‘SPEAK TO ME, O MUSE... OF HARRY POTTER’

a retired Classics master prayed, as he wrote to J.K. Rowling’s publisher, offering to take up the
author’s request and translate Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone into ancient Greek.
Calliope, and perhaps Clio and Thalia* also, responded favourably. Andrew Wilson’s specimen
chapter was accepted and he was given a contract.
[* respectively the Muses of epic poetry, history and comedy]

Thus began what we mere mortals would consider an unachievable-huge exercise in prose
composition. Just as the ancients described the walls of Mycenae as ‘Cyclopean’ – they could not
envisage the massive blocks being put into place by anyone other than a giant – in such a way should
we view AMW’s completion of his gargantuan task in only a year.

All those of us, who have struggled with reading Alicia in Terra Mirabili or Winnie-Ille-Pooh,
realize that the success of such ‘ancient’ versions, and the pleasure derived from them, depend on a
knowledge of the English original, with its established context, loved phrases and idiosyncratic
humour. We need the ‘crit’, in order to appreciate fully the translator’s skill. Haretos Potter kai h
thou philosophou lithos is no exception, and AMW does not disappoint.

In conveying the style and atmosphere of the original, AMW ranges from the gravity of Thucydides’
narrative to the elegance of Plato’s dialogues. The Sorting Hat’s song, at the start-of-term banquet in
Hogwart’s Great Hall, is a tour de force in Euripidean iambic trimeters.

Letters preserve the ancient form of address, as when ‘Minerva McGonagall, the Deputy
Headmistress, sends greetings to Harry Potter’ (Athêna Maganogalea Hyparkhêgos Hareiô Poterî
khairein). JKR’s own subtle Greek satire is expertly captured. Who does not admire, for example,
the Cereberus-substitute, Fluffy (Oubathrix, ‘Woolly-hair’, with a nod to Herodotus)?

Proper names, a particular challenge, are occasionally transliterated and inflected, but more often
they acquire an Aristophanic portmanteau dimension (Quidditch is Baroophairikê, ‘leakus’ ball-
game’) or they are interpreted (Norbert’s epithet, ‘the Norwegian ridgeback’, becomes Norbertos
ho glyphonotos hyperboros, ‘the sculptured-back beyond the North Wind’). Was POTTER so
established a commercial, best-selling surname that it could not be translated as Keramew?

An essential delight of this book is that it resembles an Oxford Classical Text, with the familiar
Greek font, accents, punctuation and capital letters (not inverted commas) to introduce speech. So,
OBMs, salute Andrew Wilson and put this celebration of his scholarship, and continuing energetic
commitment, on your shelves with pride. Chronia polite, a Andreou!

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J. K. Rowling: Haretos Potter kai hê tou philosophou lithos Ancient Greek edition translated by