



Nominative Determinism: Classically Derived Names in the Potter Saga

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Nominative determinism occurs when a person's name reflects what that person does or is, for instance Mr Baker making bread or Ms Taylor making dresses. In the Potter saga J. K. Rowling seems to have a particular fondness for nominative determinism. In her case the names often derive from Latin and Greek language and tradition.

This note will consider those examples of nominative determinism in the Potter saga with their roots in classical language and mythology. It thus excludes derivations from other linguistic sources such as Durmstrang, the northern academy of magic, its name derived from the 18th century German literary movement known as *Sturm und Drang* or the name Voldemort, which ambiguously may come from the French either as 'theft from Death' or as 'flight from Death'.

Remus Lupin

Remus Lupin was the Defence against the Dark Arts teacher who taught Harry the Patronus charm. He was one of the originators of the Marauder's Map. He died during the Battle of Hogwarts. Lupin was a werewolf.

Remus was the first name of one of the mythical twins who founded the city of Rome, twins who were said to have been suckled by a she-wolf.

The surname Lupin derives from the Latin second declension masculine noun

lupus, a wolf. The idea of men who could transform into wolves occurs in Latin too, such creatures being termed by the poet Ovid as *ambigui*. Lupin himself is an ambiguous figure, the kindest and gentlest of men when himself, a terrifying figure when transformed.

The example of Lupin raises familiar if unanswered questions. Was Remus given this first name because he was infallibly destined to become a werewolf? Or did he become a werewolf because his parents were unwise enough to give him that name? How is it that his family name was Lupin? He became a werewolf through being bitten. There is no suggestion that he came from a hereditary lupine family. Rowling does not pose these questions, let alone answer them. They are part of the mystery of nominative determinism.

Sybill and Cassandra Trelawney

The same cannot be said of Sybill Trelawney, the Hogwarts Divination teacher, whose destiny was much clearer. Her great-great-grandmother was the famous seer Cassandra Trelawney, so it was perhaps always possible that Sybill too would inherit the Inner Eye. In the ancient world the word *Sibylla* was used as a proper name for female seers and also for other women. Its etymology is unknown. A number of different cities in the ancient world claimed to have a Sybil.

The most celebrated of the ancient world's Sybils was perhaps the Cumaean, who came to Rome during the reign of Tarquinius Priscus. She sold books of prophecies to the Romans, which could be consulted only on the authority of the Roman senate.

The Sybil had 12 books of prophecies for sale. When she announced the price the Romans declined to buy, regarding the price as exorbitant. She destroyed six books and offered the remaining six – at the same price. The process was repeated. When there were only three books left the Romans bought them at the original exorbitant price – an early demonstration of the economic reality that scarcity of supply increases prices. The books were stored in the temple of Capitoline Jupiter, where they were destroyed in the fire of 83 BC.

Sybill Trelawney's great-great-grandmother Cassandra is of interest. She was named after the princess of Troy, daughter of Priam and Hecuba, who was brought back from the Trojan War as the war prize of the victorious Agamemnon. Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra was so pleased to see her husband back home with his new girlfriend that she and his cousin Aegisthus murdered them both.

This Trojan Cassandra was celebrated not only for her prophetic powers but also for the way in which those powers were exercised. Apollo granted her visionary powers in return for sexual favours she promised him. However Cassandra broke her word.

Apollo therefore instead of revoking her powers ordained that, although Cassandra would prophecy the truth, the Trojans were fated never to believe her.

As a result Cassandra forecast that her brother Paris' elopement with Helen would lead to the destruction of Troy, and that the great wooden horse should not be brought inside the walls of Troy. Her warnings were ignored, with disastrous consequences.

Whether this same fate befell Cassandra Trelawney, to foretell the truth and not to be believed, we do not know. But it is certainly a fate that befell her great-great-granddaughter. Sybill Trelawney made two prophecies that were believed. She predicted that a child would be born who could fight on equal terms against the Dark Lord, which turned out to be Harry. That was the great prophecy preserved in the Ministry of Magic's Department of Mysteries and sought with such intensity by Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Later Trelawney correctly predicted in a trance that the Dark Lord's closest ally, Peter Pettigrew or Wormtail, would be restored to him. Pettigrew escaped from Lupin and Sirius Black in his animagus form of Scabbers the rat.

Despite these two correct prophecies, both Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall regarded Trelawney's powers with scepticism. McGonagall dismissed Divination as a hoax subject and Dumbledore joked, when Trelawney's prophecy about Pettigrew proved accurate, that this was her second success in more than 20 years so maybe she deserved a pay rise. Contempt for divination reached its peak when Hermione Granger walked out of the lesson, dismissing it as unworthy of her attention.

But Dumbledore, McGonagall and Granger were mistaken. In Harry's tea leaves Trelawney saw a huge dog which she took for the Grim, a symbol of approaching death. She was of course mistaken about the Grim. But she was quite right about the huge dog. Sirius Black was just about to appear in his animagus form as a huge black dog. She saw the dog but mistook its significance.

On the eve of the final round of the Triwizard tournament Trelawney foresees the death of a contestant. It is assumed that the prophecy relates to Harry, who survives. But Cedric Diggory dies, fulfilling the prophecy.

Again, when Professor Dolores Umbridge challenged Trelawney to make a prophecy, she said that Umbridge was in great danger. Umbridge scoffed at the prophecy, but we soon see Umbridge unwisely venturing into the Forbidden Forest and being carted off by an angry mob of Centaurs. She was indeed in danger. Trelawney was right again, and once again like the namesake of her ancestor she was destined not to be believed.

Minerva McGonagall

The Roman goddess Minerva was regarded in classical mythology as the Italian equivalent of Greece's Pallas Athene. Like her Greek counterpart, Minerva was the goddess of (among many other attributes) wisdom and magic. She was often depicted with her sacred companion, an owl, significantly from the viewpoint of Hogwarts where owls were both plentiful and the backbone of the communication system. It is somewhat surprising that McGonagall's Patronus was a cat rather than an owl.

Alastor (Mad-Eye) Moody

Alastor Moody was one of the most successful Aurors, the wizards who combat Death Eaters on behalf of the Ministry of Magic. It was said that half the cells in Azkaban were filled by Moody. Moody also served as Defence against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts for one year, spending part of the time locked up in his own trunk while Barty Crouch junior impersonated him, using Polyjuice Potion. Moody was killed during the evacuation of Potter from the Dursley household.

In ancient Greek mythology the *alastor* is the avenging deity or daimon. The *alastor* drove those who suffered crimes to exact revenge. For example when Clytemnestra murdered her husband Agamemnon, her son Orestes was compelled to take on the role of the *alastor* and to become a matricide. Moody recognised the savagery of the Death Eaters and relished punishing them with equal harshness. He seems also to relish his battle scars.

Argus Filch

Argus Filch was the caretaker at Hogwarts, responsible for maintaining order in the school. He was a squib, born into a magical family but devoid of magical powers. He was also a vengeful soul, refraining from torturing the pupils only because Dumbledore forbade it.

Filch's given name is the Latinised version of the Greek *Argos*, a many-eyed creature described as *Panoptes*, 'all-seeing'. His many eyes make the Greek Argos a perfect watchman, engaged as such by no less than Hera. In this case the derivation of the name must be intended ironically, since even with the help of his cat Mrs Norris (a name borrowed from a different tradition) Filch was totally unable to keep order in Hogwarts. Fred, George and Harry, with the help of the Marauder's Map and the Invisibility Cloak, ran rings around him. Peeves the poltergeist made fun of Filch at every opportunity.

Rowling was not the first to borrow the name *Argos*. Homer used the same name for Odysseus' vigilant dog. When Odysseus returned incognito after his 20-year absence, the dog was the first to recognise him.

Sirius Black

Harry Potter's godfather was an animagus, able to change himself at will into a huge dog. Accordingly he is named Sirius, for the Dog Star. Sirius is the brightest star in Earth's skies. It is known as the Dog Star because it belongs in the constellation *Canis Major*. Greek and Roman mythology are both rich in stories about this dog. One Greek version identifies *Canis Major* as the dog gifted by Zeus to Europa. One Roman version sees *Canis Major* as the watchdog set unsuccessfully to protect Europa from being abducted by Jupiter. The name *Canis Sirius* was not adopted for the dog until the 16th century. Until his untimely death at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange, Sirius was certainly a bright star in Harry's otherwise bleak Dursley-dominated firmament.

Hermione Granger

Occasionally research into nominative determinism draws a blank, as in the case

of Hermione Granger. There is of course a classical Hermione, the daughter of King Menelaus of Sparta and his Queen Helen. She is variously reported to have been married to Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, and to Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. There is however nothing in the life and times of the classical Hermione that sheds any light on the life and career of the daughter of two Muggle dentists who turned out to be a supremely gifted witch, gifted in every field except Divination. If Rowling had in mind an etymological link that has eluded research, she might care to indicate it.

Severus Snape

Severus Snape served as Potions Master and Dark Arts Master at Hogwarts. He was also the Housemaster of Slytherin and briefly Headmaster. He was above all a skilled double agent, loyal to Dumbledore but trusted by Voldemort. Voldemort claimed that he always knew when someone was lying. Snape deceived the Dark Lord.

Severus Snape's life and career were dominated by his unrequited love for Lily Potter. Because Harry is her son, he will go to any lengths helping Dumbledore protect Harry. He even sat impassively while a Hogwarts colleague was murdered. But Harry closely resembled his father James, who married the woman Snape loved. Snape saw father and son as arrogant, conceited and contemptuous of rules. The derivation of Snape's given name reflects this ambivalence.

The dictionary definition of the Latin word *severus* mentions 'serious', 'strict' and 'stern', all qualities of which Snape would be proud. The definition however also mentions 'disagreeable' and 'oppressive', qualities the Gryffindor students would recognise in Snape. And finally the definition mentions 'dreadful' and 'gloomy', qualities in Harry's eyes typifying Snape for most of the story.

In the end Harry captured Snape's dying memories and replayed them in the Pensieve. At last he saw the true qualities of Snape, 'the bravest man I ever knew'. He named his son Albus Severus Potter.

Rowling reported that she wrote one chapter of the Potter saga in a hotel room, writing in floods of tears. Our guess is that the chapter in question was

that in which the true story of Snape's hopeless love is revealed and the ambiguity of his name resolved.

The Carrows

The Death Eaters who imposed savage discipline at Hogwarts when Snape became Headmaster were brother and sister, Alecto and Amycus Carrow. The sister's given name takes us back to one of the oldest and most fearsome traditions of ancient Greece. The Furies or Erinyes were chthonian powers – that is to say powers of the earth rather than powers of the heavens like the Olympian gods and goddesses. Their role was to punish wrongdoers, often visiting the curses of parents on their children.

The Furies terrified the Greeks. Aeschylus called them daughters of the night and depicted them on stage with snakes for hair. In later writers their names are given as Tisiphone, Megaera and of course Alecto. Amycus is named for the brutal king of the Bebryces. He compelled all and sundry to face him in boxing matches. The rule was that the loser's life could be forfeit. The Argonaut Polydeuces fought and beat Amycus, skill triumphing over brute strength. In different versions of the story Amycus is either tamed or killed after losing the fight.

Quirinus Quirrell

Quirrell was the Professor of Defence against the Dark Arts in Potter's first year at Hogwarts, ostensibly a tense and nervous young man. Harry revealed that Quirrell's body was partially possessed by Voldemort.

Quirinus was a Roman god claimed by some to be of Sabine origin. We know little about him except that his divine function seems to have been similar to that of Mars and that he had his own *flamen*. The *flamines* were priests in the college of the *Pontifices*. The *flamen* of the god Quirinus was one of the three major priests, alongside those of Jupiter and Mars, a very senior position.

In principle each *flamen* was supposed to conduct the rites of the divinity to whom he was dedicated, and no others. But what we know of the *flamen Quirinalis*

associates him only with the rites of other gods. He is supposed to be devoted to one master. But his dedication to that master is non-existent, his loyalty lies elsewhere. This is perhaps Rowling's cleverest piece of nominative determinism.

Luna Lovegood

Luna Lovegood is named for one of Rome's most significant deities. The Roman moon goddess may have her origin in pre-Roman Sabine days, though this is disputed. In historic times she had a cult with one temple on the Aventine and another on the Palatine, which remained illuminated all night long.

Sundry others

Some names are simply derived. Ludo Bagman is the Head of Magical Sports. *Ludo* is Latin for 'I play'. In his youth Ludo was a famous Quidditch player.

Regulus Black conforms more closely to the elitist ideals of the Black family than his renegade brother Sirius: his name means 'a prince' in Latin.

Other names offer too many possibilities to allow certainty. Which Roman might have inspired Rowling to name a Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge? The Oxford Classical Dictionary lists more than fifty entries for individuals bearing the praenomen Cornelius. Which if any of these might have influenced Rowling in choosing a given name for Fudge must remain a matter of guesswork.

Pomona Sprout, the Herbology Professor at Hogwarts, is named after the Roman goddess of fruits, especially of those grown on trees. Pomona was only a minor deity, with a sacred site 20 kilometres out of the centre of Rome on the Via Ostiensis. She did not have even a minor festival.

Bellatrix Lestrange is the female Death Eater who killed Sirius Black and Dobby the House Elf, who styled herself Voldemort's most faithful follower. The Latin word *bellatrix* means a female warrior. She was killed by Molly Weasley in the Battle of Hogwarts.

The Hogwarts astronomy teacher is Aurora Sinistra. The Latin word *aurora* means daybreak or dawn. *Sinistra* is the

feminine of the ordinary word *sinister* for left as opposed to right. But ancient superstition (reflected in modern usage of the word ‘sinister’) made the left unlucky, so that *aurora sinistra* may mean the unfavourable or inauspicious daybreak. Is this a learned joke on Rowling’s part? Is daybreak seen as unfavourable because it is the moment at which astronomical observation becomes impossible?

Dolores Umbridge is aptly named. In Latin *dolores* are pains, miseries: she caused plenty of those.

Professor Septima Vector taught Arithmancy at Hogwarts, *septima* being the female form of the Latin word for ‘seventh’. Seven is a powerful numerological entity.

Albus Dumbledore

Finally we turn to Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. The first name of the Hogwarts Headmaster is etymologically problematic. In Latin there are two words for ‘white’. One such word

signifies a white without lustre, a pallid white. Its opposite in Latin is *ater*, a dull and gloomy black. The other Latin word for ‘white’ means a glistening or gleaming white, its opposite being *niger*, glossy black. But the Latin word for the unattractive pallid white is *albus*. If Rowling wanted us to think of Dumbledore as shining white she should have called him Candidus. Instead she invites us to think of him as pallid and colourless.

It seems unimaginable that an author as scholarly as Rowling should have accidentally picked the wrong name for Dumbledore, in some senses the pivotal figure of the whole Potter saga. What does she want us to feel about Dumbledore? Rita Skeeter dug up some unsavoury truths about his early life, when in league with Gellert Grindelwald he flirted with the notion that the wizarding community should emerge from its secret world and openly dominate the Muggles, the very ideas that surfaced when the Death Eaters took control of the Ministry of Magic. Whenever someone excuses Dumbledore for having

entertained such notions on the grounds that he was young, Harry points out that Dumbledore was then the same age as Harry, Ron and Hermione are now. The excuse of youth won’t wash.

Dumbledore’s brother Aberforth branded Albus as a master of secrets and lies. Dumbledore certainly left Harry, Hermione and Ron to combat Voldemort with only the sketchiest guidance. Maybe the choice of an unappealing first name is meant to prepare the reader for a less than uncritically favourable view of Dumbledore.

Conclusion

Using names with echoes of their Greek and Latin origins, Rowling reminds us that we all inhabit a palace of knowledge and culture built on foundations laid by our spiritual forebears.

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