Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 17
Issue 2 *Tolkien's Animals*

Article 6

2023

From Classical to Medieval: A Reflection on Bats in Tolkien's Works

Fiammetta Comelli
State University of Milan, fiammettacomelli@gmail.com

From Classical to Medieval: A Reflection on Bats in Tolkien's Works

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Kristine Ainsworth Swank for her valuable advice, attention to this writing and the patience with which she listened to my ideas. Without her generous guidance, the work would not have reached this form. I also thank the wise and useful suggestions of my reviewers: their careful reading allowed me to improve and enrich this writing.

From Classical to Medieval: A Reflection on Bats in Tolkien's Works

1. *Introduction.*

1.1 *An apparently secondary animal: the analysis and the use of the bat within Tolkien's Legendarium*

Dragons, giant spiders, wolves, exceptional horses and eagles are just some of the animals one thinks of when imagining Arda's universe, populated by fantastic creatures – good, bad or neutral – that play a more or less central role in deciding the fate of Middle-earth. However, it seems worthy to also analyse those who initially appear irrelevant or negligible: in this sense, bats remain indeed in the background but are, at the same time, a constant and – as we will see – meaningful presence in Tolkien's imagery.[1] In fact, assuming that animals have always been invested with symbolic and cultural meanings in human thought, particularly in fiction and literature, the bat is no different in this respect. Some of his main texts – *Roverandom*, *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit* – are joined and crossed by the appearance of this particular mammal, showing us how it has been employed since the very beginning of his stories, with different relevance and functions. Hence, the aim of this paper is to trace the cultural roots of the symbolic imagery of the bat – not always univocal in the past – inherited in Tolkien's works, which is linked to the vision of medieval bestiaries and, in general, of its negative representation in the Middle Ages then taken up and reinterpreted by the early Gothic literature. We will try to reflect on how the author employs this animal, a vehicle of specific connotations that have remained mostly unchanged over time in his writings but assume different relevance and shades depending on the context. As it will be argued, bats are frequently used as mirror images[2] – a narrative device used by Tolkien to create

[1] The bibliography on animals in Tolkien's stories is increasing and it follows various directions: on the question of anti-speciesism, it is worth mentioning SIMPSON 2017; for an encyclopedia article surveying Tolkien's animals, their sentience and eschatological functions see SOOKOO 2007 along with VOM LEHN 2015 that makes an overview of the animals in Middle-earth and their function. On the question of personhood and animal sentience, see HARTLEY 2014, MORRIS 2009 and SPIRITO 2007. An analysis of the bat had not been considered until now, precisely because of its secondary role (in our opinion, as we will attempt to show, only apparently) in the development of the events and in the interactions with the characters. This work intends instead to illuminate the often unnoticed presence of the animal, noting the originality of Tolkien's conscious use of it.

[2] Tolkien is known for the employment of mirror images and dualisms in his cosmogony and narration. For example, as WU MING 4 2022 points out in this case underlining, for example, the complementarity of feminine and masculine: "this principle also operates within each individual character - regardless of whether they are male or female - in which there must be a balance between aspects that are conventionally defined as masculine and those that are conventionally defined as feminine. […] Male and female attitudes must be equally part of the

parallelism and convey a more complex idea of the identity of his characters – in opposition to something else, both in the environment where the story is set and, at the same time, in the characterisation of specific characters, like the antithetical yet connected couple of Thuringwethil and Lúthien.

In general, this work is intended to fit within the framework of what has come to be called *animal studies*, which arose in the mid-1980s in the United States and then in Europe. In more recent years, animal studies have become a more diverse field with a rich variety of approaches[3] capable of questioning the anthropocentric approach through which the interaction between the different species has often been analysed.[4] Not least because of the urgent climatic and environmental crisis of our time, which calls for a decisive rethink on how we exploit and cohabit with animals, it certainly seems appropriate – if not necessary – to reconsider the function and role of animals in the literary field as well: employed not as mere literary devices, but as active components that contribute to shaping an imaginary alongside with us. This gives us the opportunity to come into contact with different ways of interacting with and perceiving our animal neighbours, thus stimulating the evolution of our present-day thinking with regard to the concepts of animality and humanity,[5] also making us open to the valuable contributions that literature is able to provide us with. In this case, the focus on the bat will give us the chance to observe, for example, how the employment of even a secondary animal actively contributes

characters' character in order for them to turn out to be positive and succeed in pursuing good. When there isn't balance, the characters fail, succumbing to evil." For a complete dissertation on the topic, see WU MING 4 2022.

[3] The bibliography on the subject is increasingly dense and diversified, depending on genres, eras and reference approaches (such as anthrozoology and zooanthropology, for example): to start approaching the subject of overcoming speciesism in bioethical reflection on the animal, SINGER's (1975) remains the starting point; but, among the numerous titles, AGAMBEN (2002) and MARCHESINI (2014) are also worth mentioning. For the ancient world, the works of FRANCO (e.g. 2008 and 2014), LI CAUSI (2015 and 2018), CAMPBELL (2014) are indispensable; for the Middle Ages, of course, PASTOREAU (2011), HECK-CORDONNIER (2021), CRANE (2013) and, for a markedly ethical slant, KOMPATSCHER-HEUBERGER (2021).

[4] The same terminological opposition man-animal is not free of contradictions and problems: we have chosen here, for the sake of expository clarity, to still adopt the lexical pair *man-animal*, which is actually harshly criticised today by animal and anti-speciesist thinkers and movements in favour of the less *dichotomous* expression *human animals – non-human animals*. As Jacques Derrida already observed (DERRIDA 2006), one can only provocatively speak of *animots* (the result of the union of the French words *animaux* and *mot*, i.e. animal and word): he thus wanted to emphasise the merely linguistic nature of this category, which eludes a concrete real, indicating only an abstract notion, more functional to humans than to animals. Making this terminological distinction is, in effect, a phenomenon of *anthropopoiesis*, of separation between the anthroposphere and the zoosphere. For this, see LI CAUSI (2018).

[5] The approaches, with which these studies can be conducted, differ. As KOMPATSCHER and HEUBERGER (2021) explain, "Within Human-Animal Studies there are scholars who provide valuable descriptive studies, while others choose to go further by adopting a critical political approach. The latter consider non-human animals not as mere objects of research, but as subjects with an agency." (pp. 250-251).

to shaping and enriching the identity of another character, like Lúthien, allowing us to observe the exchanges and points of contact between different identities (here the animal and the elf).[6]

After all, this field appears to be productive in relation to Tolkien's work and it is certainly not surprising: in fact, for an eco-critical perspective of the relationship between man and nature, Tolkien's works offer a very rich material.[7] Between the pages of his adventures in Middle-earth, one is surprised by the attention not only linked to the description of fantastic places and beings, but above all to the recall of real environments – also through the use of a precise taxonomy – easily recognisable to the eyes of the readers, who can thus truly immerse themselves in the lands described. Thanks to this identification and mirroring between fiction and reality, the reader can feel part of the tale and, probably, grasp the food for thought on the subject of nature and humanity. Tolkien's love for nature, with particular attention to flora, is well known, as can be seen in the omnipresent warning in *The Lord of the Rings* against the aggressiveness of unbridled industrialisation to the detriment of the environment. On the subject, much more could and should be said, but here it is enough to recall how the elements of nature, in the creation of Tolkien's universe, are anything but merely passive components in the development of events: it is a nature that speaks, as we shall see, even when it does not seem to play any significant role, and it have its own sphere of action, departing from an anthropocentric vision.

The analysis of a single animal – namely the bat – will be the focus here, but it was deemed appropriate to introduce the subject by dwelling, briefly, on the function and the relevance of nature in the mythopoietic process of the Professor. He designed a universe where the continuous mirroring between humans and nature permeates the entire creation of the Secondary World, allowing us to question the ways in which the Primary World interacts with it. Indeed, even with regard to the question of the subjectivity of the elements of nature, the scholar Roberto Arduini, for example, observes, in relation to the Ent:

---

[6] Indeed, it is possible to observe precisely an evolution of the bat symbolism linked to the elf: in one of the earliest versions, as we shall see, instead of cladding herself in the bat skin taken from Thuringwethil, this bat symbolism already cohabits within herself through her black hair as later it will be argued. In this case, rather than points of contact between these two different species, it is her identity that embraces this imagery.

[7] In the case of animals, for instance, as scholar THIJS PORCK (2022) explains, "*Middle-earth* is rife with animals. A tally by Antje vom Lehn has revealed that J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* makes mention of no fewer than seventy-five different kinds of animals. These animals often help the protagonists in their quest or act as their proxy, visualising such emotions as fear and discomfort. Other animals, mostly birds, are used for descriptive purposes, e.g., to describe distances travelled ('as the crow flies'), the atmosphere of a location (from the melancholic piping of birds on the way to Bree to happily singing fowl in Rivendell) or the sounds made by characters (Tom Bombadil, for instance, whistles 'like a tree full of birds')." (p. 266).

> [is] one of his original and most enduring creations, the distinctive character of which is that they are not human beings in the form of trees, but rather trees that are sentient. The presence in Tolkien's work of 'non-human' agency and subjectivity is thus central to the development of the story. [...] Another way in which Tolkien's animated and enchanted Middle-earth can be understood is by asking: what is its opposite? The barren, lifeless nature caused by 'industrial technoscience'.[8]

This allows us to understand how Tolkien created, with appropriate differences[9] within his *Legendarium*, an imaginary world where nature can have its own subjectivity, a non-human one but not less significant and important, that coexists alongside the human one.[10]

1.2 *A question of method: sources and problems for studying the representation of the bat in Tolkien*

As we know, Tolkien had a very rich and varied education, the result of multiple interests and stimuli that would later come together in his writing, giving us a multifaceted panorama of his cultural influences. He started out with classical studies when he enrolled at Oxford University in 1911, beginning his academic career by studying Latin and Greek:[11] however, he left two years later to study English language and literature, thus having the opportunity to deepen his main interest in Germanic philology. He later became Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Pembroke College, Oxford University, in 1925 and, then, of English Language and Literature at Merton College in the same university from 1945 to 1959. A fine medievalist, he was at the same time a careful scholar of pagan mythology – especially Nordic and, to a lesser extent, classical – not forgetting

[8] ARDUINI 2021, p. 13. Own translation.

[9] "Tolkien's interests in *The Hobbit* were not narrowly focused on creating sophisticated representations of non-humanoid beings.[…] His animals are reductive, anthropomorphic and subject to human control. By contrast, in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien has a vastly deeper commitment to creating a vivid and consistent Secondary World, and in doing so he gives distinct character to his natural world." See SIMPSON 2017, p. 75.

[10] As the scholar Simpson points out, "the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, which was completed intermittently in the 1940s, coincided with early interest in animal rights. In 1947, C. S. Lewis published an essay in a pamphlet of the New England Anti-Vivisection Society, suggesting that Tolkien had a certain level of awareness about animal rights issues from conversations with his fellow Inkling (Root). Regardless of the extent of Tolkien's early awareness of the very origins of what was to become a worldwide movement, Tolkien makes apparent his ability to work within fantasy to elucidate social ideas." *Ibid*, pp. 72-73.

[11] Cf. *Letters*, no. 142: "I was brought up in the Classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer". Actually, he was trained in Classical studies since his time at King Edward's School, "but soon his wayward tastes led him beyond the Classical world." He even played Hermes for the 1911 performance of Aristophanes' *The Peace*. See GARTH 2003.

the influence of the rest of the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition in his creative process.

With regard to the theme of the present work, we believe that all the multiple cultural references mentioned above would have influenced the symbolism of the bat in Tolkien's corpus. Indeed, when bats are encountered in Middle-earth, as we will analyse later, the impression is that Tolkien drew more from a common cultural substratum of the European West – rather than from a specific textual revival – nourished by several directions. In fact, from an imagery that was starting to consolidate in the Ancient world, the Middle Ages decreed the substantial union of the bat with demonic forces, permanently relegating this image of the animal to demonization. Taking this representation into account, the bat and its constituent elements – such as the wings or the screeching – will be consequently associated with a spectral dimension throughout the history of European literature[12] (to which only a brief mention will be made, as this is not the subject of this work), arriving in Gothic-style literature from the eighteenth century onwards, primarily in Polidori and Stoker, hence the new, rather recent bat-vampire combination.

The crystallization of demonic judgment in the Middle Ages on the one hand, and the influence of Gothic literature on the other, without taking into account possible contributions due to folklore and local feeling, allow us to understand how unproductive it appears to search for specific sources in the case of this single animal. Rather, our intention is to bring into dialogue, without any claim of direct derivation from a precise source – but evaluating the possible frequentation of certain texts by the Professor[13] – elements of continuity between the medieval imagery and that of Middle-earth around this mammal, as we will shortly examine.

2. *The symbolism of the bat in Tolkien's works and its cultural legacy*

2.1 *Bats: the origin of their bad reputation in Europe*

In the European West, bats have always been misunderstood creatures, which still today provoke a sense of disgust and estrangement, despite the fact that they are actually valuable allies of man, often exploited and hunted by the

[12] A really brief and summarised cultural history of the bat can be consulted in FERBER 2017, pp. 19-20.

[13] For example, the bestiary tradition: as the scholar PORCK (2022) explains, regarding a study on the two Old English and Middle English versions of the *Physiologus*, "his 1927 poems in Adventures in Unnatural History and Medieval Metres are testimony to his familiarity with the medieval bestiary tradition, particularly the Old English and Middle English Physiologus, and his talent for producing works inspired by and imitating medieval originals." See PORCK 2022, p. 278.

latter. It would be difficult here to list all the reasons for this contempt,[14] also because such judgment is not unanimously shared around the world.[15] But what can be certainly said is that this hostile perception, also on a cultural level, can be explained in the abnormality, from a human perspective, of such a peculiar animal: its ethological habits (for example, the nocturnal activity, the unusual way of sleeping, hanging upside down in dark caves) and its physical characteristics (the only mammal that flies, but with featherless wings and a non-linear flight, without considering its sinister screech). In this direction, it can be useful to cite the anthropologist Maurizio Bettini, who developed the theory of *affordances* – firstly elaborated in the field of ecological psychology by James Gibson – in order to explain why some animals, or parts of them, have been used metaphorically as symbolic representations of various cultural models:

> According to Gibson and Reed, human perception focuses on the possibilities that surrounding objects offer to meet our various needs. The possibilities or 'affordances' manifested in these objects correspond to the properties of that object. In terms of ecological psychology, then, our definition of an object corresponds to the possibilities that it presents to our awareness, or to the recognition of the features which render it suitable for our purposes. […] Gibson's and Reed's theory of affordances can also be applied to cultural behavior and practices, including the use of animal metaphors. In other words, it seems that the notion of affordances developed in the ecological psychology may be relevant to the general problem of symbolism, that is, why certain animals or certain plants – certain parts or aspects of animals and plants – are especially suited to serving as meaningful symbolic expressions.[16]

That can easily explain why, since Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages, bats have been employed to depict, for example, the souls of the dead in the Homeric Otherworld[17] or the Devil's wings described by Dante in his

[14] It is not the case here to delve into the issue of the threat to the conservation of the species, often caused by the culturally hostile perception of the bat. It is only necessary, however, to recall how the bat, which is the focus of attention as a possible vehicle for the SARS-CoV-2 19 virus, is extremely useful to man, as a natural insecticide for example: instead, it is often a victim of human exploitation, since it is taken and hunted from its wild habitat, transmitting to man viruses with which the animal cohabits and to which it is immune, and then causing the dreaded spillover. On this, see LEOPARDI 2022.

[15] Some cultures in Asia and the Pacific, for example, value the bat as a good wish and sign of good luck: it is certainly interesting that in Malaysian Borneo "people consider it taboo to disturb a fruit bat. If a man whose wife is nearing childbirth unthinkingly does so, some harm may befall the unborn baby"(SIERADZKI and MIKKOLA 2022): this last datum is curiously connected to a mention by a classical author, Artemidorus of Daldi, who, in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, records the same belief of the bat connected to motherhood, in this case in a positive key: if a pregnant woman happened to dream of a bat, this dream experience would prove to be a good *omen* (Artem. 3.65.)

[16] BETTINI 2008.

[17] Hom. *Od*. 24. vv. 1-9.

Commedia.[18] In other words, in the case of the European West, the proprieties and ethological observation of these mammals offered the material to think about the world of the dead and the afterlife, due to, for example, their habitat and close connection with nocturnal activity[19] (also in the medieval period, in miniatures, bats were pictured at the entrance to Hell); or cunning, as in the ancient fables, where the ambivalence of their bodies – half bird and half rodent – allowed them to claim to belong to one species or another according to convenience, becoming a perfect metaphor for human behaviour.[20]

During the Middle Ages, all these elements were emphasised through the allegorisation of its natural features, making this mammal as something impure, demoniac and connected with sin:[21] since the Old Testament, in fact, bats are included in the category of repugnant animals, not to be eaten at all.[22] And, above all, the bestiary tradition – a genre with which Tolkien was familiar – reinforces this interpretation. Hence, a specific imagery of the animal has been consolidated in the West, destined to relegate this mammal more and more to tales of horror, as an ally of evil forces (yet with a certain fascination, when the taste for Gothic began to spread in European fiction). As we shall see, Tolkien largely takes up this European tradition in his tales: such symbolism is also connected to the phenomenon of vampirism, which certainly contributed to the imagery of our animal in his *Legendarium*.[23]

At first, this animal seems to pass in silence among Tolkien's stories: in fact, it is not one of the main animals that play an active role, appearing sometimes only as an effective literary device in order to emphasise a gloomy and hostile setting, as we will see in some parts of *The Hobbit*'s tale and in *Roverandom*.

---

[18] Dante, *Inferno* 34. 49-50.

[19] Homer uses the metaphor of the bats in order to convey a specific idea of dead souls: just like a group of bats, which are located in dark caves (one of the entrances to the ancient otherworld), flutter in a group like a cluster and screech, the souls are depicted hopeless, without orientation and not capable of an articulate language. They squeak (*trízein* from the Greek), while the living, in the poems, are often referred to by the term *méropes*, which refers to those who possess an articulate voice. On this, see BETTINI 2019, in particular chapter 16.

[20] Aesop. 251.

[21] For the sake of completeness, it must be said that even in the Middle Ages – and in Late Antiquity – there were some favourable positions towards the small animal: this is not surprising, because medieval men's judgments of fauna and flora were not always clear-cut in establishing what fell within the realm of good and evil. In Basil of Cesarea's *Hexaemeron* and Ambrose's (directly influenced by the first), there is a recognised sense of charity in bats, due to their habit of remaining together in social groups and forming strong bonds with one another, thus attributing a positive value to this characteristic. In particular, Basil admires the mutual love that bats have by nature. But this aspect, while not absent even in the tradition of the bestiaries – which echo the Church Fathers on the subject – remains on the margins. See Bas. *Hex*. 7. 5.; Ambr. *Hex*. 5. 88.

[22] *Lev.* 11:19; *Deut.* 14:18.

[23] In this sense, for a more complete study, as we intend to do in the future, we should also carefully study the texts of Gothic fiction and possibly the beliefs of folkloric memory.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, we find it in several of his adventures: it is an undercurrent that quietly runs through several stories, allowing us to observe a possible thematic evolution. From the final battle of the Five Armies in *The Hobbit* (where its action is counterbalanced by the eagles), to its function to connect two opposite female characters (Lúthien and Thuringwethil), it reveals itself to be a more significant symbol than it appears at first glance.

As a general, but not unequivocal, premise, it seems useful to start to observe how, in the constitution of the secondary world of Arda, light and darkness – according to its focus on complementarity (a narrative device for both his universe in general and his characters) – are two inescapable poles not only for the narration of the cosmology of that universe (the creation and consequent destruction of the two Trees of Light in Valinor, for example) but also for determining what operates on the side of Good or Evil,[24] highlighting the blurred boundary that every creature, from the most powerful of the Ainur to the most miserable man, can cross. And it is clear, consequently, how an animal that lives exclusively in the dark, only coming out at dusk, cannot but be placed among the forces of Evil, as indeed readily happens in the fighting in *The Hobbit*: also, we briefly noted how the bat had been linked, during the Middle Ages, to the fallen angel Lucifer – of whom one thinks of when imagining Melkor – lending him his wings.

In this sense, it is possible to observe the influence of the medieval allegory, according to the principle that a certain phenomenal reality, as it appears, is therefore not neutral, but represents morally determined values. And on closer inspection, this, for Tolkien's cosmology, is not surprising: if the bat was perceived negatively by medieval commentators because it was considered a contaminated being, straddling several species and, in general, against nature, it may become a perfect emblem to symbolise, in turn, the nature corrupted by Melkor, as opposed to that of the Valar, pure and uncontaminated. A bit like the part that stands for the whole, like a synecdoche, the bat represents, already in the Middle Ages, an abnormal being, one that violates the normal rules of nature; consequently, in a broader sense, it symbolises a certain type of contaminated and chaotic nature, just like the one that realises and represents the figure of Melkor, not by chance inspired by Lucifer.

[24] For example, the fortress of Melkor/Morgoth – Utumno – geographically recalls this opposition: excavated from the far north of Middle-earth, it is precisely described as "deep under Earth, beneath dark mountains where the beams of Illuin were cold and dim". Cfr. *The Silmarillion*, p. 42. The question is obviously much more complex than that: in this case, it was significant to underline how, from a cosmology based on the conflict and weaving between light and darkness, Tolkien plays with these elements creating associations of opponents. As we will see, for *Roverandom* the environment looks different again: the enlightened part of the moon, where the good – yet bizarre – wizard lives, is from the start populated by dangerous animals, such as our bats.

However, as we shall see, Tolkien seldom describes realities presented in such a clear-cut, seamless manner: our bat, in fact, is indirectly associated, in the tale of Beren and Lúthien, to the latter, an absolutely positive and, one might assume, heroic character. This does not necessarily mean that the bat acquires a better consideration, but what it represents – darkness and its moral values attached to it – is not exclusively relegated to evil or otherness: instead, it reveals the flip side of the coin even of a positively recognised character, highlighting the balance between opposite but mirror-like components of her psychology and, in this case, more of her abilities, as we will argue. Beyond Lúthien, Tolkien seems to employ this narrative strategy several times, for different contexts and characters, using bats as mirror images starting from *Roverandom*.

2.2 *Roverandom*

Actually, the first and brief occurrence of the bat in Tolkien is found in his poem *Goblin Feet*, published in Oxford Poetry in 1910 for his beloved wife Edith Bratt. Here the bats are named *flittermice*, an old-fashioned poetical word after the Middle Dutch *fleddermuys*, whose meaning reflects the physical duality of this mammal, perceived as a flying mouse. What can be of interest in this poem, within an enchanted dimension, is the amicable connotation of bats, here tenderly specified as "pretty", contrary to the description and the symbolism further adopted for his novels ("I am off down the road/ where the fairy lanterns glowed/ and the little pretty flittermice are flying"[25]).

But it is in *Roverandom*, a novella written circa 1925 but published posthumously in 1998, that Tolkien started to use these mammals as negative elements, linked to darkness. In this story, a dog named Rover, transformed into a toy by a wizard, lives various adventures starting from the Earth, then the moon and, eventually, at the bottom of the sea in order to regain his former dog nature. Bats are presented as hostile creatures that live on the moon, which in turn is divided into two sides, the enlightened one and the obscure one.

To be precise, the first mention in the text about bats is a mockery of Rover by a winged dog (also named Rover) that he encounters on the moon:

> Silly little puppy yourself! Who said that you could call yourself Rover, a thing more like a cat or a bat than a dog?[26]

However, later on, bats are presented as dangerous creatures for Roverandom (as the earth-dog is renamed, to distinguish him from Rover the Moondog), Tolkien writes, after a description of the frightening insects that are

[25] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Goblin Feet*, vv. 1-3.
[26] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Roverandom*, p.17.

located on the bright side of the moon, that "worse than insects were the shadowbats".[27] What is of interest here is that, differently from other Tolkien's stories – where bats are all expressly related to dark places as opposed to brighter settings – these creatures inhabit the bright side of the moon, creating an internal contrast. Yet the opposition with this luminous setting lies in Tolkien's chosen term for them – the already mentioned *shadowbat* – that insists on the darkness, from which derives the negative judgment and consequent dangerousness, as we can see in medieval allegories. Again, it looks interesting to think about the parallelism between shadowbats, described as the most dangerous creature in that part of the moon, and the white dragon, the other terrific animal (and actually the antagonist of the Man-in-the-Moon). It could be a detail, but we find it curious that these animals – shadowbats and the white dragon – which are seen as the enemy in one and the other part of the moon, are described chromatically in contrast to their location and to each other – the first ones living on the bright side and the latter on shadowy edge of the dark side – mirroring each other.

With regard to the explicit association with the moon as the habitat of the bat, it may be mentioned that it seems to evoke a Gothic-type setting, precisely because it represents a typical and frequent scenario in vampire stories. To cite just one example, in Stoker's *Dracula* the moon is mentioned about fifty times and there is no lack of explicit association between the moon and the bat, on several occasions.[28] Moreover, on other occasions too, when describing Beren and Lúthien's mission to Angband's fortress disguised as a werewolf and a bat, respectively, Tolkien again reuses the lunar setting.[29] This confirms the fact that it is necessary to look at the symbolism of the bat by reflecting on the historical moment in which Tolkien wrote: if the association with demonic spirits, as vampires would later be, has its roots in the numerous mentions of the Middle Ages, then the discovery of a new species of blood-sucking bats in South America in the nineteenth century allowed for a vampire-like association with the bat. The union between the bat and the vampire, as already mentioned, is in fact late, because originally the figure of the vampire, in the Balkan area, had nothing to do with this mammal;[30] only after the discovery of a new species, in fact, were they probably associated.[31]

---

[27] *Roverandom*, p. 20

[28] "Between me and the moonlight flitted a great bat, coming and going in great, whirling circles." Cfr. Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 128 But not only that: the association is echoed on pp. 117 and 171.

[29] *Lays of Beleriand*, Canto XII, v. 234.

[30] On this subject, see BRACCINI 2011.

[31] By the way, again in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, we read: "Can you tell me why in the Pampas, ay and elsewhere, there are bats that come at night and open the veins of cattle and horses and suck dry their veins;" p. 229.

2.3 *Lúthien and Thuringwethil*

The character who best embodies this now-defined bond is Thuringwethil, a servant and messenger of Sauron in the First Age. The name is essentially made up of two parts, *thurin* (secret) and *gwath* (shadow): with regard to the second term, consulting the *Appendix*[32], it is clear that the shadow in question is not so much that of objects projected by light, but refers specifically to a faint light, which – we might add – is well suited to identifying a bat-like creature, who moves more nimbly precisely when the light tends to diminish at twilight. Seeing in the figure of Melkor a Fallen Angel (like Lucifer) and Thuringwethil as his ally, it is clear that the all-medieval association of the devil linked to the bat is taken up again: specifically, we can see that in presenting Thuringwethil, Tolkien immediately alludes to her wings:

> She was the messenger of Sauron, and was wont to fly in vampire's form to Angband; and her great fingered wings were barbed at each joint's end with an iron claw.[33]

It is no coincidence that Tolkien dwells precisely on the wings: as we mentioned before, starting from the thirteenth century onwards,[34] the devil started to be depicted with bat-like wings. In fact, in the eyes of medieval commentators, but also during the classical world,[35] these wings, covered with a cartilaginous membrane and not feathers, were considered odd and, particularly for the Middle Ages, a sign of evil and sin. Within the framework of medieval Christian exegesis, the leather is linked to materiality, as opposed to the lightness of feathers – and thus to the concept of elevation – found instead in the wings of angels. This detail was echoed also in the bestiary tradition, for example in the Latin *Oxford Bestiary*, of English origin, dated between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century. Transmitted by the *Ashmole* 1511 manuscript and preserved at the Bodleian Library, it describes as follows:

---

[32] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, p. 338.
[33] *Ibid*, p.173.
[34] CATTABIANI 2000. On this iconographic change related to the devil's wings, it would be appropriate to carefully evaluate the reasons for this change: if the famous art historian Jurgis Baltrusaitis argued that the iconography of demon bats was transplanted into Western culture from East Asia, this thesis can be revised in the light of texts that, like the bestiaries, insisted heavily on the strangeness of these wings, in addition belonging to a nocturnal and feared animal.
[35] For example, the ancient Latin poet Ovid, within his *Metamorphoses*, writes about a myth of the daughters of Minyas, that were transformed into bats: when he describes their metamorphosis, he specifically mentions these strange wings that are not made of feathers but, instead, are shiny because cartilaginous. («*Non illas pluma levavit/ sustinuere tamen se perlucentibus alis*», Ovid. *Met.* 4. 410-411)

> It does not fly thanks to the feathers but, lifted by the aerial rowing of its membranes, it is carried around and takes vigour like a flight of feathers.[36]

"*De Vespertilio* [Bat]." Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 1511 fol.63r. (1201–1225).

Furthermore, with regard to this character, a vampire-female, it is interesting to note that the only vampire chosen to be exhaustively described, within Middle-earth, is actually female.[37] Although this theme also deserves to be explored further, the association of the bat with women already existed in the Ancient world with the Ovidian myth of the Minyads – three sisters transformed into bats by the offended god Dionysus – which was also taken up and moralised in the Middle Ages, when Ovid became very popular reading in the revival of the Classics of the European Late Middle Ages.[38] Apart from this specific datum, it is Gothic literature that emphasised this aspect and might have influenced this particular case. In this sense, the first text is *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, from which the other later novels were also inspired. Once again, it seems possible to glimpse a stratification of symbolic imagery enriched over time, absorbing different stimuli that came together to create one.

And again, as seen before in *Roverandom*, Tolkien uses the bat's symbolism to create a specularity, in this case between two opposite female

[36] Own translation. See ZAMBON 2010, p. 956.
[37] Sauron assumes the guise of a vampire as well, cfr. *The Silmarillion*, p. 170.
[38] Concerning witches in the Middle Ages, it is interesting to note that bat blood was mentioned in recipes for flying ointments (cfr. LEVACK 2012, p. 59). In another context, but still related to preparation, the use of bat's blood had already been mentioned by Pliny in the ancient world to ward off disease (for example, cfr. Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 30. 64).

characters: Thuringwethil and Lúthien.[39] Before analysing the connection between these personalities, it is possible to start observing the duplicity of Lúthien's names, which already tells us about the multifaceted symbolism of this recognized positive heroine. Her second name Tinúviel – given not coincidentally by Beren, whose love binds her to a mortal destiny – means *nightingale* or, literally, *Daughter of the twilight*. This bird[40] already presents an ambivalence in itself: on the one hand, it is, since antiquity, a metaphor of singing ability, certainly appropriate for a character whose main strength is actually the charming beauty of her voice. On the other hand, in Western European culture, it represents a mournful symbol: for example, it recalls the myth of Orpheus, as narrated by Virgil in the *Georgics*. It may not be a coincidence that she was named after this bird just because Orpheus, when descending to the Underworld and losing his beloved for having turned back, is compared in his grief to a nightingale that has lost its young.[41] As Wu Ming 4 notes, reflecting on Lúthien's heroic acting, after a sort of first journey into the Underworld, that is Morgoth's fortress:

> […] Lúthien must make a second hellish journey. We witness here the reversal of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: […] it is Lúthien who goes to the halls of Mandos and with her singing moves the Valar, convincing them to give her a chance.[42]

Thus, it seemed curious to us to compare these two stories, joined by the same plot structure yet, in the end, with a happy (but mortal!) ending in Tolkien's rewriting, itself probably derived from another medieval rewriting.[43] And, again, in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* the nightingale heralds the night – the clandestine night of lovers – as opposed to the lark the dawn, and thus the time to part; and as Cattabiani notes, "if the two lovers listen to the nightingale, they will remain united forever but expose themselves to death"[44], actually like our protagonists.

---

[39] The story of Beren and Lúthien is recounted more fully in *The Lay of Leithian* song, but is also taken up in the *Silmarillion*.

[40] It is our intention to deepen, in a future paper, the nightingale's symbolism in Tolkien's narrative, exploring his possible cultural references and models. For now, a brief mention is here functional to underline Lúthien's dualism.

[41] Verg. *Geo*. 4. 507-515. in Virgil's narration, he uses, to evoke figuratively the nightingale, the word *philomela*, actually the name of a female character from Greek myth transformed into a nightingale

[42] Own translation: "[…] Lúthien deve compiere un secondo viaggio inferico. Assistiamo qui al ribaltamento del mito di Orfeo ed Euridice: […] è Lúthien che va nelle aule di Mandos e con il suo canto commuove i Valar, convincendoli a darle una possibilità". Cfr. WU MING 4 2019, p.122

[43] *Ibidem*.

[44] CATTABIANI 2000, p. 278.

It is not the first time that Tolkien alludes to a dualism of female characters, by defining them by more than one name for example, in order to create a more vivid and complex identity: in this way, even for the purest of creatures the more discontinuous and recondite aspects are exalted. In Galadriel, for example, this is very evident and, as in the case of Lúthien, is conveyed by the double onomastics: while the name "Galadriel", given to her by her beloved Celeborn, means *crown of light*, "Nerwen", attributed to her by her mother, means *man-girl*. Her proverbial wisdom, on the other hand, may also include a corruption of the latter, such as the temptation to become a queen instead of the Dark Lord. This aspect embodies the whole of Tolkien's *Legendarium*, from its very start[45] and reflects also the way Tolkien thinks about his characters; also indirectly speaking to his readers, he focuses on the balance, inside each one of us, of different yet complementary inner parts: it is the awareness and skilful handling of this complexity that favour a character's success.

The scholar Wu Ming 4 observes that, focusing on this theme but specifically addressing the male-female dichotomy within the characters, "male and female attitudes must be equally part of the characters' character in order for them to turn out to be positive and succeed in pursuing good. When this balance is not there, the characters fail, succumbing to evil".[46] In fact, in Lúthien's case, her action is balanced by heroic action traditionally associated with male characters (for example, her feat in the afterlife – that is in the Halls of Mandos – as already seen) but skilfully utilising her feminine qualities, such as the potentially ambiguous magical ability – the enchanting voice – that, in effect, Lúthien often manages to save herself and allow her goals to be achieved, or her hair which, in its association with twilight, cloaks her and brings on slumber in others (e.g., Beren & Lúthien p. 64 & 228).

It is not possible here, for reasons of space, to examine the figure of Lúthien in detail, but certainly her connection with the twilight dimension, also highlighted by her disguise as a bat on the mission to Angband (Thuringwethil's mantle) returns a double image of her, interconnected and inextricable. It can be observed how, in effect, Lúthien's destiny is in proximity to death after meeting her loved one, as wisely said by Huan when Lúthien wanted to join and complete the mission toward Morgoth's fortress:

[45] Arda's cosmogony was briefly mentioned before, based on the balance between the complementarity of the male and female genders of the Valar's couples, then on the contrast of light and darkness.

[46] Own translation: "Attitudine maschile e attitudine femminile devono fare in egual misura parte del carattere dei personaggi affinché essi si rivelino positivi e riescano a perseguire il bene. Quando questo equilibrio non c'è i personaggi falliscono, cedono al male." Cfr. WU MING 4 2019, p.110.

> From the shadow of death you can no longer save Lúthien, for by her love she is now subject to it.[47]

And it is no coincidence that even their first meeting is interwoven as much with marvellous poetry, which illuminates their meeting and emphasises their exceptional character, as it is, at the same time, with shadows, mentioned as much in the description of her as in the foretelling of a destiny that is indeed united but forced into mortality. When Beren first met her, weighed down by past sorrows, is actually on the evening and, again, the author dwells on the physical her description, insisting on the dualism in her:

> Blue was her raiment as the unclouded heaven, but her eyes were grey as the starlit evening; her mantle was sewn with golden flowers, but her hair was dark as the shadows of twilight.[48]

Here it is certainly significant to observe how Tolkien emphasises this dualism of character already from the syntactic structure: every affirmative proposition is countered by an adversative one, underlining, already from her physical appearance, the multifaceted complexity of Lúthien. Also noteworthy is what is reported in *The Lay of Leithian*: until that moment Lúthien had not known fear, but her encounter with Beren makes her run away precisely because of fear, "seeing that shape with shagged hair/ and shadow long that halted there".[49] In this sense, within a story probably with the most intense love ever described but, simultaneously, with the renunciation of an ethereal and immortal dimension, we saw how Tolkien reflects on the dualism of this pure character but destined to pass through the shadows, not only with respect to her two names but also through her disguise as a bat (whose wings are not coincidentally defined by Huan as "wings of hell"[50]) with the mantle of her other – yet related – female opposite: Thuringwethil. Beren's reaction, when he sees her disguised as a bat, well represents the contrast between the purity of the figure of Lúthien and her near metamorphosis, as he perceives at that moment:

> and horror was in his glance as he saw upon his flank a bat-like creature clinging with creased wings.[51]

In *The Lay of Leithian*, on the other hand, Lúthien is described, while disguising herself, uttering elvish words for fear of being contaminated by the bat skin:

---

[47] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, p. 173.
[48] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Ibid*, p. 160.
[49] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lays of Beleriand*, Canto III, vv. 615-616.
[50] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Ibid*, Canto XI, v. 3435.
[51] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, p. 174.

> With elvish magic Lúthien wrought,
> lest raiment foul with evil fraught
> to dreadful madness drive their hearts;
> and there she wrought with elvish arts
> a strong defence, a binding power,
> singing until the midnight hour.[52]

And again, always in this game of alternating purity and darkness, the dichotomy and the transition from a nocturnal animal to one that heralds the light are thus emphasised, when she faces Carcharoth:

> The vampire dark/ she flung aside, and like a lark/ cleaving through night
> to dawn she/sprang.[53]

Finally, it may be interesting to briefly analyse her action inside the fortress of Angband, which well illustrates this double symbolism of her, also represented by her disguise as a vampire: in *The Silmarillion*, in fact, she was initially deprived of her camouflage at Morgoth's behest; this actually allowed her, thanks to her extraordinary beauty, to take advantage of Morgoth's weakness and distraction to escape from his sight and, from the shadows, sing a song that could make him blind; while his whole court falls asleep, she takes up again her winged robe and her voice becomes grave and obscure; then, she transfers her mantle over Morgoth' eyes, condemning him to a dark sleep. Here it appears significant to notice how her voice can be, as said before, an ambiguous power, whose use and effect may vary depending on the purpose: it can therefore be as much a bearer of grace and wonder as it is a weapon capable of rendering anyone who hears it inert, whose dangerousness is – vaguely – reminiscent of that of the Homeric Sirens. And in that specific episode, while her voice has the same purpose – that is to neutralise the enemy – at the same time we see how it goes from being irresistibly sweet to being profound and dark; is like a change of register, not coincidentally coinciding with the moment when she takes up her winged robe again.

> Then Lúthien catching up her winged robe sprang into the air, and her voice came dropping down like rain into pools, profound and dark. She cast her cloak before his eyes, and set upon him a dream, dark as the Outer Void where once he walked alone. Suddenly he fell, as a hill sliding in avalanche, and hurled like thunder from his throne lay prone upon the

[52] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lays of Beleriand*, Canto XI, vv. 3460-3465.
[53] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Ibid*, Canto XII, vv. 3812-3815. Here the mirroring can be seen specifically between the vampire costume and the lark, as well as, more in general, between the nightingale (her other name) and the lark, two birds, one of the dawn and the other of the twilight.

> floors of hell. The iron crown rolled echoing from his head. All things were still.[54]

As a last, but not least, annotation, is a brief mention of *The Tale of Tinúviel* which contains one of the earliest versions of their story. In this case, a hazy black cloak, imbued with magic and somnolence, is made of her own hair, covering her bright white dress[55] (insisting, again, on her duplicity). She uses it to face her enemies at the fortress and, not coincidentally, Melko, when asking her who she is, points out that she flutters as a bat;[56] later on, Tolkien describes her flying dance, wearing the black hair cloak, silent as a bat.[57] This fact allows us to understand how her proximity with the bat symbolism, in the author's initial intentions, was not only already foreseen, but that it was even part of herself in a constitutive way, from a physical level. Later on, this imagery was approached and connected to her through the disguise of Thuringwethil's skin; but we think it is significant to point out the subtle evolution of this theme. In fact, this allows us to say that Lúthien's duplicity, symbolised also by the external mirroring with the female vampire, described before, seems functional to rather underline her internal ambiguity. Although we have tried to provide more examples of the complexity of this character – i.e. the name, the voice and her physical appearance – we believe that the analysis of the bat, connected to the elf, allows us to understand more deeply her narrative psychology and values, thus reassessing the role of the animal within the Tolkien corpus.

Much more could be said about this: for now, it is sufficient that we have highlighted how the connection of the bat with a female character is far from irrelevant and would deserve further reflection.

2.4 *The Hobbit*

Finally, bats also accompany Bilbo's mission in *The Hobbit*, a presence he feels fearful of at first, but to whom he then gets used: they are actually quite frequent, although in this case bats are really often used for descriptive purposes, to mark a hostile or otherwise borderline dangerous circumstance.[58] Apart from the description of Smaug with bat wings – a clear medieval inheritance – it will be in the final battle of the Five Armies that these animals, on behalf of Evil, will play an active role, darkening the sky to facilitate the passage and combat

[54] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, p. 175.
[55] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Il racconto di Tinúviel*, p. 54
[56] *Ibid*, p. 73.
[57] *Ibid*, p. 74.
[58] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, p. 61 regarding the comparison of the bats to the Goblins; p. 118 when describing how large bats disturb the Company; pp. 190, 191 and 193 when they disturb first Bilbo and then the rest of the Company as they pursue their mission to the Lonely Mountain.

of the goblins.[59] Here, still in the game of opposite and complementary mirroring, bats can be seen as an evil air power in contrast to a good one, represented by the eagles.

In fact, while giant bats were helping the enemy army by obscuring the sky, creating confusion, provoking terror and drinking the blood of the fallen – here bats are clearly connected to the theme of vampirism discussed above – when the eagles finally arrive, they take action through an opposite operation in fact, by brightening the sky and bringing hope. In this way Tolkien describes the effects of the giant bats in the battle, employing a term that merged the bat directly with the cloud:

> But the bat-cloud came, flying lower, over the shoulder of the Mountain, and whirled above them shutting out the light and filling them with dread.[60]

And again:

> The great bats swirled about the heads and ears of elves and men, or fastened vampire-like on the stricken.[61]

After a while, the arrival of the eagles provokes the opposite effects:

> The clouds were torn by the wind, and a red sunset slashed the West. Seeing the sudden gleam in the gloom Bilbo looked round. He gave a great cry: he had seen a sight that made his heart leap, dark shapes small yet majestic against the distant glow. "The Eagles! The Eagles!" he shouted. "The Eagles are coming!" Bilbo's eyes were seldom wrong. The eagles were coming down the wind, line after line, in such a host as must have gathered from all the eyries of the North.[62]

Thus, it appears significant that two air animals, with their specific abilities and characteristics, produce opposite yet complementary effects, building up, again, contraposition through the bat.

---

[59] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, pp. 224 and 226. Bats are also briefly identified as the allies of goblins attacking the North Pole in 1933 in Tolkien's *Letters from Father Christmas* when Father Christmas is awakened to "squeaking and spluttering…and a nasty smell" in his bedroom, as he "caught sight of a wicked little face at the window" of "bat-riding goblins" (J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters from Father Christmas*, p. 87). Tolkien's picture accompanying the 21 December letter shows, what looks like, glowing eyes at the window of Father Christmas's bedroom (*Ibid*, p. 89).
[60] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, p. 205.
[61] *Ibid*, p. 206.
[62] *Ibid*, pp. 207-209.

In this case, however, this same juxtaposition seems to recall another one: in the medieval vision, in fact, the eagle was generally regarded as the king of birds – becoming even a Christological metaphor – whose opposite can only be the bat, a metaphor for the devil itself. Although different traditions, not always favourable,[63] coexisted with the eagle, it tends to be a solar animal, a symbol of power and spirituality since the Ancient world.[64] During the medieval period, a legend circulated that imagined that the eagle, having grown old, would fly towards the sun to burn its wings and the haze in its eyes; afterward, it would descend into a spring and, having dipped three times, would come out rejuvenated:[65] of course, it is an allegory of baptism. It is worth mentioning here, because we know Tolkien read it,[66] the Middle English *Physiologus*, a vernacular version of the medieval bestiary tradition that started with the Greek text *Physiologus* in Late Antiquity.[67] In this text, the allegorisation of the eagle,[68] placed in one of the first chapters, compares the story of the bird – which goes towards the sun to be burnt and then submerged in the regenerating water – to the man who becomes a Christian. The sun is compared to the love of God, which the Christian – like the eagle – is now able to gaze upon without looking away:[69] on the contrary, it is precisely daylight that the bat detests, according to medieval commentaries.[70]

In general, it can be observed that the eagles fight with two other evil air powers (in addition to the bats), which are physically connected with the bat and can be seen as different existential levels of Evil. In fact, starting from our bats, whose origin is not explicated but is frequently connected with evil's forces (still without coinciding with the Evil itself but recalling it, more as an environmental and perceived evil), there are also the Nazgûl's winged beasts at the Battle of the Morannon,[71] concluding with the most terrible evil air creatures: dragons.[72]

---

[63] In fact, its rapacity sometimes made it a negative symbol: even in the Old Testament, for example, it is ascribed among impure animals (*Lev*. 11, 13). In general, this ambivalence in interpretations of animals is a fairly common practice in the Middle Ages.

[64] It becomes inevitable to think of Zeus or Jupiter: the eagle was the messenger and conduit between the divine and mortal worlds, ever since the *Iliad* (*Il*. 24. 308-321).

[65] This legend is inspired by *Psalm* 102,5.

[66] As PORCK 2022 notes, "The Middle English *Physiologus* is referred to in his article on *Chaucer's Reeve's Tale* as well as in his *Exeter College Notebook*s" (Cilli, Oronzo, *Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist* (Edinburgh: 2019) 18).

[67] This text, dated to the mid-13th century, survives only in one manuscript – the Arundel 292 at the British Library in London – and it describes thirteen animals: its source is undoubtedly the Latin *Physiologus* by Theobald with some innovations.

[68] The bestiaries were generally structured in this way: a descriptive part of the nature of the animal (*natura*) was followed by its moralisation (*significatio*).

[69] ZAMBON 2018, pp. 2266-2269. As we said before, the eagle is positive.

[70] Isid. *Etym*. 12, 7, 36.

[71] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*: *The Return of the King*, chapter VI.

[72] Cfr. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, p. 238. Morgoth quailed, and he dared not to come forth himself. But he loosed upon his foes the last desperate assault that he had prepared, and out of

In this light, bats assume even greater importance: although winged beasts and dragons are distinct creatures from our small mammals (in the case of dragons with a rich and stratified cultural history over time), they can be seen, at the same time, as sort of bats in power, both physically (having the same type of wings) both in their degree of malevolence and thus, also, in the relevance of their narrative role. The winged beasts, probably created by Morgoth in opposition to the eagles and ridden by the Nazgûl, are described by Tolkien essentially with bat wings, that is without feathers and with fingers webbed with hide:[73] it is expressly said that is a creature "apt to evil".[74] Dragons, on the other hand, were created by Morgoth and represent the most evil air creature,[75] not only for their physical power but primarily for their malevolent cunning. And, when describing Smaug, it is pointed out that "Smaug lay, with wings folded like an immeasurable bat".[76] The use of this adjective makes us think of a sort of giant bat, which, as written above, lends its wings at some point for the iconography of the dragon: in the end, a magnitude both in terms of dimension and evilness.

Finally, in *The Hobbit*'s chapter *Flies and Spiders*, we see again how Tolkien employs a curious image of the bat, again opposing obscurity to light: in the first part of Bilbo's journey through Mirkwood forest, in the deepest darkness nocturnal and dangerous animals lie, including huge black bats that flutter around, while not distantly, in the light, on the top of an oak tree, there are butterflies– actually the purple emperor – there strangely all black as well.

3. *Conclusions*

We have tried to provide an idea as precise as possible of the often neglected – yet relevant – symbolism of the bat, useful to grasp one of the narrative techniques often employed by Tolkien, the use of mirror images. The main idea is that Tolkien takes up the medieval lore of the bat's symbolism,

---

the pits of Angband there issued the winged dragons, that had not before been seen; […] But Eärendil came, shining with white flame, and about Vingilot were gathered all the great birds of heaven and Thorondor was their captain, and there was battle in the air all the day and through a dark night of doubt. "

[73] Cfr. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, p. 840. "[…] if bird, then greater than all other birds, and it was naked, and neither quill nor feather did it bear, and its vast pinions were as webs of hide between horned fingers."

[74] *Ibidem*.

[75] Although several categories exist created by Morgoth, here we are focusing on the winged dragons.

[76] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, p. 157.

which established the bad reputation of this mammal, then enriched by the tradition of Gothic fiction: we have tried to show the very rich cultural substratum, made up of several epochs, behind this animal, that reflects the way with which humans have looked, with suspicion, at this animal. In this, we wanted to highlight the legacy of the Middle Ages in the allegorisation given by a phenomenal datum of nature – the bat – which, being unfamiliar and ambiguous in its physical appearance and habits, precisely by virtue of its appearance, has been charged with morally determined symbolic values.

Hence, examining how Tolkien employs bats in his writings, we noticed how frequently he uses them in opposition to complementary mirrors (such as: in *Roverandom*, the white dragon; in *The Silmarillion* or in *The Lay of Leithian* the two female opposites Thuringwethil and Lúthien; in *the Hobbit* the eagles against bats). We have noticed how in some cases the contrast of the bat with other creatures, like the eagles, is functional in determining a natural ally of Good in contrast to the one that serves Evil; but, more significantly, he relates it to a diametrically opposed character – Lúthien – thus allowing us to glimpse a deeper characterisation of the elf, here only just mentioned and, by extension, of the multifaceted concept of good and evil, pure and impure, of the conscious balance between these two dimensions. Above all, it sought to argue how Tolkien, in an original and modern way, starts from a well-determined and crystallised cultural inheritance – such as the European perception of the bat – and transforms it to convey new meanings: the bat, which has always been relegated to nefarious figures, is also used to highlight certain aspects of the angelic Lúthien who, like the allegorisations of medieval bestiaries, also contains an ambivalence within herself.

The symbols of nature, in this way – far from drawing a clear barrier – intersect and exchange with each other, allowing us to grasp their co-presence and appreciate their complexity: it is precisely through the continuous mirroring between man and nature that, since the origin of literature and thought in general, humanity seems to have sought to understand itself and represent, in a metaphorical manner, its cultural instances.

Bibliography

AGAMBEN 2002 = Agamben G., L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale, 2002, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.

ARDUINI – BARELLA 2021 = Arduini R., Barella C., Paesaggi della Terra di Mezzo. La natura nelle opere di J.R.R. Tolkien, 2021, Eterea, Roma.

BETTINI 2008 = Bettini M., Laughing weasels. Animal voices from myth to natural history, in "Quaderni del Ramo d'Oro online" 2008, Siena, n.1, pp. 209-216.

BETTINI 2019 = Bettini M., Antropologia e cultura romana, 2019, Carocci, Roma.

BRACCINI 2011 = Braccini T., Prima di Dracula. Archeologia del vampiro, 2011, Il Mulino, Bologna.

CAMPBELL 2014 = Campbell G. L., The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life, 2014, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

CATTABIANI 2000 = Cattabiani A., Volario, 2000, Mondadori, Milano.

CRANE 2013 = Crane S., Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain, 2013, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

DERRIDA 2006 = Derrida J., L'animal que donc je suis, 2006, Galilée, Paris.

FERBER 2017 = Ferber M., Animal, In "A Dictionary of Literary Symbols", 2017, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

FRANCO 2008 = Franco C., Gli animali e i loro uomini, 2008, Protagon, Siena.

FRANCO 2014 = Franco C., Shameless. The Canine and the Feminine in Ancient Greece. With a New Preface and Appendix, 2014, University of California Press, Oakland.

GARTH 2003 = Garth J., Tolkien and the Great War, 2003, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

HARTLEY 2014 = Hartley, G., Civilized Goblins and Talking Animals: How *The Hobbit* Created Problems of Sentience for Tolkien, in "*The Hobbit* and Tolkien's Mythology: Essays on Revisions and Influences", 2014, McFarland, pp. 113–35.

HECK – CORDONNIER 2011 = Heck C., Cordonnier R., Le Bestiaire Médiéval. L'animal dans les manuscrits enluminés, 2011 Cittadelles & Mazenod, Paris.

HONEGGER 2004 = Honegger Th., A Note on Beren and Luthien's Disguise as Werewolf And Vampire-Bat, in "Tolkien Studies" 2004, vol. 1, pp. 171-175.

KOMPATSCHER-HEUBERGER 2021 = Kompatscher G., Heuberger R., Ethical Literary Animal Studies and colinguistics: Approaching Animals, in "Papers on Language & Literature. A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature" 2021, vol. 57.3.

KUNZ 1984 = Kunz T., Halloween Treat: Bat Facts and Folklore, in "The American Biology Teacher" 1984, vol. 46.7, pp. 394-99.

LEOPARDI 2022 = Leopardi S., L'innocenza del pipistrello, 2022, Edizioni Ambiente, Milano.

LEVACK 2012 = Levack B. P., La caccia alle streghe in Europa, 2012, Laterza, Bari.

LI CAUSI 2018 = Li Causi P., Gli animali nel mondo antico, 2018, il Mulino, Bologna.

LOW – HOONG – SHEN – MURUGAVEL – MARINER – PAGUNTALAN -TANALGO – AUNG – SHEHERAZADE – BANSA – SRITONGCHUAY – PREBLE – AZIZ 2021 = Low M., Hoong W. Z., Shen Z., Murugavel B., Mariner N., Paguntalan L. M., Tanalgo K., Aung M., Sheherazade, Bansa L. A., Sritongchuay T., Preble J. H., Aziz S. A., Bane or Blessing? Reviewing Cultural Values of Bats across the Asia-Pacific Region, in "Journal of Ethnobiology" 2021, vol. 41.1, pp. 18-34.

MARCHESINI 2014 = Marchesini R., Fondamenti di zooantropologia. Zooantropologia teorica, 2014, Apeiron, Bologna.

MORRIS 2009 = Morris M., Middle Earth, Narnia, Hogwarts, and Animals: A Review of the Treatment of Nonhuman Animals and Other Sentient Beings in

Christian-Based Fantasy Fiction, in “Society & Animals”, 2009, Brill, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 343–56.

PARRILA 2021 = Parrila S., All Worthy Things: The Personhood of Nature in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Legendarium, in “Mythlore. A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature” 2021, vol. 40.1, pp. 5-20.

PASTOREAU 2011 = Pastoreau M., Bestiaires du Moyen Âge, 1995,

PORCK 2022 = Porck T., 19 Medieval Animals in Middle-earth. J.R.R. Tolkien and the Old English and Middle English Physiologus, in “Figurations animalières à travers les textes et l’image en Europe” 2022, Brill, Leiden, pp. 266-280.

SIERADZKI – MIKKOLA 2022 = Sieradzki A., Mikkola H., Bats in Folklore and Culture: A Review of Historical Perceptions around the World” in “Bats - Disease-Prone but Beneficial”, 2022, IntecthOpen, London, chapter 1.

SIMPSON 2017 = Simpson E. R., The Evolution of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Portrayal of Nature: Foreshadowing Anti-speciesism, in “Tolkien Studies”, 2017, West Virginia University, Morgantown, pp. 71-89.

SOOKOO 2007 = Sookoo L., Animals in Tolkien’s Works, in “J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment”, 2007, Routledge, pp. 19-21.

Spirito 2007 = Spirito G., Speaking with Animals: A Desire that Lies near the Heart of Faërie, in “Hither Shore: Interdisciplinary Journal on Modern Fantasy Literature”, 2007 vol. 4, pp. 27-40.

STOCKER 1998 = Stocker B., Dracula, 1998, Broadview Press.

TOLKIEN 1910 = Tolkien J.R.R., Goblin Feet, in “Oxford Poetry”, 1910, Oxford B. Blackwell, Oxford.

TOLKIEN 1999 = Tolkien J.R.R., Letters from Father Christmas, edited by Baillie Tolkien, 1999, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston.

TOLKIEN 2002 = Tolkien J.R.R, The Lays of Beleriand, 1985, HarperCollins, London.

TOLKIEN 2005 = Tolkien J.R.R., The Lord of the Rings, 1968, HarperCollins, London.

TOLKIEN 2010 = Tolkien J.R.R., The Hobbit, 2010, HarperCollins, Glasgow.

TOLKIEN 2011 = Tolkien J.R.R., The Silmarillion, 2011, HarperCollins*Publishers*, London.

TOLKIEN 2017 = Tolkien J.R.R., Beren e Lúthien, 2017, 2017, Giunti Editore, Firenze.

WU MING 4 2019 = Wu Ming 4, Il fabbro di Oxford, 2019, Eterea Edizioni, Roma.

VOM LEHN 2015 = Vom Lehn A., Animals in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, in "Lembas Extra: Magazine of Dutch Tolkien Society Unquendor", 2015, pp. 191-222.

ZAMBON 2018 = Zambon F., Bestiari tardoantichi e medievali. I testi fondamentali della zoologia sacra cristiana, 2018, Bompiani, Milano.

Illustration Credit

"*De Vespertilio* [Bat]." Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 1511 fol.63r (1201–1225). Photo: © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, CC-BY-NC 4.0. (For more information on terms of use, please see https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/terms/); Image available at https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/faeff7fb-f8a7-44b5-95ed-cff9a9ffd198/surfaces/501aac48-1ed7-4f6e-bb41-1150a1e35d8e/.