



The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's Equestrian Epic

By Lynn Forest-Hill

The recent trilogy of films based on J.R.R. Tolkien's book *The Lord of the Rings* brought to the screen a succession of exciting and beautiful equestrian images as noble white horses are opposed to the black steeds of the servants of the Dark Lord and valiant cavalry charges are opposed to his monstrous armies. The films depict the most important horses created and named by Tolkien:

- Shadowfax,
- Snowmane,
- Arod,
- Hasufel,
- the elven horse Asfaloth
- and Bill the pony.

CGI even created the glimmering horses of the Elves (except Asfaloth). The films also offer a vivid representation of the race of horsemen—the Rohirrim, or people of Rohan. Their society, complete with flowing horse-tail crests and white-horse standard, is evocative of historical and mythical tales of the close relationship of heroes and horses that are found in many cultures—one reason, perhaps, for the great success of the films.

Across the world, many cultures include an appreciation, even reverence, for the beauty, power and faithfulness of horses, and many myths depict their close association with heroes. Each hero in the films is associated with a named horse, except the two hobbit-heroes Frodo and Sam. Sadly, however, the process of adapting *The Lord of the Rings* for the screen sacrificed much of the significance of horses in the book. The images and action in the films stir the blood, but are fleeting. The book, however, develops the depiction horses in subtle ways that bring out social and moral dimensions particular to Middle-earth but also reflect the importance of horses in worldwide myth and legend.

The sturdy ponies of The Shire are lost from the film adaptation although in the book they are an indication of the comfortable status of their owners, as well as being suited to their size. Merry's ponies and the pony that pulls Lobelia's trap are signs of affluence and status. It is, then, interesting that Bilbo and Frodo choose not to keep ponies, even though both Bilbo and Frodo are plainly competent riders.

On the other hand, Bill the ill-treated pony bought in Bree is a symptom of evil encroaching even on the borders of the homely Shire. Bill's recovery is certainly a response to Sam's gentle care, but at the end of his sojourn in the Elven retreat of Rivendell his condition is also a sign of the virtue of that place.

For the sturdy hobbit ponies Tolkien had native English breeds such as the small rough-coated Shetland or tough Dartmoor ponies as models for them, but Icelandic ponies are equally hardy, and are besides home-loving, a quality demonstrated by Merry's ponies, and Bill when they are left to their own devices.

The names Tom Bombadil gives Merry's wandering ponies are playful and ordinary, but they recall the idea found in some mythologies and fairy tales that creatures may have 'real' names and they will answer to these rather than to their imposed names. Knowledge of a 'real' or hidden name often conferred special power on anyone who knew it.

The pony Merry rides in Rohan is called Stybba, and this is simply the Anglo-Saxon word for a stub, fitting for a short stocky animal.

Having been introduced early in the story to the great black horses of the undead Ringwraiths, the sound of hooves following Aragorn and the hobbits towards Rivendell creates tension and horror—quickly remedied by the jingling of harness as Asfaloth, the glimmering white horse of the elf-lord Glorfindel, appears. The jingling of harness bells may be a sign of Glorfindel's power as an elf-lord because he makes no effort to hide from the Ringwraiths, but it is also a reminder that Tolkien was an accomplished Chaucer scholar – when the pilgrim Monk in *The Canterbury Tales* is riding 'men might hear his bridle / jingling in a whistling wind.'



Glorfindel's horse carries Frodo to safety as the Ringwraiths pursue him, but after this, neither Frodo nor Sam, his stalwart friend and helper, ride during the Quest to destroy the Ring. Their slow horse-less plodding emphasises their isolated struggle to complete the Quest.

While Aragorn, the returning king, is in Rohan he rides Hasufel a horse of Rohan, but in the book his kinsmen, the Rangers, bring him his own horse Roheryn before he rides through the terrifying Paths of the Dead. Roheryn is no glamorous kingly steed. He is rugged and rough-haired but proud, and this faithful horse reflects his master's own proud but rugged demeanour and his loyalty to his small hobbit friends.

Gandalf the wizard is always greater than he appears to be; named both the Grey and the White, he rides Shadowfax, a horse of extraordinary beauty and speed whose coat can be by turns silver white or shadowy grey. However, one magnificent horse reflects his rider's character, and is his downfall. Snowmane, the horse of King Theoden of Rohan, is truly a kingly steed, snow white, and noble, reflecting the king's aged but regal warrior status. In battle, Snowmane is confronted with the most terrible enemy as a Ringwraith mounted on a fearsome flying creature, stoops hawk-like on him and his rider. The sequence is well-represented in the film as the faithful horse rears in terror, dislodges the King, and becomes the cause of his death. The pathos of this death in battle derives from the role played accidentally by the faithful horse.

The faithfulness of the horses of heroes is a familiar theme in many myths and legends, but Tolkien, in his literary quest to create a mythology for England, would have been hard pressed to find indigenous English myths or legends as sources for his horses and their heroes. England has little in the way of horse-based mythology although there is spectacular evidence that it once

existed. The Iron Age Celtic tribes that once inhabited the island of Britain left evidence of the status of the horse in that society. On a hillside at Uffington just south of Tolkien's former home in Oxford, is a great stylised carving of a horse which may have been sacred to the Celtic horse goddess Epona. The green turf of the hill was cut away in prehistoric times, exposing the white chalk beneath, and while the cultural and symbolic significance changed through time, the carving has always been tended. As it lies close to another evocative ancient site, the neolithic burial chamber or barrow called Weyland's Smithy which Tolkien visited, he would have known of this mystical white horse.

He would also have known the strange 'hobby horses', creatures deriving from ancient folk myths and still seen at folk festivals, but England has so few horse myths that horses in *The Lord of the Rings* mostly have their sources in the Celtic and Norse myths and legends Tolkien studied. From Celtic mythology he would have known Epona, and her Welsh counterpart Rhiannon. The names Shadowfax and Snowmane relate to Icelandic names of legendary horses such as Hrimfaxi, a name meaning 'Frosty mane' from 'hrim', 'frost' and 'faxi', 'mane'. Snowmane is an anglicised variant of this. Icelandic legend has other horses with similar names, such as Freyfaxi – Frey's black-maned stallion.

Horses in *The Lord of the Rings* occasionally share unusual characteristics with legendary ones. Shadowfax, the white horse Gandalf rides, cannot be tamed by any ordinary man. This echoes the wildness of the legendary Bucephalus who could only be tamed by Alexander the Great. The wildness of these horses declares the special nature of the beast and the riders who tame them, but in Tolkien's story Shadowfax also belongs to the race of mearas – horses whose sire could speak human language. Tolkien uses the Anglo-Saxon word for horses tautologically when he names the horses of Rohan mearas ('mearas' is an Anglo-Saxon word for 'horses'). At the same time, the 'talking horse' motif reflects Tolkien's love of folk and fairy tales. It echoes the *Goosegirl* fairy tale, in which the humiliated princess's horse, Falada, is beheaded and the head hung over a gateway. As she passes by it talks to and consoles her. The story is known to have come into Western Europe from Middle Eastern legends and a version of the name Falada and the story are still known in Pakistan.

Although the talking sire of the mearas is a fabulous beast from the created mythic past of the people of Rohan and Shadowfax does not talk, the implication that horses in Middle-earth could still do so occurs early in *The Lord of the Rings*, when the Fellowship prepare to leave Rivendell. They discuss carrying provisions on the journey and Sam reveals that Bill the pony will again be their pack animal. He announces 'That animal can nearly talk ... and would talk, if he stayed here much longer'. The pony's potential for language could be attributed either to Sam's fond exaggeration, or to the influence of the elvish surrounding, but it resonates outside and inside Tolkien's fiction with the stories of Falada, and the sire of the mearas.



Besides the individual named horses in his book, Tolkien created Rohan as a horse-based society. He declared it his version of Anglo-Saxon society, using Anglo-Saxon names for places, people and things. However, Anglo-Saxon armies did not fight on horseback. The evidence from

Anglo-Saxon war poetry, especially *The Battle of Maldon*, depicts the army dismounting and sending their horses to safety before battle commences. It is likely that Tolkien drew on Gothic military tactics when he depicts the cavalry of Rohan riding into battle, for he loved the Gothic language, and commentators infer from this his creation of the cavalry of Rohan. It might be more to the point to see Tolkien borrowing from various sources as his way of creating the missing mythology of England out of the cultures that influenced and coincided with the formation of English culture and offered the richest sources for fantasy: from Celtic and Norse mythology, European history, and the fairy tales of nineteenth-century Germany.

Horses in the book of *The Lord of the Rings* reflect the status and something of the characters of the heroes. Conversely, slow, weary, but stoic determination is expressed by the absence from Frodo and Sam's journey of the *tharfasti thjónninn*, Icelandic for 'the most useful servant'. Tolkien's horses are, then, always more than convenient or aesthetically pleasing means of transport and his depiction of them reflects their importance in many cultures.