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Chapter 9
"Autism-Like?" Neurodivergence and the Premodern World

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> Do you ever think about autistic medieval nuns. I'm pretty sure there were some, it's statistically impossible there weren't nuns that were on the spectrum. Other nuns at the monastery looking at them like "Sister Margary always looks to be in peace and so content with this life, why cannot I be such a good nun as well" and then immediately start grieving about the sin of envy or some shit.

> Meanwhile Margary has zero fucking idea that anyone is staring at her, busy thinking "oh man I sure fucking love having the same meal at the same time every single day, and then going back to my simple repetitive work where Nobody Fucking Talks At Me all day."[1] — "homunculus-argument"

To be brutally honest, I never had thought about autistic medieval nuns. In spite of the apparent incongruity of this comparison, made on the micro-blogging site *Tumblr* in late 2022, it nevertheless struck a chord, with over 25,000 "reactions" from other users, the vast majority of which have been positive. For "homunculus-argument," who themselves identifies as neurodivergent, the appeal of an imagined, medieval monastic life is not to be found specifically in its religious vocation, but in the potential that it offers as a place that is amenable to the needs of an autistic individual promise of a life that is more attuned to specifically neurodivergent desires and habits.[2] To an extent, it is perhaps surprising that this comparison had never occurred to me, given that it brings together several of what one might term (with a wry nod) my "special interests." I'm a medievalist by training, am also autistic, and—while I wouldn't go so far as to call myself an

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1 homunculus-argument, "Do you ever think about autistic medieval nuns," Tumblr, August 25, 2022, https://homunculus-argument.tumblr.com/post/691914135797170176/do-you-ever-think-about-autistic-medieval-nuns.

2 Posting under the display name Nyöhähähhäh, the Tumblr biography of "homunculus-argument" reads: "A feral gremlin that mostly posts about finnish grammar, having ADHD, and random story ideas that I have floating around which I won't get around to writing because of my ADHD. Grown-ass man who is still on tumblr." https://www.tumblr.com/homunculus-argument.

expert in the topic—have even written, however briefly, about women religious. Encountering this Tumblr post, during the first stages of research for what would eventually become this chapter, made concrete a task that otherwise felt rather abstract, one which I've been undertaking for several years: attempting to reconcile, rather than delineate, two of my identities, as an autistic person who also works in Medieval Studies.[3]

In an ironic twist, my own autism diagnosis arrived the day before I graduated from my own undergraduate degree. For several years, I did nothing with this information, determined that I should keep my "academic" and "personal" lives as distinct from one another as possible; my ultimate decision to begin discussing my autism diagnosis with others was motivated not by anything relating to my then-nascent PhD research, but rather by an excruciating series of social slip-ups. Nevertheless, from the very first blog post that I published on the topic, in mid-2017, many of the most engaged, thoughtful, and considered discussions that I entered into were with fellow medievalists, and in the intervening years, these conversations helped to encourage me to explore how these two parts of my world might inform and relate to one another.[4] It was in this vein that I contributed to the long-running #DisMed panel series at the 2018 Leeds International Medieval Congress, and by 2022, the cat was firmly out of the bag. Working to support autistic students transitioning to study at the University of Exeter, and teaching courses across Medieval Studies, I came to ask myself the same question that *homunculus-argument* would later ask: what if autism *could* be relevant to the study of the medieval world, and what if Medieval Studies could stand to benefit from considering autism as a framework?

In this chapter, I am not aiming to provide a conclusive answer to either of these questions. Much ground-breaking advocacy work has been done by the increasing number of autistic medievalists who have discussed how autism has informed and shaped their own experience, among them Hope Doherty-Harrison and Helen Swift.[5] In spite of the personal note on which it began, this chapter

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3 In its original form, this chapter was produced as a contribution to a meeting of the "REsearchers and Students on Neurodiversity" (REaSoN) group at the University of Exeter. I am grateful to Lena Worwood and Sumeiyah Koya for giving me the opportunity to work on this topic for the first time, and to the editors of this volume for welcoming my contribution to this volume and for their invaluable feedback.

4 Edward Mills, "My Experience with Asperger's: Studying, Socialising, and Starting to Speak Up," *Anglo-Normantics*, April 17, 2017, https://edward-mills.co.uk/2017/04/17/my-experience-with-aspergers-studying-socialising-and-starting-to-speak-up.

5 See Doherty-Harrison's chapter in this volume. Helen Swift (@poulethelen), "It's a year since I received my assessment report that confirmed what I was totally sure/completely unsure that #ActuallyAutistically I knew. A little thread . . .," Twitter (now X), January 31, 2022, https://twitter.

does not look to add another voice to these invaluable interventions. Instead, it looks to examine the relationship between autism and the shared object of our research—the pre-modern world—and to ask whether terms such as "autism" and "neurodivergence" might have a productive role to play as a lens through which to interrogate pre-modern texts. Neurodivergent medievalists, I suggest, are well-positioned to draw critically on the vocabulary of the medical present in order to examine more productively the medieval past. With a specific focus on literary material, I will suggest that, when framed appropriately, neurodiversity certainly has a role to play in creating new understandings of premodern texts, with the notion of "autism-like"—a term modelled on Judith Bennett's "lesbian-like"—allowing us to circumvent the methodological impasse of debates surrounding anachronism. I will also look to demonstrate the implications of this approach in a specifically teaching-focused context, with a view to dismantling some of the systemic barriers surrounding access to knowledge and (as the title of this volume implies) creating a more accessible academy.

Neurodivergence and the Medieval World: Questions of Approach

Since the development of the paradigm of "neurodiversity"—a term that originally referred primarily to autism but has since broadened to include a wide range of other conditions such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder, and dyslexia—there has been an increasing interest in reading literary-historical sources through the lenses that it offers. Such work frequently serves an emancipatory purpose: as Julia Miele Rodas suggests in the foreword to her 2018 work *Autistic Disturbances*, "by identifying autistic expressive characteristics [. . .] and exploring the challenges and possibilities belonging to these modes within this context, perhaps readers will begin to see autistic expression as a ubiquitous presence in a broad range of cultural artifacts."[6] In the

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com/poulethelen/status/1488296263686803458; Helen Swift (@poulethelen), "Summer academic in-person conference season can be invigorating and joyful. It can also be stressful and exhausting for many reasons; I limit myself to one . . .," Twitter (now X), June 7, 2023, https://twitter.com/poulethelen/status/1666371631285927936, accessed December 11, 2024.

6 Julia Miele Rodas, *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe* (University of Michigan Press, 2018), 30. Scholars working in early modern studies have shown a particular interest in such readings: see (among others) Bradley J. Irish, *Literary Neurodiversity Studies: Current and Future Directions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), which offers a "neu-

historical sphere, speculation surrounding specific individuals is clearest in the work of Michael Fitzgerald, whose multiple publications in the *Journal of Medical Biography since* the early 2000s each asked whether a single historical figure "was" in some way neurodivergent.[7] Such positivist approaches, however, are rarely carried through to the ultimate conclusion of a definitive diagnosis: one recent examination of Hildegard of Bingen, for instance, notes merely that she "manifested many of the traits listed in DSM-IV TR's criteria for an ASD diagnosis and that as an adult she lived in an environment similar to that which modern clinicians create to treat ASD."[8]

Questions of retrospective diagnosis and anachronism—whether it is productive or appropriate to pronounce historical individuals as "neurodivergent," as "autistic," or as having "autistic traits"—inevitably take a position on a fundamental methodological dispute, one that Monica Green has neatly described as "the historian's dilemma": the tension between an emic approach, where "our task [is] to reconstruct the world as historical participants perceived it," and an etic one, where we might endeavor "to use the methods and categories of modern science to find out what "really" happened, as judged from an external frame of reference, that of modern science."[9] Green's considered advocacy for an "etic" approach, however, must be offered appropriate context: namely, that the field of plague studies, which Green has played such a vital role in reinvigorating in recent years, has recently acquired precisely the "modern frame of reference" that allows for such an approach to be adopted. The presence of *Yersina pestis* bacteria in the tooth enamel of plague victims (excavated from medieval plague pits) could have no analogue in historical studies of neurodivergence, which cannot be inferred in the same way from archaeological investigation. Instead, social and cultural histories of disability have tended towards adopting an "emic" approach, one that focuses on understanding the lived

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rological reading" of *Othello*, and the ongoing AMEND (eArly Modern European NeuroDivergence) network, led by Laura Seymour at Swansea University. In medieval studies, George Manning's "NeuroNorse" project is exploring neurodivergence in the context of Old Norse literature.

7 Michael Fitzgerald, "Did Lord Byron Have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder?" *Journal of Medical Biography* 9, no. 1 (February 2001): 31–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/096777200100900110; Michael Fitzgerald, "Did Ramanujan Have Asperger's Disorder or Asperger's Syndrome?" *Journal of Medical Biography* 10, no. 3 (August 2002): 167–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/096777200201000311; Muhammad Arshad and Michael Fitzgerald, "Did Michelangelo (1475–1564) Have High-Functioning Autism?" *Journal of Medical Biography* 12, no. 2 (May 2004): 115–20, https://doi.org/10.1177/096777200401200212.

8 Patricia Ranft, "Ruminations on Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and Autism," *Journal of Medical Biography* 22, no. 2 (May 2014): 113, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967772013479283.

9 Monica H. Green, "Taking 'Pandemic' Seriously: Making the Black Death Global," *The Medieval Globe* 1 (2015): 51.

experience of historical figures with reference to the world in which they lived, all while attempting to avoid potentially distorting present-day perspectives. This viewpoint is defended in powerful terms in one recent study of medieval attitudes to learning disability. Eliza Buhrer notes that:

> [. . .] modern learning difficulties would have had little significance in medieval culture because medieval ideas about intelligence, cognition, learning, and the knowledge and skills one needs to navigate day-to-day life do not map neatly onto modern categories. As a result, it does not make sense to try to reconstruct the history of learning difficulties by combing monastic chronicles for accounts of distracted novices, searching illuminated manuscripts for the work of dyslexic scribes, or attempting to unearth modern medical concepts in medieval texts.[10]

Buhrer's interest instead lies in "exploring how people in the Middle Ages understood intellectual variance," essentially emphasizing the study of the past on its own terms. As she notes, the concept of an individual being "dyslexic" would have mattered very little in the medieval world, where "literacy was neither widespread nor expected."

Given the lack of any such "frame of reference" for what we might term "medieval neurodivergence," it would appear that labelling premodern individuals as unambiguously autistic or neurodivergent is a task best left un-attempted: ill-informed at best, and actively dangerous at worst. These perspectives, however, are unsatisfactory in one respect: in emphasizing the alterity of the Middle Ages, they run the risk of neglecting precisely the continuity of existence that the neurodiversity movement has worked to emphasize. How can we recognize and acknowledge the fact that autistic and neurodivergent people (by any definition) existed in the Middle Ages, while still respecting and understanding the very different worldviews that informed how they were seen and saw themselves? One possible model to follow in this respect can be found in premodern queer theory, for which questions surrounding medieval "homosexuality" have acted as a touchpoint for questions surrounding anachronism in a similar fashion to neurodivergence. In particular, the work of Judith Bennett suggests one potential route out of this epistemological impasse, through her coinage of the term "lesbian-like" in 2000, which sought to describe "(medieval) women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who

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10 Eliza Buhrer, "Learning Difficulties: Ideas about Intellectual Diversity in Medieval Thought and Culture," in *A Cultural History of Disability in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jonathan Hsy, Tory V. Pearman, and Joshua R. Eyler (Bloomsbury, 2020), 118.

lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women."[11] Bennett is circumspect regarding the limitations of her term, and makes no claim for it being a panacea, noting that "while it can usefully broaden the field [of premodern sexuality], it cannot cover it." Nevertheless, she makes a compelling case for the term's ability to "expand lesbian history beyond its narrow and quite unworkable focus on women who engaged in certifiable same-sex genital contact."[12] Perhaps the most powerful aspect of "lesbian-like" as a tool, for Bennett, lies in its potential to create a more inclusive and flexible framework for analyzing premodern same-sex relations:

> The approaches of intellectual history and cultural critics have suggested that the Middle Ages were either indifferent toward lesbian practice or hostile to it. A social history that includes ("lesbian-like" women) might draw a different picture [. . .] medieval society might have generally been, in fact, filled with possibilities for lesbian expression.[13]

In the two decades since Bennett formulated the term, significant progress has been made in writing this new "social history." Bennett's formulation has spawned a wide-ranging critical response, with multiple volumes deploying the concept as a core part of their analyses, and (more recently) new terms being coined that bear a debt to Bennett, including "trans-like."[14] There is nevertheless an apparent reluctance to extend this useful critical device to neurodivergent histories, with terms such as "ADHD-like" and "autism-like" being deployed largely in the presentist sphere, and almost exclusively in medical literature.[15]

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11 Judith M. Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1/2 (2000): 9–10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704629.
12 Ibid., 14, 16.
13 Ibid., 22.
14 On the response to Bennett's coinage of the term, see the essays in Noreen Giffney, Michelle M. Sauer, and Diane Watt, eds., *The Lesbian Premodern* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For "trans-like," see J.D. Sargan, "What Could a Trans Book History Look Like? Toward Trans Codicology," *Criticism* 64, no. 3/4 (2022): 571–86, https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2022.a899738.
15 The term "autism-like" is frequently used in medical studies, often describing observed behaviors in mice (rather than humans) as part of an effort to identify purported genetic influences on autism. For one such study, see Valerie J. Bolivar, Samantha R. Walters, and Jennifer L. Phoenix, "Assessing Autism-like Behavior in Mice: Variations in Social Interactions among Inbred Strains," *Behavioural Brain Research* 176, no. 1 (2007): 21–26, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbr.2006.09.007. The authors of this study do not precisely define the term "autism-like," although their study, as a whole, places emphasis on "low levels of social behaviour" and "poor social learning." For a rare case of "ADHD-like" in a historical context, see Marcelo M Victor et al., "Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Ancient Greece: The *Obtuse Man* of Theophrastus," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 52, no. 6 (June 2018): 509–13, https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867418769743.

Why, then, might a considered application of the term "autism-like"—one that, to use Bennett's formulation, sees it not as a "blunt instrument," but uses it in "playful, wise, and careful ways"[16]—prove useful? Why might we want to open up to the idea that medieval society might have been "filled with possibilities for *autistic* expression?" Most obviously, the term "autism-like" offers a way of drawing on the "frame of reference" offered by etic terminology such as "autism" while still acknowledging that they are essentially modern constructions. With its emphasis on actions, rather than identities, "autism-like" makes no effort to "claim" individuals as autistic, and recognizes that "the 'recovering' of an autistic subject from the assumption of a neurotypical identity is as likely to be an act of violent seizure as it is an act of cultural liberation."[17] Nevertheless, it also echoes the implication in *homunculus-argument*'s Tumblr post that people who would today be described as "autistic" have always existed. In the example that follows—which, it should be acknowledged, explores a male and canonical figure from the well-explored pantheon of Arthurian romance—I would like to explore how the concept of "autism-like" might be productively mobilized. Just as "lesbian-like" challenges monolithic interpretations of same-sex desire in the premodern period, the lens of "autism-like" might allow for new interpretive lenses to be opened up, through which the subjective experiences of individuals might be understood in a more nuanced fashion.

"Autism-like" in Practice: Percival and Lancelot

While the specific concept of "autism-like" has not previously been applied to medieval literary texts, Arthuriana has served as a site of intervention by practitioners in what is known as the "neurohumanities." In her reading of Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal* ("Story of the Grail," ca. 1185), Paula Leverage argued that "signs of autism" are present in Perceval, the young knight who is progressively acculturated into the Arthurian world throughout Chrétien's unfinished text. Specifically, Leverage emphasizes Perceval's deficiency in "theory of mind," (ToM) or "the attribution of mental states and intentions to others that affords us the possibility of adapting our behaviour in response."[18] Analyzing a number of episodes

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16 Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," 24.

17 Rodas, *Autistic Disturbances*, 12.

18 Paula Leverage, "Is Perceval Autistic? Theory of Mind in the *Conte Del Graal*," in *Theory of Mind and Literature*, ed. Paula Leverage et al. (Purdue University Press, 2011), 140, 135–36.

from the text, from Perceval's misguided treatment of the first lady he meets to his failure to enquire into the cause of the Fisher King's injuries, Leverage argues that Perceval's "lack of ability to read his mother's gestures and her mental state is the same cognitive deficiency that prevents him from engaging in the social exchange of question and answer."[19] Leverage's argument can be criticized from a number of perspectives. Most notably, the assumption that autistic individuals carry some form of "cognitive deficit" and lack a defined "theory of mind"—an assumption on which Leverage's edited volume is largely predicated—has been called into question since 2011, and runs counter to many of the concepts at the heart of the neurodiversity movement. In particular, the "double empathy problem," first explored in 2012, has proposed that difficulties in attributing specific cognitive states to others (colloquially known as "mind-reading") between autistic and non-autistic individuals are bidirectional, rather than monodirectional.[20] This does not condemn theory-of-mind-inspired readings of literary texts to critical oblivion: indeed, as Leverage notes,

> One of the advantages of considering Perceval as autistic is that this description is relevant to many scenes that in the past have been interpreted separately, using in each case different models to explain Perceval's behaviour. In approaching Chrétien de Troyes's story of Perceval from the perspective of ToM, we highlight the importance in this romance of communication between the characters, and, more significantly, the failure of that communication.[21]

"Autism-like," I suggest, allows us to retain the benefits of having a single framework for analysis, without necessarily being wedded to the potentially problematic concept of "theory of mind". Indeed, as we shall see, the paradigm of "autism-like" accounts for a much wider variety of behaviors associated with neurodivergence than "mind-reading," and in so doing opens up other Arthurian texts to neurodivergent readings. What, then, might such a reading look like?

Towards the end of the Old French *Lancelot* (ca. 1215–1220), the longest text of the enormously influential Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian prose romances, the titular character returns to the castle of his friend (and, in several interpretations of the text, lover), Galehot.[22] Expecting to find his companion, Lancelot is distraught at his absence, and experiences a period of severe mental agitation:

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19 Ibid., 144.

20 Damian Milton, "On the Ontological Status of Autism: The 'Double Empathy Problem,'" *Disability & Society* 27, no. 6 (August 2012): 883–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008.

21 Leverage, "Is Perceval Autistic?" 145.

22 Galehot, a former enemy of Arthur turned close ally and companion to Lancelot, is not to be confused with Galahad, Lancelot's son who ultimately succeeds in the Grail quest.

Et quant il vint en Sorelois, si fu recheus a trop grant joye, mais de Gallehout n'i trouva il mie, car il s'en estoit alés entre lui et Lyoniel por lui querre. Et lors fu Lanselos tous diervés ne ne gardoit l'eure k'il foursenast, car il ne savoit a cui conforter et tous les joies c'on li faisoit li desplaisoient. Une nuit s'embla des gens Galehot a mie nuit, si n'en porta que sa cote et ses braies et sa cemise. Et de la grant angousse k'il avoit li nés escrevés en son lit et si avoit sainnié de sanc plainne escuielle.

[And when [Lancelot] came to Sorelois, he was welcomed with great joy, but he could not find Galehot, because he and Lionel had gone out to seek him. And so Lancelot was very disappointed and did not know when he might lose his senses, unsure who (else) could comfort him; and it seemed that all of the pleasantries that were offered to him did not please him. One night Lancelot left Galehot's men at midnight, wearing only his nightshirt, tunic and stockings; owing to the great anguish that he was feeling, he had struck his nose against his bed and bled almost a bowlful of blood.][23]

Lancelot's flight from Sorelois has attracted relatively little comment: in one of the few treatments of the episode, Sarah Louise Lowson reads Lancelot's response in Galenic terms as an instance of *mania*, noting simply that "the strain [of separation from Guinevere] is too much for him."[24] The dominant lens through which Lancelot's numerous "episodes" throughout the cycle have been read has been that of "madness," with Lancelot's behavior in instances such as at Sorelois representing an aberration from otherwise-normative attributes. In her seminal reading of several instances of Lancelot's "madness," Sylvia Huot characterizes such moments in the narrative as manifestations of the "essential conflict at the core of his being:" namely, the tension between Lancelot's love for Guinevere and his betrayal of her through his fathering of Galahad.[25] Huot presents these moments as discrete episodes into which Lancelot variously "lapses," or which have "onsets," and which contrast with otherwise socially-laudable qualities: Lancelot, ex-

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23 The standard edition of the prose *Lancelot* is Alexandre Micha, ed., *Lancelot: Roman en prose du XIIIᵉ siècle*, 9 vols (Droz, 1978–1983). In Micha's edition, which provides the so-called "long version" of the text, the episode above is chapter XXXIV (vol. 3, 249). The version cited above is from the "short version" of the cycle, based on a modernized orthography of H.O. Sommer, ed., *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances, IV: Le livre de Lancelot del lac, II* (Carnegie Institution, 1911). The "short version" has been chosen as it corresponds most closely to the text found in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 111, whose illustration of the episode is analyzed below. The translation is my own.

24 Sarah Louise Lowson, "*Daguenet Le Fol*: A Lesser-Known Representation of Madness in the Thirteenth Century French Arthurian Prose Romances" (PhD diss., Durham University, 2004), 49–50. For an altogether more cursory treatment, focusing solely on the "distress" experienced by Lancelot, see Leslie C. Brook, "Some Old French Nose-Bleeds," *French Studies Bulletin* 8, no. 27 (Summer 1988): 3–4, https://doi.org/10.1093/frebul/8.27.3.

25 Sylvia Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 52.

amined through the eyes of others who see him, is notable for the "disjunction between (his) physical stature and his mental *disintegration*" (emphasis added).[26] A lens of "autism-like" allows us to complement these readings of how others perceive Lancelot with a second angle of approach, one through which we can explore Lancelot's own internal turmoil. In the description of Lancelot's confusion at Sorelois, the reader is given privileged insight into Lancelot's mind: we are told that he is *diervés* ("disappointed") at Galehot's absence, that he is aware of the possibility that he might "lose his senses" (*forsener*), and that he cannot find solace in any activity.[27] Even the most outwardly alarming manifestation of what others see as his "madness" is justified, as Lancelot's self-inflicted nosebleed is explained as a consequence of his *grant angousse* ("great anguish").

Reading Lancelot as "autism-like" opens a new realm of possibility: namely, that Lancelot's behavior pattern here is consistent with a meltdown. The experience of a "meltdown"—a loss of control over one's behavior characterized by the UK's National Autistic Society as "an intense response to an overwhelming situation"—is one familiar to many autistic adults. As Laura Foran Lewis and Kailey Stevens note in their "descriptive phenomenological study" of meltdowns in adults, "Typical characteristics of autistic meltdowns [. . .] include crying, screaming, verbal or nonverbal requests, and self-harm behaviours." Lewis and Stevens identify six "themes" that "capture the essence of the experience of having a meltdown," namely "feeling overwhelmed, experiencing extreme emotions, losing logic, grasping for control, finding a release, and minimizing harm."[28] The behavior of the prose *Lancelot*'s titular character reflects many of these patterns, and occurs in response to a number of changes in circumstance. Lancelot finds the trauma of his recent separation from Guinevere, which has already placed great strain on him, compounded further by the absence of precisely the individual from whom he had, on previous occasions, sought "comfort." His response to this situation is certainly "intense," and is marked by precisely the manifestations of distress that are common in meltdowns.

Identifying a consistency between modern understandings of autistic meltdowns and the fictional thirteenth-century knight, who operates within the distant Arthurian imaginary, need not amount to describing Lancelot himself as autistic. The lens

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26 Huot, *Madness in Medieval French literature*, abstract [n.p.] (for "lapses"); 51 (for "onset"); 53 (for "disintegration").

27 The term "reader" here is used in a very broad sense, encompassing the possibility for oral group reading of the text. On the "reading vs. hearing" debate as applied to the prose *Lancelot*, see Carol Dover, "The Book of Lancelot," in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. Carol Dover (Boydell and Brewer, 2003), 90, n. 16.

28 Laura Foran Lewis and Kailey Stevens, "The Lived Experience of Meltdowns for Autistic Adults," *Autism* 27, no. 6 (January 2023): 1818, 1820, https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221145783.

of "autism-like" allows for a focus on Lancelot's behaviors and emotions, rather than his identity; perhaps the least ambiguous statement that could be made in this context is that they, to borrow a phrase from Rodas, "resonate with autism."[29] Viewing Lancelot's actions in this way does, however, allow his character to be read in a more consistent manner than the "madness" frame permits. Far from being aberrations, or periodically recurring flaws in the character of an otherwise-unimpeachable figure, moments such as Lancelot's distress at Sorelois emerge as contributing to his character, rather than representing an aberration from it. In one particularly striking illustration of the Sorelois passage, produced in the late fifteenth century, Lancelot is pictured walking away from Sorelois castle, his hand held to his chest in anguish. The majority of the illustration is occupied by the castle itself, and by the gossiping "gens Galehot" as they gesture towards him, but Lancelot, as the largest figure in the image, nevertheless occupies a significant portion of the frame as he wanders—barefoot and clad only in his nightshirt—towards the forest. Lancelot's observers, with their sly glances and hand-gestures in his direction, arguably draw the eye of a viewer of this manuscript in the first instance, but an "autism-like" framing allows us to consider in greater depth the figure at the heart of the image.[30]

Implications of "Autism-Like"

The example of Lancelot suggests that the critical lens of autism, filtered through the broad sense of "autism-like," might be a productive means through which to conduct literary and social history in its own right. This need not, however, be the endpoint of "autism-like" as a tool for scholarship. Judith Bennett's exploration of "lesbian-like, " on which "autism-like" is built, also emphasizes the term's role as a rallying-cry for present-day concerns:

> I want to participate in the creation of histories that can have meaning for those women who today identify as lesbians, bisexuals, queers, or otherwise. This search has parallels in the social histories of other minorities, and it speaks to the emancipatory possibilities of history. Some historians would downplay this aspect of their work; I am not among them [. . .] In its best forms, history transcends the antiquarian impulse, seeking, of course, to understand the past in its proper contexts but seeking also to play with the ways in which the past illuminates the present and the present illuminates the past.[31]

29 Rodas, *Autistic Disturbances*, 29.

30 BNF, MS français 111, fol. 120r. A digitized version of this folio is available at https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10502007v/f243.item.

31 Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," 4.

In the same way, my increasing acknowledgement of (and engagement with) the tools of "autism-like" have had a significant impact on how I shape my teaching and day-to-day practice. The medievalist Richard Utz has lamented how as an academic discipline, Medieval Studies has historically attempted to distance itself from self-professed "enthusiasts" such as practitioners of Live-Action Role-Playing (LARP), and laments what he identifies from as early as 1850 as "ever more sedulous, positivist, and socially unambitious endeavors [. . .] the closing of the academic mind towards the publics who had entrusted them with researching the past."[32] Utz's self-declared "manifesto" for welcoming medievalism into the canon of Medieval Studies might usefully be extended to neurodivergence: when its inherent anachronisms are embraced and acknowledged, rather than dismissed as "presentist" (and hence irrelevant), the results can be both productive and inclusive. While diagnoses of "autism," and frameworks such as "neurodivergence," are modern social constructions, there is still value in identifying the presence of individuals with "autism-like" behaviors, whether they be historical figures in their own right (as with Hildegard of Bingen) or emerge from the period's creative production (such as Lancelot). Carolyn Dinshaw aptly suggests that medievalists should "think further [. . .] about the sources of scholarly research and knowledge, and the potentials for opening them up beyond the paradigm of professionalism that has rigorously delimited scholarship from any other more explicitly affective enterprise."[33]

Indeed, as an autistic medievalist, it's difficult for me not to feel a sense of kinship with the individuals discussed in this chapter; acknowledging this connection, rather than shunning it, would allow us in turn open up our discipline to students whose relationship to the medieval world is not simply one of empirical, positivist detachment. When working with incoming autistic students at Exeter—in Medieval Studies or as a personal tutor—I acknowledge my affective engagement with the medieval world and share my diagnosis from the outset, in the interest of creating a welcoming and accessible space for all students. This does in fact explain why directions to my office—infamously difficult-to-find as it is—are supported with visual references, which I include in my email signature.[34]

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32 Richard Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Arc Humanities Press, 2017), 19.

33 Carolyn Dinshaw*, How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Duke University Press, 2012), xii.

34 On the "transition" from school to university for autistic students, see Edward Mills, "Supporting Neurodiverse Students through the Transition to University," *WonkHE*, March 21, 2023, https://wonkhe.com/blogs/supporting-neurodiverse-students-through-the-transition-to-university. The visual guide to finding my office at Exeter is available at https://sway.office.com/I5IqkQ TyE839C1HT.

The world of Medieval Studies certainly can seem disconnected from the urgent discussions of accessibility and inclusion that the essays in this volume so urgently explore, and which I work to incorporate in my teaching practice. Nevertheless, by making use of the critical tools available to us, we as medievalists—and particularly as disabled medievalists—are in a position to create precisely the welcoming and engaged academy that many of us are working towards. In this context, a term such as "autism-like" may allow us to remain alert to the risks of presentism and to our responsibility not to appropriate for our own means the identities of others, while embracing the unique insights and critical perspectives that neurodivergent-informed readings can offer historians and literary scholars alike. The experiences of isolation, exclusion, and otherness—all familiar facets of life for many autistic people around the world today—are just as prevalent in the experiences attributed to Lancelot, and working with this connection need not only be an act of quaint similarity-spotting. If premodern neurodiversity existed, then there is surely no harm, after all, in looking to find it, and engaging with it on its own terms.