



Neurodiversity, Past and Present

Copying not Diagnosing: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue

Abstract

This article re-evaluates the case of Hugh Blair of Borgue (1747–8) from the standpoint of neurodiversity pride. This case was brought by John Blair against his older brother the laird Hugh Blair of Borgue. John successfully argued that Hugh was an Idiot incapable of marriage. As a result, Hugh's marriage to Nickie Mitchell was annulled and their children disinherited; John and his descendants now stood to inherit Hugh's estates. Some modern criticism has suggested that Hugh was autistic. During the court case, Hugh's life and way of behaving and communicating, were often painfully critiqued. Exploring an autistic reading of Hugh that emphasises his creativity and love of imitation, I argue that attempting to "diagnose" him with autism using modern diagnostic criteria can replicate some of the harsh judgements that the court made against him. I end by suggesting that, as Hugh loved to copy, we might spend some time in our lives imitating Hugh.

Keywords: Hugh Blair, eighteenth-century, neurodivergence, autism, marriage, Idiocy

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What is your name? Hugh Blair

What age are you? Hugh Blair

Being desired to hold up his right hand, he held up the left ¹

These quotations are from the Scottish Court of Session in Edinburgh's 1747 interrogation of Hugh Blair, laird of Borgue in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland. Hugh's younger brother, John Blair, who was Hugh's guardian or "curator," was attempting to have Hugh's 1746 marriage to the surgeon's daughter Nicholas "Nickie" Mitchell annulled. John was successful; the annulment made John the heir to the estates of Borgue in place of Hugh and Nickie's descendants. Hugh and Nickie's first child David was born in 1748 shortly after the court case, and their second child Grizell was born in 1752. David was named after Hugh's late father, and Grizzel was named after Hugh's mother. Before David's birth, Nickie had miscarried two pregnancies that the court knew of.

The ground for annulment was that Hugh was an Idiot (legally, a person permanently lacking what were deemed normal levels of reason and understanding) unable to understand a marriage contract. The court concluded that Hugh could speak, hear, and write, but not with understanding or proper "Human Reason" (he had less reason, it believed, than a five-year-old). Interpreting the questioning I excerpted from above, the court decided, "from comparing the Questions together, and from the Manner in which the Answers were made it was very Evident that the Answer came out right from *accident* and not from *design*." ²

The legal documents from *Blair v Blair* are the only substantial evidence we have about Hugh; he did not keep a diary that we know of, for example. This article re-evaluates Hugh Blair's case and the one study of it—historian Rab Houston and developmental psychologist Uta Frith's *Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue*—from the standpoint of neurodiversity pride. ³ As an autistic scholar, I explore the ways in which my own, and other neurodivergent people's scholarship, creativity, and experiential knowledge offer a rich understanding of what it means to be autistic. This understanding of autism, not reducible to lists of diagnostic criteria, provides a lens through which to view Hugh Blair's case anew. I conclude that retrospectively "diagnosing" Hugh with autism using *DSM-IV* and *DSM-V* diagnostic criteria reinforces the court's dehumanising approach and conclusion. ⁴ Rather than imposing a diagnosis on Hugh, I suggest we allow him to shape us through performing the acts that made him distinctive.

Quoted above are just a few of the "easy" questions the Commissaries (legal officials) asked Hugh in court to ascertain whether he had enough understanding to be married. The court corroborated this questioning with statements from Hugh's neighbours and family members regarding everything from whether he seemed interested in women to whether he seemed able to count his own fingers and tell his right hand from his left. In the court's eyes, Hugh gets horribly tangled; on this occasion he does not accurately inform them what the weather is, whether he has had his dinner, or where he used to live. The court probes into Hugh and Nickie's sex life, astonished that a woman might wish to marry such a man.

Hugh's life and behaviours as reported in the court case might resonate with the experiences of neurodiverse people in the present day. In some significant ways, Hugh seems to have thought and behaved differently to his society's norm in a way that—with no need for a formal diagnosis—we can call neurodivergent. I do not mean here that I am *informally* diagnosing Hugh. Instead, we can engage with him beyond diagnostic frameworks. Neurodivergent people can be aware that we think and behave differently from the "norm" without needing to consult lists of diagnostic criteria.

Hugh Blair's Case: The Evidence and Its Problems

Hugh may well have been what we nowadays call autistic; like many autistic people he may have had what we now refer to as a learning disability. The court documents describe him using echolalia, delighting in and communicating through imitation, showing a lack of subservience to many behavioural codes, fiddling with small objects—i.e., potentially stimming—and pursuing activities that interested him no matter the weather or time of day. The behavioural codes he flouted included visiting neighbours without invitations and "sauntering" around during family prayer. The richness of autistic experiences and worldviews, and the unique ways that autism manifests in different individuals defies the notion that autism can be condensed simply to a list of lacks and deficits which can be applied straightforwardly to a given individual. Hugh also experienced the negative side of being neurodivergent, including lack of adequate care from those nearest him, and being placed at a disadvantage when it came to advocating and protecting his own interests in court.

Bullies targeted and mocked Hugh, as they do so many of us. His family did not care for him well before his marriage; it seems John mishandled Hugh's money, and Hugh stayed in a mean garret room wearing John's filthy cast-off clothing. The family seems to have often ignored Hugh, especially when visitors were present, leaving him to his own devices as his room and clothing became increasingly unsanitary. The household servants got Hugh to do "drudgery work," taunting him for it, and the family seems to have condoned this. [5](#)

Children and adult deponents such as the local tailor William Taggart asked Hugh to dance and to remove his clothes for their own fun. This became a key aspect of the court's investigations, as, rather than focusing on the fact that Hugh's neighbours were sexually persecuting him, the court took Hugh's compliance with these requests to demonstrate Hugh's inability to understand social rules about decency. It also is used as evidence of his lack of humanity. John's lawyer describes Hugh as "the plaything of the youngest boys." [6](#) Thereby, the lawyer positions Hugh as more like the boys' puppet than their playmate. One of the lists of questions the court posed to witnesses was, "Have you not, for your own diversion, often made said Hugh dance or bable in his foolish manner, and would he not have done so, as long as you pleased?—and did he not, as often as you bad him, discover his nakedness, without ceremony or seeming to know that there was any indecency in it, or without regarding however [sic] were present?" [7](#) It may be that Hugh simply did not care about such things; it may be that he was troubled by this manipulation but could not express it, or his distress was ignored or not understood.

Autism offers multiple explanations for Hugh's reported behaviours. Take, for example, Hugh holding up his left hand and holding up his right. Many autists naturally have a different proprioceptive awareness and verbal processing differences which can make following quick-fire instructions difficult; for this reason we may interpret left as right. Though autistic and learning disabled people are, as Remi Yergeau explains, too often "storied out of rhetoricity" and wrongly deemed incapable of irony, Hugh may have been mocking the court when he held up his right hand instead of his left. [8](#) Moreover, why *should* he hold up his left hand just because someone asked him to, especially if the court and Hugh's family had not taken care to explain to him properly that this strange "someone" was vested with legal authority, and power to annul his marriage?

The court evidence does not offer a totally transparent window into what kind of person Hugh was. The evidence is troubling for several reasons: John Blair was deeply invested in proving that Hugh was an Idiot, and the court documents several of the witnesses supporting John simply calling Hugh names, William Taggart states that people "usually called him the Fool Laird of Borgue, or Daft Hugh of Borgue." [9](#) Moreover, the court's line of questioning seems designed almost inevitably to make Hugh seem foolish.

The "Bill of Advocation for Hugh Blair," a long document probably written by Hugh's lawyer, created from several pages glued vertically together and written occasionally in the first person as if in Hugh Blair's voice, provides some plausible reasons why Hugh gave the answers that he did to the court's questioning. This document states that Hugh's "absurd and improper answers" were "occasioned no doubt from his not perceiving the import of the questions, or their not apprehending his answers. Whereas had they admitted his mother or father-in-law to be with him at the time, who

might have made him understand the questions, he might have answered the same properly, as he did several of them even with the disadvantages he laboured under." [10](#) Hugh's lawyers point out that Hugh is a better communicator when with people he knows, and when questions are put to him in a clear way so that he understands their meaning or "Import." Another potential meaning of "Import" is "importance"; thus perhaps Hugh's lawyers also meant that Hugh communicates better when he is empowered to understand what is at stake in the dialogue.

The Commissaries used Hugh's performance negatively to evaluate his ability to understand and reason. Hugh's lawyers argued instead that it indicated a failure of two-way communication, explaining that when others took care to speak accessibly and listen properly to Hugh, he could understand. The Bill adds, in Hugh's voice, "I...can both comprehend the speech of others when delivered pointedly and distinctly by a voice with which I am acquainted and can also express myself so as to be understood by others." [11](#) "Pointedly" might refer to highlighting key pieces of information for Hugh and presenting them one at a time, a communication style often beneficial for autistic people. The Bill states that Hugh's parents "neglected" him rather than attempting to "rectify" his "difficulty of utterance," largely leaving it to the minister John Welsh to teach him to read, write, and recite prayers and the catechism. [12](#)

Perhaps we do not know what Hugh's communication skills would have been like, had he not been thus "neglected," but his time with Welsh gives us an inkling. Though Hugh did attend school, he seems to have had a particular rapport with Welsh, staying over at the minister's house. Welsh stated that Hugh behaved decently at church and had some idea of religion including the Sabbath. The Defence emphasised that, in general, Hugh did seem to keep the Sabbath. Welsh "thinks Hugh Blair can be made to understand the matrimonial contract if people could talk to him in a Language he understands." [13](#)

We do not know for certain whether John Blair's lawyers fired questions at Hugh or gave him enough time to think through his answers, but the Bill suggests that this may have happened; even if it did not, the Bill indicates that the court's interlocations with Hugh did not give him a fighting chance of displaying his true communication skills. Verbal processing differences are not the same thing as a lack of understanding, but the court ultimately interpreted them in this way, as did several witnesses. William Jamison, minister of the gospel at Berrick, deposed that he "put severall questions to him and knowing him to be Deafish, spoke with a very loud voice, that these questions the Deponent designedly made plain and obvious that the Defender [Hugh] answered them for the most part very absurdly and sometimes made a foolish smiling stare in the Deponents face without answering any thing." [14](#) Welsh, who was one of Hugh's key supporters, but who unfortunately could not attend the court and support Hugh further because he was frail and thought a winter journey could end his life reportedly cautioned of Hugh, "Be tender of telling all his foolish actions and none of his wise ones, that if all the foolish things the wisest of us has done were told and none of the wise the wisest of us would look foolish." [15](#)

Using the *DSM* to "diagnose" Hugh with autism, as *Autism in History* does, involves drawing on diagnostic criteria that are unstable and often dehumanising. I am not opposed to diagnostic tools *per se* as instruments that can help identify conditions like autism. However, diagnostic language describing autism hampers an attempt to appreciate the richness of Hugh's life because it encourages us to view Hugh as *less than* the average human. Viewing Hugh primarily through the lens of diagnostic criteria occludes *Autism in History's* ability to recognise and value Hugh's life and abilities. As I have discussed elsewhere, diagnostic literature pervasively describes autism in terms of deficit, difficulty, limitation, and failure. [16](#) This is not the way to describe what is ever-more being recognised as a beautiful identity, something integral to how another human being is, rather than a "disorder." Why not describe us according to our needs, interests, and strengths, for instance, rather than our "lacks"?

Further, diagnostic criteria for autism have changed repeatedly since Eugen Bleuler first used the term "autism" in 1911. [17](#) When *Autism in History* was published, the most recent version of diagnostic criteria was the 1994 *DSM-IV* (updated in 2000). In their analysis of *Blair v Blair*, Frith and Houston draw on *DSM-IV's* emphasis on autistic traits like abnormally intense interests and repetitive, idiosyncratic language. They assert the trans-historical validity of diagnostic criteria, hoping to use such criteria to identify "the unchanging core of autism" in earlier centuries. [18](#) Stijn Vanheule calls for a more critical approach to the DSM, urging us to "become cognizant of its strengths and weaknesses, including its theoretical underpinnings, its position in historical debates on the scientific status of psychiatry and clinical psychology." [19](#) He discusses how the DSM remains a rigidly "North American instrument," which is not only inapplicable to other cultures, but fails properly to theorise its (in)applicability in other contexts—and, I would add, other time periods. [20](#)

In her wonderful parody, *DSM 69: Dolly Sen's Manual of Psychiatric Disorder* (2016), Sen states, "the *DSM* is a diagnostic tool that aims to pathologise all things human;" it has an "abusive nature" that defines other people's minds as "ugly" and "lesser" when in fact they are beautiful and creative. [21](#) To ask whether Hugh was autistic according to *DSM* criteria is thus to ask whether he was marked by lack, failure, and deficit; to define him as autistic by these criteria is to define him as less than what a human "should" be. Frith and Houston use such *DSM-IV*-derived language throughout *Autism in History* to describe and explain Hugh. For instance, analysing Hugh's speech they state, "what he said suggested he was defective in the processes of his thought. He had the ability to use language but did so in an

idiosyncratic way which meant he could not communicate effectively." [22](#) In my reading, which recognises that communication between several people involves all parties being able to convey and receive information, the responsibility for communication breakdowns cannot be loaded solely onto Hugh.

Autism in History simultaneously alerted me to Hugh's existence, piquing my interest in him, and motivated me to develop other approaches to *Blair v Blair*. Unsurprisingly, given the criteria the authors were working with, this book's reading of Hugh is rather negative. *Autism in History* opens with a suggestion that autistic people may in fact experience "genuine affection," and with an encouragement to empathise with Hugh's family and the way they treated him. Frith positions autism as something Hugh "suffered from," emphasising what she reads as autism's (by implication, negative) impact on Hugh's family and society. Thanking the parent of an autistic child who had offered comment, Frith writes that this person's

long-standing personal experience with autism has played a vital role in interpreting the witnesses' evidence. It was a critical moment for me when she was able to confirm that in her view too Hugh Blair suffered from autism, and that the family members reacted just as similar families would react today. Above all, [this autist] encouraged me to see the signs of gradual learning and genuine affection that people with autism can experience. If readers can empathize with, rather than censor, the members of the Blair family, then this is very much due to her insight into the impact of autism on the sufferer, the family and society. [23](#)

That autistic people experience genuine affection should not be a revelation. Autism is not a disease we "suffer" but a positive, dynamic, way of being; ableism from the societies we live in (including particular subsections like families or academic institutions) is what makes us suffer.

Frith's call to empathy does not include a call to empathise with Hugh, focusing instead on endorsing the behaviour of Hugh's family who made him wear filthy clothes and annulled his marriage. I hope no "similar families would react today" in the same way, though saddeningly frequent news stories demonstrate that some present-day families do maltreat their autistic members. Frith and Houston position Hugh's autism as a monster that single-handedly destroyed his family when they write, "just as today, the impact of autism on the family was formidable. It split the family apart and caused financial ruin." [24](#) As Frith and Houston know from the archival evidence they cite, John Blair also caused familial instability. Hugh's lawyers argued that John "malversed" in his office as Hugh's guardian by not collecting Hugh's debts or conducting a proper inventory of his possessions; moreover witnesses described John as subject to melancholy and furious fits, and violent to such an extent that he had to be tied down and Hugh had to save their mother from John's attacks. [25](#) Frith and Houston do not here mention that the court case split *Hugh's* family apart in the eyes of the law, rendering his marriage null, though he said that he loved Nickie Mitchell best out of all women, and though they had children together. These children experienced the financial impact of disinheritance. Not autism, but ableism here splits families apart, and then legitimates that splitting.

Sen asserts that creativity helps her to make sense of her experiences as a Mad person: "words like disorder, pathology, false beliefs don't explain my experience or help me make sense of them: creativity does." [26](#) Although she is talking here specifically about psychosis, Sen's prioritising of creativity over diagnostic language can help us to engage with Hugh. Hugh created phrases and rhythms, objects, and social connections through copying and repetition; these might inspire us to creativity. Several witnesses noted that Hugh frequently repeated short phrases; instead of pathologising this as defective autistic language, we can appreciate that, as Julia Miele Rodas notes, repetition is a hallmark of much acclaimed poetry. [27](#) Hugh also created things—for example, piles of stones, holes in the ground, whittled sticks, mended clothes, a soaked bed, a brushed coat, and a rotten wig—through imitating others, namely quarriers, carters, and his mother.

The remainder of this article discusses Hugh's (self-)copying behaviour, and suggests that we might respond to Hugh's case not by imposing a disempowering retrospective diagnosis but by copying him and thereby empowering him to influence us. Though we cannot fully correct the wrong the court committed against Hugh by annulling his marriage, as he passed away over two centuries ago, we can honour what we know of him as a person and bear witness to what we know about who he was. In copying Hugh, we might experience some of the autistic joys of echolalia, repetition, and imitation. Copying Hugh confronts fears of a future in which neurodiversity replicates fears seen in present-day language of an "autism epidemic" as if autism is an infectious disease to be cured, its proliferation reversed. In the face of a court case that aimed to end the legitimate Blair line through Hugh's descendants, we can live a future where elements of Hugh's behaviour reproduce in countless individuals.

Loving to Copy: Hugh's Life

Most of us are copiers. From learning research methods to mastering handwriting, to deciding on outfits to wear, we gain skills and ideas through repeatedly imitating others, inevitably putting our own flourish on a piece of writing or outfit. Philip Sidney wrote of his sonnets, "all my deed / but copying is" because his love-poems copy Nature's work, Nature having made his beloved beautiful. [28](#) From what we know of Hugh, he repeated his own and others' words including the Catechism, copied out handwriting, and imitated people working with their hands (like quarriers and masons), creating his own stone-piles and his own dykes beside dykes that had already been built. Drawing on

eighteenth-century Enlightenment stereotypes about humanity and brutishness, the court decided that Hugh's copying indicated that Hugh was a mere imitation of a human being. I look again at the different examples of copying I have just listed, suggesting readings that detach them from the court's negative appraisal.

Hugh engaged with both the written and spoken word. As well as communicating through repeated phrases, like many who use echolalia he occasionally echoed back some of his interlocutors' words by way of answer. Here is another excerpt from the court's questioning:

Where did you live before you came to Edinburgh?

Answer: Edinburgh.

Do you hear me when I speak to you? answer: speak!...

Is your wife alive? ans. Wife

Have you any bairns? ans Bairns. [29](#)

Echolalia is a common communication form for many neurodivergent people, including autistic people. We can use it to affirm what the other person is saying, to show that we have heard, or simply to contribute to a conversation in our own way. However, when we do not play neurotypical language-games and respond according to neurotypical manners of questioning and responding, this becomes one of what Nick Chown calls the language games used to pathologise autism. [30](#)

Susan Anderson writes that, historically, non-normative speech has meant lack of personhood, and "those who were unable to speak in particular ways were effectively excluded from personhood." [31](#) Anderson explains that whether read as a marker of location, intellect, or social status, non-normative speech was effectively silence. [32](#) John's lawyers interpreted Hugh's memorisation of the Catechism along these lines, emphasising Hugh's seeming inability to understand what he copied, "He learned to write but without understanding what he wrote any further than the figure of the Letters. That he learned to repeat the Questions and the Answers in the catechism but without any knowledge of either, without ever being able to distinguish between the Question and the answer." [33](#)

When a court official wrote out questions for Hugh by hand, Hugh copied the questions rather than write the expected reply. The official then wrote out an instruction for Hugh to stop copying down the questions but to answer them; Hugh copied out this demand not to copy. Responding with echolalia or a rote recital does not in itself mean a person lacks understanding or the desire for social connection. Neurotypical listeners often associate echolalia with confusion and lack of understanding. Although they tend to suggest that echolalia shows the autistic person is confused, usually the confusion is the neurotypical listener's; they are confused by echolalia.

Hugh's copying recasts the lawyers' and court officials' questions in a different way, raising the possibility that it is not entirely "correct" or perfectly fit for the purpose of explaining who Hugh is or giving him a chance at showing his skills. Echolalia has its own logic. "Hugh Blair" does contain the answer to the question of Hugh Blair's age; for those wishing to learn Hugh Blair's age, what better resource than Hugh Blair himself? Like many autistic people today, Hugh repeated stock phrases. When asked if he or if a named other would die, "His answer was alwise, Hugh Blair no die, Hugh Blair no die." [34](#) This is not necessarily an unchristian assumption that he would not die, as John Blair's lawyers argued; it may mean "I don't want to die!"

At times, Hugh's echolalia attracted criticism, especially his use of the pleasantry "very well" at what were deemed inappropriate times. Hugh often replied "very well" when asked how he or other people were, even when he had "a dangerous bloody flux that nearly killed him" and his "sister was so ill, that she was a Dying." [35](#) However, all too often, neurotypical others (both in Hugh Blair's time and our own) define what is "appropriate" and "in context." Moreover, Hugh's echolalia is filtered through others' reports. The detail that, pleased with a blue coat he wore, Hugh repeated "Hugh Blair bonny coat" comes to us via John's witness William Taggart. [36](#)

The court focused particularly on asking witnesses about the extent of Hugh's religious understanding. Several deposed in Hugh's favour, including ministers John Gordon and Welsh. [37](#) However, as we have seen, the court ultimately interpreted Hugh's repetitious language as evidence that he did not understand Christianity and thus Christian marriage. Mardy Philipian has interestingly argued that the repetitive nature of Christian worship may have appealed to autistic worshippers and had an equalising effect, allowing them to participate alongside neurotypical and allistic worshippers in repetition that had spiritual significance, their conformity to the liturgy enabling their "acceptance into the wider social fabric of a community." [38](#) Hugh could certainly repeat the liturgy and by all accounts regularly attended church and neighbours' burials. John's lawyers argued that Hugh attended burials uninvited but the defence denied this, citing his "decent" behaviour at these burials as proof of his humanity, his understanding of rules of Christian and social behaviour, and his integration into society as a valued mourner. [39](#)

John's lawyers adduced moments when Hugh behaved oddly during family prayer and church services as evidence that he did not appreciate the familial, spiritual, and social experience of prayer, stating "he had no sense of Religion. When the family were at prayer he was sauntering about and Tumbling what happened to Come in his way," playing with small items, or (once) attempting to knit a stocking as everyone else knelt. [40](#) Hugh may simply have needed to

stim, a natural autistic behaviour that does not indicate a lack of understanding. Hugh seems to have behaved in this way throughout his life. "During prayers at school he used to make sport to the Boys and when the parish was assembled at sermon in the church yard in May 1746 he and the Boys were Employed in exchanging their flowers and Nosegays and making a noise in such manner that the church officer found it necessary to turn them off." [41](#)

The officer had little effect. Hugh (in his late thirties) and the boys continued to focus on each other; the boys walked "in a procession by him putting off their hats and bowing as they past and he putting off his hat & Bowing in return in front of the whole congregation." [42](#) While Hugh might not have conformed to everybody else's idea of Christian worship, he did afford importance to attending church, and to polite gestures such as bowing, offering a nice gift (flowers), and doffing the hat. Executing and repeating these polite gestures at a socially-unacceptable time and place caused concern. Hugh seems to have had his own understanding of religion, too; for instance, when asked where God was, both evocatively and reasonably, "did he not answere Auld Beard far awa?" [43](#)

Hugh devoted much time to imitating other people in practical pursuits. With oddly echolalic diction, the *Answer for John Blair* states, "He carried stones out of the Quarry in imitation of the Quarriers but without distinguishing between night and Day between fair weather or storm, he carried the stones from the Quarry in imitation of the Carters and laid them in a heap without any purpose, he built dikes in imitation of the masons but for no use as they were hard by other Dikes already built." [44](#) The *Answer* parses Hugh's behaviour as imitation. Hugh pursues his building projects and other interests without regard to the weather or the time of day, focused on these imitative pursuits.

This is part of a wider pattern whereby he focused on the task at hand and not on wider contextual information like the weather, the time of day, or who was watching. For instance, he was said to carry unsavoury rubbish through and out of the house when gentlefolk were visiting and performed "his" chores (in reality chores more proper to the servants, who took advantage of Hugh) even in "foul weather." [45](#) Focusing on fine details that interest us is common to autistic people. One of Hugh's key interests was selecting sticks and shaping them into what he called "spindles" or "spindles." He took these sticks from various inappropriate locations, such as his mother's wainscoting. [46](#) In the moment, Hugh focused narrowly on his desire to make spindles to the exclusion of taking into account the importance of the lengths of wood to other people. However, he returned Grizell's wood to her when asked. Likewise, he stole cloth from tailors and his mother's swan-skin blanket to patch his clothing, perhaps focusing on acquiring and applying a patch to the exclusion of everything else. [47](#)

At times, indeed, Hugh's imitation of how he was "supposed" to behave left him needing support. He found some aspects of caring for himself hard; though he tried to wash his bedlinen, clothes, and wig, he left them sodden or infested with lice. The court heard, "He would wash his own Linnens, even in the Winter season, and frequently to lay them in his Room or about his Bed and keep them there till they were rotten and useless and even to wash his Wigs, which he sometimes dried at the fire, sometimes upon Dykes, sometimes on the Branch of a tree and most times upon his own head." [48](#) He "often" brought water into his room and threw it upon his bed and bed clothes; when seen carrying water to his room and being asked what he would do with it he replied "Bed, bed, Louse, Louse, Flea, Flea." [49](#) He was perhaps imitating his mother Grizzell, who used boiling water to kill the lice in his clothing. Hugh gravitated here towards looking after himself and his belongings, doing so in idiosyncratic ways that imperfectly imitated procedures accepted as correct and sanitary.

Deponents' appraisals of Hugh's practical activities tended to turn on the question of whether they were useful. Noting Hugh's skill and the fact that he seemed to learn through imitation, Welsh stated, "as Hugh Blair was more capable of being taught by the Eye than by the Ear he thinks he might have been taught some mechanical Employment." [50](#) Indeed, it was common for early eighteenth-century lairds and their wives, perhaps particularly in the Highlands, to get practically involved in supervising their lands, which might include managing crops and milking cows for instance. Hugh may have intended, and been training himself, to work helpfully alongside the quarriers.

Other deponents deemed Hugh's interests purposeless. William Taggart deposed, "he frequently diverted himself by cutting and shapeing small sticks which he called spindles and which he offered as complements to come of his Neighbours...they were very ill made and the Deponent thinks could be no use to any Body." [51](#) Taggart may not have understood Hugh's purpose, though several deponents placed perhaps undue emphasis on every behaviour needing a legible purpose. For Taggart, the spintles were pure amusement and recreation (diversion) because they were not useful. Many artistic or crafted gifts are by no means useful but still significant. Hugh may have intended them as a social lubricant, a mark of affection. Taggart was not the only deponent to describe Hugh's practical projects as "diversion."

William Jamison, minister of the gospel at Berrick "has seen him delving in the fields among clay and soil by himself for his own diversion." [52](#) To divert is also to turn away, implicitly from an established course. According to his critics, Hugh's diversions carried him away from what the way he was supposed to be behaving, as well as (ultimately) from a legitimate marriage. In fact, however, the court's annulment of his marriage most threatened to divert and disrupt Hugh's life. Berrick and Taggart both view Hugh's 'diversions' as self-focused; he amused only himself in these moments, without bestowing any benefit on others, either by giving them a gift that was actually valuable or by creating a useful item or participating usefully in society. It is perfectly valid to behave in this way.

Analysing Hugh's imitative behaviour, John's lawyers concluded that Hugh himself was a mere imitation of a human being. They suggested that Hugh looked outwardly human but lacked the understanding proper to a human. Vicious language of superficial imitation pervades their description of Hugh and Nickie's marriage; they described it as a theatrical performance, using theatre to mean something lesser than reality. Hugh and Nickie's local minister refused to officiate at the wedding because he believed Hugh incapable of marriage. Subsequently, the *Answer* relates, Nickie and Grizzell "came to Edinburgh and brought the Idiot along with them," then "Miss Nicholas Mitchel who it seems had agreed to act a part in this shameful farce, to act the solemnity of a marriage with the figure of a man and afterwards to go to bed to him" was married by "the character of a minister." [53](#)

Not only was Hugh a "figure of a man"—someone appearing human but lacking reason—but the officiant was farcically performing the role of minister, "the character of a minister." Houston closely follows the court's conclusions and anti-Hugh rhetoric throughout, summarizing that, "[Hugh's] mother cooked up a scheme to marry Hugh to Nicholas, daughter of the surgeon Archibald Mitchell. The parish minister refused to proclaim the banns on the grounds that Hugh was quite incapable of giving consent or of taking marriage vows; a stance fully supported by the presbytery of Kirkcudbright. In spite of this, the designers pressed ahead with the marriage." [54](#) Vocabulary like "cooked up" and "the designers" positions Grizzell as a schemer, Archibald and Nickie as her cronies, and Hugh as a simple idiot, despite other witnesses taking more favourable opinions of Hugh. Reducing Hugh to "the Idiot" "brought... along with them," the *Answer* emphasises Hugh's supposed lack of agency in contracting the marriage.

Court documents leave Nickie's role and intentions somewhat blurred, veering between suggesting she might genuinely feel attraction and love for Hugh and casting her as a pawn in Grizzell's game. The *Answer* states that Grizzell "took up a project to put a marriage upon that poor Idiot with Nicholas Mitchel." [55](#) Depending on how "with" is interpreted, Nickie could be Grizzell's co-conspirator or a puppet Grizzell manipulates alongside Hugh. The *Answer* consistently describes Hugh as a kind of anthropomorphic pet, manipulated by humans. "The Lady Borgue, mother of this unfortunate creature...kept him about her house like a natural Idiot." [56](#) The *Answer* states, explaining of "this poor Idiot" that "excepting his figure he differed very little from the Brute Creation." [57](#)

This language of brutishness, wielded violently against people of colour and people in lower socioeconomic classes, as well as against disabled and neurodivergent people, suggests in general a person who deviated from eighteenth-century ideals of upper-class white behaviour. John's lawyers described Hugh as more akin to an animal trained to perform certain actions without understanding them than a rational human being, arguing that the household chores Hugh completed were "things that a Brute might be taught to perform" and not a sign he was a family man. [58](#)

Although Hugh seems to have been hearing, when John successfully petitioned to become Hugh's guardian, he did so on the grounds that Hugh was deaf. John perhaps did so for strategic reasons, as a straightforward route to becoming Hugh's Tutor. Nevertheless, categorisation as deaf at this time aligned Hugh further with beasts. Kristin Lindgren explains that even eighteenth-century "advocates" of deaf people failed to acknowledge their full humanity. [59](#) The court seized this discourse made available to them, driving home Hugh's supposed parity with animals. The *Answer* states that Hugh prefers the company of dogs and cats to human company, and several reports describe him (like many present-day pet owners) allowing cats to sup from his spoon. [60](#)

Central to their investigation into whether Hugh had sufficient human understanding, the court was concerned to discover whether Hugh understood—and could consent to—the marriage contract, which implied fulfilling the husband's role of cherishing and protecting his wife and being the kind of person that she can "love reverence and obey." [61](#) They probed whether he understood what marriage meant, whether he had a natural inclination towards women, and whether he understood Nickie to be his wife. [62](#) The court decided he was "a natural Idiot incapable of knowing the Import of a marriage contract and to give the consent that is necessary to the Essence of such contracts." [63](#)

In addition to pervasively comparing Hugh to a "Brute," the *Answer* compared Hugh and Nickie's union to child marriage. To them, marrying this disabled man was as inappropriate as if Nickie had married a child unable to understand marriage and sex. [64](#) John's lawyers suggested that "go[ing] to bed to him" was shameful for Nickie. The image of Nickie and Hugh in bed resurfaced during the trial. The *Answer* suggested that Nickie was attracted only to Hugh's human appearance and that when she and Hugh slept together she was essentially sleeping with a Brute rather than communing with a human: "It was without any precedent in these books...where a woman had *pretended* to make a Husband of a natural Idiot, or to lye downe to one who had nothing Human about him but the External Figure." [65](#) This language marks Nickie as strange, "without any precedent," as though marriages involving cognitively disabled people were rare and difficult to understand. Perhaps the court was influenced by the contemporary stereotypes detailed by Simon Jarrett and CF Goodey of virile simpletons: men physically (even extraordinarily) attractive according to ideals of masculine strength and beauty but lacking what was deemed civilized understanding. [66](#)

The *Bill of Advocation* states in Nickie's voice that Hugh "behaved with great Tenderness of affection towards me." [67](#) However, Frith and Houston lean away from this reading, writing that, "We do not know how old Nicholas was or whether she had previously had problems attracting a partner. Apart from her initial reluctance, we know nothing

about her reactions to the prospect of marrying Hugh or her later experience of the marriage's physical or emotional side." [68](#) They adduce John Galt's 1820s novel, *The Entail*, to suggest that like one of the novel's protagonists, Nicholas was motivated to marry Hugh because of his money. [69](#) Hugh and Nickie married around eighty years before the novel was published, and it is not a novelisation of their lives.

The loaded inclusion of this novel further casts aspersions on the idea that Hugh and Nickie genuinely loved and were attracted to each other. By questioning whether Nickie had difficulty attracting partners, Frith and Houston imply that Hugh was an inferior partner she settled for. As Kirsty Liddiard points out in her excellent book, *The Intimate Lives of Disabled People*, disabled people have historically been, and still are, treated as if our intimate lives are unimportant, abnormal, non-existent, or something to be controlled by others according to what others think are appropriate. [70](#) Hugh and Nickie are part of a long line of disabled people and their partners suffering intrusive questioning and others' attempts to define and limit their sexuality; ultimately the Court used its power to mark their union as socially and religiously incorrect.

The court picked up on witness statements that Hugh would say that any woman was his wife and attempted to test them, with uneven success. [71](#) Here is some of the line of questioning:

Is Nicholas Mitchell your wife? ans: yes
Is Peggy Veitch your wife? ans no
Do you live with Nickie Mitchell ans yes...
Do you live with Mary Brown? ans Mistres Mitchell
Was you ever in bed with Peggy Veitch: ans: Nicholas Mitchell.
Whom do you love best? Ans: Nickie Mitchell...
One of the commissaries having askt the said Hugh if he would marry him, he answered yes [72](#)

Contrary to the story that Hugh would indiscriminately say that any person was his wife, in court he clearly states that Nickie is his wife and Peggy is not, and that he loves Nickie best. [73](#)

Answering questions about other women with "Nickie Mitchell" does not necessarily mean that Hugh was confused about who his wife was. His answers may indicate that he was confused by the barrage of questions, or still processing earlier questions, or it may simply be his attempt to correct the questioner: "no, I was not in bed with Peggy, but I was with Nickie." Likewise, when asked "when came you to town: To which he answered Nickie Mitchell," his answer is understandable; he came to town because of Nickie, she is on his mind. [74](#) When the commissary mockingly asked Hugh if he would marry him, Hugh may have been confused by this odd question and answered off-the-cuff or he may have been mocking in return. Perhaps Hugh was queer and the commissary appealing.

Although Hugh did not always express himself verbally in a normative manner, his actions suggest he took Nickie Mitchell as his only wife. He might show his genitals to anyone who asked, but he would never kiss a woman who was not his wife, though several woman tried in mockery. One such incident involved the only act of violence Hugh ("the Defender") was recorded as perpetrating. John McEwan testified that "when one of the Servants made a show as if to kiss him, he the Defender seized her by the throat and with violence endeavoured to throw her down 'being in a great passion' and he the deponent does believe that he might have done her mischief if he the Deponent had not interposed." [75](#) Here, McEwan describes Hugh's violent and threatening response to other women trying to kiss him. Elsewhere, Hugh refused with words. One woman's deposition showed that "when the deponent or other women in the house have asked a kiss of him, he refused to kiss them saying 'no no' and seemed to be angry." [76](#)

We do not definitively know why Hugh and Nickie stayed together after the court annulled their marriage. But, as they had two children, a highly plausible option is that they loved each other and wished to continue their family life. Frith and Houston's own later reading of the evidence actually supports this conclusion. They write, when Hugh and Nickie's daughter was born after the annulment,

curiously, she is described as "Grissel, lawfull daughter of Mr Hugh Blair and Nicholas Mitchell." There is no record of another marriage and, unless Rev. Gartshore [who refused to marry Hugh and Nickie but baptised their children] had had a change of heart, the only explanation is that Hugh and Nicholas had become recognized as husband and wife "by habit and repute." However difficult it may have been, Hugh and Nicholas had remained together. [77](#)

"By habit and repute," Hugh and Nickie were a recognised couple in their community.

Although Frith and Houston emphasise that they believe it rare for an autistic person to have children, Hugh was a parent. [78](#) To this day, stereotypes prevail whereby autistic people are predominantly unruly children or adults with no intimate lives. This entails that material about autism is all too often marketed at harried non-autistic parents of challenging autistic children. Ignoring the autistic adult is a way of straining towards an imagined future without autism. In this future, autism is simply a child's disease that can be grown out of or cured. As the work of writers like Joanne Limburg shows, autistic people throughout history have indeed been parents, and perhaps have not been

diagnosed because of these stereotypes. [79](#) Autistic parents, which Hugh may be an example of, trouble the prevailing de-sexualised, patronisingly childish image of the autistic person who either has no sex life or is too socially awkward and undesirable to gain a partner.

Liddiard notes that frequently "disabled people are stripped of and/or denied a gender identity." [80](#) Hugh's cognitive and behavioural differences led the court to question whether he fulfilled the requirements of ideal eighteenth-century, upper-class manhood: sociable, polite, and a model of superior understanding to his wife. Deeming Hugh not to fulfil these ideals bolstered their suggestion that he would be a poor husband. Rosalind Carr explains, "one of the basic tenets of Scottish Enlightenment discourse was that man was a social being, and that his social interaction, informed by his society's mode of subsistence and form of government, shaped his moral character." [81](#) Correct behaviour also indicated an understanding of Christianity and an appreciation of the solemnity of Christian worship. Hugh's perceived nonconformity to "society's mode of subsistence and form of government" cast doubt on his moral and human status. Hugh seemingly cared little for certain "social graces" such as how to behave in front of guests in a way that reflected his and their social hierarchies in normative ways.

The court picked up on even incidental details here. Schoolmaster Thomas McCourtie saw Hugh sitting beside an applewife and thought it an odd place for a gentleman to sit. [82](#) However, several depositions indicated that Hugh clearly understood social codes, like paying his share when drinking with companions and responding in kind when somebody bowed, drunk his health, offered their hand to be shaken, or raised their hat to him. He proved his judgement and concern for civil behaviour by rescuing his mother from someone (implicitly, John Blair) who tried to beat her. He also helped Grizzel in other ways; the following are just two examples. When Grizzel asked Hugh to walk with her to Borgue, he arrived at her house dressed in his best clothes on the appointed day "before she was up;" he warmed her knitting wool at the fire for her so she would not have to get up. [83](#)

Furthermore, though Hugh's tatty clothes were remarked on as evidence of his foolishness and lack of understanding of social mores befitting a laird, the defence noted that they were appropriate to the drudge work he performed, and moreover that they were the clothes John had given him. [84](#) Hugh's marriage seems to have been a time of personal development. Before, he was "kept as a scullion about the House of Borgue," but afterwards learnt to brush his coat before coming to table and then carve the meat, saying grace before and after the meal and learning to help his mother with her headdress: helpful and polite actions that showed social engagement with others befitting a head of house and dutiful son. [85](#)

Conclusion

No mere copy of a fully-fleshed human, Hugh was a human who liked to copy. Imitation can be hugely generative, though *Autism in History* results in what is to me largely a frustrating copy of the court's approach to Hugh. As Vanheule writes, diagnosis can be alienating; drawing on Foucault, he recounts the view that

psychiatric diagnosis has an alienating effect: a diagnosis is made up of bits of psychiatric knowledge that are imposed upon an individual from without. For example, when an individual believes that he suffers from ADHD, as indicated by his doctor, *alienation* is at play: alien criteria dictate what is going on with this person, and bring about conclusions as to whether he has a disorder or not. As the criteria used for making the diagnosis are believed to match how the individual feels and behaves, these criteria obtain a status of truth. [86](#)

Diagnostic analysis of the court case treats Hugh as if he were an object to be analysed, further denying him influence over other people. It alienates Hugh from the truth of his own being, locating it in the diagnostician and their diagnostic criteria. We can let Hugh influence *us* by performing actions that he performed, allowing them to shape our bodyminds, if only for a time. These actions, rooted in the bodymind allow him to root in us.

Manifesto of Actions to perform

- Brush your coat and carve at Table
- Saunter about when others are praying and tumble what comes in your way
- Throw water on your bed and cry Louse! Louse! Flea! Flea!
- Repeat: Hugh Blair no die
- Whittle and fashion sticks as gifts for family and neighbours
- Create an ornamental dyke beside a working one
- Delve in the fields among clay and soil for your own diversion
- Stalk about with your bowl in your arm
- Sit beside an apple wife
- Cart stones in imitation of the Quarriers, and lay them in a heap
- Wash your own wig and dry it on a tree
- Give Hugh Blair's descendants their inheritance

I am very grateful to a grant from the Oxford University John Fell Fund which enabled me to travel to the National Archives of Scotland to consult documents CC8/6/320, CS219/3, CS271/75961, and CS104/10 relating to Blair v Blair, and for the assistance of the archivist Bryony Millan. Many thanks to Sandy Steel and to Martha Sofía Franco Rodríguez for commenting on this article, and to David Parry at Exeter University, Michael Booth at University College Cork, and Philip Milne at Shakespeare's Globe for the opportunity to present some of this material in 2023 and 2024.

Endnotes

1. *Process of Declarator of Nullity of Marriage, Blair v Blair*, 1748, National Archives of Scotland, CC8/6/320, 50.2 and 50.3.

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2. *Answer for John Blair*, 1748, CS271/75961, National Archives of Scotland [a summary of the court's conclusions], hand numbered pages, p. 5. A successful eighteenth-century writ like John's was a "retoured breve". As a property-owning laird, Hugh is a typical subject of a retoured breve. Hugh's case does not reflect the experiences of the many paupers who faced legal processes and incarceration for Idiocy; see Rab Houston *Madness and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 34.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198207870.001.0001>

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3. Rab Houston and Uta Frith, *Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). The chapters in this co-authored book were written separately. I refer to the book using both authors' names, except where, as in Frith's acknowledgements section below, one author signs their name.

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4. American Psychological Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed., text revision (Washington DC: APA, 2000) and *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., text revision (Washington DC: APA, 2002). Criteria for autism are at 299.00.

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5. The household and family neglected Hugh "in his cloaths, which were very bad and nasty and generally his Brother John, tho' the youngest of the two, his old casten cloaths—In his Bed which was in a Garret Room and meaner than the common servants – and every other way by neglecting him and little or nothing minding or noticing him, especially when company or strangers were about the house," *Process*, 10. William Taggart says, "the servants allways treated him as a fool, payed him no manner of respect, nay not so much as they did one another, Despised him and broke ludicrous jests upon him and frequently put him upon Drudgery work," *Process* 49.4.

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6. *Answer for John Blair*, 18.

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7. *Process*, 12. The court summarised this as a point in Hugh's disfavour, "discovers nakedness or privities without any ceremony or seeming to know that there was any indecenty therein," *Process*, 49.11.

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8. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 10–11.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372189>

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9. *Process*, 49.58.

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10. *Bill of Advocation for Hugh Blair* (1748), National Archives of Scotland.

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11. *Bill of Advocation*.

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12. *Bill of Advocation*.[Return to Text](#)13. *Process*, 124.[Return to Text](#)14. *Process*, 49.54.[Return to Text](#)15. *Process*, 131.[Return to Text](#)16. *DSM-IV*, 299.00. Laura Seymour, "Shakespearean Echolalia: Autism and Versification in *King John*," *Shakespeare* 18(3) (2022) (pp. 335–51), 336–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2022.2090596>[Return to Text](#)17. Eugen Bleuler, *Dementia Praecox Or The Group of Schizophrenias*, trans. Joseph Zinkin (New York: International Universities Press, 1950), passim and e.g. pp. 63ff. An English translation of Eugen Bleuler, "Dementia Praecox oder Gruppe der Schizophrenien," in G. Aschaffenburg, ed. *Handbuch der Psychiatrie* (Leipzig: Deuticke, 1911).[Return to Text](#)18. Houston and Frith, *Autism in History*, 4. *DSM-IV*, 299.00.[Return to Text](#)19. Stijn Vanheule, *Diagnosis and the DSM: A Critical Review* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 5, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137404688>. For specific examples of bias, see Vanheule, *Diagnosis and the DSM*, 13, 27.[Return to Text](#)20. "It is as if shifting viewpoints of mental distress, changing socio-economic practices, and broader epistemological positions don't affect symptom expression and experience" and, I would add, diagnosis, Vanheule, *Diagnosis and the DSM*, 57.[Return to Text](#)21. Sen, *DSM 69: Dolly Sen's Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* (Nottingham: Eleusinian Press, 2016), 3, 7.[Return to Text](#)22. Frith and Houston, *Autism in History*, 81.[Return to Text](#)23. Frith, in Frith and Houston, *Autism in History*, ix.[Return to Text](#)24. Frith and Houston, *Autism in History*, 2.[Return to Text](#)25. "The said John Blair is lyable to and often seized with fits of madness some times sullen and morose at other times furious and cannot be kept within the bounds of discretion & therefore altogether unfit for the said office of tutor in law," *Dilligence*, 1745, CS219/3 National Archives of Scotland. John McEwan, who had known the Borgue family for 13 years, "said John Blair was seized with a disorder in his senses to such a height that it was thought proper to have him bound and that accordingly he was bound. And he thinks this was done by advice and direction of his the said John Blair's mother," *Dilligence*. Several witnesses corroborated McEwan's statement that John had "fitts" several times over the last two years; John Gordon, married to John Blair's's aunt, says John had these "sullen Morose or Melancholly fitts" for about 15 years at least, but they worsened and became violent in the past few years, *Dilligence*. In 1761, John Blair's son David found John "totally Deprived of his understanding" after an illness "that by degrees affected his judgement" and successfully asked in court to take control of John's affairs and become his "factor in loco Tutoris." During David's minority, the Lordship appointed Helen Lamont (David's mother) factrix over John and Hugh's estates. Now in his majority, David wished to claim his inheritance as both Hugh and John's heir, promising to maintain "the void John Blair" and "the void Hugh Blair," 17 July 1761

Bond of Cautionry, William Gordon for David Blair of Borgue, CS104/10, National Archives of Scotland.

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26. Sen, *DSM 69*, 8.

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27. Rodas argues, in mainstream poetics repetition is lauded for its beauty and deep meaning. However, autistic repetition is pathologised as mechanical and "a sign of absence or vacancy" perhaps because poets supposedly repeat intentionally whereas autists repeat involuntarily without understanding their own words, "what clinical literature reads as 'echolalia,' 'parroting,' and 'stereotypy,' are 'forms of repetition other writers associate with mantra, with poetry, and with literary modernism.'" Julia Miele Rodas, *Autistic Disturbances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 44, 7.

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28. Philip Sidney, *Syr PS His Astrophel and Stella* (London: J Danter, 1591), sonnet 3. The poems were published posthumously; Sidney died in 1586.

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29. *Process*, 50/1, 50/5.

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30. Nick Chown, "Language Games Used to Construct Autism as Pathology," in Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Anna Stenning, and Nick Chown, eds, *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 2020), 27–38.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429322297-4>

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31. Susan Anderson, "Speech," in Susan Anderson and Liam Heydon, eds, *A Cultural History of Disability in the Renaissance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) (pp. 117–32), 118, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350028906.ch-006>. Cf. Dwight Codr and Jared Richman, "Speech: The Sound of Disability" in D Christopher Gabbard and Susannah Mintz, eds, *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 105–119.

<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350028944.ch-007>

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32. Anderson, "Speech," 132.

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33. *Answer for John Blair*, 18. For an example of lairds' education, and discussion see Stana Nenadic, *Lairds and Luxury: The Highland Gentry in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2002), 50.

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34. *Process*, 13.

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35. *Process*, 49.20.

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36. *Process*, 49.6.

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37. John Gordon said Hugh Blair "had got more light and freedom of conscience than he John Gordon had got," *Process*, 65.

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38. Mardy Philippian, "The Book of Common Prayer, Theory of Mind, and Autism in Early Modern England," in Allison Hobgood and David Wood, eds, *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2013) (pp. 150–66), 152, cf. 160.

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39. Tenant farmer John Carsan, both Hugh's servant and his schoolfellow, deposes that Hugh showed "great sympathy and Concern upon hearing of the Death of any of his neighbours or acquaintances," further evidencing Hugh's social integration: "he has seen the Deponent in publick houses Drinking with other Company" and (several court documents state) paying his share, *Process*, 48.11, cf. *Bill of Advocation*.
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40. *Answer for John Blair*, 20. "In the time of family worship it was usual with said Hugh to walk about the Room or amuse himself with some childish diversions and playthings," *Process* 6, cf. *Process* 49.29, 49.39.
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41. *Answer for John Blair*, 20–21.
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42. *Answer for John Blair*, 21.
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43. *Process*, 13
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44. *Answer for John Blair*, 19–20.
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45. "he had not so much understanding as to distinguish the proper seasons" in which to do things, performing his tasks even in "foul weather;" "in carrying out nastinesse from the house, which was one part of his work he made no distinction who were present whether only the people of the Family or Gentlemen and Ladies that were strangers," he went "to Gentlemens houses without an Errand or without Invitation he brought off with him Coats Linnens &c without knowing the wrong or Impropriety of what he did, and he did the like things in his mothers house," taking Grizell's wainscoting he "cut it down to what he called spindles...he stole cloth from the Taylors and from the beds of the House without any sense of the Impropriety of what he was doing," *Answer for John Blair*, 19.
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46. *Answer for John Blair*, 19.
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47. *Answer for John Blair*, 19–20.
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48. *Process*, 6.
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49. *Process*, 6, 10.
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50. *Process*, 124.
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51. *Process*, 49.5–6.
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52. *Process*, 49.54.
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53. *Answer for John Blair*, 3. The first minister the Blairs and Mitchells consulted, George Hartshorne, said "Mr Blair seemed to him quite incapable of giving consent to, or of taking on Marriage Vows" he put it before the Presbytery and they decided Hugh should not be allowed to marry, *Process*, 83.
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54. Houston, *Madness and Society*, 59. For further quotations from the trial see p. 60.

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55. Answer for John Blair, 2.

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56. *Answer for John Blair*, 2.

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57. *Answer for John Blair*, 2.

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58. *Answer for John Blair*, 19.

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59. Kristin Lindgren, 'Deafness', in *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Eighteenth Century*, D. Christopher Gabbard and Susannah B. Mintz, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 87.

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60. *Process*, 12; *Answer for John Blair*, 19.

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61. *Answer for John Blair*, 7.

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62. One of the first questions in *Process* is, "Could you ever discover in Hugh, from all your acquaintance with him, the smallest degree of passion and inclination for the other sex."

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63. *Answer for John Blair*, 15. The *Answer* states that he cannot understand "the nature of an obligation to marry," and "on the opinion of Grotius neither a furious person nor an Idiot can contract marriage," *Answer for John Blair*, 11, 8.

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64. *Answer for John Blair*, 13.

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65. Answer for John Blair, 4.

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66. "there was a place in Georgian society for the intellectually limited but physically capable simple man, and their differentiation from 'real' idiots was becoming clear," Simon Jarrett and CF Goodey, "Learning Difficulties: Intellectual Disability in the Long Eighteenth Century," *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Eighteenth Century* (pp. 121-137), 128. Jarrett and Goodey adduce the examples of William and Dick in John Cleland's 1746 novel *Fanny Hill*. Cleland creates a substantial scale between the respectful "simpleton" William who is simply naïve and of "country breeding" and the "soft simpleton" Dick who struggles to speak due to intellectual disability rather than rustic bashfulness, whose enormous penis and attractive body demonstrate how "nature had made him amends in her best bodily gifts, for her denial of the sublimer intellectual ones," and who is a "brute-machine" unable to engage with Louisa's attempts at conversation and her expressions of consent or otherwise as he exercises the only "superiority" he has over her: that of physical strength, John Cleland, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, ed. Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 71, 160-4.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/owc/9780199540235.001.0001>

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67. *Bill of Advocation*.

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68. Frith and Houston, *Autism in History*, 32.

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69. Frith and Houston, *Autism in History*, 32.

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70. Kirsty Liddiard, *The Intimate Lives of Disabled People* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315556598>. Liddiard carefully distinguishes this from disabled people on the ACE spectrum.

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71. Cf. *Process* 49/4, 49/27.

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72. *Process*, 50/4.

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73. Hugh's Wikipedia page repeats the story that he would indiscriminately say "yes" to any offer of marriage: "It is uncertain whether Hugh ever knew he was married or not, as whenever he was asked if he would like to marry someone he would reply 'yes' regardless of their gender or whether he even knew them or not. He answered 'yes' when asked this question by a male commissary in the courtroom," "Hugh Blair of Borgue," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Blair_of_Borgue, last edited November 14th 2021 [accessed 07.01.2022]. The reference provided for this on Wikipedia is Rab Houston's podcast "A Silent Madness" (2017) arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/psychhist/index.php/2017/09/19/a-silent-madness-hugh-blair/ [accessed 23.12.2023]. Attributed to "Morag Cambell" on Wikipedia, at 8.00, Houston states, "If asked whether he was going to marry a certain person, Hugh always answered yes, regardless of who they were."

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74. *Process*, 50.1.

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75. *Process*, 49/37

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76. *Process*, 49/28.

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77. Frith and Houston, *Autism in History*, 96. In 1761 David Blair stated "Hugh Blair your petitioner's uncle...is an Idiot' and his 'pretended marriage annulled', though it was in David's interests to emphasise the continued illegitimacy of Hugh and Nickie's marriage as he wished to take control of both Hugh and David's affairs, *Bond of Cautionry*.

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78. Frith and Houston, *Autism in History*, 168.

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79. Cf., e.g., Limburg's discussion of Frau V, *Letters to My Weird Sisters* (London: Atlantic Books, 2021), 133–182.

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80. Liddiard, *Intimate Lives*, 19–20.

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81. Rosalind Carr, *Gender and Scottish Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59.

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82. *Process*, 49.61.

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83. *Process*, 46.13–14, 48.14.

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84. *Bill of Advocation*. "Even in his lucid intervals he [John Blair] neglected the person of the said Hew Blair in so far as he allowed him to do the most servile things for the family such as carrying peats water &&c for the use of the house, and did not furnish or provide him in cloaths and attendance suitable to his circumstances," *Dilligence*.
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85. "He was taught to brush his Coat and to carve at Table, and to put on and tye his mothers head cloaths," *Answer for John Blair, 22*.
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86. Vanheule, *Diagnosis and the DSM*, 23.
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