

The Lightning Thief as Modernized & Neurodiverse Mythology

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With the release of the Percy Jackson and the Olympians live-adaptation series on Disney's streaming service, generations new and old will be able to visit (or revisit) the age-old question of what it means to be a hero. Released in 2005, the first part of this series - *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan - paved the way for legions of young readers to find themselves engrossed in another realm that seemingly lies beneath our own, at least in the imagination. This realm recontextualizes the ancient Greek myths in a more contemporary setting, with equally updated themes and elements. In *The Lightning Thief*, however, monsters and angry deities aren't the only forces that the young demigods in the novel must face. When it comes to Percy Jackson's world, neurodivergence plays a big role in shaping the life of a hero, even if they may struggle on the other side of "the Mist." This is an important part of the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series that has allowed young neurodivergent readers to discover not just heroism in themselves, but community in others just like them (as the author of this essay can attest). Almost twenty years since its release, *The Lightning Thief* still makes a strong case for its place in young adult, fantasy, and neurodivergent literature, as well as a potential source of scholarly analysis in fields such as mythology, literary studies, and pedagogy.

Neurodiverse young adult literature (NYAL) is a genre which has been studied and discussed by previous scholars, including Miriam DesHarnais and Lisa M. Barker in their article "Life and Literature Beneath the Surface: Using Neurodiverse Young Adult Literature as Mentor Texts for Narrative Writing." They outline the impact that NYAL books can have when it comes to facilitating discussions about mental health and neurodivergence. Specifically, the article points out that when writing neurodiverse characters, "writers often make compelling, unconventional choices with structure, format, syntax, punctuation, and diction" (DesHarnais and Barker 82). This atypical approach to writing, according to the authors, is an important part of what makes a book a mentor text, a model for students and young writers to try out the stylistic choices provided within. Mentor texts also serve as ways to conduct "teacher-facilitated whole-class discussion," allowing students to come together in a healthy environment to make sense of and interpret a given text (DesHarnais and Barker 83).

Any "unconventional" stylistic choices in *The Lightning Thief* might not be readily apparent at first glance. This could be related to Riordan

primarily working with second-hand knowledge of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as the story was originally written for his son. However, Percy's narration, as well as his self-stated qualities, show interesting word choices that serve as possible examples of his attention deficiencies. This is first seen when Percy is dealing with a bully, Nancy, after she dumps food into his lap; he attempts to "count to ten" to calm himself down, as a school counselor instructed, "But I was so mad my mind went blank. A wave roared in my ears. I don't remember touching her, but the next thing I knew, Nancy was sitting on her butt in the fountain" (Riordan 9). The lack of scene detail, coupled with a shift in action, is referred to in-text by Percy as "if a puzzle piece fell out of the universe and left me staring at the blank place behind it," and he was told that this was an aspect of his ADHD causing him to "misinterpret" events (Riordan 11). This is, in fact, a common element of ADHD, though Percy casts doubt on whether or not he is truly "misinterpreting things" - a lack of detail does not necessarily mean something has been remembered incorrectly.

In Percy Jackson's world, neurodivergence doesn't just have a place—it has important meaning and relevance to a demigod. However, this does not hold the same for his life on the other side of the Mist. Percy, as the main character, is open and unapologetic about his various diagnoses. However, he also laments how much difficulty this brings him when it comes to school, especially in the case of his mythology teacher Mr. Brunner: "...Despite the fact that I have dyslexia and attention deficit disorder and I had never made above a C- in my life ... [Mr. Brunner] didn't expect me to be as good; he expected me to be better" (Riordan 7). Even though Percy faces considerable challenges in learning, with little success, he is still held to high expectations by the adults in his life, surpassing even those of his peers.

Being able to see Percy struggling in this way is crucial for students with similar behavioral difficulties, as it allows them to relate to his low self-esteem at this point in the book. For example, rejection sensitivity (not an official symptom, but a widely reported facet of ADHD) is featured during a prominent moment early on in the novel after Percy is told by Mr. Brunner that Yancy Academy "'isn't the right place'" for him. Percy says, "Here was my favorite teacher, in front of the class, telling me I couldn't handle it. After saying he believed in me all year, now he was telling me I was destined to get kicked out" (Riordan 22). Though one could discern later on that Mr. Brunner likely just made a poor choice of words at the moment, the reader is familiar enough with Percy's current mental health and self-esteem that it becomes obvious just how much he is feeling rejected by the one teacher he felt he was able to trust.

In addition to unique stylistic choices, NYAL can also help readers reframe their understanding of seemingly opposing concepts, such as

“disability” vs. “normalcy.” Jen Scott Curwood’s “Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature” compares novels where the main characters exhibit various conditions (ranging between physiological, mental, and emotional) to analyze how these works construct disability. When looking at the novel *Jerk*, California, she notes that the main character Sam/Jack (who has Tourette’s syndrome) “feels profound anger and isolation from the world” as a result of stigma from both his stepfather and others (Curwood 22). This is a common experience for young people with undefined mental illnesses and neurodivergence who find themselves stuck between childhood and adulthood, unable to fit into one or the other. It’s only when he finds himself around people who see him as “smart, capable, and worthy of love” that Sam/Jack begins to rediscover his identity (Curwood PG#). Namely, “His stepfather and classmates, in particular, reinforced a normalcy narrative that privileged those who could control their bodies,” until Sam/Jack realized “he can write his own disability counternarrative” (Curwood 22). This is the power that stories that center disabled and neurodivergent voices can have: the ability to show young readers that they are in charge of their own stories, not any outsider.

The entirety of *The Lightning Thief* serves as a sort of “disability counternarrative” - in fact, it is heavily tied to the “hero’s journey” that Percy must follow as he is introduced to the realm of gods and monsters. As he becomes acquainted with Camp Half-Blood, he is informed by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena, that his neurodivergence is a result of his godly heritage. As an example, she states that “as for the attention problems, that’s because you see too much, Percy, not too little” (Riordan 88). Annabeth’s words mirror a common understanding of ADHD as an inability to regulate attention, rather than an absence, in spite of its name (Pritchard). The adults in his life who refuse to offer him meaningful assistance therefore are not allies, but are also specifically antagonistic towards him because of his status as a semi-divine hero. According to Annabeth, most of the campers have gone through similar experiences with adults not accommodating their needs, making Camp Half-Blood the only place where young heroes such as Percy and Annabeth can find some sort of sanctuary.

In addition to dialogues on neurodiversity and disability, the benefits of reading *The Lightning Thief* as an adaptation of Greek mythology, and specifically one written for adolescents, cannot go unnoticed. This “re-writing” of ancient texts is discussed by Alexander Leighton in his article “Re-Discovering Mythology: Adaptation and Appropriation in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians Saga.” In particular, Leighton calls attention to how unimportant it is to young readers that a certain original text came first before

any retelling because the appearance of these appropriated stories are almost always the first experience such readers have with these ancient myths. It's not just that young readers connect to these stories because they're technically more "new," however. Leighton points out that along with a more modern setting "Many of the values, outcomes and associated morality of the Greek myths are revisited and given a new perspective, reflecting more closely perhaps the morals, values and attitudes of the contemporary culture" (63). This provides added complexity to the narrative, while also allowing the young reader to make more meaningful connections to the original myths.

Not only are the settings and themes updated, but so are the actions and motivations of the central heroes of the story. According to Leighton, "Many heroes of Greek tragedy and Greek mythology made poor choices which ultimately signalled their doom and many readers may expect Percy's fate to be similar" (66); this is not strictly the case in *The Lightning Thief*, however. While Percy is still shown to be impulsive and rash on several occasions (such as mailing Medusa's severed head to Mount Olympus, home of the gods), he and his friends often make more tactful and nuanced decisions when dealing with elements of the mythological world. Updating these characters' motives for a contemporary young audience "allows readers to make different inter-textual associations and form meanings and understandings of their own" (Leighton 66). This comes up often, for example, in the relationship between Percy and Annabeth, who at first exhibit tension with each other because their parents, Poseidon and Athena, have an infamously bitter rivalry stemming back thousands of years.

During a particularly brusque moment in the novel, as they approach St. Louis, Percy wonders out loud to Annabeth if their parents ever had to cooperate on something. Eventually, she comes up with an answer: "'I guess... the chariot,' she said tentatively. 'My mom invented it, but Poseidon created horses out of the crests of waves. So they had to work together to make it complete'" (Riordan 202). Because their survival depends on their cooperation with each other, Percy and Annabeth have to look to the past to find ways in which they both can have common ground. In this "adaptation" of Greek mythology, the heroic figures have considerable insight into the history and nature of the gods that the "original" Greek heroes would not have been as likely to possess. Such a level of critical thinking and thoughtfulness is influential to young readers who may not immediately connect with the choices made by heroes such as Oedipus or Perseus. This characterization of Percy and Annabeth is important because it combines the knowledge of the "root narratives" with a contemporary reimagining of said stories in such a way that "may inspire readers to seek out and explore their adaptations' hypotexts" (Leighton 67). In other words, adaptations of ancient texts may serve as a gateway for young readers to discover these origins.

For young readers, being able to see oneself reflected positively in a story is precisely why representation in literature is so vital. When paired with fantasy elements, such a story can establish itself as a narrative of empowerment. This allows young adults to see themselves in ways they may not have seen yet in their own lives and inspires them to find or create places of community in order to find others like themselves. The *Lightning Thief* is no exception to this with its cornerstone acceptance of neurodivergence, a stylistic understanding of a neurodivergent mind, and an embracing of neurodiverse young adults as heroes-in-training. The novel responds to the themes and assumptions made by its ancient source material in a way that informs the characterization of the central heroes of *The Lightning Thief* and, as a result, the appreciation of the audience in both the adapted text and the original sources. Throughout the entirety of the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series (as well as its sequels), we also see how Riordan discusses other themes such race, gender identity, and sexual orientation by using the same principles he uses for neurodivergent narratives; that is, at the end of the day, a hero is a hero, no matter who they are, and one's differences can form an important part of this heroic identity as long as one finds the right place to be themselves.

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