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# Dreaming of Dragons: Tolkien's Impact on Heaney's *Beowulf*

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### Dreaming of Dragons: Tolkien's Impact on Heaney's *Beowulf*

#### **Abstract**

On the influence of Tolkien's *Beowulf* essay, and his subtle shaping of our current cultural conception of dragons, on Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*.

#### **Additional Keywords**

Beowulf; Heaney, Seamus. Beowulf; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit

## Dreaming of Dragons: Tolkien's Impact on Heaney's *Beowulf*

Felicia Jean Steele

As a result of surging interest in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, due in part to the Peter Jackson film adaptations and in part to the publication of Michael D. C. Drout's variorum edition of Tolkien's *Beowulf and the Critics*, both popular and scholarly audiences have come to understand the role that Old English literature, particularly the *Beowulf* poem, plays in Tolkien's literary worldview. Anglo-Saxonists widely acknowledge their dependence upon Tolkien for the ground broken by his 1936 essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." Without Tolkien's intercession, *Beowulf* may never have come to be treated as the work of art it is. Any discussion of *Beowulf* criticism invariably begins with a reference to Tolkien. Peter S. Baker introduces his recent collection of essays by saying that Tolkien's "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" "continue[s] to be influential" and is "still worth the student's attention" (xi). So present is Tolkien within the critical mind of the Anglo-Saxonist that Roy Michael Liuzza, in his essay about the dating of *Beowulf* closing the same volume, references Tolkien's unconditional acceptance of "the attribution of *Beowulf* to the 'age of Bede'" (281). The placement of Tolkien at the "alpha" and "omega" of *Beowulf*-scholarship in this particular collection demonstrates the prominence Tolkien occupies within the Anglo-Saxonist imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Tolkien's influence is also felt in literary treatments of the poem that may not always be as welcomed by Anglo-Saxonists as they are by contemporary readers nursed on Tolkien's fantastic treatments of the poem's narrative elements. Both scholars and poets assert the centrality of Tolkien's role in *Beowulf* criticism. Bruce Mitchell comments that "The Greenfield and Robinson *Bibliography* records seventy items on 'Literary Interpretations' of *Beowulf* before J.R.R. Tolkien's lecture and two-hundred-and-fifty between its publication and the end of 1972" (209). Seamus Heaney credits Tolkien

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Chance has discussed Tolkien's influence on medieval scholarship in the critical assessment that introduces her collection, *Tolkien the Medievalist*.

with an “epoch-making paper” that takes “for granted the poem’s integrity and distinction as a work of art” wherein Tolkien “proceeded to show in what this integrity and distinction inhered”—a major departure from the litany of ostensibly non-literary scholarly treatments of the poem that precede his discussion of Tolkien (“Introduction” xi). Few Anglo-Saxonists would quibble with Heaney’s characterization of Tolkien’s significance, even though much has been said concerning Heaney’s faithfulness to the original poem.<sup>2</sup> For scholars, poets, and students alike, Tolkien’s essay has become central to our understanding and treatment of the poem. At the same time, Old English literature is central to our understanding of Tolkien’s own literary canon.<sup>3</sup> Tolkien’s re-imaginings of *Beowulf* in his fiction emerge seamlessly from his critical treatment of the poem. Thus, in Heaney’s translation of ll. 2287-2290 we find a perfect parallel to Tolkien’s recasting of the dragon episode in *The Hobbit*. Although Heaney’s unfamiliarity with *The Hobbit* makes it unlikely that Tolkien’s fiction influences his translation directly, Tolkien’s scholarship clearly prompts Heaney to select the same literary trope to represent dragonly consciousness: the dream.<sup>4</sup>

Heaney translates ll. 2287-2290 quite freely. The original poem presents the dragon awakening to awareness that a thief has trespassed on his hoard. The reader gets a glimpse of the dragon that resembles a bloodhound, casting about for the scent left by the interloper:

Dǫ se wyrm onwōc,      wrōht wæs genīwad;  
 stonc dǫ æfter stāne,      stearcheort onfand  
 fēondes fōtlāst;      hē tō forð gestōp  
 dyrnan cræfte      dracan hēafde nēah. (2287-2290)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Howell Chickering reports that “professional Anglo-Saxonists early on derogated [Heaney’s translation] with the name ‘Heaneywulf’ since to them it was ‘just not *Beowulf*’” (161). Andy Orchard comments that “Heaney’s version has been justly celebrated as a piece of poetry in its own right,” contrasting it to “more pedestrian” prose translations (81).

<sup>3</sup> As T. A. Shippey points out “Tolkien’s fiction is certainly rooted in philology;” he also reports that Tolkien believed “a primary ‘fact’ about my work, that it is all of a piece, and *fundamentally linguistic* in inspiration” (xiii).

<sup>4</sup> When asked if *The Hobbit* could have influenced his translation choices, Heaney answered, “I just wish the answer could be more interesting, but the truth is, I have not read *The Hobbit* and am therefore unlikely to have been influenced by the Tolkien dragon episode” (“Letter to the Author”).

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from *Beowulf* will be from Klaeber. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

[When the dragon awoke, anger was renewed. The stark-hearted sniffed after the stone, discovered the footprints of the enemy; he stepped too near, with secret craft, to the head of the dragon.]

In Old English, the dragon is a “wyrn” characterized first, and most significantly, by its sense of smell. The dragon is animalistic, instinctive, and most unlike the human trespasser, who, with a “*dyrnan cræfte*,” has enough skill to go unnoticed initially.

When Heaney translates this passage, he subtly argues for a consciousness of the dragon that surpasses simple anger or mere animal instinct. Heaney’s dragon does not simply awake to discover the scent; he awakens from a dream:

When the dragon awoke, trouble flared again.  
He rippled down the rock, writhing with anger  
when he saw the footprints of the prowler who had stolen  
too close to his dreaming head. (2287-2290)

Heaney’s dragon is much less like the sniffing dog implied in the Old English text, who “*stonc ðā æfter stāne*,” but more a true worm, who “rippled down the rock, writhing with anger.” Both the Anglo-Saxon poet and the twentieth-century adapter maintain their focus on the “footsteps” (*fōtlāst*) of the thief. The most significant, and interesting, translation/adaptation decision comes with Heaney’s characterization of the dragon as one who has a “dreaming head.”

The notion of a dragon’s internal consciousness appears in Tolkien’s famous essay, but it is most fully realized in the way that Tolkien adapts the dragon episode in *The Hobbit*. Tolkien’s assertion of the dragon’s inner life in “The Monsters and the Critics” comes as he comments upon this very passage in *Beowulf*:

Beowulf’s dragon, if one wishes really to criticize, is not to be blamed for being a dragon, but rather for not being dragon enough, plain pure fairy-story dragon. There are in the poem some vivid touches of the right kind—as *þa se wyrn onwoc, wroht wæs genīwad; stonc æfter stane* [when the dragon awoke, strife was renewed; he then moved quickly along by the rock], 2285—in which this dragon is real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own, but the conception, none the less, approaches *draconitas* [dragon-ness] rather than *draco* [dragon]: a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the

undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life). (Tolkien, *Monsters* 16-17) <sup>6</sup>

For Tolkien, this particular passage exemplified dragon as beast, with an awareness of his own bestiality that overwhelmed his watered-down role as symbolic token of the failings of nobility: "malice, greed, destruction." Tolkien de-allegorizes, or de-symbolizes, the dragon in *The Hobbit*. In other words, he provides the script for the inner life of the dragon that asserts its nature as "*draco*," the thing itself, rather than the abstraction, "*draconitas*."

In the opening chapter of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien foreshadows the way in which Bilbo will act out the drama of lines 2280-2286 of *Beowulf*, the description of the thief who seeks the cup as a means for reconciliation with his master.<sup>7</sup> Gandalf tells the assembled dwarves that he has chosen "the fourteenth man" for their expedition, to recover the hoard Smaug the dragon guards in the Lonely Mountain.<sup>8</sup> Gandalf says that Bilbo "is a Burglar, a Burglar he is, or will be when the time comes" (*Hobbit* I:28). When the time comes, he is indeed a burglar, a burglar who is dumbstruck when he gazes on the dragon's hoard the first time:

He gazed for what seemed an age, before drawn almost against his will,  
he stole from the shadow of the doorway, across the floor to the nearest  
edge of the mounds of treasure. Above him the sleeping dragon lay, a dire

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Faraci has already commented that "When *The Hobbit* was published, its readers were privileged to get a full picture of what Tolkien considers 'dragon enough.'" (59).

<sup>7</sup>  
oð ðæt hyne ān ābealch  
mon on mode; mandryhtne bær  
fæted wæge, friodowære bæd  
hlāford sinne. Ðā wæs hord rāsod  
onboren bēaga hord, bēne getīðad  
fēasceaftum men; (2280b-2285a)

[until one man angered him in his mind; he bore the gold-plated cup to his leader, asked his lord for terms of peace. Then the hoard was explored, a cache of rings carried out, the petition granted to the wretched man.]

<sup>8</sup> The number fourteen has a particular resonance within *Beowulf*. When Beowulf sets out for Heorot, he leads a crew of fourteen men in the expedition and, hence, is "fīftāne sum" (a certain one of fifteen), l.207. When Beowulf returns from dispatching Grendel's mother, he is one of the "fēowertāne Gēata gongan" (fourteen of the Geats walking), ll. 1640-1641. At the conclusion of *Beowulf*, "ealre twelfe" (twelve lords), l. 3170, circle Beowulf's barrow. Since these have expressly been described as "Gēata lēode" (the people of the Geats), l. 3137, there may be some ambiguity. If Wiglaf is included in the count, there are fourteen warriors present: the twelve encircling the barrow, Wiglaf, and the departed Beowulf.

menace even in his sleep. He grasped a great two-handled cup, as heavy as he could carry, and cast one fearful eye upwards. Smaug stirred a wing, opened a claw, the rumble of his snoring changed its note. (*Hobbit* XII: 228)

Tolkien recasts the narrative of the young thane, driven out of his community, who plunders the dragon's hoard in hope of regaining his lord's favor, as the story of Bilbo Baggins, reluctant thief finally seduced when his "heart was filled and pierced with enchantment" at the sight of the hoard (*ibid.*). The only substantial differences between the Old English poem and Tolkien's narrative (besides the reduction in stature on the part of the protagonist) are the physical presence of the dragon within the scene and the description of the cup, focused more on the architecture of the vessel rather than upon its material. It is "two-handled" and "heavy" rather than simply "gold-plated."

Unlike the dragon in *Beowulf*, Smaug does not awaken immediately, but as our narrator tells us,

It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him. Dragons may not have much real use for all their wealth, but they know it to an ounce as a rule, especially after long possession; and Smaug was no exception. He had passed from an uneasy dream (in which a warrior, altogether insignificant in size but provided with a bitter sword and great courage, figured most unpleasantly) to a doze, and from a doze to wide waking. (*Hobbit* XII: 229)

In Tolkien's fictional narrative, the dragon is full of that "bestial life and thought of his own" that he praises in his scholarly treatment of the lines, to such an extent that he even dreams. He is even a capable accountant, able to know his hoard "to an ounce as a rule." Moreover, Smaug is an unexceptional dragon, alike in every possible way to all other "live dragons" to which our narrator refers. Tolkien's narrative move—his assertion of proverbial wisdom—foregrounds the fact that our narrator is aware of other dragons, who have behaved similarly in the past. Finally, and most importantly for our discussion of Heaney's treatment of ll. 2287-2290, the dragon dreams.

The dragon's dream itself proves the most interesting detail of the passage. Smaug dreams of a warrior, "altogether insignificant in size but provided with a bitter sword and great courage." The principal way that

this passage might be read would be as a lucid dream on Smaug's part: despite his drowsiness, he remains aware of Bilbo's presence. Indeed, the Hobbits are "insignificant in size," and Bilbo is no doubt courageous by the time he encounters the dragon. While not armed with a "bitter sword," Bilbo "loosened his dagger in its sheath" as he enters Smaug's hoard (*Hobbit* XII: 226). Bilbo's dagger, however, is not sufficient to penetrate the dragon, who is "armoured above and below with iron scales and hard gems," so that he is confident that "No blade can pierce me" (XII: 238). The hobbit does not enter the hoard with any intention to injure the dragon, so it would be impossible to assert that Smaug has any premonition or awareness of Bilbo's presence that would inspire such an anxious dream.

Nor could we assert that Smaug's dream is a premonition of his future demise. Smaug dies not at the hands of a warrior armed with a "bitter sword," but at the point of the last arrow discharged from Bard's bow (XIV: 262). A thrush shares the intelligence Bilbo had collected during his riddling banter with the dragon and prompts Bard to aim an arrow "for the hollow of the left breast" (XIV: 261). When the dragon displayed himself to Bilbo, Bilbo had thought the "large patch in the hollow of his left breast as bare as a snail out of its shell" (XII: 238). If Smaug had had a premonition of his own death, he should have dreamt of a "warrior insignificant in size," because of his great elevation with respect to Bard, "armed with a bitter arrow." Thus, we may say confidently that Smaug's dream is neither lucid vision nor premonition of death.

Smaug's dream manifests his knowledge of dragon-lore, the intersubjectivity that he shares with other dragons. In other words, Smaug is dreaming not of a warrior "insignificant in size" and "provided with a bitter sword" that shall face him before his own death, but of a warrior who has contended against another dragon. He is dreaming the stories of dragons. According to Tom Shippey, "For Tolkien's taste there were too few dragons in ancient literature, indeed by his count only three—the Miðgarðsorm or 'Worm of Middle-earth' which was to destroy the god Thor at Ragnarök, the Norse Doomsday; the dragon which Beowulf fights and kills at the cost of his own life; and Fafnir, who is killed by the Norse hero Sigurð" (36). While Smaug does not refer directly to the folkloric traditions of dragons, the whole dragon episode of *The Hobbit* is suffused with a sense of history: Smaug's personal history, the history of dragon-lore, and the history of Middle-earth itself. These three historical threads connect Smaug with the



dragons of Germanic literature, and Smaug's subjectivity conjures up an awareness in the reader that Smaug feels his status among dragons. Once Smaug awakens, he senses something strange, a "breath of strange air in his cave" (XII: 229). Unlike the dragon of *Beowulf*, Smaug is not moved to "stonc æfter stāne," but is instead moved to recollection, critique, and suspicion: "He had never felt quite happy about" the draft from a little hole, "and now he glared at it in suspicion and wondered why he had never blocked it up. Of late he had half fancied" he had heard knocking (ibid.). Smaug feels, suspects, and fancies. Not only does Smaug manifest his particular subjectivity in thought recorded by our omniscient narrator, he speaks, and speaks of himself, in acutely historical terms.

The hobbit makes the most of Smaug's inflated sense of historical importance. Once detected, Bilbo claims that he has come to Smaug's lair "to have a look at you and see if you were truly as great as tales say" (XII: 234). From the outset, Bilbo and Smaug encounter one another accompanied by the folkloric tradition of dragons. Although flattered that Bilbo seems "familiar with [his] name," the dragon is not fooled, and is seemingly aware that Bilbo is exploiting the shared tradition of dragon-lore in their discussion. The narrator also returns to proverbial wisdom about dragons to place Smaug further within the purview of the tradition:

This of course is the way to talk to dragons, if you don't want to reveal your proper name (which is wise), and don't want to infuriate them by a flat refusal (which is also very wise). No dragon can resist the fascination of riddling talk and of wasting time trying to understand it. (*Hobbit* XII: 235)

Smaug, therefore, is not a unique dragon, but a dragon like any other whom the narrator knows. Shippey points out that the "riddling talk" recalls the Eddic poem *Fáfnismál*, where Sigurð "will not give his name, but replies riddlingly, calling himself both motherless and fatherless" (36). Smaug is a dragon like that faced by any great Germanic hero, a dragon like Beowulf's foe, or a dragon like that faced by Sigurð. Thus, we may contend that Smaug, in his dream, dreams of Beowulf, "a warrior insignificant in size" and, indeed, "provided with a bitter sword and great courage."

Tolkien borrows the plot of the plundered hoard, this plot of the thief who steals the cup from the sleeping dragon. But the little touch of literary genius, Tolkien's nod to *Beowulf*, comes not from just this plot, but

from the way he manipulates the dreaming dragon Smaug in his story. Tolkien uses Smaug's dream to remind us of the sleeping dragon in *Beowulf*, who is finally defeated by Beowulf himself, who first attacks him with an ancient long-sword (Nægling) and finally with a short sword.

Nægling forbærst.  
geswāc æt sæcce      sweord Biowulfes  
gomol ond grægmael. (ll. 2680b-2682a)  
[Nægling snapped; Beowulf's sword, ancient and gray, failed at battle.]

Pā gēn sylf cyning  
gewēold his gewitte,      wæll-seaxe gebræd  
biter ond beaduscearp,      þæt hē on byrnan wæg (ll. 2702b-2704)  
[Then still the king himself held his wits, drew the battle-dagger, bitter and battle-sharp, that he carried in his coat of mail.]

The description of the "warrior [...] provided with a bitter sword" even recalls the language of the passage where Beowulf's dragon-foe meets his end, where the hero draws a "wæll-seaxe" that is "biter ond beaduscearp." Not only does Tolkien recast Bilbo as the thief who steals the cup, Tolkien deploys the language of the dragon's death-scene in Smaug's dream. Given Tolkien's acute awareness of language and all its resonances, it seems likely that his use of a cognate (*bitter* for *biter*) is intentional and indicates a direct gesture to readers familiar with the Old English original that he modifies.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, when Heaney's dragon realizes that a "prowler [...] had stolen / too close to his dreaming head" the connection between *Beowulf* and Tolkien's *Hobbit* comes full circle. Not only does Tolkien reframe the concluding heroic episode of *Beowulf* as the adventure of a hobbit from The Shire, but Tolkien's treatment of that episode has such resonance for our modern understanding of the poem that it parallels translation choices in the decidedly most modern of translations. For both Tolkien and Heaney, dreaming is the optimal measure of subjectivity. Although Heaney doubts that *The Hobbit* could have influenced his translation choices, Tolkien's scholarship certainly has. Heaney discusses Tolkien's impact upon *Beowulf*

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<sup>9</sup> As an astute anonymous reader has pointed out, Tolkien regularly demonstrates preference for cognates in translations. For example, in Tolkien's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we find PDE *flood* for ME *flod* (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Pearl. *Sir Orfeo*, 13). Other translators, including Marie Borroff, prefer the term *sea* (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Verse Translation*, 13).

scholarship (and the reading of the poem) with clearly articulated respect for “Tolkien’s brilliant literary treatment,” that argues “that the *Beowulf* poet was an imaginative writer rather than some kind of back-formation derived from nineteenth-century folklore and philology” (“Introduction” xi). The imaginative writer, the *Beowulf*-poet, manages to create a balanced poem where the “set pieces [...] have the life-marking power of certain dreams” (xii). The most powerful and vivid of all of these dreams, for the poet (medieval and modern), is the dragon, who,

once he is wakened [...] manifests himself [as] 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 of 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 which arises at the very mention of the word ‘dragon’. (“Introduction” xix)

For both Heaney and Tolkien, the “oneiric power” of the dragon rises up within the dragon’s own consciousness and is fixed upon this moment of waking in the poem. The two authors have transposed the dragon’s power to inspire dreams in readers of the poem upon the dragon itself.

Tolkien moved outside his scholarly treatment of the poem to give inner life to the dragon, placing the dragon-episode within his imagined Middle-earth so that he might give subjectivity and language to the dragon. Heaney manages to accomplish the same purpose within his translation of the poem, clearly guided by Tolkien’s “Monsters and the Critics.” As a result, we may be able to say that Tolkien’s fiction acts as an ancillary to his scholarship; he uses his fiction to make manifest his own vision of the poem, his heroic world, and the subjectivities of its monsters. In return, adapters and translators of the poem, so accustomed to Tolkien’s worldview presented explicitly in his scholarship, to which all writers (both scholarly and poetic) are undeniably indebted, and presented implicitly in his fiction, have begun to translate the poem as interpreted by Tolkien. Even though Tolkien’s scholarly output, by contemporary standards, was infinitesimal, it has made a lasting and indelible impact on our reading and understanding of *Beowulf*.

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