



Essential Dragons Beyond Tolkien's Middle-earth

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In his lecture and essay, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” J.R.R. Tolkien states that, in early northern European literature, “real dragons, essential both to the machinery and the ideas of a poem or tale, are actually rare” (12). He could name two: Sigurd’s Fáfñir and Beowulf’s dragon. In Tolkien’s Middle-earth legendarium dragons are also present and rare, with perhaps only two, Glaurung and Smaug, having essential roles. Where Tolkien expanded the population of dragons in literature is in his extra-Middle-earth writings. But not all dragon references are essential. For instance, the “Errantry” poem states, “His bow was made of dragon-horn,” showing that dragons are present in the world of this poem (line 53, *Treason* 92). Also “Mythopoeia” includes, “and sowed the seed of dragons, 'twas our right” (line 68). These indications of dragon, both physical trace and legendary kernel, are passing mentions within these poems. But certain of Tolkien’s creative works outside the Middle-earth legendarium do have essential dragons: “The Hoard” poem, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, “The Dragon’s Visit” poem, and *Roverandom*. Also outside the legendarium, Tolkien delivered lectures and academic essays that featured the use and effect of dragons in literature. This paper distills three lectures that

Tolkien gave on dragons and uses their tenets to examine the dragons in Tolkien's prose and poetry beyond Middle-earth.

Tolkien Lectures with Dragon Topics

In the mid 1930s, Tolkien presented three lectures that focused on or made significant mention of dragons in northern European stories. Each of the talks touched on specific themes that a dragon may bring to a work of literature. The first of these, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" was read to the British Academy in November 1936 (B:M&C, 1). It had an enormous impact on *Beowulf* scholarship by shifting focus from regarding the Old English heroic poem as a linguistic and historic artifact towards viewing *Beowulf* as a work of legitimate poetic art and story. A fundamental aspect of the lecture is its focus on the hero Beowulf's encounters with the monsters: Grendel and the dragon. Tolkien emphasizes that these creatures "still remain in *Beowulf*, mortal denizens of the material world, in it and of it" (20). The *Beowulf* poet describes the dragon waking, slithering and sniffing along stone walls (lines 2287-88, p. 186-187), vividly indicating to Tolkien that "this dragon is real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own" (B:M&C, 17).ⁱ At the same time the dragon symbolizes certain concepts, the poet carefully maintaining a balance between the reality of the monster and its symbolism. In particular, the dragon is "a personification of malice, greed, destruction..., and of the indiscriminating cruelty of fortune" (17).

A year later, Tolkien spoke in a lecture series for children at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History (*Letters*, 27, 435). The New Year's Day 1938 lecture subject was "Dragons" and, although the lecture was not published, Tolkien's notes for it are preserved in his manuscript folios and have been summarized in several works.ⁱⁱ In this less formal setting

speaking to children, Tolkien discoursed on various types of dragons, how they act, where to find them, and what is to be done with them. He noted that “It was the function of dragons to tax the skill of heroes, and still more to tax other things, especially courage.... Armies cannot overcome them.... Dragons can only be defeated by brave men – usually alone. Sometimes a faithful friend may help, but it is rare.” (emphasis in Tolkien Ms., Rateliff, *HTH*, 541).

In a third lecture, the following year, Tolkien presented his Andrew Lang Lecture “On Fairy-stories” to an academic and public audience at St. Andrews University in March 1939. The ideas were developed further into an essay published in 1947, and both presentations note Tolkien’s strong affinity for dragons. He famously stated, “The dragon had the trade-mark ‘*Of Faërie*’ written plain upon him....I desired dragons with a profound desire.” (B:M&C, 135).

In this paper then, we will explore how Tolkien’s essential dragons in “The Hoard,” *Farmer Giles of Ham*, “The Dragon’s Visit,” and *Roverandom* meet these five criteria that Tolkien specifically presented as associated with dragons in northern European tales:

- Dragon as a mortal denizen of the material world, its physical presence established;
- Dragon as a personification of malice, destruction, and cruel Fortuna;
- Dragon as a personification of greed and miserliness;
- Dragon in single-combat, testing a hero’s courage; and
- Dragon as indicator of Faërie, magic, or a desirable Other-world place.

Tolkien’s essential dragons may also exhibit characteristics and textual echoes of the early Northern dragon stories that he knew so well. The similarities and differences as characters, and the literal and symbolic roles that dragons play in these tales set outside Middle-earth, might be

crystallized using the formula of Tolkien's own tenets that he set for dragons in his 1936-1939 lectures.

"The Hoard"

Tolkien initially published "The Hoard" poem as "Íumonna Gold Galdre Bewunden," in 1923 in a Leeds University poetry journal.ⁱⁱⁱ The original Old English name of this poem is taken from line 3052 of *Beowulf*, meaning "the gold of the ancients wrapped in a spell" (Chittering 233, Shippey *R&B* 342). "The Hoard" is a five-stanza poem set in ancient and dark-age times, telling the story of a pile of treasure initially fashioned by "Elves of old" whose race then waned. The treasure was taken over successively by a dwarf, a dragon, and a warrior who died in his old age leaving the hoard locked underground and lost.^{iv}

Connections to the *Beowulf* poem's final, tragic, dragon section are apparent in "The Hoard," not only in its original name, but in the central dragon. Like *Beowulf*'s dragon, the Hoard dragon sleeps and wakes and sniffs his cave and his gold, giving detail to a manifest, animal life. As a personification of malice and greed, both the *Beowulf* and Hoard dragons guard a considerable underground treasure and know every scrap of it, ready to murder to achieve the hoard, then crush and kill any thief to protect it. Turning to the fourth of Tolkien's dragon criteria, "The Hoard" dragon is challenged in single combat by a courageous warrior – again paralleling the *Beowulf* legend – and the dragon is defeated. The Faërie-magic criterion for the Hoard dragon is more of a stretch, as "The Hoard" poem is tragic in mood and does not have a stirring eucatastrophe. Including the Elves as the first holders and makers of the treasure, the poem recounts how each holder of the hoard wanes and fades, while only the cold treasure underground endures. But there is arguably a strong sense of Faërie throughout this poem, the

mournful, yearning strain of Faërie. The Elves work strong spells and song into the fair treasure they make. A dwarf, dragon, and sword-wielding warrior are certainly the stuff of fairy-story. The Hoard dragon, then, in versions spanning forty years, displays the five qualities Tolkien seeks in a literary dragon.

Farmer Giles of Ham

Farmer Giles of Ham likely originated as a story told to the Tolkien children in the late 1920s (Croft, 197). Tolkien mentions *Farmer Giles* in his *Letters* in July 1938 saying, "I rewrote that to about 50% longer, last January, and read it to the Lovelace Society in lieu of a paper 'on' fairy stories.... the audience... generally convulsed with mirth. But I am afraid that means it has taken on a rather more adult and satiric flavor." (39) (Note that 'last January' 1938 would have been just after the Dragon lecture for children.) Allen & Unwin published the story as a slim volume in 1949.^v The story is indeed comically satiric, filled with philological puns and send-ups of stock medieval characters like millers and parsons and dandified knights.^{vi}

While of a markedly different tone than "The Hoard," *Farmer Giles* and its dragon Chrysophylax can be measured handily against Tolkien's criteria for an effective literary dragon. Chrysophylax is a mortal denizen of the material, medieval world of this story; Giles and his dog Garm encounter the dragon "lying half across a broken hedge with his horrible head in the middle of the road" (153). Clearly a flying, fire-breathing, village-burning, parson-consuming dragon, Chrysophylax is also a talking dragon and wily materialist who bargains with Giles and the townspeople of Ham. Where he may be weaker as a literary dragon is in the personification of malice, destruction, and greed. He lies and breaks his word with the townspeople, but is not strictly malicious; he burns farms and nearby villages, but does not destroy all. Chrysophylax is

greedy for his treasure, but quickly relinquishes (most of) it when his life and limb are threatened (unlike the Beowulf dragon, Hoard dragon, or even Smaug). When the king's knights run away at Chrysophylax' initial, fire-breathing defense of his lair, Giles is left alone with his trusty grey mare and magic sword. Farmer Giles is reluctantly courageous as he faces the dragon in single combat – thus meeting that criterion. The Faërie Other-world in *Farmer Giles of Ham* is quite present in the story, but perhaps in a separate place from the village of Ham and environs, (even though the story claims that the village dogs speak - in short words that sound like barks). In the words of Tom Shippey, "it seems to me that the other world there is the world of fantasy from which the giant and the dragons come," that is, the Western mountain borders of Celtic Wales (*R&B*, 325). The five dragon factors are all present here, but the emphasis in *Farmer Giles* is on more lighthearted aspects of the dragon criteria.

"The Dragon's Visit"

This ten-stanza poem, about a dragon's brief stay in a 20th-century seaside town, was written in the '20s and published in 1937 in the *Oxford Magazine* along with the other "Tales and Songs of Bimble Bay."^{vii} It is a delicate balance of lighthearted scenes, a longing for the archaic, and violent action. Phrases and scenes in the poem allude to particular Sigurd and Fáfñir details and echo of the final Beowulf scene.^{viii}

"The Dragon's Visit" shares many of the tenets that Tolkien laid out for dragons. The physical details of the dragon – his color, simmer, speech, and song – establish him well as a mortal denizen present in the world. His personification of chaos and destruction develops later in the poem, but it is not a wanton destruction or random Fortuna. The green dragon is goaded to draconian retribution only after his offers of beauty and song are ignominiously rejected by the

Bimble folk. The other dragonish aspect of greed for treasure is not pursued at all in this creative work, but the Faërie Other-world aspect of the dragon-character is strongly drawn. The glamorous dragon visiting from over the sea contrasts strikingly with the pedestrian philistines of Bimble. The single combat element of most dragon tales was missing from the original poem, but Tolkien adds that aspect when he changes the ending of the poem in the 1960s. Old Miss Biggins survives the razing of the town and answers the dragon's challenge that "None of them now have the wit to admire / ... / Nor the nerve with steel to meet his fire" She meets the challenge with both admiration of him and a stab to the heart. It is interesting to see that Tolkien alters the poem much later, after his dragon-related lectures in the late 1930s, and particularly adds the missing dragon criterion of single-combat.

Roverandom

During the Tolkien family summer holidays in 1925, they rented a house on the Yorkshire coast where second son Michael lost a cherished toy dog (*Roverandom* Intro ix-xi). Tolkien told the episodic tale of the little dog Roverandom to provide a comforting story of the adventures of that lost toy, and later he wrote it out.^{ix} Set in the 20th century like "The Dragon's Visit," *Roverandom* is unusual in Tolkien's writing in that it includes more than one dragon "essential both to the machinery and the ideas of the tale": the Great White Dragon of the Moon and the ancient Sea-serpent.^x

How do these two essential dragons meet Tolkien's criteria for dragons? The White Dragon is described in some detail as "white with green eyes, and leaking green fire at every joint, and snorting black smoke... had wings, like the sails that ships had" (34). His verbal threats to kill the little dogs and the actual chase of Roverandom across the moon, singeing him

with green fire, further demonstrate a real physical presence within the story and also suggest a personification of malice and destruction. The White Dragon is given a backstory of a trip to the world where he “fought the Red Dragon of Caerdragon in Merlin’s time,” but returned “titanic and so enormously bad” to the moon in “a time when dragons’ tails were esteemed a great delicacy by the Saxon Kings” – possibly a reference to the *Farmer Giles* story (33). But in this children’s tale, the White Dragon does not kill anyone and is himself campily beaten back by the firework rockets of the wizard Man-in-the-Moon. The Sea-serpent, who comes in during a later episode, is also described physically, at least the green tip of his tail seen by Roverandom and mighty voice thundering “Stop this NONSENSE!” (79) His actions stamp him as a form of the great Midgard Serpent Jörmungandr, with his size, potentially apocalyptic effect, and efforts to bite his own tail. This story does not include single-combat of a hero against either dragon. Roverandom is technically the protagonist, but he is a puppy and no epic hero. The dragons are managed, just barely, by wizards’ spells, not single combat. These dragons seem too ancient and elemental to be challenged by a warrior with a sword. Rather than Faërie, these dragons suggest forces of nature, the mythic expanse of moon and sea, even though the story is mostly played for laughs with the escapades of a little dog. The *Roverandom* dragons stray into fundamental “nature myths” thus losing personality and interest, as Tolkien posited in the “On Fairy-stories” essay (*B:M&C Essays*, 123). Other elements of *Roverandom* (especially the children’s dream-world on the other side of the moon) do seem to conjure the Other-world of Faërie, but not its dragons. Perhaps the fact that Roverandom’s dragons fall short on several key criteria is part of the reason Tolkien did not pursue revision and publication of this story in his lifetime, beyond an initial draft sent to Allen & Unwin in 1936.

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Tolkien initially drafted each of these four works with essential dragons in the 1920s, prior to delivering his lectures, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," "On Dragons," and "On Fairy-stories" in the later 1930s. The criteria of dragon-lore drawn from those talks apply in virtually every one of these published works outside of his Middle-earth legendarium, although the tales themselves, and the dragons in them, are markedly different. Two stories are set in the far past, and their dragons diametrically different: the tragic dragon of "The Hoard" and the comic Chrysohylax of Farmer Giles of Ham. But for each long-ago dragon, Tolkien provides: 1) strong detail of its animal existence, 2) a personification of malice and destruction, 3) personification of greed, 4) the encounter with a hero in single-combat, and 5) the enhancement of the Faërie element through the presence of that dragon. The two dragon tales with a 20th-century setting include plenty of physical detail and actions for these recent dragons, with massive fire-breathing destructiveness. But "The Dragon's Visit" and *Roverandom* do not present dragons that have inherent greed for treasure in their nature – treasure does not feature in the stories. (I blame 20th century paper money as incompatible with dragons.) The modern-tale dragons also do not necessarily face a hero in single-combat, but the one 20th-century tale that Tolkien revised after his 1930s lectures, "The Dragon's Visit," did get that aspect added to the poem. The Faërie element may be strongest with "The Dragon's Visit," in part because of its contrast of the modern town with the longed-for Other-world of dragons. The story that seemed to miss the most dragon elements is the one story not revised at all after those three lectures, and not published by Tolkien himself. In *Roverandom*, the dragons exhibit more the characteristics of nature myth than Faërie. Tolkien never pursued publication of that story, possibly in part due to the difficulties in solving the deficiencies of the dragons, by his own stated criteria. A poorly

drawn dragon might just ruin a fantasy tale. Sticking with Tolkien's criteria for an essential dragon, though, can elevate a story.

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Notes

ⁱ Atherton, in *There and Back Again: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Origins of the Hobbit*, presents C.S. Lewis' discussion in *An Experiment in Criticism* regarding "the useful and perceptive distinction between realism of content and realism of presentation....it is certainly possible in a work of the imagination for the content to be unrealistic, for instance a fantasy about dragons, but nevertheless for it to present the dragon in a realistic manner so that the creature comes across as believable. Lewis's example of presentational realism here is one that Tolkien certainly knew well – the depiction in the Old English heroic poem *Beowulf* of the dragon snuffling along the rock as it wakes and gradually realizing by its acute sense of smell that someone has visited its lair while it has been asleep. This is only a brief touch, but it secures the creature in the tangible world (personally, Tolkien would have liked to have had more such details in the presentation of the dragon in *Beowulf*)." (53-54) Tolkien's contributions to the presentational realism of an imaginary character, the dragon, are explored in this paper. Further exploration of other, more recent dragons presented in notable post-Tolkien literature can be found in Dierdre Byrne's lecture, "Dragons: Ancient Creatures in Modern Times."

ⁱⁱ The *Tolkien Gateway* online lists the January 1, 1938 "Lecture on Dragons" to have been extracted and published in *Leaves from the Tree* (1991 essays -Christina Scull paper), in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator* (Hammond and Scull, 1995), and in *The J.R.R. Tolkien*

Companion and Guide (Scull and Hammond, 2006). The source used here is the "Tolkien's Dragons" essay by John D. Rateliff in his 2007 *The History of The Hobbit*, part two, chapter XII. Conversations with Smaug, particularly Note 5. There, Rateliff summarizes and quotes from *Ms. Tolkien A61 e., fols. 98-125*. The quotations used here are quoted from Tolkien's manuscripts by John Rateliff in the Note.

ⁱⁱⁱ The January 1923 "lúmonna Gold Galdre Bewunden" poem is reprinted in *The Annotated Hobbit*, pp. 335-337 and further discussed in detailed comparison in Tom Shippey's "Versions of 'The Hoard'" in *Roots and Branches*. Tolkien significantly revised the original poem for republication in the *Oxford Magazine* March 1937; he made further minor revisions and renamed the poem "The Hoard" for the 1962 *Adventures of Tom Bombadil* poem collection and 1966 *The Tolkien Reader* (Shippey, *R&B*, 341). Shippey indicates that the main difference between the original *Gryphon* version and the subsequent versions, regarding the dragon character, is that the original version has a more morally pointed tone (*R&B*, 346). The dragon seems to be used to punish the dwarf for a theft of the gold 'stolen from men and elves' (line 15), and the aged dragon's treasure-lust is more clearly drawn, "His joy was dead and his cruel youth / But his lust still smouldered and he had no ruth." (lines 31-32). The physical description, thoughts, and actions of the dragon do not change much over the revisions, but his cruelty, lust, and ruthlessness are not stated so clearly in the later versions as they are in 1923.

^{iv} A brief synopsis of "The Hoard:" Elves of old initially fashion the pile of gold and treasure, but they wane before a shadowy Greed. The treasure, now collected in a cave, is worked further by an old dwarf who is killed by a young dragon who takes over the treasure cave. This Tolkien dragon has no name (none of this poem's characters has a name or speaks), but stanza two describes his physical presence as a fire-breathing young dragon who burns the old dwarf to take over the treasure-hoard. The dragon does not add to the hoard, but is "chained" to his gold, silver, and gems as he joylessly snuffs and licks the treasure beneath his black wings in miserly ire at potential thieves. Even as a deaf, old dragon, he is ready to defend his hoard with knife-like teeth and horny hide. When the dragon becomes old and his fire wanes, a young warrior comes to challenge the dragon and kills him in turn. But when that warrior becomes a king, old and miserly having left the treasure hidden in the cave, he is overcome by enemies and does not pass on the treasure, now locked away and lost.

^v Tolkien's cover letter for the 1947 mark-up of *Farmer Giles of Ham*, which was finally published in 1949, requested an inscription to C.H. Wilkinson of Oxford's Worcester College Lovelace Society, to whom the expanded, more satirical version of the story had been read.

Tolkien wrote that "it was Col. Wilkinson of that College who egged me to it, and has since constantly egged me to publication" (119, 133).

^{vi} A brief synopsis of *Farmer Giles of Ham*: It set in a specific locale, along the Thames River just east of Oxford, but in a hazy dark-ages time "after the days of King Coel maybe, but before Arthur" (*Tolkien Reader*, 124). A yeoman farmer Giles of Ham, with his hilarious and cowardly talking dog Garm, chases off a giant roaming onto Giles' farm from the Western mountains. The local king rewards Giles with a sword that turns out to be a magic dragon-fighting sword, Caudimordax (Tail-biter in the vernacular). When a fire-breathing, talking dragon, Chrysophylax Dives of the Western mountains, comes roaming and rampaging near the village, Farmer Giles with his wise old grey mare and sword chase down the dragon, who is cowed by the eager magic sword. Later the king sends a troupe of foppish knights and Farmer Giles to hunt the dragon and find his mountainous lair full of treasure. The worthless knights flee Chrysophylax or are killed, while Giles faces the dragon, bargains with him at swordpoint, and persuades him to carry most of his treasure to Giles' town. There Giles, with the aid of the dragon Chrysophylax, defeats the craven king's attempt to claim the treasure and sets up his own Little Kingdom.

^{vii} References vary on the original drafting of "The Dragon's Visit." Carpenter's *Biography* of Tolkien puts the Bimble Bay collection composition just after a 1922 visit to seaside Filey on the Yorkshire coast (112-113). Anderson's *Annotated Hobbit* reprints the two published versions of "The Dragon's Visit" and presents the evidence that Tolkien wrote long afterwards on the first typescript "Oxford 1928? rev 1937" (311). It was certainly published in February 1937 edition of *Oxford Magazine (Letters)*, 434). Tolkien notes in a May 1937 letter to Allen & Unwin that the "editor of the O.U. Magazine ... has been giving it a good dose of my dragon-lore recently," referring to him publishing "lúmonna Gold Galdre Bewunden" and "The Dragon's Visit" (18).

Tolkien revised it in the 1960s for *Winter's Tales for Children 1* (1965) and *The Young Magicians* (1969), and in the revision, the dragon is stabbed to the heart by Miss Biggins in the tenth stanza, and an eleventh stanza is added (Anderson, 311-12).

"The Dragon's Visit" poem has been reprinted at least twice in the 2000s by Douglas Anderson. In a review for the Mythopoeic Society of Anderson's collection *Tales Before Narnia*, John Rateliff remarks, "And as for Tolkien's "The Dragon's Visit" [1937], this is an unalloyed pleasure: one of Tolkien's best poems, available again in its original form, in a font size larger than could be squeezed into the margins of *The Annotated Hobbit* (revised edition)."

^{viii} Brief synopsis of "The Dragon's Visit:" The verses are presented mostly in sympathy with the dragon's perspective as he lies on blossoming cherry trees and encounters the dull

denizens of a suburban town on Bimble Bay. He is an admirable green dragon, singing enchanting songs of his homeland of Finis-Terre. The neighborhood clearly does not appreciate the beauty of the dragon or his song. When the helmeted fire brigade is called in with firehoses, he warns them away but they poke him from underneath while he lies in the trees (reminiscent of Fáfñir being jabbed from underneath by Sigurd lurking in a hollow [*Legend*, 108]). "The dragon's eyes from green went red," and he commences to smoke and thresh his tail, smash and burn the town, and consume its citizens (Anderson, 310). Sailors over the Bay of Bimble can see the burning, and the dragon buries the remains of the townspeople on a high cliff on the shore, singing a dirge (echoing the funeral pyre, grief-song, and sea cliff monument to Beowulf visible to seafarers in the Old English poem [lines 3137-58, pp. 239-241]). In the first version of "The Dragon's Visit," the dragon sadly muses on the old, heroic order changing to the dull folk of Bimble Bay while flying back to this homeland. A second version reworked in the 1960s has old Miss Biggins stabbing the dragon to death just as he is leaving, saying that she must end the "wanton damage," while still calling him a "splendid creature" with a remarkable voice (Anderson, 312).

^{ix} Confirmation dating of the original story comes from Tolkien's inked drawing and paintings illustrating the *Roverandom* story dated 1925 or 1927. After revisions, a version of the story was submitted for possible publication in 1936, but was abandoned in favor of a sequel to *The Hobbit* (*Roverandom* Intro xv). *Roverandom* was not published until posthumously in 1998.

^x The basic outline of *Roverandom* is of a real dog named Rover who bites a wizard Artaxerxes and is turned into a toy, is sold to a little boy, and is lost in the sand. A second wizard, Psamathos, finds him and sends him to the Man-in-the-Moon, where he is renamed Roverandom. The moon contains many wonders, including the Great White Dragon, who lives on the moon's edge and is apparently instrumental in eclipses, as "he had been known to turn the whole moon red, or put it out altogether" so that the Man-in-the-Moon must use his magic to clear it up quickly (34). (The Man-in-the-Moon's control of moon dragons and their role in lunar eclipses is also a feature in the *Letters to Father Christmas* [22].) Roverandom gets into serious trouble by stumbling into the lair of the Great White Dragon and rousing him. After further adventures, little dog is sent to live under the sea where he befriends a mer-dog who came there long ago via a dragon-prowed Viking longship called the Red Worm (65). Among their adventures, the two dogs encounter and awaken another form of dragon, the enormous, ancient Sea-serpent, by causing him to be bitten on his green and slimy tail (77). The Worm turns, causing enormous undersea earthquakes and hurricanes, but spells from Artaxerxes quiet it before it can sink another continent. After

this escapade, the wizard and Roverandom return home, where the dog is restored and reunited with his owners.

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