

Manwë's Messengers:
The Role of Eagles in Tolkien's Middle-earth

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“Eagles are not kindly birds. Some are cowardly and cruel. But the ancient race of the northern mountains were the greatest of all birds; they were proud and strong and noble-hearted.”¹ The Great Eagles appear throughout the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, though their exact role in Middle-earth is unclear. In a letter, Tolkien wrote that: “The Eagles are a dangerous ‘machine’. I have used them sparingly, and that is the absolute limit of their credibility or usefulness.”² The Eagles’ role in *The Silmarillion* is mostly limited to mentions of Sorontur – Lord of the Eagles, usually referred to by the Sindarin name Thorondor – who served as an emissary of the Valar. In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, however, the Great Eagles serve as a kind of a *deus ex machina*, coming to the rescue in the Battle of Five Armies and the Battle of the Morannon, respectively. Thus a reader may begin to wonder: why do the Eagles intervene at some points and not others? There has been some debate as to why the Eagles do not intervene more, but further study reveals that their intended purpose was as messengers and watchers, permitted to involve themselves only at dire moments. Intervention is therefore discouraged.

Early in *The Silmarillion*, the Vala Manwë says: “Before the Children awake there shall go forth with wings like the wind the Eagles of the Lords of the West...In the mountains

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, annotated ed., ed. Douglas A. Anderson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 150.

² Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, eds. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 271.

the Eagles shall house, and hear the voices of those who call upon us.”³ The Eagles he creates are led by Thorondor, who is described as “The mightiest of all birds that have ever been. The span of his outstretched wings was thirty fathoms. His beak was of gold.”⁴ Throughout *The Silmarillion*, Thorondor and the Eagles serve as emissaries of the Valar. They are also tasked with keeping watch over Morgoth:

For Manwë to whom all birds are dear, and to whom they bring news upon Taniquetil from Middle-earth, had sent forth the race of Eagles, commanding them to dwell in the crags of the North, and to keep watch upon Morgoth; for Manwë still held pity for the exiled Elves. And the Eagles brought news of much that happened in those days to the sad ears of Manwë.⁵

While ever-watchful, the Great Eagles rarely intervene in the affairs of Middle-earth except in dire circumstances, assumingly under the instruction of the Valar.

Many readers have questioned the nature of the Eagles, and whether they were in fact Maiar. On a typescript of a draft of the *Annals of Aman*, Tolkien wrote a note stating that: “Manwë...sent Maia spirits in Eagle form to dwell near Thangorodrim and keep watch on all

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 46.

⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, vol. 5 of *The History of Middle-earth* (1987; repr., New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 276.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 110.

that Melkor did and assist the Noldor in extreme cases.”⁶ However, this changed in later drafts. Christopher Tolkien suggests the reason for this is that, as an emissary of Manwë, Thorondor could be a Maia, but the other Eagles, such as Gwaihir and Landroval in *The Lord of the Rings*, are said to be descendants of Thorondor.⁷ He goes on to theorize that “[the Eagles] were taught language by the Valar, and raised to a higher level – but they still had no *fëar*.”⁸ Without *fëar* – Tolkien’s term for souls – the Eagles could not have been Maiar.

The Eagles frequently act under the instruction of the Valar – namely Manwë. During the First Age of Middle-earth, the Eagles first appear during the story of Fingon as he seeks to rescue his old friend Maedhros from Angband in hopes of reuniting the divided Noldor. As Fingon prepares to shoot Maedhros to release him from his torment, Thorondor himself stays the Elf’s hand. The Lord of the Eagles carries him up to Maedhros upon the precipice of Thangorodrim, and then bears the two of them back to Mithrim.⁹ As Fingon had prayed to Manwë for help, it is probable that Manwë took pity upon the Elf’s quest to end the feud between the Noldor, and sent Thorondor to his aid.

⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion, Part One: The Legends of Aman*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, vol. 10 of *The History of Middle-earth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1993), 138.

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion, Part One: The Legends of Aman*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, vol. 10 of *The History of Middle-earth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1993), 410.

⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion, Part One: The Legends of Aman*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, vol. 10 of *The History of Middle-earth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1993), 411.

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 110.

From this point, Thorondor and the Eagles continue to appear throughout *The Silmarillion*. When Fingolfin – High King of the Noldor – is slain in combat with Morgoth during the Dagor Bragollach, Thorondor saves the Elven-king’s body from mutilation.

And Morgoth took the body of the Elven-king and broke it, and would cast it to his wolves; but Thorondor came hasting from his eyrie among the peaks of the Crissaegrim, and he stooped upon Morgoth and marred his face. The rushing of the wings of Thorondor was like the noise of the winds of Manwë, and he seized the body in his mighty talons, and soaring suddenly above the darts of the Orcs he bore the King away.¹⁰

There is no simple answer as to why Thorondor intervened in this instance; one can only assume that Manwë continued to pity the exiled Noldor, and did not wish for the body of Fingolfin to be befouled. Later in the story, when Thorondor espies Húrin and Huor lost in the mountains, he bids two of his Eagles to bear them to Gondolin according to the intentions of the Vala Ulmo.¹¹ This indicates that the Lord of the Eagles answered to other Valar, not just Manwë.

At the end of the First Age, the Eagles appear during the War of Wrath to aid the Valar when they are driven back by a host of winged dragons from Angband. “But Eärendil came, shining with white flame, and about Vingilot was gathered all the great birds of heaven and

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 154.

¹¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 158.

Thorondor was their captain, and there was battle in the air all the day and through a dark night of doubt.”¹² The arrival of Eärendil and the host led by Thorondor marks a turning point in the battle, and the Valar ultimately prevail against the forces of Morgoth.

However, the appearance of the Eagles can also serve as a warning from the Valar. When Ar-Pharazôn and the Númenóreans began to speak openly against the Ban of the Valar, eagle-shaped storm clouds began to appear over Númenor, a sign of warning from the Lords of the West. When this fails to deter the men from their new beliefs, the Eagles are sent to Númenor in truth. “Then the Eagles of the Lords of the West came up out of the dayfall, and they were arrayed as for battle, advancing in a line the end of which diminished beyond sight; and as they came their wings spread ever wider, grasping the sky.”¹³ This marks the beginning of the destruction of Númenor.

A bitter rivalry existed between Thorondor and Morgoth since the Lord of the Eagles marred Morgoth’s face, sometimes resulting in the Eagles’ interference in the affairs of the Elves in *The Silmarillion*. During the fall of Gondolin, the Eagles come to the aid of the surviving Elves as they are ambushed by Orcs at Cirith Thoronath. “Hardly would they have been saved by the valour of yellow-haired Glorfindel...had not Thorondor come timely to

¹² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 252.

¹³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 277.

their aid.”¹⁴ The Eagles fell upon the Orcs, driving them back and slaying all to prevent word of the survivors of Gondolin from reaching Morgoth’s ears.¹⁵In *The Book of Lost Tales II*, a more detailed account is given of Thorondor’s arrival:

Then arose [Thorondor], King of Eagles, and he loved not Melko, for Melko had caught many of his kindred and chained them against sharp rocks to squeeze from them the magic words whereby he might learn to fly...Now when the clamour from the pass rose to his great eyrie he said: “Wherefore are these foul things, these Orcs of the hills, climbed near to my throne; and why do the sons of the Noldori cry out in the low places for fear of the children of Melko the accursed? Arise O Thornhoth, whose beaks are of steel and whose talons swords!”¹⁶

This excerpt provides new insight into the actions of Thorondor and the Eagles, and why they might intervene in some instances when not instructed by the Valar.

In the Third Age, Great Eagles appear again in *The Hobbit*, though in a rather different manner than that found in *The Silmarillion*. These instances often portray the Eagles intervening in the affairs of Middle-earth to repay debts, usually owed to Gandalf.

¹⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 243.

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 243.

¹⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales, Part II*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, vol. 2 of *The History of Middle-earth* (1984; repr., New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 193.

The Eagles first appear in the story when Bilbo Baggins and the thirteen dwarves that comprise Thorin Oakenshield's Company are besieged by wolves and goblins. The "Lord of the Eagles" and his followers rescue Gandalf, Bilbo, and the dwarves from the treetops, carrying them to safety. It is later revealed that Gandalf "had once rendered a service to the eagles and healed their lord from an arrow-wound."¹⁷ The motivation behind the rescue is explained when Lord of the Eagles tells Gandalf: "We are glad to cheat the goblins of their sport, and glad to repay our thanks to you..."¹⁸

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Eagle Gwaihir is mentioned in connection to Gandalf, who recounts the tale of his rescue from Isengard at the Council of Elrond, saying: "Gwaihir the Windlord, swiftest of the Great Eagles, came unlooked-for to Orthanc; and he found me standing on the pinnacle. Then I spoke to him and he bore me away, before Saruman was aware."¹⁹ Gwaihir comes to Gandalf's aid again after the wizard defeats the Balrog, bearing him from Celebdil to Lothlórien.²⁰ At the end of *Lord of the Rings*, Gwaihir and the Eagles Landroval and Meneldor assist Gandalf in rescuing Frodo and Sam from Orodruin.

¹⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, annotated ed., ed. Douglas A. Anderson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 157.

¹⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, annotated ed., ed. Douglas A. Anderson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 158.

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary ed. (1954; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 261.

²⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary ed. (1954; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 504.

It is interesting to note that many readers assume that Gwaihir is the “Lord of the Eagles” mentioned in *The Hobbit*. However, after the Battle of the Morannon in *The Return of the King*, Gandalf says to the Eagle: ““Twice you have borne me, Gwaihir my friend... Thrice shall pay for all, if you are willing.”²¹ As Douglas Anderson points out in *The Annotated Hobbit*, the ‘two times’ referenced by Gandalf both occurred in *The Lord of the Rings*, and therefore Gwaihir cannot be equated with *The Hobbit*’s “Lord of the Eagles”.²²

Perhaps the most memorable appearances of Eagles in Tolkien’s work are as a *deus ex machina*, arriving during the direst of circumstances to “save the day”. At the Battle of Five Armies, the Eagles arrive when all hope seems lost, in a moment Tolkien described as ‘eucatastrophic’²³ - ‘eucatastrophe’ being a term he coined for the “good catastrophe” – a “sudden, joyous turn of events that provides the happy ending to a fairy story”.²⁴ The arrival of the Eagles to the battle allows the Elves and men on either side of the valley to join the fight below.²⁵ Similarly, the Eagles appear near the end of the Battle of the Morannon in *The Lord of the Rings*. They attack the Nazgûl from the air, inspiring hope in the hearts of

²¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary ed. (1954; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 949.

²² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary ed. (1954; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 504.

²³ Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, eds. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 100.

²⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, annotated ed., ed. Douglas A. Anderson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 345.

²⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, annotated ed., ed. Douglas A. Anderson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 349.

beleaguered host of the West.²⁶ These appearances as a *deus ex machina* are thrilling, but as Tolkien noted, the Eagles are a dangerous ‘machine’ used in this way.

Throughout Tolkien’s works, the Eagles play an important role. Though there has been some debate as to why the Eagles do not intervene more, further study reveals that their intended purpose was as messengers and watchers, permitted to involve themselves only at dire moments. As noble creatures, the Eagles will also occasionally intervene in the affairs of Middle-earth to repay a debt, such as that owed to Gandalf by Gwaihir. Even in Tolkien’s early drafts, it is apparent that Eagles are an important part of Tolkien’s stories. By 1930, the Eagles had “become their ‘traditional’ roles in the stories that comprised Tolkien’s legendarium: the one to threaten the heroes and the other to intervene when all hope had been lost and deliver them from evil, almost as a visible grace. *Deus ex* indeed.”²⁷

²⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary ed. (1954; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 948.

²⁷ John D. Rateliff, *The History of the Hobbit, Part 1: Mr. Baggins* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 224.

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