

“BEASTS,” “BEINGS,” AND EVERYTHING BETWEEN: ENVIRONMENTAL AND
SOCIAL ETHICS IN *HARRY POTTER*

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in English and the Graduate Faculty of the University
of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date Defended: April 5, 2012

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Abstract: This paper examines J.K. Rowling's fictional textbook, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, alongside the *Harry Potter* series, exploring how Rowling questions official academic discourse that defines boundaries between the human and nonhuman. By creating magical characters that straddle the line between "beast" and "being," as defined by fictional scholar Newt Scamander, Rowling blurs the boundary between human and animal and questions the treatment of the nonhuman as subhuman that results from such firm boundaries. At the same time, in other areas of her novels Rowling seems to reiterate the division of the human from the nonhuman, and seems to maintain a hierarchy of power that positions fully human characters over their nonhuman – and "part-human" – counterparts. The weakened boundary between beast and being complicates any discussion of the novels' social agenda, particularly regarding what many critics have perceived as Rowling's racial stereotyping of her part-human characters according to white, imperialist tropes. The result is an ambiguous code of environmental and social ethics that hinges on the question of what it means to be a being – human – as opposed to a beast – animal – and whose right it is to define these important legal and social categories.

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“Beasts,” “Beings,” and Everything Between: Environmental and Social Ethics in *Harry Potter*

Introduction

In the introduction to *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, J.K. Rowling’s fictional scholar, Newt Scamander, notes that “the definition of a ‘beast’ has caused controversy for centuries” (x). The rest of *Fantastic Beasts* ostensibly aims to solve this controversy, creating an “acceptable” system of classification that establishes boundaries between beasts, “big hairy things with too many legs,” as Harry and Ron call them, and “beings,” “any creature that has sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws” (xii). Rowling’s companion piece to her *Harry Potter* series, often mentioned within the narrative itself, offers her readers a glimpse into an official, academic discourse from her magical universe that mirrors our own systems of natural classification; she creates a textbook, complete with footnotes and references to other “scholars,” that attempts to define “firm” categories for beasts and beings (*Fantastic Beasts* xii), similar to the medieval bestiary, as well as to biology and zoology textbooks we may find in the science classroom, that delineate the human from the nonhuman. In my thesis, I explore how Rowling’s series complicates these fictional categories, questioning the official academic discourse and blurring the boundaries between beast and being, and, by extension, human and nonhuman. By creating magical characters who straddle the line between beast and being, Rowling disrupts the rigid separation of the human from the animal and problematizes the treatment of the nonhuman as subhuman that results from such firm boundaries. The result is a complex, often ambivalent, message about humanity’s relationship to the environment, to nonhuman others, and to those who are “othered,” or forced to occupy a liminal discursive space between human and nonhuman.

Harry Potter, at first glance, may not appear to be the most obvious subject for such an ecocritical reading. Many environmental critics reject fantasy, or any genre that is not explicitly “nature writing,”¹ as worthy of consideration for its environmental messages, and children’s literature has often been scorned by literary criticism more broadly. As Lawrence Buell points out in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, however, “environmentality is a property of any text,” and “all human artifacts bear traces” of environmental influence, and fantasy and science fiction are especially adept at imagining the future of our environment (Buell 25). Children’s literature, more specifically, has “long been preoccupied with natural history, ecology, and human-animal interaction,” educating children on the “proper” ways to engage with the natural world (Dobrin and Kidd 4). Giselle Anatol also demonstrates in her introduction to *Reading Harry Potter* that children’s literature like *Harry Potter* is a “powerful tool for inculcating social roles and behaviors, moral guides, desires, and fears,” and has a definite “effect on the intellectual and social development of today’s children and tomorrow’s adults” (Anatol, “Introduction” xv). The *Harry Potter* series is specifically noteworthy because of its widespread popularity and, therefore, widespread influence: each book of the series has won several prestigious awards, the series has been translated and distributed around the globe, and according to a 2011 study by *Forbes*, J.K. Rowling still ranks among the top fifteen highest-paid authors in the world, in spite of a four year publishing hiatus since the seventh *Harry Potter* novel (Anatol, “Introduction” x, Bercovici).

¹ At the 1995 ASLE conference, John Elder defined nature writing as “a form of the personal, reflective essay grounded in attentiveness to the natural world and an appreciation of science but also open to the spiritual meaning and intrinsic value of nature.” Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace, in *Beyond Nature Writing*, call this “literature of wilderness,” and indicate that, up until quite recently, consideration of such literature has “dominated the field” of critical literary analysis (Armbruster and Wallace 2).

Accepting this premise – that children’s literature can and does influence children’s values, including their values regarding the natural environment – in my first chapter I will read J.K. Rowling’s *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* alongside the canonical *Harry Potter* series to demonstrate how Rowling challenges Scamander’s academic discourse separating beast and being. In this chapter, I argue that *Fantastic Beasts* reflects and imitates real-life methods of zoological classification. Not only is it formatted as a textbook, lending it a sense of academic authority, it also explicitly calls the reader’s attention to real-world debates about animal classification in its introductory chapters and exemplifies several of the historical debates surrounding the human/animal divide. After establishing the question “What is a beast?” as one that affects both those in Rowling’s fictional universe and the reader’s own historical one, Rowling then sets up two divergent discourses on how to “properly” view the “beastly” – or nonhuman – world. By connecting *Fantastic Beasts* to *Harry Potter* through a series of “handwritten” annotations attributed to Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Rowling offers readers a chance to read the two texts as a dialogue regarding animal classification. On the one hand, she offers Scamander’s authoritative, academic attempts to create a firm divide between “beasts” and “beings,” while on the other she reminds the reader of Harry, Ron, and Hermione’s experiences with these creatures, challenging this official discourse and questioning an inflexible division between the human and nonhuman characters. What to make of this dismantled boundary, however, ultimately remains ambiguous; in other areas of her novels Rowling continues to maintain a desire for a division between beast and being, creating an ambivalent environmental ethic on the relationship between the human and animal kingdoms.

In the second chapter, I explore how this ambiguous boundary between the human and the nonhuman contributes to the novels’ complicated message about social and race relations. I

look specifically at several critics' arguments regarding the treatment of "part human" others in the series, particularly the house elves, centaurs, giants and goblins, and how an understanding of *Fantastic Beasts* and its relationship to the series complicates these arguments. Because there is such a diverse array of creatures in Rowling's universe, it is unclear which are "beings," and should be read as human characters, and which are "beasts," or animals, making J.K. Rowling's "social vision," as Elaine Ostry calls it, much more difficult to define. Finding a neat, one-to-one correlation between any one species within the text and our own socially defined races, as several critics have attempted, becomes nearly impossible when Rowling's complex and conflicted environmental ethic comes into consideration. For example, are the goblins, centaurs, house-elves, and the vast array of nonhuman others in the *Harry Potter* universe stereotyped and made inferior to their witch and wizard counterparts because of their unclear status as "beings," or because Rowling is racializing them, "replicating" racial ideologies, as suggested by Anatol? Or are these two aims somehow connected – because they are racialized, they are not clearly human, or vice versa? Are we dealing with ambiguous messages about human rights, or animal rights, or some amalgamation of the two? . In the end, I suggest that Rowling's apparent ambivalence towards issues of social equality arises primarily from the conflicted questions posed by her problematic human/animal divide. By bringing Rowling's treatment of the nonhuman into the discussion, finding a clearly defined answer to the above questions becomes, I argue, nigh impossible, resulting in an ambiguous (and sometimes frustrating) message about both social and environmental justice.

Chapter 1: “Magizology” and the Problems of Animal Classification

In 2001, for the U.K. charity Comic Relief, J.K. Rowling wrote two of Hogwarts’s required textbooks that had been mentioned several times throughout the *Harry Potter* series: *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *Quidditch through the Ages*. Each book is attributed to a fictional author, a scholar on the subject at hand, and contains scribbled notes from Harry, Ron, and Hermione offering commentary on these so-called “expert” opinions. *Fantastic Beast and Where to Find Them*, penned by Newt Scamander, is the textbook for the Care of Magical Creatures class, a subject that, through both their personal adventures and Hagrid’s questionable tutelage, our three protagonists have an intimate familiarity. Scamander adheres to “magizology,” the aim of which is to educate the children of the wizarding world about the various classifications of beasts, to “ensure that future generations of witches and wizards enjoy their strange beauty and powers as we have been privileged to do” (*Fantastic Beasts* xxi).

Fantastic Beasts attempts to answer the question, “which of these creatures is a ‘being’ – that is to say, a creature worthy of legal rights and a voice in the governance of the magical world – and which is a ‘beast’?” (*Fantastic Beasts* x). The task is not simply to decide how to best classify an imaginary animal kingdom; it is a question of how to decide what makes a particular organism rational, “worthy of legal rights” and governmental power, versus a simple “beast” or creature that can be possessed, traded, and controlled. Implied in the text is an additional question: who has, or should have, the power to establish such an important boundary between those who have rights and those who have none? As *Fantastic Beasts* reveals in its introductory essays about the history of magizology, any attempt to differentiate between beasts and beings can easily lead to power struggles and potentially oppressive practices towards those creatures ultimately deemed to be the legally inferior beasts.

In *Fantastic Beasts*, we see two divergent narratives regarding these questions: Scamander's official, academic voice that attempts to establish his own authority and seek a satisfactory boundary between beasts and beings, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione's personal notes challenging Scamander's definitions based on their own personal experiences. Throughout the text of both *Fantastic Beasts* and the *Harry Potter* series proper, Rowling links this debate to Euro-American historical attempts to differentiate between the human and nonhuman, a similarly problematic divide. When read side by side, Rowling's texts suggests that a "firm" boundary between the two – beast and being, human and animal – is impossible, although the political and social ramifications of this boundary collapse are ultimately unclear.

Although she creates a compendium of "fantastic," fictional creatures, Rowling, through Scamander, explicitly links *Fantastic Beasts* to Western academic discourse defining the natural world. In a section entitled "A Brief History of Muggle Awareness of Fantastic Beasts," Scamander states:

"Astonishing though it may seem to many wizards, Muggles have not always been ignorant of the magical and monstrous creatures that we have worked so long and hard to hide. A glance through Muggle art and literature of the Middle Ages reveals that many creatures now believed to be imaginary were then known to be real. The dragon, the griffin, the unicorn, the phoenix, the centaur – these and more are represented in the Muggle works of that period, though usually with almost comical inexactitude." (*Fantastic Beasts* xiv)

"Scamander" is, of course, referring to the medieval English *Bestiary*, a volume based on older, Latin systems of animal classification. According to Lisa Verner in *Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*, bestiaries functioned as a "teaching text," both for "religious

moral instruction” and for the “laymen curious about the natural world” (Verner 94). Because it presented both “the mundane and the monstrous” side by side and, according to Debra Hassig, because of its frequent mischaracterization of animal behaviors in the service of “religious allegory, political satire, and moral instruction,” the medieval bestiary is often disregarded by contemporary environmental scholars as a serious indicator of animal taxonomy during the period (Verner 93, Hassig xi). It is commonly viewed as a purely metaphorical text, a tool used for religious indoctrination, rather than as indicative of accepted truths about the natural world. However, as Verner demonstrates in her study of medieval hunting manuals, the bestiary was so influential that expert huntsmen relied on its “depictions of animal behaviors and qualities” when out on the hunt, even when experience taught them these descriptions were false: “the authority of the bestiary tradition surpassed the huntsman’s own firsthand experience” (Verner 95). In “Did Imaginary Animals Exist?” Pamela Gravestock additionally indicates that in these bestiaries “imaginary animals are given the same treatment – both pictorially and textually – as those animals that were known to exist” and fantastic or “monstrous” creatures were not classified separately (Gravestock 120). Instead, all animals were listed according to their similarity to known animals within the accepted categories: “exotics, domestics, birds, reptiles, and fishes” (Gravestock 124). The dragon, the griffin, the unicorn, the phoenix, and the centaur were placed alongside animals as mundane as dogs, cats, and fish, according to their apparent moral signification and “theological meaning” (Gravestock 131).²

² According to Gravestock, it is too simplistic to state that medieval readers did or did not believe in fantastic beasts. To suggest that they were merely mistaking “real” animals “denigrates the human imagination,” and makes little sense as animals such as the crocodile and elephant, which are listed mostly correctly, would seem as unreal to most English people in that time period as more monstrous creatures (131). Additionally, to suggest they simply believed in these creatures ignores the fact that much of their characteristics come from fables and fairy tales. She suggests that the truth lies somewhere in the middle, and that the important lesson to take away from the

The “comical inexactitude” of the bestiary, as Scamandar refers to it, arises from this tendency to describe the “brute creation” according to human values – moral attributes and theological allegories – that have little to do with actual animal behaviors (Thomas 52). Keith Thomas, in *Man and the Natural World*, criticizes real early modern naturalists for seeing the world from “an essentially human viewpoint,” defining – and valuing – beasts according to “their relationship to man” (Thomas 52). Bestiaries relied on a supposed “natural hierarchy” of beings, with “rational” man at the top and descending in “levels of perfection” from humanity downwards, that was based not in natural observation but religious doctrine and political ideology (Thomas 53). The white, European man was at the top of the great chain of “being,” and beasts were anything “less perfect” than this ideal (Thomas 54). The discovery that humans were, in reality, just another member of the animal kingdom with natural instincts of our own revealed the ridiculousness of the great chain of being, and the development of rational, detached natural observation demonstrated the existence of entire ecosystems that operated independently of human morals and concerns (Thomas 129). This detached observation also revealed that animals possessed “reason, intelligence, languages,” along with many other so-called “human” qualities, complicating earlier divisions of the human and nonhuman (Thomas 129).

By critiquing this real, historical system of classification alongside her fictional, magical system, Rowling invites readers to compare the two and question both. Scamander may mock early “Muggle” attempts to understand magical beasts as “comically inexact,” but Rowling mirrors this “comical inexactitude” in her discussion of the history of magical classification before Scamander. In *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, the problems Rowling creates for early magizology – a tendency to be too “wizard-centric” when defining the boundary

bestiary is that, for the medieval Englishmen, natural reality did not matter as much as the theological, moral, and symbolic meaning of the creatures being studied (Gravestock 131).

between rational beings and fantastic beasts – mirrors the “human centric” animal classification of the medieval and early modern period of British history. The early attempts in the magical world to differentiate “beast” from “being” are equally as misguided as works by medieval and early modern naturalists, and even Scamander, a character usually possessed of the utmost confidence in his field, calls them “extremely crude” (*Fantastic Beasts* x). *Fantastic Beasts* tells us that, in its early days, magizoology attempts to define “being” as anything that looks, talks, and walks like a human witch or wizard, and “beast” as everything else. Burdock Muldoon, “Chief of the Wizards’ council in the fourteenth century, decreed that any member of the magical community that walked on two legs would henceforth be granted the status of ‘being,’ all others to remain ‘beasts’”; this, however, excluded rational creatures such as the merpeople and centaurs, capable of governing themselves, from early conceptions of being (*Fantastic Beasts* x). Madame Elfrida Clagg’s later suggestion that any (and only) creatures that could speak “human language” would be considered a “being” also proves to be too simplistic: merpeople, whose speech patterns are far different than that of human witches and wizards, are still left out of parliamentary procedure, and trolls, capable of imitating human language but not comprehending it, violently disrupt government proceedings during this stage (*Fantastic Beasts* xii).

Fantastic Beasts in its “current” edition, like contemporary zoology, aims to escape such human-centered viewpoints, and to offer a more naturalistic definition of “beast.” Scamander suggests that “most of the magical community” has finally agreed upon an acceptable definition of beast and being: a being is “any creature that has sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and bear part in shaping those laws,” and a beast is any creature incapable of such rational thought and communication (*Fantastic Beasts* xii). This reflects attempts by contemporary philosophers and psychologists to define “humanness” as sentience:

the ability to “have a distinctive personality, have the capacity for tool use, and the ability to communicate with others” (Mitchell 210). On the surface the distinction appears as reasonable outside of Rowling’s fictional universe as within it

At this point in the text, Rowling has invited the reader to compare her magizoology with nonmagical, human zoology, and to see where, historically, animal classification has failed us. While readers might expect that these new, rational definitions of beast and being, human and nonhuman are the final answers to Scamander’s (and our) age-old question, “What is a beast? (or animal),” Rowling complicates this definition even further both within *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and the official series. Scamander is forced to admit at the end of his introduction that “the matter [of beast and being] has not rested here,” and that there is “continued uncertainty” regarding his delineation of the two groups (*Fantastic Beasts* xiii). This uncertainty has potential consequences far beyond the ability to accurately categorize the magizoological kingdom, affecting the rights and governmental power of the creatures in question. There are “extremists who campaign for the classification of Muggles, nonmagical humans, as ‘beasts’”; Acromantulas – giant, talking spiders – and Manticores – reptilian beasts with the head and brain of a man – are seen as “incapable of overcoming their own brutal natures” and denied ‘being’ status in spite of being “highly intelligent”; centaurs and merpeople have “refused ‘being’ status and requested to remain ‘beasts,’ dissatisfied with wizard rule and electing to govern themselves; and nobody is really sure what to do about werewolves, who, while dangerous ‘beasts’ in many ways, are decidedly human a vast majority of their existence (*Fantastic Beast* xiii). Rowling exemplifies Ross Mitchell’s point in “Making Meaning out of Human/Animal,” that, in a postmodern world where all meaning is a “fleeting concept,” even “human signification” – the answer to the question, “what does it mean to be human?” – is still

not easily answered (Mitchell 205). Lest this appear a mere fanciful notion from Rowling's fictional universe, Mitchell notes that legislators in the United States and Britain are currently struggling with the rights of animals who participate in central roles of human life and medicine – including stem cell research and in vitro fertilization – and in 2008, a group known as the Great Ape Project was able to acquire an official statement granting Great Apes limited human rights in the Spanish legislature (Mitchell 210). Similarly, in “Shifting Symbolic Boundaries: Cultural Strategies of the Animal Rights Movement,” Elizabeth Cherry asserts that the current animal rights movement is all about “boundary work,” dismantling and qualifying symbolic boundaries established between the human and animal (458). In the case of “companion animals,” such as pets, animal rights activists suggest that humans should view these creatures as “fellow sentient beings” worthy of legal consideration rather than as nonhuman others (Cherry 460). Rowling's blurring of the animal/human divide is clearly relevant to our contemporary political, cultural, and social imagination.

Rowling questions the boundaries between the human and nonhuman within *Fantastic Beasts* in two primary ways: textually, through her “handwritten” annotations from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and more broadly by creating a universe so complex that clear boundaries between sentient beings and creatures *cannot* easily exist. There are not simply “humans” and “animals” in the *Harry Potter* series: there are magical humans (witches and wizards), and nonmagical humans (Muggles); there are sentient, rational nonhumans (goblins, house-elves, centaurs, merpeople, etc.), and creatures who appear more obviously animal (hippogriffs, kneazles, doxies, etc.); and, lastly, there are creatures who do not appear to clearly fit into any of these categories (acromantulas, manticores, etc.). Scamander's attempts to neatly categorize this diverse array of creatures, and to legitimize their treatment as subhuman, are constantly

challenged within the series itself, a fact Rowling calls to her reader's attention by using the children's notes throughout *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

Rowling's hand-written annotations by Ron, Harry, and Hermione linking *Fantastic Beasts* with human-animal experiences in the novels lead us to reconsider the meaning of these encounters in their original contexts. Hippogriffs, for example, are described by Scamander as instinctual beasts, offering no recognition of rational individuality: there is no emotional or logical reason that "bowing shows good intentions" and that "if the hippogriff returns the greeting, it is safe to draw closer"; it is simply the hippogriff's animal instinct (*Fantastic Beasts* 21). Additionally, breeding and taming are recommended "only for experts," as the hippogriff is considered a somewhat dangerous beast. At this point, Rowling includes an annotation by "Harry," jokingly asking "has Hagrid *read* this book?" While this commentary is certainly intended to amuse, it does make us recall the scenes with Buckbeak in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, and Hagrid's treatment of him. Reading Hagrid's description of the hippogriff is quite different from Scamander's:

"Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud," said Hagrid. "Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don't never insult one, 'cause it might be the last thing you do."

Then, later:

"Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff to make the firs' move," Hagrid continued. "It's polite, see?" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 114-115).

Whereas Scamander describes the hippogriff in a detached, clinical fashion, Hagrid describes them as having feelings – namely, pride – and social customs, as well as the ability to discern insults from respect. While we could write this off based on Hagrid's propensity to

anthropomorphize his pets, further descriptions of Buckbeak in the novels confirm Hagrid's characterization. Buckbeak respects Harry, Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, and Sirius, because they offer him kindness and respect, and he even becomes a loyal friend to them throughout the series, helping to free Sirius from wrongful imprisonment and remaining by his side while he is a fugitive; he attacks Draco, however, whose insults and arrogant personality offend him.

It is important to note that Buckbeak *does* initially bow to Draco, allowing the boy to interact with him based on the hippogriff's established social ritual – it is specifically Draco's epithet, “you great ugly brute,” that prompts Buckbeak's attack, suggesting the ability to comprehend human speech. Buckbeak (and other hippogriffs) possess some level of discernment, determining if they want to be approached or not and by whom, and possess enough rationality to communicate, albeit in a limited way, with their human companions. Also, it appears that as long as the hippogriff receives the respect it believes it is due, no “expert” is necessary for taming or training it, in spite of Scamander's claim; apart from Draco, the rest of Hagrid's class of thirteen-year-olds is perfectly capable of interacting with the creature appropriately, and Harry flies safely on Buckbeak's back mere moments after they meet, armed only with Hagrid's short instructions (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 115). This calls into question the so-called “objectivity” of animal classification, as lived experience challenges the accepted zoological depiction of the hippogriff; even though Scamander's work is based on “many years' travel and research” and “objective observation,” his intellectual depictions of the creature do not match Harry, Ron, and Hermione's extensive experiences with the hippogriff. Buckbeak also problematizes the divide between beast and being more generally. Based on these experiences, the hippogriff seems to be possessed of a rationality and personality that the official definition of

“beast” would deny them, throwing into sharp relief the injustice of Buckbeak’s trial and near-execution.

Buckbeak’s classification as a beast marks him as a creature not “worthy of legal rights,” allowing Draco and his father to unfairly, and successfully, persecute him in the magical courts before the “Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 218). Hagrid swears that the committee “has it in for interestin’ creatures,” and suspects that the meeting will turn out badly from the beginning, even though the children confirm that “Buckbeak isn’t a bad hippogriff” and “there didn’t seem to be any particular harm” in the creature (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 219). Hagrid and the three protagonists spend all of the Christmas holiday mounting Buckbeak’s defense, but in the end it is fruitless and he is sentenced for execution: “‘Malfoy’s dad frightened the Committee into it,’ said Hermione, wiping her eyes. ‘You know what he’s like. They’re a bunch of dodderly old fools, and they were scared’” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 292). To the “dodderly old fools” on the Committee, Buckbeak’s life is worth less than Lucius Malfoy’s money and influence, and they do not even consider the facts of the case; it does not matter that Draco is not seriously injured by the hippogriff, nor that Draco is directly responsible for the confrontation, only that Buckbeak is a mere beast, easily “disposed.” Because beasts, like animals, are classified as “outside the moral community,” they are not allotted legal representation, and little consideration is given to their welfare beyond Hagrid, Harry, Ron, and Hermione (Mitchell 209).

Rowling emphasizes the injustice of the ruling through the children’s reactions to it: Harry’s “mind had gone blank with shock,” Ron is “paper-white” and Hermione “swayed on the spot” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 331, 332). She also suggests that Buckbeak’s life is as morally significant as Sirius Black; when Dumbledore sends Harry and Hermione back in time to prevent

Sirius's execution, he implies that they should save Buckbeak as well: "If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 393). Just as the characters refute Scamander's academic authority in treatment of the hippogriff, they refute the authority of the Ministry to deny Buckbeak's legal right to a fair trial, stealing him from under the Minister of Magic's nose even though "they know the law"; it is implied that doing what is morally right outweighs following the letter of the law (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 393). Buckbeak ultimately becomes a fugitive with Sirius Black, having no legal recourse available to appeal the decision.

Other creatures in Rowling's universe more obviously blur the boundary between human and animal, and cause the reader to question discursive practices that deny rights to such intelligent creatures. Scamander initially labels the werewolf a beast, with a Ministry of Magic Classification of XXXXX indicating it as a "known wizard killer impossible to train or domesticate" (*Fantastic Beasts* 41, xxii). He defines a werewolf as an "otherwise sane and normal wizard or Muggle" that "transforms into a murderous beast ... actively seeking out humans in preference to any other kind of prey" (*Fantastic Beasts* 41). Scamander, however, admits the controversial nature of this particular classification: he is careful to state in a footnote that only "in its transformed state" is a werewolf considered a beast, causing werewolves to "be shunted between the Beast and Being divisions [of the Ministry for Magic] for many years" (*Fantastic Beasts* 41, xiii). As with Buckbeak, readers of the Harry Potter series see how this problematic classification leads to real miscarriages of justice. Through a note by Harry above the "werewolf" entry, "Werewolves are not all bad," Rowling reminds her readers of Harry's teacher and friend, Remus Lupin, and of the social and political oppression he must endure due to his condition (*Fantastic Beasts* 41). Remus Lupin is portrayed as heroic: when we first

encounter him in the novels, he saves Harry and his classmates from several dementors who have boarded the Hogwarts Express, and throughout the series he puts his life in danger to fight Voldemort alongside the Order of the Phoenix. Additionally, he is described as a mild-mannered, even-tempered, and patient man, traits that lead Harry to assert that Lupin is “the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we’ve ever had” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 424). We also learn through Lupin’s history that it is possible to control the effects of the werewolf bite by ingesting Wolfsbane potion, a concoction that “makes him safe” during the full moon: “I keep my mind when I transform. . . . I am able to curl up in my office, a harmless wolf, and wait for the moon to wane again” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 353).

In spite of his kind nature and willingness to control the wolf, Professor Lupin is constantly discriminated against in the magical world, forced to occupy a lower socio-economic class due to his classification as a dangerous “beast.” He is first described as haggard and graying in spite of his youth, signs of poor health and nutrition, and dressed in “an extremely shabby set of wizard’s robes that had been darned in several places” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 74). Lupin later reveals that his unhealthy, “shabby” appearance is because he has never been able to find gainful employment with his condition: “I have been shunned all my adult life, unable to find paid work because of what I am” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 356). The ending of *Prisoner of Azkaban* reveals that this attitude is still prevalent in the wizarding community; once Lupin’s condition as a werewolf is revealed, parents do not want “a werewolf teaching their children,” despite his wonderful abilities in the classroom (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 423). In *Order of the Phoenix* Sirius reveals that Dolores Umbridge “drafted a bit of anti-werewolf legislation that makes it almost impossible for [Lupin] to get a job,” and Harry indicates that Lupin looks “much shabbier” since losing his job at Hogwarts (*Order of the Phoenix* 302). Although werewolves in

uncontrolled wolf form are certainly dangerous – when Lupin is unable to take his Wolfsbane in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, he attempts to attack Harry, Ron, and Hermione – Rowling makes it clear to her readers that it *is* a controllable condition, and that Lupin’s mistreatment derives more from prejudice than from the actual danger. People like Dolores Umbridge “loathe part-humans,” discriminating against any creature that straddles the boundary between beast and being. Umbridge and her ilk are also reported to “persecute” merpeople and centaurs, who are also classified as “beasts” by Scamander and the Ministry, simply because they are “scared of them” (*Order of the Phoenix* 303).

Rowling questions the legitimacy of this social injustice, demonstrating how even supposedly dangerous “beasts” possess an element of humanity. Through Harry’s indignation regarding Lupin’s treatment in society, and through Scamander’s indication that these particular classifications of “part-humans” as “beasts” are not readily agreed upon within the magical community, the reader begins to understand the ramifications of classifying a particular creature as a “beast,” unworthy of legal rights. Buckbeak is nearly killed because of it, and the heroic Lupin is unable to care for himself, and later his family, because of society’s prejudice. The reader readily accepts this challenge to the authority of Scamander’s definitions because of the “humanity” of the creatures involved, and the sympathy afforded them by the trustworthy protagonists, Harry, Ron, and Hermione: Buckbeak is a loyal friend and guardian, and Lupin courageously fights alongside the heroes of the novel. We are more than willing to question a system of classification that allows for the maltreatment of these laudable figures.

At this point, it might be possible to assume that Rowling, like the animal rights activists discussed by Cherry and Mitchell, is throwing out any clear signification of “human” and dismantling the remaining symbolic boundaries that have been established between beasts and

beings. There are noble characters who challenge Scamander's assertions that beasts are incapable of the same rational thought and emotional attachment possessed by humankind and are dangerously incapable of controlling base, animal urges. In several other places, however, Rowling's text maintains a desire to reassert a boundary between "intelligent" beasts and witches and wizards, attempting to place the former firmly in the "animal" category. Two particular creatures labeled "beasts" especially reveal the series' underlying anxiety about the human/animal divide: Aragog, the acromantula in *Chamber of Secrets*, and the figure of the snake.

The acromantula is unproblematically categorized as a beast by all parties involved in Rowling's universe. Scamander describes the acromantula as a "monstrous eight-eyed spider capable of human speech," bred simply to "guard wizard dwellings or treasure" and "incapable of overcoming its own brutal nature" in spite of possessing "*near*-human intelligence" (emphasis mine, *Fantastic Beasts* 1, xiii). As I read Aragog, however, his "intelligence" is not less than Harry, Ron, or Hagrid's, as the "*near*" implies. Aragog is not merely "capable of human speech," but possesses memories, relationships, and friendships, just like all of our human characters. He remembers everything from his past, saying "I remember it well" when looking back fondly on his time with Hagrid, and reciprocates Hagrid's friendship out of respect and gratitude: "It would have been my instinct," Aragog says, "but out of respect for Hagrid, I never harmed a human" (*Chamber of Secrets* 278). He understands wizarding law enough to know that Hagrid's punishment for supposedly opening the *Chamber of Secrets* was unfair, and recognizes the necessity of staying in hiding: "Hagrid protected me," he acknowledges (*Chamber of Secrets* 278). He is also capable of familial love and affection, as evidenced in his reference to his "wife," Mosag, and their "family" (*Chamber of Secrets* 278). These abilities at communication

and apparent rational thought are not limited to Aragog either – we see his children speaking in a similar manner when they bring Ron and Harry to the clearing.

Based on this evidence, it would appear that the acromantula possesses “sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community,” meaning it *should*, legally, be a “being.” Why, then, is the acromantula considered a “beast”? One might assume it is due to its “highly dangerous” nature to “wizard and muggle alike,” as Scamander puts it. Although Aragog undoubtedly endangers Harry and Ron’s lives by offering them up to his children, it is not due to any lack of rational ability: Aragog simply “cannot deny [his children] fresh meat, when it wanders so willingly into our midst,” suggesting that, although he acknowledges Harry and Ron as “friends of Hagrid,” he values the importance of feeding his family more, which could be viewed as a rational decision (*Chamber of Secrets* 279). Additionally, Aragog shows the ability to suppress this violent side, to “overcome his brutal nature,” demonstrating respect for humankind in his relationship with Hagrid, overcoming his “instinct” to harm due to his gratitude and his acknowledgement of Hagrid’s status as a “friend” (*Chamber of Secrets* 278-9). It seems that it should theoretically be possible for some sort of peace to exist between wizardkind and the acromantula based on mutual respect and reciprocity, so, *why doesn’t there?*

I believe that there are two reasons for Aragog and his brethren’s consignment to the category of “beast.” Firstly, in spite of Scamander’s insistence that “appearance does not matter,” the fact remains that the acromantula is, as Harry and Ron say, “a big hairy thing with too many legs” (*Fantastic Beasts* i). Because of its horrific appearance, Harry, Ron, Scamander, and, I would argue, Rowling and most of her readers, feel that the acromantula simply *cannot* be fully capable of participating in a legal society; people often resort to morphology, a perceived “genetic similarity,” when defining the human versus the animal and determining how rights and

privileges should be assigned (Mitchell 209). Related to this reliance on appearance is a reluctance to let go of an objective definition of what it means to be human, and to relinquish the place that this ideal humanity holds at the top of the social hierarchy. Rowling's characters, including Scamander, fall into the trap identified by Keith Thomas: seeing the animals around them "from an essentially human viewpoint," classifying them "according to their relationship to man" rather than according to any intrinsic value (Thomas 52).

Rowling's portrayal of snakes is from a similar "human viewpoint," in this case specifically recalling the "comical inexactitude" of the medieval bestiary by assigning moral significance to species. Although not discussed in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, snakes feature heavily in the *Harry Potter* series due to Harry's abilities as a Parseltongue, a wizard who can converse with snakes. On the one hand, Harry's rare ability reveals that snakes, in spite of being defined by both wizard- and humankind alike as distinctly animal, are capable of rational thought and conversation. Towards the beginning of *The Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry speaks with a boa constrictor at the zoo that, upon being released from its prison, thanks Harry for his help: "Brazil here I come. . . . Thanksss, amigo" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 28). Additionally, in *The Chamber of Secrets* Harry is able to hear the voice of the basilisk as it travels through Hogwarts's walls, and Rowling frequently depicts Lord Voldemort, who is also a Parseltongue, holding conversations with his pet snake, Nagini. Much like the acromantula, however, snakes are generally depicted as wholly "beast" or animal in spite of these rational abilities, and are furthermore closely aligned with Lord Voldemort and the "evil" side of the wizarding war.

In spite of Scamander's apparent assertion of the bestiary's ridiculous nature, and Rowling's continual challenge of human-centered, classical systems of animal classification, the *Harry Potter* series follows this iconography quite closely when it comes to the figure of the

snake. In the medieval bestiary, snakes “assume an extremely negative role in stories of other animals that identify snakes as symbols of evil and of the devil,” relying on religious iconography that depicted Satan, the “ultimate evil,” as a snake in the Garden of Eden (Wheatcraft 146). In spite of the novel’s frequent assertions that there is nothing *inherently* wrong with being a Parseltongue (Harry, our protagonist, is, after all, capable of speaking with snakes), nothing *inherently* evil about Slytherin House (Professors Slughorn and Snape of Slytherin House appear to be heroic figures by the series’ end), Rowling frequently reasserts the duplicitous, evil nature of the snake with this imagery. One particular adversary of the snake in medieval texts was, interestingly, the stag, thought to represent virtue (Wheatcraft 147); Harry’s patronus is, of course, a stag, which is also his father’s animagus form, and Harry constantly faces off against snakes and snake-like enemies. His first serpentine opponent is the basilisk in *The Chamber of Secrets*, who, unlike the friendly snake in *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, seems only capable of serving an evil master in the form of Tom Riddle; its only “dialogue” is the repeated phrase, “Come ... come to me ... Let me rip you Let me tear you Let me kill you” (*Chamber of Secrets* 120). Slytherin House is, additionally, closely associated with the snake, and is concordantly pitted against Harry throughout the novels: Lord Voldemort is a Slytherin alum, Slytherin is Gryffindor’s arch rival in every Hogwarts event, and it is the house of Harry’s schoolyard nemesis, Draco Malfoy (another name associated with the medieval serpent).³ Nagini, Lord Voldemort’s pet snake, appears to be a ready and loyal servant to her master, nearly killing Harry, Ron, and Hermione at several points in *The Deathly Hallows*. Finally, Lord Voldemort himself appears in the very first novel as “snake-like”: “Harry would have screamed,

³ From Wilma George and Brunson Yapp’s *The Naming of the Beasts*: “*Draco* is usually translated dragon, but few English words have been as much misused ... In the bestiaries *draco* is a species of serpent...” (200).

but he couldn't make a sound. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake" (*The Sorcerer's Stone* 293).

There are two messages here at odds with one another. On the one hand, Rowling's depictions of creatures like Buckbeak, and other intelligent pets like Hermione's cat Crookshanks and the thestrals, undermine a firm line between beast and being and advocate for a more progressive view of animal intelligence and rationality. On the other hand, Aragog, a rational being of "monstrous" appearance, is still firmly placed within the category of beast, *both* according to Harry, Ron, and Hermione based on their experience *and* according to the academic discourse. Additionally, the figure of the snake, and the majority of actual snakes that appear in the novels, are easily classified as beasts, largely because they are implied to be "naturally" evil and deceptive. Beasts like Buckbeak are valued because their apparent intelligence allows them to better serve their human masters: they possess a willingness to aid the beings – witches and wizards like Ron, Harry, and Hermione. It is not so far-fetched that people think that pets may be more like us than we originally thought, because pets, whether it is the fictional Buckbeak or our own dogs and cats, are more than happy to obey our commands. Creatures like Aragog, however, who appear to be frighteningly different than the human ideal and also *don't* serve human masters, who are "untrainable," are rejected as feral and dangerous and forced to the fringes of society, with all of the other "evil" animals that are meant to be feared and hated. Readers no longer have a clear idea of what it means to be a "being" versus a "beast": Scamander's ideas are obviously flawed, but a consistent alternative is not presented.

Chapter 2: “Part-humans” and Social Justice

Rowling’s environmental ethic toward the animal, nonhuman world is complex: *Harry Potter* appears in one moment to dismantle the boundaries between beings and beasts through Rowling’s challenges to the academic discourse presented in Scamander’s text and the counter narrative provided in the margins. However, “vicious” creatures like Aragog and snakes remain consistently classified and stereotyped according to seemingly natural, uncontrollable characteristics of their dispositions. The dividing line between beast and being, and how witches and wizards should view and treat the former, is ultimately unclear: while Rowling seems more than happy to suggest that beasts like Buckbeak are more rational than generally given credit, in other places the dangerous, animal nature of untamable, uncontrollable creatures is constantly reaffirmed, and it is unclear what rights and responsibilities are owed to either. Buckbeak still functions as a pet or servant, and the acromantulas and snakes are adversaries to be fought against.

The matter becomes more ambiguous when one reconsiders what Sirius Black refers to as “part-humans,” which, for the purposes of this chapter, include the centaurs, house-elves, giants, and goblins (*Order of the Phoenix* 303). I believe that Rowling’s ambiguous classification of beast and being results in what Elaine Ostry calls an “ambiguous social vision” toward these “part-human” characters, “wavering” between “protest and acquiescence” of racism (Ostry 98, Anatol, “Replication” 109). Ostry identifies Rowling’s use of generic elements of the “fairy tale” as the reason for this ambivalence, as fairy tales necessarily rely on a certain level of conservatism when delivering morals (Ostry 100), whereas Giselle Anatol cites “Victorian racial ideology” and “racialized imperialist tropes” as the source of Rowling’s “inconsistent” racial vision (Anatol, “Replication” 109). While Ostry and Anatol both provide viable explanations, I

argue that it is Rowling's confused treatment of the human/nonhuman divide that complicates and, occasionally, undermines her explicitly antiracist message. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin indicate in their introduction to "Zoocriticism and the Postcolonial," racism is "imbricated with discourses of speciesism" (Huggan and Tiffin 135); the label "animal" is often used to justify the domination and oppression of the social Other. Because these discourses are so closely related, and because in *Harry Potter* it is unclear in many cases whether a character functions as an animal or human figure, this inequality is amplified.

There is a tendency in essays analyzing the social and racial conditions depicted in the *Harry Potter* series to assign racial, ethnic, or cultural identities to Rowling's part-human or humanoid characters. There is no doubt that, to some extent, these part-humans are racialized, as Elaine Ostry identifies: the giants are depicted as "tribal" savages and called "great hairy morons" by the novels' more despicable characters like Draco Malfoy, the goblins have "swarthy, clever faces" and Dobby the enslaved house-elf is depicted as having an "ugly brown face" (Ostry 95). Anatol additionally points out the similarities between Rowling's representation of the giants and Victorian imperial representations of indigenous tribesmen, and the centaurs' similarity to early British stereotypes of Native Americans (Anatol, "Replication" 118). Rowling's attitudes towards these characters is certainly ambivalent at best: while, as Brycchan Carey points out in his essay "Hermione and the House-elves Revisited," Rowling has an explicitly anti-racist, anti-slavery message in her novels, any "move to direct action ... peters out" by the end of the series ("Revisited" 160). Ostry indicates that Hagrid's naïveté and poor decision-making skills cause the reader to wonder if he "deserves his lower status," and Anatol notes that "sympathetic" characters like Harry and Ron still fall into the trap of stereotyping,

viewing the giants and centaurs as “savage,” the house-elves as born servants, and the goblins as naturally duplicitous. (Ostry 96, Anatol, “Replication” 117).

One image that Anatol draws attention to in support of this argument is the Fountain of Magical Brethren in the Ministry of Magic: “Harry observes that the centaur, goblin, house-elf, and witch are all ‘grouped around’ a wizard, who stands taller than the rest, and the expressions on the faces of the nonhuman beings are ‘adoring’” (Anatol, “Replication” 113). Certainly a provocative image from *The Order of the Phoenix*, according to Anatol it reveals the “hierarchy of power” within the wizarding world, with the tall wizard claiming the position of authority (Anatol, “Replication” 113). One important fact that is not fully considered in any of the three arguments regarding this hierarchy, however, centers on one word mentioned by Anatol here: the issue that the goblins, centaurs, and house-elves are all “nonhuman.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, Rowling gives us a complicated universe in the *Harry Potter* series, and with the house-elves, goblins, and centaurs we are not simply dealing with different races of “humans,” or with clearly separate categories of “human” and “animal.” Instead, these creatures fall somewhere in the middle of Rowling’s scale of “beast” and “being.” As nonhuman creatures with humanlike attributes, their equality, or inequality, to the human witches and wizards is based on factors both social and environmental. Revisiting these accusations of implicit racism at worst, ambivalence at best, then, when considering my own argument regarding Rowling’s problematic beast/being, human/animal dichotomies, results in a complication of any reading of this statue, and the series more generally, as racial allegory.

Harry first sees the Fountain of Magical Brethren on the way to his expulsion hearing in *Order of the Phoenix*, but he encounters it a second time as he leaves the Ministry of Magic that

same day. Upon further reflection, Harry decides that he does not quite approve of the statue's message:

He looked up into the handsome wizard's face, but up close, Harry thought he looked rather weak and foolish. The witch was wearing a vapid smile like a beauty contestant, and from what Harry knew of goblins and centaurs, they were most unlikely to be caught staring this soporily at humans of any description. Only the house-elf's attitude of creeping servility looked convincing. (*Order of the Phoenix* 156).

Several things occur in this brief passage: Harry disputes the ultimate authority of the “weak” and “vapid” witch and wizard, acknowledges the agency and pride of the part-human goblins and centaurs, yet still asserts that they are not “humans,” and notes that the house-elves are, unfortunately, accurately depicted. Notably, the giants are left out of the league of “magical brethren” altogether. This moment perfectly encapsulates Rowling's attitudes that have been illustrated by Anatol, Ostry, and Carey, and by me in the first chapter. In the same instance, Harry is dismantling and reaffirming the boundaries between the human witches and wizards and their nonhuman companions. By focusing on the “nonhuman” facet of this equation, however, we begin to see that the reasons for Harry's – and, perhaps by extension, Rowling's – ambivalence cannot be easily attributed *only* to racial ideology.

Each of the nonhuman creatures included in the fountain, as well as the giants, are viewed by Scamander and the primary characters as lying somewhere between beast and being throughout Rowling's texts, as part-human characters. The centaur is the most obviously part-human, part-animal creature in the series, with “a human head, torso, and arms joined to a horse's body” and classified as a beast in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (*Fantastic*

Beasts 6). Anatol takes issue with this classification, the tendency of Hagrid to refer to the centaurs as “creatures” rather than “beings,” and additionally points out the stereotype of the “indigenous person” living “in harmony with the natural landscape of the Forbidden Forest,” carrying only bows and arrows (Anatol, “Replication” 118). While these racial tropes are definitely present, the centaurs’ close identification with the natural environment is not purely an issue of race. Scamander is careful to indicate that “being intelligent and capable of speech, [the centaur] should not strictly speaking be termed a beast, but *by its own request* it has been classified as such,” and that its XXXX Ministry of Magic classification is not because the centaur is “unduly aggressive, but because it should be treated with great respect” (*Fantastic Beasts* 6). A footnote in the introduction of Scamander’s textbook clarifies the unusual nature of this request: in spite of being offered “being” status by the Ministry, the centaurs choose to “manage their own affairs separately from wizards” because of their “objection to some of the creatures with whom they were asked to share ‘being’ status, such as hags and vampires” (*Fantastic Beasts* xiii). There are two implications of this refusal to join wizarding society: it is still in accordance with Anatol’s argument, stereotyping the centaur as the “proud Indian brave”, but also suggests a positive valuation of the nonhuman as equal, perhaps even superior, to the human (Anatol, “Replication” 118).

The centaurs’ choice to specifically be labeled a beast is unique among part-humans: giants also maintain their own affairs separately from the Ministry of Magic, but they are not classified as beasts by Scamander or the government. Centaurs ask to be viewed simultaneously as a “herd,” as wild and close to nature, and as “a race” or “a people,” suggesting that there need not be a distinction between the two states of being (*Order of the Phoenix* 601, 756). The centaurs actively support the notion that a beast can be as rational and independent as any being.

Instead of relying on human, witch-and-wizard technology like wands or crystal balls to do magic, the centaur relies on the tools offered by nature, “watching the skies” and “observing the burning of certain herbs and leaves” to predict the future (*Order of the Phoenix* 603). Firenze, a centaur who briefly acts as Hogwarts’ divination instructor, even emphasizes the superiority of this spiritual connection to the environment over human magic, referring to Sybill Trelawney’s efforts at divination as “human nonsense”; he asserts that “tiny human accidents” are of “no more significance than the scurrying of ants to the wide universe,” and advocates a more global, cosmic worldview (*Order of the Phoenix* 603). In spite of their human upper half, their appearance and behavior remain largely animal: they “neigh” in laughter, “paw” the ground with their hooves, “stampede” and “thunder” through the forest (*Order of the Phoenix* 755). They are not merely “pretty talking horses,” however, refusing to “recognize [wizard] laws” or to “stand wizard invasions and insults” (*Order of the Phoenix* 757). Even Firenze, who is more willing to interact with witches and wizards than the rest of his herd, warns the students that, in spite of their similarity in appearance to pets and work animals like the hippogriffs and thestrals, centaurs are “not the servants or playthings of humans” (*Order of the Phoenix* 757). In many ways, then, the centaur is a highly subversive figure, bridging the gap between beast and being in both appearance and behavior, exposing the political, artificial nature of Scamander’s classification process by electing to step outside of it. However, as Anatol and Ostry indicate, many of these same characteristics – pride, isolationism, closeness to nature – are negatively attributed to indigenous people in Western stereotypes. The centaurs’ rhetoric, bemoaning the “arrogance of [wizard] kind” and asserting their noble status as “an ancient people” certainly “oozes with the language of the ‘proud Indian brave,’” and their use of the bow and arrow calls this same imagery to mind (Anatol, “Replication” 118).

It is possible that Rowling engages here in the discursive practice identified by Huggan and Tiffin: animalizing the centaurs in order to affirm their “racial” inferiority. However, as Anatol indicates, Firenze is portrayed as a “self-possessed subject” who “resists having himself or his culture appropriated and manipulated by those in social power,” rather than as a creature of inferior rank to witches and wizards (Anatol, “Replication” 119). Bigotry against the centaur is primarily associated with villainous characters: the Death Eaters “called insults at the centaurs” as they make their way through the Forbidden Forest at the end of *Deathly Hallows*, and Dolores Umbridge demeans them as “half-breeds” of “near-human intelligence” (*Deathly Hallows* 728, *Order of the Phoenix* 756). At the same time, their animalism is occasionally emphasized in a degrading manner by sympathetic characters as well: Trelawney generally calls Firenze “the horse” or “the nag” in an effort to undermine his authority, and Hagrid refers to the entire herd as a “cowardly bunch o’ nags” for refusing to take sides in the battle against Voldemort (*Order of the Phoenix* 426, *Deathly Hallows* 728). It is unclear what to make of the centaurs’ ambiguous social status: their decision to reject the superiority of the category of “being” and to form their own society in the wilderness can be seen as an affirmation of the value of the nonhuman if they are read as intelligent, animal characters asserting their individual freedom, or they may conversely be interpreted as an exemplification of damaging racial stereotypes if read as a representation of the isolationist, angry pride often associated with indigenous people by white imperialists. There is no neat way to reconcile these two possibilities; through the centaurs Rowling somehow manages to both challenge philosophical doctrines that devalue the nonhuman and reaffirm imperial ideologies that segregate the racial Other.

The connection between othering and animalization becomes even more difficult to define when looking at nonhuman creatures not officially classified as beasts in the textbook but often treated as inferior to other “beings” within the narrative itself. The house-elves are a prime example of such creatures, not included in Scamander’s anthology of fantastic beasts but still excluded from participating in the magical government and only offered limited legal rights. Ostry demonstrates the racialization of these beings: Dobby is described as having an “ugly brown face” and a “wide toothy grin,” and it is impossible to ignore the fact that the elves are depicted as slaves (Ostry 95). Although Hermione is outspoken against house-elf slavery and we have at least one example of a house-elf, Dobby, unhappy with his social position, on the whole the anti-slavery campaign is not taken seriously. Especially problematic to Ostry is the fact that the “house-elves like their position,” and are described by Ron as “enjoying” getting “bossed around”; even Dobby, who wishes to escape his enslavement to the Malfoys, follows Harry with “slavish adoration” after he is freed and will only work for Dumbledore for “one Galleon a week and one day off a month,” liking work “much better” than freedom (Ostry 96, *Goblet of Fire* 379). Ostry also criticizes the portrayal of Dobby and the other house-elves as servile and infantile, historical “white” imagery used to “depersonalize” African Americans (Ostry 96). In many ways this is reminiscent of “attitudes historically attributed to slaves,” and could be read as a recapitulation of the image of “the happy slave devoted to their masters,” utilized in white depictions of the South to justify the oppression of African Americans (Ostry 96).

These stereotypes are troubling, but when one remembers that the house-elves are not, in fact, human, other possible reasons for their innate cheeriness and servile temperament present themselves. As with the centaur, it is unclear whether the house-elf is a being or a beast and, therefore, whether it can be read as completely analogous to a human counterpart. In terms of

appearance, Dobby and Winky are both described in animal terms, as having “bat-like” ears, a diminutive stature, “bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls” and “wide eyes the size of plates,” reminding the reader of an insect or amphibian (*Chamber of Secrets* 12; *Goblet of Fire* 97). Additionally, the house-elves, like other creatures that can be classified as beasts, seem to share a uniform disposition grounded almost completely in instinct: they all enjoy servitude, but they are not simply loyal to their masters. House-elves are magically bound, presumably from birth, to the witches and wizards who own them and *must* obey their orders; they are largely incapable of enacting free will. Kreacher, Sirius’s house-elf, literally “lives to serve the noble house of Black” and is “forced to do [Sirius’s] bidding” even though he hates Sirius, and Dobby feels a biological imperative to injure himself whenever he attempts to disobey the Malfoys, requiring Harry to physically restrain him in order to stop: “Dobby leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the window, shouting ‘*Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!*’ . . . Harry hissed, springing up and pulling Dobby back onto the bed” (*Order of the Phoenix* 109, 832 *Chamber of Secrets* 14).

Because Rowling does not neatly align the house-elves with beings, beasts, or humans, it is reasonable to read them not as humanoid servants, but like Buckbeak or Crookshanks, as loyal but intelligent animal companions deserving of our respect. Even if Hermione’s anti-slavery campaign is ultimately ridiculed and the “house-elves remain in bondage”, Dumbledore admonishes Harry that even a house-elf as unpleasant as Kreacher “must be treated with kindness and respect,” as they have “feelings as acute as a human’s” (Carey 160, *Order of the Phoenix* 832). As trusted protagonists, Dumbledore and Hermione’s sympathy for the house-elves leads the reader to understand that “the welfare of [house-elves] and all oppressed groups in the wizarding world is of central concern to a free and equitable society” in spite of their

continued servitude at series' end ("Hermione and the House-Elves" 172). This distinction between "slave" and "pet" is of course problematic, because the house-elves possess similarities *both* to racial stereotypes and traits associated with docile beasts. Is the implication, even if made unintentionally, the somewhat horrifying one that slaves are inherently obedient to their masters, or is Rowling offering us a glimpse into the inner workings of the mind of a pet and encouraging us to treat such beasts with more dignity? Neither the series itself nor Scamander's supplementary text offers an obvious answer to this question.

Goblins, the last of the part-humans included in the Fountain of Magical Brethren, are nearly the closest thing to humans in appearance and intelligence. The physical features that set goblins apart from the witches and wizards cannot really be called "beastly" in Scamander's terms: they are described as short with "slanting black eyes," a "domed head, far larger than a human's" and "long, thin fingers," lending them an unusual appearance compared to the other human characters, but not necessarily an animalized one (*Deathly Hallows* 486, 466). Their behavior, however, is reminiscent of a beast: they eat "raw meat, roots, and various fungi," and, like the house-elves and the magical creatures described in *Fantastic Beasts*, the inherent nature of goblins can be "summed up" in a few neat paragraphs (*Deathly Hallows* 516). Bill tells Harry that the goblins are a "different breed of being," the word "breed" contradicting their status as "beings", and describes them as greedy and obsessed with ownership: "I would be very careful what you promise to goblins...it would be less dangerous to break into Gringotts than to renege on a promise to a goblin" (*Deathly Hallows* 517). Griphook confirms Bill's characterization at nearly every turn; Harry fears Griphook for being a creature that is "unexpectedly bloodthirsty," who "laughed at the idea of pain in lesser creatures, and seemed to relish the possibility that they might have to hurt other wizards to reach the Lestrangle's vault" (*Deathly Hallows* 509, 510).

Griphook ultimately betrays Harry, Ron, and Hermione, stealing the sword of Gryffindor just as Bill predicted he would do. Such behavior is not limited to Griphook: Scamander informs readers that the goblins tried to undermine early attempts to define beast and being by training trolls to disrupt the meetings of the Wizengamot for no apparent reason (*Fantastic Beasts* xii). All goblins are thoroughly “classifiable,” consistently conniving, inhuman creatures that are “bred” differently, and behave differently, than other beings; like snakes, Rowling portrays them as being inherently deceptive and dangerous. Anatol draws parallels between the goblins’ odd appearance and behavior and British characterizations of the “mysterious Orient”;⁴ I would add that the goblins’ threatening and “beastly” nature further sets them apart from witches and wizards as a “fascinating, exotic Other,” “subhumans” that are “unassimilable” into human, or “being,” society (Anatol, “Replication” 120, 122).

While all of the members of the “magical brethren” are ambiguously labeled in Rowling’s universe, the humanity of the giants is perhaps the most ambivalent, disquieting issue addressed in the novels. Although more independent than the house-elves – giants, like centaurs, choose to govern themselves outside of Ministry rule – the giants are still not clearly defined as beings, left off of the Fountain of Magical Brethren entirely (*Order of the Phoenix* 426). In many ways the giants actually appear quite “beastly”: not only are full-blood giants monstrously huge, they have “skin like rhino hide” and are “the weight of a couple o’ bull elephants” (*Order of the Phoenix* 427). Even Hagrid, who is half-giant, half-wizard, is described as having an unkempt, animalistic appearance, with a “shaggy mane of hair,” a “wild” beard, and eyes “glinting like

⁴ Anatol describes how the “anxiety of witches and wizards in regards to goblins,” their deceit and “sneakiness,” can “easily” be seen to parallel “Western fears of Asian takeovers, especially in the United States,” where, in the “late twentieth century anxieties about Asians bumping White Americans out of their valedictory and prestigious college spots raged” (“Replication” 121).

black beetles” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 46). The giants and half-giants, as written by Rowling, “lack self-control”, relying on the witches and wizards in the series to carefully regulate them much like they would the dangerous beasts listed in Scamander’s textbook that are “impossible to train” (Ostry 95, *Fantastic Beasts* xxii). Grawp, Hagrid’s full giant half brother, is portrayed as destructive and dangerous, nearly killing Harry, Ron, and Hermione in the Forbidden Forest when Hagrid tries to introduce them, and Firenze suggests that Hagrid’s efforts to tame Grawp are foolish and purposeless: “His attempt is not working...and he would do better to abandon it...he must be brought to his senses” (*Order of the Phoenix* 604). Hagrid, although more human than his brother, continuously demonstrates a similar beast-like tendency toward the reckless and uncontrollable in his post as the Hogwarts Gamekeeper. Harry jokingly notes in the margins of *Fantastic Beasts* that “everything Hagrid likes” is a “known wizard killer,” though Harry questions Hagrid’s awareness of this fact: “Has Hagrid even *read* this book?” (*Fantastic Beasts* xxii, 6). Hagrid is often associated with dangerous beasts; he is the person initially responsible for bringing the fearsome acromantula Aragog into the Hogwarts grounds as a childhood pet, he owns a giant, three-headed, vicious dog named “Fluffy,” and, in *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, he trades vital information for a ferocious pet dragon, whom he gives the benign name, “Norbert” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 236). Hagrid is entirely at home with these creatures and they with him, suggesting that they are kindred spirits. He refers to himself as Norbert’s “mommy” and is not bothered by the dragon’s violent, wild outbursts, and the normally vicious Aragog, a creature of similarly ambiguous humanity, calls Hagrid a “friend” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 237, *Chamber of Secrets* 279). In each of these cases one of the fully human protagonists is forced to intervene to protect Hagrid and his “friends”: Dumbledore keeps Hagrid from being imprisoned when Aragog is discovered in the castle and finds a relatively safe use for Fluffy, guarding the Sorcerer’s

Stone, and Ron's brother Charlie has to retrieve Norbert and release him into the wild before Hagrid loses his job (*Sorcerer's Stone* 241). Hagrid's naïveté represents a mild, harmless form of the full giants' base – and decidedly more menacing – irrationality: when explaining his brethren to Harry, he explains that if you “overload ‘em with information ... they'll kill yeh just to simplify things” (*Order of the Phoenix* 429). Ron confirms Hagrid's description of the giants' brute, simple nature, adding that “they're just vicious, giants...they just like killing, everyone knows that...it's in their natures, they're like trolls” (*Goblet of Fire* 430). The comparison to trolls is noteworthy, as trolls are unequivocally classified by Scamander as beasts (*Fantastic Beasts ?*).

Giants are clearly represented as animal-like in many respects, definitely intellectually inferior to the unmistakably defined beings in the novels. However, they still do not quite fit into the category of “beast” either, especially given that they are capable of mating with humans. In keeping with Scamander's definition of a “being,” they communicate coherently with witches and wizards, through a translator, and have formed their own tribal societies, ruled by the “Gurg” or chief, indicating the ability to participate in a legal system (*Order of the Phoenix* 427). Hagrid, as a half-human, is capable of small amounts of magic using a wand hidden in his umbrella, a power not afforded to any of the other aforementioned part-humans, and in spite of his “unfortunate liking for large and monstrous creatures,” Harry and Ron are confident that Hagrid is *not* a monstrous creature: Harry dismisses the importance Hagrid's parentage, adamantly stating “There is nothing wrong with Hagrid!” and Ron agrees, asserting that “he's not dangerous” (*Chamber of Secrets* 249, *Goblet of Fire* 430). Grawp, whom Firenze labeled a hopeless case, is eventually “civilized” by Hagrid, appearing “dressed in a jacket and trousers” and “docile, almost human” at Dumbledore's funeral in *The Half Blood Prince* (*Half Blood*

Prince 643). Possessing a fantastic, beast-like appearance yet capable of human thought and emotion like the centaurs, with the added ability to procreate with humans, one might expect that their racialization is similarly complicated by Rowling; however, because she portrays them as exceedingly simple-minded and savage, it is not a stretch to view this fuzzy position on the human/animal boundary as simply the “racist bestialization of non-European people – in this case, indigenous populations” (Anatol, “Replication” 115). Rowling’s description of the giant communities relies on much of the same imagery as that used by the British to describe the “stereotypical savage native” (“Replication” 115): they live in a distant, foreign land away from civilization, and while “wizards may have killed a few” giants off over the years, “mostly they killed each other,” unable to stifle their vicious instincts to fight when forced into close proximity by an expanding magical empire (*Order of the Phoenix* 427). In spite of coming to Harry, Ron, and Hermione’s rescue a few times in *Order of the Phoenix* and again in *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry is only willing to allot that Grawp is “almost human” at Dumbledore’s funeral. Rowling depicts the creatures as being animalistic in appearance, brainpower, and impulse control in spite of their closeness to humankind, which compounds the sense of inequality located in the imperialist overtones she uses to describe their primitive culture.

Social inequality and environmental hierarchies between “beast” and “being,” then, cannot be fully separated in the series. Because beasts are still considered according to their usefulness or danger to mankind throughout *Harry Potter*, any “being” or creature of ambiguous status who appears outwardly too nonhuman may suffer the same fate: the house-elves are rendered as wanting to be enslaved to human masters, because of their “natural” subservience; the centaurs and acromantulas *must* be segregated from humanity out into the wild, “Forbidden” forest because of their volatile, unpredictable natures; the goblins and giants are innately

treacherous and cannot be trusted and integrated into human society. Although all of these part-human creatures are sufficiently intelligent to understand the laws of the magical community they are classified throughout the series as less than human; they are nonhumans understood only according to their relation to the fully human witches and wizards. These beastly beings pose various threats to our main human characters, and it falls to the fully rational “beings” to keep the peace. Rowling’s work suggests that animals may be more like humans than we tend to believe, but humans – in this case witches and wizards – are still “masters” over anything deemed subhuman and, therefore, inferior.

Conclusion:

Both Rowling's environmental and social visions are ultimately ambiguous. In certain instances, like in her descriptions of Buckbeak and Lupin, she blurs the boundaries between beast and being and invites the reader to extend that doubt about the fixedness of categories to the rigidity of the separation between the human and animal. In other ways she reasserts that same division, relegating intelligent animals like Buckbeak to positions of service to human masters and monstrous creatures like Aragog and snakes to the fringes of the magical world. It is not clear if a "beast" is entirely inhuman or if all "beings" can be reasonably compared with human counterparts, and the reader is unsure what to make of this disrupted boundary, especially as it affects the perception of part-humans. It is uncertain if the centaurs, house-elves, goblins, and giants fit into either of Scamander's categories, and, as a result to what extent they may be read as either human or animal. Rowling's apparent ambivalence toward house-elf slavery, for example, could either be read as negative racial stereotyping *or* as uncertainty as to the proper relationship between "humans and companion animals" (Cherry 460). Even in instances where racialization is clearly occurring, the unclear "being" status of creatures like the goblins and giants plays a pivotal role in their categorization as a racial Other. In circumstances where the reader is not sure whether he or she is dealing with human races or animal species, the connection between racism and speciesism becomes even more tangled than Huggan and Tiffin initially suggest. The result appears to be a reiteration of the "great chain of being" identified by Keith Thomas: although nonhuman others are granted limited legal rights in Rowling's universe, human witches and wizards are still at the top of the social hierarchy, in charge of the Ministry of Magic and the rule of the magical world, and "part-human" creatures are afforded differing

levels of social status and power depending how “*near*” or “*almost*” human the witches and wizards perceive them to be.

This is not, of course, to accuse J.K. Rowling of being anti-environmentalist or racist; her series is far more complex than that. Rather, the implication of this argument is that Scamander’s initial purpose, to solve the problem, “What is a beast?”, is ultimately an exercise in futility; in playing with the notion of humanity by creating such a diverse world of human and nonhuman magical creatures, Rowling demonstrates that the answer is impossible to define, as the sentience and rationality of all of the creatures in Rowling’s universe, regardless of their particular categorization, is constantly called into question. The more pressing question that remains at the end of the text is, “What is a *being*, and who has the right to define that category?”. The answer to that question reaches beyond the realm of pure discourse and poses sticky problems for social justice: what rights and responsibilities do beings have that beasts do not, what responsibilities do beings have *toward* beasts, and how does that affect those who are unfairly classified? By connecting this question to real-world philosophical crises regarding the nature and rights of humanity, Rowling asks the reader to similarly consider what, exactly, it means to be human, and the potential impact such a definition has on all those affected by it.

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