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Ruddy Stargazers: Centaurs, Philosophers, and a Life worth Living¹

Anne J. Mamary

You are a star-gazer, my Aster: if only I were the sky, so that I could look at you with a multitude of eyes

--Plato².

In the end, it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was your heart that saved you.

--Albus Dumbledore³

I first read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in my thirties, two or three years after it was published. By the time *Goblet of Fire* was released, I was standing in a bookstore line at midnight with a bunch of teenagers in Hogwarts robes waiting as if we were on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ for the scarlet steam engine to transport us to the world of magic. Plato, too, tells the story of a journey at the start of the *Republic* (*Politeia* in the Greek). Socrates says, "I went down to Piraeus with Glaucon, son of Ariston" for the festival of Bendis, the Thracian moon goddess, newly introduced in Greece).⁴ Plato invites readers to join in on the nightlong conversation that might well transport us to a whole new world.

Rowling's novels are largely set at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and are about education at the most obvious level. From the Sorting on the first night, to how the young students treat each other and what commitments they develop toward the school and the

¹ From *The Alchemical Harry Potter: Essays on Transfiguration* in J.K. Rowling's Novels © 2020 Edited by Anne J. Mamary by permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640. www.mcfarlandbooks.com.

² Diogenes Laertius 3.29, translated by Mitchell Parks, Knox College.

³ Rowling (2002) 844.

⁴ R. 327a.

world beyond, Rowling invites readers to think about justice. Though Plato's *Politeia* is surely an examination of justice in both the person and the community, it, too, about education in the sense of what and how a person ought to study in order to become just and to build a just society. Harry's education makes Number 4 Privet Dr. more strange every year. When Socrates and Glaucon finally return to Athens, they, too, have rethought who they and their society are at a foundational level. The Dursleys might think of Harry as a "ruddy stargazer," as Hagrid describes the Hogwarts Centaurs.⁵ Socrates was also sometimes dismissed as a "star-gazer, an idle babblers."⁶

Yet the Centaurs and the philosophers might be stargazers in another sense. Both Rowling and Plato suggest we become stargazers like the half-human, half-horse Centaurs at Hogwarts and like Socrates, who is described as the half-goat, half-human Satyr in Plato's *Symposium*.⁷ Rowling's Centaurs are able practitioners of Divination, while Satyrs were consorts of the Greek god Dionysus, known for "crossing and transgressing the border between the divine and the human world."⁸ Rowling's Centaurs and Plato's philosophers believed our individual and collective lives were microcosms of the vast cosmos and that we might read patterns there to help us navigate the "ship of state" with care for the whole community, as "true pilots."⁹

As his characters in the *Politeia* try to define justice, however, Plato shows that most have a focus much closer to the Earth, as if the human being were the center of the universe rather than one part of an immense living cosmos. Early in the conversation, Thraysmachus insists that justice is "the advantage of the stronger."¹⁰ Voldemort operates by this definition as does Lucius Malfoy when he ostentatiously supplies racing brooms for the Slytherin Quidditch team on the condition that Draco play Seeker.¹¹ In *Sorcerer's Stone*, Professor Quirrell, who is host to the disembodied Voldemort, says that in his misguided youth, he was "full of ridiculous ideas about good

⁵ Rowling (1997) 254.

⁶ R. 488e.

⁷ *Smp.* 215b.

⁸ Näsström (2003) 139.

⁹ R. 488d.

¹⁰ R. 344c.

¹¹ Rowling (1997) 111.

and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.”¹²

Plato’s brother Glaucon explains what he sees to be the common view of justice, which is different in degree but not in kind from Thrasymachus’ (and Voldemort’s) view. Glaucon reports that most people think “. . . justice . . . [is] a thing honoured in the lack of vigour to do injustice, since anyone who had the power to do it and was in reality ‘a man’ would never make a compact with anybody neither to wrong nor to be wronged; for he would be mad.”¹³ It is a contract, even one bitterly accepted, to avoid doing harm in exchange for not being harmed. While the Malfoys and Dursleys often abide by the contract of not harming in exchange for not being harmed, the Dursleys have also taught Dudley to have an attitude of superiority and entitlement, for example, rewarding him with praise for his greed when he whines about having fewer birthday presents as he turns eleven than he did at ten.¹⁴

When Dumbledore chides the Dursleys for “the appalling damage [they] have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between [them],”¹⁵ he is like Socrates who suggests to his interlocutors that they have misunderstood justice and that the misunderstanding has impoverished them. Socrates suggests that there are three categories of goods and that his friends have put justice into the wrong one. Socrates explains some things are chosen because they are good in themselves, like joy.¹⁶ In a second class, there are things chosen, like medicine or physical training, not because they are good in themselves and which may be downright unpleasant, because they lead to good results, like health or skill. The final and highest class, Socrates explains, are things that are chosen both for their own sakes and for their results. His friends have put justice into the class of bitter medicine for the sake of avoiding harm when, Socrates argues, it belongs in the class of things that are both good in themselves and good for their results—for the person and the community.¹⁷

¹² Rowling (1997) 291.

¹³ *R.* 359a–b.

¹⁴ Rowling (1997) 22.

¹⁵ Rowling (2005) 55.

¹⁶ *R.* 357b.

¹⁷ *R.* 357c.

I. Gyges' Ring and the Cloak of Invisibility

Both Rowling and Plato leave open the possibility of learning different habits of behavior or changing one's mind. Even Voldemort, whom Harry invites at the last moment to "'Be a man. . . . try . . . Try for some remorse.'"¹⁸ Even Thrasymachus and the whole company, whom Socrates invites to reconsider the lesson each learned from childhood that being a man means being able to abuse others without fear of punishment. In Plato's tale, a shepherd, climbing into a chasm in the earth, takes a ring from the corpse he found there as Voldemort took the Elder Wand from Dumbledore's tomb. The shepherd acted exactly how Glaucon or Thrasymachus might have expected him to act. He used the ring to seduce the queen, to overthrow the king, and to seize power for himself as Voldemort wanted to use the Wand to secure power for himself.¹⁹

If there were two such rings one on the hand of the just person and the other on the hand of the unjust, Plato's men are convinced there would be little to distinguish between the two. They are convinced that no one with such a ring would "persevere in justice and endure to refrain his hands from the possessions of others."²⁰ Plato and Glaucon's brother Adeimantus suggests that fathers teach their sons to seem just rather than to be just.²¹ The seeming gives a kind of invisibility behind which to gain wealth or power without regard for others or for punishment, as Lucius Malfoy warned Draco "that it is not—prudent—to appear less than fond of Harry Potter."²² The Cloak of Invisibility can also be used for narrow self-interest as Harry used it to sneak into Hogsmeade. He is filled with genuine remorse when Lupin reminds him, "Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive, Harry. . . . A poor way to repay them—gambling their sacrifice for a bag of magic tricks."²³ Though Harry learns from this abuse of invisibility, Glaucon and his friends need more convincing not to believe that Harry's problem was getting caught in the act, not the act itself.

¹⁸ Rowling (2007) 741.

¹⁹ *R.* 359d–360b.

²⁰ *R.* 360b.

²¹ *R.* 363a.

²² Rowling (1998) 55.

²³ Rowling (1999) 290.

But what if there were two such rings, Socrates asks them again, one on the hand of the entirely just person and the other on the hand of the entirely unjust? The idea of invisibility might allow the company to examine justice and injustice without the complicating factor of public opinion. The rings might reveal the wearers' true hearts and the virtue (*arête*) or true function of the human being. If the physician's virtue is to heal and the pilot's safe navigation of ships, is the soul's virtue not to be just? Is not the soul's virtue to provide for health and safe navigation through life and its goal and "advantage [as in the other arts] to be as perfect as possible?"²⁴

Even though he uses the same language as Thrasymachus—justice is the advantage of the stronger—what counts as advantage and what qualifies as strength have shifted nearly beyond recognition. Socrates continues, the one "who lives well is blessed and happy. . . . The just is happy and the unjust miserable."²⁵ The Cloak of Invisibility can also enable the best of behavior. Most of the time, Harry is inclined to use the Cloak to protect himself and others, as Socrates' hypothetical entirely just person practices justice both because it is the right thing to do in itself and because it brings about the good both of the individual and the whole community.

When Harry has money for the first time in his life, he spends it on as much as he can carry from the lunch trolley for Ron Weasley and himself and is happy, finally, "having never had anything to share before or, indeed, anyone to share it with."²⁶ Rather than guarding against the possibility of the other's injustice, the two new friends enact justice as something good in itself as they enjoy each other's society, happily eating their way through a pile of treats, Ron's corned-beef sandwiches abandoned on the seat nearby. It is a rare moment of sheer joy. At the same time, Ron and Harry practice justice for the good results it produces. Each gives the other something he craves: for Harry the friendship he has been denied for ten years and for Ron the singularity he rarely experiences with so many siblings. Rather than each taking whatever he can get, each gives to the other what the other needs and what he can give.

Socrates' friends really want to be convinced "justice belongs to the class of those highest goods which are desirable both for their

²⁴ R. 340d–341e.

²⁵ R. 353e–354a.

²⁶ Rowling (1997) 102.

consequences and still more for their own sake.”²⁷ And so Socrates suggests that they look for justice in the *polis*, since, he says, justice in the city is like justice in the person, but “perhaps, there would be more justice in the larger object and more easy to apprehend.”²⁸ Ron and Harry’s friendship, like Socrates’ city, is founded on human need and its inhabitants “live together as partners and helpers. . . . and . . . share things with one another, giving and taking.”²⁹ The city’s inhabitants each contribute their skills, and they live together in peace, with neither excess nor poverty (which is equally destructive).³⁰

Unfortunately, Glaucon is not convinced after hearing Socrates’ proposal, calling it a “city for pigs”³¹ and wanting “relishes and myrrh and incense and girls and cakes.”³² They want luxuries; they treat other people’s sexuality as a commodity; they value wealth and prestige above mutual support. They echo (or perhaps presage) Voldemort’s assessment of Snape’s love for Lily Evans, when he says, ““He desired her, that was all,””³³ reducing Snape’s love to the basest sort of desire as Socrates’ friends reduce what is important in their lives to luxuries. They want, as Socrates says, a “fevered city,” one which he tries to heal in the rest of the dialogue’s books much as Rowling tries to heal a world fevered with fear of Voldemort’s quest for dominance and an ordinary view of happiness tied to wealth and position.

II. A Tale of Two Sortings: The Myth of the Metals and the Sorting Hat’s Songs

Trying to help them to see that they are fevered with a desire for possessions and position, Socrates tells his friends the story of the metals in each of our souls precisely to help them heal their souls’ acquisitiveness. Plato’s story shows both that we are all kin and that we at the same time each have our own unique abilities.³⁴ Those with golden souls are wisest and fittest to leadership (they are not power-

²⁷ R. 367c–d.

²⁸ R. 368e.

²⁹ R. 369c.

³⁰ R. 372b–c.

³¹ R. 372d

³² R. 373a.

³³ Rowling (2007) 740.

³⁴ R. 414e.

hungry but hungry for a society that meets human need rather than greed); those with souls of silver are “sorted” into the guardians of society—both gentle and courageous; and the ones with souls of brass or ivory are the farmers and craftspeople, who have the predominant virtue of *sophrosune*, which is often translated as moderation or temperance, but which has the wider connotation of being level-headed under pressure or having excellence of character.

While many have interpreted the “myth” as evidence that Plato was an authoritarian, advocating a rigid class structure, another truth, the opposite truth, emerges from the story. We are born to follow our own lives, which are a combination of our connection to the universe—in the *Timaeus*, Plato links each human soul to a star—and our own choices, some made so frequently that they seem to have come from nature.³⁵ The story is a reversal of the commonly held idea that one is bound by one’s parents’ class and a reversal of the idea that rulers are the best (*aristos*) simply by accident of birth. The best are those who, like Harry, “have leadership thrust upon them, and take up the mantle because they must, and find to their own surprise that they wear it well.”³⁶ Each group has a predominant virtue, yet they are all siblings, born of the earth and strongest standing together. A microcosm of the city, each person has all of these virtues as well, and justice, both in the person and in the *polis*, is the harmony of wisdom, courage, and moderation or excellence of character.³⁷

In Rowling’s tale, the Hat prefaces each Sorting with a song, which operates something like Plato’s “Myth of the Metals.” The Sorting Hat can see something of the “heavenly imprint” in each student, while also recognizing the imprint of family and culture. The moderation of a virtuous Slytherin’s ambition must also be in the other houses, for it takes effort and determination to make good choices. It also takes Gryffindor courage not to back down in the face of adversity, and an ounce of Ravenclaw wit to know the difference. The friendship and loyalty of Hufflepuff is the justice or harmony of the whole. Near the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Dumbledore asks the assembled school to raise a glass to Cedric Diggory, murdered by Voldemort, saying ““Lord Voldemort’s gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally

³⁵ *Ti.* 41d–e.

³⁶ Rowling (2007) 718.

³⁷ *R.* 433e.

strong bond of friendship and trust.”³⁸ Cedric and Hufflepuff House represent the harmony—the friendship—of the person and the *polis*. The death of one good person, Cedric, is a loss; the death of Hufflepuff’s unifying qualities of friendship and loyalty, of persistence and hard work, is the loss of justice at Hogwarts, in all of our lives.

III. Ruddy Stargazers

The prisoners in Plato’s cave are chained at the neck and at the ankles and observe the images cast on the wall in front of them, thinking they are reality. When Glaucon remarks that they are “strange prisoners,” Socrates responds, they “are like to us.”³⁹ That is, they are ordinary people, like the kids who arrive at Hogwarts are ordinary people. The image makers are “the stronger” in Thrasymachus’ understanding of the word and maintain their power not with physical force but with a constant display of images, reinforcing the worldview that wealth and power are best and that justice is only a compromise to guard against others’ treachery.

Socrates offers an alternative in his description of the prisoner who breaks free, turns around, and sees the image makers at work. Climbing out of the cave, he or she realizes that there is a world of nature illuminated by the sun and, climbing higher still, a world of ideas illuminated by the Good, which, he says, is the parent of the Sun.⁴⁰ All of the prisoners have the power to turn their heads around and to see another possible world. Their hands are free; they are not gagged. Yet, they react to the prisoner who has broken free and comes back to report a world of basic fairness illuminated by the sun with the same confusion as the Dursleys have when Dumbledore tells them they have abused Dudley.

Socrates says that the cave is an allegory of education and explains that education is not about pouring “knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes.”⁴¹ Rather, education which ought to be an awakening of the powers already present in us; it is turning “the indwelling power of the soul”

³⁸ Rowling (2000) 723.

³⁹ R. 515a.

⁴⁰ R. 508b.

⁴¹ R. 518.

toward the Good.⁴² Describing a ship on which the crew has no understanding of navigation and nevertheless takes control, Plato writes, “They have no suspicions that the true pilot must give his attention to the time of the year, the seasons, the sky, the winds, the stars, and all that pertains to his art if he is to be a true ruler of a ship.”⁴³ In Socrates’ view, the philosopher as just and good ruler, or, as Socrates calls him or her, the “captain of the ship of state,” is a stargazer who uses “the blazonry of the heavens as patterns to aid in the study of those realities. . . . He will be willing to concede that the artisan (*demiurgos*) of heaven fashioned it and all that it contains in the best possible manner for such a fabric.”⁴⁴ It is not that the heavens—the stars and the planets—are in one realm and that our lives are in another. Rather, when the students of astronomy become philosophers, they are seeing and hearing the wisdom of the cosmos shining through our physical and temporal lives.⁴⁵

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, just as Hogwarts was founded, the study of astronomy, was “adopted by practitioners of magic, medicine, and alchemy”—and the Hogwarts’ Centaurs.⁴⁶ Like Plato’s philosophers, Rowling’s Centaurs are stargazers in the magical world, because they are looking for patterns in the heavens which might guide our lives. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, though, Hagrid shows that he has both an uncommonly close relationship with the Centaurs and a bit of impatience with them when he asks them if they’ve seen anything unusual in the forest only to get “‘Mars is bright tonight’” in response. “‘Never,’ said Hagrid irritably, ‘try an’ get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy stargazers. Not interested in anythin’ closer’n the moon.’”⁴⁷ In ruby red Rubeus Hagrid’s irritation, “‘ruddy stargazers,’” can be read as a dismissal. It is indeed to the heavens that the Centaurs cast their attention but, as Firenze suggests, as a mentor and guide. He tells the students, “In the past decade, the indications have been that Wizardkind is living through nothing more than a brief calm between two wars. Mars, bringer of battle, shines

⁴² R. 518b–d.

⁴³ R. 488b–e.

⁴⁴ R. 529e–530a.

⁴⁵ R. 530d.

⁴⁶ Joost-Gaugier (2006) 116.

⁴⁷ Rowling (1997) 253–254.

brightly above us, suggesting that the fight must soon break out again.”⁴⁸

IV. The Myth of Er and the Tale of the Three Brothers: A Life worth Living

With Socrates’ and the Centaurs’ shifts in angle of vision comes risk. Socrates recognizes that the just person or the person who has broken free of competitions among images of gold and power will face resistance and possibly violence.⁴⁹ Socrates refused to propose exile or escape from prison, saying “a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong.”⁵⁰ Firenze explains that Voldemort killing unicorns and drinking their blood to save his own life will pay a terrible price. He will have but a half-life, a cursed life,” Harry says, “But who’d be that desperate? If you’re going to be cursed forever, death’s better, isn’t it?”⁵¹

In “The Tale of the Three Brothers” near the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Rowling writes a story about human souls confronting mortality and morality, about what life is worth living. At the end of the *Politeia*, Plato writes a story from beyond the grave.

Er, believed to have died in battle, returns to life from his funeral pyre, to tell the story of death and choices. Each soul who went to the underworld drew a lot and was then given the choice of its next life. Most made choices that reflected the common view that money and position are most important. Yet the soul of Homer’s Odysseus made a different choice. His soul “got to make its choice last of all, and since memory of its former sufferings had relieved its love of honor, it went around for a long time, looking for the life of a private individual who did his own work, and with difficulty it found one lying off somewhere neglected by the others. He chose it gladly and said that he’d have made the some choice even if he’d been first.”⁵² Odysseus’ choice reminds readers of the healthy city Socrates described early in

⁴⁸ Rowling (2002) 603.

⁴⁹ *R.* 517a.

⁵⁰ *Ap.* 28b.

⁵¹ Rowling (1997) 258.

⁵² *R.* 620c–d.

the *Politeia* in which each person worked toward the good of the whole and in which there was neither poverty nor greed.

In Rowling's tale, each of the Peverell brothers choose a gift from death, a gift which both revealed something about their characters and shaped their future lives. The youngest, Ignotus, chose the Cloak, which allowed him to live his life accepting of his human mortality. Only Ignotus recognized that he could live a moral mortal life, eventually departing, friends with death.⁵³ He and Odysseus are like the ordinary citizens of Plato's healthy *polis*, who, after a long life of living well, "drinking their wine and hymning the gods, hand on a like life to their children,"⁵⁴ as Ignotus Peverell and James Potter handed on the Cloak to theirs. In the epilogue of *Deathly Hallows*, Harry and Ginny stand on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ seeing their son Albus Severus onto the Hogwarts Express. It seems as though Slytherin has been reconnected with its Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw friends and that there is more harmony in the world than there had been when Harry made his first trip to school. Despite his grief over his son's departure, Harry reaches to the lightening scar on his forehead and realizes it "had not pained him for seventeen years. All was well."⁵⁵ After a long conceptual journey through the night in Plato's *Politeia*, Socrates and his friends depart for home, both home and each of the friends transformed. Socrates wishes for them all, "both here and in that journey of a thousand years . . . *eu prattômen*," May we, all of us, do well.⁵⁶

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⁵³ Rowling (2007) 409.

⁵⁴ *R.* 372c–d.

⁵⁵ Rowling (2007) 759.

⁵⁶ *R.* 621c–d.

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