

MYTHONYMS AND THEIR ROLE IN LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF HARRY POTTER

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Abstract: This study examines the strategic deployment of mythonyms in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, analyzing how these nomenclatural choices function as instruments of characterization, foreshadowing, and world-building. Through close textual analysis of character names, locations, and magical entities, this research demonstrates that mythonyms operate simultaneously on multiple semantic levels, creating intertextual dialogues with classical, medieval, and folkloric traditions while establishing internal narrative coherence. The findings reveal that Rowling's mythonymic system draws predominantly from Greco-Roman mythology, Arthurian legend, Celtic folklore, and alchemical tradition, creating a sophisticated onomastic network that reinforces themes of destiny, moral duality, and the cyclical nature of heroism. This analysis contributes to broader discussions of literary onomastics and demonstrates how mythonyms function as compressed narrative information, encoding character traits, plot trajectories, and thematic concerns within nominal structures. The study concludes that mythonyms represent a critical yet underexamined dimension of literary craft, particularly within fantasy literature, where world-building demands the creation of culturally resonant yet imaginatively distinct nominal systems.

Keywords: Mythonyms, magical entities, narrative coherence, fantasy literature, Harry Potter.

Introduction.

The naming of literary characters has long been recognized as a significant element of fictional craft, yet the specific use of mythologically-derived names—what we term mythonyms—remains insufficiently theorized within literary scholarship. Names in literature are never arbitrary; as Algeo (1973) argues in "On Defining the Proper Name," they serve as concentrated semantic units that convey information about character, setting, and theme while simultaneously operating within the mimetic framework of realistic designation. Mythonyms represent a particular subset of literary names that explicitly invoke extratextual cultural memory, establishing what Genette (1997) would call "trantextual" relationships between the contemporary work and anterior mythological narratives. Unlike neologistic fantasy names that signal pure invention, mythonyms anchor fictional worlds within recognizable cultural matrices while simultaneously claiming membership in imaginative realms where ancient patterns reassert themselves in new configurations.

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997-2007) provides an exemplary case study for analyzing mythonymic function in contemporary literature due to the series' deliberate and extensive engagement with mythological nomenclature across multiple cultural traditions. The seven-novel sequence, which chronicles the maturation of its titular protagonist from orphaned child to world-saving hero, constructs a secondary world that exists in occluded parallel with contemporary Britain, populated by witches, wizards, and magical creatures whose names consistently invoke classical, medieval, and folkloric antecedents. Previous scholarship has noted Rowling's use of

mythological allusion—Colbert (2001) catalogs many of these references in "The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter," while Granger (2008) explores alchemical symbolism in "The Deathly Hallows Lectures"—but little sustained attention has been paid to how mythonyms function systematically as literary devices rather than merely decorative references. This study addresses that gap by examining how mythonyms operate within the Harry Potter series to achieve multiple simultaneous functions: characterization through nominal predestination, foreshadowing through mythological parallel, world-building through cultural layering, and thematic reinforcement through symbolic resonance.

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws upon literary onomastics—the study of names in literature—as developed by scholars such as Ashley (2003) in "The Cultural Processes of 'Appropriation'" and Bertills (2003) in "Beyond Identification: Proper Names in Children's Literature." These scholars establish that literary names operate within what might be called a "semantic density" distinctly different from real-world naming practices; where actual names gradually accrue meaning through association with their bearers, literary names are strategically selected to convey predetermined information. Mythonyms intensify this semantic density by importing entire narrative and symbolic structures into the text through nominal reference alone. When Rowling names a character Minerva, she invokes not merely a word but an entire constellation of associations: Roman goddess of wisdom, strategic warfare, and magical craft; patron of artists and teachers; the Athena-figure whose birth from Jupiter's head signifies intellectual parthenogenesis. The name becomes what Barthes (1967) might call a "lexia"—a unit of reading that opens onto multiple simultaneous significations.

Methods

This study employs qualitative textual analysis methods drawn from literary onomastics and comparative mythology to examine mythonymic function within J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. The analytical approach combines close reading techniques with systematic cataloging of mythologically-derived names, followed by examination of their narrative deployment and thematic significance. The methodology is structured in three phases: identification and classification, source analysis, and functional interpretation.

In the identification phase, all character names, location names, and named magical entities across the seven Harry Potter novels were systematically reviewed to identify mythonyms—names demonstrably derived from or meaningfully referencing mythological, legendary, or folkloric sources. The criteria for inclusion required either direct nominal correspondence with mythological figures (e.g., Minerva, Remus, Circe) or clear etymological derivation from mythological terminology (e.g., Draco from Latin "draco" meaning dragon, with mythological resonances). Names were excluded if they appeared to be conventional given names without specific mythological referents or if their mythological connection was speculative rather than demonstrable. This process identified approximately fifty significant mythonyms distributed across major characters, minor characters, ancestral figures referenced in genealogies, and locations within the wizarding world. The focus was limited to names within the English-language source texts, acknowledging that translation necessarily alters onomastic effects in non-English editions. The source analysis phase involved tracing identified mythonyms to their originating mythological traditions through consultation of primary mythological texts and secondary scholarly sources. For Greco-Roman mythonyms, reference was made to classical sources including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hesiod's *Theogony*, and Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca*, alongside modern scholarly syntheses such as Grimal's "Dictionary of Classical Mythology" (1951) and Hansen's "Classical Mythology: A Guide to the Mythical World of the Greeks and Romans" (2004). Celtic and Arthurian references were traced through medieval sources including Geoffrey of Monmouth's

Historia Regum Britanniae and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, with reference to modern Celtic scholarship such as MacKillop's "Dictionary of Celtic Mythology" (1998). Alchemical and hermetic references were examined through historical alchemical texts and secondary sources including Abraham's "A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery" (1998). This phase established the specific mythological content associated with each name, including narrative contexts, symbolic associations, and thematic patterns in the source traditions.

The functional interpretation phase analyzed how each mythonym operates within Rowling's narrative by examining three dimensions: characterological function (how the name relates to the character's personality, role, or destiny), narrative function (how the name anticipates plot developments or creates dramatic irony), and thematic function (how the name reinforces broader conceptual patterns in the text). This analysis involved close reading of relevant passages in which named characters appear, with particular attention to moments of revelation, character introduction, and climactic action. Comparative analysis examined how similar mythological referents are deployed across multiple characters to create thematic patterns. For instance, the appearance of multiple canine-associated names (Sirius, Remus, Fenrir) was analyzed to understand how Rowling constructs a symbolic network around themes of loyalty, wildness, and the human-animal boundary. Textual evidence was gathered through systematic review of all seven novels in the series, with particular attention to the original British editions published between 1997 and 2007.

The analytical framework draws upon Bertills's (2003) model of name functions in children's literature, which identifies several key operations that literary names perform: identification (distinguishing characters), characterization (revealing character traits), world-building (establishing fictional reality), and reader engagement (creating interpretive challenges). To this framework, this study adds the specific category of mythological prefiguration—the way mythonyms establish expectations about narrative trajectory by invoking patterns from source myths. The analysis also considers what Genette (1997) terms "hypertextual" relationships, examining how Rowling's text transforms, extends, or subverts the mythological hypertexts it invokes through naming. This approach allows for understanding mythonyms not as simple allusions but as sites of complex negotiation between tradition and innovation.

Limitations of this methodology must be acknowledged. First, interpretation of mythological references necessarily involves subjective judgment about which associations Rowling intended and which may be coincidental or reader-imposed. To mitigate this, the analysis focuses on cases where either multiple consistent associations support the connection or where textual evidence suggests deliberate deployment of mythological parallels. Second, this study examines only names in the published novels, excluding supplementary materials such as Rowling's writings on Pottermore or the Fantastic Beasts franchise, maintaining focus on the core narrative. Third, the analysis is conducted from an anglophone perspective and may not capture cultural nuances that readers from other linguistic or cultural backgrounds bring to these names. Finally, while reader-response data would enrich understanding of how mythonyms function for actual audiences, this study focuses on textual analysis rather than empirical reception study. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a systematic framework for understanding how mythonyms operate as literary devices within a major contemporary fantasy series.

Results

The systematic analysis of mythonyms in the Harry Potter series reveals a sophisticated onomastic architecture organized around four primary mythological source traditions: Greco-Roman mythology, Arthurian and Celtic legend, alchemical and hermetic tradition, and constellation mythology. These categories are not mutually exclusive but rather intersect and reinforce one another, creating what might be termed a "mythonymic network" in which individual names gain

additional significance through their relationships with other mythologically-laden names in the text. The following sections present findings organized by mythological source tradition, followed by analysis of patterns that emerge across categories.

Greco-Roman Mythonyms

The most extensively deployed mythological tradition in the Harry Potter series is classical Greco-Roman mythology, which provides names for approximately twenty major and minor characters. The most prominent example is Minerva McGonagall, whose given name directly references Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, strategic warfare, magical arts, and the patroness of teachers and skilled craftspeople. The mythological Minerva was born fully formed from Jupiter's head, representing intellectual self-sufficiency and wisdom as an originary rather than acquired quality. Within Rowling's narrative, Professor McGonagall serves as Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, Head of Gryffindor House, and Transfiguration professor—a role that directly parallels the transformative aspects of Minerva's domain over craft and artifice. Her characterization emphasizes sharp intelligence, strategic thinking in both academic and military contexts (she leads Hogwarts' defense against Death Eaters), and a particular concern for education and proper instruction. The name thus operates characterologically, encoding within its classical referent the essential qualities that define McGonagall's role in the narrative.

The mythonym Hermione Granger similarly draws upon Greco-Roman tradition, though with more complex implications. Hermione appears in Greek mythology as the daughter of Menelaus and Helen of Troy, a figure whose mythological narrative involves being fought over by rival suitors and ultimately rescued by her grandfather Orestes. However, Rowling herself has indicated in interviews that she selected the name partly for its classical resonance and partly to give a young girl a name suggesting intelligence and dignity that might protect her from mockery—a meta-textual function where the mythonym operates defensively in anticipated reader response. Within the text, Hermione functions as the intellectual conscience of the protagonist trio, whose vast knowledge drawn from extensive reading repeatedly provides crucial information for solving mysteries and surviving dangers. Her name's classical Greek origin aligns with her role as the repository of learned wisdom, even as her actual characterization exceeds and complicates the relatively passive role of her mythological namesake, suggesting Rowling's practice of invoking mythological names while not remaining bound to mythological narratives.

The characters Remus Lupin and Sirius Black demonstrate mythonymic doubling, where both given name and surname reference related mythological or symbolic content. Remus Lupin bears the name of one of Rome's legendary founders who, along with his twin brother Romulus, was raised by a she-wolf after being abandoned as an infant. The surname Lupin derives from Latin "lupinus," meaning "wolfish" or "of wolves." This double-wolf nomenclature prefigures the revelation that Lupin is a werewolf, creating dramatic irony for readers familiar with the classical reference and retrospective recognition for those who are not. The name functions as what narratologists might call "proleptic characterization," where nominal information precedes and predicts narrative revelation. Similarly, Sirius Black takes his given name from Sirius, the Dog Star, brightest star in the constellation Canis Major. The revelation that Sirius's Animagus form is a large black dog creates nominal-symbolic coherence, while his surname Black references both his family's dark reputation and, more specifically, the appearance of his canine form. The pairing of Lupin and Sirius as close friends, both bearing canine-associated mythonyms, establishes a symbolic kinship that operates beneath the narrative surface, linking them through nominal association before their shared history is revealed.

Draco Malfoy's given name derives from Latin "draco," meaning dragon or serpent, with direct mythological referents including the dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece and the dragon-serpent

killed by Cadmus. In Greek mythology, dragons represented primordial chaos, guardianship of treasure, and often antagonistic forces requiring heroic conquest. Draco's role as Harry's primary rival among students, his placement in Slytherin House (symbolized by a serpent), and his family's association with Dark wizardry all align with draconic symbolism. The name functions predictively, establishing Draco as an antagonist through mythological association even before his character actions confirm this role. His surname Malfoy, derived from French "mal foi" (bad faith), reinforces this characterization through a different linguistic tradition, demonstrating Rowling's practice of layering onomastic meaning from multiple sources.

Argus Filch, the Hogwarts caretaker, references Argus Panoptes, the hundred-eyed giant of Greek mythology who served as a watchman for the goddess Hera. The mythological Argus's defining characteristic was his ability to keep watch with some eyes sleeping while others remained alert, making him the ideal guardian who could never be caught unaware. Filch's role as caretaker and rule-enforcer who patrols the castle corridors attempting to catch rule-breaking students directly parallels this watchman function, while his partnership with Mrs. Norris, a cat whose eyes seem to see everything, provides a concrete manifestation of the multi-eyed vigilance associated with his mythological namesake. The name thus operates as occupational characterization, where mythonym directly corresponds to narrative function.

Numerous minor characters and historical figures referenced in the series bear Greco-Roman mythonyms that create what might be termed "mythological depth of field," establishing the wizarding world as one where classical naming conventions persist. These include Alecto and Amycus Carrow, Death Eaters whose names reference Alecto, one of the Furies (vengeful deities who punish wrongdoing), and Amycus, a centaur known for barbaric violence in Greek mythology. Andromeda Tonks bears the name of the princess chained to a rock and rescued by Perseus in Greek mythology, a figure who represents both imperiled innocence and ultimate salvation—Andromeda's characterization as a Black family member who defied her family's dark ideology to marry a Muggle-born wizard creates thematic resonance with her namesake's narrative of escape from monstrous threat. Pomona Sprout, the Herbology professor, takes her name from Pomona, Roman goddess of fruit trees, gardens, and orchards, creating direct mythological correspondence between name and magical specialty.

The pattern that emerges from Greco-Roman mythonyms in Harry Potter is one of functional correspondence: characters' names typically anticipate or reflect their narrative roles, personality traits, or magical specialties. This correspondence operates along a spectrum from subtle (Hermione's classical resonance suggests learning and dignity) to explicit (Lupin and Sirius's names directly reference their animal associations). The use of classical mythonyms also establishes the wizarding world as culturally continuous with Western literary and educational tradition, suggesting that magical society preserves classical learning that Muggle society has increasingly forgotten—a theme consistent with the series' broader construction of the magical world as simultaneously archaic and contemporary.

Arthurian and Celtic Mythonyms

The second major mythological tradition informing Rowling's mythonymic system is Arthurian legend and broader Celtic mythology, which provides both structural parallels and specific nominal references. The most significant Arthurian mythonym is Albus Dumbledore, though the connection operates more subtly than the direct classical correspondences discussed above. While "Albus" is Latin for "white" (suggesting wisdom, purity, and age), Dumbledore's characterization and narrative function align closely with the Merlin archetype from Arthurian legend. Like Merlin, Dumbledore serves as the wise mentor to a destined hero, possesses vast magical knowledge, manipulates events behind the scenes to prepare the hero for his ultimate confrontation with evil, and maintains a complex moral position that includes deliberate withholding of information and strategic sacrifice of individuals

for greater goods. The parallels extend to specific plot elements: both Merlin and Dumbledore engineer the hero's upbringing away from centers of power, both die (or depart) before the hero's final triumph, and both leave behind cryptic guidance that the hero must interpret. The mythonymic connection here operates structurally rather than nominally—Dumbledore embodies the Merlin archetype so completely that his function constitutes a mythological reference even without direct nominal correspondence. Arthur Weasley's given name creates more direct Arthurian resonance, particularly given his characterization as a fundamentally decent, honorable figure who works within a corrupt Ministry of Magic while maintaining personal integrity—qualities that align with idealized Arthurian virtue. His large family of sons (particularly the twins Fred and George, whose mischievous heroism recalls figures like Gawain) suggests the fellowship of the Round Table, while his wife Molly's fierce maternal protectiveness and domestic domain recall Arthurian representations of idealized domesticity. The Weasley family's poverty despite their nobility of character parallels the "noble knight in reduced circumstances" motif common in Arthurian romance. While these connections are subtler than direct mythological naming, they demonstrate how mythonyms can operate to establish archetypal resonances that structure reader understanding of character relationships and moral frameworks. Morgana, referenced among the portraits at Hogwarts and mentioned in wizard media references (Merlin and Morgana are invoked as historical magical figures), directly names Morgan le Fay, the complex sorceress of Arthurian legend who serves variously as Arthur's half-sister, antagonist, and ultimately the one who bears him to Avalon after his final battle. The inclusion of Morgana in wizarding history establishes Arthurian legend not as fiction but as actual magical history within the Harry Potter universe, creating a layered relationship between mythological tradition and fictional world-building. This strategy—treating mythological figures as historical—characterizes Rowling's approach to Celtic and Arthurian material more generally. The name Hogwarts itself, while not directly mythological, resonates with Celtic naming conventions and British topographical mythology. The element "hog" suggests the wild boar, a significant creature in Celtic mythology associated with the Otherworld, warrior ferocity, and magical transformation. The boar appears repeatedly in Celtic mythology, including the hunt for the supernatural boar Twrch Trwyth in the Welsh Mabinogion. That Hogwarts's founding took place over a thousand years ago, in the medieval period during which Celtic and Arthurian traditions were being literarily codified, creates temporal alignment between the school's legendary founding and the cultural moment of Arthurian romance. The sorting of students into houses bearing animal emblems (lion, serpent, eagle, badger) recalls both heraldic tradition and the Celtic practice of associating lineages and peoples with totem animals. Firenze, the centaur who becomes Divination professor, bears an Italian name meaning Florence, but his species connects him to Greek mythology while his characterization and the centaur community's practices incorporate elements of Celtic druidic tradition, particularly regarding astronomical observation and prophetic interpretation of celestial phenomena. The centaurs in Harry Potter are depicted as star-readers whose knowledge is ancient and whose separation from human wizarding society echoes Celtic and Arthurian representations of the Otherworld as spatially contiguous with but culturally separate from human civilization. While Firenze's name itself is not mythological, his function as mediator between centaur wisdom and human education recalls figures like Chiron, the wise centaur who tutored heroes in Greek mythology, demonstrating how mythological roles can operate independently of mythonymic naming. The pattern emerging from Arthurian and Celtic mythological references is one of structural and archetypal correspondence rather than direct nominal reference. Where Greco-Roman mythonyms typically involve direct name-to-source correspondence, Arthurian material operates more through character function, relationship structure, and thematic resonance. This difference may reflect the different cultural positions of

classical and medieval mythology: where classical mythology provides a stable lexicon of names and associations, Arthurian material provides narrative patterns and archetypal relationships that structure heroic storytelling. The mythonymic strategy shifts accordingly, from nominal to structural mythological reference.

Discussion

The systematic analysis of mythonyms in the Harry Potter series reveals that these names function simultaneously as literary devices operating on multiple narrative levels: characterological, prophetic, thematic, and world-building. This multivalent functionality distinguishes mythonyms from other forms of literary naming and explains their particular utility in fantasy literature, where authors must create secondary worlds that feel both imaginatively distinct and culturally resonant. The findings invite discussion of several key issues: the relationship between mythonymic determinism and character agency, the pedagogical function of mythonyms in children's literature, the tension between accessibility and interpretive depth, and the broader implications for understanding how contemporary fantasy literature negotiates its relationship with mythological tradition.

Mythonymic Determinism and Character Agency

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding is the tension between mythonymic suggestion and character autonomy. As demonstrated in the results, characters bearing mythological names typically fulfill functions or exhibit traits suggested by their mythological referents: Minerva is wise and teaches transformation, Remus is a werewolf, Sirius takes a canine form, Draco serves as an antagonist associated with Slytherin House's serpent symbolism. This pattern might suggest a deterministic universe in which characters are bound to enact roles predetermined by their names—what we might call "nominal destiny." However, closer examination reveals that while characters generally fulfill their mythonymic suggestions, they do so through unexpected means or with significant complications that preserve their agency and prevent the narrative from becoming merely a retelling of classical myths.

Consider Hermione: while her name invokes classical learning and her character embodies intellectual excellence, her specific narrative trajectory—Muggle-born witch who becomes the most accomplished student of her generation, rights activist for magical creatures and house-elves, essential partner in defeating Voldemort—bears no resemblance to the mythological Hermione's narrative of being fought over by suitors. The name establishes a cultural register (classical, learned, dignified) rather than determining a plot trajectory. Similarly, while Sirius's name predicts his canine Animagus form, it does not predetermine his characterization as the reckless but loving godfather, his wrongful imprisonment, or his tragic death while finally acting as the family Harry deserves. The name provides symbolic coherence but not narrative inevitability.

This finding aligns with Bertills's (2003) argument that names in children's literature must balance characterization with surprise—readers need sufficient consistency between name and character to maintain fictional coherence, but if names too precisely determine outcomes, narrative suspense collapses. Rowling navigates this balance by allowing mythonyms to suggest character domains, personality traits, or symbolic associations while preserving the specific narrative trajectory as unpredictable. Draco, despite his dragon-serpent name suggesting clear villainy, ultimately cannot murder Dumbledore when confronted with the reality of killing, cannot fully embrace Death Eater ideology, and survives the series in moral ambiguity rather than being simply defeated as a villain. His name marks him as dangerous and aligned with serpentine Slytherin, but his character development complicates that initial mythonymic suggestion.

Conclusion.

This analysis of mythonyms in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series demonstrates that mythologically-derived names function as multivalent literary devices operating simultaneously on characterological, narrative, thematic, and world-building levels. The systematic examination of

mythonyms drawn from Greco-Roman mythology, Arthurian and Celtic legend, alchemical tradition, and constellation mythology reveals a sophisticated onomastic architecture that creates cultural depth, facilitates characterization, enables foreshadowing, and establishes thematic patterns. These findings contribute to broader understanding of how contemporary fantasy literature negotiates relationships with mythological tradition, using names as sites of intertextual engagement where anterior cultural materials are invoked, transformed, and integrated into new narrative configurations.

The study's most significant findings concern the tension between mythonymic suggestion and character autonomy, demonstrating that while characters generally fulfill roles or exhibit traits suggested by their mythological names, they do so through unexpected means and with complications that preserve narrative suspense and character agency. This pattern suggests that mythonyms operate not as deterministic forces but as interpretive frames—they establish expectations and symbolic associations that characters negotiate rather than mechanically enact. The relationship between name and character parallels the series' broader thematic engagement with prophecy and destiny: both carry weight and create patterns, but both allow for individual agency and unexpected modes of fulfillment.

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