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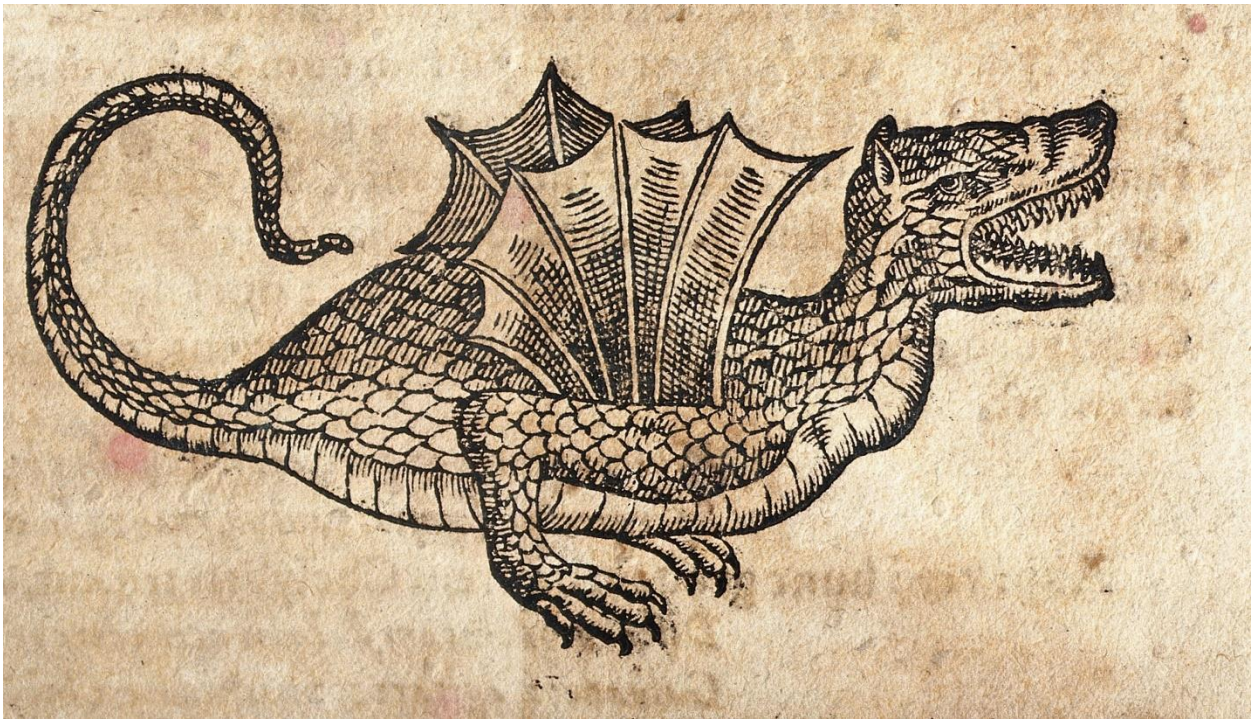
Cait Coker
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, cait.coker@gmail.com

Ruthann Mowry
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, ruthannm@illinois.edu



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The Dragon is Not an Allegory:
Reading Tolkien's Monsters in Medieval Contexts

Ruthann Mowry and Cait Coker

In his letters, J.R.R. Tolkien stated both that he considered LOTR "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work" (no. 172) but that he considered the work "built on or out of certain 'religious' ideas, but is not an allegory of them (or anything else)" (no. 283). However, Tolkien was also a medievalist, and understood that texts always contained a multitude of readings as documentary objects that were kept and used in specific ways. Creatures and imagery contained in medieval books provided information to the reader, as when bestiaries explicate fauna with attributes both real and metaphysical. They thus combine fiction and fact to describe animals with allegorical descriptions alongside their scientific (or pseudo-scientific) analyses. In particular, bestiaries portray dragons as frightening, near-demonic monsters laden with specific Christian symbolisms.

For the scope of our paper today we want to focus on two of Tolkien's dragons: Smaug from *The Hobbit* and the dragon from his translation of *Beowulf*. Though dragons appear in several of Tolkien's other fictive works, these two texts have extensive connections that have long been noted in the scholarship. For example, Douglas A. Anderson notes in *The Annotated Hobbit* that Tolkien conceded an unintentional mirroring of scenes in which a thief—Bilbo in *The Hobbit* and an unnamed character in *Beowulf*—steal a gold cup from the dragon's hoard. On

January 16, 1938, the London newspaper *The Observer* published a letter asking among other questions whether this episode in the novel is based on a similar episode in *Beowulf*. Tolkien's response published in the February 20 issue replied that "it was not consciously present to the mind in the process of writing, in which the episode of the theft arose naturally" (272). Tolkien's description here of unconscious borrowing is interesting in the context of other readings of this scene in the original text, made problematic due to the illegibility of the phrasing in the manuscript. (More on that in a moment.) And the key here is on the use of "dragon" to describe a creature that is threatening, inhuman, greedy and dangerous—but not necessarily supernaturally evil.

A Short History of Dragons

First, we want to start by asking: where did the European dragon come from? (We ask this specifically to denote the very different cultural contexts of Southern and Eastern Asia as well as the Americas.) When we use the phrase "European dragon" we are all likely to mentally summon a similar creature: larger than a human, often with a long neck and tail, often winged and scaled, and usually green or red in color. This image is imported into our minds from dozens of sources, including children's fairy tales, Disney films, fantasy novels and games, and of course, Tolkien's fiction. And all of these sources have their roots in medieval iconography, which itself evolved from a compilation of earlier dragon lore in late antiquity. Scripture, natural history, pre-Christian traditions, and mythology coalesced to form this version of the medieval dragon, which can be seen in texts ranging from bestiaries to fables and poetry. The essential components of the dragon have not changed over the past few hundred years, rather, the cultural interpretation of the dragon has morphed from a specifically religious allegory to secular entertainments.

One of the major complications for seeking a useful definition for "dragon" is the historical tendency to label serpentine animals as dragons and dragons as serpentine animals. There are several large, serpent-like creatures in Greek mythology that could be classified as a dragon: the dragon Jason slays and Cadmus's dragon are two examples. However, is Cerberus a dragon? We commonly think of it as a three-headed dog, but it is also described as having a serpentine tail and snakes protruding all across its body. What about the biblical Leviathan? This beast is usually thought of as a sea serpent, sometimes even as a whale, but in the Book of Job it is also described as something like a fire-breathing crocodile. For modern readers, then, the difference between a serpent and a dragon is blurred and depends on individual sources and their attendant cultural contexts. A compelling example of this is the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Contemporary iconography of the serpent who convinced Eve to partake of the forbidden fruit lean towards the visual representation of a snake. Images from the medieval and early modern periods often show a creature that is half-human, sometimes even sporting bat-like wings that lend it the air of a demon or fallen angel. And the words used to describe this creature are usually *serpiens*, or serpent, and *draco*, or dragon, with both of them being used interchangeably. We also see *drakon* in Greek, *wyrm* used in Old English, and *ormr* in Old Norse. These philological variations of terminology, combined with the lack of clear delineation of characteristics that would accurately define what a dragon is or what one looks like, makes setting strict parameters

for what a dragon is and what it is not rather tricky. We can make a start, however, in looking at how the image and description of the beast evolves over time.

The precursor to the medieval bestiary is the Greek *Physiologus*, most likely written in Alexandria in the second and third centuries AD. The *Physiologus* is a compilation of minerals, birds, and animals, including mythical creatures, that were used as allegorical stories to illustrate Christian morals. Each animal was assigned a role or a moral and was accompanied by a specific section from the gospel. During the shift to the medieval period, the emphasis of the *Physiologus* evolved to focus more heavily on various creatures and their moral and allegorical meanings. Bestiaries in particular favored pairing animals, both real and mythical, with specifically Christian rather than classical morals. The bestiaries and the *Physiologus* both acted as didactic tools for religious teachings and possibly aids for conversion.

In these texts, dragons are represented in different forms, but they are all related to or appear similar to serpents. Some bestiaries specifically classify dragons as "the king of the serpents." The dragon is repeatedly associated with the Devil. This can be seen in both the Bible as well as the bestiary tradition.

"(7)And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, (8) And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. (9) And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him." (Revelation 12:7-9 from the *King James Version*)

And a translation from a 12th century bestiary:

"The Devil, who is the most enormous of all reptiles, is like this dragon. He is often borne into the air from his den, and the air around him blazes, for the Devil in raising himself from the lower regions translates himself into an angel of light and misleads the foolish with false hopes of glory and worldly bliss. He is said to have a crest or crown because he is the King of Pride, and his strength is not in his teeth but in his tail because he beguiles those whom he draws to him by deceit, their strength being destroyed. (White 167)

Its moral properties are associated with pride, arrogance, and its origin story is ultimately the catalyst for original sin -- again the previously mentioned representations of the snake that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. However, it does vary in its physical characteristics. There are dragons with wings and without wings; dragons that spew fire and those who do not; and even dragons with legs and without. Some scholars argue that a dragon should be defined as a creature who is serpent-like; very large; has wings, claws, and a tail; breathes fire and/or poison, guards some form of treasure, and lives in a remote location. One of the main characteristics of dragons is that they guard something - they are guardians. When the religious allegorical stories are removed from the mixture, dragons are seen guarding groves (Greek), guarding the entry to the underworld (Cerberus), and of course, protecting hoards of gold. Here we come back to Tolkien: Smaug is protecting his hoard of gold as is Beowulf's dragon.

Dragons in *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*

Tolkien's own prose translation of *Beowulf* was famously unfinished despite its near completion in 1926 (Tolkien vii), and finally published with his son Christopher acting as editor in 2014. The translation is dwarfed by his extensive commentary that clarifies on his own translation choices and offers, in some cases, multiple interpretive readings. Unfortunately, these notes conclude just before the dragon episode, short of about a third of the poem; we thus lack the explications of this unnamed character as well as the monster that he and Beowulf encounter. For the unnamed character, Tolkien chooses to use the word "thrall" (l. 1868), while he uses "dragon" (l. 1872) to describe the creature. He later uses "the serpent" (line 2241) and "the fell fire-dragon" (l. 2256) to describe the creature that Beowulf fights. He is "an alien creature fierce and evil" (l. 2240) whose foes are "these hated men" (1. 2241).

In "The Thief in *Beowulf*" Theodore M. Andersson draws on Klaeber's glossary to describe the unnamed character as a "slave" or "outcast" (493), "the thirteenth man in the company" (494) who steals the cup to reconcile with Beowulf. He goes on at great length to analyze the power relationships and the possibilities of this character as illustrated by power relationships, especially in the context of stealing and outlawry. He does not comment on the monster. In "The Dragon's Treasure in 'Beowulf'" Paul Beekman Taylor devotes more time to the monster— "Whether man-dragon or beast-dragon—Leviathan, Python, or fire-drake—the salient fact about the dragon that Beowulf combats is that it or he is the guardian of a particular treasure" (229) —and then proceeds to use "dragon" and "serpent" interchangeably while focusing on its nature as "treasure-guardian." Finally, R.D. Fulk, writing in his 2005 article "Some Contested Readings in the 'Beowulf' Manuscript", discusses the then-forthcoming revision of the Klaeber edition of the text, providing extensive word- and line-readings to discuss choices made around the damaged leaves. All three scholars spend much more time, justifiably, analyzing the hints of the missing word, often rendered as *þ(eow)*, rather than on the terms *draca*, or "dragon", and *wyrm*, or "serpent".

When we come to *The Hobbit*, Bilbo first sees Smaug after stealing into his hoard much as the man in the *Beowulf*. (Unlike the *þ(eow)*, the thirteenth man, Bilbo is the fourteenth or the fifteenth of the company, following the dwarves and Gandalf.) Smaug is described as "a vast red-golden dragon" sleeping on his piles of gold and jewels "with wings folded like an immeasurable bat" (270).

> Bilbo had heard tell and sing of dragon-hoards before, but the splendour, the lust, the glory of such treasure had never yet come home to him. His heart was filled and pierced with enchantment and with the desire of dwarves; and he gazed motionless, almost forgetting the frightful guardian, at the gold beyond price and count. (271)

Just like the unnamed adventurer, Bilbo steals a cup as proof of his adventure, and Smaug almost seems to wake. He doesn't, but instead "shifted into other dreams of greed and violence, lying there in his stolen hall…" (271). Bilbo presents the cup to Thorin to the acclamation of the group, assuring his membership by way of being the burglar. Smaug is himself very much the traditional "treasure-keeper", luxuriating in his golden hoard, and of course fiercely resentful of the theft.

During Bilbo's second encounter with Smaug, the dragon initially pretends to be asleep before piercing Bilbo with his red gaze. Being knowledgeable in dragon-lore, Bilbo knows to reply to Smaug's questions with polite riddles and without revealing his own name. In *The Road to Middle-earth*, Tom Shippey compares this episode with "The Lay of Fáfnir" in the *Elder Edda*. The hero Sigurthr and the dragon talk as the dragon dies; Shippey notes that "Like Bilbo, Sigurthr refuses to tell the dragon his name but replies riddlingly (for fear of being cursed); like Smaug, Fáfnir sows dissension between partners by remarking on the greed that gold excites" (82). It is during this conversation that Smaug arrogantly reveals his weakness which of course shortly leads to his destruction, as pride goeth before a fall from high altitude.

In contrast, scholarly readings of *Beowulf* are tempted towards the familiar allegorical and even the metaphysical due to its references to Old Testament episodes. Judith Garde argues in "Christian and Folkloric Tradition in 'Beowulf': Death and the Dragon Episode" that the *Beowulf* poem has "an unreservedly Christian orientation" (341) and that the context of its proposed composition for a medieval Anglo-Danish Christian court is essential to its reading. Tolkien's repurposing of the "theft from a dragon" story transforms this context to children's fairy story that in the broader cultural context of early twentieth century Britain perhaps assumes cultural Christianity, but by no means requires it for comprehension, and indeed conceivably secularizes it to the point of metaphysical inscrutability. Sometimes a dragon is just a dragon.

When we return back to *The Hobbit*, what is interesting is the emphasis on Smaug as a greedy, malevolent creature—and yet not a supernatural force on the scale of, say, the Devil. In Tolkien's legendarium, that role would be reserved for Melkor, or Morgoth. Melkor is Quenyan for "He who arises in might" while Morgoth is Sindarin for "Black Foe of the World." He is a Luciferan figure, one of the Ainur created at the beginning of the world and who ultimately rebels and falls. Initially he has the power to appear in whatever form he likes, but his corporality becomes troubled as his malice and corruption grow. In the Ainulindalë section of *The Silmarillion*, he is first described as "in the beginning the greatest of the Ainur who took part in the Music" (6), but by the time of his corruption he is "a mountain that wades in the sea, and has its head above the clouds, and is clad with ice and crowned with smoke and fire, and the light of the eyes of Melkor was like a flame that withers with heat and pierces with a deadly cold" (10). As far as his etymological origins, *The Shaping of Middle-earth* notes that an early version of his name was *Manfréa Bolgen*, from the Old English words *man* ("evil, wickedness"), *fréa* ("lord"), and *bolgen* ("wrathful") (202).[1] Not a *draco* or *serpiens* in sight.

Conclusions

Finally, if Smaug were indeed to be considered an allegorical representation of the medieval Christian dragon, we would need to assume a few things that we simply don't have textual evidence for authorially. Smaug would need to be representative of the Devil, with attendant supernatural abilities; as we have discussed, this is not so. In order for the allegory to

[1] See: *The History of Middle-earth*, Vol. IV: *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, III: "The Quenta", Appendix 1: Translation of Quenta Noldorinwa into Old English.

work, Smaug would needs a saint-like figure as an opponent, who would vanquish the dragon in order to bring Christianity to the people or prove his dedication to God. It is Bard the Bowman who ultimately kills Smaug, but Bard is very much depicted as a secular figure despite his ability to speak to the thrush; he has a wife and child, and he eventually becomes the King of the Dale, taking on a definitive power of an earthly rather than godly sort. In order for the allegory to work, Smaug needs the saint-like hero and since there is not one, the Christian allegory falls apart.

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