sheltered from everything he will learn to 'walk' again. Percy is taught about the world, its structure, and its workings, but he is also taught about himself and his body. Our hero learns to fight and grows into his new self, setting the path for the subsequent adventure by making alliances and enemies. However, what is probably the most important

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[3] It might be important to point out that Percy's mother does not actually die in this scene, but rather she is swept away by Hades before the Minotaur gets a chance to kill her. However, the scene is perceived by Percy as an actual death, and he will be made aware of the opposite only much later in the story.

part of this rebirth is the revelation of Percy's biological father, effectively exchanging his mom (linking him to the common world) for a father (linking him to the myth world). Percy is reborn as his father's son, and he will start his quest as this newborn.

Initiation

The second part of the monomyth is constituted by the initiation phase where our hero will go through various trials in order to grow but also to accomplish his quest that will culminate in what Campbell terms 'the meeting with the Goddess' and the 'atonement with the Father' (Campbell 1972). Riordan's use and structure of the monomyth slightly changes from the classical adherence to it seen in the previous stage with the parts relating the Campbellian hero with the goddess and women in general is left out to the profit of an expanded section on trials accomplished by Percy as well as his encounter with his father. This way of writing accomplishes two purposes, with on the one hand more space available for Riordan to recount tales of old through Percy's various trials, and on the other hand a greater focus on the father image and the importance of it in the development of Percy before reentering the common world.

The trials are important to Riordan as they give the book the mandatory action scenes, but they also constitute the actual retelling of the myths through a new perspective as Percy experiences them and solves them either in the same old fashioned way or with a modern twist. Therefore, it is not surprising that the nine ordeals he needs to go through take up about half of Riordan's book. The trials follow the concept set by the threshold, in that they allow the hero to slowly assimilate his old self into the new one, '[t]hen he finds that he and his opposite are not of differing species, but one flesh' (Campbell 1972, 108). Percy is being taught to look at himself in a different light, and to be proud of his neurodivergence that allows him to survive through the various ordeals, showing that he is not inherently dysfunctional but rather divergent with respect to the norm set by the common world, a notion neutral in itself.

The subsequent part that should relate to the union between the hero and a feminine ideal which can be represented by a goddess, a mother, or the Earth image is left out and Riordan jumps to the reunion between Percy and his father. The 'Atonement with the Father' is an essential part of the monomyth where all trials, tragedies, and hardships encountered by the hero are transformed as the hero is given a chance to look back at his life with a higher perspective giving sense to his experience and atoning both the son and the father. The scene takes place on Mount Olympus after handing back to Zeus his missing master bolt, Percy is given a chance to look at his father and share a powerful dialogue that ends as follows:

> There was a different light in [Poseidon's] eyes, a fiery kind of pride. "You did well, Perseus. Do not misunderstand me. Whatever else you do, know that you are mine. You are a true son of the Sea God."
> As I walked back through the city of the gods, conversations stopped. The muses paused their concert. People and satyrs and naiads all turned toward me, their faces filled with respect and gratitude, and as I passed, they knelt, as if I were some kind of hero. (Riordan 2006, 346)

This is but the first step in our hero's journey, but it already shows the great change happening in him, a union of opposites, a 'Apotheosis'. While Campbell sees this union as that of the male and female parts of the hero, I would suggest that we can extend that concept to all opposites which then encompasses

the opposition between Percy's self-image in both the common and the myth world. Moreover, this encounter between Percy and Poseidon presents to us the 'The Ultimate Boon', a gift bestowed upon Percy by his father and taking the physical shape of Medusa's severed head, but also an intangible part that is the subject of my Chapter 4. The boon is important because it allows for a renewal of the world and represents the first of many iterations of the 'healing' of the common world.

Return

Given the successful nature of Percy's quest, and his desire to return home to be reunited with his mother, his journey back is effortless and uneventful. Percy's mother has been restored back to the common world, waiting for him at their family home alongside Percy's stepfather and the boon received by Poseidon. This setup constitutes the last of Percy's ordeals, the final barrier before crossing the threshold and reentering the common world.

Percy quickly faces the problems of his old world, embodied in the image of his stepfather. Riordan presents to us a new version of the scene of Percy's return home with the warm image of his mother and the evil one of his stepfather, playing poker while menacing both of them. While the return of Percy from Yancy Academie early in the book led him and his mom to flee the family home to the symbolic family home on the beach where Percy's mom and Poseidon shared a fleeting time together, Riordan now presents to us a different version as they choose to not flee. The major difference between both versions, outside Percy's new found self, resides in the gifted boon and its power to regenerate the common world, in this case, the power to return the family home to Percy and his mom. Medusa's severed head retains its magical power to petrify anyone that lays eyes on her and thus can be used on Percy's stepfather to get rid of him forever. However, it goes further than the simple reappropriation of the family home as Percy is not the one wielding this power but his mom, effectively also liberating her by making use of the myth world power, albeit on a smaller scale. Moreover, the impact of Percy's quest can also be seen on his friends where Annabeth finally breaks free of her self imprisonment in camp Half-Blood by choosing to go live with her father for the length of the new academic year, and Grover is finally trusted with his dream quest. These are the first signs of the regeneration of Percy's world upon reentering the common world.

The closing act of the monomyth leaves Percy in an unprecedented situation. Back into the common world, he now has no stepfather to worry about, a legitimate biological father, a freed mother, and a new found respect for his own self. Percy Jackson can now decide in which direction he wants to continue, either remaining in the common world living alongside his mother and normal people, or returning to camp Half-Blood within the myth world, to which Percy chooses the former while going back to camp every summer. He has now access to both worlds at will and can cross unchallenged. This is the first step towards the concluding act of the myth cycle and the 'Freedom to Live'. However, many more monomyth cycles await our young hero before the process is fully realised, and thus the last part of *The Lightning Thief* narrating the revelation of Luke's betrayal is not inherently part of this monomyth cycle but revelatory of the upcoming new cycle.

Concluding Remarks

It is important to remark on some of the diverging points between *The Lightning Thief* and the structure of the monomyth, or rather to note the degree of agreement or disagreement and why that is the case. While Riordan's narrative can be understood to a great extent through the monomyth, there is not a strict adherence to it. As a matter of fact, Campbell himself remarks that various mythological narratives might put emphasis on different aspects of the structure or omit other parts of it altogether. In the case of *The Lightning Thief,* Percy Jackson's adventures need to be understood as parts of several episodes and cycles in which changes in Percy happen bit by bit through several iterations of the monomyth cycle, thus showing us after each iteration a renewed Percy up until the very moment when it becomes obsolete and Percy Jackson does not need to cross to the myth world anymore as both worlds are now one and the same. Therefore, important parts of the monomyth such as the 'Atonement with the Father', 'Apotheosis', or even the 'Freedom to Live' are fully achieved later in Percy's saga and *The Lightning Thief* present to us the first steps that our hero takes into the myth world.

However, it is also important to note that, as opposed to other works of children's fantasy that are set either in another, far removed, world such as *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954-1955) and *A Song of Ice and Fire* (Martin 1996-present), or worlds hidden or accessible within our own such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis 1950-1956), *His Dark Materials* (Pullman 1995-2000), and *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997-2007), the world of Percy is superposed on the real, common world. With the exception of a few cases, the large majority of Percy's adventure happens simultaneously within the real world and the myth world where one can move from one to the other by simply changing one's point of view. The myth world does not require a physical gateway such as the wardrobe in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, it presents a mental gateway accessible anytime, anywhere, and by anyone willing to challenge the prism through which one's own world has been experienced up until now. Therefore, we can consider both worlds to be one and the same where a 'simple' change of paradigm leads to a total reinterpretation of our surroundings and experience. Indeed, as was already hinted earlier in this chapter, it is not about reinventing a whole new world, but rather about triggering a change of perspective.

Chapter 3: Use and Re-use of Heritage

It's funny how humans can wrap their mind around things and fit them into their version of reality. Chiron had told me that long ago. As usual, I didn't appreciate his wisdom until much later. (Riordan 2006, 334)

A self-evident notion is that Rick Riordan does not create out of thin air the places, creatures, and people that can be read about all throughout the adventures of Percy Jackson, but in fact draws from the rich heritage background that is attached to our modern Western civilization. Therefore, it is important to look at what Riordan uses and how he does so. However, before starting on this path, I believe it is important to begin our talk with the following extract from *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan 2006).

Come now, Percy. What you call 'Western civilization.' Do you think it's just an abstract concept? No, it's a living force. A collective consciousness that has burned bright for thousands of years. The gods are part of it. You might even say they are the source of it, or at least, they are tied so tightly to it that they couldn't possibly fade, not unless all of Western civilization were obliterated. The fire started in Greece. Then, as you well know—or as I hope you know, since you passed my course—the heart of the fire moved to Rome, and so did the gods. Oh, different names, perhaps—Jupiter for Zeus, Venus for Aphrodite, and so on—but the same forces, the same gods [...] The gods simply moved, to Germany, to France, to Spain, for a while. Wherever the flame was brightest, the gods were there. They spent several centuries in England. All you need to do is look at the architecture. People do not forget the gods. Every place they've ruled, for the last three thousand years, you can see them in paintings, in statues, on the most important buildings. And yes, Percy, of course they are now in your United States. Look at your symbol, the eagle of Zeus. Look at the statue of Prometheus in Rockefeller Center, the Greek facades of your government buildings in Washington. I defy you to find any American city where the Olympians are not prominently displayed in multiple places. Like it or not—and believe me, plenty of people weren't very fond of Rome, either—America is now the heart of the flame. It is the great power of the West. And so Olympus is here. And we are here. (*Ibid*, 72-73)

You may or may not have read *The Lightning Thief*, but this passage illustrates well the heritage underside of the story as well as the philosophy employed by Riordan in his use of the heritage landscape. Potent terms are used which link to the idea of 'collective consciousness' and to the duality between the mutable outward appearance of the myths and gods as opposed to the constant inner value they represent. Moreover, a link is made on a physical level by linking various parts of the world by the same narratives, but also through time, back to ancient Greece in the form of a 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000). Riordan considers these narratives as an integral part of our 'collective heritage' which in turn points towards 'where our modern culture came from' (Rick Riordan n.d. a).

However, undertaking a comparative study of all the ancient Greek elements present in the narrative of *The Lightning Thief* would go beyond the scope of the present study. Therefore, we will focus on one specific element that has the advantage of giving us a good idea as to how Riordan reworks myths, namely the Underworld. Its representation in *The Lightning Thief* is an interesting example of how Riordan deals with a narrative that is part of a larger heritage landscape. The House of Hades, setting the stage for the climactic revelation of the plot of *The Lightning Thief*, is described extensively over chapter 18 and 19 by the author who incorporates newer elements on top of this age-old place. A question that

now seems relevant to ask when reading this part of the book is how true it is to its origins, or not. Moreover, is the concept of 'fidelity', or for that matter 'authenticity', of any relevance to Riordan's use of the mythical narrative? Let's first look at the scene as it is portrayed in *The Lightning Thief.*

The Underworld

The entrance is situated in the far west which, given that Olympus is located in Manhattan, corresponds to Los Angeles. It is accessed through a fictitious place called DOA recording studio, and our heroes encounter upon arrival both people who fade upon being looked at and Charon himself who requests coins for passage to the Underworld. However, when the ferryman discovers that they are not in fact dead, he refuses passage to our heroes. Percy is then forced to bribe Charon with more money which allows them to take the elevator that stands as a modern version of Charon's ferry. The elevator starts *downward* and suddenly lurches *forward*, embodying first the descent to the Underworld and then the crossing of the Styx. At that moment we have a switch to a more classical depiction of the Underworld, where the elevator turns into a wooden barge rowed by Charon himself across the River Styx. Upon reaching the other shore, Percy encounters a vision like an airport where the dead are separated in three distinct lanes that pass underneath the vigilant eyes of the three-headed Kerberos. The one lane passing underneath Kerberos's belly marked as 'EZ DEATH' leads to the Fields of Asphodel and represents the line taken by the dead that do not wish any judgement over their deeds during their lifetime, while the other two lane passing on each side of Kerberos, are marked 'ATTENDANT ON DUTY', and will lead to judgement (Riordan 2006, 291). Percy and his friends manage to pass onto the Fields of Asphodel after Annabeth distracts Kerberos by making him play with a rubber ball. On the Fields of Asphodel, the dead are described as unintelligible shades with no real will of their own. A tent is erected for the judgement of the dead which is presided over by older and newer members such as King Minos, Thomas Jefferson, and Shakespeare. Two lanes leave the tent with the left side reserved for the dead that have been judged to suffer eternal punishment on the Fields of Punishment, while those following the right lane are bound to Elyseum. Elyseum is described as containing a lake with three islands, the Isles of the Blessed, for those choosing reincarnation and accomplishing deeds in their mortal lives worthy thrice of Elyseum. After passing these sights, on their way to Hades' palace, the bewitched flying shoes of Grover act up and draw our heroes to the brim of a bottomless pit that is Tartarus, the Titans' prison.

At first sight, this description seems to be quite accurate, inscribing itself in the plethora of other representations of the Greek Underworld that can be seen through the entirety of popular culture and that is so familiar to us accustomed to seeing it on the big screen, books, video games, and more. Various familiar elements make their appearance such as the tripartite division of the Underworld according to deeds done in one's lifetime, Charon's familiar image as the boatman rowing souls across the Styx for a price and even the familiar sight of Kerberos, the three headed dog. Therefore, when anachronistic elements makes their apparition such as the mention of Thomas Jefferson and Shakespeare, or even the act to liken the Underworld's separation of souls as airport lanes, one can wonder why would Riordan clearly move away from what should be an untouchable, fixed narrative that has been and will always be part of our heritage as is. To understand the error behind this view we need to go back to the foundational texts that deal with the Underworld representation.

Early representations of the Greek Underworld, as we are familiar with, can be found in works such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Theogony*. Familiar features can already be found in Homer's Book 11 telling of Odysseus' visit to the Underworld. His journey to the west passes the setting sun, in the land of the Kimmerians where he talks with the dead (Green 2018, 170; see also *Odyssey* Book 11, 9-19). While the notion of the 'west' is recognisable with that of Riordan's Underworld, the first discrepancies can be found in the fact that Odysseus does not travel *underground* to reach the world of the dead. This is actually the most notable theme we will encounter in the *Odyssey* where familiar elements can be found but in a different setting. Indeed, the same can be said with the mention of Minos as presiding over the dead but, as Hard notes (Hard 2020, 104), that is not yet seen as a judgement for actions done by the dead in their earthly life, but rather Minos is seen as continuing his kingly role from his past life in death. There is no notion of punishment outside those set by the gods on certain people such as Tityos, Tantalos, and Sisyphos seen by Odysseus himself (Green 2018, 186-187; see also *Odyssey* Book 11, 576-600). There is no tripartite division of the Underworld yet. These characters, and all the dead for that matter, are simply gathered in one place that is described by Homer as a meadow of asphodel (*Ibid*, 185; see also *Odyssey* Book 11, 538-540). Places such as Elyseum are also mentioned in Homer's work (*Ibid*, 80; see also *Odyssey* Book 4, 561-569) but as being located far away at the end of the Earth rather than down below, within the Underworld. It is a place for exalted human beings that have gained through divine favour or simple familial relation to the gods their place in paradise. On the other side lies Tartarus which is located by Hesiod in his *Theogony* as far under the earth as the earth is under the sky. It is a place where the Titans are bound (Powel 2017, 76; see also *Theogony* 574-588) which recalls the familiar notion seen in *The Lightning Thief*. Other elements such as characters like Charon are simply missing from these two works. Odysseus travels to the Underworld by his own means and he does not pay any sort of fare in the process. In fact, Charon can be seen as making an appearance in later tradition, and Aristophanes' *Frogs* is the first text referring to a necessary fee of two obols for Charon to row the dead across the Styx (Halliwell 2015, 177 and 183; see also *Frogs,* 139-140 and 270-271).

We will have to turn towards the later work of Vergil and his *Aeneid* to arrive at a more refined description of the Underworld. As a matter of fact, Riordan's structure of the Underworld can be closely related to that found in *Aeneid*. In both stories, the hero is seen descending underground where they are met by shades waiting to be ferried over to the other side by Charon awaiting payment for doing so. Similarities go as far as picturing two rather similar scenes showing Charon shoving along souls to make room for our hero on the boat:

> [Charon] *escorted us into the elevator, which was already crowded with souls of the dead, each one holding a green boarding pass. Charon grabbed two spirits who were trying to get on with us and pushed them back into the lobby.* (Riordan 2006, 288)

> [Charon] *turned the dark ship to approach the bank,*
> *Shoved the souls from their seats along the benches,*
> *And cleared the gangways. Towering Aeneas*
> *Boarded the hollow leather boat.* [...] (Ruden *et al.* 2021, 153; see also *Aeneid* Book 6, 410-413)

Upon reaching the other shore both Aeneas and Percy are met with the three headed Kerberos, then they encounter the place of judgement for the dead presided by Minos. Upon crossing the Fields of Asphodel, and talking to ghosts, Aeneas is faced with a bifurcation leading on the right to Elyseum, as in *The Lightning Thief*, and left to Tartarus (*Ibid*, 158; see also *Aeneid* Book 6, 540-543). This later notion deviates from Riordan's narrative which differentiates the Fields of Punishment and Tartarus but which still locates the dead suffering punishment to the left. However, we can clearly recognise Tartarus has a pit that is also described as plunging deep down into the ground. Therefore, what we see is a much closer structure than that found in Homer and the presence of the same characters. While many differences are still apparent, notably in the physical description of characters such as Charon, one can see that Riordan's work is both faithful to tradition but also inscribed itself in a process of appropriation, reworking, and innovation.

Virgil himself stands as inheritor of all previous traditions that developed over the centuries stretching as far back as Homer and Hesiod, and his *Aeneid* is an important pivotal point where the heritage pool of the ancient Greece was successfully assimilated by a Roman poet to explain the origins of their civilization as inscribed in a much older tradition. Gransden (2004, 23) points towards the idea of a reversal of Homer's two epics in *Aeneid* where a parallel structure can be found in the narrative surrounding Odysseus and Aeneas, a kind of reappropriation to define a new Roman identity.

More can be found through writers such as Pindar, Aeschylus, or Plato, and Riordan is conscious of the debt that English literature has, as a whole, towards mythology and the fact that 'Percy Jackson is part of that tradition' (Rick Riordan n.d. a) of drawing from this pool of narratives. However, an exhaustive study of the ideological currents surrounding the depiction of the Underworld, and for that matter the notion of the afterlife, is not the subject here.

Heritage

We tend to focus too much on the past, and what it represents, or what *we think* it is about, rather than looking at how people engage with, and how they articulate values and meaning from it. Laurajane Smith in her now famous work *Uses of Heritage* (2006) argues for a notion of heritage as intangible in the first place, and as 'a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present' (*ibid*, 2-3). The material, or the story for that matter, seen as whole and pristine is only a receptacle for the heritage process. It is a vehicle and using that vehicle is what it is to do heritage, not owning any one version of it. Smith puts forward a notion of heritage that forces us to look past the materiality and monumentality of the heritage object to the inner values it carries. In this view, all heritage is intangible, the physicality of the material or the story is artificial, socially constructed, and a crystallisation of the set of values held by the one interacting with the heritage. Moreover, focusing on the materiality of heritage runs the risk to put forward one unique story, one associated with the visual appearance of the object or in Smith's terms an 'authorized heritage discourse' (*Ibid*, 11), AHD for short, which corresponds to a crystallisation of not only a past set of values but a value system from the group in power which controls the object and that does not have to align with minority communities. The AHD is socially constructed and it has no more relevance than any other narratives, it just happens to be the story of those creating and defining what is 'heritage', and thus it seems to be the 'real' one. As a matter of fact, it is true for some of us but not to all and this should

allow us to see that other perspectives exist even if contradicting ours. Sharon Macdonald (2013) points towards the distinction between history and memory whereby history becomes a channel for the elite's narrative while memory is 'seen as relatively unmediated and transparent in its very subjectivity' (*Ibid*, 13). Material and stories should be seen as vehicles of meaning, and therefore it should not surprise us that they (the outer shape) change over time to retain the same (inner) meaning. Heritage is therefore a process, not a thing.

Let's return to the example developed in this chapter, Riordan's representation of the Underworld. Why would one instance, one version, of the story be more significant than another? We can recognise the values in Homer's *Odyssey* but we can also see those, and different ones, in Vergil's *Aeneid*. These authors show variations on the same ideas, but they are informed by different cultural backgrounds in other things. What we should ask ourselves is why those specific versions are more important than other narratives predating the *Odyssey*? What makes those stories obviously part of our heritage and more relevant than others? A lot can be argued in terms of the cultural impact those stories had then and now, their 'original' nature as setting an archetype for many other narratives or even the technical prowess of the work itself but those are subjective notions defined in the present according to what we value as good and important. In the end, Smith puts it quite well when she says that,

> *heritage is heritage* because *it is subjected to the management and preservation/conservation process, not because it simply 'is'. This process does not just 'find' sites and places to manage and protect. It is itself a constitutive cultural process that identifies those things and places that can be given meaning and value as 'heritage', reflecting contemporary cultural and social values, debates and aspirations*. (Smith 2006, 3)

The story of the *Odyssey* is a masterpiece because of the excellence of it but *we* are the judges of that, and we could have elected other stories and authors. It simply was, and is, relevant to our belief system and the society we live in, but it does not make it any more significant than another version. The *Odyssey* is a masterpiece but to us only. Smith, talking about tribal women, notes that heritage is not 'static', but rather it is the opposite, a process which not only carries past values to the present but also creates new ones (*Ibid*, 47-48). Acknowledging that statement allows us to make a step in the right direction in seeing the potential power of popular culture and the actual relevance of its content as it intrinsically does the same thing. In this view, popular culture and for that matter fantasy as a genre is tremendously important for the heritage sector as it is a very volatile environment, exacerbated by the age of mass communication, where ideas and feelings of belonging to specific communities or exclusion from them, run against a specific, unique, and authorised discourse to form a plethora of other possibilities. Popular culture is in the process of reshaping all the outward materiality of the heritage landscape as we have known it in order to fit the current values that various people and their communities hold.

However, a serious concern that has been raised due to this use made by the industry behind popular culture is the large-scale commodification of our heritage and the potential loss of authenticity and diversity resulting from that phenomenon. Sharon Macdonald articulates this understanding of the risk around the current standardisation that heritage knows in this area, where the same patterns, stories, and visuals are used and reused through different media to sell what people want which lead to a loss of diversity, a loss of 'authenticity' from popular culture as compared to heritage which is 'something real' (Macdonald 2003, 109-110).

However, is that really the case? Macdonald notes the strangeness of this assertion as commodification is an external process and does not change the intrinsic value of authenticity (*Ibid*, 119). To recognise one version of a narrative above others, be it the authorised one or the one that sells the most, does not impact the intrinsic authentic value of the story itself. It does put a price on it, and thus it tends to shut down all other versions as being wrong or false, but that is only the case in a binary understanding of heritage where truth opposes falseness as opposed to acknowledging a vast landscape of interpretations and representations of our heritage. As a matter of fact, the very nature of popular culture as a worldwide stage for artistic expression is what I argue makes it a place of diversity rather than not. Using the term 'authentic' is what is problematic in the first place as it is also relative and socially constructed. Many versions of myths exist, and disentangling which is more true than another or more authentic is not only difficult but pointless. 'Which version is "right"? Pick the one you like best! But that doesn't mean the other versions are wrong. They are just different.' (Rick Riordan n.d. b).

Returning to the narrative of the Underworld*,* what is important to note is the flexible nature of the story as having no clear starting point outside of artificially defining one as we have done here with the work of Homer and being an amalgamation of several concepts over centuries, spanning many cultures. Where should we locate the origin of the story, the singularity of creation that can be defined as the authentic one? We could also reverse the exercise, and from Homer go backwards in time and identify the prime myths surrounding concepts such as the 'River Styx' or the location of the Underworld in the west. Fidelity and authenticity are subjective to our definitions. These narratives evolved and incorporated contemporary elements of the authors drawing from them. These stories embody archetypes, certain types of values which are found in the surroundings of the authors. Taking the example of the ferry as an elevator shows us that both embody in essence the value of displacement while both are contemporary to each author, however the meaning behind it remains the same.

Therefore, *The Lightning Thief* can be understood as a myth narrative, as well as a pure retelling of old narratives. It re-actualises the heritage landscape by swapping old values for their contemporary counterparts. It is conservative to some degree as the narratives are not discarded for new ones but rather are changed to fit what it should look like today. If the world changes and our languages and values do so with it, the myths of old need to be updated. Popular culture can be understood as such a motor. As Riordan likes to remind us, people see what they want to see (Riordan 2006, 293), what is familiar, and *The Lightning Thief* is an attempt to think about how the gods would have looked and behaved if they were contemporary to us the readers. If our notion of heritage is based on an authorised discourse and a concept of absolute authenticity, rather than a social and relative approach, we risk to see Riordan's work as a child's play with precious assets rather than what it is; a process of participation in heritage by building upon a common landscape of ideas which is not intrinsically important but rather act as a vehicle for what people value as important. The rather interesting thing about *The Lightning Thief* is the fact that Riordan knows that, and he plays with the malleable notion of heritage while leaving it quite open for many interpretations.

> "Wait" [Percy] *told Chiron. "You're telling me there's such a thing as God."*
> *"Well, now," Chiron said. "God—capital* G*, God. That's a different matter altogether. We shan't deal with the metaphysical."*
> *"Metaphysical? But you were just talking about—"*

"Ah, gods, plural, as in, great beings that control the forces of nature and human endeavors: the immortal gods of Olympus. That's a smaller matter." (*Ibid*, 67)

Riordan does not remove the idea of a more monotheistic understanding of a creator which shows that he uses Greek mythology to represent gods that are not the absolute ruler of the world but only one possible representation and understanding of the inner heart of Western civilization. Anyone would not necessarily see the Greek gods but rather the supernatural forces respective of their culture, their heritage, which points towards the idea that what matters, what is shared between viewers and witnesses, is the inner values of the scene while the outward appearance changes according to the best way the meaning can be conveyed given one's own predisposed set of values. This concept can be further demonstrated when Percy is surprised to see a preacher in the Greek Underworld given that he believes in something different.

"But if he's a preacher," [Percy] *said, "and he believes in a different hell…"*
Grover shrugged. "Who says he's seeing this place the way we're seeing it? Humans see what they want to see. You're very stubborn—er, persistent, that way." (*Ibid*, 293)

Riordan, through his narrative, offers a place of coexistence between different belief systems where he searches for a common ground experienced by all. He draws on the intermingled heritage pools our society has inherited, the similarities between them but also the fact that we will all end up in the same place at the end of our lives, be it as the son of Poseidon or as a Christian.

Chapter 4: Neurodiversity

I thought about Haley's struggle with ADHD and dyslexia. I imagined the faces of all the students I'd taught who had these same conditions. I felt the need to honor them, to let them know that being different wasn't a bad thing. Intelligence wasn't always measurable with a piece of paper and a number two pencil. Talent didn't come in only one flavor. (Rick Riordan 2005)

Percy Jackson and the Neutral-Value Model of Disability

The way Rick Riordan approaches subjects such as ADHD and dyslexia within Percy Jackson's saga is quite original and is worth delving more into in order to understand how he uses heritage, as well as everything else we have seen so far, to arrive at this quite unique picture. Riordan does not shy away from putting a large emphasis on the non-normative nature of our heroes. It is important to realise that what Riordan is working on is not an image where traits such as ADHD and dyslexia are seen as part of the established norm but rather part of something bigger which accords greatly with a neurodiversity understanding of these neurological traits. In many different instances, characters of *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan 2006) remind Percy, and us by the same token, of this situation.

> *"[...] What I'm trying to say … you're not normal, Percy. That's nothing to be—"* (*Ibid*, 22)

> *"Because I'm not normal,"* [Percy] *said.*
> *"You say that as if it's a bad thing, Percy. But you don't realize how important you are.* [...]*"* (*Ibid*, 39)

> *Annabeth frowned. "Don't you get it, Percy? You* are *home. This is the only safe place on earth for kids like us."*
> *"You mean, mentally disturbed kids?"*
> *"I mean* not human*. Not totally human, anyway. Half-human."* (*Ibid*, 94)

While these different characters emphasise the idea of being 'different' to Percy, they also try to persuade our hero that it is not a bad thing in itself, a notion that Percy struggles to come to terms with in the early part of *The Lightning Thief.* Indeed, he has a lot of problems accepting the idea of not being normal because to him it is equated to both being dysfunctional and in pain. The whole monomyth cycle discussed in Chapter 2 embodies this movement from rejecting who Percy is in society at an instant in time, to living through the death of this image, and reuniting with a new perspective on life and on himself. The missing part of the puzzle, in order to understand such a change, is the understanding behind these neurodivergent traits.

A very important notion behind the monomyth cycle is the creation of two separate worlds, one that we are familiar with and another with different rules which is embodied by the myth realm. In the former, ADHD and dyslexia are both seen as pathologies which disable the afflicted person suffering them. They lower the ability of our heroes to focus in class or trouble them when they have to read. These traits are pictured as disabling, bad, and affecting our heroes in a negative way overall. However,

using the Neutral-Value Model of disability introduced in Chapter 1 from Barnes (2016) and extended by Chapman (2020), we saw that this picture can be broadened and nuanced. This particular model enables us to consider these neurological traits as neutral intrinsically which in turn allows us to analyse the experience of the neurodivergent on a person-to-person basis. 'Local' well-being is limited physically or temporally, it is experienced with respect to a feature or a limited time-period, while 'global' well-being is an overall state which is not inherent to one specific feature or time period. Barnes herself articulates it the best when giving the example of her sister's running habits (Barnes 2016, 78-118) where her sister, not being a morning person and getting blisters on her feet, experiences some local bads with respect to a feature, namely her feet and the pain due to blisters, as well as with respect to a limited time period, namely being miserable just after woken up so early to run. However, while these are examples of local bads experienced by Barnes' sister, *overall* she experiences a global good in the form of being healthier and happier thanks to her running habits. A notion in itself not tied to a specific feature nor a specific time period, it is a global behaviour. In the end, global well-being is dictated by the amount of local goods and bads in such a way that if the goods outweigh the bads, then well-being is overall positive or *vice versa.*

In the fictional work of Rick Riordan, the common world leads Percy to experience ADHD and dyslexia negatively on a local level with respect to various features in his own internal context and the external context that society at large represents which in turn amounts to a global bad in our demigod's case. Not only his well-being with respect to features such as reading or concentrating in class are negative but they overall amount to a global bad. This is the issue at hand, because regardless of how ADHD and dyslexia are experienced on a local level, good or bad, if they amount to a global bad they will drastically impact, worsen, and probably disable the person in question. It is easy to see how this process leads to an impasse for the person, as if nothing changes in the local bads and goods with respect to internal or external features, then there is no possibility to shift the global well-being. These kinds of changes are extremely hard to initiate in a society which has a large momentum going against it and for young people who are influenced greatly by how they are seen by others. However, *The Lightning Thief* offers a solution to this problem.

Riordan, by creating the myth world at the centre of the monomyth, creates the possibility of a second external context removed from the one the readers are immersed in, namely our real world. This means it offers the possibility to experience a whole new set of local goods and bads with respect to features of the myth world. Indeed, we have already seen in Chapter 2, how disability tends to be reverted when the threshold between these two worlds is crossed, where the strong emphasis on demigods being dysfunctional in the real world is reverted when they move to the myth world. This tendency towards dysfunction is further illustrated by the role the media play in the *The Lightning Thief* which recount to the 'normal' Americans every deed and fit of strength of Percy through the lens of the pathology paradigm, thus every action is seen as abnormal and sick, picturing Percy Jackson as an out-of-control and dangerous kid on the run from the police. When Percy draws nearer to the threshold back home, it triggers an inversion cycle where the media change their understanding of everything that has happened so far by casting a new light on the events and see that '[p]oor little Percy Jackson wasn't an international criminal after all' (Riordan 2006, 334).

This change of external context results in a shift of the global well-being within the myth world moving from bad to good or at least to a better situation when compared with the beginning of *The*

Lightning Thief. When Percy crosses to the myth world, local goods now outweigh the local bads which is why his global well-being changes which has an impactful influence on everything else. Indeed, thanks to this change in global well-being, and Percy's prolonged immersion within the myth world, local well-beings are starting to also shift where what was once experienced as bad with respect to a specific feature, such as being hyper-active, is now experienced as good, ADHD and dyslexia are now perceived differently, in a better light. Therefore, upon reentering the common world, Percy's situation does not revert back to what it was initially because of the different amount of local goods and bads he now exhibits. Effectively, this results in a change of global well-being in the real world too which, within our monomyth understanding of *The Lightning Thief*, represents the healing part of his world.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, many more iterations of the monomyth cycle, and this interaction with a new external context, will be necessary for a total shift of Percy's global well-being in the common world. However, we can already see the positive impact it has on Percy's global well-being, as his initiation in the myth world allows him the space to change some of his local well-beings to be able to handle the real world. This shows us that these neurological traits are not bad or good intrinsically, but they change with the context. This is an understanding that is only possible when seeing them as neutral, giving them the possibility to change over time with different interpretations. It is not about pathologizing these neurological traits as soon as they are seen and experienced as non-normative, but seeing that there is more to them, more than the binary distinction of 'Am I normal, or not?'. Yes neurodivergent traits can lead to a global bad but neurotypical traits can too, and they can also lead to a global good. This is in the end how the boon brought back by Percy affects him by changing how he views himself. It points towards how society is the main disabling effect in Percy's case, but obviously, this can be different for others who present a different agglomeration of local bads and goods.

Reception

An important part of this conversation is how the subject was actually received by people in general, either people being neurodivergent themselves or not. Debates surrounding the representation of neurodiversity in Riordan's work are widespread, and fans as well as detractors think and argue around this representation. Maybe due to the international fame of Rick Riordan as an author of young fantasy since its debut in the genre in 2005 with *The Lightning Thief*, as well as the large universe his series encompass, conversations and debates are as ardent today as they were ten or fifteen years back. This should only grow larger with the upcoming release of a new adaptation of the Percy Jackson's saga as a series, on the 20th of December 2023, on the Disney plus streaming platform. However, I am not proposing to do an exhaustive survey of these online conversations, nor a statistical analysis of them, as this would far exceed the time available for the present research topic, but rather to look at positive *and* negative reactions *The Lightning Thief* raises surrounding common themes that touch upon the representation and 'authenticity' of neurodiversity. Are people happy, curious, or even mad at what they read about in Riordan's book? Why do some people experience this story as a good, or a bad experience? In other words, why would it improve their experience, or views on these neurological traits?

Platforms such as 'Reddit' and 'Riordan Fandom' are interesting places to look for conversations around *The Lightning Thief* as they offer spaces of exchange to freely share with one another within large

communities. Indeed, Reddit is a very large and popular platform for online communities and happens to house the 'r/camphalfblood' (Reddit n.d.), a community comprising approximately 110,000 members, where people for the past decade and more have been discussing various topics around Riordan's work. Various posts over the years have gravitated around judging this representation of neurodiversity in *The Lightning Thief*. Some feel empowered by the representation of ADHD and dyslexia in the books (u/[deleted] 2013), while others are outraged by this seemingly terrible depiction (AsherCross-Culen 2021; u/Sunflower-Spirals 2022). Upon further reading of these posts, I can gather that a lot has to do with understanding ADHD and dyslexia not as monolithic traits but as the very large neurological landscapes that they represent. Each and everyone, while having similarities between their conditions, exhibit ADHD and dyslexia differently. What one experiences may differ greatly from another's experience and Percy's own. What is striking in a Neutral-Value understanding of ADHD and these posts is how people, in essence, try to relate to Percy's behaviour by either comparing the way ADHD and dyslexia are exhibited in themselves and Percy, and how this affects their own local and global well-being if they are themselves neurodivergent, or comparing it to what they think ADHD and dyslexia are about if they are neurotypical. While some may find that our hero clearly behaves and reacts in the way they would, others point at how unlikely his behaviour is. It amazes me how such a story has the power to raise so many emotions from the public and about subjects such as neurodiversity, gender, or even religion that usually tend to be on the fringes of what neurotypical people, and 'normal' people to a broader extent, in general think and experience on a daily basis.

The main issue here is that Riordan based Percy, and his struggles with ADHD and dyslexia, on his own son's experience which obviously will be very different from others[4]. This leads some conversations to discuss the 'trueness' and 'authenticity' of ADHD and dyslexia represented, which in itself is very interesting and relevant from a heritage standpoint as the notion of 'authenticity' and 'fakeness' are quite similar. To some degree, there is a need for part of the fanbase to explain how these demigods actually do not have ADHD and dyslexia because they are not authentic. One of the popular way to explain those neurological traits away from the 'real' ones, in our common day world, is by building upon the idea that demigods are in fact misdiagnosed by human doctors who mislabel the demigods' innate nature because they cannot comprehend what are actually their combat skill and reflexes, as well as the fact that their brain is wired to ancient Greek in the first place (u/Leoram1217 2022). This is also based around the fact that a lot of the negative impacts these traits can have are not as present in the story and in our heroes adventure as some would like them to be (AsherCross-Cullen 2021). Annabeth being a prime example of that, even though she herself appears at times to be hindered by her dyslexia (Riordan 2006, 171), she nonetheless is a brilliant girl who reads a lot, and some fans cannot understand why that is the case when compared to themselves or their understanding of dyslexia for example. However, I would disagree with this specific understanding as *The Lightning Thief* was created in the first place around the condition of Riordan's son and because usually the attenuation, or complete reversal, of the negative effects due to these neurological traits is caused by our heroes stepping into the myth world which represent a different paradigm away from the pathology paradigm that readers are most used to

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[4] The struggles of Riordan's son, not only influenced, but constituted the origin of creation of *The Lightning Thief*, and its emphasis on ADHD and dyslexia, can be read about in the following interview 'The Learning-Disabled Hero' (Rick Riordan 2005).

and that is what influences their local well-beings. As a matter of fact, moving away from *The Lightning Thief* for just one second, and looking at the whole of Riordan's work, shows us that more and more characters in his universe represent different ways ADHD and dyslexia can manifest themselves, with Leo Valdez and Frank Zhang, from *The Heroes of Olympus* (2010-2014), being extremes of this representation with the former showing what is an extreme manifestation of ADHD while the latter does not have it. But why is that interesting? In a neutral value understanding of the story, I think that these characters offer various ways local traits can combine to form a global behaviour, and they offer various representations to the readers who may, or may not, find his or her favourite character, a character to whom they can relate to. However, this also points towards intrinsic issues that differ from character to character, who are faced with different obstacles because of their neurodivergent traits.

From Heritage to Neurodiversity

Similarities can be drawn between issues surrounding the heritage sector, as seen in Chapter 3, and issues at stake with neurodiversity and neurodivergent people. In 'From Neurodiversity to Neurodivergence: The Role of Epistemic and Cognitive Marginalization', Mylène Legault *et al.* (2021) raise very familiar issues for students of heritage. The most prominent one surrounding the role of the 'neurotypical', or the people with the psychological type and behaviours that are considered the norm and their role in creating 'epistemic injustices'.

> *Epistemic injustices are situations where persons who do not belong to a dominant social group are denied (or simply not offered) access to or participation in the shared epistemic resources. The various concepts and knowledge base available do not represent their lived experience (hermeneutic injustice), and their testimony is given less weight to shape the collective epistemic resources (testimonial injustice).* (*Ibid*, 12854)

Strikingly similar to the situation faced by an understanding of heritage through the lens of the Authoritative Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006) which boils down to simple facts; a privileged group defines a norm on their pattern of living and beliefs, rejecting in the process all other forms of heritage and behaviours, creating minorities and injustices in both cases. In other words, what we are witnessing is a small group of people diverging from a predefined norm and suffering for it. Their identity is not recognised as valid, or typical of the environment they live in, and they are asked to adapt to what is 'normal'. Therefore, if our goal is to bridge the gap that appeared by the definition of norms and authoritative discourses one needs to not only work on openness but inclusivity more broadly. This distinction is well encapsulated by Legault when writing that '[t]he question is often "are they capable of accessing resources?" rather than "are the resources accessible?"'. There is a very large difference when asking those questions because it goes beyond processes of openness where one stands ready to welcome people in, but rather invert this process and look at the reasons behind why one cannot access something or even does not desire to. As a matter of fact, emotions towards these processes such as apathy or even anger are probably better suited to trigger conversations around inclusivity rather than simply openness. Epistemic injustices appear everytime the material and tools given to people are inadequate or geared towards a very specific part of the population. In 'Forget about "Heritage": Place,

Ethics and the Faro Convention', Schofield (2015) points towards the same systemic injustices when talking about actively engaging minorities in the management of their heritage.

> *The problem of course is that these processes might themselves be excluding and thus discriminatory. People who are illiterate cannot make written representations; people with mental health issues may not feel able to attend what would seem intimidating planning committee meetings, or even talk with a planning officer. Either we accept that or we explore new ways to achieve public engagement, ways that allow everyone to participate— (Ibid, 201)*

Therefore, using heritage in a way that is not 'classical' nor authoritative, through for example new ways of articulating ideas, away from the heritage experts, as we see here through popular culture, can allow minorities to express their values and their heritage. As much as it is important for minorities to have their heritage recognised as 'heritage' in the eye of the West and our definitions of heritage to help them overcome that oppression, neurodivergent people need their own identities recognised as valid identities in our understanding of these neurological traits in the West. In that regard, Riordan participates in a process of heritagisation where the past is used to vehicle meaning in the present. Therefore, when Schofield points towards the divisive nature of the word 'heritage' and the idea that better alternatives might be possible, I think that one such alternative can be glimpsed through *The Lightning Thief.* The similarities between issues with neurodiversity and heritage are not chanced upon but rather point towards an intrinsic phenomenon that are one and the same. Values and ways to express one's own experience and identity are transmitted through heritage and narratives and both can be used to reinforce one another.

In essence, what *The Lightning Thief* offers to us is to experience, through Percy's monomyth cycle, two different global well-beings. It offers a window for the readers to see themselves through a different paradigm. Changes happening in Percy can be reflected on the reader base, sprouting new communities online of people that share similar traits and values. Reading about the adventures of a fictitious character who struggles with the same problems and who solves and grows from it can allow the reader to gain the same reward without going through the cycle physically. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, escapism in this case allows the reader to move to a different space where he or she can re-evaluate his or her experience and that is achieved through the same way heritage is done. The past is used in the present in order to present and vehicle one's own identity as being legitimate and valid.

Conclusions

Like the Greek stories of old, The Lightning Thief is an attempt to explain a natural phenomenon — a myth to help my son make sense of who he is. (Rick Riordan 2005)

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to show the inherent potential present in popular culture, and more specifically in fantasy writing, to address social issues such as the representation of neurodiversity in our Western civilization through the use of our heritage landscape. This was mostly studied through *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan 2006), the first of a fifteen-book saga, divided over three specific cycles, and written by Rick Riordan. The main research question driving this paper was *how popular culture represents neurodiversity through its appropriation and re-imagination of ancient myths?* In the course of exploring this topic, I have defined a specific analytical framework, studied Riordan's narrative, and discussed, in links with the scientific literature, the outcomes of such a use of our heritage landscape in regards to the heritage sector as well as neurodiversity.

I chose to use a framework composed of three distinct parts in order to study *The Lightning Thief*. Campbell's concept of the 'monomyth' (Campbell 1972) was used to explore the narrative's structure, due to its relevance to both myths and popular culture, while fantasy as a genre was shown to be a fertile ground when it comes to discussions around non-normative subjects, but also because of its use in heritage practices as a medium for meaning-making by making use of the past in the present. However, in order to fully understand the events happening within Riordan's narrative, I introduced concepts around neurodiversity as I argued that what we witness unfolding in *The Lightning Thief* is not a representation of superheroes with superpowers, or a world removed from ours with different rules, but rather the superposition of the myth world onto our own common day world.

The most important aspect arising from the use of the monomyth as a lens to study Riordan's fantasy relates to the creation of two different realms, one of the commons and one of the myths, with a specific way to travel from one to the other which is not embodied through a physical gateway but by a mental change of perspective. A paradigm shift away from the pathology paradigm in the common world to the neurodiversity paradigm in the myth world is what it takes to transport oneself to the realm of myths where the movement from one to the other helps Percy heal his inner self. However, what we should retain from this particular way to move from one world to another is that both realms are in essence the *same* world. Why is that important? These demigods are not superheroes, they have traits and capacities that are not special intrinsically, neither in the common nor the myth world. Therefore it shows that understanding and working with neurodiversity is not a fantasy that can only exist somewhere far removed, inaccessible to all but a select few, but rather it is here and now if one is willing to change his or her perception of the world. In essence, the myth world gives a place to escape for our hero where Percy's global well-being changes for the better which in turn impacts his local well-beings in a similar, positive way. As a matter of fact, the broader saga encompassing *The Lightning Thief* shows us that Riordan creates a story with more than one representation of ADHD and dyslexia by creating various characters that each have a specific way to manifest these neurological traits.

Riordan articulates this concept through the use of heritage, making sure to anchor his narrative within what is closest to us. In that way, heritage is seen as intangible and as a process not tied to any

physical receptacle in the first place. He builds upon our common heritage landscape and uses past narratives to articulate in the present new meanings and values. More importantly, he creates a fluid environment where many different interpretations of the same objects, narratives, and events can coexist by allowing people to have different understanding of the events. Moreover, I argued that the similarities between issues in heritage and neurodiversity are due to the same intrinsic process that is inherent to defining identities and one's own history and place in society.

Heritage studies is not a monolithic field and can only be experienced through other fields, it is intrinsically interdisciplinary and dependent on the specific shape heritage takes and the use made of it. We need to move away from a binary understanding of heritage as 'true' or 'false', the idea to preserve the 'real' as opposed to the 'fake'. As a heritage student, one should keep in mind that heritage is more than its materiality and monumentality but that it can take a variety of forms, of which I argue popular culture and fantasy is a facilitator. The artistic freedom given to people to create, re-imagine, and share different narratives from the pre-established, authoritative one, is what makes it a prime contender to social debates and a place for those marginalised. Fantasy is being used in a way that used to be ascribed to the mythical tale, the tale of wonder, or the holy text, as it gives an otherworldly perspective from which to look down on our own actions, ethics, and lives to a broader extent. It opens the possibility to offer multiple narratives on the same object or story, it offers a lens through which to look at various identities. The use of popular culture and fantasy has nothing to do with 'low' or 'high' culture, but it is about culture in the making, a process of meaning-making and heritagisation that cannot be ignored.

This research project has remained a small and contained endeavour around the world of Riordan, but I hope that it showed the intrinsic potential present in popular culture and fantasy writing when it comes to heritage and neurodiversity. There are a plethora of narratives available in popular culture which deserve to be taken seriously by the heritage expert as it is more than a simple play with our heritage landscape but an ever developing and growing ground for understanding *what* is heritage and *how* to use it for the larger population. As a matter of fact, my research project could be extended on a much broader scale to the materiality of popular culture and use made of its components in the daily life of their owners where the books themselves, collections, and all other kinds of objects are used in similar ways than religious and sacred objects before that. The natural next step of my research would be to dedicate a broader and more systematic data collection and analysis of the reader base. Creating and using questionnaires sent out to a large pool of people would enable better insights on the effects of the story on people's well-being but it would also be the space for asking feedback on what they think of this particular use of the heritage landscape. Moreover, an entire area of research is available around the performative arts around these popular topics such as those embodied in role playing, musics, or even cosplay. These areas are all deserving of our attention as a representation of how heritage is used, re-used, and displayed on a daily basis away from the authoritative narratives, the expert understanding on what defines heritage and how it should be preserved. More importantly, we should focus on how people experience these uses and how they impact not only their well-being but also how they impact and structure their lives.

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