To English and Back Again: Preserving the Complexities of Fantastic Creatures on the Journey Between Languages

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Abstract

As Anglocentric fantasy scholarship continues to globalise, the challenges and complexities of translation, specifically into English, reveal that an overreliance on tradition in translation has anglicized global fantasy. Fantastic creatures are a cornerstone of the fantasy genre and are also prominently featured in fantasy-adjacent texts such as mythology and folklore. As a result, translators of these texts are frequently faced with names and terminology surrounding fantastic creatures, which—whether entirely new or culturally specific—poses a unique challenge for translation. This article will identify some of the strategies that have been utilised to meet this challenge, with the goal of building a vocabulary with which to study this process further. The strategies identified are Substitution, Descriptor, Naturalisation, and Tradition. The implications and effects of these strategies are analyzed through the spectrum of foreignization and domestication in translation practices. This article discusses the potential pitfalls of Anglocentrism and Anglonormativity, primarily associated with domesticating approaches in translation into English. A case study examines how the word "giant" has been used to gloss or translate the jotunns of Norse mythology. The descriptions and behaviour of the *jotunns* in Norse mythology are often contradictory, and as a group they are incredibly complex and open to interpretation. This work will examine both the origins and limitations of the term "giant," and how a dedication to tradition affirms its continued use. In conclusion, while domesticating translators hesitate to demand too much of readers by presenting complex and foreign terms, translators' attempts to help readers can rob a creature or concept of its complexity—and perhaps the very things that make it so fantastic.

Keywords

Translations, jotunn, giants, Game Studies, Norse mythology, fantasy, fantastic creatures

Introduction

As interest in the fantasy genre grows, and global fantasy traditions become increasingly interconnected, fantasy readers and scholars will be faced with more translated texts and with concepts that have gone through a process of translation before reaching them. In fantasy texts and works from related genres, one often encounters the names and terminology surrounding fantastic creatures, which pose a unique challenge to translators. Choices made in translation can drastically affect the interpretation and study of their associated texts. Creatures specifically lifted from myth and folklore come with their own challenges, often intrinsically connected to their cultures of origin: they are particularly vulnerable to being lost in translation in multiple ways.

This article categorises and examines four strategies of translating creature names – analysing the implications and effects of these translation strategies along a spectrum of foreignization and domestication. By highlighting potential pitfalls of Anglocentrism and Anglonormativity in translation, which is primarily associated with domesticating approaches into English, the article examines how translation choices made in the anglophone sphere can result in the erasure or simplification of global fantasy cultures into one homogenous Anglocentric view. This article concludes with a case study of the word "giant," examining its usage in English to gloss or translate the *jotunn*s of Norse mythology.

Strategies in Translation

In 1959, Roman Jakobson described the inherent problem with equivalence as there being "ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units" in different languages (Munday 60). This issue of so-called "translatability" then becomes a question of degree and adequacy (61). Language is inextricably tied to culture, and the more culturally specific a word (and associated concept) is, the harder it may be to find an adequate translation and, crucially, the more the meaning may be lost in the process of translating it. These difficulties become particularly complex with mythology, which usually originates from a mix of medias and creators with no identifiable original form (Witzel). There is a complicated struggle between style, function, and form, as when it comes to myth translation, "the choices made by the translators as the decision whether to keep stylistic features of the source language text or whether to keep the figurative language of the original become considerable" (Bahmani 224-225). Translating these mythologies requires an understanding of both the source and target cultures and languages, and an intricate discussion of stylistic integrations of fiction.

Fantastic creatures are often inspired by or directly taken from a country's folklore or mythology, and a translator can quickly encounter a situation where two languages do not have enough cultural overlap for a creature to have a name in both languages. Furthermore, the combination of the translator's knowledge of the modern language and what they learn from the text itself does not necessarily give

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them a full understanding of the mythology that the creature is based on. Dorota Guttfeld describes this issue in her exploration of translation strategies for *The Witcher* series:

> such knowledge of the fantasy does not necessarily go hand in hand with an understanding of the mythologies which went into its making, as attested by the treatment of *borowiki*; rather than Slavic wood demons, the translator understands these to be a species of mushrooms, as dictated by the common modern meaning of the word, and translates the term accordingly. (85)

Fantasy creatures are often an amalgamation of mythology, imagination, culture, and real creatures. In addition to the source and target languages, many contemporary fantasy texts involve a "third culture" of the fantasy world. As Ruslan Saduov and Vinczeová Barbora describe:

> Thematically, fantasy elements may be observed in the novel since the reader will encounter neologisms denoting fictional places, creatures, or other phenomena, arising from the "third" culture created by the author. The occurrence of the third, fictional culture conditions the appearance of previously non-existing lexemes needed to denote these phenomena. (65)

This already challenging situation is further complicated by elements that are unknown and possibly even unknowable, whether it be an author's intention, the intricacies of an ancient text, or aspects that have been left intentionally ambiguous. Each translator has to evaluate their individual situation and choose a strategy with which to approach it. If a translator encounters a fantastic creature, they are then faced with a multitude of choices: should they prioritise phonetic similarities, direct meaning, or cultural implications of the source or target language? Do they connect the creature to a similar mythical being in the target language to make its implications clearer, or do they try to retain the cultural connotations of the source language?

For the purposes of this text, translation strategies will be placed into four categories, with the final category dependent on some or all of the previous strategies. This list is not exhaustive but rather an attempted organisation of the existing translation strategies translators employ.

1. **Substitution**: e.g., *fairy, goblin, elf, gnome, demon, mermaid, ghost*, arguably *giant*
2. **Descriptor** (interpretation): e.g., *giant, abominable snowman, water spirit*
3. **Naturalisation** ("untranslated"): e.g., *satyr, centaur, yeti, jotunn*
4. **Tradition** (explained further below)

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The **Substitution** strategy takes the name of a creature that already exists in the target culture and uses it in the place of the creature in the source text. For example, if a brand name that is featured in the source text does not exist in the target culture, translators can choose to replace it with a different brand that the target audience of the translation would know, and that fulfils a similar function (or has a similar reputation) in their culture. Rather than prioritizing communicating the qualities of the specific brand, this method tries to evoke similarities through replacement in an attempt to preserve the experience and flow of the text. Fantastic creatures often go through a similar process, where creatures from the target culture's folklore are used as shorthands for the creatures in the source text.

The substitution strategy has resulted in an international, Anglophone-based "fantasy lexicon." Whether or not a creature came from Anglophone folklore originally, many creatures have become familiar to Anglophone readers over time due to their presence in literature and pop culture. Despite not originating in Anglophone folklore, vampires, centaurs, and genies are familiar to regular English readers of fantasy literature, and they can all-too easily be used to replace the names of other, less familiar creatures, losing cultural significance in the target text. The continued pervasiveness of several enormously influential Anglocentric fantasy texts and brands over decades, from J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth to more contemporary works like Harry Potter or the Marvel Cinematic Universe, are unmatched on a global scale, and serve to perpetuate this Anglocentric lexicon.

As this article will later explore through the depictions of *jotunn*, using a term from the Anglocentric fantasy lexicon erases complexities inherent in the source language and categorizes *jotunn* under an Anglocentric term "giant." Some translations will substitute names of fantastic creatures from any source language into anglicized ones, which risks erasing cultural implications in specific texts and the diversity of global fantasy more generally.

The **Descriptor** strategy in translation uses descriptive terms, or constructs a name that gives the reader a quick descriptive impression of the dominant characteristics of the creature in question. This strategy is quite reliant on the interpretations and considerations of the translator, who is responsible for determining which quality of the creature is the most essential, and what is most important for the reader to know. A sub-category of this strategy is the reinvention of already invented names, a popular topic of discussion surrounding international translations of series like Harry Potter, which has been translated numerous times into many languages. For creature names invented by the author, translators may try to create new names that evoke similar impressions or preserve the author's wordplay. To return to the example of brand names, the Descriptor strategy would term a Starbucks chain as simply "a coffee shop," or perhaps invent a new name that has a similar feel.

The **Naturalisation** strategy may at first glance seem like the "untranslated" option, keeping the name of the creature as it is or changing it as little as possible. However, it is important to note that the

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process of naturalisation is still a translation. In almost all cases, the word will go through some level of adaptation to suit the target language's script, grammar, and even pronunciation rules. Guttfeld examines one instance of this in Andrzej Sapkowski's The Witcher series, where a translator aiming for dialectic similarities changes the name of creatures and subsequently loses the cultural implications behind the name. "The form *Bobowaks* […] is clearly an attempt to […] keep the original term intact. The translator does not realize or chooses to disregard the etymology behind the term, which combines the term for an unspecified childhood spook, and a skin-changer alike to a werewolf" (85). In an example of a different kind of naturalisation, Oey Vella Valencia W. and Rahmanti Asmarani identify an instance in a translation of *A Game of Thrones* where the translator changed "Arakhs" to "Arakh-arah," as the target language did not have the consonant "khs" (211). If a translator is working with a less unified source text, such as translating a creature that appears in multiple cultures and languages, naturalisation may also involve a choice of which name to use. This translation strategy is the one that relies the most on the reader either being willing to learn or already being familiar with the creature and mythology (at least to the level that a speaker of the source language would be). It places the onus on the reader to gain knowledge of the source culture.

The **Tradition** strategy involves translators utilizing previous translations of similar material. A translator may choose this method because they are trusting that another translator made a well-informed choice, or they may simply be aiming for internal consistency in their own language. This strategy separates itself somewhat from the rest partly because it is only applicable if a previous translation has been made, but also because it implicitly involves turning to one of the three other strategies. However, it is a distinct strategy both because of the actual process of translation and because its effects are distinct from the other three strategies. Deferral to a tradition or accrual of historical choices has implications for the treatment of the source and target cultures, often giving one culture a degree of power over the other.

A translator's choice of strategy will be influenced by many factors, including which specific readership a text is intended for and what they are familiar with, how the word is intended to be read, and how often and in what way the word has appeared in the target language previously. For some, the word "giant" may simply be a denotation of size for a creature, or it may reference the specific types of giants that appear in stories such as "Jack and the Beanstalk." In the context of Norse mythology, as discussed below, the translator may assume the reader would understand it as the traditional translation for the *jotunn*s. Between Substitution and Naturalisation, there are nuances regarding creatures that have appeared in the target language so frequently that they have developed a mythology and frame of reference separate from the culture from which they originated. Arguably, this is the case for creatures of Greek mythology in the English tradition, and the aforementioned standardised fantasy lexicon that is emerging in Anglocentric cultures.

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In some cases, the translator's intended strategy may not be reflected in the actual effects. For example, some words may be used with the intention of being descriptive and universally understood, when in fact the translations may be more culturally specific than the translator assumed. Terms such as "demon," "spirit," or "ghost" may be intended to be universal terms, but in reality become inflected with alternate meanings in the target language. Laura Bohannan's "Shakespeare in the Bush" reports the experiences of an American anthropologist facing unexpected difficulties when attempting to explain the term "ghost" to a local population. The Tiv, who "unlike many of the neighboring tribes […] didn't believe in the survival after death of any individuating part of the personality" (2), refused to believe the ghost of Hamlet's father could exist without being either an omen from a witch (which would not be able to talk) or a reanimated corpse (which they would be able to touch)—neither of which would have the exact attributes of a ghost, as it is depicted. What Bohannan reveals is that terms an author may think are universal or, at the very least, share commonalities may in fact be far more connected to each person's cultural framework than originally assumed.

The Implications of Strategy

When evaluating and analysing different strategies of translation, it is necessary to avoid vocabulary like fidelity, accuracy, or betrayal, which have historically influenced much of translation studies. Each translation strategy has its own priorities in what it recreates for a new reader, with its own set of benefits and drawbacks, and most are applied to the text in some way that confronts the question of equivalence. As Jeremy Munday explains, "the whole question of equivalence entails subjective judgement from the translator or analyst" (69). However, it is also important to examine what losses and gains are associated with which strategy, to have an open discussion evaluating whether these choices are balanced, and to critically engage with "accepted" translation strategies. It is useful to evaluate these strategies through the lens of the *foreignization* and *domestication* spectrum in translation practices, as explored by Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator's Invisibility*. The difference between extremes of *foreignization* and *domestication* can be briefly explained as the choice between bringing the author to the reader, or the reader to the author. A domesticating technique will lose its closeness to the author's context but bring it closer to the reader's context, often making it less visible that it is a work of translation: in other words, making the translator invisible, as Venuti's title suggests. A foreignizing technique will keep the text close to the author's context and expect more effort on behalf of the reader, often making choices that make it clear that the text is a work of translation.

The strategies outlined here can be placed roughly along this spectrum, with the Substitution strategy being the most domesticating and the Naturalisation strategy being the most foreignizing. The Descriptor strategy is positioned in the middle, as implications can vary substantially depending on elements such as what descriptive terms are used, the basis and methods of a translator's choice, and whether the name of the creature is descriptive in the source language.

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The placement of the Tradition strategy is perhaps the most interesting, as it is often assumed that the new translator's choice will simply be placed where the previous translator's choice was. However, it is a unique choice with its own implications. In the context of translation into English, Tradition has been positioned as leaning towards domestication for two key reasons. The first is that when translating to English, previous translators' choices are much more likely to be domesticated than not. Venuti observes that the United Kingdom and United States in particular have dominant cultures of domestication in translation. Such a culture of domestication influences numerous stages of the translation process, including which texts are chosen and accepted for translation and publication, which styles of translations are used, how translations are edited in publishing, and by which standards translations are later reviewed, with the UK/US-based anglophone market leaning heavily towards idiomatic, easy-flowing English for decades (Munday 241). The second reason that Tradition is positioned closer to domestication is that the Tradition choice prioritises the target culture's tradition. The reasoning behind using the Tradition strategy is often that, regardless of the quality of the original translation choice, it will at least be understood amongst the target culture. Even when a foreignizing strategy is chosen, if it is chosen because it is what has traditionally been done, the choice is then domesticating towards the tradition itself – though perhaps a sub-tradition of the target culture, such as the custom of a specific academic field. This can then result in the development of a parallel culture of understanding surrounding a certain term or concept, as over time the target culture creates a self-referential bubble independent of the source text. The potentially conflicting motivations between a translator and the publisher also impact the process of translating published fantasy texts. Language may be changed to connect to trends in fantasy or perceived advantages in marketing and sales. Rather than being motivated by a desire to create an interpretation of the text as close as possible to the source text, the translation of a text may be motivated by monetary concerns where translation choices are made for profit rather than meaning.

Pitfalls of Anglocentrism and Anglonormativity

The *jotunns* of Norse mythology are a group notoriously hard to define, to the point where their resistance to definition has almost become a defining quality in and of itself. Prominently featured in Norse and Scandinavian myths, their one consistent trait is that they are usually presented as a rivalling

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or antagonistic group to the Norse gods (commonly used as a collective term for the Æsir and Vanir) with their own parallel structures of community more complicated than a separation between "self" and "other" in Norse culture. These myths also include the repetition of individual characters, from Ymir from whose body parts the landscape was created, or the cunning Loki who resides in Asgard with the gods. However, while many individual *jotunns* are described in detail, their defining qualities as a group are a topic of much debate due in part to translation difficulties in Old Icelandic and the subsequent retellings of the creatures in mythology and cultural representations. As Tom Grant explains in "A Problem of Giant Proportions," there were several distinct creatures who have come to be known under the singular "giant":

> For as long as scholarship on and translation of Old Icelandic sagas have existed in the English language, the word 'giant' has been silently accepted as a term which maps unproblematically onto this literature […] The words that medieval Icelandic authors used for gigantic beings, including but not limited to *jötunn, risi, þurs and troll* [...] and any independent meaning that might be attached to these individual words, is whitewashed. These emic terms and the figures they describe are made to match the expectations attached to the singular, modern, and etic noun "giant." (77-78)

The simplification of these distinct fantasy creatures into one homogenous, narrow, and single translation anglicises the important distinctions between these terms. *Jotunns* can be smaller than humans, larger than mountains, monstrously ugly, or strikingly beautiful. Some can be recognised by appearance from miles away, while others are indistinguishable from humans at first glance, and are only recognised by their behaviour or values. As their physical attributes are wildly disparate, the connections between them would seem to be something more conceptual: a particular connection to nature, a matter of allegiance, or a collective term for a variety of magical creatures. In her work on Norse myth, gender, and shamanism, Norwegian archaeologist Brit Solli suggests one of the defining distinctions between the *jotunns* and the gods may be that they are opposing forces of chaos and cosmos, where the ultimate matches are the marriages between the (usually beautiful) female *jotunns* and the male gods (36). When understanding this chaos as a defining quality of the group, the disparate physical qualities of various *jotunns* may be understood as precisely something that defines them: the many various expressions of chaos. Due to their central role in the Norse mythology, an interpretation of what the *jotunn* are can have implications for the interpretation of the entire narrative as a coherent text. This is almost a metaphor for translation studies as a whole: the impossibility of understanding and then interpreting precise fantasy elements.

In the Old English tradition that has continued into modern English, the *jotunns* have been and often continue to be over-generalized as "giants," a descriptive term highlighting a single physical

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attribute. The term is not necessarily wrong for all cases; it certainly applies to some of the individuals it intends to describe. However, making this descriptive term central gives false significance to size as a distinguishing factor, simplifying what is a far more complex group of individuals, and losing much of the ambiguity from the source text. It bears mentioning that the word *jotunn* does not in itself carry any descriptive meaning in the source language, with its closest etymological cousin being an older Germanic word for "rough-eater" (Caprona 869). The reason why "giant" continues to be used in English is not necessarily a matter of it being considered the best term, but rather a matter of tradition. The choice of translating *jotunn* and related words to "giant" harkens back to some of the earliest translations of the *Eddas* into English. As Carolyne Larrington explains in her recounting of the Eddas' translation history, Norse mythology, with its associated poetry and prose, was known in England from the late seventeenth century through the Codex Regius manuscript, though the enterprise of translating the Eddas would not gain traction for another hundred years. It was not until a fully edited and annotated version of the manuscript (with accompanying Latin glossary) was published by a Copenhagen commission in 1787 that longer translations began to be published. The new version had made the texts approachable for "scholars who were neither native speakers of Icelandic nor trained in Old Norse studies," which opened up the "possibility of translating eddic verse into English from an Old Norse original, with the help of a Latin translation and the substantial Copenhagen glossary" (Larrington). This opened the door for a wide variety of authors and scholars to try their hand at retelling Norse mythology in English with varying degrees of success.

In most of these early translations and retellings, the strategies were overwhelmingly domesticating in nature, and many were also substantially criticised by both contemporaries and later historians (Larrington). One of the earliest works to use the specific term "giant" was A. S. Cottle's 1797 work *Icelandic Poetry, or The Edda of Saemund*. Cottle, who "rightly assumes that his readership will be most familiar with Greek mythology" (Larrington), opens his work with a lengthy comparison of the Norse and Greek deities, stating that to "the attentive reader of the Northern antiquities, a striking similarity will appear between them and the Grecian" (Cottle xxiii). One of the comparisons Cottle draws is that "Thor also bears some analogy to the Grecian Jupiter who overthrew the Giants with his thunder as Thor did with his mallet" (xxv). This image of a parallel between the Titans and the *jotunns* illustrates some of the strategies that led to "giant" becoming regularly used.

Over time, usage of the term became common and has later become a matter of robust tradition in both academic and non-academic texts, despite scholars acknowledging its limitations and its misleading nature. The steady use of the Tradition strategy in the anglophone academic sphere has created the kind of self-referential bubble previously described, in which scholars repeat the choices of those that came before them in a developing parallel tradition, eventually leading to most contemporary anglophone scholars in this field using "giant" today. The tension between the

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term's limitations and its prominent use in the anglophone tradition can be seen in the notes of very recent translations, such as Jackson Crawford's translation of the Poetic Edda, published in 2015. To accompany his translation, Crawford includes a glossary in the back of the book, listing names "that belong to characters and places that the reader might need defined in order to understand the text more fully" (343). He explains the complexity of depictions of the *jotunn* in the following glossary entry:

> **Giant**, traditional English translation of Old Norse *jotunn* and related words. The term does not appear to imply a creature that is necessarily larger than the gods are, and the *giants* do not usually look different from the gods (or, indeed, humans). *Giant* women are often attractive and even marry gods (see e.g. *Gerth* and *Skathi*). However, there are also *giants* that are ugly or have unusual numbers of heads […] and some are turned to stone in daylight. (357)

This glossary entry demonstrates the many conceptual challenges that *jotunn* pose, and the simplifying treatment they have received in translation. It is the only glossary item for which Crawford cites the English tradition, or indeed mentions a translation choice at all. This is perhaps something he felt was necessary as a defence or justification, given that he immediately highlights the shortcomings of the term. What is shown here is the entry in its entirety, where Crawford points out a great number of things the *jotunns* (as a group) are *not*, and yet lists no qualities they *all* have, highlighting their general resistance to any quick and easy definition. This resistance necessarily complicates depictions of the *jotunn*, posing the question of how to accurately define a term that is not actually a specific fantasy creature but rather a collective cultural understanding of a group of fantastic peoples. As a scholar, Crawford approaches the term critically but still uses it in his translation, having chosen the path of Tradition in this instance. But while he may use the term with hesitation and a nuanced understanding of its history, translations such as his set a precedent for others who read his work without his comprehensive knowledge of its background, who may not approach the translation in the same way, and who may use it as a source for their own work.

Subsequently, much of the popular culture image of the *jotunns* is in many ways a consequence of these Anglophone academic translations. Through a mixture of academic tradition and the massive global influence of the Marvel franchise, particularly the Thor comics and subsequent film adaptations, the specific image of the "frost giant" has come to characterise interpretations of the *jotunns*. Even when representing variants of *jotunn*, such as in the the 2015 game *Jotun* and the 2020 game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, depictions focus on two key elements: their large size and their connection to the cold and ice. In *Valhalla*, the *jotunns* mostly appear large and blue, with some capable of shape-changing, though some *jotunns* like Loki and his wolf-child, Fenrir, look nothing like this and are depicted with various magical abilities. Side quests (optional content)

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further complicate this view of the *jotunn* as an enemy, showing that the *jotunn* have a separate culture and are often the victims of the gods (*Assassins*). This would appear to be a more nuanced portrayal of jotunns that shows some of their variety, but overall the inherent ambiguity of the term is diminished. A week after its release, *Valhalla* was already one of Ubisoft's best-selling games, and its popularity will most likely further cement this version of *jotunns* as blue frost giants and propagate this distinct subset of the homogenous "giant" in popular Anglocentric culture (Wood). By turning to what others have done before, a parallel understanding and self-referential culture of adaptation has arisen in anglophone pop culture. A line can be drawn from domesticating strategies of translation used in the eighteenth century all the way to major modern media franchises that reproduce and propagate the same interpretations on a global scale. Along the way, much of the ambiguity, diversity and complexity of the *jotunns* have been lost.

Conclusion

Every word has a journey, and every work of translation will have gone through a significant process of adaptation before it reaches its audience. For everyone involved in the translation process, the first step to tackling Anglocentric practices in translation strategies is the recognition of Tradition's implications and the Anglonormativity that underlies current practises. Then, it behooves translators to choose a translation strategy that maintains more of the source text's unique fantasy elements. For those who are not in the position of translating works themselves, it is important to adapt a critical approach to translated works and consider the journey that a word has gone through before it reaches readers. Choices in translation may affect our understanding more than we realize, especially if our goal is to approach the source text itself rather than an adaptation on its own independent terms. As works of fantasy continue to be translated into English, it may be beneficial to more thoroughly consider whether some translation strategies are better suited than others for preserving the idiosyncratic and culturally specific fantastic elements in a text. While the issue of equivalence is inherent in translation, the experience of myth, by which every translator and reader uniquely contributes to the collective mythology of the *jotunn*, further complicates this issue. The myth of *jotunn* have historically been translated by Anglocentric fantasy scholars as "giant," simplifying and erasing the original aspects of the mythical creatures. While a domesticating approach may make even the most out-of-this-world text feel familiar and easily understood, many of the fantastic texts we study do not aim to be easily understood, but rather to delight in the absurd, subversive, challenging, and often intentionally ambiguous elements of the genre. One could instead take the exact opposite approach and highlight the disruptively unfamiliar and marvellously different in a text. By further acknowledging the distance between us, we might be able to come closer to the magic of the world in all its baffling complexity.

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