

Merope's Son

In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the sixth installment in her tremendously successful series, J.K. Rowling introduces her readers to the obscure family of the principal antagonist, Lord Voldemort. The most remarkable member of this ancient yet fading wizarding family is a young woman named Merope Gaunt, who, we soon learn, is Voldemort's mother. Physically and emotionally abused by her entire life, Merope bewitches a non-magical man so that he will be her husband (Rowling 2005). The enchantment eventually lifts and the man leaves her pregnant; as a result, she does not even live an hour once her son is born (Rowling 2005). This boy grows up to be the cruelest, most destructive wizard in history.

Rowling did not choose Merope's name at random. Several figures in Greco-Roman mythology are named Merope; the two most significant are the *Pleias* Merope, the wife of Sisyphus and the only one of the *Pleiades* to marry a mortal, and Oedipus's adoptive mother, the queen of Corinth and wife of Polybus. In his recent book, *Harry Potter and the Classical World*, Richard A. Spencer describes these two major mythological Meropes and their potential connections to Merope Gaunt, but he leaves the implications of these connections unexplored (Spencer 2015). The goal of this paper is to pursue the repercussions of Merope Gaunt's name in the ways the character's life and actions resonate throughout the story, especially as they affect the fate of her son. This will bring to light the complexity of Rowling's characterization of her main antagonist and, more broadly, the efficacy of her adaptation of classical mythology to enrich her fictional world.

The significance of Merope's name also goes beyond the margins of Rowling's series. In her article "The Games People Play," Gabriela Steinke notes Rowling's Merope as one example in a line of characters based on the mythological figures of Merope in female-authored narratives

of the fantasy and magical realism genres, here in Diana Wynne Jones' *The Game* (Steinke 2010). Another noteworthy example is in *Mary Poppins*, published in 1934 by P. L. Travers, a well-established literary role model for Rowling. These authors employ a version of the actual mythological *Pleias* Merope, not a namesake, as Rowling does. Still, the popularity of a Merope figure among female authors writing within these genres suggests something appealing about her mythological origins for authors in this group. Through the perspective of *Harry Potter*, a final, if lesser, aim of this paper is to consider the treatment of Merope Gaunt in relation to the other Merope figures in this tradition.

Bibliography

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