

HARRY POTTER : ANCIENT MYTH WITH A MODERN TWIST

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Abstract

“The Gospels contain a fairy-story . . . But this story has entered History and the primary world.” These are the words quoted by Tolkien, the myth maker for JK Rowling’s Harry Potter. It is no surprise that J.K. Rowling got inspired by ancient myths and legends. Global, myth, folklore, and legends offered stimulation for the vast assortment of vivid creatures and fantastical elements that fill the pages and the silver screen of the alluring, magical world of the Harry Potter authorization. For many readers, the Harry Potter stories may have been their first peek at creatures from ancient myth – even though with a modern twist. Rowling is adroit at combining elements from some of the world’s oldest and greatest legends – tales of heroic journeys, tests of courage and strength, good vs. evil, friendship, love, pain and heartache, all rolled up in an enchanting world where nature and magic blend. The familiarity with these aspects makes the operating themes elite, but they are given a brand-new layer of paint. Some of the more famous creatures from a classical myth which appear in the story include: unicorns, mer-people, dragons, a sphinx, ghosts, elves, witches, wizards, and giants – this is a magical world after all. But there are also some lesser-known beings which show up, and others which played such a role that it is worth noting how they were adapted from ancient tales into a more modern wizarding world.

Keywords: *Myth, Fantasies, Histories, Folklore, Retelling, Classic, Enchanting, Wizards*

Introduction

J.K. Rowling, the best selling author of the *Harry Potter* series, uses mythology to add layers of meaning to her own creative storylines, provide insight into the characters and plot, and foreshadow events to come. Rowling reinvents the old myths referred to in her text by creating surprise twists that are a reversal of the reader’s expectations. In her *Harry Potter* series, Rowling has made use of Greek and Roman myths. The paper attempts to delve into the use and description of age-old myths by the writer of the current era. The author’s use of myth to reflect contemporary concerns is explored.

J.K. Rowling, the author of the well-known series of *Harry Potter* books, draws heavily from mythology, legend and folklore, expressing modern ideas and social morals to the newest generation of readers. She reinvents the old myths through a pattern of surprise twists and a reversal of expectations that ultimately reveal the author’s own perspective and contemporary ethos.

The term myth has broad applicability. In its simplest definition, a myth is a story with traditional roots that uses symbols and imagery to express ideas, mysteries and truth. Although today’s western cultures

do not interpret myths literally, they are still believed to hold real meaning metaphorically, morally and symbolically. Eric Caspo states in 'Theories of Mythology', "Myth is one of the most important media for ideological work. Most ancient myths survive because they operate at the highest ideological level: they participate in the creation of a unifying general ideology" (301)

Rowling acknowledges the substantial role played by classical mythology, history and language. She uses them in various ways. She has drawn her inspiration from a broad range of literary and historical sources. She has a special attraction for names. She chooses them from history and classics of the past and if she fails to get out of her own choice, If she is unable to find a name for her character she invents on her own, basing them on ancient myths, she tries to give the names a modern twist. The most famous villain of the series, Voldemart, can trace his name to the French phrase meaning "flight of death" The name of a Rowling character can draw upon specific myths that provide the character with a kind of history, imbue the character with significant character traits, and relate to the character's role in the stories. Rowling often alters some aspects of these mythological references, twisting them into something unexpected. A closer look at these changes often reveals how they support the larger ideas that are at work in the text. Assigning mythic names to characters is a clever writing device too, for it allows Rowling to link her characters to mythological characters of the same name. Ultimately, such connections imply something about the nature of the characters. Argus Filch, the grumpy watchman of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is a good example of this. In Greek myth, Argus is the name of another watchman who was covered in eyes. He was chosen by the goddess Hera to guard Io, a young girl whom Hera had transformed into a cow out of jealousy. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* Io describes her terrifying guardian:

I'm frightened when I see the shape of Argos,
Argos the herdsman with ten thousand eyes.
He stalks me with his crafty eyes: he died,
But the earth didn't hide him; still, he comes
even from the depths of the underworld to hunt me:
he drives me starving by the sands of the sea. (569-574)

Ovid tells us in, *Metamorphoses*, that it was nearly impossible for anyone to get past him unnoticed as he never closed all of his eyes at once. Even when he slept, some eyes were ever watchful:

...Argus

Who had a hundred eyes; two at a time,
No more than two would ever close in slumber,
The rest kept watch. No matter how he stood,
Which way he turned, he always looked at Io,
Always had Io in sight. (629)

Apollodorus says in *The Library of Greek Mythology*, the writer who compiled a comprehensive guide to Greek mythology during the first or second century AD, does not specifically describe Argus the watchman's many eyes, but he calls him "Argos the All-Seeing" in reference to the well-known trait.(59) Zeus, smitten with Io, sent clever Hermes to rescue her. Eventually, Hermes managed to bore Argus so

thoroughly with long, drawn-out stories, that all of his eyes closed in sleep. Hermes then killed him. Naming the Hogwarts watchman after this formidable watchman of Greek mythology is humorously misleading. Rowling's Argus, who is called Filch by the students, certainly tries to be ever watchful and all-seeing. He is overzealous in his mean-spirited attempts to catch students violating curfew or breaking any other school Myth, folklore, and legends provided inspiration for the cosmic range of vivid creatures and fantastical elements that fill the pages and the silver screen of the enthralling, magical world of the *Harry Potter* authorization. For many, the *Harry Potter* stories may have been their first glance at creatures from ancient myth – albeit with a modern twist, where did they arrive from, the dragons, unicorns and hippogriffs of the *Harry Potter* universe? Monsters and mythical beasts execute a role in JK Rowling's work which goes beyond that of world-building: they append symbolic and psychological profundity, as well as repeating to us again and again that we are visiting a magical place. Rowling is both an inventor and archivist of fantastical animals, colonizing her universe with a mixture of what one might term 'classic monsters' (trolls, centaurs, merpeople) and folklore staples (bowtruckles, erklings), flanking her own inventions (dementors).

Some of these collected monsters are hugely better known than others: grindylows and boggarts, for example, have origins in Celtic and English folklore, but they are hardly domestic names. These relatively minor creatures often have a less-than-fantastical backstory: grindylows live in shallow water and threaten to grab at children with their green, reed-like arms. It isn't difficult to see here both an explanation for the existence of the grindylow – it shares many characteristics with water plants, which are usually mobile and thus have their own disquieting appearance – and an explanation for why such stories might thrive – as a warning from parents to their children to keep away from a potential hazard, even if the risk was more likely to come from drowning than a malevolent water sprite.

But the enormous preponderance of Rowling's favourite monsters has shifted their way from the ancient world to her modern, magical one. The description of Fawkes, the Phoenix is not only an extraordinary fiend, skilled in auto-regeneration; he's also a historical one. His colour – red and gold – is the same as that of the phoenixes revealed by Herodotus in his *Histories* from the Fifth Century BCE. Herodotus is known as the 'father of history' and, by his critics, as the 'father of lies. He reports what he is told by people he meets on his travels, often without the presentation of further evidence. In this instance, he's told that phoenixes live in Egypt, so he relays this information to his readers. He does add that he hasn't seen the creature himself; only through pictures, he is able to describe one.

Even the more critical Roman historian, Tacitus, reports on a phoenix-sighting, again in Egypt, during the reign of the emperor Tiberius in the First Century CE. Tacitus found some disagreement about the bird's lifespan but says it is generally held to live for around 500 years. His sources are unanimous on the subject of the bird's beak and the colour of its plumage, however: all agree that it differs from every other bird, and is sacred to the sun. Interestingly, Tacitus and Herodotus suggest not that a phoenix is reborn from its own flames, but that a young phoenix will carry the body of its parent bird some considerable distance and then bury it. Though even as he tells us the story, Herodotus describes this particular element as unbelievable. Another *Harry Potter* animal that has undergone changes to its fantastical nature is the multi-headed dog. Cerberus, the dog who guards the entrance to the Underworld in Greek myth, is a dog of many talents but no fixed number of heads. The poet Hesiod reckoned he was a fifty-headed beast, and Pindar was more ambitious still, suggesting a hundred heads. Later Greek and

Roman writers usually go for three, although vase painters – there's a beautiful example of Cerberus on a vase in the Louvre – often depict him with two. Perhaps two heads are better than three when it comes to painting them. However, many heads he has, Cerberus has one thing in common with Fluffy, the three-headed dog in the first *Harry Potter* novel: both are distracted by music. Cerberus is a discerning dog, and it takes the lyre-playing of no less a musician than Orpheus to paralyze him (as Virgil tells us in *The Georgics*), holding his three mouths agape. Fluffy is an easier audience and can be lulled to sleep by a mere enchanted harp. In a nod to the Cerberus myth, Rowling employs Fluffy as a guard-dog, lying atop the trapdoor which leads Harry, Ron and Hermione on their search for the philosopher's stone. Are we meant to wonder if the children are entering the gates of hell? Certainly, they undergo trials which wouldn't be out of place in the underworld of Greek myth: the torturous puzzles, the physical peril, the emotional trauma.

Rowling plays a contriving role in global myth making. The philosopher's stone itself has its ancestry in both myth and history: Nicolas Flamel, Dumbledore's friend and the stone's inventor, was a real etch who lived in Paris in the 14th Century. It was after many years after Flamel's death that he was believed to have discovered the secret to eternal life: later writers accredited alchemical skills to him but there is no evidence to suggest he actually possessed these. Nonetheless, he has a street named after him in Paris today (as does his wife Pernelle), which is a kind of immortality, at least. Even dragons – who have twin mythic histories in Europe and Asia, as Rowling observes with the shorter snout and protuberant eyes of her Chinese Fireball dragon – take their name from the Greek word, drakon. And the basilisk which dwells inside the Chamber of Secrets has also taken his name from the Greek: a diminutive form, meaning 'little king'. Rowling kept the part of the basilisk myth which sees it capable of destroying everything in its path with its toxic force. Happily, for her readers, she abandoned the fatal flaw which is detailed by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural Histories*: for Pliny, the basilisk can be destroyed by the mere smell of a weasel.

Perhaps the most enigmatic monsters at Hogwarts are the centaurs that live in the forbidden forest. They seem to be direct descendants of the centaurs which were believed to have lived on Mount Pelion in Thessaly, in central Greece. Rowling's centaurs also preferred a woodland home, although they had a reputation for lascivious behavior which the noble Firenze and his companions have avoided. Firenze himself, with his passion for astrology and education, owes something to the celebrated centaur, Chiron, who was teacher to Achilles, Theseus and other Greek heroes, and was also a renowned astrologer. There is a beautiful fresco, originally from Herculaneum, in the archaeological museum in Naples, which shows Chiron teaching Achilles to play the lyre. His back legs are curled behind him, almost like a dog, while his front legs support his weight and his hands pluck at the lyre strings. It's a beautiful reminder that human beings have been thinking of mythical beasts for as long as we have been writing, painting and thinking.

Rowling like other children's literature writers has richly and realistically used magic and metaphor in her series of *Harry Potter*. Beasts made up of two species – centaurs, and merpeople (merpeople are sentient beasts that live underwater) – are a common part of folklore. But even more complex species-mingling occurs sometimes. The hippogriff is a relatively modern creation, dating back to an Italian poem of the early 16th Century. But the combination of a griffin (itself a combination of an eagle and a lion) and the horse is predicted centuries earlier. In his *Eclogues*, Virgil describes a scene in which all the usual

rules no longer apply: griffins will mate with mares, he says, and fearful deer will drink next to hounds. The very existence of a hippogriff is presented as an impossibility, not because of their fantastical nature, but because of the well-known animosity (to Virgil's audience, at least) that existed between horses and griffins.

One interesting point is to consider the monsters and beasts which Rowling has not used, most notably the satyrs and nymphs which populate so much Greek myth. (The French witch Fleur mentions that wood nymphs are used as Christmas decorations at the Beauxbatons School, but they seem to have no other role). It's this as much as anything that makes us think about the symbolic purpose of the mythic creatures in *Harry Potter*. Harry's world – perhaps surprisingly for one filled with teenagers – is largely devoid of sex: there is some kissing, but the predation which satyrs represent is absent. Even the girl who shares a name with the passive Greek nymphs, Nymphadora Tonks, shares little else with them, besides an ability to change appearance (and usually when this happens to a nymph, it is because she is trying to avoid a lusty satyr, rather than battle evil). Other creatures serve allegorical purposes too: elves have been much grander elsewhere than in Rowling's work (think of the superiority and otherness of the elves in Tolkien's work, for example). Rowling's house-elves are a clear reminder of slavery and servitude. Similarly, centaurs and giants suffer under Umbridge's domination of Hogwarts, since they are regarded as less than human. Species-ism stands in for racism very easily. It is worth noting that although dragons and basilisks put Harry and his friends in physical peril, the scariest creatures in the Potter universe are the dementors – creatures Rowling invented herself. These may bear some physical similarity to wraiths, and the Black Riders in 'The Lord of the Rings', but the psychological and emotional damage they cause is their own. Rowling has linked them with her own experience of depression, reminding us (if such reminders were necessary) that the darkest monsters most of us will face are those in our own minds. (Natali, BBC)

Rowling has a degree in Classics, so it's easy to see where she pulled her inspiration for some of the creatures, names, and symbols in her most famous work. Although much of the *Harry Potter* series' world-building can be attributed to the author, she was also inspired by stories from all over the world.

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