Georgia State University
Digital Archive @ GSU

Graduate English Association New Voices Conference 2007

English Department Conferences

9-2007

Horses of Agency, Element, and Godliness in Tolkien and the Germanic Sagas

Dana Miller
Georgia State University, dmiller34@student.gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/english_conf_newvoice_2007

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Miller, Dana, "Horses of Agency, Element, and Godliness in Tolkien and the Germanic Sagas" (2007). *Graduate English Association New Voices Conference 2007*. Paper 10.
http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/english_conf_newvoice_2007/10

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department Conferences at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate English Association New Voices Conference 2007 by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

Miller, Dana
Dr. Carey—Spring 2007: English 8900
2007 New voices Conference September 27-29
Graduate English Association
English Department, Georgia State University
Atlanta, Georgia

Horses of Agency, Element, and Godliness in Tolkien and the Germanic Sagas

> *Where now the horse and rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?*
> *Where is the hair and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?*
> *Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?*
> *They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow;*
> *The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.*
> --J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers

Russian princesses were once buried with them. Royalty ride only white ones. They are often regarded as the only panacea for handicapped children. Richard III would have given his entire kingdom for just one of them. Their ownership can radically define one's position in the social hierarchy of Saudi Arabia. The road to great human civilization and imagination has always been carved by the hoof prints of a horse. No matter what section of the globe is studied, Japan with its samurai tradition, the Mediterranean with conquerors like Alexander, the Bedouin, the American West, the Crusades, and certainly the sagas of ancient Iceland, horses figure predominantly and with gravitas. What is the contract between man and equine that allows a beast ten times our size and one hundred times our strength to willingly serve in our ambitions? What magnetism (and who placed it) is it that draws humanity and horses together? Pegasus, Epona, The Houyhnhnms, Bucephalus, Black Beauty, Mr. Ed!! Horses have equal pride of place in art and mythology. J.R.R. Tolkien, in his epochal books The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, utilizes horses as a representation of the human soul and a direct mirroring of a divine will. Horses in Tolkien's books function as both masculine and

feminine symbols of sexuality. Ever the great narrative balancer, Tolkien features ponies of rambunctious, pudgy resolve in The Hobbit and counterpoises them with valiant, magisterial warhorses in The Lord of the Rings. For every Shadowfax the reader receives a Bumpkin, just as for every Frodo there must be a Gollum—this equality representing one more connection amongst man and horse in Tolkien's world. All of the horses in Tolkien evoke visages of hope, glory, nobility, or power—and all of the qualities on that same list could be said to be running themes in the books. What contract is thus in place between Tolkien and the image and power of the horse in his fictional works? Tolkien's horses epitomize more than simply personified warriors/characters, but elemental forces that belong to something even beyond Mother Nature. Their magic, unlike that of all other fantastical creatures in The Lord of the Rings, is never explained away. In this sense, horses come to represent the mystery of the natural world and perhaps even the unknown face of God in Tolkien's Middle Earth.

Horses and ships have nearly exclusively borne humanity to the discovery of the world. Indeed, the deepest connection between horses and boats can be seen to exist mostly in their function—they are both, essentially, vessels of men. The need to point out the value of ships to Viking culture and advancement would hopefully be moot. The necessity of tracing and investigating the role of horses in Viking culture and in Icelandic myth exerts a greater influence being that a good deal of this paper's focus will reside on the Germanic saga roots of horse lore in Tolkien's writing. This will require a comparison of both Germanic horsemanship and English equine tradition, as Tolkien himself was English and yet many of his best-loved stories borrow so much from Germanic sources. Let us first examine the origination of horse culture in Iceland.

"Icelandic horses have been an important part of life on this Sub-Arctic island since Vikings settled Iceland over one thousand years ago. And not long thereafter horse touring started in Iceland. Icelanders have always gone horse-touring to keep their horses in condition for the sheep and horse round-ups in the fall. And, since governing themselves required gathering together annually in a field in Southern Iceland, with regional meetings closer to home, riding long distances quickly became part of their culture. For many farmers in the distant valleys, a horse back riding tour with friends and neighbors was one of a few sources of socializing and recreation" (Horses North). This excerpt unveils more than historical knowledge about the region of Iceland. The notion that horses take one to friends and family, they bear one to places of importance—this is the field in which it becomes clear how horse lore so pleached itself in the human psyche. Horses became synonymous with possibility. The official website of the BBC suggests that the Vikings fought primarily on foot before the end of the 11th century. "Their horses were small and they had no real cavalry. Documentary sources do report horses occasionally being used by Viking leaders in battle, but more usually they served as a rapid means of transport to the battlefield, where their riders dismounted to fight."

So how did horses come to such a position of publicity in the Germanic sagas of this time period? A consideration of The Prose Edda and the stories of Norse mythology must begin this topic. "Night rides before with the horse named Frosty-Mane, and on each morning he bedews the earth with the foam from his bit. The horse that Day has is called Sheen-Mane, and he illumines all the air and the earth from his mane" (Sturluson, 19). Here the extreme presence of horse lore in the creation myths of ancient Iceland can be seen and also perhaps a peek into Tolkien's spark for giving his own fictional horses

such innate and deific qualities. The notion of bits and bridles rises up for the first time (to return again in a long concatenation in later sagas, Wagner, and Tolkien) in this excerpt and the idea that the very dew of the morning stems from the labored efforts of a horse, the foam of his mouth as he works with his bit specifically, suggests a deep appreciation and awe for the contract between man and horse. The same zeal for a horse's natural beauty emanates in this example as the mane of Day's horse (the mane and neck always being a point of admiration in judging the conformation and critiquing the beauty of horses even to this day) is credited with the brightness of the daylight, as if to say that we humans owe the very light we inhabit to the gleam of a horse. This sentiment echoes in Greek and Roman mythology in the sun god Helios and the fiery horses that draw his chariot across the globe. The bridle theme intensifies at the appearance in The Prose Edda of a jotun giantess named Hyrrokkin. She arrives riding a wolf and using a viper for a bridle (Sturluson, 68). This image compounds the duplicity of meaning that bridles take on in The Prose Edda, the sagas, Wagner, and Tolkien. Bridles may be either taming instruments or fetters binding friends. The color, type, and materials of a rider's bridle reveal worlds about his or her social position, birthright, and mission. The way the horse responds to the bridle also carries meaning—if a horse fights the bridle or the rider is too harsh with the bit, calamity generally ensues. Great attention focuses on the jingling of bridles in the sagas. This jingling equates the sounding of church bells and often represents great realization for the rider.

Explicating all of the medieval meanings and cosmologies of horses would be fodder for several books on their own. The courtly English paradigm of the way a knight's seat of his horse reflected upon his manhood sustains and flourishes in The

Nibelungenlied. Horses in The Nibelungenlied function as pride, payment, power, proof, prestige, and often prophecy. Examples include the refusal of Grani (who later dies with his rider) to be ridden by aught but Sigurd of the Volsungs as well as the telling faltering of Siegfried's horse under the first startling blow of King Luedeger in battle. Horses in the sagas of the Volsungs and the Nibelungs tend to mirror the very thoughts and desires of their riders, as though they were an extension of spiritual, and not merely bodily, power. The descriptions of the horses' armor and galloping paces dominate many of The Nibelungenlied battle scenes and traveling passages. The jingling of bridles and bells on the horse tack often symbolizing epiphany and transition in a character's life. The horses in battle often supercede other instruments of war the warrior may possess. Njal's Saga features a type of horse fighting that could easily be viewed as reversal of the Greek gladiator tradition in which the horses are the instruments of strength and the men mere mounted spectators.

Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung magnifies this symbolic presence of horses in several ways. Grane, the fabled horse of Brunnhilde falters in the frantic attempt to protect and escape with Siegelind. The bridles of the Valkyrie hang loose when they are reprimanded by Wotan. Siegfried, rather emblematically, bridles a bear to further torture Mime. Repetitive mention of horses standing nearby, descriptions of dismounting, and images of leading horses by the bridle occur at nearly every scene or chapter change of Wagner's magnum opus. Tolkien codifies and extends this tradition in The Lord of the Rings most notably in the character of Shadowfax, who is able to hear the thoughts of Gandalf even when they are miles apart.

England and equine endeavor have long been synonymous. J. Edward Chamberlin's Thy Servant the Horse gives an informative etiological history of the Viking horse lore remnants that have helped shape England's horse culture. From 793 AD the Norsemen or Vikings began to settle in England. The Lake District is rather proud of its Viking heritage, perhaps because many of its people descend from them. Many place names in the Lakes owe their names to Norse language: Roundthwaite, Kirkby Thore, Stonethwaite, Wasdale. Quite of a few of these are also horse related:

Hest Bank (hengst = horse, usually a stallion)

Hesket (hesta-skeith: skaithe= a racecourse for "horse-pacing" or "horse-ambling")

Capple Rigg and possibly Chapel Waste (capul = a riding horse and later also a packhorse, rigg = ridge, waste = uncultivated land)

Rosthwaite (hros = horse, thwaite = clearing)

Studfold (stod = breeding mares, fold = enclosure)

Tolkien allocates a similar historical naming process in his Riders of Rohan. Eomer, the young prince of Rohan, takes his name from the Old English "eoh," meaning "fame" and "meara," meaning "horse." Eomer's sister Eowyn likewise bears a telling moniker, translating to "horse joy." One does not have to travel or reside in England very long to realize that horsemanship and horses in general embody and represent the English countryside. Fox hunting and the Steeplechase remain quintessential pastimes of England. For Tolkien, a classic Oxfordian, horses and the countryside must have been as secondary a notion as breathing. Horses to the English contain a sense of rural identity and sybaritic upper class heritage. They remain a dual motif for the history of the English working class as well as the blazoned crest of the aristocracy.

Tolkien utilizes the image of horses in a highly metonymical manner and sets their place up, from the very start, as one of deep and prismatic meaning. Frodo names his horse "Strider" after his beloved friend, Aragorn. "The Prancing Pony" is the jaunty and dangerous pub at which Frodo first meets Aragorn in The Lord of the Rings and the place at which the ponies of the hobbits are lost in The Hobbit. The Elves and Gandalf have a special way of communicating with horses. An entire society of Middle Earth, the Rohirrim, center their very lives and traditions atop the backs of their horses. Even the manner in which the Rohirrim are described by Tolkien gives something of an image of their connection to their steeds: "proud and willful, but…true hearted, generous in thought and deed; bold but not cruel; wise but unlearned, writing no books but singing many songs, after the manner of the children of Men before the Dark Years" (Two Towers: 33).

Pondering the presence of the sublime or the divine in Tolkien perhaps provides the best point of origin in getting at the figures of his horses. Needless to say there will always be great philosophical debate raging around the topic of Tolkien and religion, a fact I believe he might have giggled over if given the opportunity, or maybe even cried over as much has been made of his dislike of his books' cultish following. Certainly Tolkien was a deeply religious man and an intelligent observer of the way religion and dogma of any kind color human life. Not only because his work conveys a sense of merriment and joy in simplicity, but also because he was a writer brimming with secrets and surprises, I assert that Tolkien hid a fantastic picture of God within his books in a place he guessed least likely for scholars and extremists to look. I submit that Tolkien put a great deal of God in his horse characters, most obviously and linearly in the

character of Shadowfax, though all of the ponies and horses mentioned in The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit carry thematic clerical saddles of one kind or another. Though many before and after him have romanticized horses in myriad literary fashions, Tolkien may be able to claim first dibs on giving horses a secular holiness. Tolkien's well-documented aversion to browbeating religion and his adherence to the medieval form of storytelling would have given him ample reason to imbue his seemingly lowest characters with the most elevated spiritual meaning.

Tolkien, the naturalist, the humanitarian, would not be expected to build any temples of his narrative with overt stained glass and mortar but from the more common cloth most believe the creator himself fashioned sanctity with—flesh and blood. Much has been made of the godly qualities within Tolkien's more human-like characters. Let us here examine what religion Tolkien might be espousing through his equines. Shadowfax reigns as the best cornerstone with which to begin. But to excavate the depth of meaning that Shadowfax holds, we must remember that we are not only looking at one religion here but two: that of Tolkien's Christianity and the gods of the ancient Norse pantheon, most eminently the mythology of Odin, the Norse all-Father and his horse of eight legs, Sleipnir.

Sleipnir's legendary birth from "mother" Loki (the mischievous Norse god who can change his form and for this occasion morphs into a gray mare) and the black stallion named Svadilfari remains popular in modern retellings of old Norse myths. One wonders if the androgynous nature of Sleipnir's parentage might lend itself to the images of both male and female sexuality that horse imagery calls forth in Tolkien's work and in the collective associations of the modern pop culture--with everyone from Madonna (with

her equine-themed Confessions tour) to the playwright Peter Shaffer's 1970s-era, sexually-loaded Equus being fixated on the link between horses and human sexual desire. Sleipnir's name means "the Glider" or "the Slipper" and he was made Odin's personal steed for his unusual powers. The description of Sleipnir in Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire's Book of Norse Myths sounds identical to many of Shadowfax in The Lord of the Rings. "In time the colt grew into a wonderful horse that no other horse could match. His eight legs were so swift that he ran like a storm wind through the air and over the billowing sea" (D'Aulaire: 71). Compare such a turn of phrase to that Tolkien reserves for Shadowfax in one of his first entrances. "That is Shadowfax. He is chief of the Mearas, lords of all horses, and not even Théoden, King of Rohan, has ever looked on a better. Does he not shine like silver, and run as smoothly as a swift stream?" (Two Towers: 504). This elucidation also conveys the elemental nature with which Shadowfax is regarded. He is nearly always written in terms of one of the four elements. Notably, just as with Odin and Sleipnir as well as with Eorl and Felaróf, Gandalf rides Shadowfax without bridle or saddle and is the only non-Rohirrim ever to ride a Meara. Gandalf does not come by this privilege easily. The story goes that upon arrival in Rohan to warn King Théoden of Saruman's treachery, Gandalf is refused and told to take any horse of his choosing and leave at once. Gandalf espies the silvery Shadowfax loping along the fields and spends three days persuading the great horse to bear him. When Gandalf does win the friendship and trust of Shadowfax the mighty horse immediately shows his special magic by running from Rohan to the Shire in a minikin six days.

Gandalf and Shadowfax develop a bond that reaches to telepathy. Even Shadowfax's name, which translates to "shadowy grey coat," gives the horse that much

more connection with his chosen rider, Gandalf the Grey. Shadowfax might even be said to be an extension of Gandalf's magical powers as the horse leads, directs, and guides the wizard on more than one occasion—such as on the way back to warn Rohan before the Battle of Helm's Deep. Gandalf arguably holds the most depended-upon position of all the characters in The Lord of the Rings as everyone waits for and looks forward to him all throughout the novel. Thus Gandalf's dependence on Shadowfax raises questions and perhaps subliminally suggests answers regarding the horse's place within the moral of the story.

What exactly is Shadowfax's symbolic meaning in The Lord of the Rings and how does he relate to the extended theme of hope in the book? As previously stated, all of the horses present in Tolkien's work appear as devices of magical hope, spirituality, transition, and renditions of God. Theoden suggests the sovereignty of Shadowfax's lineage as a horse prince: "There is none like to Shadowfax. In him one of the mighty steeds of old has returned. None such shall return again" (Two Towers: 522). The 'steeds of old' mentioned here may refer to Sleipnir himself or, more directly, to Felaróf, the great ancestor of the Mearas brought to Middle-earth from the Undying Lands by the Vala Oromë. The Thain's Book website sheds enormous light on the lineage and mythology of these first horses of Middle-earth. It seems that Oromë was in possession of a magnificent steed named Nahar, which Felaróf is believed to descend from. When Felaróf was a colt, Leod of the Eotheod attempted to ride him and was thrown to his death. Eorl, his son and the first king of Rohan, vowed to avenge his father's death. Eorl demanded a weregild from Felaróf for the death of his father and the great horse submitted his freedom to the man's will, but he would allow no one but Eorl to ride him.

Felaróf and Eorl later rode into the Battle of the Field of Celebrant in the aid of Gondor and were buried in the same mound in 2545. From this history the reader may see the birth of the longstanding communion between horses and the Rohirrim.

Shadowfax is said to be the most famous of Felaróf's descendants and notoriously elusive. Several occasions in Tolkien's masterpiece find Shadowfax's name itself demonstrating the weight and mystery of his presence—he is often described in terms of being like a shadow. Eomer depicts the wild Shadowfax at the Golden Hall as being "like a shadow among the willows" (Two Towers: 524). Indeed, Shadowfax calls to mind forces unseen and powers gently hidden. From this perspective, it looks entirely possible that Shadowfax may be Tolkien's chosen partner/balance to Gandalf because the horse is a combination of all the world's natural elements, the same elements that any wizard employs in the wielding of power and casting of spells. Shadowfax is the only character in the book to which Gandalf attaches direct dependence and is in many ways valued above the mortal and magic characters of the story, as exemplified in Gandalf's speech upon his returns before the Battle of Helm's Deep: "With the help of Shadowfax—and others, I rode fast and far" (Two Towers: 551). Most intriguing in the study of this quotation is the semantics of placing Shadowfax not only at the head of the list of parties Gandalf felt he had to thank, but to separate him from the others as though they were somewhat of an afterthought in comparison.

The idea that Shadowfax exists as Gandalf's sole equal confidante and aide promotes a view of the horse as more than simply another magical force. Gandalf relies on Shadowfax. Everyone else in the book relies on Gandalf. So where does this place the horse in the hierarchy of power within the story? He is indeed referred to as "prince of

horses" by Théoden at the moment he is given officially to Gandalf (Two Towers: 525). Shadowfax, like any noble Englishmen, seems to carry his family tree and the legendary greatness of his line even in his very comportment. Perhaps Tolkien intends Shadowfax to engender the best of the English monarchical tradition. Numerous times reference is made to Shadowfax's breeding and the myths of his ancestors, the Mearas. *Meara* is the word for horse in Old English. Is Tolkien, even by virtue of the repeated name of this great line of horses, subtly imbibing Shadowfax with a weight of wonder and glory in the vane of ancient English names of power such as Tudor, Lancaster, or York? Certainly the power of history and the past was not lost on Tolkien. He was nothing if not an astute observer of the world.

It is well-established that Tolkien's writings contain a great deal of political thought and commentary. It may also stand to reason that the history of the horse held meaning and sway over his writing and Shadowfax exemplifies one major strand of that. The Black Riders occupy another. It rings beneath Tolkien's level of dexterity to label them plainly as the parallel force of darkness acting against the purity and light that Shadowfax exudes. In considering the symbolic role of the Black Riders, it must first be remembered that Sauron once attempted to buy horses legitimately from Théoden and the people of Rohan but was openly refused. Sauron later dishonestly obtains only black horses and puts them to evil ends, thereby breaking and violating that sacred agreement between man and horse that Tolkien, and indeed both the modern world and Middle Earth, seem to honor—that horse and man come together to progress, to do good, and to right wrongs. The Black Riders use their horses for the pursuit of nefarious greed. Tolkien may be here giving a message against the other great task for which man has

always relied on horse—for conquering. The fact that Wormtongue is given a horse and allowed to leave and go wherever he chooses delineates the emphasis of horses in Théoden's world. Horses in the world of the Rohan people evenly represent human decency and charity. To deny even a known villain a horse is an inhumane punishment and not one they are willing to be associated with. The only justifiable reason for refusing a living soul a horse is if that soul plans wrongful use of the horse's strength. In this respect, the horses of Tolkien's story represent a parallel to the ring itself in their potential for help and harm.

An insight into the power of the horse image in Tolkien can even be found in the derogatory, arrogant statements of Saruman. "For I need you not, nor your little band of gallopers, as swift to fly as to advance, Théoden Horsemaster" (Two Towers: 581). Saruman's barbed verbal attack on Théoden can be interpreted as his total divorce from forces of purity, hope, light, and good. It must be noted that Saruman takes the opportunity to belittle the horses here and adds the superlative *Horsemaster* to Théoden's name as if in rebuke. Given the snide timber of this conversational exchange prior to that superlative, the moniker does not appear to be one of respect but bitter rejection of what it stands for. All throughout The Lord of the Rings the Rohan riders elicit immediate respect and awe-stricken reverence for their riding capabilities, seemingly because such prowess over an animal as majestic as a horse implies a level of integrity and strength (much like faith) that is not seen every day. Saruman's demeaning tone and deliberate derision Théoden's horses, albeit Théoden's pride and ancestry, denotes not merely an attempt to reject the man but also the divinity of the horse symbol in the man and his people. We must not forget that Théoden is one of many suffering kings in The Lord of

the Rings. To align him as a Christ figure has always been a popular interpretation and would seem to lend even more credence to the importance of his emblematic animal. By the same token, this exchange between Saruman and Théoden seems to elevate or reveal the contract between man and horse to the level of the covenant between the Christian God and humanity—unable to be broken unless forsaken or forsworn and never venal.

Horses as agency and ability recurs as a germane theme in The Lord of the Rings. They serve as weapons and vehicles. They exist as friends and laborers. They are viewed as the greatest of assets. Nowhere is this more visible than in the final conference of Aragorn and Théoden before the Battle of Helm's Deep. Théoden says, "Snowmane and Hasufel and the horses of my guard are in the inner court. When dawn comes I will bid men sound Helm's horn, and I will ride forth." Even here at the onslaught of what might be his final battle, Théoden weighs his options at the definitive battle of his life with the power of his horses as his foremost thought of asset. He does not here say that his best men are inside and ready to do battle, he says that his best horses are. It bespeaks the solemnity of riding in this engagement that Aragorn asserts "I will ride with you" rather than "I will *fight* with you or "I will *die* with you" though both of those terms at that moment seem far more poignantly likely (Two Towers: 539).

Though they linger throughout the story as conjoined counterparts, Shadowfax seems anything but under the power of Gandalf and Gandalf understands that the bond they share is one of mutual respect and a desire for good outcomes, as evidenced in Gandalf's conversation with Pippin when they are both astride the great horse:

> But Shadowfax will have no harness. You do not ride Shadowfax: he is willing to carry you—or not. If he is willing, that is enough. It is then his business to see that you remain on his back, unless you jump off into the air.

Pippin then asks how fast Shadowfax is going and comments that the horse is "fast by the wind, but very smooth" and exclaims "how light his footfalls are!" Gandalf replies "He is running now as fast as the swiftest horse could gallop, but that is not fast for him" (Two Towers: 596). This segment hints at the loftiness of Shadowfax's meaning as a character. He is not merely a horse to be ridden. He cannot be ridden unless he chooses it. Thinking of him as something of an elemental god or figure of Christian purity would transfer another level of meaning to this statement—Mother Nature will not be directed, bid, or manipulated. The natural world is not at the beck and call of humanity, nor is the Christian religion. Also, the passage suggests that the awe you can perceive with your eyes does not hold a candle to that which is just beneath the periscope of mortal perspective.

For this reason and perhaps others, Tolkien nearly always bestows Shadowfax with adjectives and descriptions appointing him to the element of Air—the invisible element. "He spoke a word to Shadowfax, and like an arrow from the bow the great horse sprang away. Even as they looked he was gone: a flash of silver in the sunset, a wind over the grass, a shadow that fled and passed from sight (Two Towers: 528)." The simile simultaneously projects Shadowfax's powers as weapon-like, giving more credence to a favorite message of Tolkien's--that nature is the most powerful force in any world. The quotation may also refer back to Shadowfax's connection to Felaróf, who was reputed to have literal wings upon his feet. Another example of Shadowfax depicted as the element

Air occurs when Gandalf first arrives at the Golden Hall of Théoden. The wizard asks where Shadowfax is and Eomer replies that Shadowfax is "running wild over the grass" and " will let no man handle him." Gandalf then whistles for the horse and again Shadowfax speeds "towards the host like an arrow." Eomer then exclaims "were the breath of the West Wind to take a body visible, even so would it appear," this time linking Shadowfax to the element Air in its most powerful form, wind. (Two Towers: 524). Tolkien connects Shadowfax to all four of the elements at different points in the story. He conjures the horse as Fire when Gandalf and Pippin ride toward Denethor. "Shadowfax tossed his head and cried aloud, as if a trumpet had summoned him to battle. Then he sprang forward. Fire flew from his feet; night rushed over him" (Two Towers: 600). The aforementioned introduction of Shadowfax by Gandalf compares him to a smooth-running stream of Water. One description of the horse's running pits him as almost waging battle on the Earth with his hooves. The alliance of Shadowfax to the four natural elements only emboldens his power as a literary image and purveyor of theme in the story.

Gandalf being in control of the element Fire may bring us back to another connection to the German sagas and Wagner. Fire in the sagas nearly always connects with cleansing and kings, mainly because a funeral pyre lingered as the apropos epitaph for the bodies of nobility as well as demarcations of their great events in life. In the saga of the Volsungs, Sigurd rides Grani through a curtain of fire to win Brynhild for Gunnar. In Wagner's masterpiece, Brunnhilde trades her beloved and magical horse, Grane, to Siegfried for an engagement ring with these words:

> For the ring, I give you my horse! Though he longs to fly with me through the storm clouds, with me he lost his enchanted power; through the skies above, Through lightning and thunder, no more Grane can fly on his way; but Wherever you lead, even through fire, fearlessly Grane will bear you (Wagner 254).

Just as in Tolkien, this trade of a simple and good thing (the horse) for a belief in a glamorous return from the ring will prove perilous. Siegfried's ring turns out to mean little more than death and destruction and Brunnhilde ends up leaping with Grane onto the blazing pyre of Siegfried after his betrayal of her. In further continuance of the bridle theme, Brunnhilde removes the bridle of her horse before this final ride. All of these examples concur in the bravery of Shadowfax when he is the only horse to stand and face the Nazgûl. He literally faces fire and survives, as does Gandalf twice in the story.

Another rich connection to the older texts can be made in remembering that Odin's magical ring Draupnir in The Prose Edda is nightly laid on a burning pyre from which will drop eight more golden rings by morning. I have previously constructed Shadowfax as both a parallel and a panacea to the ring of power. Surely Tolkien must be allocating not only the kingly connection of fire to Shadowfax but also the might of the symbolic number nine, which numerically and biblically references ending, conclusion, even death. In many respects, fighting for the ring with Gandalf does claim a certain portion of the life of both horse and rider. Both journey together at the end to the Gray Havens. It is fire that forges the ring and it is fire that must destroy it. Shadowfax must face beasts of fire that other horses run in fear from. Remembering that the horses of the Witch-King are enslaved horses reminds us that Shadowfax here is not only confronting

fear but the ramifications of abuse (his own kind turned against him) that follow the ring—just like all of the other major characters of the story must do. In this way Tolkien equalizes Shadowfax with all of the other critical characters of The Lord of the Rings. Shadowfax being aligned with fire paints him in apocalyptic colors that resonate with the tone of the older sagas and give Tolkien's story deeper cadence.

Helmut Nickel, in his contemplative article "And Behold, a White Horse," focuses primarily on the descriptions in the Revelation of St. John of the symbolic colors of the four horses of the Apocalypse, yet inadvertently lends some possible sources for Tolkien's creation of Shadowfax and the horse's connection to the elements. The colors of the four horses of the Apocalypse correspond to their duty and position. Most importantly for our interest here is the fourth horse, reputed to be pale and the color of decay as he is ridden by Death. Shadowfax's coat continually commands new descriptors for silver and several times is said to be shrouded by Night itself. Nickel explicates the connection between St. John and chapter ninety-nine of the ancient Chinese chronicle Ts'ien Han šu which contains a description of the officials who were sent out in the Christian year 9 to collect old seals from the Han dynasty and issue new ones. Apparently the five generals were immaculately dressed to match not only their horses, (which were red, black, gray, white, and yellow) but also the directions in which they were riding. Chinese cosmology assigns color meanings to the five cardinal directions: red for South, black for North, blue for East, white for West, and yellow for Center. While most of Western thought ascribes only to four cardinal directions, it seems that Shadowfax's color and association with speed may link him not only to the St. John text but to the Chinese concept of the world's center. Shadowfax and Gandalf the Gray matching so

closely in color and name also appears to weave their legend in with that of the Chinese cosmology.

How and why do horses *move* us—both literally and figuratively? Surely the physical mobility they have afforded humanity has shaped modernity in the same fashion as the motorized engine did. But horses also linger as supplanters of human emotion. No other creature could be said to have been painted as much, written about as frequently, or imagined as lovingly as Mother Nature's galloping objet d'art. Horses carry a great deal of human history on their intrepid, willing shoulders. In Tolkien's case, they carry a large portion of his theme and narrative. While most fantasy novels include horses in some capacity (flying, horned, talking), Tolkien expands their importance in a unique and satisfying way, giving them cultural and imaginative meaning. Horses have been described as Nature's quadruped poem, as emblems of an agrestic and fulfilling life, and as the nostrum to many of the ills of man. Tolkien creates horses that are habitués of all that is right and good in the world. When they gallop there is a split second where all four feet are off the ground—they are flying! Ballet was founded on the idea that dancers wanted to get as close to heaven as possible, to leap as high as humans could. Not much changes in the roborant dance of horseback riding and Tolkien seems to have realized this fully as he mapped out the lives and deaths of his fictional steeds. Tolkien's horses serve as an apotheosis for the readers and the characters of his stories.

Works Cited

BBC.com. 2007. British Broadcasting Corporation. 5 April 2007. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/weapons_02.shtml/>.

Boswell, George W. "Tolkien as Littérateur." The South Central Bulletin. Vol. 32, No. 4. Studies by Members of SCMLA. (Winter 1972): 188-197.

Burns, Marjorie. Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth. Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2005.

Chamberlin, J. Edward. Horse: How the Horse Has Shaped Civilizations. New York: Bluebridge, 2006.

Chamberlin, J. Edward. Thy Servant the Horse. London: Country Life, 1952.

Chance, Jane, ed. Tolkien the Medievalist. Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture 3. London and New York: Routledge, 2003

D'Aulaire, Ingri and Edgar Parin. D'Aulaire's Book of Norse Myths. New York Review of Books, New York: 1967.

Horses North. 2007. 15 April 2007 <http://www.horsesnorth.com/>.

Hyland, A. Equus: The Horse in the Roman World. London, Batsford: 1990.

Hyland, A. The Horse in the Middle Ages. Stroud, Sutton Publishing: 1999.

Johnstone, C. "A Biometric Study of Equids in the Roman World." Diss. York University, 2004.

Keegan, T. The Heavy Horse: Its Harness and Harness Decoration. London, Pelham Books: 1973.

Lamb, A .J. R. The Story of the Horse. London: Maclehose: 1938.

Nelson, Willie. "We Have A Lot To Learn From Horses." CNN.com. 2006. Cable News Network. 1 November 2006 <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/11/01/nelson.commentary/index.html/>.

Nickel, Helmut. "And Behold, a White Horse…Observations on the Colors of the Horses of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Metropolitan Museum Journal. Vol. 12. 1977: 179-183.

Magnússon, Eirikr. "Odin's Horse Yggdrasill." Folklore. Vol. 7, No. 1. March, 1896: 74 75.

Sturluson, Snorri. The Prose Edda. Translated by Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur. Written in 1220.

The Thain's Book. 26 April 2007 <http://www.tuckborough.net/>.

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings. London: HarperCollins, 2004.

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Silmarillion. Christopher Tolkien, ed. London: Harper Collins, 2002.

Wagner, Richard. The Ring of the Nibelung. New York: W.W. Norton, 1976.