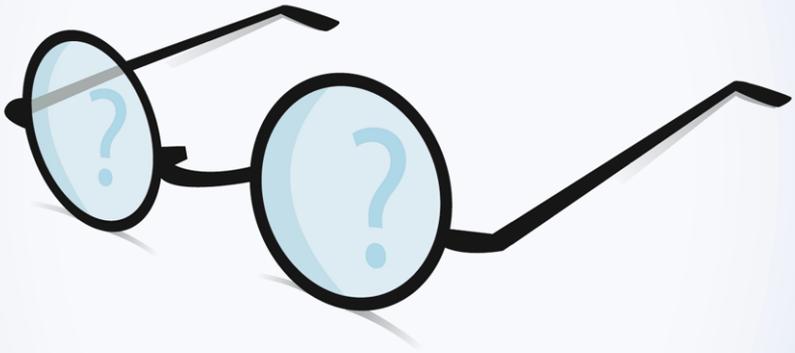




THE RIDDLES OF HARRY POTTER



SECRET PASSAGES AND
INTERPRETIVE QUESTS



SHIRA WOLOSKY



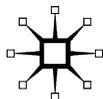
The Riddles of *Harry Potter*

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*Secret Passages and Interpretive
Quests*

Shira Wolosky

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*“Oh, I would never dream of assuming I know all of
Hogwarts’ secrets.”*
Albus Dumbledore 4:23, 417

*To my children: Tali, Elazar, Tamar, and Nomi who grew up
with Harry Potter and have been my closest and most
constant consultants*

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Note on References

References to the Harry Potter books throughout this text will be by book and chapter numbers in the American editions published by Scholastic, Inc.: *Book 1, Book 2, Book 3, 1999; Book 4, 2000; Book 5, 2003; and Book 6, Book 7, 2007*. Other cited works by J.K. Rowling are the following: *The Tales of Beedle the Bard (London: Bloomsbury, 2008); Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them (London: Bloomsbury, 2001); and Quidditch Through the Ages (London: Bloomsbury, 1985)*. I refer however to the magic stone of immortality in the first book as the Philosopher's Stone rather than the Sorcerer's Stone of the American title.

Chapter 1

The Magic of Harry Potter

The world of *Harry Potter* is a world of riddles and secrets, which is to say, one of hidden and then discovered meanings. Magical objects, magical creatures, things that happen, and tasks that are undertaken are all filled with significance beyond what meets the eye. There are coded instructions; hidden corridors and rooms; unseen doorways and houses; secret passwords and passageways; and dreams, visions, and runes to decipher. The very language of the books is filled with codes, puns, and puzzles. In fact, all around in the books there are secret worlds readers at first miss the signs of. The importance of riddles and secrets is hinted in chapter titles such as “The Very Secret Diary,” “Hermione’s Secret,” “The Riddle House,” and “The Secret Riddle.” There is the Unknowable Room and the Chamber of Secrets. Dumbledore, too, it turns out, has secrets in his life: “He learned secrecy,” as his brother, Aberforth, accuses, “at our mother’s knee” (7:28, 562).¹ Then there is the villain named Tom Riddle. This name is itself a riddle concealed by another name, one which is also hidden since most fear to pronounce it and, like so many other words and objects in the books, is itself a riddle: *Voldemort* may mean, in a play on French, “flight-from-death” or perhaps, from German, “will-to-death.” There are even more possible meanings.

The riddles in *Harry Potter* tend to have not one solution, but many. In this, they are true to literary meaning as such. Literature is writing that always opens to further interpretations. The power of literary images and figures, structures and sequences is that they always mean more, leading down not one path but many, into deeper understandings and new possibilities.² Interpretation is required to unlock these meanings, and *Harry Potter*—with its riddles, puzzles, codes, and secrets—is also very much a story about interpretation. It tracks the characters’ attempts to identify and penetrate the secrets and riddles, in an active pursuit that underscores the importance and vitality of interpretation itself. Harry himself is a hero of riddles, not only because of his power to solve them, but also because of who he is and what he (and the reader) discovers about himself. Harry

remains imperfect, familiar, and ordinary in many ways. But, like other fairy-tale heroes, he also has unrecognized worth.³ And this is true not only of Harry, but of other children and people around him. There are secret dimensions in them (and in us readers), which the books awaken us to. Riddles summon Harry and the other characters, and readers along with them, to seek a level of understanding that requires constant energy and commitment.⁴ In this sense, the main action in the Harry Potter books, weaving through all the texts, their events, their twists and turns and magical objects and actions, is interpretation itself. The books challenge us to ponder: How do we put together the information we receive? According to what expectations and understandings do we approach what we see and experience, and how do these expectations direct us toward one interpretation or another? What do we do with pieces of information that do not fit into our expectations and paradigms?⁵ What is the impact if the picture abruptly changes, and what seemed to mean one thing instead means another, in an altogether unexpected fashion?

Indeed, the Harry Potter books are full of suddenly changing interpretations. What looked like one thing turns out to be another. A character who seemed good turns out to be bad; and a seemingly bad character, to be good.⁶ A whole course of events heads in completely unforeseen and even misunderstood directions. Earlier books in the series take on utterly different meanings in light of later ones. The meanings of magical objects unfold and change. But we live now in a world in which long-accepted understandings are in fact under constant pressure, and in which we realize more and more that the keys to what we see and know are the patterns of understanding we bring to our experiences, not some given facts with clear and stable meanings. *Harry Potter* reflects our contemporary world with its complicated, dangerous, and often unexpected turns and challenges.

In many ways the Potter books are classically patterned as quests, but in the broadest sense, what Harry and those around him pursue are secrets and riddles. In this sense the “quest” is the act of interpretation itself. What the books also show is that such interpretation is never-ending, since the world we live in is one of inexhaustible meanings. Our interpretations can always be altered, as we encounter experiences we never suspected were even possible.⁷ This wonder of ever new interpretation that leads to greater understanding of ourselves, others, and the world we live in is the greatest power of literature, and the ultimate magic of *Harry Potter*.

Ordinary Worlds and Magic Ones

Most books of magic take place in an entirely separate world, to which ordinary people—if there are any—are somehow transported. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, is set in a separate Middle Earth. C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* transport British children to the land of Narnia. Or, magical characters are introduced into our world, as is the case with Mary Poppins.⁸ In *Harry Potter*, however, Rowling builds a magic world that not only exists alongside the ordinary one but also within it, so that the two constantly mingle with each other.⁹ The magic world is officially hidden from the non-magical Muggle one, through the International Law of Secrecy introduced in 1689 in order to protect wizards from Muggles. Yet, for those who know where to look and what to do and say, London is filled with sudden entrances and hidden avenues into the magic world: Platform Nine and Three Quarters at King's Cross Station; 12 Grimmauld Place, unnoticed between numbers 11 and 13 in an irregularity that the street has gotten used to); the broken telephone booth that serves as visitor's entrance into the Ministry of Magic; the closed-for-refurbishment shop front for Purge & Dowse, Ltd., from which a mannequin will beckon entry into St. Mungo's Hospital, all are unnoticed portals into the world of magic. Farther north, Hogwarts appears to the Muggle eye as a ruined castle, its "Danger—No Entrance" sign warning visitors away. The other schools of magic are similarly hidden. Scattered villages, such as Godric's Hollow, harbor the families and histories of wizards invisibly among cottages and monuments and graveyards. Anywhere the characters go they may stumble across, or walk unknowingly by, entryways to these hidden places. Tapping on bricks in the yard of the Leaky Cauldron, the pub scrunched invisibly between two storefronts, leads one into Diagon Alley. But a leaky cauldron is itself an image of the whole magic world, which is porous and penetrable— an image that could apply likewise to the ordinary world. (Percy Weasley's compulsive campaign against leaky cauldrons comically underscores the futility of such an effort.)

Magic in *Harry Potter* works in two directions. There is the presence of magic in the ordinary world, showing Britain to be a world full of hidden mystery. But there is also the portrayal of the magic world in concrete detail, with an exactness that, in a kind of inverse realism, makes its workings seem vividly actual. This is not, however, in order to create an alternative to the real world, but to reflect and interpret the familiar world we inhabit.¹⁰ The Potter world enchants not because it is so alien but because we recognize in it our own. On one

side this opens a sense of wonder and mystery about the inexhaustible possibilities inherent in reality, but ordinarily hidden. On the other, the magic world duplicates conditions in the actual world, mirroring our lives in ways that can be wish-fulfilling but also nightmare-haunted, an alternative space that everywhere turns us back to the reality we inhabit.

The central scene of magical events for Harry throughout most of the books is the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. *Harry Potter* is often described as another boarding-school book in a long line of them, which of course it is.¹¹ But what is the attraction of school books in the first place? The school, especially the boarding school, offers an image of a world with its own society, its own rules, its own geography of buildings and campuses, its own authorities and hierarchies, and its own activities and subjects of study. For everyone, school is to some extent a second world, the boarding school even more so. Yet, although separate from it in specific ways, school also remains part of the outside world.

The realistic details that serve to bind magical school life to ordinary reality are extensive and elaborate. Hogwarts has courses and textbooks, studying and exams, sports and clubs (Charm Club seems to be a pun on Charm School), cliques and rivalries, punishments and detentions. It has its fads and fashions. When Harry asks Lupin about the Levicorpus jinx, Lupin grows nostalgic: “Oh that one had a great vogue during my time at Hogwarts . . . It was very popular . . . you know how these spells come and go” (6:16, 336). There are carefully detailed scholarly journals, such as *Transfiguration Today*, *Charms in Charming*, and *The Practical Potioneer* (7:2, 17), as well as a whole library of books used in school and elsewhere (Molly has her own preferred household reference books). Charm and Transfiguration lessons entail all the difficulties of mastering any real-life school assignments. Neville accidentally transfers his ears to a cactus. His hedgehog, transfigured into a pincushion, cringes every time a pin comes near it (4:15, 233). Exams can go wrong as well. In a transfiguration test to change a teapot into a turtle, one student worries hers “still had a spout for a tail—what a nightmare”; another asks, “Were the tortoises supposed to breathe steam?” (3:16, 317) As to potions, their effects are most carefully calibrated and regulated. Slughorn warns that, “in excess,” the lucky potion “causes giddiness, recklessness and dangerous overconfidence and is a banned substance in organized competitions . . . sporting events, for instance, examinations, or elections” (6:9, 187–188). The euphoria potion has side effects: “You’ve added just a sprig of peppermint, haven’t you?”

A stroke of inspiration, of course that would tend to counterbalance the occasional side effect of excessive singing and nose-tweaking.” Love potions must be used within date. The use of Veritaserum, the truth potion, is carefully controlled and requires Ministry of Magic authorization (4:27, 516).¹²

The Hogwarts school curriculum not only mimes the sort of schedule and concerns that are also characteristic in non-magical schools (including vivid accounts of exam anxiety), but incorporates both magical and non-magical history, bringing them into complex mutual reflection. Although never herself wanting to be a witch, through inventing the Potter world, Rowling says, “I’ve learned a ridiculous amount about alchemy. Perhaps much of it I’ll never use in the books, but I have to know in detail what magic can and cannot do in order to set the parameters and establish the stories’ internal logic.”¹³ Magic in fact has been a part of normative history. Natural philosophers, including Nicholas Flamel (d. 1418), genuinely sought the Philosopher’s Stone. When Hermione investigates the “local history of witchcraft” during a holiday in France (3:1, 11), she is doing concrete historical research. All too real are the persecutions recounted in Bathilda’s *History of Witchcraft*, even if the magical community has its own viewpoint of them:

Non-magic people were afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognizing it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame Freezing Charm. (3:1, 2)

Yet as Babbitt Rabbity in *Beedle the Bard* shows, the witch hunts were very violent and the outcomes stunningly bloody.¹⁴ Here magical and non-magical history do not so much mirror each other as intersect. Historical witch persecutions in the Renaissance serve as the background for the drafting of the Statute of Secrecy in the Potter books. And witches—to the extent that they were hunted, tortured, and burned—are very real actors in normative history.¹⁵

Consistently throughout the books, magic is clearly a figure for contemporary technology.¹⁶ The devices of magic in many cases represent and reenact technological apparatus on which we daily rely. Arthur Weasley, who is constantly marveling at the ingenuity of Muggles as they manage without wizardry through their own mechanical, electrical, and other technological contrivances, underscores this reflection.¹⁷ Muggle machinery cannot be employed within the wizarding world since magic interferes with the functioning of its machines. And

magic, like technology—or rather technology, like magic—requires training to master both the extent of and the limits to its powers, what it can and cannot accomplish, the responsibility entailed in its exercise, and the morality of its applications. Dumbledore tells the boy Tom Riddle when interviewing him before his entry into Hogwarts, “We teach you not only to use magic, but to control it” (6:13, 273). The use of school itself as an image makes central this effort to learn not only the power of magic but also the dangers of its misuse, as well as the need to control and direct the power it bestows. This power of magic for good or evil, depending on its purposes and controls, puzzles the Muggle prime minister when he learns that the wizarding world is at war: “You can do magic! Surely you can sort out anything.” But the (ex-) Minister of Magic Fudge answers, “The trouble is, the other side can do magic, too” (6:1, 18).

Dursleys and Weasleys

If the magic world mirrors the Muggle one, the Muggle one in turn is penetrated by magic. This is the case despite the Muggle world’s inability to perceive the magic surrounding and within it, indeed, despite its adamant resistance to magic and refusal to acknowledge it. The Dursley family embodies this non-magical militancy. The Dursleys do everything in their power to seal their home against Harry’s magical presence. There is a struggle to keep out any world other than their own. They guard the borders of their own reality like a tightly shut box. The essence of “Dursleyism”: is to resist any intrusion, any expansion, any shadow, or any brightness beyond the world of their very tidy, very clean suburban house and lawn.¹⁸ Life is a job with drills, dinner hours, and television. The Dursley battle against Harry goes beyond simple dislike of him or even resentment of a burden thrust upon them. It is rooted in their rejection of anything beyond their own horizon, anything that challenges their interpretation of their world.

Yet, their efforts to limit and control magic fail. Harry’s magical nature stubbornly escapes, like steam from a teakettle, the Dursley family’s attempts to suppress him. They close him in a cupboard under the stairs—a strong image of both parental and psychological repression—and lock him in, and then put bars on his room. They starve him and leave him behind when they go out, and treat him as if he doesn’t exist when they are in. They ask him to disappear, as at their suck-up dinner party. They are determined not to “tolerate

mention of... abnormality under this roof" (2:1, 2). They say, "Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?" (1:3, 36).

But magic penetrates the tidy, compulsive Dursley world. Though they try to ignore the "strange and mysterious things" that are "happening all over the country" (1:1, 2), Harry arrives on their doorstep, sternly watched by a cat reading a map. Harry's letters of acceptance to Hogwarts invade the closed crannies of their sealed-shut home. Mrs. Figg, whom the Dursleys count on to keep Harry out of the way, turns out to be a Squib ("Of course I know Dumbledore; who doesn't know Dumbledore?" [5:2, 21]). The escape of Sirius Black is reported on their news (3:2, 16). Dementors appear in an alleyway of their comfortable suburb of Little Whinging. In the last book, the Dursleys are driven from home and work, assigned magical protectors whose resumé's they cannot inspect. Not only the Dursleys' own lives, but the entire non-magical world has lost its boundedness against the uncanny. The disasters reported on the television news "aren't accidents—the crashes and explosions and derailments and whatever else has happened since we last watched the news. People are disappearing and dying and he's behind it—Voldemort" (7:3, 34). The Muggles who have been reported as dead from a gas leak are actually victims of the Killing Curse (7:22, 439), just as Pettigrew's attack on Sirius was originally reported as a gas explosion (3:3, 40). The title of the chapter in which Harry first performs magic (freeing the boa constrictor at the zoo)—"The Vanishing Glass"—suggests, as so many chapter titles do, not just this event but a whole theme: the disappearing barrier between the ordinary world and one that is uncanny, mysterious, and marvelous, as well as untamed and challenging to norms and securities.

The Dursleys incarnate not only coercive conformity, but a wilful interpretive refusal. They are bad readers, glued to interpretive frameworks that refuse to acknowledge any anomalies that challenge their expectations and preconceived understandings.

At the opposite pole are the Weasleys: "Life in the Burrow was as different as possible from life on Privet Drive. The Dursleys liked everything neat and ordered; the Weasleys' house burst with the strange and unexpected" (2:3, 40). If the Dursleys offer a severely normal view with no room for magic, the Weasleys offer a magic view into the Muggle world. As Hermione says of Muggle Studies, "It is fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view" (3:4, 57). Arthur Weasley is endlessly enchanted with Muggle artifacts: "Ingenious really how many ways Muggles have found of getting along

without magic” (2:4, 42). Muggle things become strange puns in his mouth: “firelegs” for arms, “fellytone” for telephone, “eclectic” for electric, “escapators” for escalators (2:3, 30). Though Arthur himself is employed in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, Fred says that if his father “raided our house he’d have to put himself under arrest.” On the other hand, from their magical perspective, the Weasleys view the non-magical world critically. When Harry asks about doctors at St. Mungo’s Hospital, Ron answers, “Doctors? Those Muggle nutters that cut people up? Nah, they’re healers” (5:22, 484). There is in fact an elaborate and meticulously thought-through medical system, with different departments for different magical ailments and cures: Artifact Accidents, Creature-Induced Injuries, Magical Bugs, Potion and Plant Poisoning, and Spell Damage—all completely hidden from Muggle view.

Arthur Weasley marvels at Muggle blindness to magic. Explaining jinxes that make keys shrink, he observes: “Of course, it’s very hard to convict anyone because no Muggle would admit their key keeps shrinking—they’ll insist they just keep losing it. Bless them, they’ll go to any lengths to ignore magic, even if it’s staring them in the face” (2:3, 38). The Weasleys are as open to new experiences as the Dursleys are closed. They are equally accepting of Muggles, Muggle-borns, half-bloods, and half-breeds. Proudly, they are “blood traitors,” rejecting the categories of ethnicity within the magical world that, in the books, give rise to hatred, violence, and evil. Fred and George particularly epitomize irreverence. Like human Bludgers, they batter arbitrary rules and social barriers, puncture pompousness, and defy convention. Their honesty and mockery of arbitrary authority become a moral and political weapon against Umbridge in Book 5: “We reckon a bit of mayhem,” said George, “is exactly what our dear new Head deserves,” said Fred (5:28, 553). Their quickly legendary “flight to freedom” serves as a model of dissent, protest, and resistance.

Yet the Weasleys are susceptible to the same concerns and troubles as Muggles are. The magic world, however special, is no more sealed off than the Muggle one is. Arthur’s career suffers from the politics of the Ministry of Magic, which frowns upon his Muggle sympathies. When Ron, Fred, and George steal a car to rescue Harry from the Dursleys, Molly screeches, “You could have died, you could have been seen, you could have lost your father his job” (2:3, 33). And while the Weasleys, unlike Dark wizards, scorn the racist categories of blood purity, pointing out how hypocritical they are—without intermarriage the wizard population would dwindle to nothing—even the

Weasleys “don’t mention” a Muggle second cousin accountant they are embarrassed to acknowledge (1:6, 94). Nor do they question the enslavement of the house-elves.

But the Weasleys are not entrapped by their prejudices or the boundaries of their world. Theirs is a project of reinterpretation, ever open to new experiences and new categories of understanding. In the end, Ron recognizes the personhood of the elves. The Weasleys welcome into their family life Hermione, who is Muggle-born; Fleur, who is part-Veela; Lupin, who is a werewolf; and Hagrid, who is half-giant. Bill works with goblins (and later is himself bitten by a werewolf), Charlie with dragons, and Arthur with the Muggle world. The Weasley family itself represents differences and independent views even while sustaining strong commitments, loyalties, and love. Molly and Arthur with their characteristic bickering dramatize that disagreement and contention can coexist with attachment. In the Hogwarts anthem, each student sings his and her own melody (Fred and George, choose an especially eccentric funeral dirge). Common life does not require uniformity. The seven Weasley siblings are strong contrasting images to the seven Horcruxes of Voldemort. Voldemort’s Horcruxes contain pieces torn from his own soul in a fruitless self-reproduction. The Weasley siblings affirm difference as well as relationship, with all the contention and revision this entails, as opposed to replication. Though Percy breaks the family bonds, siding with the Ministry of Magic against his father, he is also permitted to return to them. And Ginny, as sister in the Weasley family, stands as counter-image to Voldemort’s mother Merope, who is abjectly under her father and brother’s control. Ginny, on the other hand, utterly refuses to allow her brothers to oversee her doings.

Word Riddles

The wizarding world has many kinds of magic, but fundamental among all of them is the magic of words. Not only the spells, but also the magical objects and persons are made of word play. The Harry Potter books are filled with word puzzles and puns; portmanteau words—so named by Lewis Carroll, referring to a word made out of combinations of other words; anagrams, which reorder the letters of words; word play with multiple languages; as well as crossing references to other literatures, myths, and lore. When the Weasleys come to take Harry from the Dursleys so he can go with them to the World Quidditch Cup, they have to blast their way through the

Dursleys' boarded-up chimney. Mr. Weasley tries to explain: "I had your fireplace connected to the Floo Network...I've got a useful contact at the Floo Regulation Panel and he fixed it for me...I'll light a fire to send the boys back, and then I can repair your fireplace before I Disapparate." Harry is "ready to bet that the Dursleys hadn't understood a single word of this" (4:4, 45). *Harry Potter* creates not only a special world, but also a special language, in which—as with government, history, school, and other matters—there are strange reflections of our ordinary ways with words.

Harry Potter is densely packed with puns, anagrams, and portmanteaus. One of the most important portmanteaus is "Pensieve," combining the word *pensive* (thoughtful) with the word *sieve* (to filter) meaning to filter thoughts, which is what the Pensieve does. There is a further pun in that entering the Pensieve involves "diving into other people's memories" (6:20, 430). This metaphor for memory becomes the magical act of plunging into the Pensieve and other people's pasts. The "Floo" Network plays on *flue* (part of a chimney) and *flew* (the past tense of flight). "Apparate" and "Disapparate" combine the words *appear*, *disappear*, and *evaporate*. The "Knight Bus" rescues like a knight in the night. "Knockturn Alley" is nocturnal in its dark arts, which can give one a hard knock or turn. "Diagon Alley" re-spells *diagonally*. "Spellotape" reminds one of the magic spell cast by scotch tape. "Grimmauld Place" is a grim old place. "Gringotts" suggests greed for gold ingots. Hermione works out the pun on "bugging," discovering Rita Skeeter to be a beetle (4:28, 546). "Remembrall" is a ball to aid remembering. "Portkey" is the key to transport through what magically becomes a door (*port* is French for door), thus a porthole to another place. Flutterby" (the bush) is an anagram for *butterfly*. "Erised" is an anagram spelling *desire* backwards. "Scrimgoeur" seems to combine *grim* with *coeur* (French for "heart"), although Rowling also hints that it is a portmanteau combination of "scraggy and grim" (7:7, 121). "Boggart" is a play on *bog*, that is, swamp; and on *mind-boggling*, when the mind bogs down from fear. "Durmstrang" plays on *Sturm und Drang*, the German Romantic movement. "Horcrux," as will be further discussed, may suggest something crucial (the crux) projected outside (from the French *dehors*). "Hallow" means to make holy. "Hogwarts" itself is a portmanteau word, deflating hoary institutions. "Dementor" is one of a group of words used in the books that are based in the Latin root word *mens* (mind). "Dementors" distort the mind, "Legilimens" read it, and "Occlumens" close or occlude it. "Aguamenti" summons water (*aqua*) with an act of the mind.

Harry Potters's magic spells are, of course, mainly Latin and further embedded in word play. "Expelliarmus," the Disarming Charm, comes from the word *expel*; "Protego," the Shield Charm, comes from *protect*. "Expecto Patronum" expects the patron-guardian. Hermione casts spells of protection around their tent when the friends are in flight and hiding: "Protego Totalum," total protection; "Salvia Hexia," hexing the forest; and "Mufflatio," muffling sounds. "Reparo" repairs; "Confundis" confounds. "Veritaserum" forces its drinker to tell the truth (*veritas*). "Imperio," the curse of control, commands imperiously; "Cruciato," the torture curse, is excruciating. As for the Killing Curse, "Avada Kadavra" takes the one spell even ignorant Muggles have heard of, Abra Cadabra, and makes it deadly ("kadavra" suggests *cadaver*, a corpse).

Chapter titles involve a range of word play, puns, and symbolic meanings as well: "Aunt Marge's Big Mistake" is about the mistake of making her big. "Grim Defeat" recalls Sirius's Dog Animagus shape as the Grim omen foretelling imminent death. "Elf Tails" tells tales of tailing. "Will and Won't" puns on the will by which Sirius has left Harry his house on Grimmauld Place and Kreacher (whose name allegorically suggests every creature), the Black family elf who is inherited with the house, who "won't" accept Harry as master. "A Sluggish Memory" discusses Slughorn's memory, which he has tampered with to make it sluggish. Other chapter titles are often symbolic, pointing to larger issues beyond what happens immediately in them. For example, "The Vanishing Glass" suggests a vanishing line between the magic and Muggle worlds and is the first of many glasses and mirrors throughout the series. "Seen or Unforeseen" signals the books' deep concern with prophecy. "Beyond the Veil" actually details the impossibility of doing so, that is, of going beyond the veil to see what is on the other side of death. "Spinner's End" weaves a spider-like web around Snape's character. "After the Burial" points to the rebirths that are the books' deepest themes. Asked about "King's Cross," Rowling replies, "The name works rather well, and it has been established in the books as the gateway between two worlds, and Harry would associate it with moving on between two worlds (don't forget that it is Harry's image we see, not necessarily what is really there.)"¹⁹

Rowling provides a set of proverbs and idioms similar to ones readers are familiar with, yet rooted in her magic reality: "Don't cry over spilt potion"; "Wouldn't touch you with a ten foot broomstick"; "Don't count your owls before they are delivered." St. Mungo's has posted medical sayings: "A clean cauldron keeps potions from becoming poisons" and "Antidotes are anti-don'ts unless approved by a

qualified healer” (5:22, 484). Ron quotes wizard superstitions: “Jinx by twilight, undone by midnight”; “Wand of elder, never prosper.” (7:21, 414). Then there are terms that grow out of wizard experience. The wand produces wandlight, the arm holding it becomes the wandarm, and trees that produce proper woods are wandtrees. Snake language is Parseltongue; speakers are Parselmouths. Goblins speak Gobbledegook—a word in common circulation restored to magical contexts.

Perhaps the most obvious word-magic involves the names Rowling invents or takes from familiar places. Rowling’s name symbolism is very wide ranging. Some names are plainly allegorical. Kreacher obviously stands for all creatures and our treatment of them. Malfoy means bad (*mal*) faith (*foi*), a name that directly points to Spenser and traditions of allegory, as we will see. Draco means dragon, as is clear from the Hogwarts Motto: “Draco Dormiens Nunquam Tittillandus,” which is Hogwarts-Latin that means “don’t disturb sleeping dragons.” Draco’s eventual son’s name, Scorpius, carries on this noxious-lizard tradition. Lucius suggests Lucifer, and Narcissa, narcissism. Bellatrix (Narcissa’s sister) means the tricks of beauty (from the French *belle*) and/or those of war (from the Latin *bellum*). The surname LeStrange is obviously strange. Slytherins are slithering. Crabbe and Goyle, Malfoy’s henchmen, are crabby and gargoylish. Grindelwald, the Dark wizard, recalls Grindell, the monster defeated in the old English epic *Beowulf*, as well as the Battle of Grunwald that pitted Poland against the Teutonic Knights, one of the earliest German invaders of Polish territory. Dursleys are dastardly and thirsty (from the German *Durst*), while their address—Privet Drive—projects the intensely private, self-interested “drive” of its inhabitants. Bode means portend, something the Unmentionable worker in the Department of Mysteries clearly does in his attempt to resist the Imperius Curse Lucius casts on him. Quirrell is quarrelsome, querulous, and quibbling. Gilderoy Lockhart falsely “gilds” his actions with those really performed by others, is vain about his hair’s golden locks, and has a locked heart. Perhaps, in the context of the books, he is linked to lockets, which conceal dangerous forces.²⁰ Peeves is peevish, and a master of chaos. (Rowling explains: “He is a spirit of chaos that entered the building long ago and has proved impossible to eradicate.”)²¹ Mr. Filch is a filching sneak. His first name, Argus, refers to a giant in classical mythology that has one hundred eyes. Dolores Umbridge’s last name refers to taking umbrage, the tendency to take offense in pride and revenge. Her first name means sorrow, which is what people feel in encountering her. Gaunt and Crouch have names that aptly state the

characters of their owners. Pius Thickenesse piously marches “along the thickly carpeted corridor” of the Ministry (7:13, 247). Pettigrew grows petty. Griphook the goblin is grasping. Mundungus is “dung” for short. Snape is a portmanteau word combining *snake*, *snoop*, *snode*, *snipe*, and *sneak*. Severus is both severe and severed (cut in two).

Flitwick, the Charms professor, reflects the subject of Charms that he teaches in his flickering, wicklike name. Slughorn suggests hitting and sloth. Slug Club combines two aggressive words that both imply hitting. Lupin means wolf, and Romulus—Lupin’s code name on the illegal radio broadcast Potterwatch—was suckled by wolves according to the legend of the founding of Rome. Lee Jordan’s code name on Potterwatch is River, as fits both “lee” and “Jordan.” Kingsley Shacklebolt (bolting away from shackles?) is called Royalty on Potterwatch; and Fred, after the insulting “Rodent” as referring to his last name Weasley, insists that his code name be changed to Rapier.

From Greek, Xenophilus means lover (*philo*) of the strange (*xeno*). In Xenophilus Lovegood, this is both a good and a bad quality. The surname Lovegood seems more apt for his daughter Luna, whose oddness suggests lunacy to some, as is evident in her nickname, Loony. Sirius is, fittingly, both the dog constellation and a pun on “serious” (as Vernon Dursely mishears). The Black family starts off associated with the Dark Lord but in the end—in the persons of Sirius, Regulus, Andromeda, and Tonks—turns to the side of light with Dumbledore. Moody is indeed moody. Stan Shunpike’s is a comment on his driving, which shuns the turnpike. Madame Maxime is, as half-giant, maximal. The vampire Sanguini’s name comes from the Latin word for blood. Hagrid, perhaps is related to the word *hagridden* which, according to Rowling, is Old English for “having a bad night.” Perhaps it also suggests haggard, although he is really more ragged. Hagrid’s first name, Rubeus, perhaps refers to rubies which also adorn Gryffindor’s sword. There seems a general tendency in the books to give French names to darker characters and Anglo-Saxon names to brighter ones. “Dumbledore” comes from Old English while “Voldemort” has French origins. “Draco (for dragon) and Malfoy (bad faith) similarly contrasts with the plain Anglo-Saxon of “Harry Potter.”

Dumbledore’s is a comical name, as Rowling underscores when Mrs. Cole, the patroness of the orphanage where Tom Riddle grew up, confuses it with “Dumberton” and “Dunderbore” (6:13, 269). Its meaning of “bumblebee” hints of stumbling, but implies a host of other virtues as well as a hidden sting. “Dumbledore,” interestingly,

rhymes with and has the same rhythm as “Voldemort,” even while they stand deeply opposed to each other. Dumbledore’s name suggests his lack of pompousness, his whimsical humor, and also perhaps the word *humble*. On the other hand, “Albus” is a gracious name derived from *alb*, meaning “white,” as in the term *Alba*, a song of sunrise, and *Aubade*, a poem of lovers parting at dawn.

Hermione, Rowling says, is a Shakespearean name. “I consciously set out to choose a very unusual name for Hermione because I didn’t want a lot of very hard-working little girls to be teased if ever the book was published because she is a very recognizable type, to which I belonged when I was younger.”²² But the name also derives from *Hermes*, the herald of the gods (although Hermione irritably declares, “I am not an Owl” when she is asked to pass messages between feuding Ron and Harry).

As for the name “Weasley,” Rowling obviously has a weasel in mind, evident from Mr. Weasley’s Patronus, which takes that shape; Ron’s fury when Zacharias Smith asks if Harry’s trying to “weasel out” of teaching Defense; and Fred’s refusal to be called “Rodent” on Potterwatch. The Burrow, the Weasley home, is appropriate as well. When Mr. Crouch calls Percy “Weatherby,” we are reminded how odd their name really is. Perhaps Weasley refers to the Catweazle series featuring an eccentric, incompetent, disheveled eleventh century wizard caught in the year 1970, who must solve a 12-part riddle, and who mistakes all modern technology for powerful magic. But the Weasley first names suggest nobility and royalty: Arthur, William, Charles, Frederick, and George all are the names of kings. Percival was a Knight of the Round Table, Ronald is from *Rögnvaldr*, which means “having the gods’ power.” Ginny, as we learn in Book 7, is short not for Virginia, but Ginevra, a form of Guinevere. Ginepro means “juniper” in Italian. A Juniper tree stands in the background of the portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci painted by Leonardo da Vinci, of a red-headed woman who was a humanist in her own right (I have no idea if Rowling had this portrait in mind when conceiving Ginny’s character). Molly’s name suggests “mollycoddling” (6:5, 90), as well as “to mollify,” which is one of her roles, although often in the guise of indignation: she is no softy, as we see in the end.

Perhaps (I like to think) Weasley is a kind of plural form of “we” (as in “we’s.”) Maybe the name Weasley (rhymes with measly?) is intended to mock pretentiousness, as is Fred and George’s transformation of Percy’s Head Boy badge to read Bighead Boy (3:4, 67). Or, more generally, assigning this name to the warm and loving family may be a way of elevating the lowly, showing the value of a family

with a comical name and no wealth? The Weasleys thus stand as opposites to the Malfoys, wealthy aristocrats with a dignified, if also threatening name. The Weasleys are poor, and they are the ultimate “blood-traitors,” rejecting resolutely the privileging of blood-purity and hatred of those who lack it that fuels so much evil.

The name of Voldemort is especially hedged with power. An anagram, it is built out of the letters of the name Tom Riddle that he wishes to disown: “Tom Marvolo Riddle” becomes “I am Lord Voldemort.” Voldemort’s name is a mask—not a revelation—a way to hide from himself and others and thus to intimidate and gain power over them. He wished from the start, Dumbledore explains, “to be different, separate, notorious. He shed his name...and created the mask of ‘Lord Voldemort’ behind which he has hidden so long” (6:13, 277). Riddle despises his given name, Tom, as ordinary. When he comes into power, he weaves taboos around the saying of his name, and is referred to, by most characters throughout the books, by the phrase “You-Know-Who” or “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” This is another aspect of Voldemort’s attempt to play god.

This bid for power Dumbledore resists. Voldemort’s name is an extension of his terror. In the very first chapter of the first book Dumbledore tells McGonagall: “I have never seen any reason to be frightened of saying Voldemort’s name” (1:1, 11). Later he says to Harry himself: “Call him Voldemort. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself” (1:17, 298). Yet Snape warns Harry against naming Voldemort, explaining, “Professor Dumbledore is an extremely powerful wizard. While he may feel secure enough to use the name...the rest of us...” ought not to (5:24, 532). During the ambush at the Ministry of Magic attempting to obtain for Voldemort possession of the prophecy, Bellatrix hisses at Harry: “You dare speak his name” (5:35, 784). And, in fact, in the seventh book the name becomes actively cursed, exposing and stripping protection from anyone who dares to utter it. This is how Harry is trapped and captured (7:22, 445). “Don’t say the name!” Ron shouts, “It feels like a—a jinx, or something...Just show You-Know-Who some respect” (7:14, 273). To Voldemort himself, however, people are “worthless, nameless men” (7:27, 550). Refusing to be intimidated, Dumbledore insists on calling Voldemort “Tom” when he comes to request the job teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts: “To me you will always be Tom Riddle.” This is a “refusal to allow Voldemort to dictate the terms of the meeting” (6:20, 441–442). Harry, too, returns to calling Voldemort “Tom Riddle” in their final duel.