

# The Voice of Beorn: How Language Moralizes the Monstrous

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Most of the strange and wonderful creatures in *The Hobbit* have limited to no voice, so they are presented to the reader mainly through their actions. Although, Tolkien's fictional world, much like the real world, is complex and populated by morally ambiguous characters, this narrative is a classic story of good versus evil. Thus, the reader is forced to judge which side the characters are on based principally on the observed behavior. For example, the trolls and the spiders only have brief moments of dialogue, but through their actions are "primarily understood as exhibitions of moral vices" (Fawcett, 2014). However, in some unique situations, Tolkien grants full voices to the monsters to ensure that the reader understands their rightful place on the side of the morally right, regardless of how objectively horrible their actions may be to an outside observer. This article will investigate this use of full language to moralize a monstrous character by examining the case of Beorn.

Beorn, the skin-changer, is usually referred to as a berserker with "a fiery temper and a suspicious nature," and would be a terrifying figure if he did not speak to reveal his fierce loyalty and good heart.<sup>1</sup> He is a character who exists at the boundary between civility and wildness. This inherent complexity of Beorn's nature is immediately apparent from his name, which is an Anglo-Saxon word for warrior, but can also mean bear; additionally, it is a cognate with the Old Norse word for bear, björn (Tolkien & Douglas, 2020). Beorn is both a huge bear and a huge man, and even the great Gandalf is unsure about his true origins. If Beorn, a hero of the Battle of the Five Armies, is judged solely based on his actions, in isolation from his full dialog, an objective jury would be forced to find that he is no more moral than the actual villains of *The Hobbit*, the goblins. To see this, let us document the cruelties of the goblins on one side of the ledger, and Beorn's on the other. This comparison will reveal Beorn's expanded use of language, in contrast to the goblins, provides him a means of framing this murderous behavior as a just war and thus making him seem moral to the reader.

First, let's account for the observed behavior of Middle-earth's perpetual evil-doers. Tolkien grants the goblins a larger voice than most of the other monsters in this story, but it is still rather limited. Right from the start Tolkien's description of them as, "great ugly-looking ... [with] horrible stony voices," marks the goblins as vile (*Hobbit* 59-60). The goblins are in the business of kidnapping and enslaving travelers. They take great delight in chaining and whipping their captives, and work their prisoners and slaves to death. The goblins merrily inform new prisoners of their expectations in song: "Work! Nor dare to shirk! While Goblins

quaff, and Goblins laugh" (*Hobbit* 61). It is also suggested by the narrator that the goblins "make no beautiful things," and are responsible for the invention of clever "instruments of torture and devices for killing large number of people at once" (*Hobbit* 62).

The goblins are further "dehumanized into a representation of evil" through their lust for vengeance (Stine 1). Upon finding Thorin and company up trees surrounded by wargs, they "sat down and laughed" (*Hobbit* 104). The goblins devised a scheme to punish the dwarves for their killing of the Great Goblin; even going so far as to taunt their trapped enemies when the dwarves' doom seemed at hand. Additionally, as a race, goblins are reported to hate everyone and everything, especially the prosperous, whose wealth and power they lust over. This greed is put on display in the large army of goblins that march to the Lonely Mountain after the death of Smaug to undeservedly claim the treasure for themselves. When one simply looks at events described in *The Hobbit*, this is the sum of the wicked activity that can be assigned to the goblins. However, clearly good characters like the wood elves of Mirkwood, at times behave eerily similar. The elves imprison the dwarves for trespassing, they are fierce enemies of the spiders whom they hate and hunt, and they also march on the Lonely Mountain after the death of Smaug to claim some of the unprotected wealth. But since the goblins are given little voice to justify themselves, so there is a strong case for the goblins as wicked and immoral characters.

On the other hand, Beorn is first introduced, very ominously, as an unnamed "Somebody," similarly to Harry Potter's 'He Who Must Not Be Known' (*Hobbit* 115). Beorn is known to be "somebody that everyone must take great care not to annoy... or heavens what will happen" (*Hobbit* 115). Beorn himself emphasizes his dangerous nature, even in his seemingly safe house, by warning the dwarves and Bilbo "not to stray outside until the sun is up, at [their] own peril" (*Hobbit* 127). Furthermore, it is made clear that he has a significant bloodlust for the slaughter, applauding Gandalf's use of lightning to kill a goblin. Beorn's own valuation of the worth of wizardry as a profession comes down to its ability to kill goblins. It is pretty safe to say that Beorn would not be impressed with The Old Took's enchanted diamond cufflinks. He remarks, "it is some good to be a wizard then," given that it improves your goblin killing capacity (*Hobbit* 122). Further along this line, Beorn tells Gandalf that he "would have given [the goblins and wargs] more than fireworks" in the wolf glade (*Hobbit* 123). Indeed, he wishes he was there to participate in the battle to properly eliminate them, not simply to drive them away.

Additionally, after confirming the validity of the dwarves' story of escaping the goblins' cave and killing the Great Goblin, Beorn's mirth is barely containable. The company's esteem goes up a good deal in the eyes of their host due to their combat with the goblins and wargs, especially the killing of the Great Goblin.<sup>2</sup> Beorn, it seems, takes great delight in the act of killing, and enjoys showing off afterwards. He tortures and mutilates a goblin and warg, not only for information, but also to create trophies to put on display. Beorn proudly invites his guest to come out and see his handy work. At this the narrative merely remarks that, "Beorn was a fierce enemy" (*Hobbit* 131).

For most of Bilbo's contact with Beorn, Bilbo is truly frightened of his host, taking Gandalf's stern warnings quite seriously. He actually "dived under the blankets and hid his head" on the first night, greatly concerned that Beorn, in bear shape, will burst in and kill them all (*Hobbit* 128). The next day, after being served by Beorn's wondrous animals all day, Gandalf mentions that he found bear tracks leading to the Misty Mountains, and Bilbo immediately assumes that Beorn will lead the goblins and wargs back to the house to kill them. Even after being scolded by Gandalf that Beorn is a friend, the nightly "scraping, scuffing, snuffing, and growling" is still quite unsettling and frightening to Bilbo (*Hobbit* 131). While inaccurate, Bilbo's reaction, as our representative in this world, is important and insightful. Bilbo's "error is perfectly reasonable" as Beorn has not done "much to dispel his guests' fears" (Olsen, 2013). This initial fear of Beorn is an objective assessment of the uncouth behavior of the monstrous carnivore that is housing Bilbo and the dwarves.

When the actions of the goblins and Beorn are viewed side by side, it is clearly seen that the two are surprisingly more similar than at initial approximation. Beorn and the goblins are both vengeful and suspicious of outsiders, while being merciless to those that they deem their enemy. Furthermore, the goblins and Beorn are documented killers with well-earned dangerous reputations; both merrily laugh and take pleasure at the death of their foes. If Beorn was as limited as the goblins' use of language, his actions would surely condemn him with the goblins as a wicked and violent creature. However, it is precisely that Beorn is granted full language that he is able to express his more civilized tendencies and justify these actions. The compensating factors and motivations can be revealed to the reader so Beorn is shown to belong firmly on the side of the moral.

At the same time that the reader is told of Beorn's poor temperament, being "extremely dangerous and unpredictable," as well as being quick to anger, the reader is told of his intense compassion for his animals. Beorn "loves his animals as his children" and has the ability to talk to them (*Hobbit* 136). Moreover, he does not eat or even hunt animals. Beorn "lives mostly on cream and honey," products that can be collected without harming his animals (*Hobbit* 116). Additionally, Beorn's presence even has a strongly humanizing effect on his animals, who serve him in the same capacity as human butlers and maids. Although he lives solely with his animals<sup>3</sup>, he does not live like one. As

seen by Tolkien's own illustration, Beorn's hall is a grand gathering place similar in style to Norse mead halls, a place that Beowulf would have been right at home (Hammond & Scull, 2012). It is further illustrated that, unlike the eagles, that only enjoy cheating the goblins of sport and do not often take notice of them, Beorn is a fully committed enemy of the wicked goblins and wargs. While he is "not overly fond of dwarves," Beorn accepts Thorin and company since they are enemies of the goblins, which shows his commitment to the side of good.

Thus, when the moral accounting is done, the narrative has compelling evidence to safely conclude that Beorn, even with his violent behavior, is a moral character while the goblins are wicked and evil. Beorn is a blend of savagery and loving devotion, a "bad enemy," but a faithful friend (*Hobbit* 131). There is no ambiguity about his morality because his ability to voice the motivations and rationale for his otherwise violent and deplorable behavior. Just as beauty depends upon one's perspective, through the use of language, Tolkien illustrates that "monstrosity is [also] in the eye of the beholder" (Fawcett, 2014).

## Notes

1. See Tyler (2004) and Foster (2003) character references.
2. " 'Killed the Great Goblin, killed the Great Goblin!' [Beorn] chuckled fiercely to himself" (*Hobbit* 131).
3. In *The Hobbit*, Beorn lives in isolation without wife or kin, and general avoids having company over. "He never invited people into his house, if he could help it" (*Hobbit* 124).

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