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The Evolution of the Animal to Magical Beast in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

Rohanian horses, Shelob, and Shadowfax. Wargs, Giant Eagles, and The Watcher in the Water. All of these creatures share commonalities beyond being creatures the Fellowship encounters in *Lord of the Rings*. These are *magical beasts*. Tolkien, the revivalist of new fantasy, was the middle-man, the go-between for medieval literature and its fantasies, to modern day fantasy. As middleman and mediator, language, landscapes, characters, and creatures were changed, and the “creatures” are my focus of analysis.

Looking back within the medieval bestiaries and understanding how medievalists used animals is the first step in understanding how Tolkien took their usage of animals and manipulated it to create such magical beasts. Animals within Chaucer's works and the medieval bestiary, while sometimes fantastic, at their core are based on real animals and animal forms. They also act and react as the common animal does, that is, they are sentient and aware. Medievalists, including Chaucer, understood that the animal could serve roles in texts beyond being figures within the landscape of humans, but rather characters themselves who assist humans in varying capacities, specifically in relation to human identity. Such is the influence animals have on Tolkien in his writing. Animals, an oftentimes unexamined group of important figures within literature, are part of that fantasy which Tolkien found inspiration in, yet reworked to fit within his own narrative.

Tolkien understood the importance of animals and used them in his texts for many reasons, just as medievalists did. For Tolkien, he reworked their forms to add fantasy to his narrative and also to recreate the classic fairy tales of old. But, specifically, I wanted to examine

how Tolkien allows for a space within the text that gives the magical beast prominence amongst human characters, thereby contributing to the plot and oftentimes pivoting the plot's focus away from the human and onto the animal, or also focusing on the human and animal as one, as we'll see with Gandalf and Shadowfax.

It appears that as Tolkien worked to create these magical beasts, one specific element of otherness he was concerned with was separating them from their other well-known peers. While the animals of Tolkien discussed in this paper—for time's sake I focus on only two: the Great Eagles and Shadowfax—appear as otherwise normal animals in appearance and often in their actions, the introduction of them within the text is always prefaced with them as “the greatest of”—greatest of all eagles and greatest of all horses. While I don't delve into fell beasts, these winged creatures do play on the well-known vulture and are described in *The Lord of the Rings* as “a winged creature: if bird, then greater than all other birds, and it was naked, and neither quill nor feather did it bear, and its vast pinions were as webs of hide between horned fingers; and it stank” (Tolkien). And along those lines we see Gwaihir, “Greatest of all the Eagles of the North” and Shadowfax as the “Lord of all horses”. Clearly these beasts are separated from their brethren and species, but to what capacity? Tolkien has chosen them to move from an ordinary and familiar animal—vulture, eagle, and horse—to a being of prominence, relevance, and magic by displaying qualities beyond the bounds of the normal animal, in which those qualities are normally assigned to humans only (speaking, high intelligence).

“In Quenya, an Elven tongue devised by Tolkien, the general term for animals as distinct from plants was *kelvar*” (“Guide to”). The language of Middle-earth and beyond (the foundation upon which this universe is built and the primary passion of Tolkien) distinguishes between plants and animals, mirroring our own language. The laws of the universe and the language

therein set the foundation for a prominent difference between plants and animals, which is the first step towards seeing animals as separate from the landscape. Tolkien scholars have noted that animals play varying roles in Tolkien's works, with one of the common forms being a talking animal that is reminiscent of the fairytale, which adds a playful element to the storytelling. Michael D. C. Drout notes in his Tolkien Encyclopedia that "Animals are an integral part of Tolkien's storytelling, and he initially included speaking animals as a lighter element in the story. As the story of Middle-earth became broader and deeper, the animals also became entrenched characters and plot-movers. Animals have varying levels of sentience, or self-awareness, and express different moral standards" (Drout 19). As Drout notes, Middle-earth moved from the playful setting of *The Hobbit* to the larger, more complex, and deeper world it is in *Lord of the Rings*, and in the transitional shift, not only did the world become broader and deeper, but so did the animals. While there are talking animals and beasts in *The Hobbit* that add the playful fantastical element, reminiscent of children's stories, the *Lord of the Rings* features more complex beings that go beyond a "talking animal" or regular animal in the sense that we know them. These animals transition with the world's complexity to "magical beasts"—figures that move the plot forward and become essential figures in the world established for the Speaking Peoples.

This use of animals, or magical beasts, can be traced back to the influence of medieval texts on Tolkien, as animal figures in many key medieval texts often contributed to the plot's forward direction and characters' interactions, rather than just being static figures. An example would be Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and the nightingale outside of Criseyde's window that sings every night. The nightingale translates into an erotic currency for the characters within the text as its song sparks a sense of love in Criseyde's heart that made it "fressh and gay." The

nightingale's function in the text does not only serve as a symbol and metaphor for Criseyde's current emotional state, but the bird also appears to help contribute to Criseyde's decision to love Troilus. More importantly, the significance of the bird appears to symbolize the idea of love for Criseyde. Such prominence of an animal within a medieval text (convincing the main character to give into love) exemplifies the importance of these creatures within the world of those "Speaking Peoples." Within *The Lord of the Rings*, while many animals do remain "normal" animals such that we see as Chaucer's nightingale, the animals that are transitioned to having more human-like attributes, thereby becoming magical beasts, and more "human" characters in their own right, without the requirement of man, or other race. But, like the nightingale, the animals do play a large role in how the narrative moves forward and how the humans and other peoples interact with each other and the larger world.

The animal and magical beast separate from the beginnings of creation as "the Vala Yavanna was responsible for creating the *kelvar* (animals and living things that can move freely). Among the *kelvar* are those with both greater and lesser sentience and intelligence" (Drout 19). The Great Eagles are birds that display this great sentience and go beyond the bounds and restrictions of the normal animal. These great birds served as messengers of Manwë and in the books often help Men, Elves, and Wizards in their quests to defeat evil. It is suggested throughout Tolkien's writings that the eagles might in fact be Maiar - spirits taking a biological form in order to address matters in Middle-earth. In *The Silmarillion* it states that "[s]pirits in the shape of hawks and eagles flew ever to and from" Manwë, and "Manwë sent Maia spirits in Eagle form to dwell near Thangorodrim and keep watch on all that Melkor did and assist the Noldor in extreme cases" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*). On the spectrum of divine being to lesser being to animal, "Maiar are the 'lesser' spiritual beings situated in the hierarchy beneath the

Valar. The Istari wizards, the Balrogs, and even Sauron himself are all Maia spirits. It's a spectrum; not all are of equal power, and of course Sauron is clearly one of the mightiest. The implication is that all the great Eagles may be spirits first, yet they do inhabit beast form and are animals in many respects. Even though they can speak as some other animals have shown in Tolkien's legendarium, *Morgoth's Ring* states that they had to be taught to speak; it does not come naturally to them" (LaSala).

Thus, the Great Eagles, in the spectrum of power, reside in a realm of their own, seemingly. It is not explicitly stated within Tolkien's writings what power resides within the Eagles, nor what their every ability is and how that differs from the average animal, but it is clear that as Manwë's messengers to Middle-earth, these beasts (or spirits?) possess more human-like qualities than other animals seen in the books, like Sam's pony, Bill (sorry, you're still loved, Bill, and yes, you had an important role within the narrative as well).

The Eagles' prominence and interconnection with the human and "good" races within the text are featured most significantly at "the end of all things" where we see Samwise and Frodo stranded in Mordor after destroying the Ring:

All about the hills the hosts of Mordor raged. The Captains of the West were foundering in a gathering sea. The sun gleamed red, and under the wings of the Nazgul the shadows of death fell dark upon the earth. Aragorn stood beneath his banner, silent and stern, as one lost in thought of things long past or far away; but his eyes gleamed like stars that shine the brighter as the night deepens. Upon the hill-top stood Gandalf, and he was white and cold and no shadow fell on him. The onslaught of Mordor broke like a wave on the beleaguered hills, voices roaring like a tide amid the wreck and crash of arms. As if to his eyes some sudden vision had been given, Gandalf stirred; and he turned, looking back north where the skies were pale and clear. Then he lifted up his hands and cried in a loud voice ringing above the din: *The Eagles are coming!* And many voices answered crying: *The Eagles are coming! The Eagles are coming!* The hosts of Mordor looked up and wondered what this sign might mean.

There came Gwaihir the Windlord, and Landroval his brother, greatest of all the Eagles of the North, mightiest of the descendants of old Thorondor, who built his eyries in the inaccessible peaks of the Encircling Mountains when Middle-earth was young. Behind

them in long swift lines came all their vassals from the northern mountains, speeding on a gathering wind. Straight down upon the Nazgul they bore, stooping suddenly out of the high airs, and the rush of their wide wings as they passed over was like a gale.

But the Nazgul turned and fled, and vanished into Mordor's shadows, hearing a sudden terrible call out of the Dark Tower; and even at that moment all the hosts of Mordor trembled, doubt clutched their hearts, their laughter failed, their hands shook and their limbs were loosed. The Power that drove them on and filled them with hate and fury was wavering, its will was removed from them; and now looking in the eyes of their enemies they saw a deadly light and were afraid.

Then all the Captains of the West cried aloud, for their hearts were filled with a new hope in the midst of darkness. (Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 927)

At the end of all things, we see the Great Eagles, led by Gwaihir, greatest of all the Eagles, come to rescue Sam and Frodo. The title accompanying Gwaihir is reminiscent of other lordly titles, “Landroval his brother, greatest of all the Eagles of the North, mightiest of the descendants of old Thorondor, who built his eyries in the inaccessible peaks of the Encircling Mountains when Middle-earth was young”, with references to his lineage and prominence within the history of Middle-earth. The incorporation of this lineage within arguably the most pivotal scene of the trilogy showcases the importance of these magical “beasts” and their prominence amongst human characters. The paragraph that features the Eagles’ approach is juxtaposed with the moment that “the Nazgul turned and fled” and the enemies “saw a deadly light and were afraid”. And then, the heroes “hearts were filled with a new hope in the midst of darkness”. While the cry out from the dark tower is ultimately what resulted in the Nazgul fleeing, the Eagles appear within the scene at that same moment—the pivotal moment of victory and defeat—as a symbol, a figure, a representation of hope for all races. It is only appropriate for the Great Eagles to arrive to battle at that moment as great and respected creatures of royal lineage within Middle-earth. So they bring the signal of a new hope and a new promise of peace to come, and following this scene they rescue the true heroes of the trilogy—Frodo and Sam. Saviors

assisting saviors. The Eagles are no longer animals and the classification of “magical beasts” even seems unfitting at this point in the narrative. Instead, characters of their own right, alongside Hobbits, Humans, and Elves seems more fitting considering the circumstances and the roles they play within the narrative.

Another creature that moves within the narrative from animal to magical beast is the horse, Shadowfax. While horses are commonly used throughout the books, they too serve a unique role, especially for the Riders of Rohan. Indeed, the Rohirrim's identity is shaped by their horses, specifically the breed called the *mearas*. Shadowfax is part of “The *mearas* (singular *mearh*) [which] were a breed of wild horses in the north of Middle-earth. Their mortality is equal to Men and their intelligence and strength are extraordinary. They surpass normal horses in the same degree that Elves surpass Men” (“Middle-earth Animals”). These horses were also known to be the Greatest of all Horses of Middle-earth (there we see the Greatest title again). Thus, they are relegated to a category that surpasses other “normal” horses, yet even then, Shadowfax is unique amongst them and transitions from a mere animal to a magical beast, especially when seen in interaction with Gandalf. In *The Two Towers* after Legolas, Aragorn, and Gimli encounter Gandalf the White for the first time, we see Shadowfax enter the narrative in the same scene Gandalf the White does, having returned from beyond the reaches of Middle-earth:

Three times [Gandalf] whistled; and then faint and far off it seemed to them that they heard the whinny of a horse borne up from the plains upon the eastern wind... ‘There is more than one horse coming,’ said Aragorn. ‘Certainly,’ said Gandalf. ‘We are too great a burden for one.’ ‘There are three,’ said Legolas, gazing out over the plain. ‘See how they run! There is Hasufel, and there is my friend Arod beside him! But there is another that strides ahead: a very great horse. I have not seen his like before.’ ‘Nor will you again,’ said Gandalf. ‘That is Shadowfax. He is the chief of the Mearas, lords of horses, and not even Theoden, King of Rohan, has ever looked on a better. Does he not shine like silver, and run as smoothly as a swift stream? He has come for me: the horse of the White Rider. We are going to battle together.’ Even as the old wizard spoke, the great horse came striding up the slope towards them; his coat was glistening and his mane flowing in the wind of his speed. The two others followed, now far behind. As soon as Shadowfax

saw Gandalf, he checked his pace and whinnied loudly; then trotting gently forward he stooped his proud head and nuzzled his great nostrils against the old man's neck. (Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 492-493)

It is noted that

No one except Gandalf could ride Shadowfax, and he was given to Gandalf by King Theoden...In an unpublished epilogue and a letter, Tolkien stated that Shadowfax passed West over the Sea with Gandalf; in *The Lord of the Rings* Gandalf appears with a "great grey horse" on the quay just before departing, and he had earlier promised Shadowfax (in the chapter "The White Rider") that they would not be parted again in this world. ("Middle-earth Animals")

The Rohirrim were unable to tame Shadowfax, and King Theoden gave him as a gift to Gandalf, in which Gandalf was able to ride—not necessarily tame—but ride Shadowfax. Shadowfax, like the other *mearas*, could understand the language of men, which made the Rohirrim's relationship with them unique. Yet Shadowfax still stands above the other horses in his abilities and interactions. Gandalf can ride him without bridle, reins, or saddle as compared to the other horses. Also, the fact that Gandalf is the only being who can ride him speaks volumes to Shadowfax as being more than a mere "special" horse. As we all know, Gandalf is no mere wizard, but is one of the Maiar: "During the Third Age, while Sauron's 'dark spirit of malice' was increasing over Middle-earth, the Valar chose five emissaries from among the Maiar to go and help the peoples" (Tolkien Gateway). One of those five emissaries was Olorin, later renamed Gandalf upon entering Middle-earth. Gandalf's qualities as surpassing the peoples of Middle-earth are parallel to the qualities of Shadowfax as surpassing all other horses. Once Gandalf the Grey becomes Gandalf the White, his kinship and unique connection with Shadowfax is obvious throughout the narrative. Without Shadowfax, Gandalf would have not been able to be a help for the peoples, especially in the siege of Gondor. In *The Return of the King* when the Nazgul are stooping down upon Faramir's men as they return to Gondor from Osgiliath, Gandalf the White and Shadowfax intervene in the onslaught:

Like thunder they broken upon the enemy on either flank of the retreat; but one rider outran them all, swift as the wind in the grass: Shadowfax bore him, shining, unveiled once more, a light starting from his upraised hand. The Nazgul screeched and swept away, for their Captain was not yet come to challenge the white fire of his foe. The hosts of Morgul intent on their prey, taken at unawares in wold career, broke, scattering like sparks in a gale. The out-companies with a great cheer turned and smote their pursuers. Hunters became the hunted. The retreat became an onslaught. The field was strewn with stricken orcs and men, and a reek arose of torches cast away, sputtering out in swirling smoke. The calvary rode on. (Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 802)

And thus, Gandalf and Shadowfax allowed the men of Gondor to safely retreat back to Gondor and pose a challenge to their enemies. Yet, when examining the moment of intervention from the White Rider, the text states that “one rider outran them all, swift as the wind in the grass”. The “rider outran”, but in actuality it is Shadowfax, not the rider, who outran. And “Shadowfax bore him, shining, unveiled once more”—it is suggested the White Rider is the one shining and unveiled, but the lack of pronouns here make it unclear which of the two is shining in this sense. Considering previous descriptions of the beauty and glistening coat of Shadowfax, in both of these sentences—the description of what we see when Gandalf comes to the rescue—the rider and horse are merged into one with “the rider outrunning” and “Shadowfax/him shining and unveiled”. The two are interchangeable in this moment, they are one identity as they charge into battle—the good up against the evil. And so we see them in this capacity when they are together. Both white, both shining, both separate from their species, their kin. They work to assist each other, both are main characters that need each other to work in their capacities within the narrative. It is even suggested that Shadowfax passed into the West with Gandalf eventually.

So we see that the animals of Tolkien’s bestiary are unique in their own rights, yet we can see the influence of the medieval bestiary and its animals’ functioning in Tolkien’s own works. Tolkien’s magical beasts do more within the narrative than serve as helpful companions to humans and other races. Rather, they become an essential part of the narrative and their identities

stand amongst other animals and the Speaking Peoples. While Sam, Frodo, and the Fellowship will always be the heroes of the text, perhaps it's time to give the stage to The Great Eagles, Shadowfax, for a time, and consider if we should transition from seeing them as beasts to beings.

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