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Abstract

While there has been a noticeable increase in contemporary romance novels with neurodiversity representation, historical romance novels with autistic-coded characters should not be overlooked. This paper aims to analyse the representation of neurodiversity in two historical romance novels: The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie by Jennifer Ashley and The Lawrence Browne Affair by Cat Sebastian, arguing that today, the "madness" of the protagonists would be recognised as neurodivergence, specifically autism. However, the love interests consistently disagree with the perception that the protagonists are mad, arguing instead that their minds are simply different, and they encourage the protagonists to embrace these differences and their unique expressions of emotions. Consequently, the novels offer

contemporary readers who are familiar with the contemporary notion of autism a historical context for the ongoing debate on whether autism should be considered a disorder, or a form of neurodivergence. Additionally, there is a contrasting representation of autism as genius, as the protagonists are characterised as both madmen and geniuses. The novels also depict four forms of isolation – voluntary, involuntary, emotional and physical — as a consequence of the protagonists' neurodivergence, which they believe to have inherited from their abusive fathers.

Keywords: historical romance, neurodiversity, madness, autism, heroes

“What will you do with yourself when you grasp that your mind is only different, not deranged?”: Madness and Neurodivergent Heroes in Historical Romance Novels

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Introduction — Why historical romance?

Over the past seven years, there has been a noticeable increase in contemporary romance novels featuring neurodivergent characters and particularly autism; the most well-known examples being novels by Helen Hoang and Chloe Liese. Of interest for this paper however are two historical romances: *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* (2009) by Jennifer Ashley and *The Lawrence Browne Affair* (2017) by Cat Sebastian, in which both male protagonists are considered to be “mad”. However, both Ashley and Sebastian have confirmed that the protagonists would today be considered autistic, and they have intentionally written them as autistic.

The central argument of this paper is that autism is characterized as a form of neurodivergence through the actions of the love interests and their perceptions of the protagonists as different rather than mad. This distinction challenges prevailing stigmas associated with autism and highlights the importance of acceptance and understanding as the foundation of meaningful relationships between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. By illustrating how these perceptions can lead to a more compassionate view of neurodivergence, the paper underscores the potential contribution of the romance genre to re-evaluating societal attitudes towards autism and promoting inclusivity.

The love interests’ perception is consistently contrasted with the secondary characters' interpretations, who perceive the protagonists' behaviours as madness. Furthermore, the novels explore the interplay between the protagonists’ neurodivergence and their consequent isolation. The objective of this paper is to analyse how these themes are intertwined within the historical setting of the novels, which are products of popular culture, written by authors and read by readers with contemporary knowledge of autism. It aims to evaluate the potential literary contributions of this analysis to the ongoing discourse on autism and the neurodiversity movement.

Popular culture is one of the most accessible ways of engaging with history and historical practices. It is also one of the most common sources of knowledge of history for the

general reader (Hackett and Coghlan 2021), including historical representation of what today is known as neurodiversity. One specific form of popular culture which presents history to the contemporary reader is the historical romance novel. In these novels, the author intentionally sets the plot during a historical period from the one in which it was published (Ficke 2021, 118). It is this distance in time which allows for —even requires— a different representation of neurodiversity than a contemporary novel, and consequently, a different way of reading these neurodivergent-coded characters.

Kristin Ramsdell defines popular historical romance novels as “love stories with historical settings” (2012, 185). Furthermore, there are no specific rules or guidelines controlling the extent of the historical in a historical romance (Ficke 2021, 118), and as argued by Lisa Fletcher, “historical romance fiction is constituted by an awareness of the instability of its narratological and ideological foundations,” (Fletcher 2008, 14). Diane Elam interprets this in the context of postmodernism as “confronting the past as predicament”, rethinking the past in the present instead (Elam 1992, 53). Historical romance, with its blend of creative freedom and the responsibility to maintain some degree of historical accuracy, is also being written today by authors such as Ashley and Sebastian, who have contemporary knowledge of autism and neurodiversity. Consequently, it offers a unique opportunity for representing neurodiversity in a historical context, thus effectively affirming that neurodiversity has always existed throughout history.

However, the representation of disability in romance is still dominated by tragedy-model perspectives, challenging the disabled protagonist’s worthiness of love and therefore undermining the very essence of the genre (Cheyne 2019, 138). A common theme in novels with disability representation is the cure narrative, in which the disabled character is “cured” by the “normal” character. Cheyne points out that in romance novels, this narrative tends to evoke two very different futures: a joyful future with a loving partner, where disability has been eradicated or ameliorated; and an unhappy and lonely future to which disability adheres (Cheyne 2019, 142). A typical pattern for romance cure narratives is that the cure comes at the end of the story and is used to intensify the happiness of the ending – the protagonists each found their perfect partner and their lives have been transformed for the better by overcoming their disability (Cheyne 2019, 143). Sebastian however seems to be intentionally challenging this narrative:

Lawrence in *The Lawrence Browne Affair* will always have anxiety and autism

spectrum issues, but he learns how to structure his life so he can thrive. He also has a supportive partner and a pet who functions as a service animal (Sebastian 2022). Because the most fundamental principle of neurodiversity is that variation in human minds is natural and not due to a deficit which can be cured, neurodiversity-informed readings can be "a cure" for the cure narrative.

According to Lisa J. Hackett and Jo Coghlan (2021), historical romance allows authors to address historical social issues, which in turn provides the opportunity for readers to engage with and learn about history outside of the education system through these novels. For example, Beverly Jenkins, a romance author known for her contribution to diversity in the genre, hopes that her novels provide her readers with "edutainment," a literary fusion of education and entertainment (Dandridge 2010). The educational aspect is especially present in *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* through the depiction of Ian's institutionalisation in an asylum and his treatment as a patient and after his release. Moreover, romance novels can also address and challenge stereotypes. As argued by Ria Cheyne, "[r]omance novels with disabled heroes or heroines require the reader to enter into an imaginative engagement with a world in which disabled people are not only worthy and desiring of love, but succeed in securing it," (2019, 139). Therefore, by the most crucial element of the genre, which is a guaranteed happy ending for the main couple, romance novels have the potential to challenge one of the most problematic stereotypes about autistic people – that they are unable to love and find happiness in a fulfilling romantic relationship.

Theoretical framework — the neurodiversity paradigm

Traditionally, in the modern West, differences in human bodies and minds have been interpreted through the pathology paradigm, which has its ideological foundation in medicine and normativity. The pathology paradigm is a framework that views deviations from the norm, particularly in relation to mental health, neurodevelopment, or behaviour, as deficits or disorders that need to be "fixed" or cured. It assumes that certain conditions, such as autism or ADHD, are inherently negative or abnormal and should be treated or corrected to align with societal expectations of normality (Walker 2021; Chapman 2023). This paradigm has been extensively criticized by scholars as well as activists and self-advocates for reinforcing stigma and failing to recognize the value and strengths of individuals who think or function differently (Walker 2021; Chapman 2023, Price 2022, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. 2020, Milton 2020). It

is from this opposition that the neurodiversity paradigm, which is based on the principle of neurodiversity, has emerged.

Neurodiversity refers to the diversity of human minds and the countless different ways they function. It is a neutral biological fact (Walker 34). It is a concept which argues that "people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one 'right' way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits" (Baumer and Frueh 2021). Though most frequently associated with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the neurodiversity umbrella also covers dyslexia, dyspraxia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and also includes neurological conditions such as Meares-Irlen syndrome, Tourette's syndrome, and synaesthesia ('Neurodiversity & Neurodivergent: Meanings, Types & Examples'). There are also acquired forms of neurodivergence, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, or alterations in the brain caused by drugs and medication (Walker 2021, 38). Therefore, the core idea of the neurodiversity paradigm can be summarised as "different, not disordered." As will be argued in this paper, it is also how the love interests in *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and *The Lawrence Brown Affair* see the protagonists.

Reading autistic-coded characters (not only) in historical novels

One of the aims of this paper is to argue that despite how the two protagonists are perceived by society, they should not be read as having a disorder, nor is there an attempt to diagnose them, since the very word "diagnosis" serves the pathology paradigm and is contradictory to a literary paper that argues for reading through a neurodivergent lens. Melanie Yergeau argues that autism is "a mode of becoming, is continuous motion that defies the clinical," (Yergeau 2017, 43) and that "autistic people themselves have their own unique mental states, beliefs, and desires" (Yergeau 2013). Yergeau's conceptualisation of autistic identity is exactly how autism is represented in *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and *The Lawrence Brown Affair*. In both stories, the reader follows an autistic-coded protagonist who is slowly discovering the full potential of his neurodivergent mind and learning to accept his unique personality, all while trying to overcome the stigma of madness and falling in love with the love interest.

What makes autism identification, definition and delineation possible at all—including identifying autistic-coded literary characters such as Ian and Lawrence— is autism's cultural product, its text. Rodas sees this as an

> autism diagnosis game [which] is embedded in the inseparability of autistic text from autistic identity; the clinical and the aesthetic are fully interwoven practices, mutually informed dimensions of autism discourse, a circumstance that contributes to understanding the complex web of critical responses to the expansive set of literatures that suggest an autistic aesthetic. (Rodas 2018, 13)

The question then becomes whether such text resonates with autistic readers, instead of whether it was written by an autistic author (Rodas 2018, 29). Rab Houston and Uta Frith claim in their book *Autism in History* that it is possible to conclude that a person from the past was autistic based on contemporary knowledge and criteria (cited in Fitzgerald 2004, 12). This line of thought contends that autistic people and what today is known as the autism spectrum with all its various characteristics have always existed. "Autism" is simply the most recent widely used label. By identifying common characteristics of autism in these historical romance novels and exploring the challenges and opportunities these traits present within the fictional societies of the narratives, readers can begin to recognize autistic expression as a pervasive element in all forms of cultural products (Rodas 2018, 30). Moreover, by knowing what characteristics define an autistic character, readers will be able to more accurately read and interpret autistic-coded characters, or characters in historical novels which cannot be explicitly written as autistic due to the lack of relevant language in a different time.

This perspective extends to the process of diagnosing a mental health condition, where the everyday behaviour of the person provides clues that form the basis for the diagnosis. The literary genre most useful for this is biography (Fitzgerald 2004, 14). *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and *The Lawrence Browne Affair* focus so much on the protagonists that they read almost as fictional biographies. Romance can therefore serve a similar purpose as biography by providing detailed insights into the lives and minds of its main protagonists. However, it achieves this through fictional narratives rather than factual accounts. Moreover, no other genre by their most essential characteristics directly contradicts several of the most perpetuated autism stereotypes — that autistic people are incapable of feeling complex emotions and being happy in a fulfilling romantic relationship.

In considering the difference between fact and fiction in romance novels versus biographies, it's important to acknowledge that ultimately, both genres serve a similar purpose when exploring neurodiversity. Biographies—and memoirs—provide factual, often linear accounts of individuals' lives, offering readers a concrete look at neurodivergent experiences grounded in real-world events[1]. This fact-based narrative can give readers insight into the socio-historical contexts surrounding neurodivergent individuals, revealing how societal norms, stigma, and even medical understandings of conditions like autism evolved over time and across cultures. However, depending on the author's writing style and the amount of factual detail included, some readers may find it challenging to relate to the experiences presented in biographies and memoirs.

Fiction, including romance novels, brings a different, equally valuable perspective. Through imaginative storytelling, romance can depict neurodivergence in a way that resonates emotionally and subjectively with readers. While the narratives are fictional, the experiences portrayed can offer intimate insights into the thought processes and feelings of neurodivergent characters. These fictions can humanize and destigmatize neurodiversity in ways that factual accounts might not always accomplish, given the focus in fiction on empathy and personal connection. In this way, while biographies offer factual legitimacy and a grounded perspective, romance novels provide a powerful narrative space for empathy and engagement, making neurodivergence more accessible to wider audiences.

Fitzgerald also stresses that the literary accounts of the famous personalities he is analysing in his book were not intentionally written as examples to be diagnostically analysed. Therefore, "the *ad hominem* argument does not apply here because the author does not attack the person of the writer, politician, etc. but attempts to increase our understanding of these individuals by explaining their psychopathology" (Fitzgerald 2004, 13). A similar approach was chosen by Jennifer Ashley and Cat Sebastian when writing their autistic protagonists. The authors themselves have confirmed that they intentionally wrote Ian and Lawrence as autistic (Ashley 2009; Sebastian 2022). And as will be demonstrated in examples in the following

[1] Some examples of recent autistic "self-help" books by American and British authors that are also partial memoirs include *Unmasking Autism* (2022) by Devon Price, *Untypical* (2023) by Pete Wharmby, and *Unmasked* (2023) and *How to Be You* (2024) by Ellie Middleton. Recently published memoires by autistic authors include *Strong Female Character* (2023) by Fern Brady and *Girl Unmasked* (2024) by Emily Katy. These memoirs are also additional examples of criticism of the pathology paradigm, focusing on personal experience.

sections of this paper, they are constantly *shown* being autistic, and so their actions and thoughts speak for themselves. It would be redundant to try to "diagnose" them as such. What seems to be expected of the reader instead is to empathise with these characters and simply enjoy learning more about their neurodivergent minds while following their romance.

The most significant implication Fitzgerald's work has on reading neurodivergent-coded characters such as Ian and Lawrence is that his psychohistorical approach validates such readings, although Fitzgerald argues that the "diagnosing" should be seen as a hypothesis, which allows the readers to judge whether or not the hypothesis stands up to scrutiny (Fitzgerald 2004, 13). However, a major issue with the psychohistorical approach is that since it has been designed by psychiatrists, the very word "diagnosing" operates in the pathology paradigm used by psychiatrists and other medical professionals. A reading guided by the neurodiversity paradigm such as the one in the following sections of this paper contributes to solving this issue. Readings and interpretations of neurodivergent-coded characters based on the neurodiversity paradigm and grounded in literary criticism will remove the "diagnostic" aspect of the act, which is tied to the institution of psychiatry and the pathology paradigm.

Representation of autism as madness

As argued by the esteemed British historian of medicine Roy Porter in his book *Madness: A Brief History*, "[a]ll societies judge some people mad: any strict clinical justification aside, it is part of the business of marking out the different, deviant, and perhaps dangerous," (Porter 2002, 62). Indeed, the interrogation of the meaning of madness of a "deviant and dangerous" nineteenth-century British aristocrat is the central theme of both novels. When asked about her motivation behind creating a character such as Ian, Ashley responded: "I wrote about Ian because I got to pondering how people in the past dealt with autism or Aspergers" (Ashley 2009). In addition to the detailed descriptions of Ian's thinking process and behaviour, arguably the most valuable aspect of the novel is indeed its depiction of how he was treated by others.

Because of his madness and his father's need to ensure Ian's words lack credibility after he witnessed his father murdering his mother when he was eight years old, Ian was sent to an asylum. He spent most of his childhood and adolescence subjected to many abusive treatments, such as shock therapy, beatings, and ice baths:

> "…austere surroundings, cold baths, exercise, electric shock to stimulate healing. Regular beatings to suppress his rages. The treatment is effective, gentlemen. He has calmed considerably since he first came to me."
>
> If Ian had "calmed," it was because he'd realized that if he suppressed his rages and abrupt speeches, he'd be left alone. He'd learned to become an automaton, a clockwork boy that moved and talked in a certain way.
>
> (…)
>
> The doctor responsible for Ian's treatment describes him during a presentation as:
>
> "His is a typical case of haughty resentment which is festering his brain. Notice how he avoids your eyes, which shows declined trust and lack of truthfulness. Note how his attention wanders when he is spoken to, how he interrupts with an inappropriate comment or question that has nothing to do with the topic at hand. This is arrogance taken to the point of hysteria—the patient can no longer connect with people he deems beneath him.
>
> (Ashley 2011, 269)
>
> (…)
>
> "The arrogance of his class coupled with his resentment toward his family has created a blockage in his brain," Dr. Edwards would explain to his enthusiastic audiences. "He can read and remember but not understand. He also shows no interest in his father, never asks after him or writes to him even when it is suggested to him. He also makes no sign that he misses his dear, departed mother." (Ashley 2011, 270)

According to the doctor, Ian's madness seems to be caused by external factors, as opposed to being inherited, as Ian believes it to be. However, an indication of certain hereditary qualities of autism was also confirmed by Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger in their seminal articles, with Kanner observing that the parents of almost all the children in his study were also exceptionally intelligent and did not appear to be particularly emotional (1943, 250), and Asperger noting that autistic traits had been observed in family members of all 200 autistic children he worked with (1991, 84). The hereditary aspect of autism has been debated since the very beginning; and, although no genetic cause has been discovered to date, many personal narratives shared by people on the spectrum also confirm an autistic family member, often several.

In the case of the two protagonists, madness is presented as inherited, with both Ian and Lawrence blaming their abusive and negligent fathers for their madness:

> "There's nothing in here to love. Nothing. I am insane. My father knew it. Hart knows it. You can't nurse me back to health. I have my father's rages, and you can never be sure what I'll do—" He broke off, his headache beating at him. He rubbed his temple furiously, angry at the pain. (Ashley 2011, 203)

Moreover, Lawrence's father regularly experienced episodes of mania and melancholy, and seems to have drunk excessively during his depressive episodes: "My father used to spend weeks at a time in bed, generally quite drunk. He was a miserable sod. One day, I came home from riding and found him dead in the stables. We told everyone he died while cleaning his gun, but he left a note. I burnt it" (Sebastian 2017, 96). With contemporary knowledge of psychology, Lawrence's father's behaviour is recognisable as bipolar, which, as mentioned earlier, also belongs under the neurodiversity umbrella.

Representation of autism as genius

In stark opposition to the madness stands the protagonists' remarkable intelligence. Ian is a recognised expert on and collector of Ming Dynasty porcelain bowls, is mathematically gifted, and has exceptional memory. Lawrence is an inventor and natural scientist, working on developing an invention which is essentially the telegraph. However, both Ian and Lawrence are repeatedly taken advantage of and used for their genius skills, despite being considered mad. Hart regularly has Ian accompany him on business trips to read treaties and contracts to memorize them and find any inconsistencies or signs of fraudulent intentions: "Isabella explained that Hart had Ian read political correspondences and treaties for him and commit them to memory, then alert Hart to those with particular phrases Hart told him to watch for," (Ashley 2011, 87). Apart from accompanying his brother on all important business meetings and reading through all the necessary documents, Ian also keeps the family ledgers.

Whereas Ian's skills are ultimately being used for the benefit of his family, Lawrence is sharing his life's work in correspondence with "a friend" he has never met, risking having it stolen. Indeed, Georgie[2] immediately suspects that Lawrence's friend is a scammer and

[2] Georgie Turner is a former thief and con artist. Being unemployed and in hiding, he is asked by his brother to travel to Lawrence's castle Penkellis and confirm whether the rumours about Lawrence being mad are true. Georgie agrees and, with the help of a mutual acquaintance, he is introduced to Lawrence as his new secretary. Lawrence and Georgie are attracted to each other from the moment they meet, though Lawrence does not hide his discomfort at having a stranger in his space who is disrupting his routine. However, he gradually sees that Georgie's presence is invaluable for the management of Penkellis, as well as for his own mental health.

maintains correspondence with Lawrence only to gather information about his latest invention so that he can sell it, and have it patented as his once it is done. This is however later resolved; and, though Lawrence's patent was not stolen, the recipient of his correspondence and the man he considered a friend was, in fact, the man's wife. Meanwhile, Georgie himself lies to Lawrence about the true reason why he came to Penkellis to be Lawrence's secretary, which is to assess whether he is actually mad. Therefore, there is deception involved. Furthermore, Lawrence risks having his intellectual property stolen and losing the money he could earn by selling the invention.

As argued by Anthony D. Baker in his chapter "Recognizing Jake: Contending with Formulaic and Spectacularized Representations of Autism in Film" in which he analyses the representation of autism in several movies released between 1985 and 2003, the savant skills, for which autistic characters are so valued, are intrinsic abilities, hence are neither intentionally developed nor acquired. And although the autistic characters have savant skills, they are unable to use these skills for their own benefit. The skills and their product are there to be ultimately used by the neurotypical characters, consequently objectifying the autistic character and denying their agency (2009, 237). In theory, Ian and Lawrence do have the agency to not allow their skills to be exploited; Ian can refuse to assist his brother, and Lawrence can stop sharing his work with a man he never met. However, doing so would mean losing an essential part of their very limited social lives. Ian would disappoint the one person who had helped him unconditionally every time he needed it, and Lawrence would end the only friendship he values.

In addition to making use of the protagonists' savant skills, because the protagonists are neurodivergent, they do not lie and struggle with recognising lies. This leaves them susceptible to betrayal. Hart initially does not believe that Beth[3] genuinely loves Ian:

> "You've known him, what, all of a few weeks? You saw that Ian is rich and insane, and you couldn't resist taking down such an easy mark." (Ashley 2011, 174).

His suspicion indicates that he is aware that his brother is vulnerable because of his inability to lie and recognise lies. Similarly, because Lawrence does not leave his tower, smugglers

[3] Beth Ackerley is a young, wealthy widow, initially engaged to Lyndon Mather, Ian's acquaintance, and fellow Ming porcelain collector. As soon as Ian and Beth meet, they are attracted to each other, and Ian becomes obsessed with her, repeatedly suggesting that she should become his lover. Beth quickly ends her engagement to Mather and starts a relationship with Ian, first as lovers and shortly after as a married couple.

are able to exploit his unawareness and use his land for smuggling. Moreover, Lawrence married the sister of his brother's friend because she was unmarried and pregnant. Her reputation would otherwise be ruined, and she would not have the financial means to raise the child. However, she soon left him for another man and died unexpectedly. Therefore, he is suspicious about Georgie's sudden appearance at Penkellis as his secretary, when he has no prior experience:

> Perhaps because Turner, like Isabella, only wanted to get close to Lawrence for a reason. Now, as to what that reason might be, Lawrence could only speculate. Isabella had found herself pregnant and in need of a husband. Lawrence hadn't seen any reason not to oblige her. (Sebastian 2017, 115)

Ultimately, the protagonists being both mad and geniuses leads to isolation and aloneness. In his 1943 article, Kanner presents the concept of "autistic aloneness", which has since become one of the defining characteristics of autism as well as the most frequently perpetuated autism stereotypes:

> There is a from the start an extreme autistic aloneness that, whenever possible, disregards, ignores, shuts out anything that comes to the child from the outside. Direct physical contact or such motion or noise as threatens to disrupt the aloneness is either treated 'as if it weren't there' or, if this is no longer sufficient, resented painfully as distressing interference. (1943, 242)

Autistic aloneness is therefore first and foremost the autistic person's attempt to isolate themselves mentally from the possibility of intrusion into their personal space or body from the outside. This may also entail physical isolation. In the historical setting of the novels, autistic aloneness is depicted through several forms of isolation—physical, emotional, voluntary, and involuntary—each providing the contemporary reader with an idea of how an autistic person of Ian's and Lawrence's social status and with their specific experiences used aloneness as a coping mechanism or how they were forced to be isolated by others.

As they are perceived to be "mad", Ian and Lawrence have been isolated for the majority of their lives, either voluntarily (Lawrence) or involuntarily (Ian). After he is released from the asylum, Ian becomes nonverbal for several months:

> "When I was first released from the asylum I wouldn't speak for three months. . . I hadn't forgotten how—I simply didn't want to. I didn't know it distressed my brothers until they told me." (Ashley 2011, 76)

Selective mutism, as confirmed in Rudy Simone's interviews with autistic women (2010, 69), is often experienced by those on the autism spectrum. For Ian, it was a much-needed coping mechanism employed to help him process the transition from being an asylum patient to a brother of a duke. Moreover, Ian frequently disappears to be alone:

> "He's used to me disappearing. I always turn up again. He knows that."
>
> Beth studied him. "Why do you disappear?"
>
> "Sometimes it gets too much for me. Trying to follow what people say, trying to remember what I'm supposed to do so people will think I'm normal. Sometimes the rules are too hard. So I go. . . Sometimes I take a train to a place I've never been or hire a horse and ride into the countryside. To find somewhere I can be alone." (Ashley 2011, 143)

By voluntarily isolating himself when he needs to and not speaking unless he wants to, he is reclaiming agency as well as the choice to do so, which he was denied in the asylum. Furthermore, his ability to travel freely is in direct contrast with his life in the asylum, where his freedom of movement was non-existent.

Lawrence is isolating himself primarily because he is convinced that, as a madman, he is dangerous to other people, including his adopted son, whom he has not seen in eight years and refuses to have a relationship with out of fear and shame:

> "No." Lawrence felt the already fraying edges of his composure unravelling fast. "Simon is not coming here."
>
> "You can't keep him off forever, you know, now that he's back in England. It's his home, and he'll own it one day." When Lawrence was safely dead and buried, Simon was welcome to come here and do what he pleased. "I don't want him here." Penkellis was no place for a child, madmen were not fit guardians, and nobody knew those facts better than Lawrence himself, who had been raised under precisely those conditions. (Sebastian 2017, 3–4)

The novels also depict two very different attitudes to socialisation typical for autistic people, reflecting the spectrum nature of autism. Ian has three older brothers and sees at least one of them almost daily and he attends social events with them rather frequently. Moreover, he has acquaintances through his collecting. Conversely, once he becomes an earl after his brother's death, Lawrence does not interact with anyone except with his two employees, Georgie and several fellow inventors with whom he

exchanges letters about their latest creations: “For all he was a hermit, the earl was an enthusiastic letter writer who maintained regular correspondence with several men of science,” (Sebastian 2017, 46). Autistic people are often more comfortable expressing themselves in writing as opposed to verbally (Simone 2010, 99–100). By limiting their conversation to correspondence, Lawrence has the ability to consider carefully every word before he writes it. He has the agency to decide when and if he will reply to the letters and still maintain a form of friendship.

Romance, madness and neurodiversity

Pamela Regis identifies the barrier as one of the essential elements of the romance novel, and the difficulty of this barrier should be significant enough to ensure that overcoming it provides a rewarding emotional experience for the reader by the story's conclusion (2007, 13–14). Moreover, as noted by Sebastian:

> In order for a romance novel to deliver a satisfying conclusion, the reader must believe that the characters deserve happiness, that they deserve the love and respect of a partner. If the reader doesn’t believe the characters worthy of love, the book inevitably falls flat. (Sebastian 2018)

In romances with disabled protagonists, disability itself is rarely a barrier to love, regardless of whether it is a cure narrative or not. In fact, the protagonists of disability romances generally have a positive attitude towards falling in love and developing a romantic relationship with a disabled individual (Cheyne 2019, 144), or as is the case in the present paper, with one who is perceived to be mad.

Despite the numerous warnings about Ian and Lawrence being mad, Beth and Georgie are not discouraged from building a relationship with them, which gradually progresses from acquaintance to romance. By having the love interests perceive the protagonists in this way, Ashley and Sebastian offer a very much-needed representation of a romantic relationship in which the neurodivergent person is loved unconditionally by a partner who fully accepts them as they are. Most importantly, Beth and Georgie repeatedly insist that Ian and Lawrence are not mad; they are simply different. They also never argue madness as the issue during disagreements, as opposed to Ian and Lawrence, who believe their madness to be the main cause:

> “You’d take the word of a madman?” he asked.

> “You’re not a madman.”
> “I was put into that asylum for a reason. I couldn’t convince the commission that I was sane.” (Ashley 2011, 76)

> But Georgie hadn’t come to Penkellis expecting anything resembling normal. Nor had he seen any evidence of the earl’s madness, however. If untidiness, rudeness, and fits of mild violence constituted madness, then Mayfair was filled with madmen—just ask any lord’s servants. (Sebastian 2017, 24)

> “I’ve been here for two weeks, and I’m still waiting to see evidence of this madness.” Turner’s voice was clipped, ironic. If he had displayed the faintest trace of sympathy, Lawrence would have found it easier to dismiss his words as so much charity or flattery. “I have to say, I’m fairly disappointed. I had hoped for some good old-fashioned howling at the moon, and all you do is build ingenious inventions and eat too much ham.” (Sebastian 2017, 95–96)

Although such behaviour is expected of a love interest, their overall perception of madness as a difference rather than a deficit hints at the contemporary neurodiversity paradigm, which challenges the notion that neurodivergent people should be seen as having a disorder. Instead, it argues that there is no “normal” way one’s mind should function and the various forms of neurodivergence should therefore be perceived as a difference. A similar point regarding the arbitrariness of the concept of normal can also be found in Mary Balogh’s *Simply Perfect* (2008), in which the female protagonist Claudia notes that definitions of normality are socially constructed, commenting that

> “…*all* girls are different from the norm. In other words, the norm does not exist except in the minds of those who like tidy statistics,” (2009, 114).

According to Rodas, the qualities that define autism—such as unconventional sociality, expressions of emotions and sensitivity—are also the characteristics which consistently have been used to justify the dehumanisation of autistic individuals (2018, 101). When one of the characters dehumanises Ian or Lawrence or calls them mad, Beth and Georgie do not hesitate to defend them by enumerating their positive characteristics instead. The point of difference is reiterated, regardless of whether the other person is a stranger or a family member, further supporting the use of the neurodiversity paradigm in the novels:

> “Is he a real devil?” she whispered.

> “The dog?” Barnabus was enthusiastically rolling around in chicken shite. “He’s much the same as any other dog, only larger.”
>
> “No, him.” She tilted her chin in the direction of Penkellis.
>
> “The earl? No, he’s only different. He’s also very large.” (Sebastian 2017, 68)

> “Ian is—“ Hart broke off and swung away to stare into the multicolored sky.
>
> “What? A madman?”
>
> “No.” The word was harsh. “He’s… vulnerable.”
>
> “He’s stubborn and smart and does exactly what he pleases.” (Ashley 2011, 174)

An interesting, shared aspect of how madness is characterised in both novels is the link that Ashley and Sebastian make between madness and/as homosexuality. In *The Lawrence Brown Affair,* the romance is between two men. Consequently, homosexuality is integral to the story and Lawrence’s characterization, especially in terms of how he perceives his own sexuality. To manage his attraction to men, Lawrence regularly joined his older brother Percy and his friends to drink and smoke excessively:

> But Percy’s set had all been utterly crackbrained, a bunch of half-mad, thoroughly drunk, opium-eating libertines. Any practice or desire Lawrence found in common with them seemed proof of his own incipient madness. (Sebastian 2017, 39)

Alcohol also helped him tolerate social situations. Substance abuse is a common masking strategy employed by autistic people to mask their autistic traits or to aid them in maintaining the “mask” during social interactions in order to appear normal (Price 108; Bargiela et al. 3287). Alcohol, cigarettes and even drugs are the most readily available forms of temporary relief in such situations, since their presence and consumption are usually expected (Sedgewick, Hull, and Ellis 2021, chap. 4). Therefore, by associating with his brother’s friends whom he considers to be fellow madmen and partaking in common activities which are socially acceptable for titled men in late nineteenth century, Lawrence temporarily achieves a sense of normalcy and sanity. Since Lawrence himself so profoundly associates his homosexuality with his madness, it can be considered a further contribution to reading him as an autistic.

In addition, Lawrence believes that his homosexuality is the cause of his madness and a major part of the reason why he isolates himself:

> “Is that why you avoid people?” Turner asked.
>
> “What?” Lawrence panted.

> “Do you think your . . . tendencies disqualify you for human company? That simply by being around another man you’ll contaminate him? Because if it is, I’ll let you know that isn’t how it works at all.” (Sebastian 2017, 95)

Homosexuality is also associated with madness in *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie*. One of Ian’s acquaintances, Arden, a patient in the asylum at the same time as Ian, was institutionalised for being openly homosexual:

> “Arden was in the asylum with me.”
>
> “So I gathered. He doesn’t look insane.”
>
> Disgust flickered across Ian’s face. “His father had him committed, wanted the doctors to cure him of his affliction any way possible.”
>
> Beth glanced to where Arden was speaking to Graves by the hazard table. They had their heads together, Arden’s nose almost on Graves’s cheek. Graves clamped a gloved hand on Arden’s elbow, then softened his grip and moved his hand to Arden’s back.
>
> “Mr. Arden prefers the company of gentlemen,” Beth concluded.
>
> “Yes, he’s an unnatural.” (Ashley 2011, 128)

There is a proven connection between autism and homosexuality. Statistically, people on the spectrum identify as non-heterosexual in significantly greater numbers than neurotypical people (Mendes and Maroney 2019, 19). Recent studies found that 24% of 129 single autistic adults identified as being homosexual or bisexual (Byers, Nichols, and Voyer 2013, 2624–25) and a study by Goldie A. McQuaid et.al concluded that the number can be as high as 41% (2023, 14). With similar results, a meta-analysis of nine studies of autistic adolescents and adults conducted by Pecora et al. found that 15–35% of all participants identified as either homosexual or bisexual (2016, 3544). The presence of homosexuality in association with madness in both novels can therefore be considered an additional contribution to reading Ian and Lawrence as autistic.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to present a neurodivergent reading of the protagonists of Jennifer Ashley’s *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and Cat Sebastian’s *The Lawrence Browne Affair*, arguing that through the behaviour of the love interests and their treatment of the protagonists, the novels provide a historical context for the contemporary neurodiversity paradigm. Despite

numerous warnings from the other characters, their distinctive personalities and behaviours are seen as differences by their love interests. In contrast, the other characters in the novels view Ian and Lawrence as mad, implying they are not of sound mind. The conceptualisation of the protagonists' madness as a difference rather than as a disorder or impairment is particularly important, especially considering the time period in which the novels are set.

Through characters in novels such as *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and *The Lawrence Brown Affair*, authors can direct the reader's attention to an issue that they otherwise might not be aware of. They have the platform to create and subsequently promote positive representation of the autism spectrum and neurodiversity in general. Specifically, what both novels ultimately achieve is telling the stories of two men who are "mad", yet they do not change to fit into society, nor are they "cured" by their partner's love. Instead, their character development is in allowing themselves to be their most genuine selves in a safe environment, unconditionally loved by a supportive partner.

However, since the novels are set in the nineteenth century and the label "autism" did not exist at that time, the protagonists are considered mad. By making the connection between what has been referred to as madness in the past and what is known as autism today in the context of reading fictional characters such as Ian and Lawrence, a similar process could be applied by historians to achieve a better understanding of the lives and treatment of those who were autistic in the past. This has already been done, for example, by Rab Houston and Uta Frith in their book *Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue*, which presents extensive evidence that the eponymous eighteenth-century Scottish laird who had his marriage annulled on the grounds of an alleged lack of mental capacity, would today be considered autistic.

While historians are frequently cautious about applying contemporary classifications and frameworks to past societies, as doing so risks misrepresenting socio-historical contexts, in this specific case, the only potential issue is with the specific word used as a label, and not the concept itself. People who are today referred to as autistic have always existed, although, due to the different socio-historical contexts, they would have experienced different stimuli and been subject to different societal norms and notions of the self that shaped their behaviour and interactions than those in modern times. However, this difference is not so substantial that there would be no basis for making the connection.

It is of course impossible to “diagnose” Ian and Lawrence as autistic since they are fictional characters and autism as a distinct condition would not be recognised for 60 more years after the 1880s, when the plot of *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* is set, and it would be another almost 4 decades before it is officially included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) in 1980 as a specific diagnosis. Furthermore, using a concept with such medical connotation as a diagnosis would contradict the main point of the novels as well as the present paper. What is important here is to recognise that characters such as Ian and Lawrence exhibit traits that align with what is known as autism today. How they think and their unique ways of interacting with the world are central to who they are, distinguishing them in meaningful ways.

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