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Draco litterarius

Some Thoughts on an Imaginary Beast¹

»Then an old barrower of the dark / happened to find the board open, / the burning one who
hunts out barrows, / the slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky / with streamers of
fire. People on the farms / are in dread of him. He is driven to hunt out / boards underground,
to guard heathen gold / through age-long vigils, though to little avail.«²

This is, if not the oldest then certainly the most famous dragon in vernacular English literature³ – it⁴ makes its first appearance in the second half of the Old English poem *Beowulf* (manuscript c 1000) – and it remains alive and kicking (or rather fire-spouting) not least due to Seamus Heaney's enjoyable translation and the somewhat less enjoyable recent film *Beowulf*.⁵ The *Beowulf* dragon, next to Fafnir in the *Volsungasaga* and the nameless dragon in the legend of St George,⁶ is probably the only dragon that can be more or less accurately placed by a modern audience – other-

1 For a more general treatment of dragons in literature, see the essays in Fanfan Chen / Thomas Honegger (eds.), *Good Dragons are Rare*, Berlin 2009 (Arbeiten zur Literarischen Phantastik ALPH 5).

2 *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney (trans.), London 1999, p. 72. For the original, see 2270b-2277b in *Klaeber's Beowulf*, Robert D. Fulk / Robert E. Bjork / John D. Niles (eds.), Toronto 2008.

3 See Lesley Catherine Kordecki, *Traditions and Development of the Medieval English Dragon*, Toronto 1980, for an (incomplete) overview of dragons in medieval English literature. As Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon. Parallels and Analogues*, Woodbridge 2000, p. 36, points out, the dragon-episode in *Beowulf* is »the longest account of a dragon-fight in medieval and classical literature.« See George Speake, *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art and its Germanic Background*, Oxford 1980, especially pp. 85-92, on the serpent in Anglo-Saxon art.

4 Both terms used to refer to the dragon in Old English, i. e. *draca* and *nyrm*, are masculine. Although it is likely that some of the dragons mentioned in the works of medieval authors are female, I will use the generic *it* to refer to dragons if they do not exhibit a clearly defined personality, in which case I will use *he* or *she*.

5 Paramount Pictures 2007, directed by Robert Zemeckis.

6 Samantha Riches, *St George. Hero, Martyr and Myth*, Stroud 2000.

wise, dragons are part and parcel of a rather vague idea of the Middle Ages. Thus, the dragon is believed to be a beast that typically haunts the pages of the average medieval tale and against whom the knightly hero has to pit his strength in order to win the hand of his beloved lady, princess, baron's daughter etc. The fact is that while we do find some dragons in romances, chronicles, or saints' lives, yet they are by no means as widespread as popular opinion would have them,⁷ and literary ›dragon hunters‹ will soon find out that they have to turn many a page to find a specimen of this rare breed. Yet dragons, in spite of their relative rareness, exert a disproportionately powerful influence on the readers' imagination. Authors and poets often exploit this potential and use the dragon for a variety of literary functions – the analysis of which will provide the main focus of my paper.

Yet before discussing the literary function(s) of dragons, I would like to deal with a more basic issue, namely: What is a dragon? The question poses a thorny problem – and not only because we have no real-world animal as an ultimate point of reference. The taxonomy of modern biology is, of course, of little use in this case⁸ – and at least the four-footed winged dragons would be considered a serious anomaly since animals with six limbs are not known in our world. Modern man knows that dragons are ›imaginary‹ and thus no longer bothers to try and find a place for them in the (basically) Linnean typology.⁹ Yet pre-Linnean scholars have tried to fit the dragon into their schematic categories – see Isidore of Seville¹⁰ and other encyclopaedists (for the English vernacular tradition we may men-

7 See Marie-Françoise Alamichel, »De *Beowulf* à Malory. Les dragons dans la littérature médiévale anglaise«, in: Danielle Buschinger / Wolfgang Spiewok (eds.), *Le Dragon dans la culture médiévale*, Greifswald 1994, pp. 1-10, esp. p. 1.

8 See Michel Meurger, »Dragons de la science, science des dragons«, in: Jean-Marie Privat (ed.), *Dragons – entre science et fictions*, Paris 2006, pp. 18-23, and Paul Michel, »... was zur Beglaubigung dieser Historie dienen mag. Drachen bei Johann Jacob Scheuchzer«, in: Chen/Honegger (eds.), *Good Dragons Are Rare* (fn. 1), forthcoming.

9 See, however, the ›(in)famous‹ table of the animal kingdom in Carolus Linnaeus' first edition (1735) of his *Regnum Animale* (accessible at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Linnaeus_Regnum_Animale_\(1735\).png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Linnaeus_Regnum_Animale_(1735).png), accessed 2 Apr 2008). *Draco* is listed in column III »Amphibia«, subdivision »Paradoxa«.

10 See Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, Wallace Martin Lindsay (ed.), vols. I & II, Oxford 1911/1987; on dragons, see vol. II, bk. XII, V »De serpentibus«.

tion Trevisa)¹¹ who categorise *draco* as the biggest of all serpents. Anyone attempting a description of this beast must take into consideration this tradition and point out the relevant features of a dragon according to these writers, e. g. that the ›fire-breathing‹ is actually due to the fact that the air exhaled from its mouth is infected by the strong poison that is concentrated in the dragon's tongue (and gall):

*And he bath venyme oonliche in his tonge and in his galle, [...] Also Plinius seith that for might of the venyme his tonge is alwey arrered, and somtyme he setteth the ayer afuyre by hete of his venyme so that it semeth that he bloweth and casteth fuyre out of his mouth.*¹²

So if Tristan had read his Solinus or Bartholomaeus Anglicus, or at least the translation by Trevisa, he would never have thought about sticking the dead dragon's tongue into his leggins where it came into direct contact with his skin – and thus poisoned him.¹³ The Middle English *Sir Tristrem* may stand for the entire tradition:

*To bote, / His tong bath he ton / And schorn of bi the rote. / In his hose next the hide / The tong onway he bar. / No yede he bot ten stride / His speche les he thar. / Nedes he most abide / That he no may ferther far.*¹⁴

The encyclopaedic tradition also informs us that the greatest strength of a dragon is not (only) in his jaw, but (also) in his tail: *Vim autem non in dentibus, sed in cauda habet, et verberere potius quam rictu nocet*¹⁵ – a fact to which many a knight can testify. Thus, Bevis of Hampton, the hero of the eponymous

11 John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things. John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus ›De Proprietatibus Rerum‹*, Michael Seymour et al. (eds.), Oxford 1975/1988 (vols. I & II Text 1975, vol. III Commentary 1988).

12 Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things* (fn. 11), vol. II, p. 1185. The letter ›thorn‹ has been replaced by ›th‹. Translation: »And he has venom only in his tongue and his gall, [...] Also, Plinius says that because of the strength of the poison his tongue is always inflamed [or: scarred], and sometimes he sets the air on fire because of the heat of the poison so that it looks as if he blows and breathes fire out of his mouth.«

13 Bevis of Hampton is, for whatever reason, more careful and sticks the tongue of the dragon onto his spear: *And the gode knight Beuoun / The tonge karf of the dragoun; / Upon the tronsoun of is spere / The tonge stikede for to bere.* (Ronald B. Herzman / Graham Drake / Eve Salisbury (eds.), *Four Romances of England. King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*, Kalamazo 1999; quotation 2887-2890, p. 277). Translation: »And the valiant knight Bevis cut out the tongue and stuck it onto his spear to carry.«

14 Lines 1483-1491 (p. 198) in *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem*, Alan Lupack (ed.), Kalamazoo 1994. Translation: »In addition its tongue has he taken and cut off at the base. In his stockings, right next to his skin, he carried it away. He didn't go even ten paces when he lost the power of speech. Necessarily he must remain there and could not go any further.«

15 Isidore, *Etymologiae* (fn. 10), bk. XII, V, 14-16.

Middle English romance,¹⁶ has not only his horse killed by a well-placed stroke of the dragon's tail, but also his shield is shattered and his left shoulder injured:

*The dragoun harde him gan asaile / And smot his hors with the taile / Right amidward the
hed, / That he fel to grounde ded. [...] The dragoun assailede him fot hot, / With his taile on
his scheld a smot, / That hit clevede hevene ato, / His left scholder dede also.*¹⁷

I do not expect anyone to succeed in giving a comprehensive definition of dragons – at least none covering all dragons. The different forms and shapes of all those creatures that have been variously considered to belong to the *draco*-family seems to me simply too divergent and varied.¹⁸

The fact that this imaginary animal posed something of a puzzle to natural scholars and that it developed a rich, varied and basically autonomous existence in fictional texts, may lie at the root of the problem. To a greater extent than is true of other animals, dragons seem to have taken on a literary life of their own and we therefore have to take into account not merely their occurrence in fictional texts, but also, or even more so, their literary function(s). Let me illustrate the importance of being aware of the different literary functions by means of some few examples.

First, authors of medieval fiction are usually not very concerned about the exact categorisation of their monsters (and indeed, the same might be of most authors of modern fiction). It is often sufficient for them to have a dangerous animal that poses an obstacle to the hero of the tale.¹⁹ »Epic« knights such as Ywain, Lancelot, Tristan, Eglamour of Artois, Torrent of Portyngale, or Guy of Warwick all prove their outstanding quality by means of killing a dragon at some time or other during their chivalric ca-

16 Interestingly, the dragon-slaying episode is not to be found in the Anglo-Norman model and is thus considered to be an addition by the English adaptor/translator; see Judith Weiss, »The Major Interpolations in *Sir Beues of Hamtouns*«, in: *Medium Ævum*, 48/1979, pp. 71-76.

17 *Four Romances of England* (fn. 13), 2779-2782 (p. 274) and 2797-2800 (p. 275). Translation: »The dragon began to attack him fiercely and hit his horse with its tail right on the head so that it fell down dead. [...] The dragon attacked him quickly and smote with its tail on his shield so that it split even in two, as did his left shoulder.«

18 For an (admittedly tongue-in-cheek) overview on the different forms of dragons, see Dugald A. Steer (ed.). 2005. *Dr. Ernest Drake's Dragonology Handbook. A Practical Course in Dragons*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, pages 12-13.

19 See, in this context, also Kathryn Hume, »From Saga to Romance. The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature«, in: *Studies in Philology*, 77/1980, pp. 1-25.

reer. *Dragonslayer* is one of the most prestigious titles a hero may attain – and it is no coincidence that Beowulf ends his heroic career with a fight against a dragon. The career of Eglamour of Artois in the Middle English romance of the same name may serve as a typical example.²⁰ The hero, in order to gain the hand of his beloved Christabelle, has to succeed in a series of three tasks of increasing difficulty: First he must hunt one of the harts guarded by a fierce giant and, as a consequence, he also has to overcome the giant; secondly, he must kill a boar and subsequently its enraged giant-owner, while last (and most difficult) he has to fight against a dragon.

With the dragon's pride of place firmly established in the minds of the readers, new and comic potential arises – which can be found as early as the 14th c. in the romance of *Sir Degaré*.²¹ The hero, who has been abandoned by his mother – a princess raped by a fairy knight while she was separated from her companions in the forest –, grew up in the care of a hermit. At the age of twenty, Degaré ventures forth into the world in search of his parents. In accordance with his rustic upbringing, he is armed only with a stout staff or club of oak which proves useful when he meets an earl fighting a dragon. The beast has already devoured the earl's dogs and companions, and now the earl himself is in dire straits. Degaré hastens to the earl's rescue, takes his club and beats the dragon to death:

*Ac Degarre was ful strong; / He tok his bat, gret and long, / And in the forehefd he him batereth / That al the forehefd he tospatereth. / He ful adoun anon right, / And frapte his tail with gret might / Upon Degarres side, / That up-so-down he gan to glide; / Ac he stert up ase a man / And with his bat leide upan, / And al tofrusst him ech a bon, / That he lai ded, stille as a ston.*²²

We cannot, of course, establish the poet's intention with absolute certainty, but I think that the poet is seeking here to shock and amuse his audience by means of his youthful hero whose first deed is beating a dragon to

20 *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, Harriet Hudson (ed.), Kalamazoo 2006, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams> (accessed 2 Apr 2008).

21 *Sir Degaré*, Anne Laskaya / Eve Salisbury (eds.), Kalamazoo 1995, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams> (accessed 2 Apr 2008).

22 *Sir Degaré* (fn. 21), 373-384. Translation: »Yet Degaré was exceedingly strong; he took his big and long bat (club) and smote him (i. e. the dragon) on the forehead so that his forehead was bashed in completely and he fell down on the spot. And he slashed with his tail at Degaré's side so that he fell down. But up sprang Degaré and began to beat him with his club and crushed every bone so that he lay dead, still as a stone.«

pulp with a club (an ›uncourtly‹ weapon used typically by giants and wild men). As such, it is a somewhat simplistic instance of a medieval author's playing with his audience's expectations,²³ and in order to do so he makes use of two elements of dragon-lore. First, that a dragon's hide is extremely hard and thus immune to the usual attacks with lance, spear or sword. Killing a dragon by means of beating him to death with a club is thus a ›realistic‹ option. Second, that the dragon is the most dangerous of animals and occurs usually as the ›ultimate‹ test for a knight's virtue and prowess. Having an unexperienced ›country yokek type of hero kill a dragon in his first encounter is thus a blatant violation of the norm.²⁴

Dragons functioning as obstacles also occur in the lives of saints. Within a Christian framework, the dragon has become the symbol of the demonic forces²⁵ if not Satan himself. It is ubiquitous in Christian ico-

23 A more sophisticated version of such a subversion of typical romance clichés (including dragon-fights) is to be found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late 14th century). When Gawain starts out from Camelot on his quest for the Green Chapel, the audience rightly expects him to encounter the ›usual obstacles‹ such as giants and dragons. And though the poet ›meets‹ these expectations, we cannot but feel the gentle irony with which he treats these stock-elements. What would take up several hundred lines in any other Middle English romance is given short shrift and the dangers of the wild, including dragons, are dealt with in less than a dozen lines: *Sumwhyle nyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als, / Sumwhyle nyth wodwos, that woned in the knarrez, / Bothe nyth bullez and berez, and borez otherquyle, / And etaynez, that hmy aneled of the heye felle* (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien / Eric Valentine Gordon (eds.), revised by Norman Davies, Oxford 1967; passage quoted pp. 20-21, 720-23; the letters ›yogh‹ and ›thorn‹ have been replaced by their modern equivalents). Translation: »At whiles with worms he wars, and with wolves also, / at whiles with wood-trolls that wandered in the crags, / at whiles with bulls and with bears and boars, too, at times; / and with ogres that hounded him from the heights of the fells.« (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (trans.), London 1995, p. 38).

24 The ›uncourtly‹ fight against the dragon is just one of the numerous folk-tale elements in this romance.

25 Dragons, next to venomous snakes and toads, are also stock-elements of hell and thus appear regularly in texts describing the tortures that await the damned. See, e. g., the Middle English version of *The Vision of Tundale*, Edward E. Foster (ed.), Kalamazoo 2004, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams>, 522-28 (accessed 2 Apr 2008): *Ther was he beyton with fendys fell, / With kene hyonus that on hym gnoue / And dragonus that hym al todrowe. / With eddrys and snakes full of venym / He was all todranyyn yche hym*. Translation: »There he was beaten by hideous fiends, by vicious lions that bite him, and dragons that tear him to pieces. By adders and snakes full of venom, his every limb was torn.«

nography and a favourite opponent of all aspirants to sainthood (e. g. St Margaret of Antiochia),²⁶ and the overthrow of the dragon, often by means of prayer, symbolises the defeat of the heathen or demonic (inner) opponents in an easily understandable way.²⁷

The most striking feature of these encounters is the fact that the saint does not use any weapons but relies solely on the power of his or her prayers and God's assistance. Although the dragon is often killed in the confrontation with the saint, there are instances of ›dragon-taming‹,²⁸ e. g. by St Samson of Dol. The *Vita II S. Samsonis*, for example, reports how the saint subdued a dragon and sent it away, never to trouble the people again:

»[St Samson] bent his knees to the ground, praying with all his heart, begging God with all his faith who is victorious over everything. As the dragon fled to the extreme end of the cave, Samson raised his voice and said: ›In the name of Christ the Son of God who is victorious over the enemy, I command you to come out at once.‹ And while all were standing around, watching, it came out forthwith, quite meek, and trembling all over and hanging its head to the ground. Then St Samson put his stole around its neck, and dragged it alongside him – the dragon's track along the ground was smouldering and burning. [...] Then he commanded it to cross a nearby river and never to harm any creature again. Without

26 See Ulrich Joger / Jochen Luckhardt (eds.), *Schlangen und Drachen. Kunst und Natur*, Darmstadt 2007, for examples of dragons in Christian art. See the Middle English *Stanzæic Life of Margaret of Antioch*, by John Lygate [c 1420], Sherry L. Reames (ed.), Kalamazoo 2003, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams> (accessed 2 Apr 2008), 163-218, for a description of the saint's fight against the devil who attacked her in the shape of a dragon. See Jocelyn Price, »The Virgin and the Dragon. The Demonology of *Seinte Margarete*«, in: *Leeds Studies in English* (NS), 16/1985, pp. 337-357, for a discussion of the theological implications of devils taking on the form of a dragon.

27 See Samantha J. Riches, »Encountering the Monstrous. Saints and Dragons in Medieval Thought«, in: Bettina Bildhauer / Robert Mills (eds.), *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, Cardiff 2003, pp. 196-218, especially p. 201, and Jacqueline Leclercq-Marx, »Le dragon comme métaphore des démons intérieurs. Mots et images«, in: Buschinger/Spiewok (eds.), *Le Dragon dans la culture médiévale* (fn. 7), pp. 45-56, on the dragon as the embodiment of sin and/or an inner weakness. See also the numerous dragon-fights in the Old English hagiographic tradition, of which Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon* (fn. 3), passim, collected and analysed a representative selection.

28 See Riches, »Encountering the Monstrous« (fn. 27), passim, for further instances of ›dragon-taming‹.

delay and while everybody was watching, that dragon headed for the wilderness across the river, and reappeared nowhere afterwards.«²⁹

The transition from hagiographic to epic dragon-fight is not always clear-cut. On the one hand, while most of the saints refrain from using weapons and rely solely on the power of God and their prayers, there are saints (or angels) that do not avoid the traditional chivalric weapons such as lance (St George) or sword (St Michael). On the other hand, we also find secular heroes who do not trust in the efficacy of their arms alone. Bevis of Hampton, the eponymous hero of a Middle English romance, is a case in point.³⁰ While he does fight against the dragon, it is not so much his bodily strength or his chivalric qualities that help him overcome the beast, as his Christian virtues and his faith in God, who provides some much needed assistance. Thus, Bevis repeatedly finds shelter and healing in a miraculous well which had been hallowed by a virgin who had **dwelt in that country and** bathed in it – allegorical allusions to baptism and the salvatory role of the Virgin Mary are obvious. The dragon does not dare approach the well and Bevis is able to recover from his wounds and gain new (spiritual and physical) strength. It is, in the end, his prayers, first to St George (line 2816) and later to God and the Virgin Mary, that put the dragon to flight (lines 2869f), and not his martial prowess:

*To God he made his praiere / And to Marie, his moder dere; / That herde the dragoun, ther a stod, / And flegb avei, ase he wer wod. / Beves ran after, withouten faile, / And the dragoun he gan asaile; / [...] Beves thanne with strokes smerte / Smot the dragoun to the herte, / [...]*³¹

Similarly, Spenser's Red Crosse Knight in *The Faerie Queene* who, as the representative of the Anglican Church, fights against the dragon (= Satan) not merely in the traditional epic manner with lance and sword but also,

29 Quoted in Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon* (fn. 3), p. 157. See also St Martha and the Tarasque, though the dragon, when walking through the village on the leash as the saint's tame pet, is attacked by the vengeful villagers and falls down dead. Further examples can be found in Riches, »Encountering the Monstrous« (fn. 27), table on p. 203, who also discusses the motif of banishment.

30 See Herzman et al., *Four Romances of England* (fn. 13). The dragon-fight episode runs from 2597-2910.

31 *Four Romances of England* (fn. 13), 2867-2870 (p. 276) and 2883-2884 (p. 277). Translation: »To God he [Bevis] prayed and to Mary, His beloved mother; this heard the dragon that stood there and flew away as if it were mad. Bevis ran after it, without fail, and began to attack the dragon. [...] Bevis then, with dolorous strokes, pierced the dragon's heart.«

or even more so, by spiritual means.³² Both the anonymous poet of the Middle English *Bevis of Hampton* and, in his wake, Spenser ›allegorise‹ the epic and romance traditions which often feature the dragon as the ultimate opponent for the hero and thus provide a link between the ›hagiographic‹ and the secular traditions.

I hope the discussion of the preceding examples has succeeded in illustrating the (often) complex nature of literary dragons and in showing that there is still a great amount of work to be done on the analysis and discussion of the ›typical‹ features of modern dragons. They are actually much more numerous in modern fantasy literature than they ever were in medieval texts, not least since many a modern writer of fantasy is interested in dragons as non-human(ised) characters.³³ It takes, of course, considerable poetic and stylistic skills and expertise to create a convincing non-human character. Saphira, in the novel (and also in the film) *Eragon*,³⁴ is, in my opinion, not so much a failure of conception as of execution. The author, Paolini, seems quite simply unable to make the reader forget (let alone enjoy) the intermediary language. As a consequence, his characters come across as stiff and predictable and the great popularity of his books is due more to the fascination with the bond between human protagonist and dragon than to any stylistic mastery on the part of the author. Paolini is also a ›good‹ example of an author plundering the rich and variegated modern tradition of dragon-figures without going back to medieval (or earlier) sources. His most immediate model, Anne McCaffrey's dragons of Pern,³⁵ are, by contrast to *Eragon*, a successful adaptation of the fire-breathing, flying dragon to a basically ›natural scientific‹ framework. McCaffrey's dragons are part of the planet's environment and have been bred to their current size and nature by early colonists in order to counter the cyclical threat of the red star. They are extraordinary beings with telepathic and telekinetic abilities who are able to travel *between* time and

32 See Maik Goth, ›Spenser's Dragons‹, in: Chen/Honegger (eds.), *Good Dragons are Rare* (fn. 1), forthcoming. The relevant passage is to be found in *The Faerie Queene* (first published 1590), bk. 1, cantos xi and xii (see Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene. Books I to III*, Douglas Brooks-Davies (ed.), London 1987).

33 See Anne C. Petty, *Dragons of Fantasy*, Crawfordville, FL 2008.

34 Christopher Paolini, *Eragon*, New York 2003.

35 The ›dragons of Pern‹ series comprises to date more than a dozen novels. The basic traits are already in place in the first one: Anne McCaffrey, *Dragonflight*, New York 1968.

space, though they are not ›magical‹ in the stricter sense of the word (i. e. they are not creatures that violate the laws of nature of Pern).

Yet while the two dragon-types mentioned above correspond more or less to the traditional flying and fire-breathing dragon, we find more complex creations with other authors – creations that raise some questions as to the origin and function of the different elements. Let me illustrate the problem by means of one of Barbara Hambly's ›dragon‹ novels, *Dragonshadow*.³⁶ Hambly makes use of the dual nature of her male protagonist (John Aversin), who appears as warrior and dragon-slayer on the one hand and as book-learned and experimental scholar with an interest in the anatomy and habits of the dragons, on the other. By means of this dual perspective, Hambly succeeds in making her dragons fascinating, yet at the same time fearsome and (at least initially) disturbingly alien creatures. The encounter between John, who travels in search of one particular dragon in his balloon, *Milkweed*, to the Skerries of Light, the home of the dragons, is a beautiful illustration of the alien, yet fascinating nature of dragons:

»And above the twisted cordillera of the Skerries of Light, dragons hung in the air, bright chips of color, like butterflies in the glory of morning. [...]

Nymr sea-blue, violet-crowned ...

[...] Not dark like sapphires, nor yet the color of the sea – not these northern seas at any rate – more was he the color of lobelia or the bluest hearts of blue iris. But he was violet-crowned. The long, curving horns that grew from among the flower-bed mane were striped, white and purple; the ribbon-scales streaming in pennons from the shorter, softer fur gleaned a thousand shades of amethyst and plum. Long antennae swung and bobbed from the whole spiked and rippling cloud, and these were tipped with glowing damson lights. The dragon swung around once and hung motionless on the air like a gull, regarding him. Even at that distance John knew that the eyes, too, were violet, brilliant as handfuls of jewels.

Don't look at his eyes, he thought, bending his head down over the ebon and pearwood hurdy-gurdy, the wind gently rocking the swaying boat. *Don't look at his eyes*. [...]

Nymr hung in the air for a moment longer, then tilted those vast blue butterfly wings and plunged straight down to the sea. [...]

Then the dragon broke the waves in an upleap of water, purple and flashing in the fountain brilliance directly under the *Milkweed*. [...]

Then it was hovering in front of him again, rocking on the air as a boat rocks at anchor. [...]

The swanlike head dipped and angled. The eyes faced front, a predator's

36 Barbara Hambly, *Dragonshadow*, New York 1999.

eyes. The entire great dripping body, thirty feet from beak-tip to the spiked and barbed pinecone of the tail, drifted closer.

John felt a querying, a touch and a pat, cold and alien as long slender fingers, probing his mind.«³⁷

Hambly's dragons are beings from beyond the stars, creatures of great power and (alien) intelligence about whom little is known. Hambly fuses elements from different traditions into a new, convincing whole. The butterfly wings, which seem, at first reading, rather incongruous, are most likely inspired by the famous painting »St George and the Dragon« (c 1470) by Paolo Uccello.



St George by Uccello, taken from
<http://www.wga.hu/art/u/uccello/6various/5dragon1.jpg>

The picture shows a two-legged dragon with what one could call »butterfly wings«. The spiked and barbed pinecone of the tail seems to unite medieval lore (the tail as the most dangerous part of a dragon) with modern reconstructions of some dinosaur-tails. The warning not to look into a drag-

³⁷ Hambly, *Dragonsbadon* (fn. 36), pp. 99, 105-107.

on's eyes may be based on general knowledge not to provoke (in particular) predatory animals by looking into their eyes – and may be ultimately connected with the etymology of the word ›dragon‹ (Greek *drakon*), which is believed to go back to *derkomai* ›the one who stares‹. One may furthermore detect elements from the Mesoamerican tradition with allusions to Quetzalcoatl, the plumed (flying) serpent god of the Aztecs. And last but not least, their ability to take on human form connects them with the Asian dragons. All in all, Hambly is able to capture the beauty and allure of the dragon in her descriptions – without letting us forget the fact that they are predators and not to be trifled with.

In her use of medieval and international lore, Hambly's approach to dragons is typically modern. It is not so much medieval sources *per se* that are incorporated and developed, but rather the late 19th and early 20th century adaptations of prominent dragon-figures (most notably the *Beowulf*-dragon, Fafnir, and Spenser's dragon in the *Fairie Queene*). Aside from the deplorable slip-up which resulted in the ›Disneyfication‹ of dragons (starting with Kenneth Grahame's *The Reluctant Dragon*),³⁸ we find that the most influential dragon of 20th century literature is Smaug the Golden in *The Hobbit*.³⁹ His kinship with the mighty worms of Germanic legend (notably in *Beowulf* and *The Saga of the Volsungs*)⁴⁰ is unmistakable, yet Professor Tolkien went beyond his sources and developed his ›Germanic‹ dragon into a character in his own right – a character that has become so influential that many modern dragons owe their basic characteristics to Smaug and thus, indirectly, to the dragons of medieval lore. It has therefore become increasingly difficult to differentiate between ›genuine‹ medieval dragon lore and elements that have been extrapolated from hints or lacunae. I mentioned the danger of a dragon's stare as just such a ›new‹ characteristic. Another would be the predilection for riddling speech. In her research into the depiction of dragons in 20th century children's books,⁴¹ Maren Bonacker sought to find out where the dragon's ›riddling speech‹ came

38 Kenneth Grahame, *The Reluctant Dragon*, New York 1989 (originally published 1898).

39 John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, London 41991, 11937.

40 *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Jesse L. Byock (ed. & trans.), London 1990.

41 See Maren Bonacker, »Der Drache aber verliebte sich ... Die Zähmung der Drachen in der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur des 20. Jahrhunderts«, in: Chen/Honegger (eds.), *Good Dragons are Rare* (fn. 1), forthcoming.

from. Yet in spite of our combined efforts, we could not trace it back further than to the conversation between Bilbo and Smaug which has, however, no exact medieval counterpart.⁴² There are, of course, numerous models of riddling speech available, both from the Middle Ages and antiquity (the Old English *Solomon and Saturn*,⁴³ the Old Norse *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*,⁴⁴ the Greek Oedipus and the Sphinx), but the transfer onto dragons must be credited to Professor Tolkien.

Future research into the history and development of dragons from medieval to modern literature, and their function(s) within literary texts, must therefore avoid the fallacy of the ›direct influence theory‹. More often than not seemingly ›medieval‹ elements are either innovations by modern authors or, if they are based on medieval concepts, do not go back to the original texts themselves but have been transmitted by ›multiplier‹ figures such as Lister Matheson or Anne C. Petty, whose courses and publications provide the aspiring writers with the necessary background knowledge and motifs. The study of this ›living‹ tradition, however, will be the focus of another paper.

42 Sigurd's exchange with the dying Fafnir in ›The Lay of Fafnir‹ (*The Poetic Edda*, Carolyne Larrington (trans.), Oxford 1999, pp. 157-165) can hardly be called ›riddling speech‹.

43 *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, Robert J. Menner (ed.) New York 1941.

44 *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, Christopher Tolkien (ed.) London 1960.

