

DRAGONS: ANCIENT CREATURES IN MODERN TIMES

INAUGURAL LECTURE

DEIRDRE BYRNE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

The Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*, establishes the heroic status of its protagonist through the traditional method of vanquishing enemies. As the culminating feat of his career, the hero, Beowulf, ageing King of the Geats, tackles a dragon who has found the treasure of a long-extinct race, buried in a barrow. The poet fills in the background:

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.

The dragon is described in resonant images: the 'old harrower', 'the burning one' and 'the slick-skinned dragon'. He is both glamorous and highly dangerous. He possesses fire, an insatiable and baseless hatred for humans, and a fondness for destruction and chaos, as well as his love of gold. The dragon does not collect the gold himself, but having found it, he is very happy to make it his home, and stays there for three hundred years, until he is disturbed by a miserable thief who steals a golden cup from the hoard, seeking to regain his lord's favour. The dragon knows his treasure well, and the theft awakens his fury, so that he explodes from the barrow, wreaking revenge in a fiery streak of destruction as he destroys whole villages in a single incandescent night.

Seamus Heaney, whose translation of *Beowulf* I am quoting here, comments in the Introduction:

Once he is wakened, there is something glorious in the way he
 manifests himself, a Fourth of July effulgence fireworking its path

across the night sky; and yet, because of the centuries he has spent dormant in the tumulus, there is a foundedness as well as a lambency about him. He is at once a stratum in the earth and a streamer in the air, no painted dragon but a figure of real oneiric power, one that can easily survive the prejudice that arises at the very mention of the word 'dragon'. Whether in medieval art or modern Disney cartoons, the dragon can strike us as far less horrific than he is meant to be, but in the final movement of *Beowulf* he lodges himself in the imagination as *wyrd* rather than *wyrm*, more a destiny than a set of reptilian vertebrae.

Indeed, the dragon proves to be the hero's final destiny: in a last, apocalyptic battle, the dragon and Beowulf kill each other. They each wield their ultimate weapons. Beowulf brings social power to the combat through Wiglaf's loyalty to his king, while the dragon uses venom derived from his kinship with snakes to lay the hero low. Even dead, the dragon epitomizes strength and an unearthly beauty:

The fire-dragon
was scaresomely burnt, scorched all colours.
From head to tail, his entire length
was fifty feet. He had shimmered forth
on the night air once, then winged back
down to his den

The dragon's corpse is unceremoniously dumped off a cliff into the sea, where he sinks into oblivion and fades from the pages of literature. He was only revived nearly a millennium later, when the Old English scholar, JRR Tolkien, wrote *The Hobbit* — a story about a thief who steals a golden cup from a dragon. The dragon's name is Smaug, which is close to the German word for 'force'.

He is described as follows:

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 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.

(Tolkien 1937 (rpt. 1981): 205-6)

Smaug, like the dragon in *Beowulf*, is both beautiful and dangerous. When his cup is stolen, he erupts from his cave in a fiery rage and, like his august predecessor, wreaks havoc in his fury:

A whirring noise was heard. A red light touched the points of standing rocks. The dragon came.

... Smaug came hurtling from the North, licking the mountain-sides with flame, beating his great wings with a noise like a roaring wind. His hot breath shrivelled the grass before the door, and drove in through the crack they had left.

(Tolkien 1937 (rpt. 1981): 209)

As a skilled re-teller of a well-known tale (the tale of the theft of a golden cup from a dragon's hoard), Tolkien has altered his source text to suit his narrative purposes. Like the *Beowulf* poet, he orchestrates the conflict between the dragon and his mortal antagonists so that the dragon is vanquished along with the threat posed by his ferocity. But he introduces consciousness into the depiction of the dragon in *Beowulf*, who has no name and certainly no thought-processes. The riddles exchanged between the hobbit thief, Bilbo Baggins, and Smaug testify not only to the innate duplicity and vanity of dragonkind but to advanced verbal facility, equal to humans'.

Another mythological dragon who gave rise to a generation of tales is the Norse Fafnir. The most detailed variant of the tale recounts that Fafnir was one of three shape-shifting sons born to the dwarf king Hreidmar. When the trickster god, Loki, mistakenly killed one of the sons, Otr, in the form of an otter, he feared Hreidmar's revenge and offered him a fabulous treasure as a ransom for his safety. Hreidmar accepted the hoard of golden objects made by Andvari, a magician, unaware that Andvari had cursed his last creation: a ring. Fafnir was overwhelmed by the lust for gold and killed his father to gain it. For his greed, he was transformed from a dwarf into a dragon, and so he lived in cave-dwelling seclusion for several centuries, guarding the gold.

This went on until the appearance of a dragon-slayer. Sigurd was nobly born, bore his father's magical sword (which was pulled out of a stone in a manner reminiscent of King Arthur's Excalibur) and was trained by Fafnir's brother, the dwarf Regin, who sought to use the young hero to gain the gold. Guided by Regin, Sigurd killed Fafnir by stabbing him through the heart. Regin then roasted the heart, but Sigurd licked of the roasting meat and so imbibed the dragon's blood. With it, he gained the power to understand birdsong and so learned that Regin was planning to kill him and keep the gold for himself.

The magic inherent in the dragon's blood heightens Sigurd's human senses. Once again, the dragon is revealed as powerfully ambivalent: he is morally and physically corrupted by greed into a monstrous animal, but he possesses the power to understand other animals by virtue of his ontological connection with the natural world. And, as Neil Gaiman comments, Sigurd's feat has contemporary resonances: "The important thing about any story where you fight a dragon is not that you're telling people that dragons are real. But that you're telling people that dragons can be defeated. And that is a huge, true thing. And something that should never be forgotten" (Neil Gaiman, writer *Beowulf* from the DVD bonus feature "Beasts of Burden").

EUSTACE

The 20th-century Christian fantasy writer, C.S. Lewis, enjoyed both Wagner's music and Norse mythology as a boy in Ireland. He must, then, have known of Fafnir's transformation and death at Sigurd's hands. In 1952 Lewis published *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the fourth volume in his *Chronicles of Narnia* series. The *Chronicles* are heavily influenced by Christian allegory and morality, as is Lewis's modernized Fafnir. He is introduced to the reader in the opening sentence of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: 'There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it' (Lewis 1952: 7). *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* gives a redemptive spin to the Norse myth of Fafnir, Regin and Sigurd. Eustace is set up, from the beginning of the chronicle, as an odious boy: '[His family] were very up-to-date and advanced people. They were vegetarians, non-smokers and teetotallers and wore a special kind of underclothes. In their house there

was very little furniture and very few clothes on the beds and the windows were always open' (Lewis 1952: 7). There is a clear clash of world-views here. The Scrubbs' modern behaviour and beliefs are denigrated in favour of the Pevensies' belief in the fantasy world of Narnia, which Eustace is magically compelled to visit. Navigationally speaking, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is a trip through unknown waters to uncharted islands and unimaginable realms. Psychologically, it is Eustace's journey of transformation from being a 'useless' boy to being useful and the hero of his own adventure.

When Eustace leaves his (unwelcome) companions to explore an unknown island and finds a fabulous treasure, he falls prey to the lure of wealth and, like Fafnir, tries to steal it and keep it for himself. It is thus that he becomes a dragon: 'You see, sleeping on a dragon's hoard and thinking greedy, dragonish thoughts, he had become a dragon' (Lewis 1952: 47). This is of a piece with fantasy's conventional use of outward appearance as the marker of psycho-spiritual reality. Like Fafnir, Eustace also steals a ring, which proves his undoing: it fits the upper arm of a boy but cuts cruelly into the dragon's stumpy forearm.

Here, though, the resemblance between the two stories ends. Eustace's draconic transformation does not alter his essentially human character, but it does force him to reevaluate humanity in the light of his new and ugly physicality. He reaches a new appreciation of friendship and resolves to be more helpful to his companions on their quest to find the seven lost lords of Narnia: 'it was clear to everyone that Eustace's character had been much improved by becoming a dragon' (Lewis 1952: 55). Once he has learned his moral lesson, Aslan, the Christian-influenced presiding deity of Narnia, removes the dragon skin and returns him to his human form.

Lewis clearly has a different agenda in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* from that of the Norse myth of Fafnir. Both tales warn the audience that greed and the desire to keep material possessions at the expense of human connection are dangerous and wreak monstrous transformations. But Fafnir meets no

redemptive end, unlike his human counterpart. Instead, he dies at the hands of the hero, whose sword has been forged by his own treacherous brother. Also, he is not endowed with consciousness and cannot be categorized as a sentient being, unlike Eustace, who remains a boy in his thoughts and emotions, despite his outward draconic appearance. By the time Lewis wrote *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, attitudes towards dragons were beginning to change. The demonization of ancient times, which had legitimated the wholesale slaughter of dragons by knights in search of glory, had given way to a more compassionate picture, in which a dragon possesses consciousness and agency. As a dragon, Eustace can think, feel and even cry.

Early dragon stories, such as those of Beowulf and Fafnir, were no doubt intended to be related to an adult audience. As the contemporary fantasy writer, Neil Gaiman, says: 'Once upon a time, back when animals spoke and rivers sang and every quest was worth going on, back when dragons still roared and maidens were beautiful and an honest young man with a good heart and a great deal of luck could always wind up with a princess and half the kingdom – back then, fairytales were for adults'

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/oct/13/film.fiction>, 17 February 2011).

Adult readers of *Beowulf* would not have believed that any of Beowulf's antagonists (Grendel, his mother or the dragon) were real. In the poem, they symbolize that which opposes human civilization: they are monstrous (which is to say, composed of bits of various predatory animals), fierce and destructive. They are, in fact, textual embodiments of ultimate destiny, namely death and chaos. There is a long-standing opposition between dragons and human culture, as seen in the Babylonian creation myth of Marduk, who killed his own mother, the dragon Tiamat, and rearranged the parts of her body to re-form the universe according to human order. At the same time, in order to establish his reputation, a would-be knight or warrior would have to destroy a worthy opponent, not one that was of no account such as a spider or a mouse. Dragons were much sought-after as suitable prey for young men seeking glory, so they had to be impressive in size, weaponry and ferocity, and ugly to boot.

The dragon in Spenser's 15th-century poem, *The Faerie Queene*, is a perfect example. He is described in great detail, as follows:

Approaching nigh, he reared high afore
 His body monstrous, horrible, and vast,
 Which to increase his wondrous greatnesse more
 Was swolne with wrath, and poison, and with bloudy gore.

9

And ouer, with brazen scales was armd,
 Like plated coat of steele, so couched neare,
 That nought mote perce, ne might his corse be harmd
 With dint of sword, nor push of pointed speare;
 Which as an Eagle, seeing pray appeare,
 His aery plumes doth rouze, full rudely dight,
 So shaked he, that horreur was to heare,
 For as the clashing of an Armour bright,
 Such noyse his rouzd scales did send vnto the knight.

10

His flaggy wings when forth he did display,
 Were like two sayles ...

(Spenser 1979: 58)

Spenser continues in this vein, clearly intending to terrify his audience as well as the Red Crosse Knight, approaching zoological precision as he describes the monster he has clearly pieced together from bits of eagles, snakes and notions of enormous size. The Red Crosse Knight, clearly descended from the cult figure of St George, vanquishes the dragon, but only after three attacks (the same number as in *Beowulf*) and with the assistance of supernatural healing springs, which patch up the wounds he has sustained in the fray. He conquers the dragon because he rides the countryside in search of adventure under the banner of his tutelary saint, who acted more purely than he. Upon purging the Libyan city of Selene of its verminous dragon who was poisoning the city with noxious fumes, the virtuous saint asked, not for the hand of the fourteen-year-old Princess Cleodolinda who was to be sacrificed to the dragon, but for the city's inhabitants to be baptized into Christianity. (It is not clear whether St George was beatified for sexual restraint, for slaying the dragon or converting the town.) In this manner, St

George allegorically banished the threat of the older pagan religion from the city and became a hero of the Christian faith.

The Red Crosse Knight is rewarded for his dragon-slaying exploits with Una's love and gratitude. But before he can marry her, the victorious warrior has to best another foe: a 'false woman' named Fidessa claims that he is already betrothed to her. Fidessa's juxtaposition with the dragon leaves the reader in no doubt that she is a similar antagonist to the scaly beast. She is equally ferocious and no less dangerous. The Knight proves himself equal to both challenges and earns romantic bliss as a prize for his heroic efforts.

As human society changed, so did human archetypes, and the dragon is no exception. Nothing could be further from *The Faerie Queene* than this description of a dragon:

The dragon was no longer than his forearm, yet it was dignified and noble. Its scales were deep sapphire blue, the same color as the stone The wings were several times longer than its body and ribbed with thin fingers of bone that extended from the wing's front edge, forming a line of widely spaced talons. The dragon's head was roughly triangular. Two diminutive white fangs curved down out of its upper jaw. They looked very sharp. Its claws were also white, like polished ivory, and slightly serrated on the inside curve. A line of small spikes ran down the creature's spine from the base of its head to the tip of its tail.

(Paolini 2004: 38)

This is the reader's introduction to Saphira, the dragon star of Christopher Paolini's blockbuster *Eragon* trilogy.

Saphira is a beautiful blue dragon, possessing, according to the director of the film, the regal head of a lion and the wings of a bat (one might add, the neck of a swan). She also has all the regular admirable attributes of older dragons: superhuman sight; impregnable scales; fiery breath; huge size and killer talons and teeth. In all these attributes, she is the apex of natural power. The two crucial differences between Saphira and the dragons in earlier tales are that she appears in a text that was manifestly written for adolescents (by an

adolescent) and is that she is not an antagonist. In the Aarne-Petersen index of folktale motifs, she would be classified as a hero's magical helper.

Heroic tradition dictates that a conventional male hero (who rises from relative obscurity to prominence and glory through his brave and manly acts on behalf of his community) must have a female companion. This ensures a happy (romantic) ending to the hero's quest through his successful insertion into the heterosexual social order as a pillar of his community. It also provides foil for the hero's obligatory masculinity. Saphira fulfils this role in relation to Eragon, who is a perfectly normal, undistinguished and illiterate farm boy until he finds Saphira's egg. His bond with a dragon, like Sigurd's lick of Fafnir's blood, elevates him above his lowly origins to the status of a Dragon Rider. In time, their relationship bestows elven and draconic immortality upon him.

As a female dragon, Saphira's sexuality classifies her in the same group as earlier dragons, such as Echidna, the mother of the dragon Ladon in Greek mythology, who guards Hera's golden apples and has to be defeated so that Hercules can fulfil his tasks. Echidna has the head and torso of a nymph, but her lower body is that of a serpent; and, like many others of her kind, she loves gold. For her monstrosity and greed, she was banned to a cave at the bottom of the ocean (from which we can deduce that she was equipped with aquatic breathing apparatus). Saphira, too, is a compound of a human and a reptile, but she is seen in completely different terms: "In the clear sky ..., her scales sparkled like a multitude of brilliant blue diamonds. She was, Eragon thought, magnificent: proud, noble, and more beautiful than any other living creature" (Paolini 2009: 63). Eragon learns the history and politics of dragon-human interaction from Glaedr, an older dragon:

"When peace was made between dragons and elves at the end of our war, the Riders were created to ensure that such conflict would never again arise between our two races The elves provided the structure of the enchantment, the dragons provided the strength, and together they melded the souls of elves and dragons."

The joining changed us. We dragons gained the use of language and other trappings of civilization, while the elves shared in our longevity Our magic, dragons' magic — which permeates every fiber of our being — was transmitted to the elves and, in time, gave them their much-vaunted strength and grace.

(Paolini 2006: 437-8)

The traditional antagonism between humans and dragons has given way to a psychic partnership. In this speech Glaedr configures the race of dragons as living embodiments of the old order of nature in Alagaesia, as seen in the fact that a dragon egg will last forever unhatched, until it senses the presence of a worthy rider, and in the dragons' immortality. Saphira is also the most powerful embodiment of nature in the trilogy, through her kinship with the forest-loving elves and her affinity with wind, water and fire. Dragons have taken on new powers through their alliance with elves and humans. The bond between dragon and Rider is held in high esteem in Alagaesia, and Eragon acquires a number of honorific titles, including being hailed by his political leader (also a woman) as the one hope for successful rebellion against the tyrant Galbatorix. As a Dragon Rider, Eragon (whose name combines his steed with the legendary Aragorn of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) is a bridge between the natural power of dragons and the more sophisticated world of human politics and social existence.

Saphira is neither a servant nor a pet. Rather, she is Eragon's perfect companion, probably because she is a female. But she is not a romantic partner: rather, their telepathic connection is a fantasy depiction of the perfect union of mother and child, in which all needs and thoughts are known and accepted. Saphira calls Eragon 'little one' and displays maternal protectiveness towards him, promising to stay with him and ward him from evil forever (Paolini 2009: 35). Paolini depicts romantic love as irreducibly complex and difficult to achieve through his portrayal of Eragon's unsuccessful pursuit of the elf princess, Arya, who treats him with a combination of condescension, coldness and collegiality. By contrast, the telepathic bond between Eragon and Saphira is a conduit for mutual and unconditional devotion and a shared commitment to ending the reign of the

wicked king Galbatorix who is terrorizing the land with his own monstrously begotten dragon, Shruikan.

The battle between cosmic forces of universal 'good' and 'evil' has permeated fantasy works from time immemorial, and the oversimplification of a morally complex world into dramatically polarized binary oppositions is probably one of the reasons for the genre's enduring appeal. Dragons in the *Eragon* series are no exception to this tradition, and Saphira and Glaedr (coloured blue and gold) meet their matches in the dragons Thorn and Shruikan, who are red and black (colours that are traditionally associated with blood, darkness, chaos and the Orient). Thorn and Shruikan are bonded to the traitor Murtagh and the despot Galbatorix through magical perversions of the normal process of a dragon's egg choosing its Rider, which is the natural order for the bond to arise. They become second-order monsters by being bonded to humans by means that lie outside the accepted procedure as outlined by Glaedr.

In an era when humans have reconsidered their connection to natural beings, Saphira offers a revisioning of the dark side of humanity through her salutary connection to Eragon, and a domestication of the earlier portrayal of dragons as wicked, deplorable and implacable enemies of humanity. The monstrous aspect of dragonhood persists in the *Eragon* series, though, in the distortion of the bond between Rider and dragon in Thorn and Shruikan's relationships with their riders. Paolini, it turns out, has not altogether revised the earlier age's demonization of dragons in his romantic portrayal of perfect communion between his hero and Saphira. He has, rather, recast it as one aspect of draconic existence. The blame lies at the feet of the humans who have perverted it through malicious intent and power, probably as part of a general lack of care for nature and its inhabitants.

HAKU

Dragon writers from Europe and America take a great deal of care to establish the physicality of their dragons, down to counting the number of talons on each foot on occasions. This chimes well with Chinese and Japanese dragon lore, which insists that a dragon must exhibit nine resemblances to animals:

‘the horns of a deer, the head of a camel, the eyes of a devil, the neck of a snake, the abdomen of a clam, the scales of a carp, the claws of an eagle, the paws of a tiger, and the ears of a cow’ (Zhao 1992: 18). Chinese and Japanese dragons are altogether different from their western counterparts, though, in their two-way association with royalty. Their elements are sky and water, symbolizing their quasi-divine nobility and mutability, not earth and fire like the conventional giant winged lizards of Western Europe. In this vein, the dragon-boy, Haku, in Hayao Miyazaki’s acclaimed 2001 anim  film, *Spirited Away*, is an altogether more ethereal creature than Saphira, despite being her contemporary. Haku’s double nature is evident in the androgyny of his appearance, connoting his liminal, inter-gender status. He leads a dual existence as a boy in the service of the wicked witch Yubaba, who has stolen his name and, because ‘Name is self’ (Paolini 2009: 287), she forces him to work in her bath-house as a majordomo and thief. Haku’s enslavement to Yubaba corrupts him morally so that he does not conform to the ideal of nobility and beneficence that characterizes most Chinese dragons. Rather, he demonstrates the principles of the Chinese oracle, *The I Ching*, or ‘Book of Changes’, which warns that a dragon who flies too high will surely fall. Haku’s dragon form is pure white and ephemeral, cloud-like, demonstrating his capacity to transcend domination. But he is injured in consequence of his thieving ways (which Miyazaki probably garnered from the Western draconic tradition) and he nearly perishes from his internal injuries. Once healed, he regains his name and, with it, his memory of being the spirit of the river Kohaku, which was choked by pollution from nearby housing developments. The restoration of Haku’s full true name, draconic freedom and the power to fly as an Eastern dragon (that is, without wings) along with the return of his boyhood innocence is another warning in fantasy against environmental misuse.

TEHANU

As I mentioned, for the eleventh-century *Beowulf* poet, death is imaged as a terrifying, ugly monster, preying on what human beings prize most: life itself. The award-winning science fiction and fantasy writer, Ursula Le Guin,

conceptualizes dragons similarly, but with a strikingly different emphasis. Her first dragon, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, is the thief and hoarder, Yevaud:

What [Ged] had taken for a part of the tower was the shoulder of the Dragon Pendor as we uncurled his bulk and lifted himself slowly up.

When he was all afoot his scaled head, spike-crowned and triple-tongued, rose higher than the broken tower's height, and his taloned forefeet rested on the rubble of the town below. Lean as a hound he was and huge as a hill.

(Le Guin 1993: 87)

Yevaud is a splendid dragon in the tradition of Fafnir, St George's dragon, and Smaug. He is beyond the reach of human power because he is huge, wise, and obeys no laws of human morality or sociality. As a young wizard, Ged has learnt dragon lore and knows that there are only two options for human interactions with dragons. Either the dragon will kill you, or it will speak to you if it considers you worthy to be addressed.

Yevaud has been terrorizing the people of his reach of Earthsea in typically draconic style: he burns their homes, eats their livestock and spreads chaos wherever he goes. He is also a master of riddles, like Smaug, and he can lie in the Old Speech or Language of the Making, which forces every object to obey its true name. Only a wizard of great power and learning, such as Ged possesses, can subdue him through the knowledge of his true name. In this way Ged becomes a dragonlord: not one who may command a dragon, but one to whom a dragon will speak instead of killing him. Dragons do not recognize any authority because, in Le Guin's words, they are 'wildness. What is *not owned*' (1993a: 22, original emphasis). '[N]ot being owned' betokens a refusal of any kind of domination, especially ideological or conceptual. Since the dragons speak the originary Language of the Making, Le Guin links power to speech and, through names, to identity. In this way she makes explicit the fact that dragons exist only in discourse and that the wizardry that creates and controls them is that of the printed word and the tale retold.

The dragons' refusal to obey any but their own imperatives binds their actions with a terrible sincerity. When the dragon leader, Orm Embar, arrives on Selidor to help Ged and Arren defeat the wicked wizard Cob, he does so because Cob's desire for power over death would also give him power over the dragon's own realm. Cob proves too powerful for Orm Embar, who lies dead at the end of their encounter with the unconscious, uncharted and unspeakable land of death, where memory is lost, time is meaningless and there is no change in any feature of existence. Ged is too weak to return to the world of human rational society by his own strength, and so 'the iron-coloured dragon', the Eldest, Kalessin, arrives to convey him back to his home island of Gont.

Despite the conventional symbolic association between dragons and what is thought of as 'the feminine' (such as chaos, duplicity and the unconscious), Kalessin is profoundly androgynous. No gendered pronoun is ever used for this dragon and it is as though s/he exists outside of the gender binary. S/he is also much less splendid than Yevaud: its wings 'were not gold like Orm Embar's wings but red, dark red, dark as rust or blood, or the crimson silk of Lorbanery' and 'there was a great splendour in that flight' (Le Guin 1993: 475). Bearing Ged home is an act of draconic freedom and transcendence of the conflict between the life-affirming power of 'the art magic' and the death drive; but it is also a choice in favour of immanence and ephemerality over the fake power of immortality.

In the last two books of Earthsea, *Tehanu* (1991) and *The Other Wind* (2001), Le Guin audaciously breaches the divide between the chaotic power of the archetypal traditional dragon and the hierarchical rationality of the human social world. The figure who crosses this divide is the abused child, Therru, whose name means 'burning, or the flaming of fire', who at the age of 'six or seven' is beaten, probably raped, and pushed into a fire by her parents. She is raised by a foster mother, but she does not recover from the fire, which has burned one eye to blindness and one arm to a charred stump. In the world of village gossip and suspicion, Therru is a 'monster brat' to be spat on and

avoided; but when her foster-parents are threatened by a wizard who strips them of their humanity and reduces their consciousness to that of animals, Therru is the only one who can call for help. Though she is blind, she possesses the piercing vision of the traditional dragon (*drakein* is one of the Greek root words for the English word *dragon*, meaning 'to see strongly') and uses it:

She ran ... onto the path along the cliff and to the edge of the cliff, where she was not to go because she could see it only with one eye. She was careful. She looked carefully with that eye. She stood on the edge. The water was far below, and the sun was setting far away. She looked into the west with the other eye, and called with the other voice the name she had heard in her mother's dream.

(Le Guin 1991: 244-5)

Growing up, Therru is always associated with fire, and while she sees ordinary shapes of objects with her whole physical eye, with the 'other' eye, the blinded one, what she sees is always fire, the dragon's element. The violence that has disfigured her has given her kinship with fire, and Le Guin says that 'the fire of the dragon runs right through the book' (*Earthsea Revisioned*: Le Guin 1993: 23). *Tehanu* is a book of outrage for the damage done to an innocent child, which is irremediable because it is founded on betrayal of the most profound of all human bonds: that between parents and child. The central transformation of *Tehanu* lies in the fact that when Therru calls for help, the call is answered, not by human helpers, but by Kalessin, the Eldest, who calls the burned child 'daughter' and does not kill either Therru or her foster mother as dragons in *Earthsea* are said to do to all humans who dare to speak to them.

Le Guin is fond of stories of origin and an extract from the fictional creation story, 'The Creation of Éa', recalling the supreme god Ea in Babylonian creation mythology, forms the epitaph for the entire *Earthsea* cycle. The poem ends '*bright the hawk's flight / on the empty sky*', linking the flight and freedom of the dragon with Le Guin's beloved polarities, emptiness and occupation of space: or Father Sky with a partly earthbound, farseeing airborne predator. This substitutes, in *Earthsea*, for the Judeo-Christian myth

which begins, '*Fiat lux*', or 'let there be light' in which 'light' or clarity banishes darkness or formlessness.

In *Tehanu*, the wise, but not magically gifted, Woman of Kemay tells an oral tale of the separation of the two master races of Earthsea: humans and dragons. Tenar retells the tale to Therru as they walk towards the home of the dying mage Ogion, who, as a young man, was instructed by a woman mage in the magic of speaking to the earth and thus gained knowledge of the elements that could have linked him to dragons' love of caves and the subterranean. The *verw nadan* or 'vedurnan' is the name given to the law that divides humans and dragons:

'When Segoy raised the islands of the world from the sea in the beginning of time, the dragons were the first born of the land and the wind blowing over the land in the beginning, dragon and human were all one. They were all one people, one race, winged, and speaking the True Language.

'They were beautiful, and strong, and wise, and free.

'But in time nothing can be without becoming. So among the dragon-people some became more and more in love with flight and wildness Others of the dragon-people came to care little for flight, but gathered up treasure, wealth, things made, things learned. They built houses, strongholds to keep their treasures in, so they could pass all they gained to their children, ever seeking more increase and more. And they came to fear the wild ones, who might come flying and destroy all their dear hoard, burn it up in a blast of flame out of mere carelessness and ferocity.'

(Le Guin 1991: 12)

In *The Other Wind*, Le Guin, with some irony, has the second-language speaker, Princess Sesarakh, who usually appears in public swathed in a column of dragon-red silk which does not allow anyone to see her features, explain this to King Lebannen:

“Long ago long ago — Karg people, sorcery people, dragon people, hah? Yes? — All people one, all speak one — one ... One language!” “But then, dragon people say: Let go, let go all things. Fly! — But we people, we say: No, keep. Keep all things. Dwell! — So we go apart, hah? dragon people and we people? So they make the Vedurnan. These to let go — these to keep. Yes? But to keep all things, we must to let go

that language. That dragon people language So we people, we let go that Old Speech language, and keep all things. And dragon people let go all things, but keep that, keep that language.”

(Le Guin 2001: 202-3)

The *vedurnan* which keeps humans and dragons apart from each other is a reversal of the literary tradition which depicts dragons as the embodiments of greed, as in the myth of Fafnir and its reworking in CS Lewis’s story of Eustace’s transformation. Here humans are driven by a need to keep possessions, while dragons are driven by the urge for freedom: and it is dragons who, ultimately, have the upper hand in discursive power. *Tehanu* and *The Other Wind* also reverse the gender of the traditional dragon-slayer. It would be mortally dangerous for a man to look into the eyes of the dragon Kalessin, but it does no harm for the woman, Tenar, to do so: and the two most impressive dragons in *The Other Wind* are the shape-shifting female, Orm Irian (christened ‘Dragonfly’), and Therru, who becomes Tehanu, a crippled girl who is excluded from heterosexual love but is able to unmake the wall between the living and the dead. Tehanu’s double sight is testimony to her dual nature as both human and dragon, the living transgression of the *vedurnan* and her community’s boundary-crossing shaman. She retains the impressive size, shape-shifting abilities and killer weaponry of ancient dragons, but she is only able to be whole when she attains her dragon shape and flies on ‘the other wind’ beyond the bounds of human cartography. Here be dragons, indeed.

Conclusion

Dragon-slayers in narratives like the legend of St George and the myths of Marduk and Sigurd were understood to be able to dispatch, not only exoteric threats to their communities, but also intra-psychic threats such as their own fears, doubts and lower impulses, which were all externalized in the fearsome figure of the chthonic dragon. In keeping with the shift in human understandings of nature, dragons in contemporary fantasy do not appear in association with slayers. Instead, they appear with privileged riders and human companions (as in *How to Train Your Dragon*, variously by Cressida

Cowell and Disney Studios; and in Cornelia Funke's *Dragon Rider*). Arising from the depths of the earth, or, in Chinese mythology, from river-beds, the imaginary figure of the dragon condenses all the most mysterious hidden powers of nature and the nagging suspicion that humans may not know everything about the planet we inhabit. David Attenborough's fifty-year career with the BBC as a natural history broadcaster and media activist for animal rights is another possible sign of a shift in human responses to large and fierce natural phenomena, which are seen in our environmentally friendly 20th and 21st centuries as more interesting than dangerous. When Harry Potter and his friends stumble upon a young dragon called Norbert in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling 1997), they do not immediately attack him to prove their heroic status. Instead, they set about the arduous task of returning him to his natural habitat, as good conservationists should.

There is more to the representation of contemporary dragons such as Paolini's Saphira and Le Guin's Tehanu than the desire to conserve exotic creatures, though. These texts inscribe a new reverence for the dark, monstrous and life-threatening aspects of life, while testifying to the enduring capacity of the dragon to flourish in print on an apparently limitless diet of connotations and associations. All the same, texts featuring dragons are generally relegated to the 'Young Adults' section of bookshops, well away from 'adult fiction', where are found more serious works dealing with war, sex and human drama. The closest a dragon comes to those shelves is in Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), where Lisbeth Salander's self-decoration is only another mark of her outsider status. In the eyes of publishers and booksellers, dragons have been downgraded to adolescent escapist fantasy. Since the dragon is one of the most enduring, resilient and protean creations of the human imagination, this can only mark a loss of faith in the creative side of the psyche. By thus exiling adult readers from the world of dragons, heroes and the force of the unconscious, we force ourselves to live in a relentlessly mechanistic present without the power of the imagination. We demonize and dragonize each other on the grounds of race, class or gender (to name only three of the possible criteria for domination) instead of soaring on the dangerous but healing wings of dragons.

Works cited

- Cowell, Cressida. 2003. *How to Train Your Dragon*. London: Hodder Children's Books.
- Funke, Cornelia (trans. Anthea Bell). 2004. *Dragon Rider*. Somerset: Chicken House.
- Gaiman, Neil. 2007. 'Happily Ever After'.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/oct/13/film.fiction> (17 February 2011)
- Heaney, Seamus (trans.) 1999. *Beowulf*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Larsson, Stieg (trans. Reg Keeland). 2009. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. New York: Vintage.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 1991. *Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea*. New York: Bantam.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 1993. *The Earthsea Quartet*. London: Penguin.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 1993a. *Earthsea Revisioned*. Cambridge: Children's Literature New England.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 2001. *The Other Wind*. New York: Harcourt, Inc.
- Lewis, CS. 1952 (rpt. 1984). *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. London: Fontana.
- Paolini, Christopher. 2005. *Eragon: Inheritance Book One*. London: Corgi.
- Paolini, Christopher. 2006. *Eldest: Inheritance Book Two*. London: Corgi.
- Paolini, Christopher. 2008. *Brisingr: Inheritance Book Three*. London: Corgi.
- Spenser, Edmund. 1979. *Poetical Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Studio Ghibli. 2001. *Spirited Away* (dir. Hayao Miyazaki).
- Studio Ghibli. 2006. *Tales from Earthsea* (dir. Goro Miyazaki).
- Tolkien, JRR. 1937 (rpt. 1981). *The Hobbit: or There and Back Again*. London: Unwin Paperbacks.

Zhao, Qiguang. 1992. *A Study of Dragons, East and West*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.