

Reasserting the Maternal: *Harry Potter* and the *Oresteia*

In a discussion of Aeschylus's *Libation Bearers*, C. W. Marshall deems *LB* 466–78 “arguably the most read passage in all of Greek tragedy” (2017, 75). Why? Because it appears, quoted as translated by Fagles (1977, 198), at the outset of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final novel in the *Harry Potter* series, published in 2007. Whether the book's hundred million or so readers have actually noticed this epigraph is another story; regardless, the epigraph fosters the expectation that readers will put *Deathly Hallows* into conversation with the *Oresteia*. At any rate, the surface-level parallels between the texts are clear: a set of three young people (Harry, Hermione, Ron / Orestes, Electra, Pylades) must attempt a countercoup against a tyrannical regime (led by Voldemort / Clytemnestra) founded by means of the murder of a problematic father-figure (Dumbledore / Agamemnon) whose aid is sought from beyond the grave.

A number of scholars have already offered more nuanced readings of the epigraph as an act of reception: see especially Groves 2017, Rogers 2017, and Lovatt 2018. It is, however, surprising that little has been said (cf. Rogers 2017, 226n.55) comparing the presentation of gender, and especially motherhood, in these texts—surprising, that is, since both texts have, in the course of their reading histories, been understood as a sort of social charter for gender relations (Zeitlin 1996 [orig. 1978], 87–9; Sutton-Ramspeck 2023, 85–7). This paper argues that *Harry Potter*, in its reading of the *Oresteia*, reasserts the value of motherhood against the misogyny of the source text.

As is well established, the *Oresteia* presents Clytemnestra initially as a complex mother figure who is later reduced, by the arguments of Apollo and Athena, to a passive vessel; in

Zeitlin's reading, for instance, this development reflects in mythic terms the domination of men over women in Athenian society. By contrast, *Deathly Hallows* reworks Clytemnestra by dividing traits associated with her among contrasting figures: the evil, antimaternal Bellatrix on the one hand and a suite of valorized maternal characters (Molly, McGonagall, Narcissa, Snape) on the other. Most important is Harry's mother, Lily: in contrast to Clytemnestra and her killer Orestes, Harry's mother has died for his sake, and he ultimately elects to follow the model of her passive, nonviolent sacrifice over the active, violent methods associated in the series with his father. Despite Dumbledore's earlier *Oresteia*-inflected depiction of the situation ("If Voldemort had never murdered your father, would he have imparted in you a furious desire for revenge?" [*Half-Blood Prince* ch.23], a sentence loaded with Aeschylean terms—even the word "furious" echoes the Furies), Harry's choice to follow a maternal rather than paternal model upends gendered expectations of the sort established in the *Oresteia* and, at least on the surface, reflects turn-of-the-millennium progressive values. In the end, however, the fact that both stories tend to the same outcome—namely, that the end of political violence brings stability and fertility to the *oikos*—reduces the distance between them and complicates a clear-cut regressive/progressive division.

Scholarly consideration of *Harry Potter*, especially regarding gender, is critical in the current moment, given both the pervasive cultural influence of the series and its author's repeated calls for limitations on trans rights: see Duggan 2022 and Henderson 2022 for discussion and models for response. This paper therefore concludes by suggesting the importance for classicists of considering *Harry Potter* not only as an instance of classical reception, but as a received text itself, subject to contestation and transformation by new audiences.

Works Cited

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