

Beorn and Radagast:

Exploring the Relationship between the Skin-changer and the Wizard

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When the dwarves and Bilbo were brought to the Carrock by Gandalf, they had been led into the land between the Misty Mountains and Mirkwood, to the east of the Great River of Wilderland. This is the home of Beorn, “A very great person,” according to Gandalf, who declares:

You must all be very polite when I introduce you. I shall introduce you slowly, two by two, I think; and you must be careful not to annoy him, or heaven knows what will happen. He can be appalling when he is angry, though he is kind enough if humoured. Still I warn you he gets angry easily (*AH* 164).

The dwarves and Bilbo are understandably curious. They all gathered round Gandalf when they heard him talking like this to Bilbo. Each had an unspoken question on their lips: who is Beorn? Gandalf describes him succinctly when he says,

He is a skin-changer. He changes his skin; sometimes he is a huge black bear, sometimes he is a great strong black-haired man with huge arms and a great beard. I cannot tell you much more, though that ought to be enough. Some say that he is a bear descended from the great and ancient bears of the mountains that lived there before the giants came. Others say that he is a man descended from the first men who lived before Smaug or the other dragons came into this part of the world, and before the goblins came into the hills out of the North. I cannot say, though I fancy the last is the true tale (*AH* 164–5).

While we may not know Beorn’s true origins in Middle-earth, one thing is certain: if Radagast desired to create an ally to help defend the natural world of Middle-earth, he could hardly have done better than Beorn.

It is possible to trace both the linguistic and the literary origins of the ursine hero. Beorn has his name-origins in Old English literature. In fact, Beorn is an Old English word for *man* or *warrior* but it originally meant “bear.” The name Beowulf, the Anglo-Saxon hero, breaks down into *beo+wulf*, literally “bee-wolf,” “a wolf to bees”; which is a metaphorical compound word (or “kenning”) for “bear.” Beorn is cognate with the Old Norse *bjorn*, which means “bear.” Linguistically speaking, Beorn the man is already merged with the bear.

The visual characteristics that define Beorn’s dwelling keep with the Norse flavoring of Beorn’s origins through the work of E.V. Gordon, who was originally a student of Tolkien’s who later became a colleague at Leeds and a close friend. He authored *An Introduction to Old Norse*, which included a drawing of the interior of a Norse hall that bears more than a passing resemblance to the drawing that Tolkien provided to illustrate the inside of Beorn’s home. Douglas Anderson describes Beorn’s hall thus:

Beorn’s Hall is a typical example of a Germanic hall, an example of which is also found in the poem *Beowulf*. It is an oblong hall built of timber, with rows of wooden pillars dividing the inside into a central nave and side aisles. Such halls usually had doors at both ends, but windows in the modern sense were unknown. A hearth-fire would burn in the middle, and the smoke would escape through shutters in the roof, which were also used to provide light in the day. The raised floor in the side aisles served as a sitting place during the day and at night was a place for beds. (AH 168)

From a linguistic and architectural standpoint, Beorn is firmly ensconced in Norse trappings. Moreover, Beorn is also laden with influence from the Norse sagas and mythology.

Supernatural man-bears resonate throughout Norse sagas. Tom Shippey explained that Beorn has “a very close analogue in Bödvar Bjarki, a hero from the Norse Saga of King Hrólfr Kraki, whose name means ‘little bear’” (AH 165). In *The Saga of King Hrólfr Kraki*, Bödvar Bjarki uses his supernatural ability of sending his bear-form to the aid of his king while his physical body lies sleeping:

The bear was always beside the king, and it killed more men with its paw than any five of the king’s champions did. Blows and missiles glanced off the animal, as it used its weight to crush King Hjóvard’s men and their horses. Between its teeth, it tore everything within reach, causing a palpable fear to spread through the ranks of King Hjóvard’s army. (HK 74).

When Bjarki is awoken from his slumber, the bear form disappears and King Hrólf and his supporters are killed. Furthermore, in *The Annotated Hobbit*, Douglas Anderson notes that Bödvar’s father, Bjorn, has been cursed by King Hring’s queen for refusing her advances.

“You deserve a punishment. . . She then struck him with her wolfskin gloves, telling him to become a cave bear, grim and savage: ‘You will eat no food other than your own father’s livestock, and, in feeding yourself, you will kill more than has ever been observed before. You will never be released from the spell, and your awareness of this disgrace will be more dreadful to you than no remembrance at all’” (HK 36–37).

Thus cursed, Bjorn is fated to become a bear during the daytime and a man at night.

*The Saga of King Hrólfr Kraki* was well known to Tolkien. In fact, a translation of it was prepared by Oxford student Stella Mills under the supervision of his colleague E.V. Gordon in 1933, and dedicated to Gordon, Tolkien, and C.T. Onions, the

lexicographer of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Beorn's ability to shapeshift into a bear also has strong parallels in Norse mythology, which is full of shapeshifters. Both Odin and Loki are shapeshifters who can take on female forms. Loki even took the form of the mare that bore Sleipnir, the eight-legged stallion that was Odin's mount. Freyja, the Norse goddess, owned a cloak of falcon feathers that gave her the ability to change her own form into that of a falcon. Fáfñir was the son of a dwarf king Hreiðmarr and the brother of Ótr, who was later transformed into a dragon while guarding his ill-gotten hoard and slain by Sigurd, another Germanic hero. Ótr himself enjoys spending time shapeshifted into an otter, which leads to his accidental slaying by Loki.

It seems clear that the origins of Beorn were influenced by both the mythology and the day-to-day life of the people found in the Norse sagas.

Given all these mythological archetypes to choose from, as well as his own descriptions of Beorn's abilities, it would have been quite simple for Tolkien to explain that Beorn himself was simply a shapeshifter who turned himself into a bear on occasion. If only it were that easy.

When describing Beorn to Bilbo, Gandalf declares, "At any rate he is under no enchantment but his own" (*AH* 165). Furthermore, in a letter (*Letters* #144, 178) to Naomi Mitchison from April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1954, Tolkien himself wrote, "Though a skin-changer and no doubt a bit of a magician, Beorn was a man." A bit of a magician? In Middle-earth this is no small accomplishment. With this description Beorn takes his place within that high circle of people in Middle-earth who can weave magic. Also, if Beorn is a man as Tolkien states so clearly, then how did a man learn to change shape so wonderfully?

Beorn had never met Gandalf before his arrival at the Carrock in *The Hobbit*. However, during Beorn's conversation with Gandalf he does mention that he is aware of at least one other wizard:

“I am a wizard,” continued Gandalf. “I have heard of you, if you have not heard of me; but perhaps you have heard of my good cousin Radagast who lives near the Southern borders of Mirkwood?”

“Yes; not a bad fellow as wizards go, I believe. I used to see him now and again,” said Beorn (*AH* 167).

But who exactly is Radagast and what is his connection to Beorn?

Radagast the Brown is one of the Istari — wizards sent by the Valar to assist the peoples of Middle-earth to oppose Sauron. In fact, Radagast was sent to Middle-earth in the company of Saruman by the Vala Yavanna. In “Valaquenta,” Tolkien refers to Yavanna as

The Giver of Fruits ... the lover of all things that grow in the earth, and all their countless forms she holds in her mind, from the trees like towers in forests long ago to the moss upon stones or the small and secret things in the mould (*Silmarillion* 27).

As one of the queens of the Valar, she is described, “In the form of a woman she is tall, and robed in green; but at times she takes other shapes” (*Silmarillion* 27).

In Quenya, Radagast's original name was Aiwendil, meaning “bird-friend.” According to Tolkien's essay “The Istari” in *Unfinished Tales*, the name Radagast means “tender of beasts” in Adûnaic. Radagast lived for much of his time in Middle-earth at Rhosgobel in the vales of Anduin, on the western eaves of Mirkwood, between the Carrock and the Old Forest Road, near the Gladden Fields. Radagast had a strong affinity

for — and relationship with — wild animals of Middle-earth. He was wiser than any Man in all things concerning herbs and beasts and it was said that he spoke the many tongues of birds.

Taken at face value Radagast certainly seems a bit less impressive than other wizards of Middle-earth. In “The Istari,” Tolkien notes that “Radagast is presented as a person of much less power and wisdom” than either Gandalf or Saruman (*UT* 394). Gandalf has a fairly high opinion of Radagast, though. In *The Lord of the Rings* Gandalf states, “Radagast is, of course, a worthy Wizard, a master of shapes and changes of hue; and he has much lore of herbs and beasts, and birds are especially his friends” (*LoTR* 257). Gandalf used Radagast’s relationship with the fauna of Middle-earth to gather information about the Nazgul:

We shall need your help, and the help of all things that will give it. Send out messages to all the beasts and birds that are your friends. Tell them to bring news of anything that bears on this matter to Saruman and Gandalf. Let messages be sent to Orthanc (*LoTR* 257).

On the other hand, Saruman certainly did not think highly of Radagast. When Saruman speaks of Radagast it is with derision:

“Radagast the Brown!” laughed Saruman, and he no longer concealed his scorn. “Radagast the Bird-tamer! Radagast the Simple! Radagast the Fool! Yet he had just the wit to play the part that I set him” (*LoTR* 258).

Like Gandalf, Saruman also used Radagast for his affinity to birds to help him look for the One Ring. In “Of The Rings of Power in the Third Age,” Tolkien notes that Saruman

gathered a great host of spies, and many of these were birds; for Radagast lent him his aid, divining naught of his treachery, and deeming that this was but part of the watch upon the Enemy (*Silmarillion* 302).

Saruman initially frowned upon Radagast's company and yet this forced relationship was not without some benefits to himself.

The final mention of Radagast in the narrative of the War of the Ring comes when scouts "had come down into Wilderland and over the Gladden Fields and so at length had reached the old home of Radagast at Rhosgobel. Radagast was not there" (*LoTR* 274). At the end of *The Lord of the Rings* the reader is left to wonder at the fate of the now-missing Radagast the Brown.

In the essay "The Istari," J.R.R Tolkien tells us that Radagast did not remain faithful to his assigned task: "For Radagast ... became enamoured of the many beasts and birds that dwelt in Middle-earth, and forsook Elves and Men, and spent his days among the wild creatures" (*UT* 390). However, Christopher Tolkien notes that the idea that Radagast "neglected the purpose for which he was sent is perhaps not perfectly in accord with the idea of his being specially chosen by Yavanna" (*UT* 393). Simply put, Yavanna may have assigned Radagast to protect the flora and fauna of Middle-earth. If so, this mission would not end with the defeat of Sauron. With this supposition, it is easy to extrapolate the notion that Radagast would have used his powers and abilities to perform his charge and may have enlisted the aid of other beings to help him do so. Here is where the lives and powers of Beorn and Radagast overlap.

The Istari had been sent to Middle-earth:



to contest the power of Sauron, and to unite all those who had the will to resist him; but they were forbidden to match his power with power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force or fear (*UT 391*).

The choice of who would be sent to Middle-earth was the cause of some debate and concern among the Valar.

Who would go? For they must be mighty, peers of Sauron, but must forgo might, and clothe themselves in flesh so as to treat on equality and win the trust of Elves and Men. But this would imperil them, dimming their wisdom and knowledge, and confusing them with fears, cares, and wearinesses coming from the flesh (*UT 393*).

Five of the Istari were sent to Middle-earth:

The two highest of this order (of whom it is said there were five) were called by the Eldar Curunír, “the Man of Skill,” and Mithrandir, “the Grey Pilgrim,” but by Men in the North Saruman and Gandalf (*UT 392*).

Radagast also settled in the West, though his inclusion in their company was a matter of some debate. Tolkien notes, “Saruman was obliged to take Radagast to please Yavanna wife of Aulë” (*UT 393*). Specifically, Saruman took Radagast “because Yavanna begged him” (*UT 393*). While Yavanna’s intent is clear — Radagast must be allowed to go to Middle-earth — there is no hint of an explanation as to why Yavanna desired that Radagast be included among the Istari sent to Middle-earth. The overriding factor is that Radagast alone possessed a particular love of the things of her making. Clearly, Yavanna took the opportunity to send an emissary of her own to Middle-earth. While the reason is never stated, his interests are much aligned with Yavanna’s own. Specifically, both have

a love of the flora and fauna of Middle-earth. Whatever the reason, Radagast's presence in Middle-earth has been secured. Now what?

Saruman, Gandalf, and Radagast have been tasked by the Valar to contest the power of Sauron. The machinations of Saruman and Gandalf in this regard are well documented by Tolkien. If Radagast did indeed become enamored of the many beasts and birds of Middle-earth, and spent his days among the wild creatures then who is to say that this was not Yavanna's intention in the first place? As the chosen of Yavanna, Radagast could merely be taking up the task that Yavanna intended for him all along, namely, the protection of the birds and beasts that she herself had brought into being. If this were so, what tools would Radagast use to do achieve this goal?

Radagast was wiser than any Man in all matters concerning herbs and beasts and it was said that he spoke the many tongues of birds. Radagast's affinity for avians was put to use by both Gandalf and Saruman in their quest for Sauron. I submit that Radagast would use these same talents to defend the lands of his patron, Yavanna. The birds would have told Radagast many things; not just the coming and going of Sauron. Even as Radagast lent aid to Saruman and Gandalf, it is possible that he would desire to aid the local flora and fauna as well. What was "local" for Radagast?

Wherever he traveled beforehand, we know that Radagast lived for much of his time in Middle-earth in the Vales of Anduin at Rhosgobel, on the western eaves of Mirkwood, between the Carrock and the Old Forest Road, near the Gladden Fields. This may not have been his only residence in Middle-earth but it is all that we are sure of. But why did he settle here? Is it because it is here that he found an ally and chose to live

nearby? Or is it that Radagast settled here first and met Beorn afterwards? Either way, Radagast the Brown and Beorn finally make the other's acquaintance.

Again, we do not have the whys and wherefores of their relationship. We do know that Beorn liked (or at the very least tolerated) Radagast. Perhaps Radagast thought even more of the relationship? Just as with Yavanna and then Radagast, we see in Beorn a lover of nature and animals. Beorn probably already exhibited these characteristics when he first encountered Radagast. Intrigued, Radagast could have used the birds to report on Beorn's comings and goings. After a while, Beorn would truly have seemed to be of the same mindset as himself and Yavanna. Just as Gandalf sought news and aid from his allies, Radagast too may have had allies to aid him in his cause of defending the flora and fauna of Middle-earth. Particularly if Radagast suffered fears, cares, and weariness coming from the flesh while in Middle-earth then he could have chosen to share that power with one who shared his worldview. Beorn is such a man.

If Radagast found a kindred spirit in Beorn, it is easy to believe that Radagast could have conscripted Beorn to the cause by teaching him some of the powers and abilities that Radagast himself used. Certainly Beorn's unusual abilities are exactly the things that Radagast might have taught him, and where else would he have learned them? First, there's his relationship with animals: we know that Beorn could talk to the animals that lived with him, just as Radagast could do. Beorn could have used this newfound talent to gather animals to him. After all, it was said of Beorn,

He lives in an oak-wood and has a great wooden house; and as a man he keeps cattle and horses which are nearly as marvellous as himself. They work for him and talk to him. He does not eat them; neither does he hunt

or eat wild animals. He keeps hives and hives of great fierce bees, and lives most on cream and honey (*AH* 165).

Beorn is a vegetarian in Middle-earth. This is certainly indicative of one who respects the natural world and also exhibits a higher sensitivity and morality than commonly found in the Norse sagas upon which his character is based. In any event, in Beorn's estimation animals are not for consuming.

In fact, the animals in Beorn's company can easily be described as intelligent companions, for they are house servants more than domesticated animals.

Beorn clapped his hands, and in trotted four beautiful white ponies and several large long-bodied grey dogs. Beorn said something to them in a queer language like animal noises turned into talk (*AH* 175).

These animals

came back carrying torches in their mouths, which they lit at the fire and stuck in low brackets on the pillars of the hall about the central hearth. The dogs could stand on their hind-legs when they wished, and carry things with their fore-feet. Quickly they got out boards and trestles from the side walls and set them up near the fire.... In came some snow-white sheep led by a large coal-black ram. One bore a white cloth embroidered at the edges with figures of animals; others bore on their broad backs trays with bowls and platters and knives and wooden spoons, which the dogs took and quickly laid on the trestle tables... (*AH* 175).

One simply does not eat friends such as these who set such an excellent table. In fact, one would go out of their way to defend friends such as these. To do so, one would need power. Radagast could have given Beorn that power.

As the name Radagast means “tender of beasts” in Adûnaic, it is implied that all beasts were under Radagast’s purview. And we have seen that Radagast had an affinity for birds and chose them to be his closest allies and companions. So too could Beorn, who came from the mountains, have a natural affinity for bears, which would explain the form he was taught to take when shapeshifting. As Gandalf explained:

As a bear he ranges far and wide. I once saw him sitting all alone on the top of the Carrock at night watching the moon sinking towards the Misty Mountains, and I heard him growl in the tongue of bears; “The day will come when [the goblins] will perish and I shall go back!” That is why I believe he once came from the mountains himself (*AH* 165).

As a man of the forest, Beorn would have been familiar with bears in Middle-earth. Radagast had his birds; Beorn had his bears. While giving a Man the power of shapeshifting may or may not be the wisest of decisions, it has already been made clear that Radagast is a person of much less power and wisdom than the other wizards. What made sense to Radagast may not have made sense to the other Istari.

As a skin-changer, Beorn is described as a Man “under his own enchantment” and a “bit of a magician.” Beorn certainly put that enchantment to good use, for his bear-form is quite imposing. Just the thought of Beorn as a bear is enough to unnerve poor Bilbo while sleeping in Beorn’s house:

There was a growling sound outside, and a noise as of some great animal scuffling at the door. Bilbo wondered what it was, and whether it could be Beorn in enchanted shape, and if he would come in as a bear and kill them. He dived under the blankets and hid his head, and fell asleep again at last in spite of his fears (*AH* 179).

Bilbo's fears are not unfounded. As Tolkien later describes Beorn in battle against the goblins in the Battle of Five Armies:

In that last hour Beorn himself had appeared — no one knew how or from where. He came alone, and in bear's shape; and he seemed to have grown almost to giant-size in his wrath.

The roar of his voice was like drums and guns; and he tossed wolves and goblins from his path like straws and feathers. He fell upon their rear, and broke like a clap of thunder through the ring. The dwarves were making a stand still about their lords upon a low rounded hill. Then Beorn stooped and lifted Thorin, who had fallen pierced with spears, and bore him out of the fray.

Swiftly he returned and his wrath was redoubled, so that nothing could withstand him, and no weapon seemed to bite upon him. He scattered the bodyguard, and pulled down Bolg himself and crushed him. Then dismay fell on the Goblins and they fled in all directions. (*AH* 349–50)

Clearly Beorn's shapeshifting ability is quite powerful and mighty to behold.

Yavanna and Radagast have an adept ally in Beorn. And yet, however Beorn achieved his great power, it did not end with him. Beorn was either naturally imbued with this power that was honed by Radagast and passed from generation to generation or, more likely, he taught the male descendants of his line the awesome ability of shapechanging into bears:

It is said that for many generations the men of his line had the power of taking bear's shape, and some were grim men and bad, but most were in heart like Beorn, if less in size and strength (*AH* 354).

Clearly this shows that the descendants of Beorn inherited this power and were also able to change their shape. But it also shows that this power did not remain with them forever, that it diminished over time and that it was eventually lost. Is this because the technique to change shape was passed down imperfectly from father to son over the generations? Was the waning of this ability due to the dilution of Beorn's family line as the family tree grew larger and further from the source magic, namely, Beorn? Is it somehow related to the diminishing of magic in Middle-earth near the end of the Third Age? Or is there another as yet undiscovered reason?

Whatever the case, the Beornings (as Beorn's descendants came to be known) make their presence felt even in *The Lord of the Rings*. Here the Beornings are allied to Rohan and with the Bardings of Dale. As Gloin explains:

“If it were not for the Beornings, the passage from Dale to Rivendell would long ago have become impossible. They are valiant men and keep open the High Pass and the Ford of Carrock. But their tolls are high,” he added with a shake of his head; “and like Beorn of old they are not over fond of dwarves. Still, they are trusty, and that is much in these days” (*LoTR* 228–9).

Long after Beorn has decimated the orc troops in the Battle of Five Armies by himself, his descendants are still fighting the good fight. Beorn and the power he wielded have affected the outcome of the War of the Ring by contesting the power of Sauron, just as Radagast was tasked to do at the request of Yavanna. They are even still known for Beorn's honey-cakes.

There are many mysteries to be explored in Middle-earth. Beorn and Radagast are but a small piece of the larger mythology that was constantly being worked and reworked

by Tolkien. Did Tolkien have a specific story in mind for Beorn and Radagast? Quite possibly. Or, was Beorn's knowledge of Radagast a throwaway line, a passing fancy perhaps begun and forgotten by the master of Middle-earth? We may never know.

Until we do know, it falls to the serious readers of Tolkien's works to listen for the mythological clues that Tolkien engendered on his creations. It falls to us to creatively and logically parse and parcel Tolkien's word-hoard. In doing so, we can confidently imagine a world where a skin-changer and a wizard worked together to contest the will of Sauron and to protect the flora and fauna of Middle-earth.



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