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Epics, Myth, and Modern Magic: Where
Classics and Fantasy Collide

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Epics, Myth, and Modern Magic: Where Classics and Fantasy Collide

I really love books. So much so, that I happen to have a personal library of over 200 of them. The majority of this rather large collection is split two ways: modern fantasy novels and books on or from the classical antiquity. I started my fantasy collection at a very young age, with the books that formed my childhood: *Harry Potter*. While I had always been an avid reader, these books threw me into a frenzy. I just had to get my hands on fantasy books. I kept growing and growing my collection until my senior year in high school, when, as an AP Latin student, I read Vergil's *Aeneid* in Latin. Although I had always had a love for ancient Greece and Rome, reading this work changed my life, and I decided to become a Classics major. Now when I go to the bookstore, the first place I browse is the fantasy section, and then I quickly move to the history section. Because of this, I have *a lot* of books on both of these topics.

Ever since my freshman year I have wanted to submit a collection to the book collecting contest, but being the book aficionado that I am, I struggled to narrow down a theme. Through the years I started projects on my passion for classics, my really cool collection of fantasy novels, and Tolkien. But this year, it struck me: why not combine them. There has been a recent trend in studies of Classical reception (that is, how modern works incorporate works from the ancient world) in looking at how modern science fiction and fantasy have been influenced by classical antiquity. Most people look at me funny when I tell them that I love this sort of thing. They question why I would want to research classics in modern fantasy when "clearly" these works are more influenced by medieval times than antiquity. However, I have always had a sneaking suspicion that there was more of a connection between ancient Greece and Rome and the fantasy genre than most people think. However, I did not have much to justify this feeling

until this semester, when I decided to take a receptions class on the classics and science fiction. This class has provided me with the theoretical framework I need to make the claims I have about classics and fantasy novels. The books that I have chosen each hold a special place in my heart. Most of them are well loved and rightfully so.

Before I begin to delve deeper into the links I have found between the classic works in my bibliography and the fantasy novels, I would like to make a note about the novels I have chosen. All of the series that I have chosen are some of the most popular in today's pop culture. I have not chosen them for their popularity but because they are some of the works that have made the biggest impressions on me, for multiple reasons. My love for J. K. Rowling's works soon lead me to discover the *Hobbit* which in turn lead me to the *Lord of the Rings* novels. These books have also grown to be very important to me and were actually the first books that lead me to think more closely about the relationship between the classics and fantasy novels. George R. R. Martin has been lauded as the American Tolkien by many critics. The complexity and detail of his books have drawn me in deeper and deeper each time I read them. And finally, Rick Riordan's *Heroes of Olympus* holds a very special part in my heart because it incorporates three of my favorite things: Greek mythology and culture, Roman mythology and culture, and the fantasy genre.

The first books I wish to talk about in depth are the classical works that I have chosen for this collection. The works I chose represent only a small amount of the books on the classics that I own, but these are the ones that I see as appearing most frequently within fantasy novels. The first is Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. While not actually written by an ancient author, this work provides an integral overview of the mythology that has been represented again and again in fantasy novels. I have also included Homer's *Odyssey*, in which the theme of homecoming, or

nostos, is extremely important. Many fantasy novels are also concerned with homecomings, and therefore this work can be found in any novel that contains a homecoming theme. *The Iliad* is also included in my collection due to the fact that it provides many examples of the epic heroes that tend to recur again and again within fantasy novels. As a conglomeration of these two epic poems, Vergil's *Aeneid* is also one of the works that tend to influence modern writers. This is especially helped by the fact that it is one of the earliest recovered works from the ancient world, giving it more time to be received in modern works. The *Aeneid* also holds a very personal spot in my collection because it is the work that made my burgeoning love for the classics blossom into a true passion. *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* both also contain a *catabasis*, or journey to the underworld, another theme that is very prevalent in fantasy works. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is also important because it contains the revenge cycle (a child taking revenge for their murdered parent) theme that is also found within many fantasy works. And finally, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* belongs within this collection because of the focus it puts on metamorphosis, another element that has been received within modern fantasy.

The *Harry Potter* series contains many of these elements in addition to the many names, spells, and creatures that have been taken from mythology and the ancient languages. This is probably due to the fact that Rowling studied classics in college. For the sake of brevity, I will briefly go over which ones are more relevant in certain books. The first is *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, in which Harry's trip to the depths of Hogwarts to retrieve the sorcerer's stone is very reminiscent of the *catabases* that both Aeneas and Odysseus make. The idea of the animagi that are introduced in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* has some ties back to the many metamorphoses that occur within the *Metamorphoses*. Finally, the most striking classical element in this series is found in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, in which J. K.

Rowling actually quotes one of the plays of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. This forces us to view these works as following the theme of the revenge cycle so prevalent within Aeschylus' plays.

To me, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are a continuation of the epic tradition in modern times. This is due to the fact that it contains heroes of epic proportions (e.g. Aragorn), *catabases* (e.g. Frodo's journey to Mordor, Bilbo's to the mountain), *nostos* (e.g. Bilbo returning home), as well as language reminiscent of the style of the ancient epic poets. I am also interested in how Tolkien incorporates ancient languages in his works, since he was a linguist.

George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* contains many parallel elements to the fall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and rise of the Flavian dynasty in Roman history. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Robert Baratheon, a Nero-like figure, is murdered and his land is thrown into civil war. In this war, there are five different kings vying for the throne. This echoes deeply the years after Nero's death, when there was a period of four different emperors in one year. The last few books in Martin's series show the end of the war and the establishment of a new dynastic family, as what happened when the Flavian emperors took over in Rome. Finally, one last parallel between these two worlds is the encroachment of a monotheistic religion on an older, polytheistic one. In ancient Rome, this was Christianity. In Martin's world, a new religion worshipping the Lord of Light is growing within the world. In addition to this, Martin's Wall that separates the civilized society from the wild is directly related to Hadrian's Wall, which was meant to keep the wild Brits out of Roman territory.

Finally, Rick Riordan's *Heroes of Olympus* series is a great example of how classical materials can be combined successfully with a fantasy genre. They are not only a way to introduce young readers to classical themes, but also provide a link between the ancient world and the modern world.

Bibliography

1. Aeschylus. *Oresteia*. Trans. Peter Meineck. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1998. Print.
 - a. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* contains 3 plays: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Furies*. These plays all focus on the revenge cycle that was prevalent in the ancient house of Atreus. In these plays, a father is murdered and his son sets out to take revenge on the killer. This story bears many striking resemblances to many similar plotlines in fantasy works and is therefore an integral part of my collection
2. Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. New York: Little, Brown and, 1969. Print.
 - a. Greek mythology has been an important part of a majority of fantasy plots. As a collection of Greek mythology, this book has been very helpful in finding strands of mythology within fantasy novels, from character names to mythological creatures that appear within fantasy novels.
3. Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2004. Print.
 - a. Homer's *Iliad* is all about the Trojan War. It is filled with many great heroes, known for their prowess in battle. While the stereotypical hero image has been attributed to Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell based his idea of the hero off of the heroes he found within Greek mythology. This work is essential to my collection because it is full of heroes very similar to those found in fantasy literature.
4. Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998. Print.
 - a. In Homer's *Odyssey* details the journeys of Odysseus as he travels home from the Trojan War. Because of the anger of the gods, Odysseus was forced to travel for 10 years before returning home. Once home, Odysseus has to rid his house of the suitors who have taken it over in order to try and woo his wife. Odysseus' tale is one of *nostos* or homecoming. The idea of the homecoming is also essential to many fantasy tales about coming home after war. Because of this, Homer's *Odyssey* is very important to my collection.
5. Martin, George R. R. *A Clash of Kings*. New York: Bantam, 2012. Print.
 - a. This second book in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series shows the very beginnings of a dynastic civil war. As a part of a long standing fantasy series, it would have been included in any fantasy collection. What makes it integral to my collection is the fact that the generic plot follows the beginning of the civil war after the fall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty in Rome
6. Martin, George R. R. *A Feast for Crows*. New York: Bantam, 2005. Print.
 - a. The fourth book in the *Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R. R. Martin shows the aftermath of the civil war that is now dying down in Westeros. While there are still a few dissenters to the throne, most of the five kings who were fighting are now dead, leaving one to the throne. Because it is reminiscent of the era in Rome after the civil war caused by Nero's death, when everyone was adjusting to the new rule, it is essential to my collection
7. Martin, George R. R. *A Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam, 1996. Print.
 - a. This first novel in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series details all the plots and intrigues that happen amongst the nobles of Westeros. It details the events that

lead up to civil war in Westeros, including the fighting between families, unstable rulers, and the death of a king. Just like all of the other books from Martin's series, it shows a clear reception of Roman history and is therefore a very important part of my collection

8. Martin, George R. R. *A Storm of Swords*. New York: Bantam, 2011. Print.
 - a. The third book in the *Song of Ice and Fire* series continues with the second half of the civil war started by Robert Baratheon's death in book 1. Its images of a country adjusting to a new dynastic rule have many parallels with Roman history at the beginning of the Flavian empire.
9. Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. A. D. Melville. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
 - a. Ovid's epic poem tells the entirety of Roman mythology and history up to the rule of Augustus by focusing on tales of metamorphoses. This work is essential to any scholar looking for classical reception in fantasy work because metamorphosis is a major part of many fantasy plots.
10. Riordan, Rick. *The Lost Hero*. New York: Disney/Hyperion, 2010. Print.
 - a. Riordan's first novel in the *Heroes of Olympus* series recounts a Roman demigod who has lost his memory and has been thrust amongst the enemy Greek demigods. This book is a very important part of my collection because it takes Greek and Roman mythology, sets it in modern time, and creates a fantasy world around it.
11. Riordan, Rick. *The Mark of Athena*. New York: Disney/Hyperion, 2012. Print.
 - a. This third book in the *Heroes of Olympus* series continues the plot started in the first book. The Greek and Roman demigods have come together to make a trip to the Mediterranean to fight off the evil that is lurking there. Because it is a part of a Greek and Roman fantasy series, this book is essential to my collection.
12. Riordan, Rick. *The Son of Neptune*. New York: Disney/Hyperion, 2011. Print.
 - a. In the second book of his series, Riordan's focus is now on a Greek demigod thrust amongst the Romans. Because it is a part of the *Heroes of Olympus* fantasy series it is an integral part of my collection.
13. Riordan, Rick. *The House of Hades*. New York: Disney/Hyperion, 2013. Print.
 - a. The fourth book in *The Heroes of Olympus* splits the narrative between two heroes trapped in the underworld and their companions above. This work is essential to my collection not only because of its mytho-fantastical genre, but because it also includes many elements of classical epic poetry within it.
14. Riordan, Rick. *The Blood of Olympus*. New York: Disney/Hyperion, 2014. Print.
 - a. This book wraps up the *Blood of Olympus* series. The evil is defeated, and there is now peace between the Greeks and the Romans, bridging the gap that was never crossed in antiquity. As the final installment in the series, it is important to my collection.
15. Rogers, Brett M., and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, eds. *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015. Print.
 - a. This book is the one that got me started on this idea. In this book, scholars show how the classical world has been received into the modern genre of science fiction. Using this work as my precedent, I have finally been able to find the connection between antiquity and modern literature that I have needed in order to justify my overwhelming feeling that these things are connected. (I would like to

clarify that this is **not** a textbook for the class I am currently taking on classics and science fiction. It is not required reading and I purchased the book of my own free will because this is something that I am generally interested in. If I had not been in the class I probably still would have purchased the book. The class just gave me an excuse to justify spending money on it)

16. Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. New York: Scholastic, 1999. Print.
 - a. The second book in the *Harry Potter* series contains many classical references. From spells to names to creatures, references to the classical antiquity can be found spread throughout the pages of this novel. Because of this clear connection with the classics, this *Harry Potter* book is a very important piece of my collection.
17. Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. New York: Scholastic, 2007. Print.
 - a. This book provided the first link to the classical world that I needed to be sure that my other findings are valid. Not only does Rowling actually quote Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* in the very beginning of the book, but there is a clear link between Harry's revenge quest and that of many ancient heroes. I hold this book as one of the most important in my collection because it sets the precedent for finding many other classical elements within Rowling's work.
18. Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. New York: Scholastic, 2000. Print.
 - a. Just like all of the other books in her series, this *Harry Potter* book is filled with many classical references. The idea of a three part heroes journey (i.e. the Triwizard Tournament) is essential to a lot of ancient plots. Because of these ties and its status as one of the most influential modern fantasy books, this book is essential to my collection.
19. Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. New York: Scholastic, 2005. Print
 - a. The classical elements continue to be found in this novel. Because classical antiquity can be seen in every book of the *Harry Potter* series, it is essential that each book be included in my collection.
20. Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. New York: Scholastic, 2003. Print.
 - a. The most important classical element to this book is its phoenix symbolism. Just as the phoenix is a symbol of rebirth, Harry acts as the leader of a rebirth in heroism amongst the Hogwarts students as he teaches them defensive magic. Therefore, this book is essential to my collection.
21. Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York: Scholastic, 1999. Print.
 - a. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, we are introduced to the idea of the animagus, humans that can turn into animals. This element, along with other forms of magic that cause mutation, and the character of Remus Lupin all tie back to the classical theme of metamorphosis. Because this book is so tied to this concept, it is essential to my collection.
22. Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. Print.
 - a. Besides *Deathly Hallows*, this *Harry Potter* book has one of the most blatant classical references. Harry must pass by a three-headed dog to go face his enemy

in the depths of Hogwarts. Fluffy harkens back to Cerberus, turning this journey into a *catabasis*, a journey to the underworld, that most ancient heroes undertook. This clear reference to the ancient world makes this book essential to my collection.

23. Tolkien, J. R. R. *Hobbitus Ille: Aut Illuc Atque Rursus Retrorsum*. Trans. Mark Walker. London: HarperCollins, 2012. Print.
 - a. This book proves that the tie between fantasy and the classics is strong. Because it is a modern work of fantasy translated into ancient Latin, it is clear evidence that there are many similarities between ancient Latin works and modern fantasy novels. Therefore, this book holds an especially important spot in my collection.
24. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. New York: Ballantine/Del Rey, 1996. Print.
 - a. Just like Harry's journey to recover the sorcerer's stone, Bilbo's journey not only to the mountain but also into its depths to face the dragon is another reference back to the classical theme of *catabasis* in the fantasy world. Because of this connection, this work provides an important link between the modern world and the ancient one, allowing me to continue to look for these same things in Tolkien's other works.
25. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Ballantine/Del Rey, 1982. Print.
 - a. Written almost as if it were an ancient epic poetry, this book is the first third of Tolkien's fantasy epic *The Lord of the Rings*. Through its highly artistic style, great heroes reminiscent of those in the ancient world, tri-part set up, and many linguistic throwbacks to the ancient world, this book is an essential part to my collection.
26. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. New York: Del Rey/Ballantine, 1994. Print.
 - a. As the final third of Tolkien's epic, this book tells how the ring is finally destroyed and peace is brought to the land. In this book, the clearest element of the classical tradition is yet again the idea of the journey to the underworld, or the *catabasis*. Frodo journeys into the hellish realm of Mordor and returns, just as Aeneas and Odysseys travel into the underworld. This, in addition yet again to the tri-part organization of the series provide clear echoes to the past and make this book essential to my collection.
27. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. New York: Del Rey/Ballantine, 1994. Print.
 - a. This second book in the *Lord of the Rings* includes many of the same classical references that the other books in its series have. Tolkien's language yet again recalls the epic heroes of the ancient world, and because of this, *The Two Towers* is an integral part of my collection.
28. Vergil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage, 1983. Print
 - a. Vergil's poem combines both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* into one work, creating a very Roman twist on these Greek classics. It contains all of the important things that its predecessors had including a *catabasis*, a *nostos*, and many epic heroes. Because it is one of the most well preserved ancient works, it has been influencing authors for years. It is essential to my collection because, before the

Iliad and the *Odyssey* were found, this poem was how many authors tied their works back to the ancient world.

29. Vergil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. Alicia Matz. 2011.

- a. Although I have always been passionate about the ancient world, what really made me develop a deep love for it was reading the *Aeneid* in Latin in my senior year of high school. My own translation of large sections of the poem represents to me my love for the classics. I put many hours, blood, sweat, and tears into this translation and as a result have come to appreciate the classical world on a much deeper level. This book is probably one the most important to my collection because it is what prompted me to become a Classics major. Without my education in the classics, I would have never been able to solidify my ideas on the ties between the ancient world and modern fantasy novels.

Wish List

1. Le Guin, Ursula K. *Lavinia*. Boston: Mariner, 2009. Print.
 - a. Ursula K. Le Guin is a famous science fiction/fantasy author. In this work, she tells the story of Vergil's *Aeneid* from the viewpoint of a character who never says a word in the epic poem. Although this could be considered historical fiction, I would argue that it is a work of fantasy because in focusing her story on a character who never talks, Le Guin creates an alternate fantasy world around her.
2. Martin, George R. R., Elio Garcia, and Linda Antonsson. *The World of Ice & Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and the Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam, 2014. Print.
 - a. This book would be a very valuable asset for my collection in that it provides more historical background for Martin's world. I hope that by perusing the history of this fascinating world I can find even more ties to classical antiquity.
3. Rowling, J. K. *Harrius Potter Et Philosophi Lapis*. Trans. Peter Needham. London: Bloomsbury, 2003. Print.
 - a. Harry Potter transfers over so well to the classical realm that someone has gone through the effort to translate it into Latin. As a person who is passionate about both Latin and fantasy this book would really enhance my collection.
4. Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (Ancient Greek Edition)*. Trans. Andrew Wilson. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Print.
 - a. Just like Harry Potter in Latin above, it would please me greatly to add this book to my collection. I just love the fact that the *Harry Potter* books are so influential that they have even been translated into ancient Greek.

Photos



