Medieval Influence on Contemporary Literature:

Bestiaries and animal symbology in the Universe of Harry Potter

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<u>Acknowledgments</u>

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<u>Abstract</u>

In Medieval times, scholars developed what would become the literature tradition of Bestiaries or Books of Beasts and ever since, these masterpieces have influenced many other literary productions including contemporary pieces of literature such as the *Harry Potter* series, written by J.K.Rowling. The popularity of her works has reached every country in the globe and recently, *Harry Potter* has resolved into being a new target for literary criticism. Although mythology in *Harry Potter* is to date one of the most criticised and considered topics by academics, the majority highlighting the weight of Greco-Roman mythology, they fail to take account of whether Medieval Bestiaries and the symbology of the creatures within have any relevant influence on Rowling's world. It is the aim of this paper to extend previous research and explore the relationship between Middle Ages' mythology and the universe of Rowling by comparing some of the creatures in common, in addition to proposing hypotheses on how to interpret them. By careful analysis of Bestiaries and of all the seven *Harry Potter* novels, my paper embraces the thought that the wizarding universe is, indeed, strongly influenced by the author's knowledge of the notions that medieval society had on animals and that this knowledge is very intelligently used to provide a deeper meaning to her creation.

Key words: Harry Potter, J.K.Rowling, Fantastic Beasts, Medieval Bestiaries, Middle Ages, Medieval Literature

1. <u>Introduction</u>

The Medieval Mythology in the Magical World of *Harry Potter*

It all started in 1997. What seemed to be the first novel of an unknown British writer called J.K.Rowling (who apparently wrote books for children), *Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone,* became very well known worldwide, having a massive impact on the lives of its readers, not only on the young ones, but also on the adult readership. Literature welcomed what would eventually become one of the most important sagas in history which today, 20 years later, is still evolving and expanding. In recent years, experts and researchers have become interested in analysing in depth the magical world that Rowling offers, its mythology being one of the central topics of their studies.

Despite the fact that "the fictional world created by J.K.Rowling is unique, it grows from a deep foundation of myths and folklore that have endured across distance and time" (Colbert, *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter*, 2008) the starting point of scholars' work has its focus on *Harry Potter*'s similarities with Greek mythology. Although the charge of meaning is indebted strongly to the classical period, research in the area of Medieval mythology in relation to Rowling's magical world is long overdue. It is for this reason that my paper is going to focus on this other era of mythology, though limiting my attention to animals and other fantastic beasts. The question remains whether the author was aware of the content of what is known as Book of Beasts or Medieval Bestiaries and whether she used this knowledge in order to "add an extra dimension to the story" (Rumander, *Mythological References in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,* 2010). As mentioned above, recent studies have claimed that the basis of Rowling's magical world is "rooted in the Western magical tradition (Middle East, Greece and Rome)" and that "Imaginary creatures like the centaur, the manticore

and the unicorn come from the same rich tradition. Many other magical beings, such as elves, gnomes, goblins, hinkypunks, and trolls have their roots in the folklore of northern Europe and the British Isles" (Kronzek & Kronzek, *The Sorcerer's Companion: A Guide to the Magical World of Harry Potter*, 2011). This paper extends the work of those mythological influences to question the importance of the legacy that Medieval times provided the author regarding zoology.

It is the purpose of the present paper to provide a further analysis of the creatures that appear both in the Bestiaries and in other literary works produced during Medieval times and those within the magical world of Harry Potter. I will also establish a parallelism between the features that Middle Ages experts applied to animals and beast and the features that Rowling provides them with. The thesis statement around which this paper turns is that the author was indeed influenced by those pieces of literature when designing her magical world and that she took advantage of these mythological references to "give a deeper meaning to the reading" (Rumander, *Mythological References in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 2010). The fourth chapter is concerned with the influences of medievalism in the *Harry Potter* series, whereas the core and main objective of the fifth chapter, in accordance with my thesis statement, is to provide a brief analysis of Medieval Bestiaries and compare them to the wizard bestiary in order to look at their similarities. Finally, the sixth chapter locates the scope of my paper within the creatures that are found in both bestiaries. Moreover, I will propose my personal theories on how medieval animal myths give the story an extra and deeper meaning.

However, before getting in depth into the main focus of analysis of this project, it is important to highlight the mighty strength that Medieval times have in different areas and aspects of Rowling's world, and this will be the aim of the following chapter

(right after the literature review); to provide, though somehow superficially, evidence of Rowling's medieval knowledge within her creation.

2. <u>Literature Review</u>

In the last decade, *Harry Potter* novels have become more and more popular and thus, it has attracted much attention from research scholars. Unfortunately, Rowling's story is still considered to be targeting a young readership instead of an adult audience. In spite of this, great effort has been devoted to the study of analyzing the novels in regards to specific topics.

Before grouping together *Harry Potter* criticism into the topics that have been already analysed, consent me to introduce the major contributor to Harry Potter criticism to date; John Granger (also known as the Dean of Harry Potter scholars) who has scrutinized the novels to uncover what the keys of the series' successfulness and their hidden meanings are in *How Harry Cast His Spell: The Meaning Behind the Mania for J.K.Rowling's Bestselling Books* 2008 (an expanded version of *Looking for God in Harry Potter* originally published in 2006) and in *Unlocking Harry Potter: Five Keys for the Serious Reader* (2007), a book we will go back to in the following chapters. Granger is also the editor of *Who Killed Albus Dumbledore* (2006) a volume that includes six theory-based essays by *Harry Potter* fans and experts who gave their own views and suggestions on how Harry's story would end; this book being released before the seventh book of Rowling's saga was published. Not only that but also, he has gone in depth into exploring the literature that influenced and inspired J.K.Rowling to write *Harry Potter* in his book *Harry Potter's Bookshelf: The Great Books Behind the*

Hogwarts Adventures (2009). After the release of the final book of the series, Granger dedicated an entire book to cautiously examine it one year after its publication: *The Deathly Hallows Lectures: The Hogwarts Professor Explains the Final Harry Potter Adventure*. John Granger is a devoted Christian and a loyal fan of Potter's ventures, thus, his critical works always include strong connections with religion, and that lead us to the next topic.

Religion is possibly the most explored ambit of culture in relation to the *Harry Potter* series not only by John Granger but by other scholars too. Connie Neal was the first expert to talk about this issue in *What's a Christian to Do with Harry Potter* (2001) and five years later she published the first edition of *The Gospel According to Harry Potter* (the second edition being published in 2008). In 2003, Richard Abanes talks about the incompatibility of Harry Potter and the Bible in his book *Harry Potter and the Bible*, highlighting the fact that sorcery is rejected by God. Christianity is not the only religion linked with Harry Potter; in *Harry Potter and Torah*, 2007, Dov Krulwich puts emphasis on the similarities between Harry Potter's story and Judaism. *Baptizing Harry Potter: A Christian Reading of J.K.Rowling,* written in 2010 by Luke Bell, *Jesus Potter Harry Christ,* authored by Derek Murphy in 2011, *Harry Potter: A Christian Chronicle,* by Sonia Falaschi-Ray (2011) and *The Christian's Guide to Harry Potter* (2012) penned by Leslie Barnhart attempt to accentuate the similarities between Christianity and *Harry Potter*. The latest released book (2017) about *Harry Potter* and religion is the one by Patricia M. Lyions: *Teaching Faith with Harry Potter* in which advices adults on how to teach Christianity through Rowling's novels.

Besides religion, the world and the novels of J.K.Rowling are explored from very varied topics and perspectives such as psychology: *The Psychology of Harry Potter* by Neil Mulholland (2007), where he analyses the story and its characters

psychologically. Also, the world of justice has been related to *Harry Potter* in *The Law and Harry Potter* edited by Jeffrey E. Thomas and Franklin G. Snyder (2010) and in *Law made fun through Harry Potter's adventures* (2011) by Karen Morris and Bradley S. Carroll. A political analysis of the *Harry Potter* saga is made by Bethany Barratt in *The Politics of Harry Potter* (2012) and the series are also related with Philosophy in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy* (2010) by the editors William Irwin and Gregory Bassham. The human history behind Rowling's story line is scrutinised in *Harry Potter and History* (2011) by the author Nancy R. Reagin and the history of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon itself is explained in *Harry, A History* by Melissa Anelli in 2008.

Several scholars alongside with Granger have tried to understand the meanings behind J.K.Rowling's lines and have provided the world with their own research and interpretations; for example in *Mapping the World of Harry Potter* (2006) *The Seeker's Guide to Harry Potter* (2008) and *Harry Potter and Imagination* (2008), the first one edited by Mercedes Lackey and Glenn Yeffeth and the later ones written by Dr. George Trevarthen and Travis Prinzi.

Mythology in *Harry Potter* also managed to make its way into the world of criticism. Even though there is no serious critical research published exclusively dedicated to creatures, some authors such as David Colbert, Allan Z. and Elizabeth Kronzek and Patrick McCauley included explanations on the origins of some of the magical creatures that appear in Rowling's universe in their respective volumes *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter* (2008), *The Sorcerer's Companion* (2010) and *Into the Pensive* (2015). Moreover, the author Richard A. Spencer delves into the saga's Classical mythological references in *Harry Potter and the Classical World* (2015).

Unfortunately, the central topic of this paper, Medieval mythology has been scarcely investigated. Due to the recent release of the film *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,* (which narrates the adventures of Newt Scamander during his travels in order to gather information about magical creatures, previous to the writing of his book) there has been an increasing interest in the topic. On 18 November, 2016, a lecture called "Repurposing Classical Myth and Medieval bestiaries in Harry Potter" was given by John Friedman, a Professor Emeritus of English and Medieval Studies at the University of Illinois about Classical and Medieval Myth in the *Harry Potter* series and lecturer Melissa Aaron gave a talk called "Harry Potter's Fantastic Beasts or Wandering With Werewolves" in which she explained how Middle Ages works influenced on the creatures within the universe of Rowling.

Despite the already existing criticism of the saga, Rowling's world is far from being deeply explored. For future research I suggest to explore the influence of Arthurian literature on *Harry Potter* or to thoroughly analyse Severus Snape, probably the most interesting character of the series. As regards with magic creatures, as the author herself has said in several occasions, more secrets are still to be revealed.

3. <u>Medieval Legacy in Harry Potter's World</u>

The spell of medieval culture is ubiquitous within the magic of the Harry Potter books. In quick succession throughout the novels, it is easy to discover manifold references and parallelisms (some of them may happen to go unnoticed) between the medieval tradition and Rowling's own self-created world. It is not only in the influence of mythology that

we can see the legacy that medieval times transferred to *Harry Potter* but also literature, architecture, honour values, observances and traditions among many others.

Although the roots of **alchemy** are related to ancient Egypt, it was a very common practise during Middle Ages. Introduced in Europe through Arab settings in Spain, this mixture of science and magic pursued the "purification and perfection of the alchemist's soul in correspondence with the metallurgical perfection of a base metal into gold" (Granger, *Unlocking Harry Potter*, 2007). The critic and Harry Potter expert, John Granger, dedicates several chapters of his books (*Unlocking Harry Potter: five keys to the serious reader, The Deathly Hallows Lectures...*) to explain in detail how Rowling's series follow the basic alchemist formula, which is the transformation of metals into gold. It is not in vain that her first novel is entitled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone* and that Voldemort is obsessed with seeking the stone and becoming immortal. Moreover, there is no coincidence in the fact that *Albus* Dumbledore is the discoverer of the twelve uses of Dragon Blood along with his beloved friend Nicolas Flamel, who is a well known medieval historical figure due to his knowledge of alchemy and his assumed success in creating the Philosopher Stone, as Rowling herself narrates in her books. Alchemy in the world of Harry Potter is an extraordinary and extensive issue that I am willing to explore in future research; nevertheless, I strongly recommend John Granger's works for further information on the topic.

Besides alchemy, Harry Potter's story is strongly influenced by the Medieval **Chivalric Code**. In Middle Ages, it was expected from knights to fulfil the moral rules strictly attached to their status, as honour, success and dignity had to be preserved over their own lives. A wide range of similarities can be found between chivalric moral norms and Rowling novels' plot. The first and most basic direction is for a knight to be "chosen" by birthright: whereas knights had to belong to the aristocratic class, the foe

that Voldemort chooses as an equal is Harry, a pure blood wizard (the equivalent of nobility in the wizards' world). Knights' moral virtues include bravery, prowess, generosity, justice and courage, all of them virtues that Rowling gifts to his protagonist. However, the most important value is to be a natural leader, the way Harry is, and to persevere until the quest (killing Voldemort) is achieved completely. Last but not least is to be merciful, Harry proving to be so not ending with Peter Pettigrew, Bellatrix and many other Death Eaters' lives when he has the opportunity. Despite his innate leadership, Harry, as knights must, obeys the authority embodied by Albus Dumbledore. This relationship between the two leads to the loyal and trustworthy relation that was shared between knights (vassals) and their lords: in the novels, this is notably mirrored through several characters' relationships: Snape/Dumbledore, Death Eaters/Voldemort, Dobby/Harry and even Crabbe-Goyle/Malfoy. At the end of (almost) every year, Harry *faces* his greatest enemy, Voldemort himself; also, it is a very common practise of Harry to fight (whether verbally or physically) Draco Malfoy, as it is a knight's duty to never refuse a combat or challenge of an equal. So to be an honoured knight, it is morally correct to refuse monetary rewards when offered in gratitude for his achievements, as Harry does giving the galleons he wins in the Triwizard Tournament to the Weasley twins. Heraldry is also extremely relevant in both the chivalric and wizarding worlds: the Hogwarts houses' insignias, the tapestry of the Black family, the Ministry of Magic and the MACUSA's seals, the emblems of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang... Finally, weaponry is reflected in what wizards call "wandlore", as wands (in parallel to swords in Medieval times) are a wizards' most powerful weapon.

Closely related to the previous idea is **medieval literature**, which also plays a part in influencing Harry's world. It is not only that the greatest authors of English literature, Shakespeare and Chaucer, used alchemical references in their writings

(among many features that Rowling mirrored) but also that Arthurian literature's structure is imitated in the novels. The *quest of the hero* is characterised by an orphaned protagonist –King Arthur/Harry Potter- who is unaware of his real identity and destiny (the latter determined by a prophecy). This hero will be guided throughout by a mentor (old, wise, white-bearded powerful wizard) – Merlin/Albus Dumbledore- who will beget an "army" in order to battle with the enemy –The Knights of the Round Table/The Order of the Phoenix. Moreover, it is the hero's status that allows them to extract a unique sword – Excalibur out of a rock/The Sword of Gryffindor out of the Sorting Hat – to be eventually returned to them – By the Lady of the Lake/ The Patronus of Severus Snape, which leads Harry to a lake in the Forest of Dean. The pursuing quest is also present in both stories - Grail/Philosopher Stone (by Voldemort) – Horcruxes (by Harry) and in the end, both heroes join in matrimony to a woman with the same name – Guinevere/Ginny. It is not exclusively the pattern that is followed; characters (such as Sir Cadogan) and their names, expressions (Merlin's beard!) and honorary titles (Order of Merlin) are transparent and direct references to the Arthurian world.

Another magical touch to Harry's world which is principally illustrated in the motion pictures is the majestic and elegant medieval pieces of **architecture** used to locate the sceneries of this enchanting story. Guided by Rowling's instructions, "with his adaptations of *Philosopher's Stone* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, director Christopher Columbus initiated the trend of employing medieval historical sites as sets for the Harry Potter film franchise" (Ward, *A Medievalist Harry,* 2015). Locations such as Durham Cathedral, Alnwick Castle or Lacock Abbey (among many others) provide the story with realism, emphasizing the greatness of the history of "wizard kind". However, the most important and distinguishable medieval location

within the films is Christ Church College, in Oxford, which was the inspiration for the creation of the Great Hall's set.

Finally, one of the most well known characteristics of Medieval culture is the tendency to regularly celebrate pompous leisure activities such as feasts, banquets and knight tournaments that took place within the aristocratic society. At Hogwarts, such abundant and resembling banquets also mark special dates, including the beginning and ending of the course, Christmas Eve or Halloween. Regarding tournaments, there are copious likenesses between the ones in the Middle Ages and in the ones in Wizarding World. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* narrates the disclosure of the Triwizard Tournament, a contest that gathers together three magic schools and tests three participants (one in representation of each school) in different magical and ethic skills before the presence of school companions and distinguished people such as the Minister of Magic. In the late Middle Ages:

> Tournaments enabled knights to practice their battle skills, it was important for a medieval knight to put on a good performance in a tournament as important people would be present such as lords and ladies, knights would be representing their families that could be clearly seen in their family emblems and coats of arms. (Roberts, *Medieval Tournaments,* 2016)

In addition to that, both in Harry Potter and in the Middle Ages, stands were built for the spectators to enjoy the tournament tasks and tents were prepared for knights/wizards to wait for their "battle" turn. Also, up to every detail of the tournament was clearly announced beforehand, and participants could get injured or killed during the tasks which could last for weeks.

Throughout this chapter we have seen how powerful the influence that medieval times had on J.K.Rowling's world is and how she managed to adapt her artistry to include veracity to her invented story, as many aspects of the lives of wizards are

impregnated with the pure essence of the medieval era. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, the aim of this paper is to focus on one particular aspect of the medieval world in relation to the author's: the mythology and the symbolism of animals. The following chapter will provide an overview of the different sources of mythology that construct the world of *Harry Potter* and a brief summary of the author's view on the subject.

4. The Mythological Mixture in the Wizarding World of Harry Potter

The world of Harry Potter is characterised by the fact that every aspect of it depends on and is surrounded by magic. The wizard community takes very seriously the International Statute of Wizard Secrecy, which states that the magical world must be hidden from the world of Muggles, "it's what we call nonmagic folk" (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone*, 1997). However, the most stunning magic of all is how exhaustively and how cautiously this magical world is created. One of the elements that enriches Rowling's creation the most is the way "she has borrowed from and built upon the folklore and mythologies of the past in creating her story" (Prinzi, *Harry Potter & Imagination*, 2009). There is no possible conception of the world of wizards without mythology, but what kind of folklore was her basis and inspiration? From which culture did it come?

It is an important detail to bear in mind that Rowling graduated in Classic (and French) studies at University. Thus, it seems accurate to highlight the fact that the

majority of her mythical references belong to the Greco-Roman tradition as for example Fluffy, the three-headed dog which guards the Philosopher's Stone in representation of Cerberus, the guardian of the Underworld's gates. In fact, what readers find when immersing themselves in Rowling's pages is somehow a compilation of traditions, folks and myths from a very wide diversity of ages and cultures, all of them fused and combined as one so to give birth to her own world's reality. Without going any further, the names of almost every character are specifically chosen to link them with other characters or places belonging to myths and tales (see Dumbledore, whose full name refers to Latin, Middle English and Celtic cultures). However, not every piece of her world's folk is borrowed but the author manages to introduce some inventions of her own and make them converge perfectly within the previous traditions in creating Harry's world and story.

In an interview for the BBC Radio4 broadcasted December 10, 2005, the interviewer, Stephen Fry, suggested to Rowling the idea that children, when reading the novels, would unconsciously take for granted that the mythology of her story would have been almost entirely created by her, as her mythology joins together divergent cultures, most of them, possibly unknown to her readership. Rowling's response was to explain her reasons for this mixture:

> I've taken *horrible* liberties with folklore and mythology, but I'm quite unashamed about that, because British folklore and British mythology is a totally bastard mythology. You know, we've been invaded by people, we've appropriated their gods, we've taken their mythical creatures, and we've soldered them all together to make, what I would say, is one of the richest folklores in the world, because it's so varied. So I feel no compunction about borrowing from that freely, but adding a few things of my own. (Rowling, *Living with Harry Potter, 2005*)

Although mythology is a very wide and complex term, the focus of my paper is to go in depth into the beasts of this magical world which definitely has its own flora and fauna, independently of those of the world of Muggles. Moreover, Rowling is

recently on her way into expanding this area of her creation with the opening of new information along with the production of a set of films which will be released in the years to come though the first of them was already released in November 2016.

The successfulness of this mixture of creatures and plants resides in the fact that "when I do use a creature that I know is a mythological entity, I like to find out as much as I can about it. I might not use it, but to make it as consistent as I feel is good for my plot" (Rowling, *Living with Harry Potter,* 2005). Some creatures such as unicorns, centaurs, sphinxes or the Phoenix are easily recognisable from previous traditions and happen to remain with the same characteristics or qualities than they were given in their origins. On the other hand, others such as the basilisk, sirens, dragons or pixies have been slightly but cunningly modified so that they could fulfil their role within the story. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, there are several creatures such as dementors, nargles or thestrals which are Rowling's own invention.

Among the different cultures and folklores that this author recovers and explores, the one I will be delving into in this paper is the Medieval mythology. Bestiaries or books of beasts were a very common sort of literature in Medieval Times. Such volumes centred their attention on natural history, each entry dealing with a different beast or plant (whether existing creatures or not –though authors at the time believed all of them to be real), explaining their main features and relating them to Biblical metaphors or moral and ethical lessons.

The fact that Rowling used these sources when giving birth to the creatures of her world will be explained throughout chapter five, in which I will analyse and compare Medieval Bestiaries and its parallel piece of literature in Harry Potter: 1st years students' textbook *Fantastic Beast and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander. Not only that but also, in chapter six, I will proffer a selection of creatures that belong both

to the Medieval era and the wizarding world as well as providing my hypotheses in relation to the creatures so as to illustrate Rowling's knowledge of the Medieval Mythology and her artistry in introducing its beasts to enhance her works.

5. Medieval Bestiaries and Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find them

Medieval Bestiaries or Books of Beasts are one of the most important literary legacies that Middle Ages left in bequest to later literary works, the world of Harry Potter being among them. It is the aim of this chapter to focus on an brief explanation of Medieval Bestiaries, then to advance towards the Bestiary in *Harry Potter* entitled *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find them*, a piece of literature written by J.K.Rowling in relation to her magical world and finally, on a comparison between the two models of bestiaries, to put the emphasis on their similarities.

5.1. Bestiaries in Medieval Times

A literature tradition started back in the 12^{th}C in Western Europe in the Catholic doctrine before the Reformation took place: the writing of Bestiaries or Books of Beasts. These volumes were produced by members of the church as they were the only literate people by that time. All aspects of life in Medieval times were influenced and controlled by religion, included education – mostly for monastic audiences-; so medieval bestiaries were used to teach natural history. However, the prevailing purpose was to lecture on how to behave so to strengthen the relationship between the self and the divine through the interpretation of animal demeanour:

> (F)irst, there is a miniature of the animal, then a description of its appearance, habits, stories connected with it, and lastly, a moral, pointing out the spiritual significance and its application to the Christian life (…) The tendency to moralise soon arose from a desire to distract the thoughts from the things of this world, and concentrate the mind only on such matters as might bring it nearer to spiritual perfection. (Allen, *Early Christian Symbolism in Great Britain and Ireland before the Thirteenth Century*, 1887)

In other words, Medieval bestiaries were a compilation of entries (some also comprised illustrations) each of them focusing on a specific rock, plant or animal, the latter category divided into two different parts: the conventional description and the moral/allegorical lesson, a methodology that led to a better learning. Some of the entries were entirely addressed towards women's behaviour. The seriousness and effectiveness of Bestiaries in instruction evidences the fact that no matter how exotic or fantastic the creatures seemed, there was a strong belief in their existence. Nevertheless "some of the fantastic elements of the bestiary are descended from hundreds of years of interconnected folk tales and myths, while others are based on older documentation of debatable merit and scholarship" (Federlin, *The Origin and Intention of Medieval Bestiaries,* 2014).

As I have explained above, Bestiaries are based on older works belonging to the Classical era which are essential to understand their inheritance. The first and most important believed source was written by a single author in the Greek language, *The Physiologus*:

> "(A) short treatise on the behaviour and appearances of a select group of animals and their corresponding divine meanings. This watershed work, written around 200CE, would become the backbone of the bestiary tradition for centuries to come. The central tenet- understanding the macrocosm from the details of the microcosm, became an essential guiding principle of the bestiary, thereby creating a model and foundation from which it would grow and expand" (Federlin, *The Origin and Intention of Medieval Bestiaries,* 2014).

In addition to *The Physiologus*, a second source that is likewise considered to have had an influence over Books of Beasts is *The Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville (written in the 7[th]C), an extensive volume that comprised a broad diversity of topics, the

12th book dealing with animals. This edition included new entries with no moral values; besides being a more organized, didactic, and encyclopedic-typed one, now relevant to scientific advances on natural history although it was far from being accurate. Isidore's intentions were no longer to moralise his audience but to teach people about their lifetime's world.

As previously mentioned, this volumes' trustworthiness was rather imprecise, as evidence was subjective and anecdotal and reliability was based on simple observation. Notwithstanding this, and despite the fact that the major number of surviving editions were found in England, these ideas spread into other European countries (such as France, Spain or Germany) and bestiaries were translated into a wide number of languages. Unfortunately, some of the original meanings were blurred or even lost within the translation process mostly highlighted by the distance between the origin of the bestiary and the (supposed) origin of animals:

> "The further away an animal is listed as living from the primary English centres of bestiary production, (the earliest being the Peterborough manuscript from 970 CE) and most prolific manufacturer of bestiaries, as the primary locus of bestiary creation in the middle ages, the more likely the description of the animal is to be exaggerated, inaccurate or fabricated completely" (Federlin, *The Origin and Intention of Medieval Bestiaries*, 2014).

Some bestiaries might have been authored by many writers and stylistic variation plays a meaningful role in concluding the authorship of older bestiary productions. Regardless of the fact that mere animal descriptions with no moral allegory cannot be declared as bestiaries at all, over time, different volumes were originated, evolving through time in intention and style but on the other hand, sharing sources and structure. That is the reason why it can be claimed that Bestiary Literature is a tradition that managed to last until present times.

5.2 Bestiaries in the World of Harry Potter

It is not until Harry finally is given a letter by Hagrid in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone* that the readership (alongside with the protagonist) learn that Harry is a wizard and that he will be attending Hogwarts, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This letter does not only contain a welcoming message but also a list of mandatory materials that Harry is required to use within his first course, textbooks included. For the purpose of this paper, we are only focusing on one of Harry's textbooks: *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* written by Newt Scamander.

Although no more information about this schoolbook is given in the novels, it became a real and hard-cover published book in 2001. J.K.Rowling, under the nickname of Newt Scamander (one of the characters she created for Harry Potter's world), decided to bring to life Harry's textbook so to raise money for charity:

> "The Harry Potter books represent a new opportunity in Comic Relief's quest to make a meaningful difference in people's lives. A special Harry's Books fund has been created where twenty percent of the retail sales price less taxes from the sale of *Quidditch Through the Ages* and *Fantastic Beasts & Where to Find Them* will go to support children's causes throughout the world. Every book sold counts!" (Rowling, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, 2001)

In spite of Rowling being the real author of the book, she maintained the fiction and offered to the muggle world the very exact reproduction any wizard could purchase at Flourish and Blotts; and more specifically, Harry's original textbook copy. Written by the well-known magizoologist (expert on magical creatures) Newt Scamander and published by Obscurus Books (18a Diagon Alley, London), this book is a compilation of brief entries about the origin, appearance and behaviour of animals and beasts (and creature-like plants) belonging to the world of wizards which are carefully described and rated according to the level of riskiness determined by the Ministry of Magic.

This special edition contains a highly engaging introduction by the author, and a foreword by Albus Dumbledore, one of the most esteemed public figures of all times

within the magical community. Not only that but also, the book is replete with hand-written notes of eleven-years old Harry and Ron, who seem not to be interested in what scholar Scamander has observed, studied and compiled over the years.

The beasts and creatures dealt with in this book are organized alphabetically and some of the entries include small illustrations apparently drawn by Newt Scamander himself. In order to give veracity to his work, Scamander includes several quotes or references to other magical and muggle sources. Nevertheless, as stated in the previous chapter, the wizarding world and thus, this textbook, is based on a mixture of totally invented and folklore-inherited creatures that happen to exist in Rowling's world.

5.3 Medieval and Wizard Bestiaries: A Comparison

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them is a contemporary and singular piece of literature that has a lot in common with Medieval Bestiaries. The following pages aim to reduce their correspondences to a common denominator and highlight them, in addition to suggesting a possibly parallelism between the Bestiary tradition and J.K.Rowling's story.

The most evident similarity between Bestiaries and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is the fact that they both offer a compilation of entries describing the origin and nature of animals and beasts, several of them even including illustrations. As explained above, instruction has been one of the objectives of bestiaries, and the fact that *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is used in Harry's story as a schoolbook is not a coincidence. Despite this fact, Rowling's version is not intended to teach Christian moral values, as bestiaries were in their origins, but rather, and in a way, evocative of Isidore's *The Etymologies*, Scamander's interest is to provide knowledge

on creatures. It is relevant to mention that the magizoologist's experiences were favoured by the already existing store of learning on animals' biology and on science which guarantees a far more trustworthy data than the one provided throughout Medieval times and thus, Scamander's discoveries do make a serious difference in the study of magizoology. This does not mean that what scholars wrote back in Medieval ages was not considered to be truthful for the science of their times, as audiences did blindly believe in the existence of the creatures described in Bestiaries. In the wizarding world, it is not only that wizards believe in those creatures but know for certain that they are, as a matter of fact, real (within Rowling's universe). For the purpose of adding integrity to the texts, quotes and references are included in both kinds of works: Medieval bestiaries citing *The Holy Bible* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* quoting other important works and authors such as Bathilda Bagshot and her masterpiece *History of Magic*.

Although original bestiaries did not organise entries in alphabetical order as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* does, several of the animals appear in both versions, such as the phoenix, the unicorn, the (hipo)griff, and even the mandrake; but I will deal with this issue in more depth in the following chapter.

On 14th of March 2017, a new version of Rowling's/Scamander bestiary was published: "like any diligent author, J.K. Rowling has revisited the original text to bring it in line with recent developments in the Wizarding World" (Rowling, *Updated edition of Fantastic Beasts library book will include new magical creatures,* 2017). This brand-new edition includes six original creatures, innovative illustrations and a foreword of the book's fictional author himself. Is it too daring to suggest that Rowling is having a gesture to the literature tradition of bestiaries by publishing a more complete and updated version of her bestiary, as happened to antiquated books of beasts?

Summing up, the influence of medieval bestiaries over the creation of an (apparently) insignificant book born out of a magical story about a wizard society is far from being coincidental. Although there are still very valuable facts to be revealed about *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* in the years to come, the weight of medieval bestiaries' features over Rowling's reproduction reinforces the accuracy of the suggestion that the author's medieval knowledge furnished the basis for Harry Potter's first year textbook.

6. The Power of Medieval Creatures in the Harry Potter Universe

Creating a fictional story requires time, knowledge and skills but building up such an intricate universe in which each and every individual detail is so thoroughly chosen, as it is Harry's world, also demands magic. J.K.Rowling is a very dedicated author who certainly loves and cares about her own work, and readers can appreciate this in every page. We believe her world to be real, almost palpable and that merit is in part due to her intelligence and mastery in the introduction of fauna within the story and its interaction with the different aspects of the wizarding world.

As it has been mentioned repeatedly throughout this paper, Rowling combines myths and creatures from all ages and locations, and she achieves so in such a way that their combination and insertion is extraordinarily solid and genuine. The goal of this chapter is to allude to some of the beasts that are common to find in Medieval Bestiaries (and in the Medieval culture itself) which are also essential in the plot of Harry Potter. Moreover, I will provide my very own conjectures on how the usage of medieval

mythology helps the novels to be more forceful and I will highlight the fact that the symbology of animals has a far more profound meaning than what is perceived on the surface.

6.1 Beast and Creatures from both worlds

It is claimed that there are approximately seven hundred characters on the whole of the story of Harry Potter, but the number of creature species is, up to now, unknown. However, the role of mythology is essential in the saga. Several beings in the Harry Potter series were also very well known creatures in Medieval times, most of them due to the fact that they appeared in the majority of bestiaries. Rowling, using her knowledge of the Middle Ages, plays with the characteristics of those animals in order to make them suitable and adequate to her plot line. Some creatures are not in the slightest degree modified, such as centaurs, griffins, mandrakes and even phoenixes. On the other hand, others are completely adjusted to her own purposes; they are given more contemporary features, as for example dragons and syrens. However, the focus of this chapter will be in those animals whose Medieval characteristics were maintained or altered, thus giving the plot a deeper meaning.

6.1.1 The Adder/Serpent

It is stated in Medieval Bestiaries that adders, which are the representation of the Devil, are deaf. Serpents are the embodiment of people who only care about money and material goods and that is the reason why they cannot listen to the voice of God: "those who are immersed in the cares of this world are like the deaf adder, while he who

resigns all earthly possession can listen to the heavenly voice" (Rhodes James, *The Bestiary*).

It is curious that the symbol of Slytherin's house is a serpent, and that the characteristic associated to a Slytherin is "ambition". Slytherin's common room is located beneath the castle which can be interpreted to be underneath the surface of the earth; that is to say, the place where adders live or the place where the Devil lives (Hell).

The character of Severus Snape is not only a Slytherin, but he is the teacher that takes after Slytherin's house, and his office room can be found in the Dungeons, as well as his Potions' class. The story of this personage explains that he has always been interested in the Dark Arts (the symbol of which is a serpent, as it was also in the Middle Ages), a preference that his best friend Lily (Harry's mother) has never liked at all. It is only a suggestion to interpret that Lily thinks that Severus is "poisoned" by the influence of bad companies into liking obscure magic; poison being one of the main features of adders.

6.1.2 The Stag/Deer and the Doe

The deer in Medieval times was probably the most important animal of all due to its symbology: it represented God himself. Also, the doe symbolised purity, chastity, virginity and true love. It was said that a lady with these qualities could transform herself into a doe. In Harry Potter, Lily Evans' Patronus takes the form of a doe. Patronus is the name that wizards give to the visual silhouette of an animal that emerges from the tip of the wand, whenever a wizard or witch casts a spell called "Expecto Patronum" which is meant to protect oneself or to send a message. Not only Rowling chose the doe to be Lily's form for her qualities but also because James Potter's

patronus, her husband, is a stag, the male partner of a doe (although he can also transform himself at his will into a deer, but that is another issue).

In Middle Ages, "early bestiaries describe the stag as a relentless enemy of snakes" (Jordan, *The Symbolism of the Stag,* 2011). Isidore of Seville explained that "when deer are ill or weak they draw snakes out of their holes with the breath of their nostrils and eat them, overcoming their poison and thus renewing themselves" (Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies,* 7thC aprox.). Ever since they first met at school, James Potter and Severus Snape were declared enemies; this possibly can be seen as a parallelism to the feud between God and the Devil. Just as the deer haunted the snake in Medieval times, James and his friends never ceased to bully Snape all throughout their years at Hogwarts. John Granger, the most important Harry Potter scholar, after attending a sermon of the Feast of Theophani, proposed:

> If you have read the seventh book of the Harry Potter series, perhaps you will recall how when all hope and direction seems lost, Harry is led one night by a doe, a female deer, to a frozen pond. In the bottom of the pond, in the moonlight that is shining through the ice, Harry can just make out the image of a silver cross. (…) Rowling has Harry break through the ice, and descend into the freezing water to seek the cross (which is actually a very special sword, which is used by someone else later in the book to cut off the head of a very large snake!) (Granger, *Theophani Sermon: Stags as Serpent Killers,* 2012)

Literally, our protagonist is guided by a doe towards the weapon that will end up being used to kill Nagini, Voldemort's pet snake.

In the end, it is revealed that Snape redeemed himself when Lily, the person he has always secretly and truly loved, is murdered by Voldemort. Severus becomes a spy for Dumbledore, infiltrating himself among Voldemort's army, the Death Eaters. It is at that moment when his own Patronus shifts and adopts the form of Lily's: a doe. It is admirable how Rowling decides to end the life of the bravest character she has ever created:

> "And Voldemort swiped the air with the Elder Wand. It did nothing to Snape, who for a split second seemed to think he had been reprieved: but then Voldemort's

intention became clear. The snake's cage was rolling through the air, and before Snape could do anything more than yell, it had encased him, head and shoulders, and Voldemort spoke in Parseltongue.

'Kill.'

There was a terrible scream. Harry saw Snape's face losing the little colour it had left, it whitened as his black eyes widened, as the snake's fangs pierced his neck, as he failed to push the enchanted cage off himself, as his knees gave way, and he fell to the floor.

(...) The hand holding Harry thudded to the floor, and Snape moved no more." (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,* 2008)

6.1.3 The Elf

For the magical community, having a (house) elf at home is nothing but extremely common. House elves are small human-like creatures who serve a family for centuries and they can only be freed if their master gives them a piece of clothes. It is in the nature of house elves to refuse freedom and to punish themselves whenever they offend the family they serve. However, Dobby, the servant of the Malfoy's family and a revolutionary elf, manages to achieve liberty and decides to be of assistance to Harry when in need.

Back in Middle Ages there was a ballad tradition that tells the story of a Knight Elf who seduced virgin ladies and killed them afterwards. With time, this tradition slightly changed and it appeared an alternative closure for the tale, with the lady being the one who kills the Knight Elf with his own dagger. In Child's compilation of ballads, number 4, *Lady Isabel and the Knight Elf,* the end narrates as follows:

"O sit down a while, lay your head on my knee,

That we may have some rest before that I die.

She embraced him so fast, the nearer he did creep,

And with a small charm she lulled him fast asleep.

With his own sword-belt so fast she bound him,

With his own dagger so hard she stabbed him.

"If seven king's-daughters here ye have slain,

Then lie you here, a husband to them all!."

A question arises whether Dobby's death is an allusion to this Medieval tradition. Reaching the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,* Dobby is murdered by Bellatrix Lestrange (lady Isabel), who throws a dagger at him,wounding him to death.

> As he turned into darkness he caught one last view of the drawing room: of the pale, frozen figures of Narcissa and Draco, of the streak of red that was Ron's hair, and a blur of flying silver, as Bellatrix's knife flew across the room at the place where he was vanishing.
>
> (…) The elf swayed slightly, stars reflected in his wide, shining eyes. Together, he and Harry looked down at the silver hilt of the knife protruding from the elf's heaving chest (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,* 2008).

6.1.4 The Basilisk and the Weasel

The Weasley family owe their surname to the English word "weasel" as they are redhaired and live in "the Burrow". In Medieval Bestiaries it was common to find an entry on the weasel or either, this mammal was included in another creature's entry: the Basilisk's.

Although the description of the Basilisk (also named cockatrice) varied among bestiaries, it was said to be the king of snakes. Over time, authors disagreed on its size but its characteristics were rather fixed:

> He was hatched out of an egg laid by an old cook. His concentrated venom is such that he kills man, beast, or bird at sight, without contact. Some state that the best weapon against him was a looking-glass, since his reflection was fatal to himself. (Rhode James, *The Bestiary,* 1932)

In "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets", a basilisk is freed around the castle so to attack muggleborns (witches or wizards whose mother and/or father have no

magic). Hermione, who is a muggleborn herself, carries along with her a mirror, as it was considered to be the only effective protection against a Basilisk.

Moreover, "others, and among them the Bestiary, held that the weasel could always get the better of him" (Rhode James, *The Bestiary,* 1932). It is no coincidence that the student that Tom Riddle (young Voldemort) chooses to control and guide the basilisk is Ginny Weasley, the youngest member of the Weasley family, a remark that a weasel is need to command the basilisk.

Another feature of basilisks is they are not able to bear a rooster crowing. Even though it is quite unnoticeable and apparently unimportant, in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,* there are several instances in which roosters are mentioned, as Hagrid, the groundskeeper, carries their dead bodies. Throughout the novel, Rowling leaves hints to readers who, if unaware of Bestiaries' description of Basilisks, will not manage to uncover the nature of the beast which is threatening the school.

To sum up, at the end of the book, Riddle confesses to Harry (and thus, to the reader) that "Ginny Weasley opened the Chamber of Secrets. She strangled the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the Serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib's cat." (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,* 2002).

In this chapter, it has been evidenced how medieval myths about animals have moulded the development of Harry's world and story leading to an enrichment of the wizarding universe and to a prestigious position of Rowling as an author. We can conclude that an astute combination of ages, cultures and beliefs is a successful receipt to give birth to a wonderful sort of magic beyond this world's reach.

7. <u>Conclusions</u>

Throughout this paper I have delved into the role of Medieval mythology in relation to the *Harry Potter* saga with the objective of offering an enlargement of previous critical studies in this area of research. I have also shared my own interpretations of a few creatures that appear in the majority of Medieval Bestiaries, and which also belong to the magic world created by J.K.Rowling. My initial thesis statement supported the view that Rowling's magical world is undoubtedly influenced by the author's knowledge on medieval culture but more specifically, on mythology. Moreover, in my personal perspective, the usage of that learning about creatures allowed her to enhance enormously her creation by giving it a deeper meaning.

Mythology is not the only aspect of Middle Ages that contributes to the construction of the universe of Rowling as it is, but also other ambits from its culture are involved in the conception of the now called "Potterverse" (Universe of Harry Potter), such as alchemy, literature (Arthurian), the Chivalric Code, architecture and entertainment activities and celebrations.

Although the focus of this paper has been placed on Medieval mythology, the author herself has stated that she fuses the mythologies and folklores of different places and times, which is a transparent characteristic of the series. However, her fauna is not only built by these ideological borrowings but also includes creatures and beings completely invented by herself. Her ability to introduce this animal mixture into her own-developed world is the real magic of *Harry Potter.*

Referring back to medieval mythology's influence over the series, one determining piece of evidence is *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,* Rowling's own version of a Medieval Bestiary, a book that goes hand in hand with the whole Potterverse. This volume is the contemporary mirror image of old Books of Beasts; the

formal/academic similarities between the two certify the fact that this medieval literary tradition is, indeed, the basis for Harry's first year schoolbook. In addition, the descriptions of the animals that they have in common are also quite similar, and Rowling justifies this (and thus, reinforces the thesis statement of this paper) by making Scamander, the fictional writer of the Potter bestiary, say:

> *Astounding though it may seem to many wizards, Muggles [non-magical folk] have not always been ignorant of the magical and monstrous creatures that we have worked so long and hard to hide. A glance through Muggle art and literature of the Middle Ages reveals that many of the creatures they now believe to be imaginary were then known to be real. The dragon, the griffin, the unicorn, the phoenix, the centaur—these and more are represented in Muggle works of that period, though usually with almost comical inexactitude. (Scamander, Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, xiv)*

As Scamander claims in this quotation, some of the beings from the *Harry Potter* world were believed to be real in Medieval times. Rowling's knowledge has permitted her to manipulate the features of the animals to her own convenience; so that the development of some events in her story is not coincidental but, instead, follows the notions accepted by medieval culture. Some creatures are completely or partially modified while other are entirely maintained: "An understanding of what Rowling inherited or modified, as opposed to what she created through her remarkable imagination, deepens our appreciation of Rowling's achievement." (Friedman, *Repurposing Classical Myth and Medieval Bestiaries in Harry Potter*, 2016). In order to give more evidence for a positive answer to my research questions, I have suggested several hypotheses on the connotations of the adder, the stag and the doe, the elf, the basilisk and the weasel in regards with *Harry Potter*'s plot line showing that medieval symbology plays a role in the significance, power and implications of these creatures.

Summing up, we can conclude that: "The Harry Potter books clearly demonstrate that Rowling had a thorough grounding in the study of the Middle Ages and Renaissance" (Levin, *Harry Potter's Fantastic Beasts or Wandering With*

Werewolves, 2016. Cited in: Gayman, *Lecture to explore the beasts of 'Harry Potter'*, 2016) and that if readers are ignorant of Medieval mythology, hints, parallelisms, gestures and most importantly, a part of the magic in these books will be missed.

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