

Mythic and Occultist Naming Strategies in *Harry Potter*

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This article looks at the names used in the seven bestselling *Harry Potter* novels by J. K. Rowling. The names reverberate with mythic and occultist meanings that complement the characterizations and that, arguably, even guide the narratives themselves: that is, the events in the stories are determinable in part by the names of the characters, which constitute metaphorical cues to the storylines. The naming patterns in the books, in effect, revive the mythic past for the contemporary world in ingenious ways.

KEYWORDS character names, metaphor, popular reading culture, myth, occultism

Introduction

A study of how the names in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books have been translated in five languages by Brøndsted and Dollerup (2004) reveals how they are actually virtually untranslatable because they are constructed with an inherent "Britishness" that taps into specific historical naming practices in English literature. With nearly 80 million Internet sites dealing with the names in the novels, it is obvious that they have a particular emotive force. As Colbert (2001) has suggested, the reason for this may be that the book series has an instinctive appeal to children and adults alike reflecting, perhaps, the appeal of the ancient myths as metaphors for understanding human character.

The mythic and occultist senses that the names evoke are part of an increasing utilization of occultist styles and forms in popular culture (Danesi, 2009). Movies, television programs, websites with occult themes dominate the airwaves and are as part of popular culture as are sexual and comedic narrative, visual, and theatrical forms. The purpose of this brief note is to look at the naming practices in the *Harry Potter* books from the perspective of myth and occultism as metaphors of character and life. Interestingly, the books are designed to follow the real aging chronology of the children who read the novels — that is, the characters in the novels age in successive novels as would the children reading them.

Myth and occultism

Occultism is the belief that hidden secrets about the universe and its mysterious forces can be unraveled through symbolic practices. These are found in all civilizations. Western occultism has its roots in ancient Babylonian and Egyptian mysticism, alchemy, and astrology, augmented by Jewish mysticism. Eminent Church figures, such as thirteenth-century Italian theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas, believed in the powers of alchemy and other occult arts and practices to provide insights into human destiny. The late medieval and early modern period saw occultism increasingly as being connected with the worship of the devil. It was thus censured, resulting in the persecution of witches and other purported devil-worshippers during the Inquisition. However, by so doing, the Church gave occultism new life, morphing into an intellectual subculture in Europe, adopted openly by writers and artists, who saw great value in occult and mystical traditions. From these new ones, such as the Arthurian legend, emerged.

As is well known, it was Roland Barthes (1957) who suggested that the spectacles, texts, and lifestyle practices of modern societies were re-enactments of ancient mythical themes. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1956) also suggested that pre-conceptual, psychic processes continue to influence cognitive behavior. He called these archetypes, which are in effect “mythological leitmotifs” that work below the level of awareness. For instance, the genital leitmotifs that all cultures represent artistically and in stories are powerfully attractive both to men and to women precisely because they evoke deeply embedded archetypes at an unconscious level. The leitmotif of the mythic huntress, as a fierce, powerful, and sexually dangerous female surfaces in all kinds of popular narratives, such as in movies like *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*. In a fundamental way, Rowling’s characters are Jungian archetypes, described through the etymology of their names.

The mythology of names in *Harry Potter*

There is little doubt that Rowling has tapped into a “mythological collective unconscious,” as it can be called, through the onomastic template of her characters. As Vico (1984) and Lévi-Strauss (1978), among others, argued, myths reveal the original naming function of language as a means to understanding human character. In many early cultures, just knowing the name of a deity was purported to give the knower great power — in Egyptian mythology, the sorceress Isis tricked the sun god, Ra, into revealing his name and, thus, gained power over him and all other gods. In most societies, ancestral names given to children are perceived to weave a sort of magical protective aura around the child. The list of such mythological functions is an endless one.

The “Wizarding World” in *Harry Potter* constitutes a mythic culture in which the names of the characters are imbued with archetypal-symbolic power. Many of the names in the book series are essentially self-fulfilling prophecies and are genealogical signs indicating bloodline status. A pure-blood Wizard, for example, is kept distinct from a half-blood one or from a “Muggle-born” (common, non-magical people) by his name. Colin Creevey, for example, is a Muggle-born wizard while Bellatrix Lestrange is a pure-blood witch. While Creevey is an actual British name, in the

context of the stories it suggests a “creepy” person, while Bellatrix is an obvious blend of *Bella* (“beautiful” in some Romance languages) and the suffix *-trix* (as in Latin *matrix*, meaning “womb” and in words such as *dominatrix* meaning “female dominator”). Lestrane needs no explanation.

Bloodline status has particular significance in the Wizarding World. There are three races or bloodlines in this World. The first is the pure-blood line. Pure-bloods are those who claim to have no Muggle ancestry. Because the magical gene is a dominant one in that universe, children born to magical parents will virtually always acquire a magical identity. If a child is not magical, but born to magical parents, he or she is designated a Squib. The word *squib* in English has several meanings, the most common of which is that of a firecracker that burns but not explodes. Like this artifact, a Squib in the novels has the magical fire within him or her, but it never explodes. The pure-bloods are the aristocrats of the Wizarding World. They are obsessed with keeping their bloodline pure, going even go so far as to inbreed in order to achieve this. Most of the pure-bloods are connected ancestrally to the character Sirius, an obvious allusion to the brightest star in the sky, also called the Dog Star, which was highly venerated by the ancient Egyptians, who regarded it as a token of a good harvest. Many Egyptian temples were constructed in such a way that the light of Sirius reached the inner chambers. The full name of the character is, actually, Sirius Orion Black. Sirius is in the heel of the constellation Orion (Knowles, 2006). Black is an allusion to the metaphor of fear as seen, in many occult practices, in black dogs. When Harry Potter sees a giant black dog lingering around him and is later told that Sirius Black is after him, it is a clue to readers that Sirius Orion Black and the black dog are one and the same. Sirius, as the reader later finds out, is an *animagus*, which means that he can morph into an animal at will. The form of the animagus is determined by the personality and inner traits of the witch or wizard. It comes, then, as no surprise that Sirius’ animagus form is a black dog when that is exactly what his name implies.

Similar allusions are imprinted in the names of the characters. The main antagonist in the series is Lord Voldemort, which is French for “flight from death” (*vol de mort*). Voldemort was born as Tom Marvolo Riddle, which is an anagram of “I am Lord Voldemort.” Both puzzle genres — the anagram and the riddle — trace their origins to ancient mythic and occult traditions. The first documented puzzle of history was, in fact, the Riddle of the Sphinx, which was connected to the Oedipus myth, and anagrams were thought to be prophetic texts of one’s destiny (Danesi, 2002). Rowling is clearly aware of the mythic-occult history of these two enigmatological artifacts and incorporates them effectively in the Voldemort name. Moreover, the name Marvolo is suggestive of *marvel*, which is what riddles and anagrams were supposed to (and continue to) evoke, especially in children when they are first exposed to them.

Voldemort’s name is a powerful evil taboo in the Wizarding World. Even twelve years after his supposed death, most of Wizarding denizens refer to him as “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” or “You-Know-Who” — recalling a tradition that finds its manifestations in various literary and occultist traditions, from the proverbial saying that one must not speak of the devil for he shall appear, to the use of a name such as *l’Innominato* (the unnamed one) in Alessandro Manzoni’s novel *I promessi sposi*

(1840). Even his followers will not speak his name out loud, calling him instead as The Dark Lord when speaking about him and My Lord in his presence. The characters Dumbledore and Harry are only two of the few people who do not fear Voldemort and thus call him always by name — a strategy that actually demystifies its power. When Harry is about to refer to Voldemort as You-Know-Who in the first book (Rowling, 1997: 216), Dumbledore admonishes him as follows: “Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself.” And when the character Hagrid berates him for using the name, Harry replies defiantly: “I’ve met him and I’m calling him by his name” (Rowling, 1997: 217). Harry actually meets the real Voldemort, Tom Marvolo Riddle, as he attempts to rescue Ginny Weasley in the Chamber of Secrets from a monster. Tom presents himself as a student who attended Hogwarts fifty years ago, but, as he says to Harry (Rowling, 1998: 231), “Voldemort is my past, present and future,” while he pilfers Harry’s wand and traces with it three shimmering words in the air, “Tom Marvolo Riddle,” after which, with one more wave of the wand, the anagram “I Am Lord Voldemort” magically appears.

Voldemort is obsessed with immortality, in synch with his name (“flight from death”). He performs Horcruxes, the most evil forms of magic one can execute in which the soul is removed from a body and stored in a container. In a Freudian subtext to the story, Voldemort hates his real name because he was named after his Muggle father, who had abandoned his mother once he found out that she was a witch, dying shortly after giving birth to him. His mother was the last descendant of Salazar Slytherin (one of the founders of the Hogwarts school who was a pure-blood supremacist). The name Salazar is of northern Spanish or Basque origin and means “palace;” Slytherin is an obvious play on *slithering*, a way of describing the movement of snakes, and Voldemort’s bodily features are evocative of a slithering snake. In the end, Harry defeats Voldemort in a humiliating manner (Rowling, 2007: 744): “Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, the body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse, and Harry stood with two wands in his hand, staring down at his enemy’s shell.” The subtext is obvious — there is no reason to fear evil. By facing it head on, and calling it by name, it will be vanquished. By using both of his names in the final death scene, Rowling ensures finality in his death.

The use of French in the construction of names takes the reader back to the tradition of medieval literature in the fledgling Romance languages, especially to traditions such as the *roman de la rose* and others. The names Draco Malfoy and Andromeda Tonks (née Black), are cases in point. The names Draco and Andromeda, like that of Sirius, reverberate with astrological tradition, which was common in the medieval period. Draco means “dragon” (in Latin). The constellation Draco represents the dragon killed by Hercules. Dragons are also common symbols of chaos and evil, as well as chivalric heralds in medieval times. For most of the book series, Draco is, in fact, Harry’s nemesis, becoming a Death Eater — a servant of the evil Lord Voldemort. Malfoy is French for *mal foi* “bad faith,” and in fact Draco’s entire family was associated with the Dark Arts for generations. Draco’s parents are Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Malfoy (née Black). Lucius derives from the word Latin word *lux* meaning “light,” and is also biblically associated with Lucifer, the light-bearer. Narcissa is the

female form of Narcissus, alluding to the original myth of narcissism. Narcissus is also the Greek word for “numb” (Room, 1995: 239) and in the series Narcissa comes off for the most part as emotionally numb — cold, unloving, and evil. However, at the end of the series, she is prepared to do whatever is necessary in order to keep her son safe.

Narcissa is the youngest sister of Bellatrix and Andromeda Black. Bellatrix (mentioned above) is also a giant star in the constellation Orion and the name also meant female “warrior” in Latin (from *bellum* “war”). Bellatrix is, in fact, one of Voldemort’s most obsessed and dangerous Death Eaters. Andromeda is the mother of Nymphadora Tonks. She is named after Andromeda of Greek mythology who was tied to a rock and left for a sea monster to mature in order to appease Poseidon. Perseus later rescued her. Andromeda was disowned by the Black family because, unlike her sisters, she married a Muggle-born (Ted Tonks). In a sense, Ted Tonks rescued Andromeda from her unstable, dangerous, and bloodline-obsessed family.

Some of the characters in the stories are given ordinary names, such as those in the Weasley clan — Arthur, Molly, Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny. This may be attributed to the fact that the Weasley clan is seen as a traitor because its pure-blood members do not subscribe to the view of pure-blood supremacy and interact with Muggle-born and half-blood witches and wizards. By naming themselves as commoners, they are communicating their sense of egalitarianism, although vestiges of pure-blood onomastics can be seen in the fact that Ron’s middle name is Bilius and Ginny’s real first name is Ginevra (the Italian version of Guinevere, King Arthur’s unfaithful wife), both of which are suggestive of pure-blood ancestry. Of Harry’s friends, Ron is the one with the most prophetic name. Ron’s full name is Ronald Bilius Weasley. Ronald comes from the Old German name Reynold, from *ragin*, meaning “counsel and ruler” (Room, 1995: 272). Bilius probably comes from the Old German word from which *bilious* derives, meaning “peevish” and “irritable.” Ron is in fact a tactician and strategist and thus is indeed a well-counseled ruler. One of Ron’s character flaws, however, is his jealous nature, which creates tension between himself and his two friends (Harry and Hermione). This makes him peevish and irritable and leads to fights between them.

Half-bloods are half-breed witches or wizards who were born of a Muggle and a magical parent. Many bear common names, such as Harry Potter (himself a half-blood), but some stand out with unusual names that are blends of words and affixes or names that suggest mythic sources. For example, Nymphadora Tonks is a blend of *nymph* and *dora*, the latter being an abbreviation of Dorothea, which means “gift of God” (Room, 1985: 86). Nymphs, in some mythological legends, can change into plants or animals. Nymphadora Tonks is a *metamorphmagus* — a witch or wizard who is born with the ability to change his or her appearance at will.

English (Celtic) and classical mythology is everywhere in the novels. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore’s name, for example, is a combination of the Latin word *albus* “white” and Old English for “bumblebee,” according to Rowling herself (Lydon, 1999), and this describes his character perfectly, since Dumbledore always appears to be “busy as a bee” and humming to himself. His full name is, actually, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Percival is a version of the Celtic name Peredur which means “hard steel” (Room, 1995: 258). It was also the name of Sir Percival, the pure

and innocent knight of the Arthurian legend, who was on a quest to find for the Holy Grail. Wulfric is a blend of *wulf* (Old English *wolf*) and *ric* meaning “ruler” (Withycombe, 1977: 284). Brian is the English form of the Celtic word meaning “strength” (Room, 1995: 43). When taken all together, his name is a veritable text, standing for a strong, pure, energetic, wolverine leader. Dumbledore is the leader of a secret organization (The Order of the Phoenix) that battles against Dark Wizards.

The name Remus Lupin is clearly indicative of the Romulus and Remus myth — Remus was reared and suckled by a wolf, hence Rowling’s use of Lupin (from Latin *lupus* “wolf”). His full name is Remus John Lupin. His nickname Moony is a clear allusion to the fact that he is a werewolf who comes out when the moon does. The Divinations professor, Sybil Trelawney, also has a very telling blended name (derived from classical and English traditions). Sybil derives from the Greek name Sibylla — a name generally given to prophetesses (Room, 1995: 304), and she makes the early prophecies that are very important later in the series. Trelawney is an English name whose original meaning was probably “for God” — an apt designator for a divinations professor. Similarly, Professor Severus Snape’s name is composed of Latin *severus* (“severe,” “serious,” “strict”), which he is, and Snape, suggesting *snap* and *cape*, and in fact he constantly snaps at Harry Potter with hostility and also has the metaphorical characteristics of a *snake*.

The name of the character Minerva McGonagall alludes to Minerva, the Roman goddess of arts, wisdom, and war. The Scottish surname McGonagall is likely from the Celtic name Conegal, meaning “the bravest” — again, a name evoking two mythic traditions, Roman and Celtic. Minerva is the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, the Transfiguration (the art of turning one thing into another) teacher and the Head of Gryffindor house. She is brilliant at performing some of the most difficult and complicated forms of magic. In the final battle of Hogwarts, she organizes the defenses and leads the charge against the Death Eaters showing her to be a true Minerva-like warrior.

Alastor Moody, the retired Auror, also bears a classical-sounding name. Alastor comes from Alexander, which means “defender of men” in Greek (Room, 1995: 9). Aurors are the police in the Wizarding World. Alastor, or Mad-Eye Moody, as he is nicknamed because of his two different eyes, one of which he can spin around a full 360 degrees, is one of the most famous Aurors to have ever lived — paralleling the story of Alexander the Great. However, being an Auror for such a long time has made him extremely paranoid (which it is said to beset Alexander as well). Moody thus changes his “moods,” as forecast by his name.

Dolores Umbridge’s name, the hated Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher in the fifth book (Rowling, 2003), like that of Albus Dumbledore, describes her personality accurately. Dolores is derived from the Spanish *Dolores* which means “sorrows” (Room, 1995: 83) and Umbridge comes from the Latin word *umbra* meaning “shadow, darkness or empty form.” In Harry’s fifth year at school, the dark and sinister Umbridge does everything nasty to him, from torturing him (by making him write lines with an enchanted quill that cuts his skin so that he can write in his own blood), to causing the death of his beloved godfather. The reader discovers at the end of the fifth novel that it was Umbridge who sent the Dementors after Harry, as Lupin explained already in Harry’s third year (Rowling, 1999: 140):

Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope and happiness out of the air around them . . . Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself — soulless and evil. You'll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life.

The last type of denizen in the Harry Potter universe is a Muggle-born wizard, of non-magical parentage with no ties to the magical world before age eleven. These individuals typically have common names, such as Colin and Dennis Creevy, Justine Finch-Fletchley, and Ted Tonks. One notable exception is Hermione Granger who, while Muggle-born, bears a decidedly pure-blood first name, with a prosaic surname and, thus, a hybrid name. In Greek myth, Hermione was the daughter of Menelaus and Helen of Troy. It also the name of the wife of Leontes in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. The name is probably derived from Hermes, the traveler and messenger, and Hermione certainly is that. A *granger* is a countryside estate.

Many of the other names in the series are fairly obvious satirical puns. For example, Professor Sprout teaches Herbology (the wizard version of Botany); Professor Vector teaches Arithmancy (divination through numbers); Professor Flitwick teaches Charms (wand movements consisting of *swishes* and *flicks*); Phyllida Spore wrote the textbook titled *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*; Newt Scamander (a blend of *newt* and *salamander*) was the author of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*; Arsenius Jigger (a blend of *arsenic* and *jig*) wrote *Magical Drafts and Potions*; and Rita Skeeter (the nickname for a mosquito who buzzes around) wrote a tabloid column for the magical newspaper *The Daily Prophet*.

Concluding remarks

The names in *Harry Potter* constitute a veritable etymological onomastics of myth and occultism. They bear allusions and references to classical Greek and Roman mythology, Celtic mythology, astrological concepts, medieval legends (such as the Arthurian one), and so on. The names evoke ancient mystical concepts, such as the belief that a given name contains prophetic information about its bearer's destiny, personality, and outlook on life. It can be argued that the narrative power of the *Harry Potter* books lies in large part in its mythic onomastics, which bring out in the reader's imagination the primordial functions of names as descriptors of human reality. Rowling has reintroduced this feature of the mythic unconscious, as many have called it, into a modern narrative that has captured the imaginations of children and adults alike.

More broadly, the *Harry Potter* books have shown that, despite Barthes's (1957) warnings that contemporary popular culture is a reiterative one based on tiresome repetition of mythic forms, it is at least possible to revisit our mythic past in new creative ways and bring it to life through narrative forms that have meaning today, as they did in the past. One of these forms, as briefly illustrated here, is the ingenious use of mythic names that take us back while at the same time allow us to understand human character.

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