Spring 2017

Inexhaustible Magic: Folklore as World Building in Harry Potter

Samantha G. Castleman
Western Kentucky University, castlemansamantha@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons, Folklore Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/1973

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.
INEXHAUSTIBLE MAGIC:
FOLKLORE AS WORLD BUILDING IN HARRY POTTER

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Samantha G. Castleman

May 2017
INEXHAUSTIBLE MAGIC:
FOLKLORE AS WORLD BUILDING IN HARRY POTTER

Date Recommended 7-12-17

Timothy Evans, Director of Thesis

Erika Brady

Kate Horigan

Dean, Graduate School

Date
Acknowledgments

Many thanks in this project are owed to my committee, Drs. Timothy Evans, Erika Brady and Kate Horigan who were incredibly supportive and enthusiastic about this research. I appreciate each and every one of the challenges these individuals presented to me throughout the process and am grateful for their input. My appreciation goes out to the entire Folk Studies department at Western Kentucky University, both faculty and students, as the curiosity and enthusiasm of these individuals inspired me every day in this process, making it truly a rewarding experience. Specific thanks also to Kristen Clark, who not only withstood my midnight text messages about wanting to research folklore in *Harry Potter* and encouraged me to pursue this idea, but also supplied all of the research I could ever need on fantasy literature and secondary world building. Thank you all!
Contents

I. Introduction: “Hogwarts will always be here to welcome you home.” ........................................ 1

II. “Liberties with folklore”: Cultural Expression in the Potter Series ........................................ 18

III. “I should not have told yer that”: Narrative Constructions of the Potterverse ......................... 42

IV. “The last enemy to be conquered is Death”: the Deathly Hallows as Cultural Texts .............. 65

V. Conclusion: “Of course it’s happening inside your head, but why on earth should that mean
that it’s not real?” .......................................................................................................................... 83

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................. 98
The practice of secondary world building, the creation of a fantasy realm with its own unique laws and systems has long been a tradition within the genre of fantasy writing. In many notable cases, such as those publications by J.R.R. Tolkien and H.P. Lovecraft, folklore exhibited in the world of the reader has been specifically used not only to construct these fantasy realms, but to add depth and believability to their presentation. The universe of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series demonstrates this same practice of folklore-as-world-building, yet her construction does much more than just create a fantasy realm. By using both folklore which predates her writing as well as created elements which while unique to her secondary world specifically reflect the world of the reader, Rowling is able to create a fantasy realm which is highly political, complex and multivocal, yet still accessible to young readers through its familiarity. Specifically through her use of cryptids, belief representation, and folk narratives both invented and recontextualized, Rowling is able to juxtapose her fantasy universe to the real-world of the reader, in effect inventing a believable secondary world but also demonstrating to young readers the ways in which her writing should be interpreted.
I. Introduction: “Hogwarts will always be here to welcome you home.”

The realm of folkloristics is one which encompasses everything from the study of material culture to the examination of ritual activity. Within such a large scope of application, the study of folklore both in and as literature has long claimed a prominent stance within the field, tracing its relevance to the very birth of American folkloristics and the early focus by anthropologists on folk narratives as mirrors of culture. As folkloristic research grew inclusive of other forms of cultural expression, creating the vast field we know today, discussions of interdisciplinary thought became intrinsic to the field of folklore. This practice once again illustrated the strong correlation between folkloristic study and literary criticism, arguing for the examination of folklore’s inclusion within literary works.

J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series which first came into public recognition with the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* in 1997, has experienced a growth in the examination of the folklore present therein. Rowling’s use of folklore is intentional, as she stated in an Edinburgh "cub reporter" press conference, "I love freakish names and I have always been interested in folklore and I think it was a logical thing for me to end up writing even though it came so suddenly" (*ITV* 2005). This love of folk material, including everything from Greek mythological references to homeopathic remedies and belief systems, certainly found its way into Rowling’s writing, and in many cases became the very tool by which the author constructed the world in which her novels are set. Through the use of cultural materials ranging from expressions of belief to folk narratives, Rowling creates a fantasy universe which mirrors and seems to symbolize in
its parallels the world of the reader. This secondary realm, while complex and unique, is familiar and accessible to the audience due particularly to the use of recognizable folkloristic elements.

Studies examining similar uses of folklore in literature have a long history within the field of folkloristics. *Folklore in Literature: A Symposium*, published by the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1957, includes works by Daniel G. Hoffman and Carvel Collins among others, on the use of folklore interpretation in literary criticism, specifically the varied uses to which cultural elements are called upon to enact within literature; among these being to add verisimilitude or symbolic meaning within writing. Collins’ short entry, “Folklore and Literary Criticism” argues that folklorists must both establish and critically examine “texts,” meaning both literary publications and the folkloristic references which these may include, in order to gain an understanding of the use of such traditional elements within literature. (Collins 1957:10). Collins asserts that while critics examining the presence of folklore in literary works have contributed a great deal to the study of folklore use in literature, the field has yet more to offer such criticism and that still more research must be done before the relationship between folklore and literature is fully understood (9). Examinations of contemporary literature such as the *Potter* series effectively serve as a continuation of the interdisciplinary study of folklore in literature. By continuing to question the relationship between the two fields and their productions, researchers are not only able to ask deeper and more meaningful questions, but to examine the ways in which this relationship and its interpretations have evolved over time.
Hoffman’s final entry to the symposium, “Folklore in Literature: Notes Toward a Theory of Interpretation,” takes Collins’ understanding of the use of the folkloric in literature a step further, pointing out not only the use of individual motifs and folklore structures within literary works, but also arguing the circular relationship which exists between the “folk and the sophisticate,” as both to some extent inform and influence the other (Hoffman 1957:18). In his examination of the uses of folkloristic references within literature, Hoffman defines three categorizations for the use of folklore in literary works: to provide verisimilitude, to be “unified and elaborated” by authors, or to provide a structure of symbolism. Hoffman, by way of conclusion, argues that critics must take into account both the function of a traditional element within its native habitat and the qualities such inclusions contribute to their respective literary works to truly understand the importance of such references within literature (20).

While this early symposium on the interaction of folklore and literature was groundbreaking in its discussion of the relationship between folklore theory and literary criticism, it was Alan Dundes’ 1965 article, “The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation” which clearly established an analytical method for such research. Dundes asserts that the investigation of the use of folklore in literature involves a two-step process. First, the critic of folklore in literary work must identify the folkloric elements being used, however, Dundes also argues:

too many studies of folklore in literature consist of little more than reading novels for the motifs or the proverbs, and no attempt is made to evaluate how an author has used folkloristic elements and more specifically, how these folklore elements function in the particular literary work as a whole (Dundes 1965:136).
It is this evaluation and interpretation which Dundes argues must be the second step in analyzing the use of folklore in literature (136). In order for the importance of folkloristic reference in literature to be understood, examinations should question the change of context of folkloric elements from the original location to the literary work, and the ways in which such alterations allow understanding of the phenomenon itself to prosper.

Roger Abrahams’ article, “Folklore and Literature as Performance,” published seven years later, shows the growth in folkloristic understanding of literary inclusion as it complicates the binary approach to folklore in literature. Rather than supporting a simplistic two-step process to interpretation, Abrahams argues that performance, particularly as it applies to folklore and literature, depends on performer-audience coordination, thereby affecting the scholarly interpretation of the identified folkloristic material within literature (Abrahams 1972:76). Abrahams is careful to point out, “one does not understand the effect of a Faulkner novel by being able to point to the traditions which he drew upon in his stories: rather, one understands because there is something within such a work which has excited the reader into investing some of his own energy into the reading of the work” (84). It is this investment of self which Abrahams believes to be the purpose of folklore in literature; to influence readers to thoroughly connect to the product at hand. Rowling’s use of the folkloric in the construction of her fantasy universe demonstrates this very exercise. The recontextualization of traditional materials within her series serves to build a world relatively similar to the world of the reader. These similarities connect young readers to the fantasy world by making the realm more familiar and accessible, and therefore easier with which to connect. Young readers invest themselves into the world of Harry Potter because they recognize it.
This focus on performative interpretations of folklore in literature and the relationship between meaning and context continues in Cristina Bacchilega’s “Folklore and Literature” (Bacchilega 2012:451). Folklore in literature, Bacchilega argues, should be envisioned on a continuum rather than as a strict binary dichotomy. The focus of this approach would rely upon the varieties of interpretation offered by including traditional elements in literature through recognizing both genres and functions within their local systems as well as their literary context. This new direction of study stands in sharp contrast to the earlier focus on the importance of finding the origin of folkloristic materials (451). As the world of Harry Potter draws heavily both from folklore and fantasy literary sources, the relationship between these two realms in Rowling’s writing clearly does not exhibit a dichotomous structure. Elements of Rowling’s created world instead lie in a variety of locations along Bacchilega’s continuum.

To further illustrate the idea of a continuum, Bacchilega’s discussion of folklore and literature turns towards theories of intertextuality, generally referencing theory argued by Julia Kristeva and claiming the concept to be “not the dialogue of fixed meanings or texts with one another: it is an intersection of several speech acts and discourses [...] whereby meanings emerge in the process of how something is told and valued, where, to whom, and in relation to which other utterances” (Bacchilega 2012:453). Maria Jesus Martinez Alfaro, author of “Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept,” ultimately describes intertextuality as a “network of relations” within each text and between the product itself and the individual parts which constitute it (Alfaro 1996:281). Alfaro claims this is “everything, be it explicit or latent, that relates one text to others” (280), yet only as far as it is perceived by the audience
(281), once again echoing the importance of audience participation argued by Roger Abrahams. Specifically in terms of literary works, authors are able to build thoroughly intertextual fantasy universes referencing both sources which were combined in its creation as well as aspects of its own being, thereby creating a network of backdrop and meaning. While based obviously within the world of the audience, these created universes are something clearly separate and unique.

When applied to *Harry Potter*, this idea of intertextuality works in multiple ways. Rowling’s writing and creation of setting, characters, and backstory incorporates a number of differing folkloristic references, ranging from historical legends regarding Nichols Flamel to emic and etic misunderstandings of art. The intermingling of these sources does exhibit intertextuality, however it is not merely the appropriation of these sources, but rather their influence upon each other within various productions created by Rowling which thoroughly shows the use of folklore within the series to be intertextual. A number of Rowling’s folkloric references appear not only in the original *Potter* series, but also in additional publications within this universe, such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. The use of these folkloristic sources in multiple productions demonstrates the ways in which these references influence each other within the series as well as actively build Rowling’s fantasy universe.

While Bacchilega points out the “dynamic” boundary between systems of communication and their respective purposes (Bacchilega 2012:452), she is also careful to describe genre as “not structures or forms, but frameworks of orientation which are dynamic, often hybrid, and emergent so that linking a text with a genre inevitably effects
an ‘intertextual gap’” (453). What is identified as “folklore” or as “literature” is located contextually within textual production and cultural history (457) and tends to have “porous boundaries” which alter with context (455). With the idea of contextual genre distinction in mind, defining what is considered “folklore” and what is acknowledged as “fact” within the realm of Rowling’s created literary universe could potentially shine a light on authorial choices in structure, thematic distinction and world building as both are used to construct a believable fantasy world.

The focus on the importance of context is the predominant argument behind Frank de Caro and Rosan Augusta Jordan’s book, *Re-Situating Folklore*, in which the authors present examples of folklore which has been “de-situated” from its natural context, and “re-situated” within the literary realm (de Caro 2004:6). It is this recontextualization, de Caro and Jordan argue, which allows literary authors to create structure, plot, or symbolic meaning from borrowed folkloristic elements (7). De Caro, unlike his predecessors, however, presents the idea of world building within the fictional realm through the use of folklore:

Folklore can also be used to suggest remoteness of place or time, or it can even be revised in the construction of alternate fantasy or science fiction worlds. For instance, J.R.R. Tolkien creates for his fantasy world an array of what are supposed to be orally transmitted songs which pass on the stories of past deeds and events. Though these songs constitute a made-up folklore and though the context in which they exist is purely a fantasy one, they partly serve to give an impression of their world as a place very much like what we may imagine a more ancient time in our real world to have been like […]. The fantasy world thus acquires a patina of antiquity which makes it seem more real, though also more distant (16-17).
This idea of folklore-as-world building is one which Sullivan thoroughly examines in his article, “Folklore and Fantastic Literature,” using J.R.R. Tolkien’s terminology “secondary world,” described as a realm harboring its own laws in which the mind of the reader can enter and find believable in his essay “On Fairy Stories” (Tolkien 1947:12). Earlier criticism of fantasy works by Tolkien further defines the concept as “the illusion of historical truth and perspective […] which is largely a product of art” (Tolkien 1991 [1936]:16). Sullivan argues that “fantasy and science fiction authors use traditional materials, from individual motifs to entire folk narratives, to allow their readers to recognize, in elemental and perhaps subconscious ways, the reality and cultural depth of the impossible worlds these authors have created” (Sullivan 2001:279). To Sullivan, the use of folklore in world building practiced by authors such as Rowling adds depth and believability to the secondary worlds of the fantasy genre. Authors of these genres, Sullivan points out, are required to create a world which “makes sense in and of itself” (280). This closed realm must then become the secondary world, in contrast to the primary world of the reader, despite what traditional materials it may borrow in its creation.

In Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings series, the secondary world can easily be identified as Middle Earth and the locations and landscapes therein. Rowling’s secondary world, however, is more complex as the Harry Potter series is intentionally set in a world identifiable to the real-world of the reader. Rowling’s secondary world is a universe in which a secret culture and identity exists inside of a world very much like our own. The hidden wizarding world, however, also alludes to a number of subgroups within itself, such as Death Eaters, the Order of the Phoenix, individual Houses within Hogwarts, and
Deathly Hallows believers. Rowling’s secondary world, then, harbors the wizarding world and all of its specific subgroups as well as the Muggle, or nonmagical, world which is meant to reflect the world of the reader.

This created universe has come to be known in online forums and social media as the Potterverse, specifically referencing the “universe” of Harry Potter, and this is the term by which I will refer to Rowling’s secondary world. While the Potterverse first only contained the original seven novels, its construction has grown immensely as the series has progressed. Today, the Potterverse includes not only the original series but all additional publications such as The Tales of Beedle the Bard, eight movies based off the original series, illustrated special editions of the original series, a theme park, any fan fiction written on the series, the popular practice of Harry Potter character cosplay, two parody musicals produced by the University of Michigan, among a variety of other parody productions, and a number of both sanctioned and unsanctioned websites for Harry Potter fans, including the Pottermore website established by Rowling herself in which fans can be sorted into their own Houses, be awarded their own wands, and discover their individual patronuses. The 2016 releases of Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, an eighth installment in the Harry Potter narrative which took the form of a play, and Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, the first of a new five-part movie series, demonstrate the vastness and continued growth of the Potterverse.

As Sullivan’s article argues, the borrowing of “traditional material” in world-building leads to the creation of folklore-like materials unique to each specific secondary world, citing authors who “have used traditional, recognizable sayings with which the reader would be familiar to set up for later sayings indigenous to the secondary world in
which they are heard” (282). To Sullivan, such practices become the primary purposes of folklore use in literature: “to give verisimilitude and local color” and “to serve as ‘models for production of folklore-like materials’” (282).

Brian Attebery’s *Stories about Stories*, also focuses on the importance of secondary world building in fantasy literature; however, he takes the inclusion of folkloristic elements beyond Sullivan’s focus on verisimilitude to argue the importance of the symbolism of the elements of these worlds (Attebery 2013:4). Attebery writes, “fantasy is fundamentally playful--which does not mean that it is not serious” (2), arguing that while literal interpretations of fantasy works can result in conflict for the reader (162), the “nonfactuality” of fantasy literature offers the freedom of symbolic truth without pressuring the reader to take a stance regarding what the interpretation of that truth may be (4). While these symbolic meanings must be indirect (164), the range of reaction to these materials, a point also stressed by Bacchilega, shows their variability to be a direct result of their vagueness as well as marker of their importance (8). These symbolic interpretations allow the reader to make personal and individual judgments without the influences of others and can demonstrate great variability from person to person.

Rowling’s use of folklore in secondary world building is not a new phenomenon, instead directly reflecting similar choices made by a number of well-renowned fantasy authors. Timothy Evans’ article, “A Last Defense against the Dark: Folklore, Horror, and the Uses of Tradition in the Works of H.P. Lovecraft,” investigates the particular ways the writer of horror tales (a subset of fantasy, as described in *A Short History of Fantasy* by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James) creates authenticity in fiction through the use
of both borrowed and created folklore material. Evans clearly states, “Lovecraft used actual folklore in his fiction, though he often transformed it” (Evans 2005:116).

Evans’ purpose is not merely to point out the recontextualization of preexisting folklore, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which such materials authenticated forms unique to Lovecraft’s secondary world and therefore strengthened the world itself. He claims “Lovecraft was quite critical of those who simply used or valued folklore in literature for its own sake, without reworking it. He advocated using ‘folk myths’ to create ‘new artificial myths.’” Evans argues it was Lovecraft’s use of the structures and devices of the folkloric, along with invented scholarly sources which intertextually referenced both other inventions by Lovecraft and established folkloric elements backing up his claims, which gave his fiction “authenticity” and made the created elements within “seem” like folklore (119).

This focus on the intertextuality of invented and preexisting folkloric materials is a topic Evans revisits in “Folklore, Intertextuality, and the Folkloresque in the Works of Neil Gaiman,” published in Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert’s 2016 publication, The Folkloresque, a term defined by the authors as “popular culture’s own (emic) perception and performance of folklore. That is, it refers to creative, often commercial products or texts (e.g. films, graphic novels, video games) that give the impression to the consumer (viewer, reader, listener, player) that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions” (Foster 2016:5). Foster and Tolbert complicate the idea of the folkloresque by focusing not on whether a material is genuine, but rather why it succeeds (8). Oftentimes, the authors argue, popular culture success can be linked to an attachment to folklore material (14), to the power, much like that called upon in
secondary world building, “to connect to something beyond the product itself” (3). It is this “connection,” that Attebery claims adds symbolism and imbues meaning, which is demonstrated in Rowling’s own folkloresque world building.

While a fairly new area of study in folkloristic research, examples of the use of the folkloresque can be found throughout the history of sf/fantasy genres. Merely a small sampling of this practice includes ballads and riddle use by J.R.R. Tolkien, local and supernatural legends both alluded to and specifically created in the works of H.P. Lovecraft, C.S. Lewis’ use of biblical allegory and the prevalence of creatures from classical mythology within his Chronicles of Narnia series, and the vast array of folk elements within the publications of Neil Gaiman, encompassing everything from foodways to culturally specific belief systems.¹

Much like in the works of Lovecraft and Gaiman, folkloresque inventions are pervasive within the Harry Potter series. While Rowling does include a number of folkloristic references attributed to the world of the reader, Rowling herself has stated, "I’ve used bits of what people used to believe worked magically just to add a certain flavor, but I’ve always twisted them to suit my own ends. I mean, I’ve taken liberties with folklore to suit my plot” (Harry Potter and Me 2001). It seems that, like Lovecraft, Rowling rarely explicitly presents unaltered folkloristic material, but rather uses these elements to build her own Potterverse folklore. Examples of Rowling’s

¹ The Hobbit, the prequel to Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings series, includes a number of traditional Old English riddles as a contest of wits between Bilbo Baggins and Gollum. One such example presented is “Alive without breath,/As cold as death:/ Never thirsty, ever drinking,/ All in mail never clinking.” Lovecraft’s “The Shunned House” is based directly on a legendary haunted House in Providence, Rhode Island, and the use of biblical allegory is evident in the sacrifice of Aslan the lion in C.S. Lewis’s The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. Neil Gaiman’s American Gods includes not only mythological references to deities such as Odin and Loki, but also discussions regarding the differences between Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan, and a focus on foodways most clearly exemplified in the numerous references to pasties.
recontextualization of traditional materials, such as her folkloresque reimagining and presentation of cryptid beings and ritual enactment fill chapter two of this work. The overhauling of preexisting folk narratives, the folkloresque invention of a unique Potterverse legend, and the combination of “old” form to “new” content in Potterverse children’s tales are examined in depth in chapter three.

The investigation of intertextuality and the folkloresque within J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series is a topic which has attracted growing interest in recent years. Carlea Holl-Jensen and Jeffrey A. Tolbert’s article, “‘New-Minted from the Brothers Grimm’: Folklore’s Purpose and the Folkloresque in The Tales of Beedle the Bard,” included in The Folkloresque, examines the portrayal of Potterverse-specific folk materials: specifically the Beedle the Bard fairy tales referenced in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows and then published as a separate compendium after the series’ conclusion. Holl-Jensen and Tolbert present a discussion touching on the two main ways the authors understand the use of fairy tales within the Potter series. The first of these uses, they argue, is to “enrich a world of fiction through intertextual references” (Holl-Jenson 2016:165); as they claim, “It is clear that Rowling imagines the wizarding and Muggle (or nonmagical) worlds as parallel cultures with parallel bodies of folklore” (168).

This argument relates directly to the one which Sullivan presents in “Folklore and Fantastic Literature.” It is the borrowing of traditional materials, such as the structure and motifs of fairy tales described in Holl-Jenson and Tolbert’s article, which Sullivan points out “allow[s] readers to recognize, in elemental and perhaps unconscious ways, the reality and cultural depth of the impossible worlds these authors have created” (Sullivan 2001:279). As Sullivan argues, it is the borrowing of folkloristic material, such as fairy
tale structures, which leads to the creation of unique secondary world materials, such as the content of the *Beedle the Bard* tales themselves, adding, as Sullivan claims, “verisimilitude and local color” to the Potterverse (282).

This practice of world building is investigated one step further by Holl-Jensen and Tolbert, who claim understanding of such folkloric references can only be reached by analyzing “the work as a whole, its reception by its audience, and other factors external to the folkloric material itself” (167). Such analysis, according to the authors, reveals assumptions on the part of the author about the nature of specific folkloric material, such as its origin, function and relevance to modern society. The revelation of these assumptions becomes the second primary purpose of fairy tales within Rowling’s writing as “metafolklore and metafictional uses of folkloric material” which “provide direct insight into what people think about folklore” (171). By mimicking the form of European *marchen*, Rowling is able to juxtapose cultural values of her own universe with those of a different culture, specifically the Potterverse (169). This second argument of their study, then, falls directly in line with Attebery’s discussion on symbolic interpretations of the fantasy genre. The juxtaposition of real-world morals and values offered through Rowling’s presentation of Potterverse culture supplies the reader with the exact “indirect” symbolic interpretation Attebery claims allows the audience to experience truth without the threat of harm or the demand to choose sides.

“New-Minted from the Brothers Grimm” is by no means the only work of scholarship to have been completed on the use of folkloric materials in the *Harry Potter* series. “The Wisdom of Wizards—and Muggles and Squibs: Proverb Use in the World of *Harry Potter*,” by Heather Hass, investigates the practice of proverb usage within
Rowling’s series. Haas claims that similar to fantasy authors before her like J.R.R Tolkien, “Rowling also uses a number of ‘proverbial comparisons’ and ‘proverbial similes’ [...]—including several that seem clearly to be unique to the wizarding world” (Haas 2011:34). Some of these materials presumably unique to the Potterverse are classified as anti-proverbs, defined by Wolfgang Meider as “parodied, twisted, or fractured proverbs that reveal humorous or satirical speech play with traditional proverbial wisdom” (as quoted in Haas: 37). To Haas, the issue becomes identifying the distinctions between anti-proverbs and true-proverbs within their own fantasy context.

Taking a structural look into folkloric elements of the *Harry Potter* series, Joel B. Hunter presents a Proppian analysis of the *Potter* series, first examining each book individually, then the series as a whole (Hunter 2013:7) in order to discover if “the aesthetic satisfaction with any particular book in the series positively correlates to that book’s fairy tale structure as enumerated in Propp’s system of thirty-one functions of a folktale’s dramatis personae” (2). Hunter’s analysis makes no assertions that Rowling intentionally followed a Proppian morphology in her writing, but he does argue that “Rowling followed unconsciously the ‘cultural script’ of folktales in writing the Hogwarts saga” (3).

While a considerable body of work exists examining the possible psychological and societal influences the *Harry Potter* series may exhibit for readers, this type of study removes the focus from intertextual and folkloresque interpretations in favor of reader response and functionalist theories. While works such as Jordana Hall’s “Embracing the Abject Other: The Carnival Imagery of *Harry Potter,” “Deconstructing the Grand Narrative in *Harry Potter*: Inclusion/Exclusion and the Discriminatory Policies in Fiction
and Practice” by Luisa Grijalva Maza and “Harry Potter and the Functions of Popular Culture,” written by Dustin Kidd, prove enlightening reads, these nonetheless fall short in relevance to discussions on Rowling’s intertextual world building.

My research investigates the ways in which J.K. Rowling adheres to the fantasy tradition of folkloresque world building within the universe established in her seven-part Harry Potter series and the potential such construction has to offer symbolic interpretations of the writing. This line of investigation includes the original seven books of the Potter series, as well as additional publications set within the Potterverse such as the textbook Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them and Tales of Beedle the Bard.

Chapter two of this work identifies folkloristic references and the ways in which these have been altered within the Potter series specifically in the realm of ritual enactment, belief representation, and cryptozoology. Chapter three examines the ways in which Rowling uses legend tales from the world of the reader combined with folkloresque created narratives to build her fantasy world and enhance both the depth of social structures and values of this realm and its believability due to similarities between the primary and secondary worlds. Chapter four serves as a specific example of this complex folkloresque world building in reference to the Beedle the Bard narrative, “The Tale of the Three Brothers,” and the Deathly Hallows legend which accompanies the fairy tale within the Potterverse.

The conclusion identifies the ways in which Potterverse folklore reflects materials, beliefs and practices visible within the realm of the reader's reality and the symbolic functions to which this practice can be applied within Rowling’s secondary world. This conclusion presents briefly the idea of Potterverse interpretations to
demonstrate real-word applicability, at least as far as making symbolic interpretation more accessible for young and under-developed readers and presents possible ideas for further research into the use of folklore within the *Harry Potter* series.

Like those authors who preceded her, Rowling calls on a number of existing traditional materials, from mythical creatures to proverb usage. While these folkloric elements, specifically traditional narratives, reference both each other as well as the original contexts from which they were drawn, Rowling also manages to establish such references as a springboard for her own folkloristic creations within her fictional world, a practice exhibited most notably in her presentation of oral lore and traditional narratives. The use of folk narratives, both invented and preexisting, and the reflection of real-world belief negotiation within the series creates a believable and substantial secondary world which effectively mirrors our own.
II. “Liberties with folklore”: Cultural Expression in the *Potter* Series

J.K. Rowling’s fascination with folklore and its influences within her writing is a topic often discussed in author interviews and press conferences. During a 1999 radio broadcast Rowling even claimed, “I would say - a rough proportion - about a third of the stuff that crops up is stuff that people genuinely used to believe in Britain. Two thirds of it, though, is my invention” (Rehm 1999), thereby admitting that while a large amount of the beliefs and practices witnessed within the series do hold some footing in history and existing folkloric systems, somewhat more of the cultural expression within the series is actually completely unique to Rowling’s Potterverse. Rather than simply presenting folklore which predates the conception of her *Potter* series, Rowling creates and adds elements of the folkloresque to these materials in a way which both compliments and strengthens the believability of the Potterverse through its similarity to and reliance on the reader’s primary world.

Comments such as these by the author clearly illustrate Rowling’s intent to recontextualize folklore, and deny the possibility of such folkloristic references being merely coincidence. The author’s use of folklore is no accident. She herself stated in the same radio interview, “I do do a certain amount of research, and folklore is quite important in the books, so where I'm mentioning a creature or a spell that people used to believe genuinely worked […] then I will find out exactly what the words were, and I will find out exactly what the characteristics of that creature or ghost was supposed to be” (Rehm 1999). While the idea that folklore is something which “used to” be believed marginalizes those materials as merely survivals of the past, Rowling’s attention to detail
when describing such traditional elements rather creates a world in which these materials are alive and well in the modern age.

References to “ghosts,” “creatures,” and “spells” demonstrate another aspect of Rowling’s use of folklore. Rather than enlisting one singular motif, custom or material, Potterverse folklore is variable, including a range of cultural expression as eclectic and diverse as such materials are understood to be within any given culture in the world of the reader. The *Harry Potter* series demonstrates a great amount of customary folklore of Rowling’s own invention, specifically in the realm of ritual; a variety of belief representations which correlate directly to preexisting folk beliefs; and a wealth of creatures and beings which, while common in modern fantasy literature, can also find their roots in cryptozoology and folklore. Although many of these traditional representations within the series are common among fantasy writing as well, Rowling’s own admitted focus on folklore argues the importance of these elements as traditional expressions while simultaneously aligning to a folkloresque tradition of world building practiced by the fantasy writing community. By calling upon both existing folklore and her own folkloresque inventions to build her fantasy universe, Rowling fulfills a generic tradition practiced by such notable writers as J.R.R. Tolkien, H.P. Lovecraft and Neil Gaiman. These folkloristic elements both borrowed and created by Rowling construct a world which is complex and multivocal but easily accessible to young readers in the way in which it mirrors reality. The similarities between the two realms create a sense of familiarity and safety which welcomes the audience and allows for investment and understanding of the Potterverse to occur.

*Rituals in Harry Potter*
The use of ritual, while prominent within the series, is so ingrained within the development of plot and action that its importance as cultural expression is easy to overlook. A number of transitionary scenes take place in which some form of secular ritual unique to the wizarding world occurs. While rituals, specifically those involved in English boarding school membership, have appeared in a number of literary works from *Jane Eyre* to *The Portrait of An Artist as a Young Man*, this does not diminish the folkloristic undertones and origins of these practices, but rather strengthens the validity of such customs both within the realm of the reader’s reality and the secondary world which the author is working to create. These instances within the *Potter* series, while folkloresque creations invented by Rowling, begin to structure the passage of time as well as the growth of ability and maturity for the students of Hogwarts in a way which is comparable both to boarding school rituals in other works of literature and to coming of age rituals within the world of the audience.

The first of these occurs early in the *Potter* series when Harry receives his letter of acceptance from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (Rowling 1997:34). Although the importance of the letter is obvious from the continued attempts at delivery despite alterations to Harry’s location, the amount of envelopes and the various ways in which these find their way inside the home of Harry’s guardians (his aunt and uncle, the Dursleys), and Mr. Dursley’s frantic avoidance and escape from the materials until ultimately the letter is hand delivered by the physically imposing Rubeus Hagrid, the

---

2 Rituals in the *Harry Potter* series are able to be identified as secular rather than sacred due to the lack of religious connotation or meaning attributed to such customs. The rituals discussed in this section do represent coming of age and rite-of-passage rituals, yet these practices reference not religiosity but the physical and mental growth and maturity experienced by childhood development, specifically as it is acknowledged through school traditions such as standardized testing.
importance of this occurrence as a cultural phenomenon is not fully explored until the last installment of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

The introductory textbook *Living Folklore*, by Martha Sims and Martine Stephens, presents a concise explanation of what may be referred to as ritual: “rituals are habitual actions, but they are more purposeful than customs; rituals are frequently highly organized and controlled, often meant to indicate or announce membership in a group” (Sims and Stephens 2011:99). While Harry’s own beleaguered acceptance process does exhibit some modicum of organization and control by an unknown third party and the letter itself announces Harry's acceptance at the proper age into the wizarding community, it is not until Harry’s exploration of Snape’s memory after his death that the audience begins to understand how truly important this ritual is within the Potterverse.

Harry’s own experience with his acceptance to the wizarding school is tempered by more pressing epiphanies within the first novel. Harry, only ten years old when he

---

*Figure 2.1: Harry’s acceptance letter. Source: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone film: 2001.*

3 Harry’s attempted coming of age initiation through the Hogwarts letter includes painfully correct addresses on envelopes referencing Harry’s exact sleeping arrangements, the ever-increasing amount and locations of owls as Mr. Dursley continuously forbids Harry from reading his own mail, and the appearance of the letters inside of a dozen eggs. These acts show intelligence and manipulation by someone holding a high level of authority and power. Therefore, while the individual in command of the event is not physically present, organization and control are still detectable.
receives his letter, not only learns that he is a wizard just like both of his parents, but also the actual circumstances surrounding the tragic death of Mr. and Mrs. Potter. This information would be shocking to any individual, let alone a young child whose entire understanding of the world has just been challenged. Snape’s flashback in Deathly Hallows, however, presents the ritual of Hogwarts acceptance without such strings.

Snape’s memory presents to Harry the boy’s own mother’s acceptance into the wizarding world through Snape’s point of view. While Snape is a pure-blood wizard and has grown up knowing of Hogwarts and what acceptance into the school means, Harry’s mother Lilly, is a child of a non-magical family. As Harry travels through Professor Snape’s memory learning the truth about a man he thus far thought of as only pure evil, he is presented a scene in which young Severus Snape is educating Lily on the rules attached to admission to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry:

“…and the Ministry can punish you if you do magic outside school, you get letters.”
“But I have done magic outside school!”
“We’re all right. We haven’t got wands yet. They let you off when you’re a kid and you can’t help it. But once you’re eleven,” he nodded importantly, “and they start training you, then you’ve got to go careful” (Rowling 2007:666).

Even more telling regarding the importance of this ritual in identifying group membership among wizards, as Snape’s memory progresses Harry is given a look into the conflict which arises between family members who gain acceptance into the wizarding world and those who do not. Young Lily complains that her older sister,
Petunia, who is non-magical like their parents, tells her that Snape is lying about the magical school. Later, a rift between the two sisters grows when it is revealed that Petunia wrote her own letter to the headmaster of Hogwarts School asking to be allowed to attend classes. As the conversation turns heated, Petunia, previously depicted as loving, if not overbearing, towards her younger sister, refers to Lily and Snape as “freaks” and, quite literally, turns her back on her sister (670). It is assumed that this moment was a turning point in the sisters’ relationship, as the Petunia of Harry’s time is distrustful and hateful towards the wizarding community and refuses to speak of the Potters and their abilities, while the Petunia of Snape’s memory demonstrates almost motherly tendencies towards her younger sister.

While this scene is important within the narrative in order to demonstrate both the origins of the Dursley’s hate for the wizarding community and Snape’s true character, folkloristic readings suggests more complex emic and etic interpretations of the initiation ritual specifically linked to the coming-of-age which is attached to the letter of acceptance within the Potterverse. While the Hogwarts letter itself serves as the first step in a lengthy initiation process to join the wizarding community, it is one which is time specific, as letters are only delivered to children who exhibit magical ability and are about to turn eleven—if a child doesn’t receive the letter around their eleventh birthday, they never will. This focus on age marks the ritual not only as an initiation but also a coming of age in the ways which this initiation effects the magical use of the child. As Snape informs Lilly, once a wizarding child begins study at Hogwarts it is understood that he or she has the ability to exhibit control over his or her power and is no longer allowed to perform magic without restraint as he or she was as a young child.
Snape, the insider among wizarding society, must inform Lily, the outsider, of the rules and expectations attached to group membership in order for Lily to fully comprehend the importance of her initiation into the community. Harry, like his parents and Snape before him, experiences a rite of passage in which he crosses from a normal human boy to a student of wizardry at a well-known school, but he too, as a circumstance of being raised by the Dursleys, must be informed of group expectations. Whereas occurrences such as his hair growing back and a python being set loose during his visit to the zoo would have remained odd but unimportant without his initiation into this other society, these events take on new meaning once Harry’s true character is revealed. As a side effect of the Hogwarts letter, Harry more fully understands the events which have occurred around him all his life, but he, along with the rest of the new Hogwarts students, now must control his magic, as he is thought of as being old enough to do so. Hogwarts membership comes not only with community membership, but group rules which must be policed. Folkloristic readings of this ritual demonstrate not only the importance of the acceptance letter as a marker of group membership, but the distinctions and issues which arise between those who become a part of this society and those who do not. While the story of Lilly and Petunia within the Potter series merely serves to explain the older woman’s animosity towards her own family, folkloristic interpretations reveal issues of group dynamics and politics between those who are members and those who are not.

The Hogwarts acceptance letter proves to be only the first in a series of rite-of-passage rituals present within the Harry Potter series. Similar to standardized tests such as end of grade and end of course examinations common in Western education, tests such as the Ordinary Wizarding Level (O.W.L.’s) and the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Test
(N.E.W.T.) are both examples of rites of passage. In order to undergo the exam, Hogwarts students are separated from the rest of the student body, given the exam, and only allowed to return to the main population upon completion. While the N.E.W.T. exam is taken at the end of a student’s seventh year and must be passed in order to transition into the wizarding community as an adult and fully competent wizard, the O.W.L. examination is given the end of the fifth year at Hogwarts, understood as the last of the “underclassmen” years. Hogwarts students are given subject tests on classes required of first through fifth year students, and based off their scores are given placement in higher level classes and allowed to choose courses as sixth and seventh year students which will specifically prepare each individual for the occupation of his or her choosing. Highly secular, these rites of passage must be undertaken at particular degrees within the Hogwarts schooling process and students are only able to move forward in their education as these rites are successfully completed. The Sorting Hat ceremony—closely illustrated in Sorcerer’s Stone and revisited in Goblet of Fire—is, however, the best representation of a high-context initiation ritual present in the series.

At a glance, the Sorting Hat ceremony is fairly simplistic. First year Hogwarts students are separated from the rest of the student body as a “patched and frayed and extremely dirty” wizard’s hat is brought before the assembly (Rowling 1997:117). This hat then sings a song telling of the creation of Hogwarts School and the characteristics attributed to each House. Then, Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall calls forth each student who then dons the old hat, has his or her respective House announced, and then finally joins the Hogwarts student body by sitting at the assigned House table (119). This ceremony, then, clearly demonstrates the tripartite structure of a high-context ritual,
identified by Arnold van Gennep as the preliminal phase, in which those undergoing the ritual are separated from those witnessing, the liminal phase during which the transition in status occurs, and the postliminal phase in which the individual is reincorporated into society at large (van Gennep 1960:13).

Much like rituals themselves, Rowling’s writing of the Sorting Hat Ceremony focuses on the liminal space Harry experiences once placing the wise Hat on his head. During the opening of the ceremony Harry feels ill at ease. He is unsure what task will be asked of him, wondering if he will be expected to pull a rabbit from the Hat (117). While Harry understands he is no longer a Muggle, or non-magical person, he also fears the Sorting Hat will announce his invitation to the school as a mistake and send him back to the Dursley’s. Once the time comes for Harry to be sorted, it is ultimately he who decides to proceed with the ritual, another component of liminal space. As the Hat ponders the boy’s “plenty of courage,” “not a bad mind,” “talent” and “thirst to prove himself,” Harry “grip[s] the edges of the stool and [thinks], Not Slytherin, not Slytherin” (121). This request not only demonstrates the boy’s belief in the magical realm and desire to enter into this new society, but also specifically locates where he envisions his role among this
group to be; not with the Slytherins who are known for ambition, cunning, and a tradition of turning out dark wizards, but the Gryffindors who are envisioned as the brave protectors of the wizarding world. Harry’s choice propels him forward, ending both his liminal space and his ritual enactment, and he is allowed to join his Housemates. Harry’s initiation is complete.

*Representations of Belief*

One of the most notable forms of cultural expression within the *Potter* series comes in the form of belief. While the belief in magic itself clearly differentiates the wizarding and Muggle worlds from one another, this dichotomous representation is only the beginning. Within this framework of belief acceptance and negation, Rowling builds an intricate discussion of the plausibility of Hogwarts students’ beliefs—practices which mirror belief systems within the primary world as well.

Herbology, a class Harry is enrolled in from the time he begins studying at Hogwarts, is a course dedicated to identifying and caring for plants which either themselves are magical or may be used for magical purposes after harvesting. It is here that Harry learns about the human-shaped Mandrake root during his second year, described as “a powerful restorative […] used to return people who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state” (Rowling 1998:92). The mandrake root is no newcomer to literary writings. Juliet, upon waking in the tomb to find her lover’s dead body references the “shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth” (*Romeo and Juliet*; Act 4, Scene 3) also described by Rowling. John Donne’s “Song,” commonly known as “Go and Catch a Falling Star,” metaphorically links women, alluded to as lacking virtue and trustworthiness, to the deadliness of the mandrake’s legendary cry (Donne 1633; line 2),
and while no reference to the legendary power of the mandrake is made, even Genesis 30:14-16 equates mandrake roots to the deceptiveness and sexual promiscuity of women when Leah uses the root to pay for a night with Jacob.

With such a lengthy history in literature, the magical use of the mandrake root is not unheard of in folklore. Rowling’s explanation of the plant’s “restorative powers” is, however, not an ability commonly attributed to the mandrake, although the plant is often confused for ginseng, which is also shaped like a human child. It is clear despite this alteration that Rowling is aware of mandrake lore, as the author’s focus on the “cry of the mandrake,” described by Harry as “bawling at the top of [its] lungs” (93) is a common motif in folk narrative (F992.1). This presentation of homeopathic remedy and belief within the Potterverse mirrors the reliance upon the belief of the individual in use exhibited within the primary world of the reader.

Discussions of belief become more prominent in Harry’s third year of study when he, Ron and Hermione begin studying Divination, a class instructed by an almost ethereal seer. It is here that the trio begin to attempt palmistry, analyzing tea leaves, and

Motifs commonly attributed to the mandrake include growth from the blood of a person hanged on the gallows (A26115.5), use as a magic forecaster (D1311.13.1), to show the location of treasure (D1314.7.1), to gain invulnerability (D1344.10), to protect against evil spirits (D1385.2.6), and to conceive (T511.2.1). Later in the series it is revealed Professor Trelawny has a grandmother named Cassandra who also possessed the gift of sight, obviously a reference to the Greek legend of Cassandra who was cursed with sight by the god Apollo for denying his advances and was believed to be insane despite correctly foretelling the fall of Troy (Buxton 2004:100).
reading magic balls. Although these practices are presented by Professor Trelawney as actual skills rather than belief practices, it is important to note that none of these activities go unquestioned within the series.

Hermione Granger, Harry’s Muggle-born best friend and often identified “brightest witch of her age” (Rowling 1999:346) has an especially difficult time accepting the practices being instructed in Trelawney’s course. Ultimately, after yet another prediction of Harry’s painful and tragic impending death, Hermione loses her patience and exclaims “Oh, for goodness’ sake! […] Not that ridiculous Grim again” (Rowling 1999:298). Then, after being told that her mind is “hopelessly mundane,” she does something completely out of character and walks out of the class never to return (299). While Hermione is consistently the student to question the validity of the Divination lessons, others, namely Lavender Brown and Padma Patil exhibit a strong belief in such practices. After Hermione’s dramatic exit from the classroom, Rowling writes:

“Ooooo” said Lavender suddenly, making everyone start.
“Oooooo, Professor Trelawney, I’ve just remembered! You saw her leaving, didn’t you? Didn’t you, Professor?
‘Around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever!’
You said it ages go, Professor!” (299).

While the wording of Trelawney’s prediction and her habit of predicting deadly accidents seem far more dramatic than a student merely dropping a class, Lavender’s unwavering belief in the Professor overlooks such discrepancies and aligns the woman’s prediction to the actual events which have just occurred. Interestingly enough, while Rowling does make the point to demonstrate both extremes regarding this argument on belief, in interviews the author has clearly stated which opinion she would side with. The
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets DVD hosts among its special features an interview with J.K. Rowling and screenwriter Steve Kloves. When discussing their favorite characters to write Rowling states, “if you need to tell your readers something just put it in [Hermione]. There are only two characters that you can put it convincingly into their dialogue. One is Hermione, the other is Dumbledore” (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets DVD interview with Steve Kloves and J.K. Rowling 2003). Rowling, it seems, who characterizes Hermione as stunningly academically intelligent with a zeal for learning, and Dumbledore as the wise and philosophical elder, uses these two characters to serve as her own voice within the series, delivering thematic and moralistic statements and thoughtful inquiries through each of their individual dialogues, though the two characters never interact themselves.

The reliance on Dumbledore is important in that it complicates the discussion of belief as the series progresses. The Hogwarts Headmaster, described by Professor Trelawney as being “ill-disposed towards Divination” (Rowling 2005:544), admits to Harry that originally he had thought the seer a fraud until she unwittingly made a prophesy foretelling the downfall of Lord Voldemort (Rowling 2003:840). Whatever the
Headmaster’s feelings towards Divination, this event convinced him of Trelawney’s worth, giving her a position among the Hogwarts faculty, defending her when the maniacal Professor Umbridge, a transplant from the Ministry of Magic determined to “reform” Hogwarts education, attempted to kick her out of the institution, keeping her identity as the woman who prophesied the Dark Lord’s demise safe not only from Voldemort’s army of Death Eaters, but also from Trelawny herself who has no memory of the prophecy, and ultimately raising a young Harry Potter to act as savior for the entire world as her prophesy foretold.

As Rowling has claimed Dumbledore “speaks for” her in a number of interviews, the Chamber of Secrets DVD interview being one of them, this simultaneous acceptance and reliance on prophesy in the midst of rejecting other belief patterns such as crystal ball and tea leaf readings complicates the views on belief present in the series. Rather than offering a blanket acceptance or denial of the efficacy such folkloristic belief practices, Rowling and the characters through which she speaks are able to distinguish one belief pattern from another and choose what they each do and do not feel comfortable accepting within their own realities. While each of the belief practices presented within the series do exist within the primary world as well, it is the negotiation of belief which strengths the complexity and reliability of the Potterverse, as such discussions must occur among practitioners in the real world. Seldom do individuals within the primary world present universal belief patterns either accepting or denying the multitude of belief systems presented within a community. Rather, individuals are selective regarding their personal belief practices, a habit mirrored within the Potterverse in a way which adds depth and believability to its use of folkloristic material.
*Fantastic Beasts and Magical Beings*

Though the Potterverse is inhabited by a number of creatures such as Dementors, Threstals and Blast-Ended Skrewts which are unique to Rowling’s fantasy universe, most of the creatures referenced within the series seem not to be new inventions, but rather notable beings which exhibit lengthy histories in both folklore and fantasy literature. Characters such as elves, goblins, trolls and giants, all of which have roots in folklore and are similarly common in fantasy literature, are beings which are awarded—to varying degrees—status as intelligent beings within Potterverse society. These individuals, however, experience little development or exploration of character or status within the series. By contrast, centaurs and werewolves, both creations of folklore with lively fantasy performances, are used in Rowling’s writing as tools with which to explore social issues such as racism and medical stigma.

*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is the textbook Harry and his friends are assigned for their first year of Care of Magical Creatures, a class taught by the lovable half-giant Rubeus Hagrid in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Published by Scholastic Books in aid of the Comic Relief charity organization in 2001, this supplementary Potterverse work fulfills the fantasy genre tradition of folkloresque materials similar to Lovecraft’s *History of the Necronomicon* and blog posts and referential materials created by Neil Gaiman, both which have been examined by Timothy Evans for folkloresque content and world-building strategies (2005;2016). Much like these notable fantasy writers and their folkloresque fantasy world creations, Rowling’s supplementary textbook offers intertextual descriptions which reference both the Potterverse and the existing folkloristic systems from which many of Rowling’s
cryptid beings are drawn in a way which adds depth to their believability and sense of reality.

Comparison of this supplementary publication to the *Potter* series serves as a useful tool when examining the perceptions of magical “beasts” within Rowling’s universe. While the book itself lists concise descriptions and backgrounds of a number of creatures which supposedly dwell within the Potterverse, the publication also harbors intertextual commentary by Harry and his friends regarding their personal experiences and views on the beasts included therein. Comparing the *Fantastic Beasts* textbook description of such beings and the trio’s comments within to representations of such figures within the series as well as to what is available in terms of folkloristic description of these beings allows for an investigation of the ways in which the Potterverse relates to preexisting folklore, and the specific ways such recontextualized materials serve to build Rowling’s Potterverse.

Centaurs are described in *Fantastic Beasts* as having “a human head, torso and arms joined to a horse’s body which may be any of several colours” (Scamander 2001:11) and a danger classification of four out of five “X,” reflecting the need for specialist knowledge in interaction, although it is noted that such classification is awarded “not because it is unduly aggressive, but because it should be treated with great respect” (footnote, pg. 11).\(^7\) These beings, it is noted, are intelligent and are only classified as a “beast” per the species’ own request to the Ministry of Magic, but are

---

\(^7\) Although written by Rowling, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* was published under the name “Newt Scamander,” the author of the text as identified within the *Potter* series. Scamander, a former student at Hogwarts, is also the main character in the 2016 film release of *Fantastic Beasts*, which chronicles his adventures in America during the 1920’s.
generally considered to be another race of magical beings, alongside elves and goblins, rather than merely a creature.

Centaurs begin playing a complicated role in the *Potter* series towards the conclusion of Rowling’s first book. When serving his detention sentence assisting Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest after being caught out of bed past curfew, Harry is saved from a malevolent hooded figure by a centaur with “white-blond hair and a palomino body” (Rowling 1997:256). This being, later identified as Firenze, is the third centaur Harry has met that evening, and although his first encounter with the centaur Ronan was amicable enough, involving dubious astrological commentary (253), Firenze’s willingness to allow Harry to ride upon his back sparks controversy amongst the centaur herd who have a history of experiencing prejudice at the hands of the wizards and so have adopted a stance of distance from the affairs of man.

![The centaur herd. Source: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Film: 2007.](image)

Relations between the herd and those humans who visit the forest never fully recover from this ordeal. Ultimately, Firenze is banished from the herd for agreeing to join the Hogwarts staff as the astrology professor as this is seen to be teaching sacred knowledge to the humans, and the centaurs begin arming themselves and issuing threats
to any outsiders who venture into the Forest (Rowling 2003:698). This disintegration of the human/centaur relationship influences Hermione to lead an unsuspecting Professor Umbridge, known for her hatred of any beings considered “sub” or “partially” human, into the heart of the centaur’s land, where the professor’s ego and prejudice enrage the herd, instigating a riot: “Over the plunging, many-colored back and heads of the centaurs Harry saw Umbridge being borne away through the trees by Bane, still screaming nonstop; her voice grew fainter and fainter until they could no longer hear it over the trampling of hooves surrounding them” (756). Although Rowling offers no explanation of what Umbridge experiences at the hands of the centaurs, later it is noted:

> Since she had returned to the castle she had not, as far as any of them knew, uttered a single word. Nobody really knew what was wrong with her either. Her usually neat mousy hair was very untidy and there were bits of twig and leaf in it, but otherwise she seemed to be perfectly unscathed. Madam Pomfrey says she’s just in shock,” whispered Hermione. “Sulking, more like,” said Ginny. “Yeah, she shows signs of life if you do this,” said Ron, and with his tongue he made soft clip-clopping noises. Umbridge sat bolt upright, looking wildly around (849).

These descriptions and encounters with the centaur herd allow Rowling throughout the series to create a dynamic representation of not only a mythological creature, but also the society to which it would belong and the relationship this being could potentially have with humans. Despite keeping the “semi-equine, semi-human form” known to the species, Rowling’s centaurs exhibit an overhaul of character. Richard Buxton’s *The Complete World of Greek Mythology* identifies centaurs as “wild, unruly and unpredictable” with “a crude animality which often exploded into violence” (Buxton 2004:117). Buxton’s descriptions of the species, both during the labors of Hercules and
the wedding of Hippodameia involve a “drastic weakness for wine” unseen in Rowling’s interpretation of the creatures, just as the characterization of “wild” and “unruly” falls short of identifying those centaurs which inhabit the Forbidden Forest which forms the borders of the Hogwarts grounds.

Greek stories of centaurs, in full actualization of the “wild” character type, often depict the beings in the act of attempted rape. The centaur Nessus is caught trying to rape Hercules’ wife Deianeira, and Hippodameia is subjected to similar treatment at her own wedding (129). While Rowling herself has never commented on this aspect of centaur-lore or what actually happened to Professor Umbridge after her kidnapping, Jacopo della Quercia, writer for cracked.com, an online article database covering popular culture topics ranging from how to interpret the latest hit movies, to celebrity death reports, to recent political commentary, questions the innocence of the event and those involved. Quercia points out that Umbridge’s final appearance in Order of the Phoenix depicts her “suffering from some kind of major trauma that didn't involve any damage to the visible parts of her body,” hinting towards the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder which often accompanies sexual assault (Quercia 2011). Quercia continues, arguing Hermione’s forethought in the act, pointing out that if any of the characters in the Potterverse were to be familiar with traditional centaur-lore, it would be Hermione, “the character whose main purpose in the plot is to know absolutely everything.”

While Rowling herself has made no comments on this accusation, it is hard to completely deny such a possibility. Rowling, the author who drops subtle Greek mythological references in family names and spell phrasing, would surely have been aware of the rape narratives told regarding centaurs, yet such a topic as inter-species
sexual assault would not be deemed appropriate for children and young readers. By simply not informing the reader explicitly of Umbridge’s fate at the hands of the centaur herd, Rowling allows those who are aware of the beings’ traditional characterization to fill in the blanks, while those unfamiliar with such tales are able to overlook this possibility.

This use of existing folk characters adds depth to both Potterverse social systems and to the individual characterizations of those involved in the ordeal. If Hermione did intend such harm to come to Umbridge, this fact casts her character in a drastically darker light. No longer merely a victim searching for a means of escape, Hermione herself becomes an arbiter of violence, and Harry, in following through and not questioning Hermione’s actions, becomes complicit in her misdeeds. Similarly, an acknowledgement of traditional centaur lore introduces the possibility of rape and sexual assault into a series for young readers, whereas merely hinting at tradition centaur narratives only suggests such an act within Rowling’s writing. While the threat of sexual violence is one which is new to the series in Order of the Phoenix, the series’ fifth installment, it is revisited in later in the series suggesting such interpretations of Umbridge’s kidnapping to not be far off-base, a topic I will return to shortly.

A far less controversial creature representation within the Potterverse is that of the werewolf. Described in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them as an “otherwise sane and normal wizard or Muggle” who “transforms into a murderous beast” at the full moon, the werewolf is designated the highest danger rating, yet Harry’s handwritten commentary notes they “aren’t that bad” (Scamander 2001:83). This notation is clearly a reference to Harry’s fondness for one of only two werewolves included in the Potter
series, Remus Lupin, a one-time professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts and close friend to Harry’s deceased parents and godfather. Lupin, introduced in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, not only teaches Harry how to combat the effects of the Dementors by eating chocolate, but also how to conjure a patronus and even explains to the boy the origin of the Marauders Map and it’s relation to Harry’s father.

Werewolves in fantasy literature are traditionally individuals who have either been scratched or bitten by one of the species and experience a change in both corporeal structure and personality during the monthly full moon, not only becoming a wolf physically, but mentally as well. Rowling holds to this identification when describing the changes Lupin suffers:

> There was a terrible snarling noise. Lupin’s head was lengthening. So was his body. His shoulders were hunching. Hair was sprouting visibly on his face and hands, which were curling into clawed paws (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 1999:381).

Unlike with the centaurs, Rowling seems to align closely to werewolf lore which predates her publications, yet once again, the writer does not present one general character type for the werewolf but rather a dichotomy of possible representations in two starkly different werewolf characters. Although the physical presentation of the werewolf itself may not be that different from traditional explanations, Rowling does take liberties with the human characters in which these monsters incubate.
While Lupin appears as a kind, caring educator who has been ostracized due to his curse, Fenrir Greyback is the epitome of the predator. Greyback is described as a “big, rangy man with matted gray hair and whiskers, whose black Death Eater’s robes looked uncomfortably tight. He had a voice like none that Harry had ever heard: a rasping bark of a voice. Harry could smell a powerful mixture of dirt, sweat, and unmistakably, blood coming from him. His filthy hands had long yellowish nails” (Rowling 2004:593). He never seems to fully retain his human form, instead inhabiting both the world of the wolf and the human simultaneously. Fenrir prefers attacking children, and is revealed to be the very werewolf which bit young Remus Lupin.

On several instances Greyback specifically requests to be given Hermione as a reward for his service to the Dark Lord in way which alludes not to using the girl for a meal, but rather for his own sexual interests. Although Greyback’s comment to Ron upon the group’s capture by Death Eaters, “Reckon she’ll let me have a bite of the girl when she’s finished with her?” (Rowling 2007:463), does not explicitly refer to sexual misconduct, it is Rowling’s identification that the line was “crooned,” and specifically to

---

8 The name “Fenrir” is yet another mythological reference, as Rowling’s predatory werewolf shares the identification with the monstrous wolf-son of Loki, the Norse god of mischief (D’Aulaires 1967:50).
Ron, who by this point has accepted his own love for Hermione, which tells the reader of Greyback’s true intentions. The potential rape of Professor Umbridge in the fifth installment of the *Potter* series is only presented in such a way that it is referential of sexual violence only to those readers familiar with Greek mythology. Hermione’s own threat of rape in the seventh novel of the series, by contrast, is presented by Greyback in a way which is much harder to overlook, and in effect validates the possibility of Umbridge’s misfortune. Sexual assault is a possible threat within the Potterverse, as exhibited in *Deathly Hallows*, making the possibility of Umbridge’s assault all the more likely.

Despite such dismal characterizations of his counterpart, Lupin is far from predatory himself. Interviews with the author of the *Potter* series which turn to the topic of Lupin often demonstrate a fondness and degree of empathy for the character. The 2001 publication *Conversations with J.K. Rowling*, quotes the author describing Lupin as a "damaged person, literally and metaphorically” and identifying the character as “really a metaphor for people's reactions to illness and disability” (Fraser 2001:40). This victimization Rowling demonstrates as a component of prejudice against illness is a theme the author has voiced in numerous interviews, on one occasion claiming Lupin’s lycanthropic curse as an allegory for AIDS stigma (“Short Stories from Hogwarts of Heroism, Hardship, and Dangerous Hobbies” 2016).

When it comes to Remus Lupin, Rowling holds true to the fantasy and folkloristic representations of the beast itself, yet uses that very identification to create something more. Lupin’s treatment by society for his curse uses folkloristic symbolism to echo the unfairness suffered by many at the hands of bias and prejudice. While Fenrir Greyback is
a monster both physically and psychologically, Rowling’s identification of Lupin demonstrates that some “monsters” are victims themselves. By presenting these two characters as dichotomous to one another, Rowling demonstrates the harm of treating those different from a dominant group according to stereotypes. Lupin is treated within Potterverse society as if he, too, victimizes small children, yet in getting to know him the wizards around him learn how wrong they are.

Rituals, beliefs, and cryptid fantastic beings abound in Rowling’s Potterverse, not only in the original Potter series, but its additional publications as well. These folkloristic references structure a believable secondary fantasy universe, including elements which are either recognizable as those materials in our own world, or new representations of culture which mirror practices and beliefs understandable to the audience. The narratives and the oral lore which permeates the Potterverse, however, gives the fantasy world its fullness and depth and creates a secondary world which is startlingly believable in its complexity.
III. “I should not have told yer that”: Narrative Constructions of the Potterverse

The Potterverse as created by J.K. Rowling is riddled with aspects of the folkloresque. Fantastic creatures, ritual presentations and representations of belief are merely a few of the traditional elements called upon to add density and relatability to the secondary world of the fantasy series by strategically mirroring the reality of the reader’s universe. Folk narratives, another aspect of Rowling’s reliance upon traditional materials, often relate in strategic ways to issues of sociological distinction and importance. In contemporary society, the transmission of narratives often concludes with a moral or lesson in the form of a proverb, can lead to joking and stereotyping that creates and upholds discrimination, and even aids in the evaluation of beliefs such as those discussed in the previous chapter. Each of these ideas have been examined in the ways in which they relate to the Potter series by contemporary folkloristic study (Haas 2011, Hall 2011 and Maza 2012, respectively). These tasks, and many others to which narrative transmission relates, mark the use of borrowed and folkloresque traditional narratives as a key component of secondary fantasy world building within the Potter series.

Much like fantasy authors before her, Rowling uses folkloresque narratives which mirror the world of the reader and efficiently build and sustain the depth of the Potterverse through its directed similarity to the primary world. Evidence of this is seen particularly within three narratives found within the Potterverse; the legend of Nicolas Flamel, a recontextualized historical legend from Europe; the tale of the Chamber of Secrets, a legend particularly created by Rowling for plot development within the series; and The Tales of Beedle the Bard, a fairy tale treasury created by Rowling which mimics
the form and structure of European folktales but presents narrative content unique to the secondary world of the Pottermore.

The Double Life of Nicolas Flamel

Never actually appearing within the Potter series, Nicolas Flamel nevertheless plays an important role in the action of the first novel. Harry’s original introduction to Flamel occurs as an inconspicuous side note to Professor Dumbledore’s Chocolate Frog card: “Considered by many to be the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon’s blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling” (Rowling 1997:102). This small reference proves so insignificant that when Hagrid, in typical Hagrid fashion, accidently informs Harry that what the three-headed dog the boy found was guarding was “between Professor Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel” (193), it completely slips Harry’s mind that he’s heard the name before, and the trio spend the better part of their school year attempting to track down any information on the man.

Nicolas Flamel was in fact a real person. Born in France in 1330, Flamel worked as scrivener and manuscript-seller until his death in Paris at the age of 88 (Dow 2013). While Flamel and his wife, Perenelle, were noted for their philanthropy and dedication to their religious community, connections between Flamel and the study of alchemy did not

---

9 Chocolate Frogs, hunks of chocolate shaped like frogs and bewitched to hop and behave as such, are a type of sweet popular in the wizarding world. Each Frog includes within its package a trading card featuring the likeness and brief information on a famous witch or wizard. While individuals represented include Merlin and the original four founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Dumbledore’s card is one of the most common.
begin to surface until long after the couple’s death. In 1612, *Le Livre des Figures Hiéroglyphiques*, or *The Book of Hieroglyphic Figures*, was published. This work, the publisher claimed, was a collection of designs purportedly commissioned by Flamel for a decorative architectural display at the Cimetière des Innocents in Paris; however, the publisher’s introduction to the work describes Flamel’s attempts to decode a mysterious book of hieroglyphics which he purchased from a Spanish sage. With his wife’s help in translation, Flamel, according to legends reported on Historyofalchemy.com, was able to reproduce the book’s recipe for the mythical Philosopher’s Stone, a product which could transform base metals into gold. The website further reports stories that claim Flamel managed to produce silver in 1382, followed soon after by productions of gold. His supposed mastery of the Philosopher’s Stone and creation of the Elixir of Life fully cemented Flamel’s importance in the world of alchemy as these were the field’s two main goals (Dow 2013).

Though the academic scholarship on the history of alchemic practice makes no reference to Flamel or his Stone, his supposed accomplishment of these two feats do fulfill the two “kinds” of alchemy practiced in Europe during the thirteenth century, that which focused on “gold-making,” and the other which was concerned with the general changes of “things” (Lindberg 1978:378). Lindberg examines the European emphasis on
“elixirs” as a cultural focus of the thirteenth century not demonstrated by early forerunners of alchemic thought within Arabic tradition. The purpose of the elixirs, however, varied, and were believed to aid in the creation of gold, to serve as medicine, and even induce immortality (379). Even if the legend of the Flamels was not known within the alchemic community itself, the narrative’s reliance upon such pillars of the field as the search for an elixir and the goal of immortality demonstrates a familiarity of those who told this legend with the core ideas of the field itself. Despite the recontextualization of this legend, Rowling’s own adherence to these themes within alchemy exhibits an understanding both of the major values attributed to alchemic study as well as an understanding of important key themes within the legend itself.

The first rebuttal of the Flamel legend was presented in 1761 by Etienne Villain who claimed that the source of the narrative was the original publisher of *Le Livre des Figures Hiéroglyphiques*, although alchemist-friendly websites which accept the Flamel narratives as historic do enumerate possible Flamel sightings in the centuries since his supposed death. Today, information on Flamel is less than easy to locate. What websites are available that mention the man exhibit not only the same narrative regarding his life and work, but in many cases even the exact, or strikingly similar, diction (Dow 2013; geni.com). Any review of Flamel’s actual life seems to be kept to a minimum, with publications rather focusing primarily on the legends which surround his work, yet academic discourse on alchemy seems to ignore the man completely.

None of this information is explicitly presented in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, yet even the novel’s original title, *Philosopher’s Stone*, and what few references are made to Flamel within the book clearly demonstrate Rowling’s attention to
the alchemic legend regarding the Flamels. Accio-quote.org, a database of interviews with J.K. Rowling which sorts its content into topics such as “characters,” “places,” and “Jo,” lists a comment from a blog post on the author’s website which states the historical context of Nicolas Flamel, once again pointing to her knowledge of folklore and active choice in using such materials.\(^\text{10}\)

Within the series itself, Hermione spends months searching before finally locating information on the Stone and Flamel. The information she ultimately locates, however, is still scant:

> The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Sorcerer’s Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The Stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

> There have been many reports of the Sorcerer’s Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicholas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight) (Rowling 1997:220).

Although ultimately this is the most information Harry and the reader are given regarding both Flamel and his legendary Stone, this description offers a sound base on which to begin examining Rowling’s use of folk narratives.

Comparison of Rowling’s description of the Stone and its maker to what is reported in European legend points out a number of alterations in Rowling’s recontextualization. While narratives regarding Flamel do credit him with creating the Elixir of Life, these narratives do not necessarily link the Stone to the Elixir. Rather,

\(^{10}\) Unfortunately, since the conclusion of the Potter series Rowling’s personal website has been renovated and changed addresses, and the link provided by Accio-Quote no longer directs the user to the blog.
these products seem to be idealized separately as the “two magical goals of alchemy” (Dow 2013; geni.com). In combining both of these efforts into one process Rowling does not contradict the legends but rather simplifies them for young readers. Instead of attempting to explain how Flamel managed to create both the Stone and the Elixir separately, Rowling simply makes these issues into one: Flamel created the Stone which was then used to create the Elixir. Since no information has “historically” been given by putative scholars regarding how Flamel came by the Elixir, Rowling’s perception of things ties up loose ends nicely for curious readers.

Another notable difference in recontextualizing the Flamel legend comes in the role of the alchemist’s assistant. While published reports of Flamel’s work identify his wife Perenelle as a co-contributor in his efforts, no such reference is made in Rowling’s description of the Stone’s inception. Rather, Perenelle is subjugated to a peripheral role and is merely identified as “his wife” while Albus Dumbledore is awarded the role of co-creator. This alteration to the legend is troubling as it displaces power and notability traditionally given to a woman to a man identified as the “greatest wizard of modern times” in a series which is heavily dominated by male figures, yet this transition is the very way in which Rowling is able to connect a European historical legend to the Potterverse she has created. It is the Stone’s ability to create the Elixir of Life which draws Lord Voldemort’s attention. Professor Dumbledore, as one of the Stone’s creators, accepts responsibility for the item and hides it at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The Stone’s presence brings the Dark Lord himself to the school and forces a young Harry Potter to not only endure deadly trials in order to save the Stone, but also to directly confront the man who murdered his parents. By substituting Dumbledore for
Perenelle, Rowling drives the action of her novel through the use of a folk narrative and creates a stronger bond between the wizarding world and the world of the reader through a specific rather than allusive link.

This bond between the Potterverse and elements in historic tradition is important as it provides a base in which to ground a believable secondary fantasy world. The use of the Flamel legend strategically ties Albus Dumbledore’s notable experience and the history of the wizarding community to that of sixteenth century Europe. Through the sharing of this legend between the Potterverse and the primary world, Rowling creates ties which anchor the secondary world in reality, adding a fragment of believability to her fiction. Intertwining her fantasy with this legend allows a suspension of disbelief for both narratives as well as creates a background for the wizarding community itself. If Dumbledore and Flamel created the Philosopher’s Stone together, then the wizarding community must be one with a lengthy history. This is not a world which sprung into existence the moment Harry and the reader became aware of it; rather, it is a social sphere which has been functioning for centuries prior to Harry’s, and our, interference.

Hogwarts: A Dark History

Unlike the legends surrounding the historical Nicolas Flamel and the Philosopher’s Stone, narratives regarding the creation of Hogwarts and Salazar Slytherin’s dark intentions within the Potter series are legends specifically created by J.K. Rowling in construction of the Potterverse. The history of the Hogwarts founders becomes of eminent importance in the second installment of the series, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, when unnerving writing appears on the walls of the school announcing “The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the heir, beware”
(Rowling 1999:138), and stealthy attacks begin leaving several students literally petrified and hospital bound.

The reference to the Chamber once again sends the ever-inquisitive Hermione Granger into action. Amid rumors and whispers of where the Chamber is actually located and what nightmarish monster might lurk inside, Hermione cuts right to the chase and asks Professor Binns during a lesson on the history of magic, “I was wondering if you could tell us anything about the Chamber of Secrets” (149). Taken off guard by such a request, Binns responds, “I deal with facts, Miss Granger, not myths and legends” (149; emphasis original). Though the professor does ultimately tell his students the story of the Chamber of Secrets, his original hesitation and categorization of the narrative is important. For the first time in the series, Rowling pointedly identifies a form of folk narrative and is careful to distinguish it as such within the text. While the Chamber of Secrets narrative, by this point in the telling of the story, is merely identified as something other than “fact,” Rowling creates a clear distinction between true and fictional narrative genres in a way which particularly mirrors the primary world of the reader. Just as “folklore” today is often used as a term to denote something which is false, Binns’s declaration that he deals in fact distinctly categorizes genres which are real from those which are merely fiction for both Hogwarts students and the reader.

This simple distinction is short lived, however, as Hermione, the character Rowling has admitted often speaks for her within the series to transmit information the author wishes her audience to know, challenges Professor Binns’s definition of narrative genres by asking “don’t legends always have a basis in fact?” (149). While Binns never fully confirms nor denies Hermione’s claim, stating instead ambivalent “yes, one could
argue that, I suppose,” this idea is one which sticks with the reader and opens a new realm of possibility regarding what is true and what is fiction both within the Potterverse and the primary world it imitates. Important, too, is the difference between well-read Hermione’s definition of “legend” when compared to academic descriptions of the genre.

Although more recent scholarship has challenged his distinction, William Bascom’s seminal definition of legends describes them as “prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today” (Bascom 1965:4). Despite reworkings of this description and new ideas by which to identify the legend genre, this still offers a solid base on which to examine Rowling’s use and identification of legendry. While Hermione’s and Binns’s methods of defining “legend” do not mirror each other, by presenting such an exchange between the two, Rowling presents the contrasts between the popular culture-influenced view of “legend,” exemplified by Binns, which defines the genre as merely fiction and fantasy with her own understanding of the term, presented by Hermione, as that which involves a narrative which although fantastic, may have an underlying basis in fact.

Hermione and Rowling’s understanding of legendry, then, rather than aligning to that of the dominant cultural definition, references the importance of emic belief emphasized in Bascom’s categorization while the setting and time period fulfill requirements of being “less remote” and in a “world much as it is today.” This influence and representation of popular culture interpretations of traditional material demonstrated by Professor Binns and his class’s discussion truly mark the Chamber of Secrets legend as folkloresque, as Foster and Tolbert’s very definition of the term claims it as “popular
culture’s own (emic) perception and performance of folklore” (Foster and Tolbert 2016:5). The very discussion of the believability of the Chamber tale further strengthens the narrative’s identification as legend as well as the ties between the Potterverse and the primary world as it explicitly mirrors the discussions of believability in legend telling investigated by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, a topic which will be covered in more depth in the next chapter (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976).

An even more striking aspect of such an exchange relies on Hermione’s identification as a liminal character within the series. Although accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hermione is actually Muggle-born. Being born and raised outside the realm of the wizarding world, Hermione has a better grasp and understanding of Muggle belief than many of her student peers. This Muggle world, one in which magic is considered to be fictional and wizards merely fantasy characters, bears a striking resemblance to the world of the reader. Rowling’s Muggle world presents a political government complete with departmental Ministries and a Prime Minister, and King’s Cross Station, the train platform from which the Hogwarts Express departs, is in fact an actual train depot in the United Kingdom. The Muggle world in which Hermione was raised, then, can specifically be seen to reflect the reality of the reader, making her understanding of the genre of legend even more telling as it destroys the true/false dichotomy in a way which reflects the dynamic boundary of genre within the primary world of the audience. Much like within Rowling’s two-part Potterverse, narrative genres in the world of the reader are often hard to categorize and often defy exact classification.
Whatever Professor Binns’s ambivalent feelings regarding the Chamber of Secrets, he does tell the Chamber’s story to the anxious History of Magic students. This telling, however, is far from simple, as first Binns must take a step back to offer a background narrative of context for the Chamber’s legend.

“Let me see . . . the Chamber of Secrets . . .

“You all know, of course, that Hogwarts was founded over a thousand years ago — the precise date is uncertain — by the four greatest witches and wizards of the age. The four school Houses are named after them: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. They built this castle together, far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution.”

He paused, gazed blearily around the room, and continued. “For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngsters who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then disagreements sprang up between them. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wished to be more selective about the students admitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within all-magic families. He disliked taking students of Muggle parentage, believing them to be untrustworthy. After a
while, there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school [...]

Reliable historical sources tell us this much,” he said. “But these honest facts have been obscured by the fanciful legend of the Chamber of Secrets. The story goes that Slytherin had built a chamber in the castle, of which the other founders knew nothing. Slytherin, according to the legend, sealed the Chamber of Secrets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic.”

There was silence as he finished telling the story, but it wasn’t the usual, sleepy silence that filled Professor Binns’s classes. There was unease in the air as everyone continued to watch him, hoping for more. Professor Binns looked faintly annoyed. “The whole thing is arrant nonsense, of course,” he said. “Naturally, the school has been searched for evidence of such a chamber, many times, by the most learned witches and wizards. It does not exist. A tale told to frighten the gullible.”

Hermione’s hand was back in the air. “Sir — what exactly do you mean by the ‘horror within’ the Chamber?”

“That is believed to be some sort of monster, which the Heir of Slytherin alone can control,” said Professor Binns in his dry, reedy voice.

The class exchanged nervous looks. “I tell you, the thing does not exist,” said Professor Binns, shuffling his notes. “There is no Chamber and no monster.”

“But, sir,” said Seamus Finnigan, “if the Chamber can only be opened by Slytherin’s true heir, no one else would be able to find it, would they?”

“Nonsense, O’Flaherty,” said Professor Binns in an aggravated tone. “If a long succession of Hogwarts headmasters and headmistresses haven’t found the thing — ”
“But, Professor,” piped up Parvati Patil, “you’d probably have to use Dark Magic to open it —”

“Just because a wizard doesn’t use Dark Magic doesn’t mean he can’t, Miss Pennyfeather,” snapped Professor Binns. “I repeat, if the likes of Dumbledore —”

“But maybe you’ve got to be related to Slytherin, so Dumbledore couldn’t —” began Dean Thomas, but Professor Binns had had enough.

“That will do,” he said sharply. “It is a myth! It does not exist! There is not a shred of evidence that Slytherin ever built so much as a secret broom cupboard! I regret telling you such a foolish story! We will return, if you please, to history, to solid, believable, verifiable fact!” (Rowling 1999: 150; emphasis original)

Although Hermione and Professor Binns’s original discussion of the narrative identified the Chamber of Secrets tale as a legend, in his exasperation, the skeptical Binns alters his categorization of the story to that of “myth” rather than legend. Once again, Rowling chooses to adhere to the popular culture distinction of “myth” as “an unfounded or false notion”11 rather than the academic understanding defined by Bascom as “prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past” (Bascom 1956:4), or similarly by Dundes as “a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form” (Dundes 1984:x). This choice demonstrates that while the author is familiar with folklore forms and genres, she is not beholden to academic study and instead chooses to present such material in a popular culture frame more accessible to her readers.12 Despite

12 As familiar as Rowling seems to be with folkloristic materials themselves, it is important to note the possibility of the author’s lack of knowledge regarding academic scholarship on expressive culture within the United Kingdom. Rowling, despite being comfortable with folkloric materials, may simply be unaware of the academic definitions of the elements which she uses.
the important differences between myth and legend in academic study, what is important to Binns in his perspective as a historian seems to be merely an identification of what is fact versus what is fiction. As the students’ discussion of the tale demonstrates, however, often such distinctions are not easy to make, thereby complicating the generic classification of such a narrative in ways which directly represent similar discussions within the reader’s primary world.

The use of this narrative within the Potterverse shows more than just the messy generic classifications which can come with narrative discourse. The Chamber of Secrets legend, and the tale of the founding of Hogwarts which accompanies it, are tales unique to J.K. Rowling’s secondary world. These tales effectively present not just a greater depth of history of both the wizarding school and community but also complicate the community itself by presenting not one general perception of characteristics which are to be valued, but rather a variation of mores which add depth and complexity to the construction of the Potterverse and initiate an over-arching system of conflict and identity negotiation which proves to be a recurring theme throughout the series.

Each Hogwarts House is based upon the characteristics each founder sought in their respective wizarding students: Godric Gryffindor preferred those who were brave; Rowena Ravenclaw only accepted students of wit and intelligence; Helga Hufflepuff looked for those who were compassionate and kind; and Salazar Slytherin only accepted those pure-blood wizards who were ambitious and cunning. Even after the death of the original founders these attributes still served as the principle qualifications which influenced the sorting of Hogwarts students. Issues between the Houses, each created based on the individual ideology of their Hogwarts founder, arise in each installment of
the series, and identification by House seems to follow students into their adult life, labeling each even as they are no longer students (Rowling 2007:680). By developing a legendary narrative which references these differences Rowling creates a complex and believable multivocal wizarding world which is not cohesive and static, but rather must continually reevaluate its perception of values over time.

**Fairy Tales and Wizard Tales**

It is not only Rowling’s use of legend narratives which helps to build the Potterverse. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, discussed in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, is a treasury of Rowling-composed classic fairy tales which are unique to the wizarding world of the *Potter* series. These tales, explicitly identified as fairy tales within the *Potter* series (Rowling 2007:407) share a number of similarities with *märchen* common to the reader’s primary world. The phenomenon of combining borrowed structure and unique content in the *Beedle* narratives has recently been investigated for Foster and Tolbert’s 2016 publication, *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*. Contributing authors Carlea Holl-Jensen and Jeffrey A. Tolbert specifically state in their analysis of the work that Rowling is able to “convey new messages through familiar forms” (Holl-Jenson and Tolbert 2016:168) in works which “seek less to replicate the content of familiar tales than to mimic their forms” (167).

Similar to *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* was published as a complementary pseudo-academic work to the original *Potter* series in 2008 as a philanthropic effort to raise funds for the Children’s High Level
Group, an organization founded by Rowling in 2010 to aid institutionalized and disadvantaged children in Eastern Europe. This supplemental text, which claims to be “translated from the Ancient Runes by Hermione Granger” with commentary by Albus Dumbledore, presents five fairy tales which, while all singular to the Potterverse, demonstrate a range of structural and thematic ties and references to Mrchen tales common in the world of the audience.

Jan Brunvand’s introductory textbook, *The Study of American Folklore*, lists seven key components of Indo-European folktale, a classification which the author admits is known best as “fairy tale” despite the lack of actual fairy characters in these narratives. The characteristics of these tales include an unspecified time and location, royal characters, the use of magic, fantastic animals, a threefold repetitive structure, a main character identified as an “underdog,” and opening and closing formulas (Brunvand 1998:230). While each of these attributes may not be specifically found within Beedle the Bard’s fairy tales, seldom is each characteristic found universally in fairy tales within the primary world, either. Characteristics that are exhibited in Beedle’s tales offer correlations to established European narratives and present a strong argument for the pointed folkloresque recreation of the fairy tale genre within Rowling’s Potterverse.

Despite references to kingdoms, villages, enchanted gardens, and even neighbors and traveling, the lack of specific setting and time period of each of Beedle’s tales clearly mirrors the generic tradition of European fairy tales within the world of the reader. To further solidify this reflection of such a well-established genre, more than one of Beedle’s tales refers to royalty, such as the knight from “The Fountain of Fair Fortune” (Rowling 2008:23) and the King and his court who serve as the fool-hardy antagonists in “Babitty
Rabbitty and Her Cackling Stump” (61). The use of magic prevails throughout the Beedle tales as a number of the characters, such as the fair maiden in “The Warlock’s Hairy Heart” and “The Wizard and the Hopping Pot,” are identified specifically as magical individuals with titles such as “witch” and “wizard.” However, a number of magical occurrences which are surprising to these gifted individuals are presented within the Beedle tales as well. The wizard’s pot is not actually supposed to hop, but grows a leg and foot of its own accord and begins tormenting the wizard until the helpless man learns to act in a more neighborly fashion (7). “The Fountain of Fair Fortune” similarly tells the story of a fountain of water which is believed to have more magical ability than the mundane wizards who journey to find it, and is only reachable one day of the year (20). Even the personified character of Death and the extraordinary magic which he possesses becomes an integral part of Beedle’s tales in “The Tale of the Three Brothers” by not only appearing in corporeal form but also presenting magical objects to the three brothers beyond each of their wildest imaginings (88).

Axel Olrik’s Twelve Laws of Folk Narrative are also reflected within the Beedle the Bard narratives. Although not all of Olrik’s laws are evident within the wizarding fairy tales, the Law of a Single Strand, Law of Concentration on a Leading Character, Law of Contrast, and Law of Repetition and Law of Three all make prominent appearances within the Potterverse fairy tale treasury (Olrik [1909]1999).

The Law of a Single Strand describes narratives which “do not go back in order to fill in missing details. If such previous background information is necessary, then it will be given in dialogue” (94). This is possibly best represented in “The Wizard and the Hopping Pot” (Rowling 2008:1). In this tale, a wizard inherits a cauldron from his
beloved father, but then refuses to aid his neighbors in the same way his father did before him. As the man begins turning away neighbors in need, his father’s pot begins to retaliate to this mistreatment, first by sprouting a bronze foot and warts (4), then issuing sounds of a braying donkey and groans of hunger (6), and finally by overflowing with tears (7) until the man finally runs through his village casting spells to remedy the ills of his neighbors (9). Although a short story, only ten pages in length, many strands of narrative actually occur within the tale. A number of characters enter and exit the narrative’s frame, each with their own individual issues, and the pot itself establishes its own chronology of events, yet Beedle’s narrative focuses singularly on the tale as it relates to the man’s relationship with the pot. No extra time is wasted discussing the wizard’s neighbors or father and their deeds or feelings towards the man; rather the narrative follows the man and his pot in particular with references to the pot “hopp[ing] at his heels all day” (6) and the wizard being unable to sleep or eat because the pot refused to leave his side (7). This specific focus in contrast to following the variety of plots available within the tale clearly fulfills the Law of a Single Strand.

While “The Wizard and the Hopping Pot” also demonstrates the Law of Concentration on a Leading Character, “a formal single-strandedness and a certain regard for the character” (Olrik [1909]1999:96), it is not the only Beedle narrative to do so. “Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump,” the longest story in the treasury at sixteen pages, follows the story of a witch who makes fun of a King who is trying to learn magic (65), is commanded by the King’s magical instructor to help him fake the King’s power (67), and is then hunted down for execution when she does not completely fulfill the task
before transfiguring herself to escape the foolish King. Despite the length of such a narrative and the tale’s initial exposition regarding the King’s desire to learn magic, from the moment of Babbity’s introduction the focus of the narrative clearly becomes the witch rather than the King or his instructor. Babbity is the only character within the tale given a name rather than being referred to by a title such as “King” or “Captain,” and rather than simply stating the witch failed to perform the trickery demanded of her by the King’s magical instructor, Beedle’s narrative explains why Babbity made such a decision in the first place. By including such thought processes “Babbity Rabbity and Her Cackling Stump” follows the Law of Concentration on one character in a narrative which presents a number of stubborn and exaggerated personalities.

The Law of Contrast, in which two characters are depicted as basic opposites (Olrik [1909]1999:91), is seen the most clearly in “The Warlock’s Hairy Heart,” the story of a warlock who uses Dark Magic to rid himself of the possibility of love (Rowling 2008:43), yet then decides to pursue a beautiful witch in order to boost his pride (47). Ultimately, the warlock shares his dreadful secret with the maiden who influences him to undo the deed (51), yet this moment of bliss backfires and ends suddenly and tragically for the young couple as the warlock’s heart proves to be damaged beyond repair (52). No two more completely opposite characters can be found in the Beedle treasury as these young and doomed lovers. The warlock is described as “handsome, rich and talented” but

---

13 In the Potterverse, transfiguration is a form of magic in which one object is transformed into something completely new. Animagi are especially powerful transfiguration wizards who can transform themselves into animals. Babbity Rabbity proves herself to be such a witch by transfiguring into a rabbit, although the King and his court believe her to have taken the form of a tree.
also “aloof and cold” with a “haughty mien” (43). His maiden, however, “was a witch of prodigious skill and possessed of much gold. Her beauty was such that it tugged at the heart of every man who set eyes on her” (47). While both characters are identified as beautiful, it is rather their particular characterizations which sets them as opposites. Whereas the warlock is proud of his Dark Magic and feels he should be the envy of all those round him, the maiden’s reaction to his secret is one of terror and she laments his deed and begs him to reverse the curse (50). These actions and her willingness to accept the warlock once the curse has been corrected prove the maiden to be pure and good of heart unlike her counterpart who basks in his dastardly work. While the opposition in this narrative may not be specific to physical characteristics, it is the personality of each of the characters which fulfills Olrik’s Law of Opposition.

In discussing the Law of Threes, in which repetition occurs within the narrative and usually up to three times (Olrik [1909]1999:89), it is impossible to choose only one Beedle tale as an example of fulfillment. With the exception of “The Warlock’s Hairy Heart,” each of the tales demonstrates a reliance on the number three. Three neighbors visit the unfortunate man in “The Wizard and the Hopping Pot,” and as each is turned away without aid the pot adds a new torment to the man’s ordeal. “The Fountain of Fair Fortune” includes not only three witches of differing ages and goals (21), but also three obstacles which must be overcome in order to reach the fountain itself (26). Babbity Rabbity also must fulfill three tasks in order to help the King’s instructor trick him, even though she does not fulfill the third task. “The Tale of Three Brothers,” which we will return to in the next chapter, includes three brothers as main characters (87), three gifts from Death (88), and three separate death scenes for each brother, the first two each
concluding with the line “and so Death took the first [or second] brother for his own” (91;92), while the final brother “greeted Death as an old friend” (93). The predominance of the Law of Threes throughout the Beedle the Bard narratives is so explicit that it is easily discernible in almost every tale of the treasury. This reliance on generic tradition then must be no mistake, but rather proves a clear effort on Rowling’s part to mimic folkloric forms common to the world of the reader.

In their work on Rowling’s folkloresque creation of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, Holl-Jenson and Tolbert discuss these Potterverse fairy tales as “cultural artifacts that transmit traditional values” (Holl-Jenson and Tolbert 2016: 168). According to these authors, “Rowling is identifying the kinds of cultural values she sees expressed in European folklore and imagining how a different set of values might rise from a different culture” (169). The emphasis on helping others and punishment for failing to fulfill this action presented in “The Wizard and the Hopping Pot” clearly fit this distinction as instructions for good, moral behavior. Similarly, each witch’s ability to fulfill her needs without the use of the magic fountain in “The Fountain of Fair Fortune” demonstrates a reliance not on magic, but rather on ingenuity and self-awareness. Interestingly, two of the Beedle narratives deal with the topic of death as it relates to the wizarding world. Babbity Rabbity foils the false magician’s plan when expected to bring a hunting dog back from the dead because, as explicitly stated within the text, “no magic can rise the dead” (Rowling 2008:72). This lesson is one of some importance as it is revisited in the second brother’s wish for a Resurrection Stone in “The Tale of the Three Brothers.” This brother learns that magic has no control over Death, and so gives into a power greater
than his own (92). Only the third brother, who seems able to recognize this truth, is spared a disappointing and heartbreaking encounter with the power of Death.

As Ron Weasley claims in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, wizarding children such as himself and Luna Lovegood are raised hearing the fairy tales compiled by Beedle the Bard “to teach them lessons” (Rowling 2007:414). This admission, in conjunction with the types of lessons presented within the narratives themselves, demonstrates important aspects of Potterverse familial culture. Much like families within the world of the reader, fairy tales are often transmitted from parent to child through the reading or telling of the narratives. This enactment of family tradition often lends to the practice of child rearing, as the narratives provide instruction on how to treat neighbors, the dangers of being prideful and greedy, and understanding the limits of power and the place of the individual in the universe, among other things. As in *marchen* tales in the world of the reader, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* offer important aspects of wizarding socialization during adolescent growth and development.

Much like Rowling’s use of both recontextualized and created Potterverse legends, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* adds depth and believability to the realm of the Potterverse through specifically mimicking the genres which these narratives reflect from the primary world. While the inclusion of the Flamel legend adds history and relatability to Potterverse, making it more believable and tangible, the Chamber of Secrets legend rather demonstrates the complications attributed to generic distinction within both the secondary and primary worlds. Lessons found in *Beedle the Bard* demonstrate important social rules and morals as well as serve as an example of familial relation and child rearing practices similar to those in the reader’s primary world, but it is the way in which
each of these and other folkloresque narratives within the series relate which fully structures a dynamic Potterverse which is accessible and relatable for readers.
IV. “The last enemy to be conquered is Death”: the Deathly Hallows as Cultural Texts

The variety of folkloric and folkloresque narratives within the Potterverse is immense in a way which reflects the multiplicity of styles of folk narratives within the world of the reader. J.K. Rowling, author of the Potter series, calls on both Potterverse folk narratives she herself has created as well as previously established texts to enhance the fantasy backdrop of her series and fuel plot development. In many cases, the use of these narratives lies in their negotiation of believability. Characters within the series are presented a narrative, make assumptions based upon its believability, and then are ultimately faced with the truth of the tale, exhibiting a structure of plot development common to fantasy literature.

The legend of the Deathly Hallows and the tale from which it is drawn prove to be a key element in the conclusion of the Potter series, specifically in that the legend itself is proven to be not only believable but actual Potterverse truth. Examinations of the Deathly Hallows narratives within the Potter series reveal a mirroring of motifs and forms such as fairy tales and legends common to those within the primary world. These tales also reflect a system of believability and belief negotiation strategically linked to the tale’s generic classification and introduce conflicts and misunderstandings which while unique to the Potterverse pointedly symbolize issues familiar within the primary world.

In the final installment of the Potter series, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Hermione Granger is awarded “a small book that looked as ancient as the copy of Secrets of the Darkest Arts upstairs” by the executor of Dumbledore’s will (Rowling 2007:126). The text is identified as The Tales of Beedle the Bard, but the three friends remain unsure why the Professor would leave her such an item. Hermione works to
decipher the book, and ultimately even brings it along when the trio flee the invasion of Lord Voldemort’s followers, much to Ron and Harry’s chagrin. While this series of events seems to be merely coincidental for the majority of the novel, the importance of the book, and the reason Dumbledore felt it necessary to it leave behind, becomes clear once the team meets with Xenophilius Lovegood, the father of another Hogwarts student whom Harry feels compelled to visit due to Lovegood’s staunch support of Harry in the face of Voldemort and his followers. Although originally adverse to the plan, Hermione finally agrees to the visit when she notices a striking symbol the man sported at the wedding of one of the Weasley children drawn in the margins of a page of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. When Hermione’s reason for the visit is revealed, Lovegood explains the symbol to be the mark of the Deathly Hallows, a term with which none of the trio, whether raised by Muggles or wizards, is familiar. “The whole thing starts,” Lovegood explains, “with ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’” (Rowling 2007:400), the last tale included in Beedle’s fairy tale treasury.

At Lovegood’s request, Hermione reads the tale to the expectant group. Beedle’s narrative, in short, tells the story of three brothers who outsmart Death and so are given items which each assumes to be a reward for their ingenuity until their use backfires. The
oldest brother, the first to be granted a gift from Death, asks for a wand which will make
him invincible, yet his boasts regarding the Deathstick\textsuperscript{14} lead to his own violent murder,
allowing Death his revenge. The second brother, by contrast, requests of Death a stone
with which to recall others from the afterlife. This brother resurrects his lost love, but
ultimately realizes the being he brought back is not his paramour but only a shadow of
who she used to be and so kills himself to join her on the other side, once again awarding
Death vengeance. The third and youngest brother, distrustful of Death, asks for a cloak of
invisibility so that he might not be followed. This brother, unlike the prior two, lives a
full and quiet life before finally passing the cloak along to his own son and welcoming
Death at last (Rowling 2007:406; Rowling 2008:87).

The content of this tale is not novel, but rather reflects a number of European
folktales involving the personification of Death and those humans who attempt to evade
him. The best known literary version of this narrative is Chaucer’s “The Pardoner’s
Tale,” a moral story against the dangers of greed and gluttony in which two friends
murder a third in order to gain a larger sum of money, but then accidentally kill themselves
when the two drink from poisoned wine the man they murdered had planned to give them
in order to accomplish the same deviant task (Correale 2002:279). Rowling’s placement
of the tale of three men attempting to outwit Death within a magical world creates a
folkloresque narrative which combines magic and wizarding duels unique to the
secondary world within a tale drawn from European tradition.

\textsuperscript{14} Also known as the Wand of Destiny or the Elder Wand, as Death supposedly created it from the limb of
an elder tree.
This short tale, lasting just over three pages in *Deathly Hallows* including the commentary from Hermione’s audience, is identified by characters within the text specifically as a fairy tale (Rowling 2007:407), yet is concluded with Lovegood’s cryptic, “Well, there you are.” In explanation, Lovegood demonstrates: “‘The Elder Wand,’ he said, and he drew a straight vertical line upon the parchment. ‘The Resurrection Stone,’ he said, and he added a circle on top of the line. ‘The Cloak of Invisibility,’ he finished, enclosing both line and circle in a triangle, to make the symbol that so intrigued Hermione. ‘Together,’ he said, ‘the Deathly Hallows’” (409).

Lovegood’s illustration of the Hallows reveals something very important to Harry and his friends. While the older man admits no mention of the Hallows is made within the fairy tale because “That is a children’s tale, told to amuse rather than to instruct” (409), he claims that those who understand the story recognize the legendary references made to three ancient objects which when combined give the owner complete power over Death. Whereas Ron and Hermione identify the narrative’s genre as that of fairy tale and believe it to be solely fiction, Lovegood instead acknowledges the Beedle tale itself as a children’s story, but rather classifies the narrative which it references as a legend, one which is specifically connected to the Peverell brothers and three ancient items. Here, Dumbledore’s gift to Hermione begins to take on new meaning: Beedle’s treasury is not just a book for her enjoyment, but may possibly hold instructions on how to beat a villain who is almost immortal.15

Figure 4.2: Chapter heading illustration taken from “The Tale of the Three Brothers,” the chapter in which the trio learn of the Hallows. Source: *Deathly Hallows*, 2007.

---

15 Lord Voldemort, Harry’s arch nemesis, is known as the darkest wizard to more nefarious deeds is the creation of a number of horcruxes. These are ite Voldemort’s soul. In order to kill the man, all pieces of his soul unattached t destroyed as well. Voldemort has seven horcruxes, each created by murderi
Lovegood’s explanation of the Hallows begins a heated discussion regarding the
generic classification of the tale and the believability of Lovegood’s claims. On one end
of the spectrum, Lovegood believes implicitly in the legend of the Hallows, even going
so far as to postulate that the three Peverell brothers, Antioch, Cadmus and Ignotus, could
have been the original owners of the items. He identifies himself as a “believer” on the
quest for the Hallows (405). Hermione however, referred to by Lovegood as “not
unintelligent, but painfully limited” (410), remains ever the skeptic regarding matters of
belief and characterizes Beedle’s story as simply fairy tale and nothing more. Their
opposing opinions, which do not become resolved during this exchange, lead to
discussions of three major themes: whether or not the Hallows could be real; superstitions
which have sprung from the Hallows legend and its fairy tale counterpart; and the
different values which are perceived as important in relation to which Hallow an
individual would choose.

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is the structure and use of motifs in
Beedle’s stories which distinguishes them as fairy tales. The genre of fairy tale, identified
in folkloristic scholarship as marchen or folktale, is described as a fictional narrative told
predominantly for entertainment (Brunvand 1998:229) and often involves formalized
openings and conclusions, a remote setting, royal characters, and the use of traditional
motifs (230). These qualifications, present within the Beedle narrative, influence Ron and
Hermione’s labeling of “The Tale of the Three Brothers” specifically as “a fairy tale”
within the text, and even Lovegood, the disseminator of the Hallows legend,
acknowledges the Beedle narrative as “a children’s tale” (Rowling 2007:409). Lovegood,
however, claims, “Those of us who understand [such] matters […] recognize that the
ancient story refers to three objects, or Hallows, which if united, will make the possessor master of Death” (410). Lovegood’s explanation of the tale then demonstrates his understanding of “The Tale of the Three Brothers” as separate from any explanation of the “three objects” to which the narrative relates. To Lovegood, Beedle’s story is merely a fairy tale, which, although separate, refers to a much older legend narrative, that of the Deathly Hallows. Believability in the tale then becomes connected not to the Beedle narrative, which is understood by each of the characters as meant for entertainment, but rather its allusions to the Hallows legend as it is connected to the Peverell brothers. These two narratives, while related, become identified separately by genre as it is related to belief.

Discussions of believability such as that which accompanies Lovegood’s explanation of the Hallows are what Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi claim fully delineate a legend as different from a myth or folktale. Dégh and Vázsonyi, in summation of their article “Legend and Belief,” state in regards to the relationship between legend and belief that legend-telling traditions “[take] a stand and [call] for the expression of opinion on the question of truth and belief” (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:119). To these researchers, the key to defining and examining legend lies not in whether or not the narrative is believed by those who transmit it, but rather in that the issue of belief is called to the forefront of the social setting and made a focus of discussion.

Although dated and somewhat controversial, William Bascom’s definition of legend is to some extent also fulfilled by Lovegood’s explanation of the Deathly Hallows. Bascom claims, “Legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when
the world was much as it is today” (Bascom 1965:4). While Dégh and Vázsonyi’s characterization of legend generally supersedes that of Bascom in modern folkloristic study, the Deathly Hallows narrative manages to fulfill both. Rowling’s presentation of belief in regards to the Deathly Hallows aligns with Dégh and Vázsonyi’s discussion, and the Hallows tale’s distinction as a prose narrative which does take place in a period less remote than that of a myth and in a setting similar to that with which the Potterverse characters are familiar within Rowling’s secondary world fulfills Bascom’s legend qualifications.

While Hermione’s reading of “The Tale of the Three Brothers” demonstrates the family and social pastime of fairy tale reading, Rowling’s reveal of the Hallows legend at the hands of Xenophilius Lovegood during a conversation following Hermione’s tale illustrates the very practice of belief negotiation which is expected to accompany the telling of a legend, proving that while the content of both the “Three Brothers” fairy tale and the Hallows legend may be invented by the Potterverse, the transmission and presentation of these narratives is, in fact, highly traditional in a way which mimics the transmission of such narratives within the world of the reader.

Seldom do “believers” of legend narratives tell these stories exclusively to those who share their belief and point of view during transmission. Dégh and Vázsonyi’s work discusses this fact in depth, explaining that not only can legends be told from believer to nonbeliever in an effort to convince the listener (100), but that “No matter how incredulous the dispenser of a legend is, no matter how much he emphasizes that his story is untrue, the receivers might accept it as truth” (99). The inverse of this scenario, a believing “dispenser” with an oppositional “receiver” serves as a model for the
transmission of the Deathly Hallows legend within the Potter series. While Hermione may read the fairy tale from which the legend is drawn, it is in fact Mr. Lovegood, the man who stanchly believes in the existence of the Hallows, who tells the trio of the legend regarding their supposed existence which lies behind the children’s tale. Hermione, the audience member who most fully dissents from Lovegood’s stance, would be identified as an “opponent” of the narrative’s believability by Dégh and Vázsonyi, as this classification separates her the furthest from the identification of “believer” (118).

Harry and Ron, the other two recipients of the Hallows legend, are harder to pinpoint in regards to belief stance. The majority of discussion on the possibility of the Hallows occurs between Lovegood and Hermione, as these two characters present dichotomous belief patterns. Arguments for either side of this belief are easier to present as extremes—whether to believe or oppose—rather than through a variety of nuances. The few comments the two other characters manage to interject, however, do present a variety of belief negotiation which is a more realistic representation of real-world belief patterns and once again demonstrates the theory of belief’s importance as described by Dégh and Vázsonyi.

Harry, raised Muggle-born without the influence of the Beedle fairy tales, finds it somewhat harder to dismiss “The Tale of Three Brothers” as simply entertainment for children than the studious Hermione due to his own lived experiences. His openness to accept a higher level of believability of the tale and a possible legendary meaning beyond its fairy tale context is demonstrated when he incredulously interrupts Hermione’s storytelling to question the personification of Death. Despite his surprise at this
characterization, Harry is quickly shushed by Hermione and reminded “it’s a fairy tale” before the narrative might continue (Rowling 2007: 407).

Harry has an even harder time dismissing the Hallows legend on which the fairy tale seems to be based once Mr. Lovegood explains what each item of the Hallows is supposed to be. Harry himself owns an invisibility cloak of unknown origin which is unlike all the others his wizarding friends are familiar with (411), and Harry’s own wand had exhibited strange activity just previous to visiting the Lovegood home, allowing Harry to be open to such an idea as an “unbeatable” wand (415). The lack of outright declaration of (dis)belief in a series with characters like Hermione and Xenophilius who clearly declare their allegiances, leads the reader to believe Harry to be neither believer nor opponent, yet his reactions and seeming willingness to remain open-minded about the existence of the Hallows mark him as favoring the possibility of belief in the legend, even if the fairy tale itself is metaphorical and meant for children. These characteristics, in Dégh and Vázsonyi’s distinction, would classify the boy as “ambivalent,” one of the three types of legend receivers which separate believers from opponents and is also a common level of belief acceptance witnessed within the primary world of the reader (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:118).

Ron Weasley, by contrast, seems wary of the legendary Hallows, yet even he would be classified as a “skeptic” rather than a “nonbeliever.” Ron, raised by a wizarding family, grew up hearing The Tales of Beedle the Bard. His understanding of the narratives as “fun” and “unserious” directly correlates to Brian Sutton-Smith’s examination of the phenomenon he terms the “triviality barrier” which deems childlore unacceptable for study as it is thought of as silly and lacking in analytical content
(Sutton-Smith 1970:2). Sutton-Smith points out that in societies which are clearly work-oriented such activities as childhood pastimes are seen as trivial and unimportant.

Ron’s passive disbelief in the narrative is exemplified when he is specifically asked by Harry if he believes the tale. Although Harry clearly means the legend of the Hallows as told by Xenophilius Lovegood, Ron’s response instead references the fairy tale claiming, “Nah, that story’s just one of those things you tell kids to teach them a lesson, isn’t it?” (Rowling 2007: 414), demonstrating the effects of Sutton-Smith’s triviality barrier through Ron’s general unwillingness to see the Beedle tales as anything other than unimportant children’s stories lacking in any deeper purpose. The final tag of Ron’s statement, “isn’t it?” however, opens a line of doubt within Ron’s method of thinking. While a rhetorical device, such an inquiry demonstrates that Ron is beginning to rethink his own conclusions about the meaning behind the fairy tale and the possible believability of the legend it references. Of the trio, Ron Weasley most clearly exhibits the active problem of individual belief negotiation within a social context as examined by Dégh and Vázsonyi (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:109).

Ron’s reassessment is demonstrated throughout the trio’s conversation about the possibility of the Hallows legend after Lovegood leaves the room. Although Harry owns the cloak and all three are aware of its existence, it is Ron who finally brings up this
matter in discussion: “‘What about the Cloak, though?’ said Ron slowly. ‘Don’t you realize, he’s right? I’ve got so used to Harry’s Cloak and how good it is, I never stopped to think’” (Rowling 2007: 416). Ron’s speech pattern, described by Rowling as “slow,” as if he is thinking through the issue as he presents it, and his admittance that Lovegood is “right,” demonstrate Ron’s personal negotiation of belief in regards to the Hallows legend. Though he never fully voices belief and in fact remains vocally skeptical of the topic, still exhibiting a desire for distance from the potential importance of the subject caused by the triviality barrier, Ron’s characterization changes dramatically during the revelation of the Hallows’ legend, showing that belief is not stagnant but rather can be reinterpreted at a moment’s notice. Even further, such distinctions and negotiations of belief within a group context fully align with Dégh and Vázsonyi’s analysis in that “the actual belief manifest at the time of the telling is always the result of the dichotomous relationship between the communal belief system, inherited in tradition and sanctioned by enculturation, and the personal belief of the individual performers” (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:103). While the belief of the group as a whole is being discussed in reference to the Hallows legend, Ron experiences an internal negotiation of his individual belief acceptance based upon his cultural background and the influence of those around him.

The telling of the legend which informs the trio of the existence of the Deathly Hallows after the reading of Beedle’s tale is a pivotal moment within the Potter series. Not only does it present to the reader an explanation of one of the novel’s biggest questions—how to defeat Voldemort—but the exchanges within the scene also greatly build upon the fantasy realm of the Potterverse, in effect creating a more believable and substantial secondary world.
Negotiations of belief prior to the Deathly Hallows discussion are not uncommon within the series, as seen in previous chapters, yet until this exchange believability has been presented in a primarily binary manner; Hermione, usually identified as the non-believer, is in opposition to those who believe unquestioningly. This same dichotomy is apparent between Hermione and Xenophilius Lovegood, yet these opinions on the Deathly Hallows are not the only ones presented to the audience. Much like within the reader’s primary world, there are believers and nonbelievers, but there are also those who are unsure of what they believe. These individuals, represented by Ron and Harry, exhibit a variety of beliefs and a high level of negotiation according to the social context of the belief discussion itself, such as those involved in the conversation and their respective beliefs. By including such points of view, Rowling allows for a widening of her own fantasy universe. Her characters, much like the individuals who make up her audience, are not forced into dichotomous roles based on belief or nonbelief, but rather demonstrate a continuum of belief stances. The reflection of the primary world in this practice is inescapable and aids in adding depth and complexity to the fantasy social strata, in effect bringing the Potterverse to life.

Rowling is careful to demonstrate the differences between believers and non-believers of the Deathly Hallows in a way which is tangible to the audience. Harry is first drawn to the mark of the Deathly Hallows at the wedding of one of the Weasley brothers. Victor Krum, all-star Quidditch player and champion for Durmstrang School of Wizardry during the Tri-Wizard Tournament of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, becomes enraged when he sees Mr. Lovegood’s necklace bearing the Hallows symbol at the wedding reception. Krum explains to Harry his understanding of the mark and its
connection to the Dark Wizard, Grindelwald (Rowling 2007:148). Krum, unaware of the Hallows legend and seemingly unfamiliar with “The Tale of the Three Brothers” harbors an understanding of the symbol which is drastically different from that which Lovegood explains to the trio. Gilbert Grindelwald, one of the darkest wizards in history, was a former student of Durmstrang and known for leaving the mark of the Hallows upon school walls. Krum, who is unaware of the history of the Hallows symbol, only knows the mark as Grindelwald’s insignia, in the same manner in which the Dark Mark, the skull with the snake wrapped around and protruding from it, serves as the mark of the followers of Voldemort, known as the Death Eaters. Believing Lovegood to be a supporter of Grindelwald’s misdeeds, Krum confronts the man before the evening is over regarding the mark and a brawl must be subdued. Lovegood, however, neatly explains this situation to the trio when asked what the mark means:

You haven’t heard of them? I’m not surprised. Very, very few wizards believe. Witness that knuckle-headed young man at your brother’s wedding […] who attacked me for sporting the symbol of a well-known Dark Wizard! Such ignorance. There is nothing Dark about the Hallows—at least, not in that crude sense. One simply uses the symbol to reveal oneself to other believers, in the hope that they might help one with the Quest. (405)

If Hermione’s interaction with Lovegood demonstrates the differences present between believers and nonbelievers, the older man’s exchange with Krum exhibits the dangers present when two groups in close quarters with one another do not fully understand each other’s culture. Rather than presenting a static explanation of the Hallows and their followers, Rowling presents a variety of groups with differing cultural understandings which must interact regarding a singular topic. The Hallows are not presented glibly as an infallible and unquestionable element within the secondary world,
but rather there are groups with differing interpretations of the mark attached to the legend, and very real consequences come from misunderstandings between these individuals. Even within a fantasy series intended for children, misunderstandings lead to violence, a lesson easily identifiable by the reader and applicable to a real-world context. By placing demonstrations of the dangers of such misunderstanding of interpretation symbolically within a fantasy realm, Rowling is able to discuss such weighty matters in a safe space which is accessible and understandable to young readers. Much like the threats of sexual violence which are only alluded to within the series, disagreements over the Deathly Hallows suggest modern day issues of religious right and social cohesion which often led to physical violence in a way which is not shocking or unnerving for readers who understand the allusion.

These confrontations heighten Rowling’s fictional narrative, interrupting exposition with action to draw in the reader and creating a tangled web of history which explains the Hallows, Dumbledore’s interest in their existence, and their importance in the fight against Lord Voldemort. Even further, such conflicts between groups relate in an understandable way to issues faced within the world of the reader. Krum’s confrontation with Lovegood mirrors many misunderstandings today in which two groups hold conflicting ideas leading one to feel wronged by another and lash out to defend itself. It is only in discussing the symbol with Lovegood the trio is able to define the discrepancies between the two interpretations of the mark and understand why such issues have arisen. Yes, Grindewald did use the Hallows symbol as his mark, but specifically as a reference to his own search for the items. While the man may have been evil, the Hallow themselves, as Lovegood states, are not. These issues of interpretation
demonstrate the inherent variety of the Potterverse, rather than a simple homogenous group of individuals who share one grand narrative and understanding. Much like the primary world itself, Rowling’s Potterverse hosts a number of small groups who harbor conflicting understandings of the world and happenings around them and must learn to coexist, although they do not always do so peacefully.

The spectrum of morals and worldviews within the Potterverse are not only demonstrated through confrontations of whole groups, however. Even friends within the series exhibit differing value systems which must be negotiated. When discussing the possibility of the Hallows beyond the hearing range of Mr. Lovegood, the conversation between Harry, Ron, and Hermione turns to the meaning of the fairy tale. Hermione states, “it’s just a morality tale, it’s obvious which gift is best, which one you’d choose” (414), yet as each announces his or her choice it becomes clear the answer isn’t quite so “obvious.”

Each of the Hallows represents a different value which, although not explicitly stated, can be inferred from the desire which would be fulfilled by each choice. The Elder Wand places emphasis on power in that it makes its owner undefeatable. The youngest brother in a family of nine and the best friend to a famous combatant of evil, Ron’s decision to choose the wand demonstrates the desire for power and recognition in his own life, a theme demonstrated throughout the Potter series. This choice seems, therefore, to place his value in the realm of physical power and dominance.

Hermione, the “brightest witch of her age” who has never experienced sibling rivalry or felt overshadowed by Harry, chooses the Cloak, the “smart” option which allows its wearer to live quietly and unhindered by those who search for the Hallows
(415). Her choice demonstrates Hermione’s desire to do things the “right” way. As the Cloak is also the only Hallow to best Death in “The Tale of the Three Brothers,” Hermione’s choice exemplifies her desire to be right and succeed. Harry, however, chooses the Stone, reported to bring the deceased back to the land of the living. Within an epic series which begins with the death of his parents and ends with numerous more casualties around him, Harry’s choice demonstrates a desire to keep those he loves, such as his godfather, Sirius Black, and Professor Dumbledore, safe and close. Harry’s choice of the Resurrection Stone illustrates a high level of guilt and regret and reminds the reader that the coming battle is not something for which Harry longs. He would rather keep those he loves safe than fight, but he understands the task Dumbledore has left before him (416). If Ron wishes for power and Hermione for success, Harry’s choice demonstrates his desire for love and support.

This moment between the friends is striking. United in almost everything, from their Hogwarts House to their efforts to stop Voldemort, suddenly the three are faced with the realization that in actuality each has his or her own goals which may very well be at odds with that of their friends; Ron longs for recognition, Hermione for success and Harry for comfort. Unlike Krum and Lovegood, however, these three do not resort to violence but rather work together despite these differences, much like, as the legend states, all three Hallows are required in order to “conquer Death.” Their ability to work together despite these differences illustrates the range of values which may be held at any one time by one group of people. Even united, no group is entirely homogenous, rather one culture may host a variety of beliefs and value systems simultaneously. In representing this, Rowling not only shows an alternative to the violence exhibited
between Krum and Lovegood on account of difference, a system of violence which directly reflects modern day issues within the primary world, but fully substantiates the world of the Potterverse as a realm which is highly political and diverse despite being a complete work of fiction. Harry, Ron, and Hermione serve as a model of cohesive difference which young readers can recognize and emulate in dealing with their own personal conflicts.

The Potterverse is fantasy. It involves a young boy who learns he is a wizard and begins training at his new-found skill, but also must face the evil villain who murdered his parents and is trying to take over the world. This world, however is not presented as a simplistic culture in which everyone is innocent and kind-hearted victims of a maniacal murderer. The Potterverse instead is proven to be vastly complicated, complete with its own narrative traditions of fairy tales and legends as well as diverse system of belief. Not everyone within this fantasy world believes the same thing, and the question of belief is not a simple “yes” or “no” answer. Much like our own world, negotiation must occur. Groups within the Potterverse, just like those in the real world, are at odds and have the potential to turn to violence. Even these individual cultures suffer from internal conflict arising from diverse systems of belief and value emphasis.

None of these issues is new to the reader, however, as each is a conflict commonly exhibited within the primary world. These details are each demonstrated by relation to, and discussion of, the legend of the Deathly Hallows, the Beedle the Bard fairy tale Lovegood understands as a reference to this ancient legend narrative, and the relationship between the two. Such discussions of narrative genre identification and believability do complicate the Potterverse, but not in a way which creates a disconnect.
between the writing and the reader. These topics in fact make Rowling’s secondary world more accessible to the audience by making it more believable and akin to our own.
V. Conclusion: “Of course it’s happening inside your head, but why on earth should that mean that it’s not real?”

One of the most complicated aspects of fictional writing is creating a believable setting in which the narrative may occur. This difficulty is heightened in fantasy works, which require a space in which the fantastic is consistent and believable. J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, has stated in an interview regarding this difficulty, "The five years I spent on *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* were spent constructing The Rules. I had to lay down all my parameters. The most important thing to decide when you're creating a fantasy world is what the characters can’t do” ("World Exclusive Interview with J K Rowling," *South West News Service*, 8 July 2000).

These “rules,” so clearly formulated by Rowling, in effect structure the Potterverse, the secondary world in which a magical society exists alongside, yet separate from, ordinary non-magical humans. An examination of the use of folklore and the folkloresque in the construction of the Potterverse demonstrates this realm’s ability to mirror and symbolize the primary world in specific and strategic ways. Understanding the relationship between the Potterverse and the primary world it represents specifically in terms of related traditional materials has the potential to spark a wealth of folkloristic research into the phenomenon of the series’ popularity.

Though Rowling did fully construct the secondary world of her series, she did not do so from scratch. European folklore and traditions common to the fantasy genre permeate the series, creating a realm which is complex and yet recognizable through its many allusions to real-world culture and history. In the words of Michael Dylan Foster, the Potterverse is particularly folkloresque in that the fantasy realm bears the “odor of folklore” of the primary world (Foster and Tolbert 2016:11). Coming of age and initiation
rituals such as the Hogwarts acceptance letter, the Sorting Hat Ceremony, and the wizarding exams reference such primary world practices as college acceptance letters and standardized tests and similarly reflect boarding school traditions noted throughout fantasy and fiction literature. Rowling’s borrowing of these practices structures a passage of growth for wizarding students based upon their mental development and, despite the number and complexity of these rituals, allows readers to gauge the growth of the characters as well as the passage of time. While these rite of passage traditions are complex, they are familiar to the reader. The folkloresque construction of Hogwarts’ school structure thereby creates a secondary world both believable and accessible to a young audience.

Rowling’s inclusion of cryptozoology within the series exhibits this same reliance upon both folklore and fantasy traditions. While images of dragons, pixies and mermaids may have all originated in folk belief, each of these have remained active stock characters of fantasy fiction as well. Each of these plays a small role within the Potter series, bearing identifications and descriptions which clearly align to the established folkloristic and fantasy characterization each is expected to play (Scamander 2001:19, 62 and 54, respectively). As discussed in the second chapter, however, both centaurs and werewolves, creatures of folklore who have once again found a home in fantasy literature, exhibit a characterization drastically different from that of their folkloristic existence.

Rowling’s folkloresque reinvention of these beings serves a specific purpose within the construction of the Potterverse, not only filling her world with cryptids familiar to young readers, but using these beings to deliver moralistic discussions and
lessons. Interactions with the novels’ centaur herd, for example, demonstrate the effects of racial bias in that a highly intelligent species actively chooses to live outside of society due to its treatment by the dominant group, an element of Potterverse centaurs demonstrated both in the species’ request to be listed as a “beast” by the Ministry of Magic and the sheer volume of negative interactions between the two species throughout the Potter series. Much like racial prejudice within the realm of the reader, some Potterverse characters, represented most effectively by Dolores Umbridge, deem centaurs and other “part-humans” as being “less than” wizards like herself. As Umbridge is an employee of the Ministry she is able to pass laws and ordinances which substantially marginalize part-humans, yet it is her bigotry and mistreatment of the centaurs which directly leads to her demise. Relations between humans and centaurs become so strained as the series progresses that interaction between individuals and the opposing group, as demonstrated by Firenze and his willingness to first help Harry and later to teach at Hogwarts, is seen as a betrayal to his kind and leads to those individuals being ostracized and cast out by their own community on the threat of death.

Rowling’s understanding of Greek mythology and centaur-lore does yet one more thing for the series. While Rowling’s centaurs are pragmatic and intellectual, more closely resembling depictions of the beings in the Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis than the drunken and rowdy creatures of Greek mythology, her allusions to these creatures create intertextual references which illustrate a dark possibility within the series only for those familiar with the traditional representation of the centaur. While libidinous activity in Greek mythology is more commonly associated with the half-man/half-goat satyrs and a number of centaurs do receive prominent social status within the belief
system, such as Chiron who trained the hero Achilles, there is no escaping the volume of narratives involving the sexual misconduct of the species. This tradition is potentially relative to the idea of centaurs as physical manifestations of a specific type of sexual taboo. The half-man/half-horse shape alludes to bestiality between a human and a horse, and could potentially explain the proclivity the species seems to exhibit for violently sexualizing human women.

This subtextual use of folkloristic narratives adds depth to the Potterverse through the introduction of a type of intimate evil previously unseen within the series, yet this interpretation is only accessible for those who are previously knowledgeable regarding centaur-lore. The introduction of rape into the series creates a Potterverse which is darker and more intimidating. Rape, an often discussed threat within the primary world, hits home for readers in a way that Lord Voldemort, in his threat of all-encompassing magical evil cannot, simply because it is more realistic. This reliance upon reader knowledge in intertextual references demonstrates Roger Abrahams’ argument that the performance of folklore in literature relies upon audience participation and the willingness of the reader to invest his or herself into the narrative (Abrahams 1972:80). If the audience does not recognize or chooses not to acknowledge the reference, the allusion is incomplete and loses meaning.

Although rape is never explicitly described within the Potter series, classical descriptions of centaurs as agents of sexual violence relate in a close way to the interaction between the herd and Professor Umbridge within Order of the Phoenix. It is easy to pass off the description of the traumatized woman after her kidnapping to be merely a side effect of that event in and of itself, yet the history of the centaur in
conjunction with actual threats of rape presented in *Deathly Hallows* make Rowling’s intention much more devastating (Rowling 2007:463). Were this interpretation of the events which Umbridge suffered to hold true, this reading would also cast the character of Hermione Granger in a darker light, as she, like Rowling, would be aware of the traditional centaur tales. Hermione, however, the same girl who slaps Draco Malfoy in the face at a young age (Rowling 1999:293), leads the bigoted Umbridge right to the very beings who will be her undoing. Hermione, then, is not a static innocent character, but rather a dynamic, intelligent and calculating individual who dishes out revenge to those who have wronged her to whatever degree she sees fit. Rowling’s secondary world may be a construction of complete fiction, yet it is the author’s reflection of traditions like rites of passage and attention to both cryptid beings and the narratives told about them which make the Potterverse believable and relatable. Through the use of recontextualized folkloristic material Rowling is able to create a universe which symbolizes that of the reader specifically in that is it is similar to, yet different from, the primary world. While the fantasy element of the series separates the primary world from the secondary and creates a safe space in which interpretation can occur, the use of both the folkloristic and the folloresque coordinates the direction interpretations of these symbols should take.

It is Rowling’s use of folk narratives, however, which fully demonstrates the depth and believability of her universe. The use of legends within the series, both those borrowed from European folklore and those specifically created for the Potterverse, present discussions of believability which demonstrate the range of belief and the importance of negotiation on both individual and social levels within the Potterverse and the primary world which it mimics. Rowling’s characters are presented with divination
practices such as tea leaf reading and palmistry, introduced to the idea of Death personified, and introduced to the complexities of prophesy. None of these belief systems are presented unquestioningly, however. While Hermione may represent the staunch critic in the majority of these discussions, other characters, such as Lavender Brown and Xenophilius Lovegood, represent her antithesis, the believer.

Rowling’s legend narratives mimic the structures and topics of the genre within the primary world, thereby clearly defining her reliance on folklore in building the Potterverse, yet it is the discussions of these materials which more intensely mirror belief in real life. Potter characters pick and choose what they believe and what they do not. Differing levels along a continuum of belief are evident in these scenarios as well; allowing characters to believe to an extent, rather than whole-heartedly, specifically represents the primary world in which individuals seldom believe completely and unquestioningly. As demonstrated specifically in Ron’s negotiation of his belief in the Hallows legend, one individual can experience a change of belief both over time and according to context (Rowling 2007: 416). Much like the real world, Rowling’s presentations of belief are not static or universal, but rather demonstrates fluidity within both individuals and societies, as well as a continuum of positions. Interactions between Potterverse characters with differing beliefs, specifically those interactions which center around the Deathly Hallows, demonstrate for readers the dangers of misunderstandings of interpretation between groups and through the juxtaposition of violent interaction to that of cohesive difference, demonstrates for young readers more healthy and effective ways to deal with difference.
Rowling’s construction of a secondary world and her reliance upon the folkloresque to enhance its believability are not unique practices but rather a generic tradition exhibited in a number of fantasy publications. The term “secondary world,” as well as the understanding of what it entails, were elaborated by the renowned fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien as a realm harboring its own laws and structures which the mind can enter and believe from the inside (Tolkien 1947:12). Specifically in terms of the use of folkloristic material within world building, Tolkien’s “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” cites W.P. Ker who claims “they give the impression of reality and weight; the story is not in the air…it is part of the solid world” (Tolkien [1936]1991:18n7).

Tolkien himself practiced the tradition of using and creating folklore within his Lord of the Rings series through the construction of oral traditions specific to his fantasy universe. Fantasy writing requires imagination and the creation of a realm in which the fantastic makes sense. To build such a universe, numerous authors have turned to existing folkloristic materials, as these too require ingenuity and imagination and aid in the construction of similarly fantastic creations. The fanciful nature of much of folklore supports and enhances the same characteristics within fantasy literature, influencing authors such as H.P. Lovecraft and Neil Gaiman to not only borrow from existing folklore, but, like Rowling, to create their own folkloresque inventions to solidify their respective universes. Foster claims the use of the folkloresque within popular culture adds authenticity to the material in which it is embedded through its association with “real” folklore (Foster and Tolbert 2016:5). This characteristic of the folkloresque is a primary goal of authors who construct their fantasy worlds from folkloristic materials and are exemplified pointedly within the works of H.P. Lovecraft. As Evans states, “The most
interesting thing about [Lovecraft’s] own use of folklore is not so much the incorporation of actual items or texts into his stories, but his invention of tradition—his use of the structures, style, and devices of folklore in a way that gives his fiction ‘authenticity,’ that makes it *seem* like folklore” (Evans 2005:119; emphasis original).

While Rowling’s method of folloresque construction in building her universe may be conventional within the fantasy genre, the Potterverse itself remains unique. Generally, secondary universes are created in one of two settings depending on the specific genre of fantasy the author is striving to write. High fantasy works, such as Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series, are described by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James as “immersive” and “not set in our world” and appear in a universe drastically different from the world of the reader (2009:253). Often, these universes are given their own names, with Tolkien’s Middle Earth as an example. Whether these realms are set on a distant planet or in a far off time, or if such information isn’t even presented due to the vast differences between the secondary and primary worlds, the two are clearly separate. Low fantasy and magical realist writers, by contrast, place the fantastic of their created universe in the midst of the mundane and treat such materials either as intrusions or commonplace, respectively (254). Works such as Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* use the primary world of the reader as a backdrop, yet introduce fantasy into the everyday, either as just an aspect of day-to-day life, or as a new circumstance which must be navigated and negotiated.

Rowling’s Potterverse, however, doesn’t fit either of these distinctions. The wizarding world of Rowling’s writing exists within and alongside the world of the Muggles, but in a way which is distinct and separate. The structure of Rowling’s
secondary fantasy world exhibits aspects of both high and low fantasy explicitly in its contrast of the Muggle and wizarding worlds, yet somehow the series itself counts as neither. Rather, the Potter series fantasy exists somewhere between high fantasy and magical realism, itself presenting a liminality within the fantasy genre. While this practice of framing fantasy within the mundane is not unheard of in children’s fantasy literature and can be demonstrated in such works as Peter Pan, it is the wizarding world’s reliance upon the Muggle social structure which exhibits a new secondary world construction. Whereas Wendy Darling and her brothers are completely removed from their everyday world in order to experience the fantastic of Peter’s realm, the wizarding world is built specifically from that of the Muggles and relies upon its institutions and settings for depth. The wizarding world simply could not exist without its Muggle base and counterpart, demonstrating the importance of the proximity of these societies and the author’s intent at juxtaposition.

Each installment of the Potter series begins with Harry at his aunt and uncle’s house with little interaction with the wizarding community. Once back at Hogwarts, however, Harry and the reader are both fully submerged into the wizarding world and Muggles are often completely forgotten or only mentioned as a sidebar when important to the narrative. These instances often include discussions contrasting the home life of Muggle-born and wizard-born students, for example when Seamus Finnigan tells Harry his mother doesn’t believe Harry’s claims that Voldemort has returned and a fight ensues between the two boys (Rowling 2003:217). As Rowling stated in her BBC World Book Day chat in 2004, “the breach [between the Muggle and wizard worlds] was final” and the two communities will never be rejoined (JK Rowling’s World Book Day Chat, March
4, 2004). Clearly, the author sees the two societies as different, each hosting its own governing Ministry and educational centers, despite the wizarding world existing right under the nose of its Muggle counterpart.

It is this unique proximity between the two systems within the Potterverse with allows the juxtaposition to occur which Attebery claims allows symbolic folkloristic interpretation to take place. The wizarding community of the Potterverse presents a full and complete fantasy structure, yet the Muggle world in which it is situated strategically reflects the reader’s primary world in its reliance on the mundane and neglect of the fantastic. Situating these two differing worlds side by side within the Potterverse asks for a juxtaposition of the two communities which in effect enhances an understanding of the Muggle world as realistic allusion and the wizarding community as a symbolic presentation of the real world. By embedding meaning within folkloristic symbols within the magical community, readers are able to decode the narrative’s moral lessons without the feeling of being pressured to agree with or take a stance against the author (Attebery 2013:4). These folkloristic symbols allow readers to construct their own interpretations of the series aided by the author’s guiding hand. By appearing less didactic and moralizing, Rowling’s lessons become more accessible for readers who otherwise may feel attacked or ostracized by more explicit moralistic lectures.

While the Muggle world presents an exact replica of the primary world, including locations such as King’s Cross Station and political structures such as the Prime Minister which actually do exist within the world of the reader, the wizarding world is more of a fun-house mirror representation of the primary world. This community reflects similar institutions such as education and politics, pastimes such as storytelling and sports, and
even social issues and negotiations relative to those of both the Muggle community and primary world, yet with a spin specific to the magical community Rowling has created. Meanings interpreted within the wizarding world, then, are able to be juxtaposed across the boundary to the Muggle world and understood within the primary world to which the Muggle community relates without putting pressure upon the reader to take action.

The comparisons of the Muggle and wizarding worlds provide a juxtaposition not only between these two realms, but also to the primary world which it represents in a way which is explicit for the reader. By presenting such dichotomous societies side by side on the page, Rowling is able to point strategically to the way the fantasy should be interpreted by reader and to what topics symbolic meaning has been applied. Placing the magical Potterverse within and yet clearly separate from the Muggle world makes the interpretation of these metaphors more accessible and easier to compare for young readers who are unfamiliar with metaphorical symbolism or unconfident of their reading abilities. In reading and interpreting the Potter series, the audience is not required to decontextualize the fiction itself in order to apply its lessons to the primary world, but rather is able to see such allusions made specifically on the page by the author.

By presenting comparisons between the primary/Muggle world and the wizarding community directly within the text, rather than across the secondary and primary universe boundary, it is possible Rowling’s construction of the Potterverse makes meaning more apparent to young readers and allows acceptance and real-world contextualization to occur more smoothly. If the use of the folkloresque within the construction of the Potterverse enhances the universe’s accessibility to readers through familiarity with forms and content, placing this fantasy world directly adjacent to a society which
undeniably represents the world of the audience more clearly demonstrates the intent to which the fantasy has been applied and the ways in which the author means it to be interpreted.

*Further Directions*

The potential of symbolic interpretations of the *Potter* series to offer accessible and understandable meanings and lessons for young readers through a relatable fantasy context offers exciting potential for future study into the phenomenon the series has become. Ethnographic interviews into reader response and experience of the series could delineate specifically the understanding *Harry Potter* fans have of the series and the ways in which it mirrors their own lives. These interviews should be directed towards the personal interpretation of the novels’ moral content as it is understood and then applied by individual readers within their everyday lives. Such research would be able to investigate if Rowling’s audience is able to interpret her use of traditional materials which mimic the primary world, and, if so, if these interpretations were able to transmit any meaning or understanding to their own lives.

One theory which could prove of use in such a study is Mary Hufford’s discussion of the Taleworld, the universe of the narrative being presented, and Storyrealm, the communicative context of that particular narrative (Hufford 1992:8). Hufford argues that narrative meaning has the ability to slip from the Taleworld to the Storyrealm context and primary world of the audience via similarities of content and verisimilitude (11). Research could examine the possibility of Rowling’s folkloristic world-building construction as the pertinent similarities Hufford mentions which allow meaning to be transmitted from within a narrative to its Storyrealm context. This work would
investigate the possibility of Potterverse moral lessons and discussions to not only be understood as symbolic and appropriate to the real world, but actively applied by the reader within the primary world as well. Specifically, can moralistic lessons within the Potterverse be adapted and adopted within the reader's reality due to the reflection of the primary world of the reader within the Taleworld, a concept similar to that of Tolkien’s secondary worlds? If the distinction between the fictional world of Harry Potter and the world of the reader is as permeable and intertextual as the boundary separating Hufford’s enclaves of Storyrealm and Taleworld, this research could investigate the ability of morality lessons within the Taleworld to transcend to that of the Storyrealm and the everyday context in which it is grounded.

This investigation could prove of greater interest if it were to take into account the diversity of Potter readership, particularly along the lines of age. Those millennials who grew up during the time period of the original publication of the books are often now parents of their own introducing the Potter series to their children. The 2016 releases of both Harry Potter and the Cursed Child and Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them have demonstrated an immense amount of popular interest, even from those who were not fans of the original Potter series. Interviewing representatives of the entirety of the Harry Potter fan culture, regardless of age or preference towards books or movies, can offer a range of responses on both the use of folklore within the series and the possible symbolic interpretations of the fantasy itself. Comparisons of the interpretations of new Harry Potter fans to those who grew up as the original series was being published would likewise be able to examine how these ideas may change with the readership as fans age.
Taking such experiential research a step further, examinations of *Harry Potter* fan culture could also prove beneficial to the study of folkloristics in questioning how, if at all, do the folklore and folkloresque elements of the series effect fan culture in terms of cosplay and fan-fiction writing. A study of fan cultures related to the series could examine group dynamics, representation and membership and the ways in which these relate to occurrences and rules within the Potterverse itself. Further, if Attebery’s claims of symbolic interpretation can be proven through reader-response studies, are there ways in which such interpretations effect and influence fan culture? While these questions are interesting and important to ask, undertaking such research would require not only an intimate knowledge of the series, but also an experiential understanding of the effects of the Potterverse on individual readers before beginning to investigate how the series could possibly influence group creation and dynamics.

However, before tackling such on-the-ground and in-depth projects, an extension of this study into the most recent Potterverse materials would prove beneficial. As I undertook the study for this work, both *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* and the film *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* were released, yet due to time restrictions and lack of familiarity I chose not to include these within the scope of my research. An examination of the folklore and folkloresque materials of these products would help to strengthen the argument that Rowling’s use of the folkloresque was done intentionally to construct the Potterverse in a way which would make it more similar to our own. Further

---

16 The new *Fantastic Beasts* film is not a dramatization of the textbook by the same title, but rather chronicles Newt Scamander’s adventure in America prior to publishing his work. As this project was undertaken, publication of the original textbook was suspended, and currently the screenplay for the film is being published under the same title. In March 2017, the original textbook of *Fantastic Beasts* was rereleased, although this new publication is missing the character commentary present in the original. There are now two Potterverse publications and a film bearing the same title, yet each with its own Potterverse contextualization.
study into the Wizarding World of Harry Potter theme park in Orlando, Florida, whether or not it calls upon the same folkloresque materials and its relation to fan culture, could also prove to be an enlightening study.

J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, and the secondary world which accompanies it, has fascinated millions of readers since the late 1990’s. After seven original books, eight movies, a number of smaller companion publications to the original series and a world-famous theme park, 2016 saw the release of two new Potterverse materials. The popularity of these productions almost ten years after the conclusion of the original series demonstrates the staying power of the Potterverse and its relevance both to literature and popular culture. The continued popularity of the series is no surprise to scholars of the folkloresque, however, who argue that success in popular culture is often linked to the attachment of folklore material and the ability of such products to “connect to something” beyond only themselves (Foster 2016:3).

The folkloresque is rampant within the *Potter* series, being used specifically in a way which creates verisimilitude and structures the author’s fantasy realm, but also allows juxtaposition and symbolic interpretation to occur in ways which are accessible to young and developing readers. Through her writing and use of folklore Rowling demonstrates the meaning behind one of the series’ most famous quotes, “words, in my humble opinion, are the most inexhaustible source of magic we have” (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, part 2* 2011).
Bibliography


