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Dragons in Twentieth-Century Fiction

Sandra Unerman

Introduction

A recent book, *An Instinct for Dragons* by David E. Jones (Routledge, 2000), argues that dragons came into the minds of humans as a combination of the images of the snake, eagle and panther, all predators of our ancestral primates, which trigger a fear response embedded in our brains from early in our evolution. Other theories have been considered by folklorists over many years (see, for example, Simpson 1978, 79). But whatever their origin, dragons today are not just a survival of beliefs and motifs from the past. They live on in popular culture and in fiction, not as a static symbol but as images which may be used in different ways and given different functions. In the twentieth century, many works of fiction have featured dragons, more so than ever since fantasy fiction became a successful publishing genre in the last thirty years. These dragons are not all alike. Some have obvious links with their literary predecessors or with traditional stories but use their materials in new ways. Others introduce new elements, sometimes borrowed from elsewhere in folklore or legend. Such changes can arise from a desire to develop fictional characters of greater individuality, whether for the dragon itself or for those who react to it, or just from a desire to write something new. But the ways in which writers choose to do this point to changes in the way they, and presumably their readers, think and feel about traditional stories and the traditional image of the dragon. They show how folklore material can be used to express changes in social attitudes and ideas, not merely to reflect the past.

History

In *British Dragons*, Jacqueline Simpson gives a brief account of dragons down the ages, from their part in cosmological myth and hero legends to their use in heraldry and folk plays. She also collects together the local stories from Britain which tell of the appearance of a dragon. In fiction in English, the usual picture of the dragon is the one taken from the hero legend, of the huge evil beast slain by a knight in shining armour. The story is so well known that people have been making jokes about it since the seventeenth century, and Simpson quotes John Aubrey:

To save a maid, St George a dragon slew
 A pretty tale, if all that's told be true.
 Most say there are no dragons; and 'tis said
 There was no George. Pray God there was a maid (Simpson 1980, 9).

There are many other allusions to dragons in poetry and fiction, whether comic or serious, but it is hard to think of a dragon who appears as a significant character in a work of fiction between Spenser's description of the battle with the

Red Cross knight in Book One of the *Faerie Queene* and the end of the nineteenth century. Since then, the dragons have proliferated and diversified. It is impossible to keep track of them all but the following examples illustrate the parts they play in modern fiction and how they may differ from traditional dragons.

Early Modern Dragons

In 1898, Kenneth Grahame published "The Reluctant Dragon" (reprinted in Zipes 1991), one of a collection of stories in *Dream Days*. This dragon turns up on the downs above an English village and is befriended by a shepherd's son. The dragon is a large and impressive creature who only wants a quiet life. He makes up poetry and admires the landscape. When the Boy (so called throughout) says, "I can't help feeling you don't quite realise your position. You're an enemy of the human race, you see," the dragon replies, "Haven't got an enemy in the world. Too lazy to make 'em ..." But the villagers want to see a fight and decide that the countryside must be freed from the scourge of the dragon, though not even a hen roost has suffered from his arrival. (We are not told what he eats.) They send for St George, who does not really like killing, though he usually has to do it, and is therefore willing to listen to the Boy's explanations. He and the dragon stage a fight, which provides a spectacle to satisfy everybody, and the dragon is invited to the Feast afterwards, at which he is a great social success.

This is a storybook dragon, which is why the Boy has the confidence to deal with him, because his parents have always encouraged his interest in fairytales and natural history. But the fight with St George reads like Grahame's vision of a folk play or spectacle at a fair. The villagers sit on the hillside and take bets on the outcome (six to four on the dragon). St George wears golden armour and the dragon has glittering turquoise scales. Between bouts, he runs round and round in circles, so that ripples run down his spine. St George wins without hurting the dragon or even making him bleed, so far as we can tell.

The humour of the story is very characteristic of Grahame and there are echoes of Toad and the Water Rat in the dragon's vanity on the one hand and his liking for a quiet life on the other. But although the story depends on the dragon's refusal to behave like a dragon, it is noticeable that the happy ending depends on St George's readiness to behave like a civilised gentleman, rather than a warrior saint. Everyone trusts him, and he takes the trouble to rescue a badger captured by the villagers for a baiting, as well as being pleased rather than disappointed that there is no evil monster for him to destroy. More recent fiction is not, on the whole, as supportive as this story in its treatment of heroes.

Two years after "The Reluctant Dragon," Edith Nesbit published *The Book of Dragons*, a collection of stories in which children encounter a variety of dragons and find ingenious ways of dealing with them (Nesbit 1972). The dragons are alarming but not seriously threatening. One escapes from a book and is tricked into going back inside. Another is captured and fed with bread and milk until its scales fall off and it turns into a cat. St George is appealed to by children dealing with a plague of dragons but he refuses to stir, although he gives some useful advice. In the last story (not published until 1925), the dragon becomes tame when treated with affection and eventually asks to be turned into an

aeroplane, feeling itself to be distressingly old-fashioned. These stories build on tradition to the extent that the dragons provide a challenge which must be met if society is to prosper. But the champions are children (often a boy and girl working together), not warriors. Their success requires courage, but not in fighting: kindness and open minds are more important in these stories than strength.

Tolkien

Farmer Giles of Ham (1949) is unusual in the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien in being set in recognisable parts of the British countryside, the Thames valley and the mountains of Wales. It tells the comic adventures of Farmer Giles, who defeats a giant and then a dragon, Chrysophylax, a fire-breathing, treasure-loving beast but a coward. The king's knights are not able to stand up to him but Farmer Giles does with the help of a magic sword, and the dragon is tamed not killed. He gives its name to Worminghall, the royal seat of the Little Kingdom, where the knights are known as the Wormwardens. The story has features reminiscent of many of the local legends recorded in *British Dragons*, especially in its explanations for local names and worthies (see Simpson 1980, Chaps 3 and 5; see also Shippey 1992, chap. 4 for a discussion of Tolkien's use of Oxfordshire place names and the creation of an idealised England in *Farmer Giles*).

Tolkien's best-known dragon is, of course, Smaug, in *The Hobbit* (1937), who is given one of the strongest portraits of any dragon in modern fiction. We are told a great deal about him before we ever meet him, of the fear and destruction he has caused and his greed for treasure. In his encounters with the hobbit, we discover also that he is loquacious, proud and cunning and that it is dangerous to look into his eyes. In much of this, Tolkien draws unmistakably on the traditions of Northern legend (see Simpson 1980, 25). Beowulf's dragon was a treasure guardian and so was Fafnir, whom Sigurd killed. The riddling talk between Smaug and the hobbit has its parallel in the dialogue between Fafnir and Sigurd, although that takes place after the death blow has been struck. So there is more to be gained and lost by the hobbit when he talks to the dragon, and the dramatic impact is greater accordingly.

Smaug is one of the most individual dragons in fiction; nevertheless, his basic function in the story is that of the traditional dragon, the evil enemy whose destruction brings about the happy ending. On the other hand, he is not killed by a hero fighting single-handed. He is shot by a Bowman defending his town from attack, with the help of information provided by the hobbit. And the dragon's death does not remove all threats to peace or safety. The quarrels over his hoard lead to as much trouble and danger for the hobbit as Smaug did when he was alive. So the dragon is a traditional one but the world in which he lives is more complicated and there is less scope for straightforward heroism than in earlier tales.

Natural History

Peter Dickinson's *Flight of Dragons* (1979) takes a different approach to dragons. Instead of a conventional novel, this is a description of the possible life cycle of

winged, fire-breathing creatures which might once have evolved on earth and then died out. On the surface, Dickinson's approach is that of a scientist who wishes to explain how it might have been possible for lizards ninety feet long to fly and breathe fire. (The theory involves hollow bodies filled with hydrogen, and mating displays.) But the evidence quoted is from fiction as well as from folklore and legend. Along the way, Dickinson incorporates rational explanations for many traditional motifs, including dragon speech, the sacrifice of princesses and the hoarding of gold. The book does not give a detailed portrayal of any individual dragon, but it does conjure up an impression of beasts leading lonely and dramatic lives, almost as memorable as the supernatural dragons of tradition.

Dragons with a pseudo-scientific explanation also feature in Anne McCaffery's popular novel, *Dragonflight* (1978), and its sequels. These are intelligent but domesticated beasts which have a telepathic link with their human riders, who are colonists on a distant planet. They have been named from the legend because of their appearance, and they breathe fire. Otherwise, their behaviour and their role in the novels are very different from those of traditional dragons. They frighten only those who are not familiar with them; and the enemy against which they and the humans struggle is mindless, an invasion of an alien plant species. So, McCaffery adapts the power and glamour of legendary dragons to express a vision of a society in which humans and animals can understand one another and live in a symbiotic relationship, not in antagonism.

The dragons of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books are dangerous and bad-tempered but not evil. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), Hagrid the gamekeeper tries to look after a baby dragon but it causes so much trouble he agrees to send it away. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), one of the trials in the Triwizard tournament is to remove an object from a clutch of eggs guarded by a mother dragon. In both episodes, Harry and his friends behave more like David Attenborough than St George: harming or fighting the dragons does not enter their plans. The true ordeals that Harry faces are struggles with Lord Voldemort, master of the Dark Arts, and his supporters. The dragons do not appear to be susceptible to his control.

Oriental Dragons

In *Tea with the Black Dragon* (1987) by R. A. MacAvoy, we meet Mayland Long, a man who used to be a black dragon ten yards long, with a head like a chrysanthemum and five toes on each foot: in other words, a Chinese imperial dragon. As a dragon, he was a scholar and collector, who became interested in humanity and man's search for truth. After centuries of study, he has turned into a man and lost contact with his own species. The novel tells the story of his encounter in San Francisco with a woman musician, with whom he falls in love as he helps her to rescue her daughter from a gang of criminals. There is a helpful discussion between Long and a young man about the difference between Western and Eastern dragons ("terror on batwings" on the one hand, long life and wisdom on the other), although it becomes clear that Long himself is still capable of violence. He never appears in dragon shape, but there are many small physical details which distinguish him from the ordinary and bring him

to life convincingly as a dragon very different from the ordinary in Western fiction.

Earthsea

The Wizard of Earthsea (1968) by Ursula Le Guin is the story of Ged, the young wizard, who must search out a dangerous shadow he has released into the world. But before he can embark on his main quest, he must deal with a dragon, from whom he is able to extract a binding promise, so that it is no longer a threat to people. Ged succeeds not by physical force but by his knowledge and by the willpower by which he resists the temptations the dragon offers him. We learn more about the dragons of Earthsea in the later novels in the series and most of all in *Tehanu* (1990) and *The Other Wind* (2001) which deal with more complex themes than the earlier trilogy. These dragons have some of the characteristics of traditional dragons: they are winged and dangerous, they breathe fire and in *The Wizard of Earthsea*, at least, they hoard treasure. In the later books, there is more emphasis on their wisdom and their complicated minds. They are not intrinsically evil and their relationship to humans and to death is much debated in *Tehanu*. Le Guin has built up a memorable portrait of creatures neither intrinsically good nor evil but powerful and beautiful. In the later books, she introduces another unusual feature. One of the themes of *Tehanu* concerns the social and psychological differences between men and women in Earthsea and this is reflected in the different ways they relate to the dragon.

Tradition Updated

In his Katharine Briggs memorial lecture (*Folklore* 111 [2000]:159), Terry Pratchett describes how he uses folklore as the material out of which his fiction is made. *Guards, Guards* (1992) demonstrates this approach in its application to the two sorts of dragon by which Discworld is inhabited. There are swamp dragons, small and bad-tempered, which are bred as pets but are liable to blow themselves up or scorch the hair of society ladies; and there is the great dragon, believed to be extinct. When one of these beasts is summoned back to Ankh-Morpork, it causes such chaos that for a short time it is made King. It does not speak aloud but communicates telepathically and demands tribute of treasure, and a high-born virgin—one a month—for its diet. But instead of being killed by a hero, it is driven away by a combination of muddled efforts on behalf of the City Watch and a mating flight by one of the small swamp dragons.

The differences between this story and the traditional hero legend go deeper than the comic surface. The dragon does not die, but lives to fight another day. Moreover, although the good guys are those who resist, the dragon is not morally to blame for what happens, unlike those who summon it and collaborate with it. The dragon's behaviour is according to its nature and it is openly scornful of the self-deception and cowardice of the citizens who yield to its power. The heroic characters are those who try to do their best as they see things, however difficult the circumstances and however eccentric their perceptions.

Another dragon who survives is found in Susan Price's *Foiling the Dragon*

(1994). This is the story of Paul, a performance poet, who is kidnapped into another world, where he is needed to recite poems to the resident dragon. The people of the dragon's country do not want it killed because it is their protector against the king who used to rule over them. The dragon is less greedy and demanding than the king, although its temper is uncertain, especially as it has begun to grow bored with the poetry from other worlds, just as it has previously tired of the bards of its own world. Paul is terrified of the dragon and runs away to the king's castle, hoping to get it killed. Unfortunately, the king's advisers and his knights are unable to realise that their way of fighting will be useless against the dragon. When a straightforward attack does not work, they try to trick it and fail. The dragon destroys the castle and nearly ravages the entire kingdom. Paul and Ziona, the sorceress who summoned him, calm him down with another trick, and Paul manages to find his way back home as a result. At the end of the story, the dragon has lost interest in poets and wants to be sent a scribe, to whom it can dictate its own compositions.

Like Pratchett, Price uses the elements of the traditional story to attack false chivalry. The boy king who ends so disastrously is named Henry V and his speech to the knights before the battle against the dragon is very reminiscent of his namesake's speech at Agincourt in Shakespeare's play. Nobody behaves heroically, but the dragon is more honest and also more appealing to read about than the king and his court. Its main characteristics are very much those of tradition, effectively portrayed. As far as I am aware, its fascination with poetry is not to be found in any obvious source but it fits in very well. The dragon's speech pattern is idiosyncratic, with verbs left to the end of sentences, as though its true home is Germanic legend. Nobody lives in a good society in this novel, but those under the dragon's protection are better off than the rest.

Ballad and Folktale

At the start of *Fires' Astonishment* (1990) by Geraldine McCaughrean, a dragon has been seen by the local people at a place called Worm's Head. It quickly becomes apparent that the monster is the son of the local lord of the manor, placed under enchantment by his stepmother. The plot of the novel is from the ballad of *The Laidly Worm and the Machrel of the Sea* (Simpson 1980, 52), with a twelfth-century setting. However, the focus is much more on the fear of the local people, the effect on their lives, their relationship with the Church and with one another, rather than on any simplistic battle between good and evil. The dragon itself is less frightening to the reader than to those who encounter it, because in the episodes told from the dragon's point of view, we experience its unhappiness. It struggles with its clumsiness and inability to communicate, in despair until it learns to spell out words by touch, with the help of an outcast monk. But when the dragon has been disenchanting, the boy has just as much trouble coming to terms with his old life and leaves in the end, to become a monk himself. Altogether, this is a highly unusual dragon, very different from the traditional image, even though his story is so close to the one in the ballad.

There is another dragon in Geraldine McCaughrean's *The Stones are Hatching* (1999). This time it is the Stoor Worm, whose sleep has been disturbed by the guns of the First World War. Her hatchlings turn into creatures well known to

students of English folktales—black dogs, barguests, cobbolds and the like. Phelim, the reluctant hero of this novel, is driven to go on a quest to fight the Worm, before she can wake up and cause utter destruction. Along the way, he is helped by other recognisable figures, some drawn from different traditions. There is the Obby Oss but also Mad Sweeny and Alexia, whose bones make a Witch's ladder for Phelim to climb to the Worm's head. The Worm is part of the landscape, so huge that her mouth is a cave as big as a cathedral. Eventually, Phelim finds a way of destroying her soul, although he takes no pleasure in it. The dragon herself is almost too big for the reader to focus on, although she makes a convincing presence in the background. The dislikable character is Phelim's sister, whom he proves able to defeat when he comes back from his quest. As with *Fires' Astonishment*, in this book McCaughrean uses traditional material to create a highly unusual story and a dragon different from most.

Conclusions

Writers today are more likely to have access to a wide range of folklore collections and studies than at any time in the past. McCaughrean's novels show how different traditions may be combined to make a successful fictional world, convincing in its own terms. In different ways, the other novels mentioned here do the same. But the changing role of dragons in modern fiction expresses deeper changes in society, as well as in approaches to fiction. One is a change in the attitude towards dangerous animals, noticeable in Pratchett as well as Dickinson and Rowling. Another is a change in attitude to humanity, which means that fictional evil is more convincing and more frightening when people, not dragons, are the true enemy. And perhaps that a happy ending is more likely to work if it is not absolute: if the dragon lives to fight another day.

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Biographical Note

Sandra Unerman has been a member of the Folklore Society since 1977. She is a government lawyer and a writer of fantasy fiction. Her Arthurian novel, Trial of Three, was published by Dobson's in 1979 and she has had short stories published by Scheherazade and by All Hallows, the magazine of the Ghost Story Society.