

Uses of Classics in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

In spring 2019 I taught a course on Classical mythology in Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series, and we started the course by reading J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Rowling's novel gave us an opportunity to discuss common themes in children's literature and prepared us to see how Riordan's series arose in a cultural landscape already influenced by Rowling's novels. And although Rowling doesn't use Classics nearly as much nor as obviously as Riordan does, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* also provided us with some uses of Classics to discuss before we moved into Riordan's more sustained engagement with Classical material. Here I offer some information and a few thoughts about how Rowling incorporates Classics into her first Harry Potter novel.

Proper names may have Classical ties.

Sirius Black – *sirius* (or *seirios*) means “scorcher” in Greek and is the name of the brightest star in the Canis Major constellation

Albus Dumbledore – *albus* means “white” in Latin

Dedalus Diggle – Daedalus is a mythological inventor and architect

Eeylops Owl Emporium – *ops* means “eye” in Greek; *emporium* is a Latinized version of Greek *emporion*, meaning “trading place”

Argus Filch – Argus is a mythological figure with many eyes, set by Hera to watch over Io when Io is a cow

Cornelius Fudge – Cornelius is an ancient Roman name

Miranda Goshawk – *miranda* means “to be admired” in Latin

Hermione Granger – Hermione is the child of Helen and Menelaus in Greek mythology

Rubeus Hagrid – *rubeus* means “red” or “brambly” in Latin

Minerva McGonagall – Minerva is the Roman goddess of wisdom

Nimbus Two Thousand – *nimbus* means “storm-cloud” in Latin

Quidditch – *quid* means “what” in Latin

Severus Snape – *severus* means “serious” or “harsh” in Latin

In all of the above instances, Rowling combines the Classical or Classically derived component of the name with a non-Classical component (e.g., Albus is Classical, but Dumbledore is Germanic), and such hybridity becomes part of the texture of Rowling’s world.

Some names mentioned in passing are more wholly Classical.

Phyllida Spore – *phyllas, phyllados* means “leaves,” “branch,” or “tree,” and *spora* means “seed” in Greek

Vindictus Viridian – *vindicta* means “protection” or “revenge,” and *viridis* means “green” or “fresh” in Latin

Jupiter – the Roman king of the gods, associated with thunder and lightning

Mars – the Roman god of war

Phyllida Spore’s name is fitting for an author of a book on magical herbs and fungus; Vindictus Viridian’s name is apt for the author of a book on recent curses. Jupiter and Mars occur as names of the planets, but their ancient super-human connotations may be activated somewhat: Harry reviews the moons of Jupiter as part of his magical studies, and the centaur Ronan notes the position of Mars in the night-time sky as part of his astrological observation.

A few names with Classical ties also show French influence.

Draco Malfoy – *draco* means “snake” in Latin, and Malfoy is Latinate via French for “bad faith”

Voldemort – Latinate via French for “flight of death”

The French influence seems to be a subtle negative marker.

Spells may have Classical components.

Alohomora – the word perhaps contains Latin *mora* meaning “delay”

Caput Draconis – Latin for “head” (*caput*) “of the snake” (*draconis*)

Locomotor Mortis / Leg-Locker curse – *locus* means “place,” *motor* means “mover,” and *mortis* means “of death” in Latin

Petrificus Totalus / Body-Bind curse – *petra* means “stone,” *fic-* from *facere* means “make,” and *totus* means “whole” in Latin

Wingardium Leviosa – the *-ium* ending is Latinate, and *levis* means “light” in Latin

Although containing Latin elements, the spells are not in Latin, with the exception of Caput Draconis. The incorporation of Latin is playful rather than academic, and Latinate components are often combined with non-Latinate ones, as in Wingardium’s use of *wing*, derived from Old Norse, in conjunction with the Latinate *-ium* suffix. Changes in Latin form may make the spells easier to understand for a non-Latin-reading audience, as in the use of *totalus* (containing the recognizable *total*) rather than the Latin adjective *totus*. Locomotor Mortis and Petrificus Totalus are composed of Latin elements but are also referred to with Germanic glosses that use everyday words.

And while I’m looking at words: Rowling has a bit of fun with the related Greek-derived words *stalagmite* and *stalactite*. When Harry remarks that he can’t remember the difference between the two, Hagrid notes the presence of *m* in one of the words. Both contain the Greek element *stal-* meaning “drip,” but *stalagmite*’s *m* signals it as a passive form, while *stalactite* is

active. For someone knowing ancient Greek, it's clear that a stalagmite is the result of what's been dripped, while a stalactite does the dripping.

Classical mythological creatures exist in the magical world of Harry Potter.

gorgons – the sight of these snaky-haired female monsters can turn a viewer to stone;

used in Hagrid's "Gallopin' Gorgons" exclamation

centaurs – beings part-human and part-horse; in Rowling's novel they are associated with

astrology and stargazing, but that is not the case in Classical texts

phoenix – a bird reborn from the ashes and flames of its own destruction

dragons, unicorns, and werewolves – found in Latin and Greek sources, but not

exclusively Classical

As is the case in proper names and spells, Classics provides some ingredients for Rowling's world, but the overall world displays a mixture of influences.

Classical figures are mentioned as magical personages of the past.

Ptolemy – a scientist working in Alexandria while Egypt was part of the Roman empire;

his interests included mathematics, astronomy, and geography

Circe – a mythological figure famous for changing visitors to her island into animals;

Circe's encounter with Odysseus and his crew is included in Homer's *Odyssey*

Ptolemy and Circe are featured on the Famous Witches and Wizards cards included in packages of chocolate frogs. Other figures from European history and folklore are also mentioned, creating a world in which fact, fantasy, and various cultural traditions are intertwined.

There are echoes of Classical mythology within Rowling's text.

an identifying scar – in Homer’s *Odyssey* the household retainer Eurycleia recognizes

Odysseus upon his return by a scar on his thigh; Harry is known by the scar on his forehead (Walde 373)

dittany – an herb used by Venus in Vergil’s *Aeneid* to heal a wound suffered by her son,

Aeneas; it is included in the volume *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* consulted by Harry

a concealing turban – in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* King Midas wears a turban after Apollo

transforms his ears into donkey ears; Professor Quirrell’s turban hides the faces of the regenerating Voldemort

three-headed dog – Cerberus is the three-headed mythological dog which guards the

Classical Underworld; Fluffy, a three-headed dog received by Hagrid from a

“Greek chappie,” guards a forbidden corridor on Hogwarts’ third floor

captivating music – in Vergil’s *Georgics* Cerberus is stunned by the lyre and song of

Orpheus when he visits the underworld, and in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* Argus is

put to sleep by Mercury’s piping and story-telling; Fluffy is lulled by a harp and flute

gazing at oneself – in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* Narcissus wastes away in his desire for his

own reflection seen in a pool of water; Harry and Ron are beguiled by the visions

of themselves which they see in the Mirror of Erised, but Dumbledore cautions Harry

against the mirror’s allure

In these instances—and, in fact, for all of the things I’ve discussed here—recognition of the Classical touchstone isn’t necessary for an understanding of Rowling’s novel. It does, however, add another layer to an experience of the text: a reader can detect how Classics is one influence

among others in Rowling's world and can also bring their own knowledge of Classics into dynamic conversation with it.

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uploaded 2020

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