

The Integration of Mythical Creatures in the *Harry Potter* Series

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English 200D
Fall 2014

From the naturalistic expeditions of Pliny the Elder, to the hobbit's journey across Middle Earth, the literary world has been immersed in the alluring presence of mythical and fabulous creatures. Ranging from the familiar winged dragon to the more unusual and obscure barometz, the mythical creature brings with it a sense of imagined history that allows the reader to become immersed in its world; J.K Rowling's best-selling *Harry Potter* series is one of these worlds. This paper will analyze the presence of classic mythical creatures in the *Harry Potter* series, along with the addition of original creations, while examining the effect that this has on the series as a whole in regards to the creation of a world that envelopes and intrigues the reader.

Often times while discussing mythical creatures, the image of the dragon is brought to mind. While it is difficult to place an exact date due to variations in terminology, the lore surrounding dragons dates back hundreds of years, and it can easily be said that dragons are the most feared and revered of all mythical beasts and beings. The essence of their mystique may be due to their shifting nature; while the dragons of earlier times were depicted as the beastly embodiment of evil, there have been many variations ranging from the wise and noble, the bloodthirsty and vengeful, and—as in Rowling's *Potter* series—the purely animal (*Goblet* 326). Still, as their individual natures may change, the morphology of the dragon remains at a constant. As Malcolm South states, dragons are “serpentlike creatures of exceptional size, with wings, claws, and a tail, breathing fire and/or poison, guarding treasure, living in remote areas (whether on land, or in or near water), and acting as antagonists to divine, heroic or chivalric warriors” (28). While Rowling's dragons follow this description as far as morphology, the dragon plays a different role as an antagonist in the wizarding world. As stated earlier, the dragons in Rowling's world are unique in the sense that they do not possess the tradition-implied sentience that many dragons of modern or classical lore seem to; they are merely beasts, and fairly vicious ones at that. The first mention of a dragon in the *Harry Potter* series is the introduction of Hagrid's baby dragon, Norbert:

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body; it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging,

orange eyes. (*Stone* 235) Harry's first year introduces the traditional serpentine dragon, something that readers can envision with confidence and clarity. The fourth year, however, provides a vivid insight on the break from tradition as Harry watches while “four fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rearing onto their hind legs inside an enclosure fenced with thick planks of wood, roaring and snorting—torrents of fire were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks” (*Goblet* 326). This is a change from the treasure hoarding, princess stealing, riddle loving dragons of fantasy and fairy tales; these are beasts that can merely be restrained, not tamed. It is with this that Rowling sets the feel for her series. The reader is told that not everything is as it seems, or is expected to be. Danger is real, even for wizards.

If the dragon is the embodiment of evil and greed, the unicorn is its counterpart as the symbol of innocence and purity. Known in the West at least four centuries before the birth of Christ—and possibly even earlier in the East—the legend of the unicorn maintains a timeless and universal appeal. Because the image of the unicorn maintains an air of probability, it was accepted as a genuine creature until the nineteenth century (South 5). The classic unicorn possesses the body of a horse, but this is not always the case. There are a variety of unicorn-like creatures, some with the body of a fish, others with a multitude of limbs, eyes, or mouths, but the defining factor is the presence of a single, prominent horn. Though the unicorn does not appear in the *Harry Potter* series often, it plays an important role in a variety of aspects in the wizarding world, and in the storyline itself. Unicorn horn and hair is considered highly valuable and useful in potion-making and wandlore, while the blood of a unicorn provides a temporary lifeline to those near death, though this benefit is rarely ever utilized. In fact, the only time that this practice is mentioned is during Harry's first year as he serves his detention in the Forbidden Forest. As he and his classmates attempt to track down an injured unicorn, Harry gets separated from the rest and stumbles upon the horrible sight of Voldemort drinking the blood from the unicorn's wound. Later, the centaur, Firenze, explains to Harry why this practice is frowned upon:

“Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used for?”

“No,” said Harry, startled by the odd question. “We've only used the horn and tail hair in Potions.”

“That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn,” said Firenze. “Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips.” (*Stone* 258)

The killing of a unicorn takes on symbolic meanings in both Rowling's interpretation and in classical lore. Traditionally, only a virgin maiden could possess the ability to successfully capture a unicorn, due to her own innocence and purity. This led to tales of "unicorn hunts" where a virgin would be used to lure the unicorn into submission, while the hunters would attack and, inevitably, kill the unsuspecting creature. Christian symbolism likens the unicorn hunters to Christ's enemies, and by extension the evil that extinguishes the good (South 17). Rowling's interpretation takes few liberties and, all in all, maintains the traditional image of the unicorn.

Another mythical creature kept classical is the centaur. Again, in Harry's first year during his detention in the Forbidden Forest, readers are introduced to Ronan, Bane, and Firenze, three wise and proud centaurs who follow the classic combination of man and horse. This is the "true form," and lesser details such as the types of legs, or the presence of wings are merely details (South 225). Symbolically, the centaur represents a dichotomy between wisdom and violence; something that Rowling portrays with ease. Upon meeting the centaur Firenze, Harry Potter is asked to ride upon his back to safety, a request that angers the other centaurs:

"Firenze!" Bane thundered. "What are you doing? You have a human on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?"
 "Do you realize who this is?" said Firenze. "This is the Potter boy. The quicker he leaves this forest, the better."
 "What have you been telling him?" growled Bane. "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?" (Stone 257).

Here it is made clear that the centaurs are proud creatures, reluctant to impart their celestial wisdom on a human and disgusted at the prospect of having their companion serve one by allowing him to ride on his back. The combination of a quick temper and a mysterious intelligence ties Rowling's centaurs back to their classical roots.

Another creature of part-human morphology is the mermaid. Oftentimes depicted in fairy tales and fantasy, the mermaid is a creature of the water, with the torso of a beautiful woman and the tail of a fish. Usually the mermaid possesses some sort of musical ability, either singing or harping, and is frequently seen sunning themselves on sands or rocks, with a mirror or comb in hand (South 133). While Rowling's merpeople do possess some of these qualities, there is a distinct twist to the traditional lore:

"The oldest recorded merpeople were known as sirens (Greece) and it is in warmer waters that we

find the beautiful mermaids so frequently depicted in Muggle literature and painting. The selkies of Scotland and the Merrows of Ireland are less beautiful, but they share that love of music which is common to all merpeople." (*Fantastic Beasts* 29)

Here there is a distinction between warm water (or salt water) merpeople, and freshwater, the latter being described as "less beautiful." In fact, the depiction of freshwater merpeople in Harry's fourth year gives them a wilder, more violent appearance:

"The merpeople had grayish skin and long, wild, dark green hair. Their eyes were yellow, as were their broken teeth, and they wore thick ropes of pebbles around their necks. They leered at Harry as he swam past; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch him better, their powerful, silver fish tails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands." (*Goblet* 498)

They are described here as being fairly tribal, living in caves and wielding spears. As with the dragons, Rowling's depiction of merpeople brings with it a sense of fantastical reality; the shock of a childhood icon being so grim and gritty in "real life" borders on the symbolic.

One of the few creatures that Rowling did not alter is the mandrake. The mandrake is more plant than animal, and while the mandrake plant does truly exist, it is not as animated as myth would imply. It is the root of the mandrake that gives it interest, and Pliny the Elder described it as such: "This plant grows close to the ground and bears violet flowers and orange berries. The roots are shaped like human beings, the white roots being male, and the black female. So deadly is their magic that trained dogs are employed to dig up the plants" (*Natura* 104). It is the cry of the mandrake that makes it so dangerous, as mentioned by Professor Sprout in Harry's second year:

"The Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes. It is also, however, dangerous. Who can tell me why?"
 Hermione's hand narrowly missed Harry's glasses as it shot up again.
 "The cry of the Mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it," she said promptly." (*Chamber* 92)

Even the morphology of the mandrake is textbook, as one is described as looking like "a small, muddy, and extremely ugly baby...[with] pale green, mottled skin... bawling at the top of his lungs" (*Chamber* 93). However, there is one small twist that Rowling adds to her mandrakes and that is the weakness of the mandrake's power due to its young age, as Professor Sprout informs the students: "As our Mandrakes are only seedlings,

their cries won't kill you yet" (*Chamber* 93). Rowling also takes advantage of the supposed humanoid characteristics of the mandrake, giving the plants a stunningly human development cycle (Allan 121). They begin to throw parties during their adolescence, and Professor Sprout comments that: "The moment their acne clears up, they'll be ready for repotting again" (*Chamber* 234). The addition of a creature most likely unknown to younger readers allows Rowling to both educate and intrigue. Her use of classic lore, and the addition of realistic variations grant the wizarding world a degree of depth in everyday life.

Also introduced in Harry's second year is the basilisk. The name of the basilisk means "little king," due to the presence of white markings on the head resembling a diadem (Borges, 30). Traditionally the basilisk is portrayed as a serpent, but later times show the basilisk as being part serpent, part rooster (though this is usually considered to be a separate creature, the cockatrice). Its venom is fatal, as well as its gaze, and it possesses the ability to move with its head held upright (South 113-115). In the Middle Ages it was believed that the crow of the rooster could kill the basilisk, and many travelers were known to carry roosters alongside them as they traveled through unknown territory (Borges 31). Rowling sticks to the classic portrayal, using the deadly gaze of the basilisk as one of the main points of conflict in Harry's second year. After Hermione Granger is petrified by the reflection of the basilisk's gaze, Harry discovers a crumpled textbook page in her hand with information on the basilisk:

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it. (*Chamber* 290)

The introduction of this information as canonical in the wizarding world is a key element of fantasy; allowing the characters to accept facts that are beyond our realm creates distance between "this" realm and "that", while still maintaining relatable ties (the fact that Hermione researched and obtained this text from a library is something many readers can relate to).

As far as deadly and dangerous creatures go, the werewolf is perhaps one of the most recognized. Traditionally, the werewolf is a person who has been changed into a wolf or a creature with a lupine form.

Usually the change is involuntary and brought about by the presence of the full moon (South 265). In the Harry Potter series, we are made familiar with the two main werewolves, Remus Lupin and Fenrir Greyback, the former being on the side of good, the latter on the side of evil. Their portrayal as werewolves begins with their names. For Remus Lupin, the story of Romulus and Remus, two young boys who suckled at the teat of a she-wolf, is clearly a source of inspiration here, while the surname Lupin stems from the Latin term *lupus*, meaning "wolf" (South 266). Fenrir Greyback's name takes inspiration from the Scandinavian myth of the wolf Fenrir, a creature so feared by the gods that they bound him in special chains and imprisoned him. At the time of Ragnarok, when the destruction of the gods is said to occur, Fenrir will break loose and kill Odin (South 360). It is clear that Rowling takes advantage of etymology in her series. While Rowling does stick to the traditional description of werewolves, there is one instance where she adds her own touch. Werewolves are traditionally depicted as evil beings—there are no "good" werewolves. However, in Harry's third year we are introduced to Remus Lupin, professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts and mild-mannered lycanthrope. Upon having his secret affliction discovered by Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Lupin explains his story:

"I was a very small boy when I received my bite. My parents tried everything, but in those days there was no cure. The potion that Professor Snape has been making me is a very recent discovery. It makes me safe, you see. As long as I take it in the week preceding the full moon, I keep my mind when I transform...I am able to curl up in my office, a harmless wolf, and wait for the moon to wane again."

"Before the Wolfsbane Potion was discovered, however, I became a fully fledged monster once a month...My transformations in those days were – were terrible. It is very painful to turn into a werewolf. I was separated from humans to bite, so I bit and scratched myself instead." (*Azkaban* 353)

Rowling describes him as a character that is aware of his affliction and not proud, unlike others of his type. In fact, Lupin seems to be the only outlier in the werewolf community. While he prefers to live a semi-normal life, the other werewolves have taken advantage of their condition, and have learned to enjoy attacking humans as Greyback mentions to Professor Dumbledore:

"But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore." "Am I to take it that you are attacking even without the full moon now? This is most unusual... you have developed a taste for human flesh that cannot be satisfied once a month?" (*Prince* 593)

What Rowling does for many of her mythical beings is unusual; she does not label them all as "good" or

as "evil." Thus, there is always at least one outlier, in this case, Lupin being the black sheep of the werewolf community. Lupin's character is a statement of the human condition; we are not any one thing, but a culmination of lessons and experiences that shape us into the people we are. Just as Lupin chose not to lash out due to his hatred for the werewolf who bit him—Fenrir Greyback, coincidentally—Greyback chooses the path of evil to satiate his inhumane desires.

Where Lupin's struggle to be normal exemplifies the deeper symbolism of the *Harry Potter* series, Rowling's humorous interpretation of fair folk and their many relations exemplifies its whimsical nature. One of the first mythical beings we are introduced to in Harry's second year is Dobby the house-elf. Described as having "large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls," Dobby is not quite the picturesque elf of children's books and fairy tales. In fact, upon further reading it is made clear that the house-elf is a type of wizarding servant:

He blew his nose on a corner of the filthy pillowcase he wore, looking so pathetic that Harry felt his anger ebb away in spite of himself.

"Why d'you wear that thing, Dobby?" he asked curiously.

"This, sir?" said Dobby, plucking at the pillowcase.

"Tis a mark of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. Dobby can only be freed if his masters present him with clothes, sir. The family is careful not to pass Dobby even a sock, sir, for then he would be free to leave their house forever." (*Chamber* 177)

Based on this description, it is clear that Rowling's house-elves are somewhat akin to brownies. The brownie, as Malcolm South states, is "a small fairy who wears ragged clothes of a brown color, [and] is the best known of the household fairies. He will perform many tasks if he is well treated, but any mistreatment of him may cause him to do some damage. If he leaves a house, the good luck attached to it goes with him" (South 329). The main difference here is the implication that the brownie performs household tasks of their own free will, while the house-elf is enslaved. Rowling uses the house-elves to represent different "classes" in the wizarding world. House-elves, while still magically powerful, are not given equal treatment to wizards. The same inequality is apparent with goblins. The goblins of Rowling's world work in Gringotts, the wizard bank, as they are experts on treasure appraisal. While they are trusted with wizard riches, they are not trusted with the secrets of wandlore, as is mentioned by Griphook the goblin to Harry and his companions:

"Wizards refuse to share the secrets of wandlore with other magical beings, they deny us the possibility of extending our powers! ...As the Dark Lord becomes even more powerful, your race is set

still more firmly above mine! Gringotts falls under Wizarding rule, house-elves are slaughtered, and who amongst the wand-carriers protests?" (*Hallows* 488-489)

This apparent inequality of the classes mirrors reality and contrasts with the lighthearted fairytale world that readers are used to. Again, as with the integration of the werewolf, Rowling addresses very real and very human issues in this series.

Aside from the many traditional creatures, Rowling has also integrated a variety of original creations into her series. One of the most important is the thestral, first mentioned in Harry's fifth year as a "great, black, winged horse" with a "skeletal body" and a "dragonish face" (*Phoenix* 444). Thestrals are one of the most misunderstood creatures in the wizarding world, most likely because, as Hermione states, "The only people who can see thestrals, are people who have seen death" (*Phoenix* 446). Naturally, Harry possesses this ability, having witnessed the murder of his parents. This becomes useful later in the book, when Harry and his companions need to find a mode of transportation that will allow them to quickly reach the Ministry of Magic:

"There are other ways of flying than with broomsticks," said Luna serenely. Harry whirled around. Standing between two trees, their white eyes gleaming eerily were two thestrals, watching the whispered conversation as though they understood every word." (*Phoenix* 762)

The thestral seems to have many physical features borrowed from traditional lore. Its skeletal appearance is similar to that of the Chichevache, a creature that survived only by eating virtuous women and because of this, was chronically malnourished (Allan 246). With the wings and head of a dragon, the thestral's appearance is essentially evil, but therein lies the point. The thestral is a symbolic representation of death; a concept unpleasant upon first look, but upon further inspection, calm and gentle in disposition.

If thestrals represent death, the dementor represents fear. In fact, the dementor is a personification of fear itself. Introduced in Harry's third year, the first mention of the dementor paints a vivid picture:

"Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin's hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Harry's eyes darted downward, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, grayish, slimy-looking, and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water." (*Azkaban* 83)

Dementors have an unpleasant effect on Harry, causing him to fall unconscious multiple times throughout the book (*Azkaban* 83-84). Eventually Professor Lupin teaches him on how to summon a Patronus, described as “a kind of anti-dementor—a guardian that acts as a shield between you [Harry] and the dementor” (*Azkaban* 237). The incantation for the Patronus (*Expecto Patronum*) is summoned whilst envisioning the happiest moments of one's life (*Azkaban*, 237-238). Rowling's dementor has many similarities to the ghoul, most specifically the Chinese *jiang shu*, or “stiff corpses.” *Jiang shu* were undead beings, most having committed suicide, fated to be in perpetual search of living creatures whose life essence they could drain (Allan, 65). This is similar to the dementor, who feeds off of “hope, happiness, [and] the desire to survive,” (*Azkaban*, 237) as stated by Professor Lupin. The dementor symbolizes fear and despair, and Rowling's Patronuses are a gentle reminder that joyful memories and happiness are our greatest allies in those dark times.

Rowling's integration of mythical creatures, both old and new creates a vivid back-story to the wizarding world. It is not just about Harry, as there are other things out there with histories all their own. The subtle symbolism and combination of traditional features with new twists allows readers to identify classic, well-loved fairytale creatures, while learning something in the process. As it is expected of Rowling, everything is integrated with purpose. There are lessons to be learned, even from mandrakes and unicorns.

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Magical creatures comprise a colourful and integral aspect of the fictional wizarding world in the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling. Throughout the seven books of the series, Harry and his friends come across many of these creatures on their adventures, as well as in the Care of Magical Creatures class at Hogwarts. Rowling has also written *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, a guide to the magical beasts found in the series. Many of these are derived from folklore, primarily Greek mythology, but also British and Scandinavian folklore. [citation needed] Many of the legends surrounding mythical creatures are also incorporated in the books. There are many mythical creatures in the HP series. Acromantula Giant spiders are seen throughout in Greek (Arachne), Egyptian (Neith), African (Anansi-can speak too, intellectual even) mythologies. Banshees Seen in Irish folktales, Banshees are female spirits who proclaim the death of a family member, usually by wailing. Basilisks For centuries, the basilisks are seen in European myth as massive serpents with a crown-shaped crest and a reputedly lethal stare. Bicorn In European folktales, the Bicorn was a creature with two horns which devours kind-hearted and devoted husbands. It is described in *Harry Potter: 16 Most Disturbing Creatures In The Series*. In between the magic and the politics in Harry Potter, there are some "fantastic beasts" that give the word "strange" a run for its money. Between Harry Potter and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (which undoubtedly promises to introduce an even wider range of creatures in the sequels), Rowling has truly stretched her imagination when it comes to creating the non-human characters in her imaginary world - seeing as even her human characters aren't really worth revisiting. But in case you're not entirely familiar with the true oddballs of the group, keep reading to explore the 15 Strangest Creatures In Harry Potter.

16 Hodag. Magical creatures are an aspect of the fictional wizarding world contained in the Harry Potter and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* series, both by British author J. K. Rowling. Throughout the seven books of the series, Harry and his friends come across many of these creatures on their adventures, as well as in their Care of Magical Creatures lessons at Hogwarts. The Care of Magical Creatures Class take care of creatures such as Hippogriffs, Unicorns and Owls. Rowling has also written *Fantastic*

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