A good dragon is hard to find
or, from *draconitas* to *draco*

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Summary

Prof. Tolkien noted: 'There are in any case many heroes but very few good dragons.' (Monsters 17) Modern readers may wonder what he meant by 'good dragons' – certainly not virtuous or 'morally good' dragons, which are, basically, a modern invention. As Tolkien himself points out, a 'good dragon' is a beast that displays the typical characteristics of *draco* without becoming a mere (allegorical) representative of *draconitas* (i.e. the vice of avarice). Yet 'death by allegory' is not the only danger literary dragons have to face. My paper looks at the symbolic and narrative functions of dragons in Germanic literature throughout the ages. As will be shown, most dragons before (but also after) Tolkien do not live up to their full literary potential as protagonist, but remain either allegorical figures of evil, devices for testing the hero's qualities, steeds, or Disney-pets. It is only such dragons as Smaug in *The Hobbit* or Chrysophylax Dives in *Farmer Giles of Ham* who live up to Tolkien's idea of what a 'good dragon' should be: a dangerous protagonist in its own right partaking in the rich symbolism of the different traditions without being reduced to these 'symbolic' functions only.

> Then an old harrower of the dark
> happened to find the hoard 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
> hoards underground, to guard heathen gold
> through age-long vigils, though to little avail.
> (Heaney 72)

This is, if not the oldest then certainly the most famous dragon in vernacular English literature[1] – it[2] makes its first appearance in the second half of the Old

1 See Kordecki (*Traditions*) for an (incomplete) overview of dragons in medieval English literature. As Rauer (36) points out, the dragon-episode in *Beowulf* is "the longest account of a dragon-fight in medieval and classical literature." See also Speake (85-92) on the serpent in Anglo-Saxon art.

2 Both terms used to refer to the dragon in Old English, i.e. *draca* and *wyrm*, are masculine. Although it is likely that some of the dragons mentioned in the works of medieval

English poem *Beowulf* (manuscript circa A.D. 1000). Professor Tolkien, whose life-long study of the poem gave him an unrivalled understanding of its content, structure and form, commented in his 1936 British Academy lecture on the monsters and remarked: "There are in any case many heroes but very few good dragons" (Tolkien, "Monsters" 17).[3] Modern readers may ask what exactly professor Tolkien could have meant with 'good' – certainly not 'morally good' since the 'pet dragon' is an invention of modern times.[4] What Tolkien had been looking for was "plain pure fairy-story dragon;" a protagonist that is a "real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own […]" (Tolkien, "Monsters" 17). Such dragons were, to his mind, "[t]errifying creatures" that "seem to be able to comprise human malice and bestiality together … a sort of malicious wisdom and shrewdness" (Rateliff, *History* 527).[5]

In the following essay, then, I will explore the literary function(s) of dragons by means of the Tolkienian concept of 'good' dragons, discuss exemplary instances of dragons as they occur in vernacular (predominantly English) literature and contrast them to Tolkien's own tales as illustrative examples for the development of this central critical idea.

I Draco mythologicus

Even though the focus of my paper concerns the dragon as a literary character, I cannot simply pass by completely the 'father' (or, considering its nature, 'mother') of all dragons: the dragon of mythology. It is not only the oldest of its species, but also the best-researched one. The greater part of publications you can find is in some way or other concerned with the symbolism[6] and meaning of the mythical dragon in different cultures. Because even a brief sketch of the dif-

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authors are female, I will use the generic 'it' to refer to dragons if they do not exhibit a clearly defined and gendered personality, in which case I will use 'he' or 'she'.

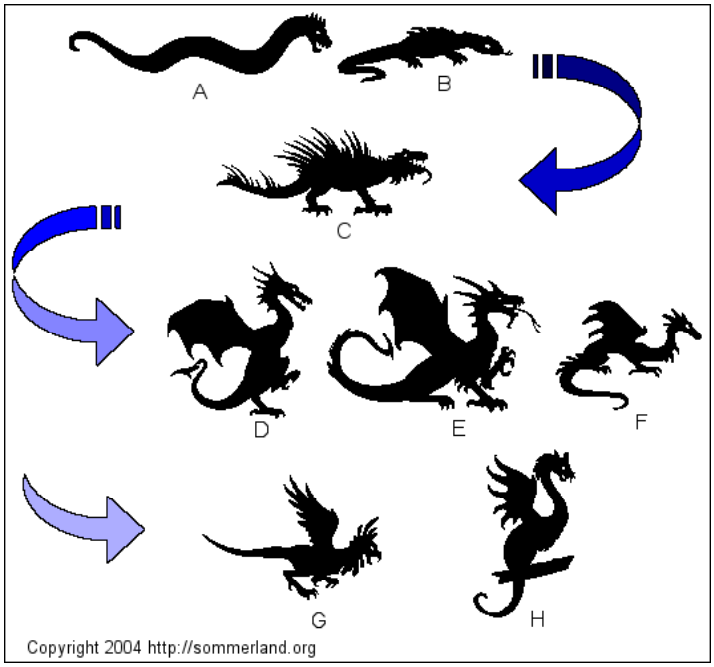
3 Rateliff (*History* 533) puts it thus: "Tolkien felt that dragons in medieval literature suffered from being too abstract and not individual enough." Tolkien's initial discussion of 'good dragons' is largely a response to Chambers, who would have loved to exchange 'a wilderness of dragons' for the tale about the Heathobard Ingeld (cf. Tolkien, "Monsters" 11-12 and Drout, *Critics* 53).

4 See Maren Bonacker's paper in this volume for an overview of the development of dragons in children's books and the rise of the 'good' dragon, and Dieter Petzold's paper (also in this volume) on the specific cultural context of this development. See also Scull and the brief sketch in Rateliff (*History* 526).

5 The statement was made by JRRT in his 1965 radio interview with Denys Gueroult.

6 Tolkien, in the context of his lecture on dragons at the University Museum Oxford (1 January 1938; cf. Scull and Hammon 211), "notes that he is deliberately leaving out Chinese dragons, who are quite distinct from the European tradition, and symbolic dragons, such as St. George's dragons" (Rateliff, *History* 541).

ferent traditions would go beyond the limits of my paper, I have to ask the reader to turn to some of the studies listed in the bibliography[7] that discuss in detail the connection between dragons and the primeval forces of nature (and chaos). Also, I won't go into the question as to how and why the dragon is a universal phenomenon.[8] Suffice it to say that the idea or concept of the dragon seems to be part of our evolutionary set-up and is most likely 'hard-wired' into our brains, yet, interestingly, with a very wide range of phenotypes (at least in the Western tradition) that poses a challenge of its own to the scientifically minded dragonologist. The picture below shows some of the most frequent forms of the Western dragons; among others, it depicts different types of the basilisc (A and G), the (Comodo) lizard dragon type (B), the wyvern (D), and the 'common' winged dragon (E).



Let us move, then, beyond the 'mythic' stage and take a look at the use of the dragon outside myth – though, of course, the mythic background must always be kept in mind as the ultimate frame of reference.

7 E.g. Okken, Evans ("Dragon"), David Jones (1-23), Petty (213-74), and Schneidewind (*Drachen*).

8 See David Jones for an anthropological explanation of this phenomenon.

II Draco allegoricus et epicus

Many of the dragons in literature both old and new are not so much dragons, or, to use Tolkien's terminology, not really representatives of the *draco*, than personifications of *avaritia* (greed), a phenomenon which Tolkien called *draconitas*. Thus Fafnir in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, or the dragon in C.S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* are humans (Fafnir and Eustace, respectively) that have been transformed into worms[9] by their avarice;[10] and even the dragon in *Beowulf* is not entirely free of *draconitas*.[11] However, the degree to which the bodily transformation also affected the personality differs in each case. Eustace's human mind is merely trapped inside a dragon's body, whereas Fafnir's metamorphosis reaches somewhat deeper and seems to affect also his spirit, so that he is, in the end, more of a dragon than Eustace – which explains why readers never have the feeling that Fafnir is merely an allegory of vice, even though he started out as a human.[12] Nevertheless, Fafnir is not yet what we could call a 'good' dragon. Tolkien, in his 1965 radio interview with Denys Gueroult, was at pains to point out the difference between Fafnir, a human turned dragon, and Smaug, a dragon through and through (quoted in Rateliff [*History* 543]): "DG: I suppose Smaug might be interpreted as being a sort of Fafnir, is he? JRRT: Oh yes, very much so. Except no, Fafnir was a human or humanoid being who took this form, whereas Smaug is just pure intelligent lizard."

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9 A similar transformation of humans (two kings) into dragons is described in the Middle English romance *Bevis of Hamtoun*. There it is the exceptional ferocity of the two kings with which they fight each other for years that is responsible for their metamorphosis. The text comments (line 2623-26, in Herzman et al. 270): "After in a lite while/Thai become dragouns vile,/And so thai foughte dragouns ifere/Mor than foure and thretti yere." Translation: 'After a short while they turned into vile dragons, and so they fought [as] dragons against each other for more than 34 years.' Further examples of men shape-shifting or changing into dragons in Old Norse literature can be found in Evans ("Semiotics" 104-6).

10 It is, in this context, of importance that Farmer Giles, the hero of the eponymous tale by Tolkien, does not fall victim to the dragon-sickness (i.e. avarice) when haggling with the dragon about the payment (cf. Tolkien, *Farmer Giles* 64). He remains largely unaffected by the treasure and thus lays the foundation for his later rise to kingship.

11 Some scholars argue that the dragon is actually the transformed 'last survivor' who buried the treasure. The text does not say so explicitly, but neither does it rule out such a possibility.

12 The version of the tale as given in Andrew Lang's "The Story of Sigurd" in his *The Red Fairy Book* (357-67) presents Fafnir as a dragon right from the start. It also cuts the dialogue between Sigurd and the dying Fafnir to a short one-turn-each exchange (Lang 360).

Tolkien was probably equally sceptical towards all those 'allegorical' dragons that have their ultimate inspiration in the apocalyptic *Revelation of John*. Within a Christian framework, the dragon has become the symbol of the demonic forces[13] if not Satan himself. He is ubiquitous in Christian iconography and a favourite opponent of all aspirants to sainthood (e.g. Saint Margaret of Antiochia),[14] 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.[15]

The transition from hagiographic to epic dragon-fight is not always clear-cut. True, the saints (e.g. St Samson of Dol) usually refrain from using weapons and solely rely on the power of God and their prayers. Yet there are, on the one hand, saints (or angels) that do not abstain from using 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 that goes back to an Anglo-Norman original, is a case in point. He fights against the dragon[16] but it is not so much his bodily strength or his chivalric virtues that help him overcome the beast, but his faith in God. It is, typically, his prayer to God and the Virgin Mary that puts the dragon to flight (lines 2869f), and not his martial strength. Similarly Spenser's Red Crosse Knight in *The Faerie Queene* who, as the representative of the Anglican Church, fights against the dragon (= Satan) not simply in the traditional epic manner with lance and sword but also,

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13 Dragons, next to venomenous 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* (Foster, lines 522-28): "Ther was he beyton with fendys fell,/With kene lyonus that on hym gnowe/And dragonus that hym al todrowe./With eddrys and snakus full of venym/He was all todrawyn yche lym." 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."

14 See Joger and Luckhardt for examples of dragons in Christian art. See the Middle English *Stanzaic Life of Margaret of Antioch* (by John Lygate, c. 1420, edited by Reames, lines 163-218) for a description of the saint's fight against the devil who attacked her in the shape of a dragon. Price provides a discussion of the theological implications of devils taking on dragon-shape.

15 See Riches ("Encountering" 201) and Leclercq-Marx 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 collected and analysed a representative selection of texts.

16 This 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 Weiss and Jacobs (297-300) for a discussion of the interpolation. The entire dragon-fight episode can be found in *Bevis of Hampton*, lines 2597-910 (Herzman et al. 269-77).

or even more so, with spiritual means.[17] Both the anonymous poet of the Middle English *Bevis of Hampton* and, in his wake, Spenser thus 'allegorises' 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. Even the epic 'division' between secular worm and allegorical dragon is not always consistently kept and romance may turn into saint's life, as can be seen in Guy of Warwick who, in the second part of the eponymous romance, becomes a pilgrim, a warrior for Christ and, in the end, a hermit.

Truly '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 career. 'Dragonslayer' is one of the most prestigious titles a hero may attain – and it is no coincidence (as Tolkien was one of the first to point out) that Beowulf ends his heroic career with a fight against a dragon. Another typical example of the dragon as the 'ultimate' opponent is seen in the Middle English romance *Sir Eglamour of Artois* (c1350; edited by Hudson) which, despite its French setting, seems to be a genuinely English poem. The eponymous hero, to gain the hand of his beloved Christabelle, has to succeed in a series of three tasks of increasing difficulty: first he has to hunt a hart and, after killing it, fight against the giant herdsman in whose care the harts are; second, he has to confront and kill a boar and, as a consequence, also the giant whose pet it was; and 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 century in the romance *Sir Degaré*. 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 an hermit. At the age of twenty, Degaré ventures forth into the world to find out about his parentage. In accordance with his rustic upbringing, he is armed only with a stout staff or club of oak, which comes in handy when he meets an earl who is fighting a dragon. The beast has already devoured the earl's dogs and his knight and is now giving the earl himself a hard time. 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 fil adoun anon right,

17 See Maik Goth's paper on Spenser's dragon in this volume. The relevant passage is to be found in *The Faerie Queene*, book 1, cantos xi and xii. See King (129-45) on the connection between the dragon-fight episodes in *Bevis of Hampton* and *The Faerie Queene*.

> And frapte his tail with gret might
> Upon Degarres side,
> That up-so-doun 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.[18]
> (Laskaya and Salisbury, *Degaré* lines 373-84)

We cannot be certain, of course, but I think that the poet is after shocking and amusing his audience with his youthful hero whose first deed is beating a dragon to pulp with a bat (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 – not least those concerned with how a proper hero should behave. A more sophisticated version of such a subversion of typical romance clichés (including dragon-fights) is found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late 14th century), a text Tolkien edited in the early 1920s. 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 help but feel the gentle irony with which he treats these stock-elements: "Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez and with wolues als, / Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, that woned in the knarrez, / Bothe wyth bullez and berez, and borez otherquyle, / And etaynez, that hmy anelede of the heye felle;"[19] 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.

The tendency to instrumentalise dragons and to (mis-)use them as mere plot-elements comes to an end only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The worms evolve from allegorical monsters with a biblical pedigree and are accepted into the community of 'speaking animals'. Hand in hand goes a 'disnification'[20] of many of the traditional epic and legendary narrative matters – a development which I am going to discuss in detail later on.

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18 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."

19 Text from Tolkien and Gordon (23, lines 720-23); the letters yoke and thorn have been replaced by their modern equivalents. Tolkien (*Gawain, Pearl, Orfeo* 38) gives the following translation: "At whiles with worms he wars, and with wolves also, / at whiles with wood-trolls that wandered in the crags, / and with bulls and with bears and boars, too, at times; / and with ogres that hounded him from the heights of the fells."

20 I first used the term 'Disneyification' until a member of my audience at the IMC 2008 in Leeds pointed out to me that Baker (174-84) uses 'disnification' in his discussion of

III Draco modernus domesticus

Kenneth Grahame's protagonist of his tale *The Reluctant Dragon* (originally published 1898) is most likely the progenitor of all those numerous 'friendly dragons' that populate 20th and 21st century children's books.[21] The dragon-protagonist of this tale is an entirely harmless beast with a strong interest in poetry and likes nothing better than a life in peace and quiet. It is only due to the misconception and prejudices of the neighbouring villagers that it comes to a staged fight between him and St George. Grahame's story thus exploits the comic potential inherent in the contrast between the traditional concept of the Western dragon (evil, savage, destructive, aggressive, and clearly dangerous) and the glaring inability of his dragon-protagonist to live up to this concept. Grahame, in contrast to later authors, relies on his audience's familiarity with the original Western tradition. It is still alive, though cast in a 'fairy tale' mode, as can be seen in some of the contemporary stories by Edith Nesbit, collected in her *The Book of Dragons* (1900). Grahame's humour works only against this backdrop of the man-eating, fire-spitting and generally evil dragon. Subsequent writers took things further and, in time, the 'good dragon' (not in Tolkien's sense of the word, though) as a harmless curiosity became a literary entity that was (at least concerning character) no longer linked to its pre-20th-century origins.[22] The development of dragons in the wake of Grahame's 'reluctant' worm shows more and more the neotenisation of the originally ferocious beast. We find this process already under way in the early illustrations to the story, yet it was not until Walt Disney Studios released their cartoon version of *The Reluctant Dragon* that we have a thoroughgoing 'disnification' in Baker's meaning of the word, namely "to render [the animal] stupid by rendering it visual" (Baker 174; see illustrations below). The cartoon character looks more like a fat, overgrown ant than a dragon. The final step that causes the ultimate disassociation of Disney's 'dragon' from its beastly background took place with the availability of merchandising products. The dragon is presented in a disnified and neotenised vis-

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the depiction of animals. I apply the term here in a more general way to refer to the 'playing down' of most of the 'dangerous' (yet essential) characteristics of animal protagonists.

21 See Berman, Evans ("Semiotics" 111, n. 43), Hanlon, Bonacker and Petzold (the last two both in this volume). There is, to my knowledge, only one 'tame' dragon in medieval literature, a nameless 'dragun' in one of Marie de France's fable "Del dragun e del vilein" (Spiegel 154-57) in which a dragon entrusts a peasant with an egg and is betrayed by him.

22 See Bonacker's paper in this volume for further 'harmless' dragons in children's literature. Terry Pratchett's swamp-dragons (bred as pets for the nobility of Ank-Morpokh) are the parodistic yet logical consequence of such an attitutde (see Fornet-Ponse's paper in this volume).

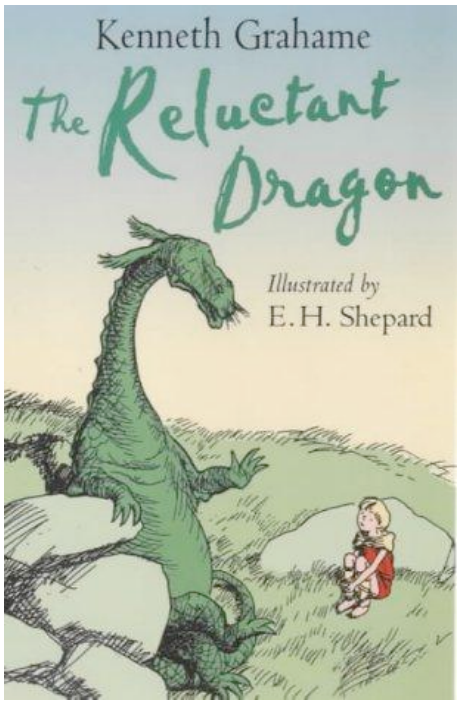
ual form, which is neither linked to a narrative context any longer, nor to a visual nor a symbolic tradition. The cuddly toy has been emptied completely of all the cultural meanings associated with the dragon and thus finds its 'logical' place next to the equally de-naturalised teddy bear. This transformation by disnification may have provided the original inspiration for Monty Python's infamous 'Killer Rabbit' episode in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The rabbit is, next to the lamb, usually seen as the most innocuous of animals. Monty Python's decision to give it the place and function traditionally assigned to the dragon is not only part of their overall strategy of inverting the expectations held by the audience, but it is also a comment on the cultural treatment of the dragon. The disnification of the 'Reluctant Dragon's' offspring has indeed moved the popular perception of dragons far into the direction of the 'cuddly animal' – and thus the rabbit. Monty Python take things one step further and replace the dragon (aka 'the monster') by a rabbit proper; yet, at the same time, they equip the product of this transmogrification process with some of the dragon's original ferocity and perilousness and thus highlight the discrepancy of 'original nature' and current depiction. The Killer Rabbit as well as the Reluctant Dragon thus illustrate that animals are often no longer carriers of predictable meanings but signifiers without clearly assigned characteristics.

These 'alienated' Western dragons may be responsible for the adoption of and hybridisation with another type of dragon – that of the Eastern (mythological) tradition. According to Quiguang Zhao, who published his *A Study of Dragons, East and West* in 1992, we can divide the Eastern dragons into three categories. Those of the high mythological tradition are depicted as positive and benevolent creatures, those of the folk religion tradition are often ambiguous characters, whereas the dragons of folk-tales are almost always seen in a negative light and provide obstacles that the hero must overcome. All dragons of the Eastern tradition, however, share a common basic phenotype and differ merely in such details as the number of claws (imperial dragons, for example, have feet with five claws, whereas lesser dragons have only three). The picture below shows a traditional imperial Chinese dragon.

http://www.kidsdomain.com/holiday/winter/color/dragon90.gif

This uniformity in appearance stands in sharp contrast to the dragons of the (pre-20th-century) Western tradition, where we find a diversity of forms and shapes yet a contrastive uniformity in moral character. Whichever shape a Western dragon may take, it is always evil and must be overcome by the hero/ine of the story.[23] Grahame's parodistic deviation from this pattern – his tale is clearly about a Western dragon (cf. E.H. Shepard's illustration below) – does not show any recognisable influence by the 'benevolent' dragon of the Eastern tradition. Yet once established as a literary element, it paved the way for the adoption of its Chinese cousins as protagonists in western stories. A dragon such as Fuchur in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* [original title: *Die unendliche Geschichte*], though explicitly identified as a Chinese dragon, would not have been possible without Grahame's pioneering break with Western tradition.

23 Riches (200) makes a similar point: "No one is quite sure what they [dragons] look like, how they behave or where they live, but one thing is clear: they are almost invariably associated with evil and can be usefully set up in opposition to a properly well-behaved human."



E.H. Shepard's cover-illustration for Grahame's *The Reluctant Dragon* (featuring a traditional Western wingless dragon of the four-legged type). [http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/images/n5/n27115.jpg]

Picture of a plastic-figure based on Disney's cartoon-version of *The Reluctant Dragon*. [http://www.wm-drewcollectibles.com/images/reluctantdragon.jpg]

Yet Tolkien, as becomes clear from his quote above, was certainly not thinking of those harmless and often rather ridiculous beasts when he talked about 'good dragons'. Not that he would abstain from using dragons in his children's stories or poems for comic effect. The adventures of the toy-dog Roverandom in the eponymous tale (written 1925) features the Great White Dragon of the moon who chases the hapless Roverandom and the moon-dog. Dieter Petzold ("Beasts" 95) astutely observes that this dragon is "both dangerous and comical". I would like to argue that the comical aspect is due to the genre of the narrative (a children's story) rather than to an intrinsic characteristic trait of the dragon.[24] It is, to my knowledge, only once that Tolkien came close to depicting an utterly ridiculous and comical dragon – in his poem "The Dragon's Visit".[25] However, even there matters are not so straightforward and the nameless green dragon reads like a parody of Grahame's reluctant worm and could thus be seen as an indirect response towards the Victorian ideal of male heroism, to which Grahame's story was a direct reaction.[26] Tolkien's dragon, who shares with Grahame's beast a predilection for the fine arts (poetry and song, respectively), is no spineless weakling. Thus, the green dragon, when attacked by the townspeople and the firemen who are led by an aptly named Captain George, has no scruples defending himself. He lays waste to the town, devours several people for supper and buries the hapless Captain George before flying off. The revised version of 1961 (see Anderson 312) changes the final stanzas and has him killed by a stab to the heart, delivered by the only survivor, a Lobelia-like Miss Biggins. Yet in spite of the dragon's demise, the overall tone of the poem is not much changed. Modern readers may feel a bit at a loss how to react to the poem. They may choose to ignore or downplay the actual brutality of the events – an entire town is eradicated, several people eaten – and focus on the 'funny' aspects of the tale, such as the dragon singing in the tree, hoping that people will appreciate his musical talent, and the rather naïve attitude of the townspeople towards the dragon. They seem to consider him a nuisance rather than a threat to their lives (foreshadowing thus the initial reaction of the people of Ham (in Tolkien's *Farmer Giles*) who at first think of the dragon as a 'seasonal' occurrence). The mixture of comical and frighteningly brutal elements is reminiscent of the humour found in Old Norse literature – a phenomenon that fascinated Tolkien.[27] The nameless green dragon of the poem drives home a fact that Tolkien's worms are never mere pets-dragons, however comical they may appear, and the idea of 'integrating' a dragon into human society, as seen in Grahame's happy

24 See also Brückner's (118-27) discussion of the White Dragon of the Moon.

25 First published in 1937, revised version in 1961. The text is most easily accessible in Anderson's *The Annotated Hobbit* (309-12).

26 See Petzold's essay in this volume.

27 See the discussion of examples in Shippey ("Heroes").

ending to *The Reluctant Dragon*, would have struck Tolkien as preposterous and utterly out of tune with the entire concept of 'dragon'.

There are indeed some good reasons for such reservations. Although dragons are an universal phenomenon and can be found in almost all cultures and times, it is not clear how the concept came into existence. Scholars have proposed numerous (more or less) ingenious theories about the origin of the concept of 'dragon'. Some argue that dragons are based on faint memories about dinosaurs that were genetically transmitted from the era of the very first mammals – whose occurrence overlapped with that of the giant reptiles for some time; some see dragons as personifications of forces of nature (storms, volcanic eruptions); or as evolutionary fusions of the three main hazards for the early mammals (the great cat, the raptor birds, and the snake). Whichever of these (and other, not listed) possibilities may have given birth to the concept, all of them have in common that the creature imagined is a powerful, dangerous, and awe-inspiring being – and no harmless pet at all. These characteristics are in accordance with both Western and the Eastern traditions, each highlighting a slightly different aspect of the basic set. Yet within this framework there is no room for 'cuddly' dragons. The 'disnification' alienates dragons from their very roots – whether East or West – and the products of this process no longer deserve to be counted among the 'real' or even 'good' (in Tolkien's sense) dragons.

IV Draco modernus ferox

1 The dragon as obstacle

In spite of the predominance of the *draco domesticus* in 20th and 21st century children's literature, the *draco ferox* of old has survived and is actually thriving in various forms and shapes. The traditional 'guardian dragon' is prominent, for example, in Edith Nesbit's *A Book of Dragons* (1900), though it is often treated ironically.[28] Furthermore, the dragon's oldest and most basic function as obstacle is to be encountered not only in numerous works of heroic fantasy, but also in a large number of fantasy-role-playing games – both in the tabletop and the online versions. It is no coincidence that one of the most popular and oldest RPG features the dragon, a most formidable opponent, as the second element of its name: *Dungeons & Dragons*. The recognition of the dragon as the most dangerous animal is traditional, as could be seen in our discussion of the epic tradition.

In the late 20th century, dragons have been re-introduced once more to a wide audience by Joanne K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books. They feature dragons as part of the fauna of the magical parallel world and they are, in this

28 See Petzold in this volume.

context, little more exotic than a tiger or any other predatory feline. Rowling's dragons conform to the traditional Western stereotype of the 'guardian of the treasure' (see the dragon guarding the vault in Gringots in *The Deathly Hallows*) and do not seem to be endowed with speech. They have their first prominent appearance in *The Philosopher's Stone* where the game-keeper Hagrid acquires a dragon's egg, which he incubates so that a young dragon hatches. His attempts to bring up the baby-dragon Norbert provide not only material for comedy and comic relief (see Petty 198-202), but Hagrid's failure to turn the dragon into a pet can be seen as an instance of a dragon's (successful) opposition to being 'disnified'. In *The Goblet of Fire*, they are obstacles against which the protagonists have to pit their strength and inventiveness within the framework of the wizard tournament. The task of snatching away a golden-painted egg combines the motif of the 'treasure-guarding dragon' with the commonly known fact that mother-animals defend their eggs. Interestingly, Rowling does not differentiate between 'Western' and 'Eastern' dragons in a fundamental way and includes the latter in her basically 'Western' presentation of dragons. The Chinese dragon is thus simply a variant of the traditional Western dragon.

Although the *draco modernus ferox* occurs frequently in 'fantastic or fantasy literature' (one may almost consider the fact that a story features a dragon as a sign of it being 'fantastic'), there are books and also films that make use of 'dragons' in a 'realistic' framework. Movies such as *Reign of Fire* feature dragons in the traditional sense of the word and simply provide a 'scientific' explanation for most of the dragon's typical characteristics.[29] An alternative way of re-inventing the dragon is best exemplified by the *Jurassic Park* films. Genetical engineering enables scientists to re-create dinosaurs that, in the course of the experiment, threaten the humans on the island. Instead of a mythic beast confronting knights in armour we have re-surrected pre-historic dinosaurs attacking modern-day heroes. *Jurassic Park* may be seen as the logical consequence of the dominance of the natural science discourse: dragons proper have no longer a place in modern 'realistic' literature yet they come in by the back-door in the guise of dinosaurs, which take over some of the functions originally performed by the dragons.

2 The dragon as prop (and beyond)

Similar to the preceding function, though not as specific, is the use of dragons as narrative props. Fantasy artists and comic-book-writers, such as Vincente Segrelles,[30] make use of dragons as mounts that carry their riders either horseback fashion or in the air. They are neither especially vicious nor intelligent nor

29 See Dickinson's *The Flight of Dragons*, albeit this book is tongue in cheek.

30 See www.segrelles.com/works/mercenary.htm.

do they show personalised characteristics and thus remain exotic and aesthetically pleasing but otherwise rather marginal elements without emotional impact. Segrelle's dragons may fascinate people who are interested in the mechanics and aesthetics of 'aircrafts', but are a disappointment to all those who are looking for character rather than mere animals. It comes therefore as no surprise that most writers, who have to rely on the power of words only, try and exploit the dragon's rich potential by providing dialogue and characterisation that goes beyond the 'animal' level.

A good example of a successful development of this potential within a basically 'natural scientific' framework – i.e. the dragons are part of the planet's environment – is Anne McCaffrey's concept of Pernese dragons. Bred to their current size and nature by early colonists so that the cyclical threat of the red star may be met, they are extraordinary beings with telepathic and telekinetic abilities who are able to travel in *between* time and space.[31] Yet what renders them so popular and successful with millions of readers is not so much their special talents and abilities, but rather their distinct personalities – which brings us to the next section.

3 The dragon as character

Many modern writers of fantasy are interested in dragons as non-human(ised) characters. It takes, of course, considerable poetic and stylistic skills and expertise to create a convincing non-human character. Saphira, in the novel *Eragon*, is, in my opinion, not so much a failure of conception (which goes directly back to McCaffrey's Pernese dragons anyway), but 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 author's part.

Barbara Hambly's novels *Dragonsbane*, *Dragonshadow*, *Knight of the Demon Queen*, and *Dragonstar*, are examples for a more successful creation of dragon-characters. She achieves this mainly by having two of her protagonists transgress the boundaries that divide the species. On the one hand, her main female human character, Jenny Waynest, repeatedly metamorphs into a dragon and thus experiences this alien and non-human state of being. On the other, the dragon Morkeleb the Black takes on human form and begins to understand humans, thus initiating a process of 'humanisation' and a development that in-

31 As such 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).

creasingly alienates him from his fellow-dragons.[32] Furthermore, Hambly (at least in the first two books of the series) makes use of John Aversin's (the male protagonist) twin-nature as, on the one hand, warrior and dragon-slayer, and, on the other, book-learned and experimental scholar interested in the anatomy and habits of the dragons. Due to 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 Aversin, who travels in search of Morkeleb the Black in his balloon *Milkweed* to the Skerries of Light, the home of the dragons in his world, illustrates beautifully the alien 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 …*
>
> And somehow the turn of that music, medium-swift, trip-foot yet stately, spoke of the shape of the dragon John saw before him, circling the bare pale spires of the rock near which the *Milkweed* hovered, sixty feet below. 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*.
>
> He played the tune that was Nymr's, fingers moving true with long practice over the ivory keys. A hurdy-gurdy is a street instrument, made to be heard above din and at a great distance in open air. The music curled from the rosined wheel like colored ribbon unspooling: blue and violet.
>
> 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*. John grasped and swung on the rigging, causing the fragile craft to heel, and the tourmaline wing knifed past close enough to douse his face with spray. It had only to spit fire at him and he was done, he thought, swiveling one of the small catapults to bear as the dragon vanished above the air bags. Sixty feet above water, any fight would be a fight to death. Shadow crossed him, light translucent through the stretch of the wings.

32 He is in this comparable to Commander Data, the android member of the Starship Enterprise crew in the 'Next Generation' series.

> Then it was hovering in front of him again, rocking on the air as a boat rocks at anchor.
>
> John stepped back from the weapon, picked up the hurdy-gurdy, and played again the pixilated threnody of the dragon's name.
>
> The swanlike head dipped and angled. The eyes faced front, a predator's 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. (Hambly, *Dragonshadow* 99, 105-7)

Her 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 (at first reading rather incongruous) butterfly wings are most likely inspired by the famous painting *St. George and the Dragon* (c1470) by Paolo Uccello, which shows a two-legged dragon with 'butterfly' wings. The warning not to look into a dragon's eyes may be based on general knowledge not to provoke (especially) predatory animals by meeting their gaze directly – or it may go back to a more literary tradition which I could trace back as far as Tolkien's Glaurung.[33] 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 that they are predators and not to be trifled with. Unlike the 'domesticated' dragons of Pern, they come in contact with humans only rarely and keep their fierce and proud independence. And although Hambly did not, unfortunately, refrain from having the dragons join the 'alliance against the evil demons' in the last volume (*Dragonstar*), she otherwise restricted the humanising tendencies to Morkeleb the Black and left the other dragons in their (more or less) unspoilt 'otherness' – an achievement few other authors share.

There are, of course, easy ways out if an author does not want to tackle the problem of dealing with non-human characters. Gordon R. Dickson, in his *The Dragon and the George* (1976, based on a novelette first published 1957), for example, not only plays with the readers' expectations by presenting the conflict dragon vs. knight mainly from a dragon's point of view; he also 'solves' the problem of how to depict an alien mind by having a human protagonist finding himself (respectively his mind) inside a dragon's body. The reader thus learns about dragons and their way of life from a vantage point at once 'inside' the dragon community yet at the same time also completely unproblematic to relate

33 The etymology of the word 'dragon' (Greek *drakon*) is believed to go back to *derkomai* 'the one who stares'. Various of the dragons mentioned in Greek and Latin literature function as guardians or 'watchers' (see, for example, Ladon, the dragon guarding the golden Apples of the Hesperides).

to. Dickson's dragon is thus indeed a 'character' – but, in spite of his dragon-body, he can be hardly counted among the 'dragon-characters'. Dickson's dragon-protagonist may be seen, to some extent, inspired by the literary ancestor of most western dragons: Fafnir of the *Völsunga Saga* or the two kings-turned-dragon in *Bevis of Hampton*. It could be argued that they, too, are nothing but human minds enclosed in the bodies of dragons. The vital difference is, however, that the bodily transformation of human Fafnir, brother to Regin, into mythical beast and guardian of the hoard of the Nibelungs, goes hand in hand with at least some degree of transformation of his personality – which is also true for the two kings in *Bevis* who seem to have lost their human qualities entirely. Fafnir who is killed by Sigurd and who holds the famous 'deathbed-conversation' with his nemesis has at least partially the ring of a genuine *draco* rather than that of a human mind trapped inside a dragon's body.

The way towards successful literary dragon-characters is thus to strike the right balance between primarily human traits (speech, rational reasoning, ability to plan one's actions, ability to love, but also to pretend and deceive – and, maybe, humour) and the predominantly animal nature and physical shape. The fact that many of the animal characteristics still play an important role in the lives of men renders them all the more convincing and we may recognise parts of ourselves 'through a glass darkly'.[34]

The discussion of some of the medieval as well as modern works featuring dragons has shown that the 'modern' tradition of 'dragons as literary characters' seems to go back not so much to the traditional dragons of medieval romances or even older Germanic epics, but that the origin of the *draco modernus ferox* is most likely to be found in Tolkien's work, namely in his influential *The Hobbit* (1937). As mentioned before, Tolkien did not only take up, adapt and develop traditional (medieval) dragon-lore such as the dragon's possessive lust for treasure, his fiery breath, and his unprotected belly, but he also added new elements to the picture – such as the dragon's predilection for riddles or the dangers of looking into his eyes.

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34 The *Beowulf*-dragon, the other famous representative in medieval western literature, is something of a disappointment. Although the poet brings him to life as a formidable and ferocious beast in passages of vivid description and great poetic beauty, the presentation lacks the necessary human traits to establish him as a character. The audience does not see him in interaction with other protagonists nor are we given more than a second-hand glimpse of the workings of his mind. His full poetic potential thus remains undeveloped, which, in view of the poem's overall structure, may be as well. A dragon of Smaugian quality and attractiveness would have dangerously shifted the focus from the hero-protagonist onto his opponent and weakened the (allegedly intended) allegorical-moralistic dimension of the poem.

In the following, I will discuss Tolkien's Smaug and Chrysophylax Dives as the 'fathers' of modern dragons – the former because Smaug has become *the* prototypical dragon of 20th century literature, the latter, though published much later and not connected with the legendarium, because he provides us with a unique opportunity of observing how Tolkien handled a dragon-protagonist outside the mythological framework of Middle-earth.

3.1 Smaug & Chrysophylax Dives

3.1.1 Smaug

Tolkien's work offers a variety of dragons – some are merely hinted at (Ancalagon the Black or Scatha the Worm), some have distinct personalities even though they are not yet 'round characters' (e.g. Glaurung), and some come to life as fully-developed protagonists.[35] Tolkien's dragons started out as semi-mechanical beings used in the siege of Gondolin to transport troops and to overcome the walls of the elven city. Yet they soon developed into more 'organic' beings and shed the last traces of their initial inspiration in Tolkien's World War I encounters with tanks (see Garth 220-21). With Glaurung, and even more so with Smaug, Tolkien abandoned the 'dragon-as-siege-engine' concept and turned towards their ancestors in medieval literature. He takes up elements found in Old Norse and Old English literature and uses them in order to develop his very own concept of *draco*. It may be of importance that his two most fully developed dragon-personalities, Smaug and Chrysophylax Dives,[36] are to be found in two texts that have either, in the case of Chrysophylax, no connection to Middle-earth, or, in the case of Smaug, show, at least originally, only very tenuous links to the legendarium. Tolkien, in his attempt to place *The Hobbit* within the larger framework of his legendarium after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, took special care to incorporate Smaug and bring his existence in line with the history of dragons in Middle-earth (see "The Quest of Erebor" in *Unfinished Tales*). Although this 'friendly takeover' has been, from a structural point of view, successful, it has influenced Tolkien's depiction of Smaug only

35 See Evans ("Dragon-Lore") and Rateliff (*History* 525-46) for a discussion of Smaug and the dragons in Tolkien's legendarium.

36 Rateliff (*History* 529) calls Smaug, Glorund and Chrysophylax Dives "fully developed personalities." There is, in my mind, a notable difference in degree between Smaug and Chrysophylax on the one hand, and Glorund/Glaurung on the other. I therefore do not fully agree with Rateliff (*History* 530) who claims that "Glorund obviously served as Tolkien's model for all the dragons who came after him, most especially for Smaug […]."

marginally. Smaug still exhibits traits of his independent inception and remains somewhat alien to the world of *The Lord of the Rings*.[37]

Although Smaug is neither the earliest nor the most powerful dragon in Tolkien's Middle-earth (see Petty in this volume and Evans, Dragon-Lore), he is nevertheless the most famous, admired and even most liked of Glaurung's offspring – and very likely the most important model for later authors of fantasy. He is, to my mind, the prototype of what Tolkien would call 'a good dragon' and thus worth closer attention.

When we first encounter Smaug, we are not interested in hearing about his ancestry and his place within the larger framework of Middle-earth. It is sufficient that the dragon occurs as a 'natural' element in the archaic world of *The Hobbit*, where dwarves live in kingdoms under the mountains, mining for precious metals and stones. Nevertheless, the first face-to-snout encounter with the dragon has been carefully prepared by the narrator who, throughout the story, strategically inserts information on dragons and hints at a larger body of 'dragon-lore' in the background, mixing (for the reader) new and (most likely) familiar elements:[38] dragons can fly and breathe fire; they collect vast amounts of gold, silver, jewels and precious objects only to 'hoard' them;[39] their stare is dangerous and may subject his victim to the dragon's will; they are capable of speech and possess a cunning mind. Moreover, in the case of Smaug, we also get to know how he attacked Erebor and killed or put to flight the dwarves.[40] Here, however, the 'humanisation' ends. Smaug, as we will see, remains a dragon – and no harmless one at that – even though he is also a fully rounded character. This becomes unmistakably clear in our first encounter with the (as yet) sleeping dragon in the great hall under the mountain – a sight which leaves Bilbo awe-struck:

> There he lay, a vast red-golden dragon, fast asleep; a thrumming came from his jaws and nostrils, and wisps of smoke, but his fires were low in slumber. Beneath him, under all his limbs and his huge coiled tail, and about him on all sides

37 See also Rateliff (*History* 531) who points out that "with Smaug Tolkien is drawing not just on his own legendary but also on another outside literary sorce [i.e. *Beowulf*]." See Brückner on the function of Smaug's extra-legendary link(s).

38 See Petty (47) and, on Tolkien's technique of creating 'depth' in general, see Shippey (*Road* 308-17) and Honegger. See also Hume, who analysed the use of monsters in Old Norse literature, and who observed that an "opponent who pops up in a hero's path as if pulled from a hat cannot intrigue us or win our attention" (Hume 8).

39 The nameless dragon in Tolkien's poem "The Hoard" (see also Shippey, "Versions") is such a prototypical dragon without a developed character of its own.

40 Tolkien thus observes one of the 'rules' for creating a satisfactory supernatural monster (as pointed out by Hume 11): "develop a context for his monster fight." Hume (15) furthermore observes: "For supernatural beings to be effective in stories, they must be part of a tradition the audience knows and to which it is conditioned to respond."

> stretching away across the unseen floors, lay countless piles of precious things, gold wrought and unwrought, gems and jewels, and silver red-stained in the ruddy light.
>
> Smaug lay, with wings folded like an immesurable bat, turned partly on one side, so that the hobbit could see his underparts and his long pale belly crusted with gems and fragments of gold from his long lying on his costly bed.
> (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 205-6)

Smaug the Golden on his hoard is the embodiment of a hoard-gathering,[41] fire-breathing dragon and has inspired various artists to depict this very scene. Bilbo finally overcomes his inertia and steals a large golden cup to prove to the dwarves that he has indeed been inside the great hall. Smaug, like the dragon in *Beowulf* (lines 2287ff), awakes, notices the theft and takes off in a rage. Tolkien's storyline follows that of *Beowulf* quite closely. Thus both dragons wreak havoc on the surrounding countryside, attack and destroy the dwellings of men. Yet there is a subtle but important difference in the depiction of the dragons. The *Beowulf*-poet has his nameless dragon come down upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of Geatland much like an impersonal natural disaster. Smaug, by contrast, achieves the status of an active protagonist by means of numerous narratorial comments that may be differentiated into 'explanatory' and 'protagonising' ones. Remarks such as "Dragons may not have much real use for all their wealth, but they know it to an ounce as a rule, especially after long possession; and Smaug was no exception" (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 207) provide a (juvenile?) audience with 'facts and figures' about this species; facts, moreover, that are not simply made up but have their basis in western traditional dragon-lore as found in myths and tales and that link Tolkien's protagonist and his world to the universe of western literature. These 'informational' or 'explanatory' comments contrast with those that function primarily as elements in the narrator's attempt to bring Smaug to life as a 'full character'. Thus we even get a peep at Smaug's (troubled) dreams:

> He [Smaug] had passed from an uneasy dream (in which a warrior, altogether insignificant in size but provided with a bitter sword and great courage, figured most unpleasantly) to a doze, and from a doze to wide waking.
> (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 207)

This is not only the first instance in English literature that mentions a dragon's dreams, but it also brings Smaug closer to the reader. Like Gawain, in the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (edited by Tolkien and Gordon in 1925), Smaug dreams of a concrete danger that threatens his life. As

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41 *Maxims II* (MS. Cotton Tiberius B i) contain the following line: "[…] draca sceal on hlæwe, / frod, frætwum wlanc." (ll. 26b-27a, Rodrigues 190). Translation: The dragon belongs in its barrow, canny and jealous of its jewels. The topos of the guardian-dragon is, of course, older and is attested at the latest in the legend of Greek antiquity where we have dragons as guardians of the Golden Fleece and the Golden Apples in the Garden of the Hesperides.

Rateliff's edition of the plot notes to *The Hobbit* show (Rateliff, *History* 496), Tolkien originally planned to have Smaug killed by Bilbo himself (in the typical manner of a stab into the soft belly). The dream thus started out as a 'prophetic' dream yet remained unaffected by the subsequent changes in the plot and became all the more an element of characterisation: Smaug the Magnificient – in contrast to Sauron, into whose mind we are never allowed – is shown having bad dreams, and we are also given the dragon's (limited and partial) point of view of the events so far:

> He had never felt quite happy about it [i.e. a small tunnel leading from the great hall upwards into the mountainside], though it was so small, and now he glared at it in suspicion and wondered why he had never blocked it up. Of late he had half fancied he had caught the dim echoes of a knocking sound from far above that came down through it to his lair. (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 207-8)

The use of free indirect style allows the reader to participate in Smaug's thoughts without a complete identification (as is the case in Gordon Dickson's novel) and the overall effect of these passages is that we see Smaug no longer solely as a brute beast and enemy. He is perceived as a protagonist who may be dangerous to our main figure of identification (Bilbo), yet whose worries – which are not unlike those of a bourgeois house-owner about a hole in the garden-fence – render him almost likeable. And even if we do not feel sympathy for Smaug, we are at least able to empathise.

Tolkien, as if to counterbalance this effect, continues with a vivid description of Smaug's wrath and his fury. There is no doubt that he is a formidable opponent and the dwarves only escape thanks to Bilbo's warning, even though the ponies are lost. The dwarves and Bilbo, as well as the reader, are quite conscious of the immensity of the threat the dragon poses. Thus Smaug has drawn level with the *Beowulf* dragon. Yet Tolkien wants more, and takes up and adapts a second element from the medieval tradition: the conversation between Sigurd and Fafnir. Various scholars have analysed and commented on the conversation between Bilbo and Smaug (e.g. Shippey, *Road* 90-91; Petty 57-60) and I can limit myself to pointing out that the verbal exchange between the two brings Smaug to the fore as a full character: cunning, cruel, archaic, with a non-human intelligence and an overpowering personality – so overpowering that there is a real danger of the dragon not only confusing Bilbo, but taking over the story. Tolkien therefore once more changes the point of view and Smaug is removed from the centre of narrative attention. The final confrontation is no longer (as originally planned; see Rateliff, *History* 496) between Bilbo and the dragon, but between the 'flat' heroic (and royal) folk-tale character of Bard and Smaug. Also, the death by an arrow, though not exactly un-heroic, is something of a disappointment. Smaug's use of 'airborn fire' as well as the defenders of Lake-

town's arrows ('long-distance missiles') contrast with the hand-to-claw struggle of traditional tales and have a curiously 'modern' ring.[42]

Tolkien is likely to have had good reasons for his depiction of Smaug as it stands. On the one hand, he has shown quite clearly the full potential of dragons as literary protagonists and characters. On the other, *The Hobbit* is not primarily a dragon-tale, even though the dragon looms large, first in the background, and then even takes centre stage, although only for a brief time. The demotion of Smaug and his death are thus necessary to restore the balance of the narrative structure. The 'good dragon' as the main protagonist is not (yet) an option.

3.1.2 Chrysophylax Dives

In *The Hobbit*, we have a basically modern character (Bilbo) entering a heroic world and encountering, as part of this heroic world, a dragon. Things are different in *Farmer Giles of Ham*,[43] where it is stray elements of a heroic world, such as the giant, the dragon,[44] or (at least in theory) the king and his knights, that enter the non-heroic domain of Ham and its immediate surroundings. The confrontation between the pragmatic, non-heroic, down-to-earth farmer Giles and the aristocratic, archaic dragon Chrysophylax Dives lies at the heart of the story's comic potential. It is not that the dragon is made fun of – or if, then only lightly.[45] The light tone of the story is in accordance with its genre yet it must not deceive the reader into believing that Chrysophylax is a tame fairy-tale dragon. He is neither harmless nor a flat character and, apart from being somewhat reluctant to attack if the odds are not in his favour, he lives up to expectations of what a dragon traditionally is. The first close encounter with the 'hero' is again carefully prepared. We hear reports about the atrocities committed by the dragon in the neighbouring villages, how Garm, Giles's dog, stumbles across the dragon unexpectedly, we witness the arming of the 'hero' and his riding out to meet the dragon (after having fortified himself with a couple of beers). Paral-

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42 See Shippey (*Author* 39-41) on the 'modern' quality of the laketown-episode.

43 As Croft (in Drout, *Encyclopedia* 197) reports, *Farmer Giles of Ham* "originated as a story told to Tolkien's children in the late 1920s, [… and] was revised several times before being published in 1949. […] In 1938, a version was read to the Lovelace Society in lieu of an expected paper on fairy tales and was well received."

44 Tolkien's use of giants and dragons as living side-by-side, and communicating with each other, may have been inspired by the giant's Rochense's relationship with the nameless dragon in *Torrent of Portyngale* (edited by E. Adam). Rochense calls it "my dragon" (ll. 566, 570) and refers to their relationship as one of master ('mayster', l. 575) and protégé ('cheff-foster', l. 574).

45 See the narrator's comment in *Farmer Giles of Ham* (41): "He had a wicked heart (as dragons all have), but not a very bold one (as is not unusual). He preferred a meal that he did not have to fight for; […]."

lels to Don Quichotte may be not quite accidental. Yet as soon as Giles finds himself face-to-snout with Chrysophylax, parallels evaporate. Chrysophylax is no windmill, nor is Giles a misguided nobleman who has read too many medieval romances. The comedy is not that of a 'reluctant' dragon who has to prove his good intentions against old prejudices, but of a 'reluctant hero'.

Giles succeeds in putting the dragon to flight almost accidentally by means of his magical sword,[46] which cannot be sheathed if a dragon is nearby and furthermore seems to attack the dragon of its own will. But before we have the rather burlesque chase of the dragon (reminiscent of the people chasing the fox in Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale*), we find again a conversation between dragon and hero at the centre of their encounter. Chrysophylax, like Smaug, endeavours to find out Giles's name and tries to trick him, so that he can catch him unawares. The dialogue between Chrysophylax and Giles exhibits numerous parallels to that between Bilbo and Smaug, and, incidentally, to the first exchange between a reluctant Bilbo and Gandalf one beautiful morning in front of Bag End at the start of *The Hobbit* ("Good morning!"). Chrysophylax adopts a mock-polite tone similar to Smaug: "'Excuse me,' said the dragon. He had cocked a very suspicious ear when he caught the sound of rings jingling, as the farmer fell. 'Excuse my asking, but were you looking for me, by any chance?'" (Tolkien, *Farmer Giles* 41). Also, he tries to get to know Giles's name: "'But pray proceed on your way, Master – let me see, I don't think I know your name?'" (Tolkien, *Farmer Giles* 41). Yet Giles, unlike Bilbo, is not tempted into entering a riddling-contest with Chrysophylax and evades the question simply by answering "'Nor I yours,' said Giles; 'and we'll leave it at that.'" (Tolkien, *Farmer Giles* 41). Although Chrysophylax resembles Smaug in many ways, he remains markedly different mostly because, on the one hand, the folk-tale setting of the tale limits the extent of the dragon's 'heroic' development. Chrysophylax never 'diminishes' to the degree of the 'reluctant' dragon, but he cannot develop his heroic potential to the full. The narrative success of *Farmer Giles of Ham* relies on the balance Tolkien kept between the dragon's dangerousness and the parodistic treatment of the traditional stock-elements of the fairy-tale dragon-fight. On the other hand, the way Giles tames the dragon is not so much reminiscent of the saga- and heroic legends-tradition but more of

46 The name of Giles's sword, Caudimordax, has caused some puzzlement among the readers. Why is it called 'Tailbiter' and not (more appropriately) 'Wingclipper'? The answer is most likely to be found in Isidore of Seville's entry on the dragon in his *Etymologies*. There he informs us that the most dangerous part of a dragon is not its snout, but the tail – and it is indeed the dragon's tail that proves most dangerous to heroes and their steeds. In *Torrent of Portyngale*, the dragon is described as a fire-breathing head on a tail (l. 552-53; Adam 20), thus highlighting a dragon's two most dangerous parts.

the way saints deal with these monsters.[47] The most striking feature of these encounters is the fact that saints do not use any weapons but rely solely on the power of their prayers and God's assistance.[48] Although dragons often get killed in the confrontations with the saints, there are instances of 'dragon taming',[49] e.g. by St Samson of Dol. The *Vita II S. Samsonis* reports how the saint tamed a dragon and sent him 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 delay and while everybody was watching, that dragon headed for the wilderness across the river, and reappeared nowhere afterwards. (Rauer 157)[50]

Texts like this occur frequently enough to suggest that Tolkien, as a Catholic and a medievalist, was familiar with the concept of the dragon-taming saint. *Farmer Giles of Ham*, I would like to argue, has not only (obvious) links to the (medieval) heroic tradition or to the (basically) Victorian innovation of the 'pet dragon' but, most importantly, it also incorporates elements from the hagiographical tradition, such as the taming of the dragon and its service to the saint/hero[51] or the 'pact of non-aggression'. The text of *Farmer Giles of Ham* is

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47 Rauer has discussed the importance of the hagiographic tradition as a possible source for the *Beowulf*-poet. At the same time, it must be noted that not all dragons in religious literature are purely 'allegorical' and some of the beasts in the hagiographical tradition retain enough of their 'realism' to make a good story. See also Evans ("Semiotics" 100) who claims the following for secular literature: "Once introduced, no dragon survives in the plot of any medieval text, even though, logically speaking, it would be equally effective if a hero managed to frighten a dragon away, or if the dragon simply lost interest, became distracted, or for any other reason failed to pursue the course of its malevolent intent."

48 Pace St George and St Michael.

49 See Riches ("Encountering") for further instances of 'dragon-taming'.

50 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"), who also discusses the motif of banishment.

51 See, for example, the bear who serves St Gallus. Serving dragons would be, in view of their 'negative' image within a Christian framework, not appropriate (see, however, the 'watchdog' dragons of the hermit Ammon; Riches, "Encountering" 205). See also Obermaier for an overview of saints and animals. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to try

thus a rich tapestry woven from diverse and complementary traditions, which sometimes intertwine with each other. Take, for example, the magic sword Caudimordax ("Tailbiter"). The sword per se belongs to the heroic tradition and Sigurd's sword Gram, fashioned explicitly from the shards of his father's broken sword in order to slay the dragon Fafnir, is the best-known example (Byock 59-60). Yet the sword alone, however hard and sharp, does not make a dragon-slayer in the heroic tradition – it is the arm that wields the sword that is of importance. In *Farmer Giles of Ham*, then, we find an inversion of this pattern – the sword seems to have a life of its own and attacks the dragon almost without Giles's doing:

> That was quite enough for Tailbiter. It circled flashing in the air; then down it came, smiting the dragon on the joint of the right wing, a ringing blow that shocked him exceedingly. Of course Giles knew very little about the right methods of killing a dragon, or the sword might have landed in a tenderer spot; but Tailbiter did the best it could in inexperienced hands. (Tolkien, *Farmer Giles* 44)

After the initial stroke to the dragon's wing during their first encounter, Caudimordax is never used again to strike a blow. Its presence in the hand of Giles is sufficient to render the dragon tame and subservient. The sword, although in appearance a 'heroic' element, is structurally and functionally an equivalent to the saint's prayers to God and, similar to the saints, it is not Giles's skill as a warrior that is put to the test, but rather sheer courage and good luck (the folk-tale equivalent to unwavering belief in God).[52]

This third and hitherto overlooked hagiographical tradition not only provides an explanation for some of the elements that have as yet been unaccounted for but also helps to understand why Tolkien's Chrysophylax differs from dragons in contemporary tales such as 'The Dragon Tamers' by Edith Nesbit. There the dragon, having been tricked into captivity, grows tame and metamorphoses, in the end, into an oversized pussycat (Nesbit 116). Chrysophylax, by contrast, never stops being *draco ferox* and it is thus in keeping with Tolkien's concept of 'good dragons' that, when he is allowed to return to his den, "he at once routed out a young dragon who had had the temerity to take up residence in his cave while Chrysophylax was away. It is said that the noise of the battle was heard throughout Venedotia. When, with great satisfaction, he had devoured his defeated opponent, he felt better, and the scars of his humiliation were assuaged,

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and turn Giles into a saint – neither his life nor his namesake (St Giles) provide any links. He may serve, however, as the model for a 'good' king (see Ferré).

52 See Rateliff (*History* 541) who quotes from Tolkien's 1938 lecture on dragons: "It was the function of dragons to tax the skill of heroes, and still more to tax other things, especially courage [*added*: and fortune]."

and he slept for a long while." (Tolkien, *Farmer Giles* 78) No pussy-catting with Tolkien's dragons![53]

V Conclusion

Tolkien's 'literary dragons' (leaving aside his 'mythical' Glaurung) may be characterised best as *pièces de resistance* in an environment that has grown increasingly hostile to the fantastic. They participate, on the one hand, in the classical and medieval traditions, which show them as guardian-figures and supreme opponents of heroic protagonists. On the other, they allude and react to contemporary dragons of the Victorian age and the early 20th century, dragons that have often dwindled into harmless and slightly ridiculous overgrown pets. The innovative element introduced by Tolkien's dragons (especially in the case of Smaug) is the creation of a distinct 'dragon personality'. He thus develops an aspect already discernible in some of the 'pet' dragons while, at the same time, he retains and even accentuates the ferocity of the mythical dragons. By endowing his lizards with a life and personality of their own, Tolkien creates characters that share in the rich heritage of the medieval dragon yet who, in addition, possess a distinct 'presence'. As a consequence, Smaug, and also Chrysophylax Dives, go beyond both the 'primitive' *draco ferox* of myths and legends as well as the whimsical *draco timidus* of contemporary children's literature. Tolkien's dragons may be related to the mythical dragons of old, but they are at the same time very 'contemporary' characters and even the post-modern reader is likely to fall under their spell. 'Good dragons' do not deny their ancestry, but build on the classical and medieval foundations.[54] Tolkien thus improved on the promising initial stages as found, for example, in the dialogue between Sigurd and Fafnir. Also, at least in the case of Farmer Giles and Chrysophylax, he seems to have taken up and incorporated traits of the hagiographical tradition, thus complementing the heroic-aggressive confrontation between dragon and hero with a somewhat more conciliatory approach.

Numerous authors dealing with dragons after Tolkien show the impact of his concept, though not always in an obvious manner. The most important element, the idea of dragons as intelligent beings with a distinct personality, was taken up by authors as divergent as Anne McCaffrey, Ursula K. Le Guin, Christopher Paolini, Jane Yolen, or Barbara Hambly, to name only a few. Yet

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53 The noise that Bilbo hears when approaching Smaug's lair for the first time is very likely a tongue-in-cheek reference to Nesbit's dragon-turned-pussycat: "A sound, too, began to throb in his ears, a sort of bubbling like the noise of a large pot galloping on the fire, mixed with a rumble as of a gigantic tom-cat purring." (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 205)

54 Stein (181), in an otherwise ill-informed paper riddled with mistakes, makes this one point, too.

although the starting point may have been the same, the results, as we have seen, and as Anne C. Petty has shown in greater detail for some of the aforementioned authors, differ greatly. I'm not so much referring to the literary quality (or lack thereof) in the various works, but to the degree to which dragons are put centre stage as characters in their own right. The nature of the dragon seems to change in direct relation to the amount of narrative space s/he is given. Tolkien's dragons, although 'round characters', were never allowed to occupy as much narrative ground as their human(oid) counterparts, though they often got very close to doing so. The situation is different in works such as *Eragon* and McCaffrey's *Dragons of Pern* books where dragons are central protagonists who take up considerable narrative space, so that the readers get to know them very intimately. The fascination of the unknown, threatening and somewhat uncanny gives way to the fascination of the exotic; and albeit familiarity does not necessarily breed contempt, it certainly de-mythologizes the dragons and takes them down a notch or two. Saphira, the dragons of Pern and also Yolen's pit-dragons soon become very familiar and, to some extent, lose the power to 'enchant' the reader.

Not so Smaug! He is, to most readers, a 'mooreeffoc' revelation that puts a sudden and unexpected spotlight on the half-hidden, half-forgotten archetype of the 'dragon' in all its awesome splendour of *tremendum et fascinosum* so that they, together with Bilbo, experience the overwhelming presence of this *draco* in unmitigated and undiluted form. Tolkien, in *The Hobbit* especially, judiciously avoids the inflationary use of dragons and gives Smaug relatively few and carefully prepared appearances – which are therefore all the more impressive. Smaug is thus spared the fate of becoming too familiar and trite a character, and though his 'death by missile' is somewhat un-heroic, he retains his status of *draco* to the very end. *Farmer Giles of Ham*, then, shows Tolkien playing with the same elements though in a somewhat less restricted framework. Yet even so, Chrysophylax Dives never deteriorates into a pet-dragon and Giles's title "Dominus de Domito Serpente" ("Lord of the Tame Worm"; Tolkien, *Farmer Giles* 74) is somewhat misleading – even Chrysophylax remains a *draco ferox* at heart, as the happy ending proves. Tolkien does not give us an unlikely 'integration' of the dragon into human society, but its successful re-introduction into the wilderness.

I hope that my discussion of dragons old and new has shown that a 'good dragon' should not and, in the end, cannot be reduced or compartmentalised if it is not to loose its essence. A 'good dragon' retains its distinct quality and carries the unmistakable stamp of 'Faery'. Yet in contrast to the land of Faery, which is hard to find and stays put, dragons sometimes invade our world – and we should be grateful for that!

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