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Fantastic Beasts and Where They Come From: How Greek Are Harry Potter's Mythical Animals?

I stand for the old-fashioned values of traditional literature, classical poetry, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Dickens, Shakespearean plays, and the great writers who will still be read in future years by those children whose parents adopt a protective attitude towards ensuring that dark, demonic literature, carefully sprinkled with ideas of magic, of control and of ghostly and frightening stories that will cause the children who read them to seek for ever more sensational things to add to those they have already been exposed to.

Graeme Whiting (2016), Acorn School, Nailsworth, UK

In this blog post¹ a UK head teacher caused controversy by treating the Harry Potter stories as a malevolent form of literature, “dark” and “demonic”, in a way that applies a religious framework to the aesthetic and moral value of children’s literature. Mythical beasts are one of the most eye-catching and distinctive aspects of popular engagement with Greek and Roman culture, but they are also potentially unstable, avatars of monstrosity and dark, demoniacal power. This chapter examines the ways that mythical beasts are used in the Harry Potter universe of J. K. Rowling.

Monsters and mythical beasts are especially attractive to film makers. It is no surprise after the huge success of the Harry Potter films that a second series is being made. The first of these was filmed from a script by Rowling based on the semi-canonical *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (published 2001 for Comic Relief) and was released in November 2016. It features Eddie Redmayne playing Newt Scamander, the future author of the famous Hogwarts textbook, on a trip to New York, in which he accidentally releases a number of dangerous magical beasts from an expandable brief-case.²

¹ While Whiting’s original blog post (*The Imagination of the Child*), the source of this epigraph, has now been removed from the school site, there is record of it elsewhere: Horovitz (2016), links to various other records of the post and reactions to it, including an article in the *Guardian* newspaper (Shannon 2016).

² A second film, *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (dir. David Yates), was released in 2018, but unfortunately too late to be discussed in this paper.

This chapter explores the Greek heritage of Harry Potter's fantastic beasts, not just in the first *Fantastic Beasts* film (dir. David Yates), but also the original bestiary, the Harry Potter novels (and films) from which the bestiary sprang. How Greek are they, and how are they portrayed? How does the Greek mythology fit into the overarching narratives? How do the portrayals of mythical beasts in the Potterverse negotiate questions of the relationship between animals and people, beasts and monsters, magical and non-magical? I start by putting this aspect of the Potterverse into the context of Rowling's general engagement with classical culture, then look at the text of the original *Fantastic Beasts* book, investigating the origins of the creatures and their aetiological functions, move on to a case study of the basilisk and the phoenix in *Chamber of Secrets* (1998), and finish by exploring beasts, monsters, and definitions in both book and film of *Fantastic Beasts*.

Harry Potter and the Classics

The Harry Potter universe brings many different mythological and literary traditions together, in its creatures as much as its storylines and settings.³ Rowling took classical modules at university, and there are many classical names, classical references, and Latin phrases throughout the books.⁴ But there is no direct, clear relationship between Rowling's world and the ancients: instead we confront the fuzziness, complexity, and imprecision of classical reception.⁵ As Peter Wiseman (aka *Sapiens*) pointed out, wizarding is envisaged as going back to the

³ Cornelia Rémi (2004–2019) gives much excellent Harry Potter bibliography. Most useful were: Whited (2002); Fenske (2008); Heilman (2008); Nikolajeva (2009); Bell (2013); Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018, 16–24); Lowe (forthcoming). On Harry Potter and school stories: Steege (2002); Galway (2012). On Harry Potter and fantasy: Webb (2015); Spencer (2015), but he is mainly concerned with story patterns and mythical archetypes.

⁴ Peter Wiseman (Petrus Sapiens) details Rowling's classical modules at the University of Exeter: "[...] she took Additional Greek and Roman Studies for the first two years of her four year French degree, including modules on: Greek and Roman Mythology and Historical Thought; Greek and Roman Narrative and Drama. She did not do Latin or Greek at school" (2002, 94). A good summary of the classical elements of Harry Potter is included in Mills (2008); Casta (2014) and Lowe (forthcoming). See also Rowling (1998) and (2001). See also Olechowska (2016) and Walde (2016).

⁵ Lowe (forthcoming, 6): "Greek myth is prominent – but not unique – among other world cultures".

ancient world.⁶ But Quidditch was invented in the medieval period after the decision to use broomsticks for travel. Newt Scamander in *A Brief History of Muggle Awareness of Fantastic Beasts* emphasizes the medieval pedigree of his bestiary:

A glance through Muggle art and literature of the Middle Ages reveals that many of the creatures they now believe to be imaginary were then known to be real. The dragon, the griffin, the unicorn, the phoenix, the centaur – these and more are represented in Muggle works of that period, though usually with almost comical inexactitude. (Rowling 2018, xxv)⁷

While modern zoologists might also laugh at the comical inexactitude of medieval representations of animals, Scamander presents medieval bestiaries as closer to the truth. Rowling indicates the intertextual roots of the project, and self-consciously highlights her own indebtedness. Arguably classics is important in Harry Potter because it was important in intervening periods, particularly the Middle Ages.

Explicit use of Greek and Roman material creates authority for Rowling and her wizards. One of the two epigraphs at the beginning of *Deathly Hallows* is from Aeschylus (*The Libation Bearers*), and offers a counterpoint to a Christian reading (William Penn, *More Fruits of Solitude*, cf. Rowling 2007, 7); Latin features as a ritual language of power, the language most frequently used in spells (cf. Casta 2014). So how do mythical beasts fit into this complex picture? Lisa Maurice has set the centaurs of Rowling into the context of other children's literature of the twentieth and twenty-first century.⁸ Rowling's centaurs are wise and violent, mysterious and disturbing. Firenze, like Cheiron, teaches and prophesies, but the centaurs defeat and probably rape Dolores Umbridge, symbol of mindless bureaucracy, and repression of student agency and opinions. This resurgence of fantasy in the face of banality and repression remodels our image of classics, which is not associated with book learning and dry but useless

⁶ On the Greek founding fathers of wizardry, see Lowe (forthcoming, 9–11). Ollivander's "have been making fine wands since 362 BC", Wiseman (2002, 93); and the first two historical wizards Ron mentions to Harry as his most sought after cards in his Chocolate Frog collection are those featuring Agrippa and Ptolemy (Rowling 1997, 77).

⁷ Quotations from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* are taken from the 2018 Bloomsbury edition, originally published in 2001, which is substantially the same as the original edition apart from an additional preface from Newt Scamander setting the book in relation to the film (IX–XIII).

⁸ Cf. Harmon (2013), on otherness and the Forbidden Forest; on centaurs Maurice (2015).

knowledge: in Harry Potter, myth is living, performative, wild and powerful.⁹ However, the centaurs which live in the Forbidden Forest are not just the noble prophets of C. S. Lewis but also the untameable, potential rapists of Ovid (and Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series).¹⁰ The initial politeness and majesty of the centaurs hides a deep violence and otherness; one might read this as an allegory for ancient societies, which seem on the surface similar and attractive, but hide deep difference and violence, particularly sexual violence. The reference to the centaurs as "an ancient people" seems almost like a metaliterary nod to the fact that Rowling has re-established the wildness of centaurs in contradiction to the traditions of children's literature, such as Lewis, which bowdlerize them by taming.¹¹

Maurice argues from theoretical approaches, developed by the discipline of animal studies, that animals and adolescents have a special affinity as groups which were recognized as oppressed at the same period. She sees Rowling as both hierarchical and colonialist: "Wizards, Muggles, Squibs, house elves, goblins, gnomes, giants, leprechauns, Veela and of course centaurs, all have their clearly defined place, and the wizard is firmly at the top of the pyramid" (2015, 163). This is true to a certain extent, but *Fantastic Beasts* is very concerned with problematization of hierarchies, both through open reflection in the text on what counts as "beast" and what as "being", and through the graffiti of Ron and Harry in "his" copy of this manual (and through Hagrid's subversive attitudes in the whole series).

This becomes even more important in the film adaptation of *Fantastic Beasts*: for the first time, a Muggle, Jacob Kowalski, is a major protagonist, introducing potential new viewers to the Harry Potter universe through his naïveté. The love story between Jacob and Queenie provides much of the emotional impact for the film, which is driven by the higher level of segregation in Rowling's America, where Muggles and wizards are not allowed to intermarry. The fact that it is not really possible to separate the two sides of the centaur, the wild and the noble, is characteristic of Rowling's universe: they decide rationally and collectively to attack Umbridge, and to refuse to take part in human society for their own reasons. As Edith Hall suggests in her chapter "Cheiron as Youth Author: Ancient Example, Modern Responses" (301–326), this union of

⁹ The image of the ancient world coming to life has long been a powerful part of fantasy literature for children, such as Edith Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), in which the statues in the garden of a great house come to life, and at the end of C. S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian* (1951), in which Bacchus forms a *deus ex machina*. On Ovid and Lewis, see Miles (2018) and Slater (2018).

¹⁰ On the connection with Lewis, see Maurice (2015, 149). The apartheid of the Harry Potter universe is a key-stone of its generic status as fantasy, but something that Rowling is continually problematizing, and the film of *Fantastic Beasts* is fundamentally concerned with deconstructing this opposition.

¹¹ On the domestication of mythology in Narnia, see Harrisson (2010).

opposites is particularly Greek. Animals are apart from and different from humans, but not necessarily better or worse than them, just as Muggles and wizards can both be better and worse than each other.

The centaurs of Harry Potter deconstruct the oppositions between knowledge and violence, civilization (especially as manifested through the education system) and destruction. The untamed nature of the ancient world and mythology offers a creative force which can overturn the repressive structures of power and adulthood.

Fantastic Beasts and Just-So Stories

The book *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is presented as a facsimile of Harry Potter's copy of his school textbook and features a brief foreword from Albus Dumbledore; various graffiti by Harry, Ron, and Hermione; a fairly substantial introduction by Newt Scamander; a list of sixty-three magical beasts, classified by danger level, with information about origin, habitat, habits, magical qualities; it finishes with a brief life of the "author". Of the sixty-three beasts, thirteen are Greek, or are ascribed a Greek origin, or have a significantly Greek element;¹² eleven are from folklore of the British Isles (including Ireland),¹³ one is Japanese (kappa), one Tibetan (yeti), one (nundu) seems to derive from African folklore. The remaining thirty-four do not seem to have obvious origins in existing folk culture.

It is not always easy to classify fantastic beasts as Greek or non-Greek. For instance, Rowling ascribes the phoenix to ancient Egypt, but in doing this she is very much following Herodotus 2.73 (cf. below, page 457). The salamander is an interesting case: it is a real animal, to which Rowling ascribes magical properties ("feeds on flame", "Salamander blood has powerful curative and restorative properties", 2018, 79). In this she seems to be reversing a tradition told by Pliny in *Naturalis Historia* 29.23, in which the salamander is highly poisonous and can

¹² Those which are (arguably) of Greek or Roman origin include: basilisk, centaur, chimaera, dragon(?), griffin, hippocampus, hippogriff(?), mantichore, merpeople(?), phoenix, salamander, sphinx, werewolf(?), winged horse.

¹³ Those with a significant British tradition include: fairies, ghoul, gnome, grindylow, imp, kelpie, leprechaun, pixie, sea serpent (Loch Ness monster), troll, unicorn. The porlock may refer to the beast of Exmoor, but this seems much less self-evident.

magically prevent fires.¹⁴ Dragons do derive from the Greek word δράκων (drakon) but are quintessential parts of medieval culture (although the huge serpent/dragon guarding the Golden Fleece seems much like its later mythical counterparts).¹⁵ Rowling's dragons come from all over the world, including China, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and Wales. Winged horses also come in several varieties, one of which certainly has a Greek link: the Aethonan, or chestnut, derives from the name Αἰθων (Aethon), meaning 'fiery', the name of a horse variously owned by Hector (Homer, *Iliad* 8.164), Pallas (Virgil, *Aeneid* 11.89), and Helios (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.153).

The sphinx is located by Rowling as Egyptian, but associated with riddles, following the Sphinx of the Oedipus myth in the *Fantastic Beasts A–Z* entry ("delights in puzzles and riddles", 2018, 82). In the introduction, the sphinx is discussed as a creature that could technically be classified as a being, not a beast: "The sphinx talks only in puzzles and riddles, and is violent when given the wrong answer" (xxiv). Although Rowling is careful not to mention the gender of the sphinx (Egyptian sphinxes are male, the Greek Sphinx is female), and its association with guarding temples is more Egyptian, it should be classified as at least half Greek. The fiction is that this guide gives you the reality behind the mythical beasts, which are mythical because of their magical nature. The merpeople are explicitly said by Scamander to take their origin from the Greek Sirens, which is, as discussed elsewhere in this volume,¹⁶ not an unusual connection.

The entry on the Chimaera alludes to the Bellerophon myth and reinterprets his fall to the Earth from Pegasus after the horse was stung by a gadfly, which seems to occur first in Pindar (*Isthmian Ode* 7.44; cf. Schol. *ad Pind. Ol.* 13.130; see also Horace *Ode* 4.11.26): "There is only one known instance of the successful slaying of a Chimaera and the unlucky wizard concerned fell to his death from his winged horse" (Rowling 2018, 14). Rowling offers a banalization of mythology, in which magic domesticates mythical beasts.

¹⁴ "[T]he salamander can kill whole tribes unawares. For if it has crawled into a tree, it infects with its venom all the fruit, killing like aconite by its freezing property those who have eaten of it. [...] As to the power to protect against fires, which the Magi attribute to the animal, since according to them no other can put fire out, could the salamander really do so, Rome by trial would have already found out. Sextius tells us that as food the salamander, preserved in honey after entrails, feet, and head have been cut away, is aphrodisiac, but he denies its power to put fire out", trans. W. H. S. Jones in Pliny (1963, 233).

¹⁵ On ancient dragons, cf. Ogden (2013).

¹⁶ Cf. the chapters by Weronika Kostecka and Maciej Skowera, "Womanhood and/as Monstrosity: Cultural and Individual Biography of the «Beast» in Anna Czerwińska-Rydel's *Bałtycka syrena* [The Baltic Siren]", and Katarzyna Jerzak, "Remnants of Myth, Vestiges of Tragedy: Peter Pan in the Mermaids' Lagoon", in this volume (247–265 and 267–280).

Werewolves are also arguably classical in origin.¹⁷ So despite the sense that the world of Harry Potter is fundamentally grounded in UK daily life and UK children's literature, and the aspirations of Newt Scamander, world traveller, aim at global comprehensiveness, in practice the largest group of beasts comes from Greek mythology.

There are further connections in the names of the magical beasts: the hippogriff has a name which is formed partly by analogy with "hippopotamus" or "hippocampus", the latter another genuine Greek mythological beast. The hippogriff, however, seems to have been invented by Ludovico Ariosto in the *Orlando furioso*, although Rowling probably came across it in Bulfinch's *Mythology* (cf. Jossa 2016). Interestingly, it is possible that Ariosto himself was drawing on Lucian's *Vera historia* 1.11, which mentions the "Hippogypioi", men riding vultures,¹⁸ who appear on the moon, where Ariosto's Astolfo is taken in canto 34 of *Orlando furioso*.

Another play on words is evident in the name "Erumpent" which refers to a rhinoceros-like creature with an exploding horn, from the Latin "e-rumpo" ('burst out'), or in the name the "Malaclaw", like a lobster but evil: "[...] its flesh is unfit for human consumption and will result in a high fever and an unsightly green rash. [...] The Malaclaw's bite has the unusual side effect of making the victim highly unlucky for a period of up to a week after the injury" (Rowling 2018, 58).

More complex is the "Lethifold" (52–57), a malicious animate blanket that suffocates and eats its victims like a boa constrictor, after causing them to forget who they are. Here Rowling combines the Lotus-eaters of the *Odyssey* with the river Lethe of the Underworld, while hinting at a depression that makes people unable to get out of bed. This classical connection is underlined by the names of the humans involved in the story Newt Scamander tells: Flavius Belby, who bravely survives a Lethifold attack, like a good Flavian explorer, and Janus Thickey who faked his own death in 1973 to move in with the landlady of the Green Dragon five miles away (appropriately two-faced – and starting life again). Newt Scamander himself is given the full name of Newton Artemis Fido Scamander: it is hard to fully unpack the implications of this name. "Newton"

¹⁷ Ancient references to werewolves: Herodotus 4.105; Virgil, *Eclogues* 8.95–100; Petronius, *Satyricon* 62; Pliny, *NH* 8.34.80–83. On werewolves in literature, cf. Sconduto (2008).

¹⁸ "We determined to go still further inland, but we met what they call the Vulture Dragoons [τοῖς Ἴππογύπιοις], and were arrested. These are men riding on large vultures and using the birds for horses. The vultures are large and for the most part have three heads: you can judge of their size from the fact that the mast of a large merchantman is not so long or so thick as the smallest of the quills they have. The Vulture Dragoons are commissioned to fly about the country and bring before the king any stranger they may find, so of course they arrested us and brought us before him", trans. A. M. Harmon in Lucian (1913, 259–261).

clearly suggests his identity as a scientist (Isaac Newton), while the diminutive Newt suggests a “geekish” concern with unattractive animals, as in Gussie Fink-Nottle of P. G. Wodehouse’s *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1934). “Artemis” links him with Greek mythology, and the idea of the hunter and hunting. “Fido” is the comic name of a typically faithful dog, suggesting both his ability to track animals down and his faithfulness (via the Latin “fides”). “Scamander” refers to one of the major rivers of Homer’s Troy, which perhaps suggests a certain exotic otherworldliness, while also including the word “scam”, perhaps linking him to the tradition of the trickster hero, of which Odysseus is a prototypical example.

Similarly the Quintaped (Rowling 2018, 73–75), formed by analogy with quadruped, is derived from the character Quintus MacBoon after a magical feud which involved the transfiguring of an entire clan, who then killed all the opposing family who had transfigured them and resisted all attempts to change them back. As often, this story undermines the hierarchy between animals and humans (and alludes to Lewis’ Dufflepuds in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 1952, but without the class-related condescension). This story shows Rowling’s interest in aetiology in *Fantastic Beasts*. She frequently plays on the differing levels of knowledge between Muggles and wizards to explain everyday problems and phobias through invented magical animals: the chizpurfle, for instance, like a gremlin, causes electrical faults in muggle appliances; the diricawl is the real name of the dodo, which is not actually extinct, but just prone to disappearing at will, so no Muggles have seen it. This latter shows the essentially consoling nature of fantasy. Fairies, on the other hand, are much less attractive in reality than in Muggle literature, apparently. The mooncalf performs strange ritual dances that result in odd formations in corn fields (perhaps a joke aimed both at the people who ascribe crop circles to aliens, and rural teenagers who could be imagined as actually creating them). Murtlaps nibble on the feet of people bathing in the sea. In this respect, Rowling’s catalogue is strangely Hellenistic in flavour.

The Basilisk and Phoenix: Monstrosity and Reversal

This section presents a case study of two mythical beasts in action: the basilisk and the phoenix at the end of *Chamber of Secrets*. This narrative sequence is significant because it foreshadows a number of thematically important developments later in the Harry Potter story: the diary is the first horcrux into which Voldemort splits off his soul; later Harry will use basilisks’ teeth to destroy horcruxes. As Tom Riddle shows us the development of Voldemort, so he also reveals the complexity of the relationship between Voldemort and Harry. Tom is his imperfect double, and Harry’s ability with Parseltongue shows his connection with Voldemort. Relationships with mythical beasts define character and have far reaching moral and narrative implications. Dumbledore’s emphasis on Harry’s identity as a true Gryffindor, on the importance of choices over abilities,

foreshadows the conversation they will have in the King's Cross of Harry's mind. The imperfect anagram of Tom Marvolo Riddle as "I am Lord Voldemort" plays on the theme of imperfect revelation: Voldemort himself does not fully understand his own nature, let alone the magic that he uses. The monstrosity of the basilisk is associated with Voldemort while the otherworldly authority of the phoenix characterizes Dumbledore. Yet mythical beasts have the potential to undermine the duality of Harry Potter, as we saw with the example of the centaurs earlier in this chapter. The close connection between Harry and Voldemort is partly brought out by their shared connection to snakes. Sirius' ability to turn into a dog and the fact that Lupin is a werewolf – two threads introduced in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999) – show Rowling's tendency to play with audience expectations about beasts and monsters.

The description of the phoenix in *Fantastic Beasts* draws on that in Herodotus:

Another bird also is sacred; it is called the phoenix. I myself have never seen it, but only pictures of it; for the bird comes but seldom into Egypt, once in five hundred years, as the people of Heliopolis say. It is said that the phoenix comes when his father dies. If the picture truly shows his size and appearance, his plumage is partly golden but mostly red. He is most like an eagle in shape and bigness. The Egyptians tell a tale of this bird's devices which I do not believe. He comes, they say, from Arabia bringing his father to the Sun's temple enclosed in myrrh, and there buries him. His manner of bringing is this: first he moulds an egg of myrrh as heavy as he can carry, and when he has proved its weight by lifting it he then hollows out the egg and puts his father in it, covering over with more myrrh the hollow in which the body lies; so the egg being with his father in it of the same weight as before, the phoenix, after enclosing him, carries him to the temple of the Sun in Egypt. Such is the tale of what is done by this bird. (*Histories* 2.73)¹⁹

The basilisk is interestingly less canonical: I wonder whether Rowling might have originally been tempted to use Medusa? But perhaps a wholly animal beast is a safer bearer of monstrosity than one that is partly human (when Rick Riordan uses Medusa she reveals potential misogyny). Pliny describes the basilisk as having the power to kill with its eyes, a crown-shaped mark on its head, and extremely venomous poison that has been known to kill a man on horseback

¹⁹ Trans. A. D. Godley in Herodotus (1920, 361).

who stabbed it with a spear, and the horse as well.²⁰ Rowling describes the basilisk in *The Chamber of Secrets* as “curious and deadly”, emphasizes its enormous size and life-span, “deadly and venomous fangs”, and “murderous stare”, the enmity of spiders and its potential destruction by the crowing of a rooster.²¹ Her basilisk differs from the ancient (and medieval) traditions in a number of ways: size, age, the connection with roosters (hatched from a chicken’s egg – this suggests the cockatrice, with which it was often confused in the later tradition). It is possible that Rowling had at one point intended that the basilisk should be somewhat smaller, since it travels around Hogwarts in the water pipe system (apparently): hence the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets itself in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. The extremity of its venom and the power of its gaze, though, are ancient features.

In Pliny the basilisk seems to kill by looking at you: contagion is a feature of its venom, as well as its gaze. In Rowling, its victims die if they meet its gaze (and in this it seems to be more like the ancient Medusa). If they see it indirectly (in a mirror, a reflection, through a camera, through a ghost) they are merely petrified (increasing the connection with Medusa, but intensifying the power). Like Medusa, the basilisk is used to kill others as a tool (although unlike Medusa it cannot still be used when dead, or blinded). Tom Riddle, a ghost remaining in the diary of his sixteen-year-old self, directs first Ginny Weasley, then the basilisk to bring about a confrontation with Harry Potter, who he knows his adult self would want to kill, himself used as a tool by Lucius Malfoy, either to discredit

²⁰ Cf. Pliny *NH* 8.33 on the basilisk: “The basilisk serpent also has the same power. It is a native of the province of Cyrenaica, not more than 12 inches long, and adorned with a bright white marking on the head like a sort of diadem. It routs all snakes with its hiss, and does not move its body forward in manifold coils like the other snakes but advancing with its middle raised high. It kills bushes not only by its touch but also by its breath, scorches up grass and bursts rocks. Its effect on other animals is disastrous: it is believed that once one was killed with a spear by a man on horseback and the infection rising through the spear killed not only the rider but also the horse. Yet to a creature so marvellous as this – indeed kings have often wished to see a specimen when safely dead – the venom of weasels is fatal: so fixed is the decree of nature that nothing shall be without its match. They throw the basilisks into weasels’ holes, which are easily known by the foulness of the ground, and the weasels kill them by their stench and die themselves at the same time, and nature’s battle is accomplished”, trans. Harris Rackham in Pliny (1940, 57–59).

²¹ “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” (Rowling 1998, 215).

Arthur Weasley's Muggle Protection Act, or manipulated by Voldemort already to kill Harry. The plays on knowledge and power in *Chamber of Secrets* fit closely with the visual nature of the basilisk's threat. Both Voldemort and more strikingly Dumbledore can be argued to participate in something like the divine gaze of ancient epic, with, among other things, the ability to know things that should only be available to the narrator.²² So Harry tells his story but Dumbledore already knows it and can extract him from the embarrassing situation of having to tell tales on Ginny. Later in the books when Dumbledore stumbles (not apparently knowing about the failure of Harry's occlumency lessons with Snape), he is like the god momentarily distracted by events elsewhere. He is of course mortal, as is Voldemort, but the obsession with mortality and memory is appropriately epic, as is the desire to rewrite and control history and society. The storyline of the Harry Potter novels uses both the monstrosity and the magnitude of narrative motifs inherited from ancient epic to create a more impressive grandeur and scale of battle: mythical beasts contribute to this sublimity, set in opposition to the quasi-divine powers of wizards.

Snakes are viewed in a wholly negative light in Harry Potter, while ancient attitudes were more complex.²³ Salazar Slytherin speaks snake, as does Voldemort, and by extension Harry; Voldemort later has the monstrous serpent Nagini as familiar and horcrux; Rowling's basilisk is an incarnation of evil. In the ancient world snakes could be guardians (of the Golden Fleece), geniuses (of Anchises in Virgil's *Aeneid* book 5), as well as destructive and terrifying (snakes and snake imagery in Virgil's *Aeneid* book 2).²⁴ Medea in Valerius Flaccus weeps for her snake (although she is, of course, a witch).²⁵ Rowling's phoenix is also rather idiosyncratic: phoenixes are not normally companion animals, and *Fantastic Beasts* emphasizes the difficulties of taming them, to bring out the extraordinary relationship between Fawkes and Dumbledore.²⁶ The introduction of the phoenix as the antagonist to the basilisk may result from the fact that Rowling's basilisk can be killed by a rooster's cry.

²² On the divine and mortal gaze in ancient epic, see Lovatt (2013, 29–121).

²³ Cf. Ogden (2013) on dragons and gazing.

²⁴ Guardian of the Golden Fleece: Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.92–211; snake as symbolic representation of the genius of Anchises: Virgil, *Aeneid* 5.84–99, with Panoussi (2009, 163–164); Trojan Laocoon is destroyed by two snakes sent by Minerva: Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.199–227; on snake imagery in the *Aeneid* book 2 see still the classic Knox (1950).

²⁵ Cf. snake episode in Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 8.54–133.

²⁶ The Harry Potter Wiki calculates that Dumbledore and Fawkes must have been together for at least 58 years, since Dumbledore knows that the tail feathers of Fawkes were used to create the matched wands of Voldemort and Harry, according to Ollivander, in or before 1938. But Ollivander could simply have passed the information on to Dumbledore (although it might be hard to extract tail feathers from a wild phoenix); see The Harry Potter Wiki [n.d.], s.v. "Fawkes".

The battle between basilisk and phoenix at the climax of *Chamber of Secrets* pits two Greek mythological creatures against each other: monster versus magical helper, Voldemort's avatar versus Dumbledore's faithful comrade. Each is represented as old and powerful, but while the basilisk's power is obvious in its size, Fawkes and the Sorting Hat seem initially unhelpful. Harry Potter himself is like a Perseus figure, afforded a magical helper through his loyalty to the higher power of Dumbledore, even if it is McGonagall who is named after Minerva. Even though Harry himself delivers the killing blow to both basilisk and diary, his agency is limited: the snake impales itself on the sword, which has miraculously appeared, and he unthinkingly stabs the diary (although he acts with more intentionality in the film version). In this way (in the book at least), he resembles Diomedes in the *Iliad*, who stabs Ares when Athena literally pushes his hand to do it.²⁷

Harry has been manipulated by Riddle just as Ginny has, led on by his desire for knowledge and his desire to be a hero, when he himself was the true prize of the quest. The battle between basilisk and phoenix, which Harry watches in shadow play on the wall in the film, is a battle of the gaze. First the phoenix blinds the beast, depriving it of its most devastating power, and then saves Harry from his apparently fatal wound. We might also see an analogy between the blinded basilisk and the Cyclops: in order to escape from the cave Harry uses the tail of the phoenix, perhaps evoking Odysseus' less than dignified escape from the cave of the Cyclops, clinging to the underbelly of Polyphemus' ram. Harry, like Odysseus, was lured into the cave at least partly by his desire for heroic recognition. The basilisk, however, bears a stronger resemblance to the dragon which traditionally guards the Golden Fleece, especially the Hydra of Ray Harryhausen's *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963).²⁸

The dualism in the battle between the basilisk and the phoenix is mirrored by the dualism of Harry versus young Tom Riddle. But this opposition is deconstructed by the fact that Harry has affinities with both basilisk and phoenix, both Riddle and Dumbledore. The doubleness of Harry's identity is brought out by his encounter with Riddle and emblemized by his connection with both the basilisk (which he understands) and the phoenix (which he inadvertently calls to him). Dumbledore in the final chapter emphasizes that identity is a choice, and Harry has chosen Gryffindor, which the Sorting Hat confirms by producing the sword of Godric Gryffindor. The whole sequence forms a katabasis and arguably an initiation (each book takes Harry a stage closer to the final katabasis in King's

²⁷ In the film of *The Chamber of Secrets*, Harry is given more agency by evading the blind basilisk for a time, and climbing up to the heights of Slytherin's statue to gain his own semi-divine perspective. In the battle between Jason and Ray Harryhausen's Hydra (Chaffey 1963), Jason also jumps up the cliffs to gain an advantage, although this is a common motif in fights with monsters. Jason also impales the Hydra on his sword, now from beneath, in a position of terror, about to die.

²⁸ Cf. the note above.

Cross, and to his own willing self-sacrifice, which arguably functions as a sort of apotheosis). The ascent of Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Lockhart, holding onto the magical tail-feathers of the phoenix lends a surreal and abrupt tone to the end of the katabasis, as with Aeneas' return through the gate of false dreams from the Underworld of *Aeneid* book 6.

Beasts are not then reduced to a dichotomy between wild and wise: the basilisk personifies Voldemort's evil, but only comes if it is called. It is under the direction of human agency. Fawkes is a representative of Dumbledore, a symbol of resurrection who will himself die and be regenerated in the *Order of the Phoenix*. His wisdom does not involve language, while the existence of Parseltongue emphasizes the intelligence of serpents. Throughout *Fantastic Beasts* Rowling problematizes the distinction between animals and humans: centaurs and merpeople refuse the invitation to take part in wizard society, while trolls and giants are incapable of interacting socially. The figure of Hagrid, himself a hybrid between human and giant, accretes problematic animals: Fluffy the three-headed hell-hound, who can be tamed by any "wannabe" Orpheus; Aragog, enormous, knowledgeable and hideous, who has helped Harry and Ron figure out the mystery of the basilisk; Buckbeak the Hippogriff, who must be rescued before he is put down; Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback; finally Grawp, the giant, Hagrid's half brother. Similarly, house-elves, goblins,²⁹ and werewolves²⁹ are all treated as oppressed minorities, not unlike adolescents in their subversion of adult expectations. The basilisk adds a layer of complication, terror, and physicality to the secret of *The Chamber of Secrets*: by working through first Ginny, then the basilisk, Riddle underlines the horror of not knowing.

Rowling complicates traditional story structures in many ways: Harry is not straightforwardly the hero nor Ginny the damsel in distress. Through repeated reversals, Rowling overturns audience expectations. Ginny has in fact been the monster, although possessed by the diary; she is only revealed as the bait at the end of the encounter. We are not yet aware that she will be Harry's long-term love interest. Similarly in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, the hero on the flying horse does not rescue the damsel in distress: instead the damsel rescues the flying horse, and uses it to evacuate the alleged villain. Comparison with classical models and mythical archetypes brings out the originality of Harry Potter. It is Ginny's unrequited admiration for Harry that drove her to confide in the diary in the first place, so Harry, or his fame, in a sense caused the entire sequence of events (although we can comfortably blame Lucius Malfoy at the very end). The image of the diary as a dangerous zone of contact and contagion intertwines the school story with the mythical and the heroic: the book itself and the act of writing can be problematic and destructive. Perhaps Graeme Whiting is right after

²⁹ The werewolves were the topic of a talk by Maria Handrejk during the conference *Chasing Mythical Beasts...* (cf. the conference booklet by Marciniak and Olechowska 2016).

all: Rowling reveals a profound distrust of books and writers, further brought out by the figure of Gilderoy Lockhart (who, like a certain stereotype of the media don, is more interested in signing books than writing them). He has plagiarized his own adventures, leaving a trail of forgetful and forgotten heroes behind him. The emptiness of his heroism is made literal by the loss of his memory (just as Umbridge will lose her memory after the trauma of the centaurs). Lockhart and Harry between them undo epic memorialization, which Rowling herself only quietly recuperates in the privacy of Dumbledore's study. The blinding of the basilisk leads to its death, and the basilisk's tooth destroys diary and memory, so that powerful gaze and heroic memory are intimately connected. Similarly, Odysseus achieves his escape from the Cyclops by denying his heroic name, and destroys his crew by reclaiming it.

Fantastic Beasts: The Screenplay

The film starring Eddie Redmayne as Newt Scamander was released in November 2016, directed by David Yates, and its success has led to plans for four more films in the story arc. Rowling wrote the script, which is published as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them: The Original Screenplay* (2016). The main beasts featured are Rowling's inventions: the niffler, a mole-like creature with a strong attraction to shiny and valuable objects; the occamy, a blue snake-like bird that takes up the space available to it; the bowtruckle, a cross between stick insect and plant; the obscurus, a vast dark force created by the suppression of a child's magical powers; the murtlap, which bites Jacob Kowalski; the billywig, sapphire blue insect; an erumpent, explosive rhinoceros; and a demiguise called Dougal. Inside Newt Scamander's case the characters encounter a Swooping Evil, reptilian bird-like form that grows suddenly from a cocoon when released; Frank the Thunderbird, bird that causes thunder and can erase memories; graphorns, sabre-toothed tiger with slimy tentacles; a fwooper, small pink bird; mooncalves, doxys, glowbugs, grindylows, and a diricawl (dodo) with its chicks.

Many of these are already in the *Fantastic Beasts* book; the Swooping Evil and thunderbird have been invented for the film. None of them are Greek in origin: in fact, none of them are traditional in origin. While the Harry Potter novels and films connected with audiences by re-using creatures with which they were familiar from elsewhere, the film of *Fantastic Beasts* thrives on novelty and obscurity. Newt's achievement is to find and tame little-known and badly understood creatures, an image for the richness of animal life on the planet. The beasts remain marvellous but clearly outside normal mythology, beyond the realms of the comfortably exotic Greek and Roman creatures. Rowling needed to go a step further to make her creations appeal more to a world-wide market, especially the US, and has left behind the need for a classical education. In a similar way, the remake of *Clash of the Titans* (2010, dir. Louis Leterrier) blended the classical

mythology of Harryhausen's original (1981, dir. Desmond Davis) with Near-Eastern and invented beasts.

In what follows, I address two main questions: what is the significance of the beasts in *Fantastic Beasts*? Why turn a bestiary into a narrative? The film of *Fantastic Beasts* falls into two parts: the narrative about recapturing the escaped beasts from Newt's magic suitcase-*cum*-zoo, set in opposition to the detection and elimination of the obscurus. The two halves of the story do not straightforwardly connect to each other: Newt's striving to clear his name accidentally brings him and his friends into contact with the obscurus.

Beasts and Beings

In *Fantastic Beasts* both book and film, Rowling reflects on the complex and problematic relationship between beasts, magical and otherwise, and the human animal. In Lewis' Narnia stories, without doubt an important influence on Rowling, there is a strong distinction drawn between the talking animals of Narnia and the dumb animals of Calormene and our world.³⁰ *The Horse and His Boy* (1954) is built around a talking horse's desire to escape from Calormene and his protective partnership with the boy. In *Prince Caspian* (1951) there are few talking animals left, hiding on the fringes of the usurped Narnia, which can be argued to represent the persistence of mythology on the margins of society.³¹ In *The Last Battle* (1956) animals aligned against the moral order of Aslan are punished by removing their sentience. Edith Hall has well discussed the problematic assumption that talking animals are suitable for children, and it is notable that the majority of Rowling's magical beasts do not talk (none at all in the film of *Fantastic Beasts*).³²

Scamander begins his introduction with a section on "What Is a Beast?", which Harry's graffiti (in the 2001 edition) answers with "a big hairy thing with too many legs" (Rowling 2018, xvii). Scamander then outlines the history of the wizarding community's attempts to decide which creatures should be allowed to participate in wizarding society.³³ The first definition of "walking on two legs" did not account for centaurs and merpeople; "the ability to communicate in human language" caused other problems; finally, wizarding society settled on "sufficient intelligence to understand and participate in making laws": these were

³⁰ On Narnia cf. the chapter by Simon Burton, "A Narnian «Allegory of Love»: The Pegasus in C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*" in this volume, p. XXX.

³¹ In Lewis' novels there is a strong association between classical mythology and the magic of Narnia, cf. n. 9.

³² On talking animals and Aesop cf. Hall (2016); on Aesop as world literature cf. also Hall (2018).

³³ The word 'creature', as in the Hogwarts course "Care of Magical Creatures", covers both beasts and beings.

the criteria used to distinguish between beasts and beings. In the present day of Scamander's wizarding world, there remain anomalies: werewolves have "Support Services" in the Beings Division, and "Werewolf Registry" and "Capture Unit" in the Beasts Division. Centaurs and merpeople were invited to join the wizarding community but declined to do so out of horror at other beings who were included (hags and vampires).

Treatment of magical beasts is a moral marker in the Harry Potter novels and the script for the *Fantastic Beasts* film: those who want to execute Buckbeak the Hippogriff in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* are inhuman and morally despicable; werewolves are treated with sympathy (the character Lupin in particular, although Fenrir Greyback is a counterexample); Hagrid in his predilection for dangerous beasts is both outrageous and admirable. Newt Scamander takes this positive attitude to magical beasts further still when he announces: "I need to find everyone who's escaped, before they get hurt. [...] they're currently in alien terrain surrounded by millions of the most vicious creatures on the planet. [A beat.] Humans" (scene 47, Kindle edition). First he calls the beasts "everyone", showing that he considers all of them, no matter how linguistically backwards, to be people. Then he contrasts them negatively with humans. Scamander's aim is to "rescue, nurture, and protect", and "educate" his fellow wizards about animals. This strong environmental message turns his portable zoo in a briefcase into a Noah's Ark, preserving species for the future. Equally his creatures function to protect, release, and aid him in his adventures: as much as they get him into trouble, they also get him out of trouble. In a sense, the Ark is also an Argo and his fellow travellers are heroes of the magical beast world, each with their individual powers.

The beasts who play a major part in the film are the niffler, the demiguise, the occamy, the erumpent, the Swooping Evil, the bowtruckle, the thunderbird, and the obscurus. All in their different ways push the boundary of beast/being/monster. The niffler is attracted to shiny objects and shows immense resourcefulness and mischief in acquiring them, essentially forming Newt's antagonist for the first section of the film. The demiguise is able to be invisible and plays entertainingly with artefacts of New York, especially in Macy's department store, like an errant child, but eventually turns out to be protecting the occamy, with its ability to fill the space available. The occamy is presented in such a way that when it escapes it seems like a fearsome and enormous monster, that fills the room and destroys it, but after it is captured by luring it into a teapot, it is literally cut down to size and redefined as a fragile and endangered creature. The erumpent is initially glimpsed as a threatening glow under the ice of Central Park, but is anthropomorphized as a symbol of the terrors of female desire: she is attracted by musk and pursues Jacob Kowalski, nearly flattening him with her huge rhinoceros-like bulk. The Swooping Evil, despite its name, is a very helpful creature who seems primarily to exist in order to act as a weapon and protection for Newt. It acts more like a tool or the superior technological

weapon of a spy or comic book hero, than a person. Newt gives its name as a translation of the “native” description, with a clear sense that he does not think it appropriate. The bowtruckle, called Pickett, is the most anthropomorphized of all: he lives in Newt’s pocket, intervenes in the narrative by picking locks and features in a touching scene where Newt is forced to swap him for information. The thunderbird, who also has a name (Frank), is the reason for Newt travelling to America, has been maltreated and rescued, and provides plot resolution by obviating the general population with a drugged rain, like an incongruous *deus ex machina*.

The obscurus is most interesting of all, since it operates across all three categories of beast, being, and monster. We first encounter one inside the briefcase-zoo, where Jacob is attracted towards it, but Newt warns him off. Newt claims that this force can cause no harm on its own, but his reaction to Jacob’s approach towards it suggests that he is dissimulating. It is produced by a child who has suppressed their magical powers, but clearly can survive on its own, since Newt’s one was removed from a child who had died. The dark force causing death and destruction in New York, which murders the press baron’s son, is an obscurus, but we are encouraged to see this as a specific act of vengeance chosen by the obscurial (child producing it). The obscurus is more like a spell than an animal, but does not operate straightforwardly at the instigation of the obscurial. It rather forms a manifestation of powerful negative emotions. Viewers are encouraged to pity the obscurial, alongside Newt and Tina – both pity and fear the obscurus, and at the end of the film a small shred of the defeated obscurus escapes, which Newt watches with pleasure.

Fantastic beasts, then, can be endearing pets or terrifying monsters, sometimes both. Harry’s interpretation of the word “beast” suggests that there is always an element of outlandishness and monstrosity. It is notable that the obscurus does not have an entry in Newt Scamander’s textbook, but is rather the name of the publishing house which releases the book. It is of course Latin, associating the classical world with darkness, power, oppression, and negative emotions. The close links between Latin teaching and brutal didactic regimes in school stories may underlie this connection, as well as the use of Latin as a language of power elsewhere in the books and in representations of wizarding.³⁴ Endearing pets have English names (niffler, bowtruckle) while monsters are more likely to be associated with ancient mythology and culture.

Conclusions

While Greek and Roman mythological beasts were moderately important in the slim bestiary that is the published book version of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, they have entirely disappeared by the time we reach the 2016 movie

³⁴ On Harry Potter and Latin, see Casta (2014); Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018).

of the same name. From the Harry Potter novels (some) beasts along with (some) names are the only classical material that survive the drastic editing required to turn five hundred pages of fiction into two hours of film. Two movements can be seen. First, the more nuanced and detailed descriptions in the novel form are more suited to allusions to mythologies past, while the films undoubtedly aim at a broader and more international audience than the books. Second, J. K. Rowling has grown in independence and self-reliance as she has moved on in her career. While the books, and particularly the early ones, have many references to existing mythologies, the world of *Fantastic Beasts* (2016) is focused on Rowling's own inventions.

What do these Harry Potter productions tell us about the mythical beasts themselves? The mythical beasts of Harry Potter are not just monstrous: they can be human-like, elemental, or almost divine. They create problems for straightforward categories of animal, human, and god, with superhuman, magical abilities, understanding, humour, and emotions. The first *Fantastic Beasts* film retains the affinity to bestiaries at the heart of the book, by introducing us to a number of beasts, each one with its own heroic abilities or powers, while the monster that dominates the dark side of the plot is generated by human pain. The mythical beasts of *Fantastic Beasts* and the Harry Potter sequence create a sense of epic sublimity, not just as antagonists, or obstacles, but as opportunities to display morality, courage, and humanity, and as problems that demand interpretation. Ultimately, along with wizards and magic, Harry Potter's mythical beasts invite us to chase the question of what it is to be human.

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