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OF FOXES, DANCING BEARS, AND WOLVES



Allart van Everdingen,
Reynard the Fox: The Wolf and the Bear Celebrate Their Freedom (1650–75).

A desire for communion with animals was so fundamental to J.R.R. Tolkien's sensibility that he retained it throughout his writing career, although it was threatened in later stages when he had become concerned that it was theologically illicit. He formulated this desire in *On Fairy-stories* (43) as "one of the primal 'desires' that lie near the heart of Faërie [is] the desire of men to hold *communion* with other living things...The magical understanding by men of the proper languages of birds and beasts and trees..." (italics added). His numerous characters manifesting this level of communion, which I shall call his "Faërian wish," include Beorn, his animal servants, and other bears; wolves and wargs; ravens; a thrush; spiders; dragons; and a solitary fox. Tolkien expressed this wish most strongly early in his writings; he became conflicted about it in later life when, as part of his growing belief that he needed to rein in his imagination and make it fit better both with mundane reality and Catholic thought, he differentiated humans and elves from animals on the basis that the latter lacked a *fëa* (soul). Nevertheless, Tolkien's desire for communion with animals was such an important part of his sensibility that he found ways to express it in his latest writings despite this conflict.

In the first part of this essay I will elaborate on the nature of Tolkien's Faërian wish, which is akin to ancient and non-European attitudes toward animals. In the next part I will discuss the quandaries Tolkien found himself in when he took the medieval scholastic attitude toward animals as his "official" viewpoint. I will then focus on how Tolkien's diverging attitudes toward communion with animals played out in his writings about three animals that were important in medieval times as well as in the legendarium, foxes, bears, and wolves, showing how traces of the Faërian wish remained even after Tolkien "officially" assumed the scholastic point of view.

THE FAËRIAN WISH

In order to understand the quality of communion that Tolkien desired it is important to examine more closely his statement in *On Fairy-stories* about speaking with animals. It is obvious that he directly expresses a wish for greater communion with animals than is possible in mundane reality. But when Tolkien invokes the "...magical understanding by men of the *proper* languages of birds and beasts and trees..." (italics added) he is also expressing a wish to minimize human control over the animal, a wish for the animal to retain its own separate agency in the relationship: the animals remain animals with their own proper languages. Tolkien is expressing a longing for a relationship that is saturated with both intimacy and individuality. I extracted the above quotation from a longer passage in which Tolkien also considers "beast fables" in which animals do *not* have their "proper" languages, but instead are imbued with human qualities to such an extent that they lose their own agency:

"The beast-fable has, of course, a connexion with fairy-stories. Beasts and birds and other creatures often talk like men in real fairy-stories. In some part (often small) this marvel derives from one of the primal 'desires' that lie near the heart of Faërie: the desire of men to hold communion with other living things. But the speech of beasts in a beast-fable, as developed into a separate branch, has little reference to that desire, and often wholly forgets it. The magical understanding by men of the proper languages of birds and beasts and trees, that is much nearer to the true purposes of Faërie. But in stories in which no human being is concerned; or in which the animals are the heroes and heroines, and men and women, if they appear, are mere adjuncts; and above all those in which the animal form is only a mask upon a human face, a device of the satirist or the preacher, in these we have beast-fable and not fairy-story: whether it be *Reynard the Fox*..." (*On Fairy-stories* 43)

What Tolkien longed for with his Faërian wish, on the contrary, is a relationship of the same nature that the Valar felt for the Children of Ilúvatar: when Oromë first encountered the Elves, he “...was filled with wonder, as though they were beings sudden and marvelous and unforeseen; for so it shall ever be with the Valar. From without the World, though all things may be forethought in music or foreshown in vision from afar, to those who enter verily into Eä each in its time shall be met at unawares as something new and unfortold” (*Silmarillion* 45). It partakes of Tolkien’s notion of recovery that includes “. . . ‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’—as things *apart from ourselves*” (*On Fairy-stories* 77, italics added). This Faërian wish is to combine communion with separate agency.

Communion, together with its opposite, agency, are the fundamental modalities of what David Bakan described as “the duality of human existence.” “Agency manifests itself in self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion; communion manifests itself in the sense of being at one with other organisms. Agency manifests itself in the formation of separations; communion in the lack of separations” (Bakan, 1966, p. 15). These modalities are highly relevant to understanding psychological and social dimensions as various as interpersonal behavior, self-esteem, social cognition, group processes, gender (Abele and Wojciszke), and religious orientation (Fauteux). Most important for my current purposes, it is widely recognized that optimal psychological functioning occurs when there is a balance of communion and agency, rather than an overreliance on one or the other. Too much agency can result in loneliness, alienation, and heartless manipulation of people and the environment; Bakan saw social pathologies such as child abuse and war as deriving from unmitigated agency. Too much communion can result in passivity, self-abnegation, and masochistically allowing oneself to be used by others. “Communion or surrender, the emphasis on connectedness, attachment, and a movement toward a sense of belongingness and sharing with others (a person, a group, a society), serves as a counterforce to experiences of loneliness and alienation that can occur in agency and autonomy. Conversely, uniqueness and self-definition serve as a counterforce to experiences of a loss of individuality that can occur in surrender and communion” (Blatt 727). Tolkien’s Faërian wish can be recognized as a wish to balance communion and agency along these optimal lines.

Tolkien’s Faërian wish links him to ancient traditions of oneness with nature and comfort with transformations of identity. The young Tolkien’s delight in such thought was well-expressed by his 1915 essay on the Kalevala, where he described humans as being embedded in nature, and where neither humans, other

organisms, or landscapes have fixed boundaries, as can be seen in the following quotations: “There are mountains, rivers, grass, and other things here much as th[ere] were there; many plants and some animals (especially the ferocious human species) may seem familiar...” (*Kullervo*, 101); “[The Kalevala may be compared to] that body of strange myth, of queer troglodyte underworld of story, of wild jugglings with the sun and moon and the origins of the earth and the shapes of Man, that in Homer (for instance) has lightly been pruned away...” (*Kullervo*, 104); “a man may kill a gigantic elk in one line and find it more poetic to call it a she-bear in the next” (*Kullervo*, 107-8); “you suddenly realize that you are all the time reading about the earth being made out of a teal’s egg, or of the sun and moon being imprisoned in a mountain” (*Kullervo*, 109).

Tolkien identified this orientation, favorably, as being at variance with European civilization: “We are taking a holiday from the whole course of European progress of the last three millenniums, and going to be wildly un-hellenic and barbarous for a time—like the boy who hoped that the future life would provide for half-holidays in Hell far away from Eton collars and hymns” (*Kullervo*, 105). Modern anthropology supports Tolkien’s sense that the communion he sought was more readily found outside European civilization. Descola (2013) surveyed ethnographies from around the world and developed the idea that most cultures do not draw the sharp distinction between human society and nature that is seen in European culture. In particular, it is common for animals, and even plants and natural objects, to be recognized as people; humans and other organisms are clothed in different appearances but share a fundamental spirit. At times animals shed their animal skins and live as humans in houses, and humans (usually in dreams) can take on the appearance of animals. An extreme version of this attitude is found in what Viveiros de Castro (2015) calls *perspectivism*, common in Amazonia, wherein not only are animals understood to be people, they are additionally understood to look at us and themselves as we look at them and ourselves. For example, jaguars see blood as manioc beer and see humans as peccaries to be hunted; vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish.

SOULS AND THE SEPARATION OF HUMANS FROM ANIMALS

Tolkien’s concept of *fëa* (soul) and *hröa* (body), on the other hand, links him to the “course of European progress” that he had repudiated many years earlier in the *Kalevala* essay. Medieval European Christendom shifted away from the classical world’s easier metamorphoses between humans and animals to the position that humans were different from and superior to animals in their possession of intellect and rational souls (De Leemans and Klemm, 153, 157-158; Salisbury, 3-5). This position was not monolithic, as can be recognized for example by human-animal

hybrids in art, and starting in the twelfth century the strict delineation of humans from animals began to break down (Salisbury, 100-107; Bynum, 22-27) or at least to be complemented by the idea of greater communion between people and animals (Resl, 179-201). However, although Tolkien did not directly expound upon sources with which his concepts of *fëa/hröa* resonated the way he expounded upon the communion in *Kullervo*, McIntosh has shown Tolkien's indebtedness to medieval scholastic philosophy, and his concept of *fëa* and *hröa* is consistent with this philosophy in stressing that humans are fundamentally different from animals because unlike animals we are rational and we possess a rational soul. The shift away from the communal Faërian wish in favor of maintaining separateness is consistent with a general trend in Tolkien's later life to increasingly confine his imagination to realistic and Catholic-compatible forms; for discussion of this as an important development in Tolkien's later life and works, see Rosegrant, 2022, 164-172.¹ Fimi (2010) has pointed out that from early on Tolkien situated his peoples and creatures in a hierarchy analogous to the medieval Chain of Being; however, not until these later writings did Tolkien take such hierarchy as precluding speech with animals. But even though the weight that Tolkien gave to these two points of view changed over time, it would be incorrect to conclude that he replaced his Faërian wish with his scholastic philosophy. Consistent with what Flieger (2019) pointed out to be Tolkien's typical simultaneous holding of contradictory ideas, his more communal view continued to exist alongside his more separate one.

The period when Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings* appears to have been transitional between his comfortable expression of the Faërian wish and his scholastic suppression of the wish. In *The Lord of the Rings* itself, speaking beasts have mostly disappeared, although importantly a fox (discussed below) has a human-like mind. Rangers "were believed to have strange powers of sight and hearing, and to understand the languages of beasts and birds" (149) but this was probably the Faërian wish placed by Tolkien into the minds of the Breelanders, rather than an actual ability of the Rangers. Only wizards are depicted speaking with creatures; Radagast at Gandalf's request is able to "Send out messages to all

¹ It is important to note that I am not making any claim that Catholicism, or Catholics in general, are opposed to communal feelings toward animals. It is only necessary to consider St. Francis of Assisi and the worldwide Blessing of the Animals on his Feast Day to recognize that any such claim would be absurd. The story of St. Francis speaking to the Wolf of Gubbio even approaches Tolkien's Faërian wish, although Francis is said to have spoken in human language rather than wolf language. Spirito (2007) discusses tales about other Christian saints communicating with animals. Furthermore, there are plenty of Catholic lovers of Tolkien who are charmed by his Faërian wish. My purpose here is only to explore Tolkien's personal internal conflict between different ways of balancing communion and separateness in relationship to animals, not to make a general statement about religion.

the beasts and birds that are [his] friends” (257). Gandalf holds speech with Gwaihir the eagle, and Frodo’s lamentation for him in Lothlórian contains the description, “with bird on bough and beast in den,/ in their own secret tongues he spoke” (359). And in an emendation of the Quenta Silmarillion that Christopher dates to the time when Tolkien was composing *The Lord of the Rings*², we read that “Celegorn [soon to be re-named Celegorm] went rather to the house of Oromë, and there he got great knowledge of all birds and beasts, and all their tongues he knew” (*Lost Road* 224-5). This statement survived in the later Quenta Silmarillion and Christopher kept it in the published *Silmarillion*³.

But as Hartley (2014, p. 2) pointed out, Tolkien’s trouble fitting speaking creatures with Catholic orthodoxy is most visible in later drafts of the Silmarillion. It was in “Laws and Customs Among the Eldar,” dated by Christopher to the late 1950s and published in *Morgoth’s Ring*, that Tolkien most overtly drew back from his Faërian wish for communion by formulating for Middle-earth a separation between people (humans and elves)⁴ and animals: people have *fëar* (pl.) and *hroar* (pl.), but animals have only *hroar*. (Tolkien stated that *fëar* and *hroar* are very like but not identical to souls and bodies, but he did not specify what their differences might be.) Hartley (2014) discussed the quandaries in which Tolkien found himself as he tried to reconcile the speaking creatures in *The Hobbit* with this scholastic understanding of souls. Tolkien demonstrated the conflict he felt about the way he had expressed his Faërian wish in earlier forms of his legendarium when he almost embarrassedly stated, “What of talking beasts and birds with reasoning and speech? These have been rather lightly adopted from less ‘serious’ mythologies, but play a part which cannot now be excised...true ‘rational’ creatures, ‘speaking peoples’, are all of human/‘humanoid’ form... ‘talking’ is not necessarily the sign of the possession of a ‘rational soul’ or *fëa*” (*Morgoth’s Ring* 409-410).

The above quote is excerpted from ‘Orcs’, a brief essay from the late 1950s that Christopher described accurately as “very much a record of ‘thinking with the pen’” (MR 409); more precisely, Tolkien was trying to reconcile his earlier stories that included “The magical understanding by men of the proper languages of birds and beasts and trees...” with his new conviction that rationality and speech could

² Passages relevant to Christopher’s dating of this emendation are in *The Lost Road*, pp. 200 & 226.

³ Since wizards were Maia, and Celegorn an elf, these descriptions do not strictly capture “the desire of men to hold communion with other living things.” However, wizards were sent to earth in the vulnerable bodies of men, and elves and humans were closely enough related to mate and produce fertile offspring, so wizards and elves speaking with creatures can reasonably be taken as an expression of the Faërian wish.

⁴ Presumably dwarves also received *fëar* when Eru granted them independent existence.

only belong to people and thus separated people from other beings. It is well-known that Tolkien struggled to decide upon the nature and origin of the orcs, and Hartley (2014) explained why this struggle was unresolvable. What is relevant to focus on here is specifically Tolkien's uncertainty about the speech of orcs. As the essay progresses Tolkien leans progressively further toward separating talking beasts from humans:

“Huan and Sorontar could be Maiar—emissaries of Manwë. But unfortunately in *The Lord of the Rings* Gwaehir and Landroval are said to be *descendants* of Sorontar... would Eru provide *fëar* for such creatures? For the Eagles etc. perhaps. But not for Orcs... The Orcs were *beasts* of humanized shape... Melkor taught them *speech*... this talking was largely echoic (cf. parrots). In *The Lord of the Rings* Sauron is said to have *devised a language* for them. The same sort of thing may be said of Húan and the Eagles: they were taught language by the Valar, and raised to a higher level—but they still had no *fëar*” (*Morgoth's Ring* 410-11).

The importance to Tolkien at this time of his conviction that there can be no communion with beasts in the form of language is highlighted by his stating that orc speech was like echoic parrot speech when this is incompatible with the evidence in both *The Hobbit* (where they are called goblins) and *The Lord of the Rings* in which orcs converse in language with complex, fully human semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.

But despite the lengths to which Tolkien went to repudiate the Faërian wish in his late writings, it continued to be recognizable there in more subdued form. To demonstrate the enduring importance to Tolkien of his Faërian wish, from his early “wildly un-hellenic” period to his later more conformist period, it is helpful to explore his writings about foxes, bears, and wolves. As predators that threatened people and their livestock, these three beasts had ancient and medieval threatening prototypes of which Tolkien was aware, making his communal wish shine through especially brightly by contrast as he wrote about them from early to late in his career.

FOXES

As Frodo, Sam, and Pippin camp out on the first night of their journey, “A fox passing through the wood on business of his own stopped several minutes and sniffed.

“‘Hobbits!’ he thought. ‘Well, what next? I have heard of strange doings in this land, but I have seldom heard of a hobbit sleeping out of doors under a tree. Three of them! There’s something mighty queer behind this.’ He was quite right, but he never found out any more about it” (*Lord of the Rings* 72).

This fox, in his nature and his relationship with the hobbits, is quite different from the medieval fox. The medieval relationship with actual foxes appears to have been almost exclusively antagonistic: foxes were predators upon farm animals and were hunted to eliminate this danger and for sport. Tolkien humorously referenced this relationship in connection with a lecture he was late in writing: “I composed it with ‘all the woe in the world’, as the Gawain-poet says of the wretched fox with the hounds on his tail”. (*Letters* 228) But rather than experiencing threat, the fox in the Shire evinces neighborly curiosity.

Medieval bestiaries emphasized the duplicitous nature of the fox: it “...never runs in a straight line but always in devious ways. It is a clever, cheating animal. If it is hungry and cannot find anything to eat, it rolls in red earth, so that it seems as if it is spotted with blood, and lies on the ground holding its breath, so that it is hardly breathing” (Barber, 65). Birds then fly close because they think the fox dead, and it is able to seize them. This is a version of the slyness that Western culture has conventionally attributed to foxes at least since the days of Aesop. Aragorn showed that he shared this opinion when he referred to Gollum as “slier than a fox” (384); as did Faramir when he said that Gollum “gave us the slip by some fox-trick” (657). But the only natural behavior captured in the attribute of slyness is that foxes do some of their hunting by stealth—as do many carnivores. The fox’s method of rolling in clay and playing dead is a human invention, as is the devious running. The bestiary goes on to state that the fox represents the devil, “who appears to be dead to all living things until he has them by the throat and punishes them. But for holy men he is truly dead, reduced to nothing by faith” (Barber 65).

This use of animals as exemplars of human behavior and ethical warnings is typical of medieval bestiaries. Their descriptions of animals were only minimally based on actual observation, and instead adhered to earlier commentary, beginning with the *Physiologus*, intended to bolster Christian values. This is a manifestation

of humans agentially disregarding the animals themselves; animals exist as a repository of human projections and wishes, with their own actual nature almost invisible.

This diminution of the actual nature of animals, and its replacement by human nature, reached its apotheosis in tales of Reynard the Fox, a story cycle that was enormously popular and widespread in medieval Europe. As we saw above, Tolkien classified *Reynard* to be a “Beast-fable” and differentiated this genre from fairy-tale because communion with humans, and/or the actual nature of the animal, are absent.

To wit: Reynard is a murderer, a rapist, a sadist, and a liar who is regularly brought before the Crown (a lion) to be tried for his misdeeds, and who proceeds to outwit the ignorant, incompetent, and corrupt authorities. Although the brutality in the tales is so prominent that it overpowers amusement for modern sensibilities (or at least for mine), the stories were originally enjoyed for their humorous puncturing of authorities and triumph of guile over might (Simpson, 19-20). In one episode that can serve for an illustration of many, Reynard has swayed the court to forgive him his crimes in part with falsehoods that turn the King against his accusers, and in part by lying that he will go on pilgrimage to Rome. Reynard then contrives to devour one of his accusers (a Hare) and trick another of his accusers to behave in such a way that it is sentenced to death (Simpson, 111-126).

The content of this tale is cruelty rather than communion. But I also want to call attention to the human overriding of animal nature manifest in the way Reynard and the other animals are depicted. Only a few features of actual animals are present: the fox lives in a hole and the fox and his family devour the hare. But these features are almost unnoticeable behind the human behaviors depicted; the animals in the tales of Reynard the Fox have been deprived of almost all their natural qualities and instead are used as displacement receptacles for satiric depictions of terrible human behavior. “The animal form is only a mask upon a human face” (*On Fairy-stories* 43), far away from the Faërian wish.

Tolkien’s fox lives in a different universe from Reynard, or even the conventionally sly fox, a universe in which communion and respect for the animal’s separateness coexist. In terms of content, he shows no sign of Reynard’s sadistic agency, and the closest he comes to slyness is his benign curiosity. This gentle interest can be considered a mild form of communion, one creature briefly concerned in a non-utilitarian way with another. But the most important way that Tolkien combined communion with agency was his imbuing the fox with a human-like mind. Although the hobbits do not speak with the fox, and it is not even clear

that the fox has speech, so this encounter does not quite reach the level of the wish to understand the proper language of beasts, it is clear that the fox has a mind that is akin to the mind of humans. Yet at the same time the fox retains his foxy identity: he is four-footed, unclothed, uses his olfactory sense in figuring out what he has encountered, and then departs on his wild fox business. Tolkien has created a moment of communion with the fox by showing how much it thinks like us, but he has not wiped away the fox's own nature. We have been brought close to the fox and yet we still see him “as we are (or were) meant to see them”—as things apart from ourselves.”

Importantly, a communal relationship with foxes is hinted at in “Of the Land and Beasts of Númenor” (published in *The Nature of Middle-earth*), written in 1965 during the period that Tolkien was otherwise striving to make Middle-earth more realistic. Tolkien writes that on Númenor “There were a great number...of foxes...Their chief food seems to have been [rabbits]. These existed in large numbers and multiplied swiftly, and were voracious herbivores, so that the foxes were esteemed as the best and most natural way of keeping them in order, and foxes were seldom hunted or molested. *In return*, or because their food-supply was otherwise abundant, the foxes seem never to have acquired the habit of preying upon the domestic fowl of the Númenóreans” (335; italics added). For the most part this depicts a realistically possible peaceable coexistence. But with the words “In return,” even though they are immediately qualified by a more realistic alternate explanation, we have a remnant of the Faërian wish: it is as though an actual understanding exists between the Númenórean humans and foxes.

BEARS

Because of hunting due to their danger to both humans and livestock, combined with habitat loss, wild bears neared extinction in the medieval period (Resl, 7). Perhaps as a way to laugh at fear, Bruin the bear in the Reynard the Fox cycle is a pathetic fool who is an easy dupe for Reynard and more than once is tortured brutally.

Captive bears were a popular entertainment in medieval days, and they were not treated much better than Bruin. In bear-baiting, the bear would be chained to a post and attacked by dogs in a fight to the death. Tolkien knew about bear-baiting: in *The Lays of Beleriand* he describes how Túrin : “...hewed his foemen,/ as a bear at bay mid bellowing hounds,/ unheeding his hurts...” (37). Other bears were cruelly trained to dance or perform on their hind feet. Training bears to dance typically involved inflicting pain by manipulating a rope attached to a ring through their nose. These practices apparently originated before the medieval period; the

first definite attestation in England is a drawing of a performing bear from the tenth century (Tunaydin). In England, bear baiting was outlawed in 1835, but performing bears were only outlawed in 1911, making it possible that Tolkien observed a performance himself; whether or not this is so, it seems almost certain that he was aware of this practice having occurred in medieval times.

Bruin in Reynard, and the actual treatment of bears, were clear examples of people exercising unmitigated agency against bears. In less physically violent form this also occurred in typical fashion in the bestiaries, where the few accurate observations, such as that bears hibernate, were mixed with numerous human fantasies and projections, such as that “The bear’s head is weak, and its greatest power is in its arms and loins; for this reason they often walk upright... They mate in the same way wherever they are found, not in the fashion of other four-footed beasts, but embracing each other in human fashion... the males respect the pregnant females... They give birth to little formless lumps of flesh... They shape them by gradually licking them with their tongue... The bear signifies the devil, ravager of the flocks of our lord, and unjust rulers” (Barber 58-60). In all these attributions, human thought eliminates the actual bear behind inaccuracies, some of which render the bear more human-like, but not in a way that facilitates communion as in Tolkien’s Faërian wish.

The popularity of bears in his family life, and their persistence in his writing, suggest that Tolkien was himself fond of bears. His daughter Priscilla at one time possessed so many Teddy Bears that she insisted upon taking along on trips that Tolkien was asked if he was a traveling salesman for stuffed bears (P. Tolkien). Rateliff points out that since *Mr. Bliss*, *Letters from Father Christmas*, and *The Hobbit* were originally written for the enjoyment of Tolkien’s children, their fondness for bears contributed to the prominence of bears in these tales. In fact, the three bears who appear in *Mr. Bliss* were based on the Teddy Bears of Tolkien’s sons, and the Father Christmas Letters specifically mention the Bingos, some of Priscilla’s bears.

Tolkien hinted with literary jokes in “The Notion Club Papers” at his own fondness for bears. He grants the name Dolbear to one member who is depicted like a sleepy bear who nevertheless makes cogent comments: “He often slept loudly, during a long reading or discussion. But he would rouse up in the middle of a debate and show that he had the odd faculty of both sleeping and listening” (*Sauron Defeated* 184, footnote). In one bear-like instance “Dolbear woke up. He yawned loudly, lifted his heavy lids and his blue-bright eyes opened wide under his red brows” (*Sauron Defeated* 184). He then proceeded to give a key disquisition on the importance of a suitable frame for a fantasy story, a matter that was quite important

to Tolkien himself (Rosegrant, 2021). Tolkien hints even more broadly at his communal feeling toward bears when he has one of the members refer to “old Professor Rashbold at Pembroke, though I didn’t know him personally. A grumpy old bear...” (*Sauron Defeated* 264) As Christopher points out, “Rashbold is a translation of *Tolkien* (*Toll-kühn*) (*Sauron Defeated* 167)”—Tolkien is calling himself a bear.

Bears, and bears communally related to humans, span from “The Story of Kullervo,” Tolkien’s earliest Legendarium-related writing (1912-1914) to the late “Of the Land and Beasts of Númenor” (1965). His bears always retain a bear-like nature independent from humans, but their aggression toward people progressively decreases.

In “On ‘The Kalevala’ or Land of Heroes,” a draft essay Tolkien wrote about the source from which he derived “The Story of Kullervo,” Tolkien writes “...the bear and wolf are persons of great importance in the ‘Kalevala’” (83) and “...the bear of course is the most hated of all animals to the farmer’s wife.” (88) In accord with this ancient fear of ursine aggression, the bears in “The Story of Kullervo” are savage predators on humans—but even so, they show seeds of communion with at least one person--Kullervo. Furious with the wife of the farmer to whom he is in thrall, because she baked him a cake with flint inside on which his special knife broke when he tried to slice it, Kullervo summons bears and wolves, magically turns them into cattle, and sends them to the woman’s fields, When she begins to milk them they resume their natural forms and devour her (29-31). These wolves and bears are in a relationship with Kullervo, a kind of communion even though Kullervo himself is almost more animal than human. Kullervo’s relationship is even closer with Musti, a magical dog who can assume the form of a bear and who teaches Kullervo and speaks to him in human language (9-10). And at one point Kullervo is described as being able “to converse even with Uru the bear,” (20) thus directly embodying Tolkien’s Faërian wish.

Tolkien of course was for many years deeply imaginatively involved with another bear-like hero: Beowulf. He began lecturing on *Beowulf* in 1920 (Scull and Hammond), translated it in 1926, delivered as a lecture the authoritative “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” in 1936, and early in the 1940s wrote “Sellic Spell,” a speculative reconstruction of the fairy tale that he imagined could lie behind *Beowulf*. Tolkien recognized that the hero’s name metaphorically merged man with bear: “Bee-wolf: to my mind the most likely etymology is a kenning—quite apart from the evident surviving ‘bearish’ characteristics of Beowulf.” (Tolkien, *Beowulf* 356) (A variant of this kenning appears in Treebeard’s list, the only mention of bears in *The Lord of the Rings*, showing that it retained importance in Tolkien’s

imaginative world: “*Bear bee-hunter*” [364]). Tolkien playfully elaborated on this communion in his account of Beowulf’s infancy: “One day some huntsmen had come upon a great bear in the mountains. They tracked *him* to his lair and killed *him*, and in *his* den they found a man-child...It seemed to the huntsmen that it must have been fostered by the bears, for it growled like a cub” (Tolkien, *Beowulf* 360; italics added). In reality, male bears do not care for cubs, and in fact are more likely to kill them if they encounter them. Even if Tolkien was unaware of this biological fact, his attributing parental care to the male increases the communal feel of a human-like family taking care of the young child. And Beowulf himself shows considerably less aggressive agency than the brutal Kullervo. Beowulf’s aggression is always in the service of helping people, even as it aggrandizes him.

Talking bears play prominent roles in three works that Tolkien composed approximately contemporaneously: Archie, Teddy, and Bruno in *Mr. Bliss*, from the late 1920s; *Letters from Father Christmas*, in which the North Polar Bear stepped onstage in 1925, and Beorn and his nighttime dance companions in *The Hobbit*, begun around 1930. Rateliff (2011) has shown convincingly that these works mutually influenced each other’s bear themes, without it being possible to determine the direction of the influence. For example, the drawing of the bears’ house in *Mr. Bliss* is very similar to the drawing of Beorn’s house in *The Hobbit*, and by the letter of 1933 the North Polar Bear is slaughtering goblins in a way very reminiscent of Beorn in the Battle of the Five Armies.

The human-animal communion involving these bears extends far beyond their speech. All of them socialize with people, all of them favor bipedal locomotion, the bears in *Mr. Bliss* have normal human names; and the North Polar Bear even adds written commentary to the letters Father Christmas sends. This communion is greatest of all with Beorn, the most serious character, who is a werebear, able to assume human form or bear form at will. It is not even clear which is his basic nature; Gandalf tells Bilbo and the dwarves, “Some say that he is a bear descended from the great and ancient bears of the mountains...others say that he is a man descended from the first men...I cannot say, though I fancy the last is the true tale.” (*Hobbit* 126)

Yet Tolkien also granted these creations their separateness from humans in the quality of fierceness natural to bears. As is appropriate in children’s books, the fierceness of the bears in *Letters from Father Christmas* and *Mr. Bliss* is rendered so as not to be too scary. North Polar Bear is a comical blunderer, and there is never a hint that his ire might be directed against Father Christmas or the children receiving the letters, but he unleashes it enthusiastically against dangerous goblins: “Polar Bear was squeezing, squashing, trampling, boxing and kicking goblins

skyhigh, and roaring like a zoo, and the goblins were yelling like engine whistles. He was splendid” (61). Archie, Teddy, and Bruno are a little more threatening; when denied the treats they requested, “‘Then we shall eat you all up—one each!’ said the bears. Of course they were only teasing; but they rolled their yellow eyes, and growled, and looked so fierce that Mr Bliss was frightened (and so was Mr Day and Mrs Knight). So they gave the bears the cabbages and the bananas” (*Mr. Bliss* 26). Even though the bears soon become friendly and host a meal at their home, this level of realistic agency is notable in a children’s book about bears; compare for example silly harmless Winnie-the-Pooh, also based on a child’s real stuffed animal, or the delightful *Little Bear* series where the actual nature of bears is indiscernible.

Beorn’s bearlike threat is much more palpable. Gandalf warns Bilbo and the dwarves, “He can be appalling when he is angry, though he is kind enough if humoured. Still I warn you he gets angry easily,” (*Hobbit* 125), before staging a comic gradual introduction to win Beorn over without triggering his wrath. While staying as guests Bilbo and the dwarves are warned not to go outside at night, and “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” (*Hobbit* 139). Beorn unleashes his full agentic fierceness to win the Battle of the Five Armies: “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” (*Hobbit* 302). In this he resembles the medieval prototype Bödvar Bjarki who fought fiercely in battle in bear form, although this was a spirit projection that was broken when his sleeping human body was awakened.

In the scene at Beorn’s house, Tolkien played particularly intricately with communion and separateness in his depiction of bears dancing. After the first night, Gandalf reports “There must have been a regular bears’ meeting outside here last night...I should say there were little bears, large bears, ordinary bears, and gigantic big bears, all dancing outside from dark to nearly dawn” (*Hobbit* 140). Tolkien has turned the medieval reality of dancing bears on its head: instead of being tortured by humans to perform against their nature, the bears choose as agents to engage for their own pleasure in a human-like behavior. But this example of human-animal communion at the same time comes across as threatening: the following night, Bilbo “dreamed a dream of hundreds of black bears dancing slow heavy dances round and round in the moonlight in the courtyard. Then he woke up when everyone else was asleep, and he heard the same scraping, scuffling, snuffling, and growling as before. Next morning they were all wakened by Beorn himself...He picked up

the hobbit and laughed: 'Not eaten up by Wargs or goblins or wicked bears yet I see'" (*Hobbit* 141).

This motif of dancing bears is the heart of the human-bear communion that remains in Tolkien's late writings. In *The Nature of Middle-earth* we read that on Númenor,

"The relations of the bears and Men were strange. From the first the bears exhibited friendship and curiosity towards the newcomers; and these feelings were returned. At no time was there any hostility between Men and bears; though at mating times, and during the first youth of their cubs they could be angry and dangerous if disturbed...Very few Númenóreans were ever killed by bears...They never dwelt in or near the homes of Men, but they would often visit them, in the casual manner of one householder calling upon another...Most strange of all were the bear-dances. The bears, the black bears especially, had curious dances of their own; but these seem to have become improved and elaborated by the instruction of Men. At times the bears would perform dances for the entertainment of their human friends...To those not accustomed to the bears the slow (but dignified) motions of the bears, sometimes as many as 50 or more together, appeared astonishing and comic. But it was understood by all admitted to the spectacle that there should be no open laughter. The laughter of Men was a sound that the bears could not understand: it alarmed and angered them" (336).

These bears do not share speech with humans, but as with the foxes of Númenor we see a remnant of the Faërian wish in the mutual understanding of their relationship. For the most part bears and humans enjoy communing with each other, yet the bears retain agency: they do occasionally kill humans, and with real-world naturalness they are most touchy when they have cubs. The mixture of separateness with communion is clearest in the dances: the bears developed dancing on their own, but they enjoy demonstrating it for humans and learned some improvements from them. But their dance performances also involve a potential limit to mutual understanding; although humans may find the bear dance comical, their laughter would be incomprehensible to the bears.

WOLVES

Like the previous two predators, wolves embody the Faërian wish in Tolkien's early writings, but unlike them wolves no longer exist in later writings. Yet their very

absence serves to illustrate the importance to Tolkien of combining separateness with communion.

Wolves were the quintessential terrifying predators of medieval times, a terror that continues to be registered in fairy tale wolves. They killed and ate livestock, and at times humans, and in return humans killed them when they could. Isengrim the Wolf in the Reynard story cycle is thoroughly humiliated by Reynard (Barber 217-223); perhaps, as with Bruin, this was a way people could laugh at fear. The medieval conception of the wolf did include communion in the form of the werewolf, a fantastical condensation that is both human and wolf. In fact, the choice of the wolf as the commonest were-animal may reflect a sense of human similarity with natural wolves; after pointing out that wolves have been viewed not only as the epitome of wilderness but also as social animals whose descendant is the dog, Ogden states, “Perhaps this, after all, is why werewolves are wolves, why, in other words, the ancients chose the wolf to be the animal of transformation: the wolf does not merely represent the crude alternative pole to humanity as its notable savagery might invite us to suspect, but rather it already embodies in itself a straddling of the divide between savagery and civilization” (17). Yet in terms of its relationship with humans, the medieval werewolf generally retained the natural wolf’s agentic predatory nature.⁵

Tolkien’s wolves share a degree of communion with humans at the same time that they stay close to the medieval prototype of dangerous agentic predators. Kullervo’s communion with deadly wolves was discussed above. Murderous werewolves appear in *The Silmarillion*: Sauron is master of werewolves, one of which kills Finrod Felagund (204), and is himself the greatest of werewolves who battles but loses to Huan (205-6). Save for one fleeting mention (*Lord of the Rings* 222) there are no werewolves in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*, but wargs take their place as a similarly communal condensation of human and beast. The word “warg” itself contains the blending: “Warg...is an old word for wolf, which also had the sense of an outlaw or hunted criminal.” (letter to Gene Wolf, quoted in Rateliff, 217). And in *The Hobbit*, the wargs have human-like social structure and the full Faërian wish of understanding the proper language of beasts is enacted in their depiction: “...in the middle of the circle [of wargs] was a great grey wolf. He spoke to them in the dreadful language of the Wargs. Gandalf understood it” (111).

But in *The Nature of Middle-earth* we learn that on the island of Númenor “There were no wolves” (335). With his late-life concern for realism, as we saw

⁵ Exceptions include Bisclavret and the werewolves described by Gerald of Wales, who retained human qualities even while in wolf form (see for instance Salisbury 144-5).

with foxes and bears, Tolkien has suppressed his full Faërian wish, so that he no longer has room for direct speech with animals, or for fantastical condensations of people with animals such as were-bears or werewolves. But after removing all these qualities from the relationship between humans and wolves, all that would remain of Tolkien's previous depiction of wolves would be separateness and danger; he had never imbued this species with benign communion. As we also saw in his depiction of foxes and bears Tolkien still wished to combine separateness with communion in his relationship with animals, whereas wolves as pure agents of antagonism are the opposite of communal. Such wolves could not fit in Númenor.

CONCLUSION

Tolkien demonstrated from early to late in his writings a Faërian wish to understand the proper speech of animals, a form of relating that would involve communion with animals while respecting their separate natures. But Tolkien's comfort in holding and expressing this wish changed over time. In his early writings, although he situated his peoples and creatures in a hierarchy analogous to the medieval Chain of Being, this hierarchy did not prevent higher peoples from at times speaking with animals. Later in his life Tolkien found it increasingly important to confine his imagination to what he understood as realistic and Catholic-compatible forms; as part of this change in orientation Tolkien drew back from his Faërian wish for communion by formulating for Middle-earth a separation between people (humans and elves) and animals: people have *fëar* (souls) and *hroar* (bodies), but animals have only *hroar*. This put him in a quandary that he never resolved to his satisfaction, because his earlier writings included speaking creatures that under his new formulation should not have been able to speak due to lacking *fëar*. Despite this level of conflict, Tolkien's Faërian wish was strong enough that residues of it remain in his late writings about Númenor: the foxes of that land appear to have had an understanding with the people that if they were not hunted they would not prey upon domestic fowl; the bears had their own dances but these were improved by human instruction, and people shared mutual enjoyment with bears when the bears danced for "their human friends" (*Nature of Middle-earth* 336).

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