

Meet the Dragon: A Brief Study of Dragons in the *Harry Potter* Series and the *Inheritance Cycle*

In the first chapter of her book *The Medieval Dragon: The Nature of the Beast in Germanic Literature* Joyce Tally Lionarons writes:

After the plethora of scholarly articles published in the 1960s and 1970s about Beowulf's dragon, which Tolkien's essay (Tolkien *Beowulf*) encouraged if it did not engender, and after the popular dragon fad of the 1970s and early 1980s [...] the publication of yet another book having to do with dragons may strike some readers as superfluous at best. Certainly we all know what a dragon is by now. But do we? (1998: 1)

She expands on this:

Contemporary linguistic and literary theory has taught us that it is dangerous to treat any word – even one which has a physical referent in the natural world – as if it were a transparent medium for the communication of a single, monologically determined meaning. This danger is compounded when we try to discover the meaning of a word like “dragon” in its literary-historical context, for the dragon – in myth, in literature, and in history – has always been a purely imaginary, and thus primarily a linguistic, phenomenon. (1998: 1)

It is, therefore, not surprising that there is more than one definition or one portrayal of the dragon. However, some traits, like their great size or wings, appear in the majority if not in every description of the dragon (e.g. Smith 1919: 257).

Moreover, the words that are used for “dragon” in Germanic languages are similar; for example the English *dragon*, the German *Drache*, the Danish *drage*, the Dutch *draak*, and the Norwegian and Swedish *drake*. Germanic words for dragon have origins in the Latin word *draco*, *draconis*, meaning a serpent or a dragon, derived from the Greek word *dracon*, meaning a dragon, which in turn is derived from Indo-European **derk*, meaning to see, to prophesy. The Latin term was borrowed by Germanic languages in the early Middle Ages; before that, the function of this word was served by the word *wurm* in Old High German (Szrejter 2012:184) and *wyrm* in Old English, both words meaning a serpent. This corresponds with the transformation that dragons underwent in the Middle Ages, a transformation emphasized by two Polish fantasy writers: Artur Szrejter and Andrzej Sapkowski. According to the latter, dragons became the embodiment of Satan in the Middle Ages and therefore had to be dreadful. All that was most terrifying – reptile scales, both lizard and phallic form, a snakelike tongue and tail, bat wings and fire-breathing jaws with sharp teeth – was compiled in the portrayal of the dragon (Sapkowski 2011: 219). To this Szrejter also adds that, during this transformation, the nature of dragons as foes changed from being enemies of the whole world to being enemies of princesses, kings and knights (2012: 183). Acknowledging the medieval transformation as a turning point in the evolution of dragons, he differentiates between old and new dragons. He argues that the most important characteristics separating the new dragons from the old ones are fire-breathing, flying and idle sprawling on treasures (183).

Dragons that epitomise this transitional phase are Fáfñir and the *Beowulf* dragon. The former was not a dragon his whole life, but was originally a man, who secretly murdered his father to obtain the father’s gold (Lionarons 1998: 64). Then, Fáfñir underwent a metamorphosis “designed to enable [him] to keep the gold he has stolen from his murdered father all to himself” (58). The dragon parts from his ill-gotten treasure only to drink, and when he walks he causes the earth to shake violently as he is of

enormous size. Fáfñir is poisonous, but he does not breathe fire and does not have wings, only legs. On the other hand he is able to speak, which may, however, be a remnant of his previous form rather than a characteristic of him as a dragon (64). Fáfñir’s life ends when Siegfried, who crouches in “a cavity in the earth until Fáfñir crawls across it, [...] stabs the dragon from below”. Due to the slayer’s getting covered in Fáfñir’s blood, a curious aspect of the dragon’s power is revealed, namely “indirectly through the dragon’s blood, [Siegfried] learns to understand the language of birds” (63).

Being poisonous, deprived of wings and not able to breathe fire, Fáfñir is more similar to the dragons from before the transition than the *Beowulf* dragon. The poem, which tells the story of Beowulf, does not contain the proper name of the dragon, and it is referred to as both *wyrm* and *draca*, which alludes to the fact that dragons could still be understood as crawling snakes as well as flying beasts. The *Beowulf* dragon possesses all the characteristics of the new dragons – fire-breathing, flying, idle sprawling on treasures which it cannot exploit (Szrejter 2012: 183). However, it still keeps to a few aspects of the archaic dragons. It is poisonous, its moves are described as snakelike writhing and it comes across as an eternally sleeping monster from underground. Thus, it can be perceived as a link between a mythical *wyrm* and a dragon from a later era.

Presenting their visions of dragons, some modern authors base their creatures lightly on medieval dragons, whereas others draw on them to such an extent that their beasts may be considered nearly identical copies of the medieval ones. This happens, for instance, in the case of Smaug, the dragon from the lonely mountain, appearing in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. In fact, the *Beowulf* dragon might be considered to be the prototype of Smaug, as the latter shares its main features with the dragon described about a millennium earlier.¹

¹ The *Beowulf* dragon and Smaug both guard a treasure which belongs to a long-forgotten king which is then accumulated under a mountain; they are robbed while they are asleep; after awaking they notice the disappearance of a golden cup; they both act similarly before the theft – as

However, in the case of the dragons in the *Harry Potter* series and the *Inheritance* cycle, the situation is quite different. The first thing about the dragons revealed in the story of Harry Potter is that they are extremely magical creatures. Although they cannot use magic and cast spells, their heartstrings are used as the core for magic wands, which makes them, next to unicorns and phoenixes, one of the three most magical animals (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 64). Then, a huge, black dragon egg is presented. In order to hatch, the egg has to be kept in fire, because a dragon mother normally breathes fire on her eggs. When the dragon is ready to hatch, deep cracks appear in the egg, a scraping noise can be heard and the egg splits open. The dragon that hatches in the first volume of the series, Norbert, a Norwegian Ridgeback, is compared to a crumpled, black umbrella (170–171). He has bulging, orange eyes, stubs of horns, a long snout with wide nostrils, pointed fangs and spiny wings – huge compared to his body. He cannot breathe fire immediately after being born but he can produce sparks (172). Despite the effort of his owner, Norbert is not friendly towards humans, and when he bites a boy, his fangs turn out to be poisonous (173–174). He thus possesses one feature of the dragons from before the medieval transition. This also shows that dragons cannot be tamed, which is the reason why, in the wizarding world of Harry Potter, they are illegal in Great Britain.

Grown-up dragons are presented twice in the *Harry Potter* series, first during the Triwizard Tournament, and once again when Harry breaks into the wizarding bank. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* there are four dragons, four nesting mothers that are a crucial element in the first task of the Tournament. Each contestant has to face a dragon-mother guarding her eggs, and collect a gold, egg-shaped device hidden among the eggs. Here,

they spend their days lying on the gold – and after the theft as they both get infuriated; have a good sense of smell; leave their cave at night and return to it at dawn. Apart from that, water is the place where the corpses of both dragons are buried.

the lack of intelligence of dragons is presented, as, despite the fact that the devices are in a different colour than the eggs, dragons guard them as fiercely as the rest of the eggs. During this encounter with the dragons, a number of details about their appearance is given. The beasts are fifty feet high, scaly, spike-ridden, hairless and are in different colours, with different distinctive features and native to different parts of the world depending on the breed (286, 296). The dragons appearing in the Tournament represent four out of ten dragon breeds existing in the world of *Harry Potter*. The opponent of the first tournament contestant, the Swedish Short-Snout, residing mainly in wild and uninhabited mountains, is an attractive dragon with silver and blue scales and long, pointed horns. Its flame is of a brilliant blue colour and it needs only seconds to reduce timber and bone to ash (*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, 24–25). The next beast, the Common Welsh Green, is predictably green, has smooth scales and a melodious roar. It issues fire in thin jets, nests in high mountains and preys on sheep, leaving humans unharmed unless provoked (21). The third dragon is the Chinese Fireball. Its other name is Liondragon and it is the only oriental dragon. It is of a particularly impressive appearance, as it is scarlet, has smooth scales and protuberant eyes and its face is surrounded by a fringe of gold spikes. Its fire is mushroom shaped and its crimson and gold eggs' shells are used in Chinese wizardry. Unlike most dragons, it is quite tolerant of its own species, but it is aggressive to other mammals, on which it will feast, its two favourite dishes being pigs and humans (20–21). The last and the biggest of the four dragons appearing in the Tournament is the Hungarian Horntail. It weighs several tonnes, and it is black and more lizard-like than the others. Its wings are as wide as those of a small airplane and it has long, bronze spikes protruding along the tail every few inches and yellow eyes with vertical pupils like a cat's. Unlike other dragons, it can shoot fire at a range of not twenty but forty feet (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 286–287). Its diet consists of sheep, goats, and as often as possible, humans (*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, 23).

Among the six remaining dragon breeds, there are: the Antipodean Opaleye, the Hebridean Black, the Peruvian Vipertooth, the Romanian Longhorn, the Ukrainian Ironbelly, and the Norwegian Ridgeback, whose youngling is presented in the first part of the series (*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, 20–25). The Antipodean Opaleye, whose glittering eyes are multi-coloured and pupil-less, and whose scales are iridescent and pearly, lives in New Zealand and occasionally in Australia, where, uncharacteristically for its species, it does not reside in mountains but in valleys. Compared to other dragon breeds, it is not particularly violent and kills only when it is hungry. It feasts mainly on sheep, though on occasion, it may also attack kangaroos (20). The most aggressive dragon native to the British Isles, the Hebridean Black, has purple eyes, rough scales, sharp ridges on its back, a spike shaped like an arrow on its tail and bat-like wings. It hunts mainly deer, but eats also dogs and cattle (22). The smallest and the swiftest of all dragons, the Peruvian Vipertooth, has smooth and copper-coloured scales, black ridge markings, short horns and unusually venomous fangs. Though it readily feasts on cows and goats, it prefers to eat humans (23–24). Native to the most significant dragon reserve in the world, where the beasts of all breeds are studied, is the dark-green Romanian Longhorn. Its long horns are glittering golden, and the dragon uses them to gore its prey. However, because of its horns, this breed is also an endangered species, as the horns are an important potion ingredient (24). The Ukrainian Ironbelly, the largest of all dragon breeds, can weigh up to six tonnes. Although it is rotund and flies slowly, it is exceedingly dangerous, since it can crash buildings on which it lands. This is a grey dragon with red eyes, and long and vicious talons (25). The last dragon breed, whose egg and youngling have been described earlier, is the Norwegian Ridgeback. Its appearance is similar to that of the Hungarian Horntail, except for the fact that it has large, black ridges alongside its back, as opposed to bronze spikes protruding along the Horntail's tail. Unlike other dragon breeds, it feeds not only on large mammals dwelling on land but also on animals living in water (23).

The fifth grown-up dragon presented in the story (whose breed is not known) appears in completely different circumstances. It is a prisoner in the wizarding bank, where, in one of the underground corridors, it stands in the way of those who want to get to the five deepest vaults in the place. It cannot be said that the dragon guards the treasure hidden in them, because it does not want to be there. It is forced to be in the underground passage, it is chained and partially blinded. The goblins who run the bank control it by mutilating it. Living underground is not something it wants or is created for, which is confirmed by the fact that its “scales had turned pale and flaky during its long incarceration under the ground” (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 432). This is one of the differences between Rowling's dragons and the dragons in *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*. In the wizarding world of Harry Potter, dragons are beasts that seek open spaces and do not voluntarily spend time underground. However, the biggest difference between Rowling's dragons and Fáfñir, the *Beowulf* dragon and Smaug is that the former are not greedy, they do not want to possess treasures, so they do not attack and plunder wealthy people or dwarves, therefore the contexts in which they appear are completely different. Another, very important difference is the fact that no killing of a dragon is presented, since all that the competitors have to do is face the dragons, trick them and steal the devices from them. It is explained that “dragons are extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides, which none but the most powerful spells can penetrate” (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 295–296).

However, there are some similarities between the dragons in the world of Harry Potter and those in the worlds presented in *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*. They do fly and breathe fire, which strongly suggests that they belong to the group of the new dragons. Moreover, at some point they do act as guardians but it is their eggs, not gold, they guard. Then, in comparison to the *Beowulf* dragon only, Rowling's dragons have poisonous fangs, are of the same height – fifty feet – and do not have the ability to talk. And in comparison to

Smaug only, they also have one weak point. The similarity, however, is restricted to its existence only, as the vulnerability itself is different. In the case of the dragons in Rowling's wizarding world, it is their eyes that are their weakest point (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 353). Finally, similarly to Fáfnir, Rowling's dragons' blood has magical qualities.

Contrary to the *Harry Potter* series, in the case of Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance* cycle, consisting of four parts: *Eragon*, *Eldest*, *Brisingr* and *Inheritance*, there are no different breeds of dragons, and it is not possible to describe all situations in which the creatures appear, as the dragon is at the core of the story of Alagaësia – the land presented in the cycle – and a blue dragon named Saphira is one of the two main characters of the story. Alagaësiian dragons can fly and breathe fire. Unlike Fáfnir, the *Beowulf* dragon and Smaug, but similarly to the dragons from the wizarding world of Harry Potter, dragons from Alagaësia do not lie on treasures, in fact, as Saphira says "Dragons [...] do not require possessions to be happy. What use have we for riches when our hides are more glorious than any treasure hoard in existence?" (*Eldest*, 556). The fact that Saphira talks here could be treated as a similarity between her and Fáfnir and Smaug. However, the manner of Saphira's speaking is completely different from the way the other two dragons talk. Saphira, along with other dragons within her world, does not produce audible words, but her utterances are heard in the minds of those she addresses. But, before more is said about grown-up dragons, the hatching process should be described, as, like in the *Harry Potter* series, this is the first thing about dragons revealed in the story.

Saphira's egg is oval, blue and measures about a foot (*Eragon*, 8). It weighs several pounds and has a flawless surface decorated with thin veins of white that spiderweb across the egg. It is cool and frictionless under touch, like hardened silk (7). Unlike in the *Harry Potter* series, all dragon eggs are of the same colours as the dragons that hatch from them. The process of Saphira's hatching is accompanied by loud squeaks coming from the egg and its rocking. After a while cracks appear on the surface of the egg, and at the top where

they meet, there appears a small hole, through which the dragon leaves the egg, beginning with the head (36–37).

Unlike in *Harry Potter*, dragon eggs do not have to be kept in fire before hatching and they do not split open. In fact, the baby dragon inside the egg is ready to leave it as soon as the dragon lays the egg, but the little dragon will not hatch until the person chosen by it to be its rider touches the egg. Thus, the infant dragons can sometimes wait years, not being affected in any way by the passing of time (*Eragon*, 112). On the other hand, the appearance of the newly-born Saphira is quite similar to Norbert's, as her wings are several times longer than her body and her fangs are sharp but her eyes are not orange, they are "ice-blue" which matches the colour of her body (38). Like Norbert, Saphira cannot breathe fire immediately after hatching and she also grows at a similar pace during the first two weeks of her life, but unlike him, she does not attack Eragon, the boy who is present during her hatching. She approaches Eragon and wants him to touch her (39), which is exactly the opposite to Norbert's behaviour as he doesn't allow anyone to touch him and bites and sends sparks at everyone who comes close to him. When Eragon touches Saphira, she does something exceptional, she permanently joins her consciousness with the consciousness of Eragon. This hurts the boy badly, which in turn makes him scared of the dragon (39), but later on, due to this connection, Eragon discovers how exceptional this creature is. Moreover, the moment they are connected, Saphira, being magical, affects Eragon by extending his life and making his body stronger, his mind keener and his sight truer than that of normal men. Apart from that, Eragon also starts to slowly acquire pointed ears similar to those of elves (54), but this is not the most important physical change he undergoes. The moment they touch, Saphira marks Eragon as her rider, leaving a silver, oval scar, called *gedwëy ignasia*, on Eragon's palm. Through this mark the rider can employ magic, and it is also a token of the dragon's power given to the rider and the changes he/she underwent.

Despite the fact that the process of hatching and growing of dragons is quite similar in the world of Harry Potter and in Alagaë-

sia, dragons from these places are completely different. In Rowling's series, dragons are simply fire-breathing beasts with no intelligence. On the other hand, in the *Inheritance* cycle, dragons have equal if not higher intelligence than humans. They are not animals, and they are endowed with more natural cunning and wisdom than people (*Eragon*, 54). Saphira is described as "as real and complex as any person," and her personality as "eclectic and at times completely alien," but this does not prevent her and Eragon from understanding each other on a profound level (61).

This distinction between beasts and intelligent creatures raises the issue of the pronouns used by the authors to refer to their dragons. Because Old English had grammatical genders, the fact that the *Beowulf* dragon, being a monster, is referred to as "he" does not provide an insight into the author's perception of the beast. However, in Modern English, where grammatical gender is no longer used, the employment of "he" or "she" may suggest that a dragon is perceived as something more than an animal. Therefore, being endowed with intelligence, Tolkien's Smaug is referred to with the personal pronoun "he". On the other hand, in *Harry Potter*, where dragons are fierce beasts, they are generally referred to as "it", although, in the case of the newly-born Norbert, the pronoun "he" is used by Norbert's owner Hagrid – probably due to his feelings towards the dragon. Moreover, during the Tournament, the dragon nesting mother which Harry has to face is alternatively referred to as "she" and "it." The situation is quite different in the *Inheritance* cycle, as Alagaësiian dragons have souls. They are therefore generally referred to as "he" or "she" depending on the dragon's gender, but when Saphira – the first dragon that appears in the story – hatches, she does not speak, her gender is unknown and Eragon is not aware of the fact that she is something more than an animal and, until the moment when he names her, she is referred to as "it".

There are also some differences on the physical level between the dragons from Alagaësia and the dragons mentioned earlier. Unlike in *Beowulf* and *Harry Potter*, where dragons have poisonous fangs and are 50-feet high, in the realm of Alagaësia, dragons' fangs are

not poisonous and the creatures never stop growing, and even the small ones have wingspans over a hundred feet and the ancient ones could pass for large hills (52).

Being so different from each other, dragons from Alagaësia and the wizarding world of Harry Potter share two more common features: they do not belong to underground caves and they are magical. However, this magical aspect differs significantly, as in *Harry Potter* dragons are one of the three most magical creatures, but they do not use magic, since only parts of their bodies are used in various magical processes. Dragons in Alagaësia use magic, however, and they participate in the casting of spells performed by their riders and they can also cast spells by themselves, though not entirely consciously; they have the power but they need some stimuli that enables them to release that energy (*Brisings*, 367). This happens for example when Saphira mends the Isidar Mithrim, the most magnificent gemstone in the realm, which was broken into thousands of little pieces during a battle. She approaches the sapphire – anteriorly put back together by dwarves – concentrates her sight and will on the stone and remains like that for a few minutes, but nothing happens. Then hundreds of dwarves watching her start to sing a slow and wistful song which fills the hall. This song provokes Eragon to think about things that were lost and a similar feeling of melancholy – not natural for her personality – is aroused in Saphira. Then, something deep and ancient awakes in the dragon and a magnitude of energy rushes through her and she touches the Isidar Mithrim. The star sapphire becomes whole once again and is even more beautiful than it was before. After that, Saphira reveals to Eragon that it was his emotions that helped her (559–560).

Similarly to Smaug, the dragons from Alagaësia are also intelligent, perhaps even more so; they also enjoy flattery (*Inheritance*, 231), remember smells of different races and cannot resist the fascination of riddles (*Eldest*, 572). But unlike Smaug, Alagaësiian dragons do not hate dwarves. In fact, they actually help them, eat and drink with them, fight alongside them in battles and they eventually agree to make them their riders (*Inheritance*, 836).

Unlike in any of the mentioned stories, Alagaësiian dragons have souls, emotions and feelings. They love their riders to such an extent that they are unable to stand the loss resulting from their riders' death, causing them to go insane if their riders die. The bond that exists between the dragon and the rider is so strong that they become like one single being rather than two separate ones, as they feel each other's emotions, fears, wishes, pain and hear thoughts even when they are not physically next to each other. A great number of other characteristics and abilities of dragons are also revealed, some more important and noble than others. For instance, Saphira says that it is a dragon's destiny "to attempt the impossible, to accomplish great deeds regardless of fear" (*Eragon*, 93) and that everyone should "live in the present, remember the past, and fear not the future, for it doesn't exist and never shall. There is only now" (*Eldest*, 361). On the other hand, she also says that dragons are not monogamous and she more than once displays her liking for alcohol (*Inheritance*, 794, 845).

However, there is another important hallmark of Alagaësiian dragons called Eldunari, which means "the heart of hearts". It is a hard, gemlike object, similar in composition to dragons' scales, located in their chests (*Brisingr*, 628). It is described by Glaedr – one of the eldest living dragons – as follows:

When a dragon hatches, their Eldunari is clear and lusterless. Usually it remains so all through a dragon's life and dissolves along with the dragon's corpse when they die. However, if we wish, we can transfer our consciousness into the Eldunari. Then it will acquire the same color as our scales and begin to glow like a coal. If a dragon has done this, the Eldunari will outlast the decay of their flesh, and a dragon's essence may live on indefinitely. Also, a dragon can disgorge their Eldunari while they are still alive. By this means, a dragon's body and a dragon's consciousness can exist separately and yet still be linked, which can be most useful in certain circumstances. But to do this exposes us to great danger, for whosoever holds our Eldunari holds our very soul in their hands. With it, they could force us to do their bidding, no matter how vile. (*Brisingr*, 628)

Thus the consciousness of Alagaësiian dragons "does not reside solely within their skulls" (*Brisingr*, 628). They may choose their minds and souls to be immortal and to share their knowledge and their energy – essential in performing magic – with the holders of their heart of hearts.

Conclusions

There seems to be a dynamic evolution in the depiction of dragons in literature. According to Szrejter's division, Fafnir, the *Beowulf* dragon and Smaug can be qualified as two transitional and a new dragon respectively. However, the dragons in *Harry Potter* and *Inheritance* seem to be outside these categories as these dragons do not require any possessions. Nevertheless, they fly and breathe fire and do not belong to underground caves – as dragons from before the medieval transition did. Therefore, they cannot be qualified as old dragons, yet they are too different from Smaug and the *Beowulf* dragon to be considered new dragons. They retain some features of the new dragons but they also change and develop some original qualities. They do not steal treasures and are exceedingly magical. Moreover, Alagaësiian dragons allow humans and other beings to ride them, and they also attend human, elvish and dwarvish parties, drinking alongside creatures of all the other races, which qualifies them as friends rather than foes, which again takes these dragons beyond the categories described by Szrejter, as the old dragons are described as enemies of the whole world and the new ones as enemies of princesses, kings and knights. This proves that the creative process is not over and may also suggest that dragons are likely to change their skin in fantasy stories to come. Nevertheless, what enables this "endless variation in the dragon's traits" (Smith 1919: 257) is the fact that, as observed by Lionarons, the word "dragon" "has always been a purely imaginary, and thus primarily a linguistic, phenomenon" (1998: 1) and therefore the only factor limiting the evolution of dragons is the creativity of the authors of fantasy fiction.

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