
Character Biography Radagast the Brown

By Oshun

Radagast the Brown is one of the Istari (Wizards) who were sent from Aman to assist the peoples of Middle-earth in their struggle against Sauron. His Quenya name is Aiwendil, which means 'lover of birds.' *Unfinished Tales* contains a section entitled *The Istari*, which is an excellent source for Tolkien's conceptions of these emissaries from the land of the gods and their roles in the continuing struggle against darkness in Middle-earth. (We will explore this resource in more detail below.)

Before we saw Radagast with bird droppings in his hair and driving a sled pulled by giant bunnies in Peter Jackson's film-stylings of *The Hobbit*, the majority of readers were probably all but unaware of this blink-and-one-misses-him character. I knew him, of course, and cringed—appalled, offended, and grudgingly entertained—every time he appeared on the screen. (I realize some viewers actually like Radagast in the film, but I'd like to reserve that discussion for another time and another venue.) There are, more importantly, some fascinating threads to chase about Radagast in the published texts. Radagast is identified in the novels, but not developed or exploited fully:

In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf actually leans on Radagast's (local) reputation to get himself, and his dwarvish and hobbit charges, accepted by Beorn. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Radagast plays a key, intermediary role in communications between Gandalf and Saruman. Yet Radagast disappears from *The Lord of the Rings* after the Council of Elrond. Searchers from Rivendell travel to his "old home" at Rhosgobel, but Radagast is "not there" (LotR II:3 267). In all the wrappings-up that occur at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* his case is not solved. Nor is it addressed in any of the Appendices.

Although a longer and complete account exists in *Unfinished Tales*, it is in *Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age* within the published *Silmarillion* where we are introduced to the Wizards of the Ainur (the Istari):

Radagast was the friend of all beasts and birds; but Curunír [Saruman] went most among Men, and he was subtle in speech and skilled in all the devices of smithcraft. Mithrandir [Gandalf] was closest in counsel with Elrond and the Elves. He wandered far in the North and West and made never in any land any lasting abode; but Curunír journeyed into the East, and when he returned he dwelt at Orthanc in the Ring of Isengard. . . .

We read therein that Saruman had begun delving into the forging and nature of the Rings of Power and searching for the One Ring, keeping his own counsel in the hope of being the first to find and secure the Ring. In good faith, Radagast assisted Saruman in gathering spies around in his service, including many birds. Radagast lent him unique aid "divining naught of his treachery, and deeming that this was but part of the watch upon the Enemy."

Gandalf introduces Radagast's name into the texts first in *The Hobbit* when he hopes to secure temporary lodging for his party of Bilbo and the Dwarves. They meet up with the shaper-shifter Beorn, who does not know Gandalf, and the Grey Wizard uses Radagast's positive reputation in those parts as a reference and introduction:

"I am a wizard," continued Gandalf. "I have heard of you, if you have not heard of me; but perhaps you have heard of my good cousin Radagast who lives near the Southern borders of Mirkwood?"

"Yes; not a bad fellow as wizards go, I believe. I used to see him now and again," said Beorn. "Well, now I know who you are, or who you say you are. What do you want?"

We hear no more of Radagast in *The Hobbit*. However, early in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf tells a tale of meeting Radagast at the Council of Elrond. It is a dark and disturbing story. Gandalf and Radagast have both implicitly trusted Saruman. When Gandalf unexpectedly encounters the Brown Wizard on the borders of the Shire, visibly agitated and unhappy, Radagast has been frantically searching for him to deliver a message from Saruman. He tells Gandalf that Saruman urgently needs to see him and that he himself has seen evidence of evil nearby. "'Nazgûl,' he whispered. 'The Nine are abroad again. They have crossed the River secretly and are moving westward. They have taken the guise of riders in black.'" Gandalf is greatly distressed as this is the first he has heard of any such movement near the Shire. He rushes off to meet Saruman, walking into a trap. Gandalf reports that the Nine have been seen:

"The Nine have come forth again," I answered. "They have crossed the River. So Radagast said to me."

"Radagast the Brown!" laughed Saruman, and he no longer concealed his scorn. "Radagast the Bird-tamer! Radagast the Simple! Radagast the Fool! Yet he had just the wit to play the part that I set him. For you have come, and that was all the purpose of my message. And here you will stay, Gandalf the Grey, and rest from journeys. For I am Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-maker, Saruman of Many Colours!"

The next and last reference to the existence of Radagast in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is ominous in tone and mysterious in content. Radagast passes out of the tale and one can only guess what happens to him.

The hobbits had been nearly two months in the house of Elrond . . . when the scouts began to return. Some had gone north beyond the springs of the Hoarwell . . . while others had climbed the pass at the sources of the Gladden River, and had come down into Wilderland and over the Gladden Fields and so at length had reached the old home of Radagast at Rhosgobel. Radagast was not there; and they had returned over the high pass that was called the Redhorn Gate.

Unsurprisingly, there is no end to speculation as to what became of Radagast. Was he killed by Sauron? Or did he fall under the control of Saruman or Sauron? Or did he continue on his own paths to carry out tasks uniquely assigned to him? One example gives a flavor of the best of such discussions:

Yet nothing negative is ever said about Radagast. He is not denounced, by Gandalf or any others of the Wise. Indeed, the only negative words about Radagast are uttered by Saruman. . . . The essay on the Istari in *Unfinished Tales* indicates that this animosity goes back to Valinor when the animal-loving Aiwendil (Radagast) was forced upon the unwilling Curumo (Saruman) by Yavanna (UT 393). The implications of this are obvious. Curumo, associated, like Sauron before him, with Aulë, the maker, is contrasted with Aiwendil, ward of Yavanna, the guardian of nature and trees.

In the index of the *Unfinished Tales*, Radagast is listed as "One of the Istari (Wizards). See *Aiwendil*." That entry simply reads: "Aiwendil 'Lover of Birds', Quenya name of Radagast the Wizard."

In *The Istari*, when Sauron first begins to stir again in the Third Age, the Valar took counsel among themselves and, with the consent of Eru, chose to send "members of their own high order" (one can assume of the Ainur, more precisely of the Maiar) to Middle-earth to provide what guidance and succor they might to the peoples of Middle-earth. They arrived "clad in bodies as of Men, real and not feigned, but subject to the fears and pains and weariness of earth, able to hunger and thirst and be slain; though because of their noble spirits they did not die." Like Men these messengers could age and suffer from the hardships of many long years of labor.

The main task of these emissaries was to "advise and persuade," but not to "reveal themselves in forms of majesty, or to seek to rule the wills of Men or Elves by open display of power, but coming in shapes weak and humble." In his essay on the Istari, Tolkien writes that the exact number of the Order is unknown, but describes five who "came to the North of Middle-earth, where there was most hope (because of the remnant of the Dúnedain and of the Eldar that abode there)." The first to arrive was Saruman, described as being "of noble mien and bearing, with raven hair, and a fair voice, and he was clad in white." In both the *Unfinished Tales* article and in *The Lord of the Rings*, he is said to have been considered by most to be the first among this special grouping:

In *The Two Towers* it is said that Saruman was 'accounted by many the chief of Wizards', and at the Council of Elrond (*The Fellowship of the Ring*) Gandalf explicitly stated this: 'Saruman the White is the greatest of my order.'

Tolkien goes on to write of "two clad in sea-blue, and one in earthen brown; and last came one who seemed the least, less tall than the others, and in looks more aged, grey-haired and grey-clad, and leaning on a staff." Of the two blue-clad wizards we hear little more, but the reader comes to know this grey wizard well as Gandalf, last and least at first appearance, but in the final analysis the first and wisest amongst his company.

Interestingly, the Istari, despite their certain unique and individualized preternatural abilities, retain but a dim and foggy memory of their past in Aman in possession of their full powers and regular communication with others of their kind in the West: "... though they knew whence they came the memory of the Blessed Realm was to them a vision from afar off, for which (so long as they remained true to their mission) they yearned exceedingly." It is a fascinating plotline that in order to more fully grasp and understand the ways in which Elves and Men would be able to resist and overcome Sauron in Middle-earth, the Istari needed to "learn much anew by slow experience" and voluntarily assume "the pangs of exile and the deceits of Sauron" in order to address the evil of that time and place.

The brown wizard referred to above is, of course, Radagast. He is dealt with ambiguously in this essay. In the purely descriptive section about the individual wizards it reads:

Indeed, of all the Istari, one only remained faithful, and he was the last-comer [referring to Gandalf]. For Radagast, the fourth, became enamoured of the many beasts and birds that dwelt in Middle-earth, and forsook Elves and Men, and spent his days among the wild creatures. Thus he got his name (which is in the tongue of Númenór of old, and signifies, it is said, 'tender of beasts').⁴

⁴ In a very late note on the names of the Istari Radagast is said to be a name deriving from the Men of the Vales of Anduin, 'not now clearly interpretable'.

Rhosgobel, called 'the old home of Radagast' in *The Fellowship of the Ring* II 3, is said to have been 'in the forest borders between the Carrock and the Old Forest Road'.

A couple of things are touched upon in the above citations that are important in order for one to make a fair assessment of the character of Radagast. First, the author alludes to the fact that Radagast has been distracted, at the very least, from fulfilling his full potential by his fascination with the birds, beasts, and manifestations of the untamed natural environment of Middle-earth. Read more harshly it could be said that he fails in those tasks in which Gandalf excels—an immersion in the needs of those he has been sent to safeguard and/or guide. The main text of *The Istari* strongly implies that Radagast did not remain faithful to his mission.

There are, however, a few more wrinkles and ambiguities in the preoccupations of Radagast that are not made clear in the body of *The Istari*. In his commentary at the end of the essay, Christopher Tolkien includes insightful elucidation of revelatory marginalia among his father's drafts. He introduces information which calls into question the exact nature of Radagast's mission, suggesting in his commentary at the end of *The Istari* that Yavanna, much to the annoyance of Saruman gave Radagast a distinct mission before he left Aman:

On another page of jottings clearly belonging to the same period it is said that 'Curumo [Saruman] was obliged to take Aiwendil [Radagast] to please Yavanna wife of Aulë'. There are here also some rough tables relating the names of the Istari to the names of the Valar: Olórin [Gandalf] to Manwë and Varda, Curumo to Aulë, Aiwendil to Yavanna, Alatar to Oromë, and Pallando also to Oromë (but this replaces Pallando to Mandos and Nienna).

Others have speculated, in addition to Michael Martinez's remark, that it seems likely that when Radagast was sent to Middle-earth "this was to protect her [Yavanna's] creations here, the forests, flowers, animals." This seems to be in accord with the final speculation on this point by Christopher Tolkien:

There is no hint of an explanation of why Yavanna's evident desire that the Istari should include in their number one with a particular love of the things of her making could only be achieved by imposing Radagast's company on Saruman; while the suggestion in the essay on the Istari that in becoming enamoured of the wild creatures of Middle-earth Radagast neglected the purpose for which he was sent is perhaps not perfectly in accord with the idea of his being specially chosen by Yavanna.

It is entirely possible that Radagast could have been sent to Middle-earth for Yavanna's purposes: to protect the land and its flora and fauna during the long struggle against Sauron and perhaps to help in its healing after the triumph of the free peoples of Middle-earth.

Works Cited

1. *Unfinished Tales*, "Index."
2. Just to show that I am fair-minded, here is a link to a well-done article by a Tolkienist who liked Radagast in the movie: [The Curious Case of Radagast the Brown](#), accessed 2 August 2016.
3. Birns, Nicholas. "The Enigma of Radagast: Revision, Melodrama, and Depth," *Mythlore* 26, no. 1-2 (2007), <http://www.questia.com/read/1G1-171579961/the-enigma-of-radagast-revision-melodrama-and-depth>. Accessed 2 August 2016.
4. *The Silmarillion, Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age*.
5. Ibid.
6. *The Hobbit*, "Queer Lodgings."
7. *The Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Council of Elrond."
8. Ibid.
9. *The Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Ring Goes South."
10. Birns, Nicholas. "The Enigma of Radagast: Revision, Melodrama, and Depth."
11. *Unfinished Tales*, "Index."
12. Ibid.
13. *Unfinished Tales, The Istari*.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. *Unfinished Tales, The Istari*. Footnote.
20. *Unfinished Tales, The Istari*.
21. "...it is said that Círdan gave the Red Ring to Gandalf when he first came to the Grey Havens from over the Sea ('for Círdan saw further and deeper than any other in Middle-earth')." *Unfinished Tales, The Istari*.
22. *Unfinished Tales, The Istari*.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Martinez, Michael. [What Happened to Radagast the Brown after the War of the Ring?](#) *Middle-earth and J.R.R. Tolkien Blog*. 30 June 2014. Accessed 2 August 2016.
27. *Unfinished Tales, The Istari*.

About the Author

Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).