

Guardians of Treasure Immeasurable
Dragons in “Fehérlófia” and *Beowulf*

(Mérhetetlen kincsek őrzői: A Fehérlófia és a Beowulf sárkányai)

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
I. Have Dragons Become Useless?	3
II. The Dragon as Palimpsest.....	5
III. Neither Human Nor Animal.....	9
IV. The Treasure: Object of Human Desires	14
V. “For the Glory of Winning”	17
VI. Ever Alive, Never Complete.....	19
Works Cited.....	21

I. Have Dragons Become Useless?

Once upon a time, when Europe, the cradle of Western civilization was no more than vast forests and fair meadows, the world might have appeared to be less complicated. Different communities had their own mythology through which they explained the world around them and found their place in it. In such prelogical thinking reality and fantasy was never clearly separate (Bertha 1). Fairies stirred in the misty forest, monsters lurked over the marshes, and a god-figure hammered thunder engulfed in a storm. Dragons are in many respects the children of this gloomy, pre-scientific age of our continent. They are frequently associated with natural phenomena: many communities see a dragon in storm and hail, while others link them to the heavenly bodies. Dragons also seem to mark spatial borders: some maps warn their users that there may be dragons beyond the humanly occupied lands, and it is also typical to have a hideous monster guarding the world's end.

Interestingly enough, some of these beliefs escaped enlightenment and were not shattered through the revolutionary development of the natural sciences from the nineteenth century onwards. Though the relics are scattered and found mainly in isolated communities, they seem to survive till the twentieth century. For instance, Géza Róheim publishes the following belief about the Székely people of Transylvania in 1925. The dragon ascends to the clouds and creates a storm: where he lets down his tale a downpour and flood occurs, where he twists his tail hail will fall (98). A late descendant of this belief could be the Székely saying: "Leereszkedett a sárkány, nagy eső lesz." (The dragon has descended, there will be heavy rain.)¹

However, speaking about folkloric interpretation of natural phenomena in the second decade of the twenty-first century may seem to be hopeless nostalgia. Natural sciences have provided us with explanations of our natural surroundings and within Western culture people would no longer believe that a raging dragon inhabits the clouds. Thus, it may be concluded that as tools of accounting for natural phenomena dragons have become useless. Yet, dragons still survive.

By giving answers to the questions of nature, science got rid of many of the ambiguities and fears that would characterise the everyday life of communities in the era of mythological thinking. We are informed about eclipses through the media and do not start wondering whether some giant monster has swallowed the sun, and we roughly know how

¹ Translations from Hungarian are mine.

hail is produced and do not think that throwing an axe towards the sky will kill the dragon that makes it. Science has cast light on the formerly unperceivable, it established seemingly firm categories, named and labelled all things within human experience; and by doing so it made our life more comfortable – and more complicated. The tribesman with his little knowledge of tradition could say that he understood his world. The myths he learned relied on everyday experience and thus they appeared to be believable. A twenty-first century citizen, however, may accept that the Earth goes round the Sun and not vice versa, but it seems to go against his experience; not to mention the fact that the language of science is completely cut off from ordinary vocabulary. In addition, science's aspiration of terminating ambiguities seems to clash with the natural human desire for things beyond facts, the "ever-present yearning for the fantastic" (Punter 2).

Thus, fantasy seems to be a proper form of escape from our over-organized and meticulously labelled world. Firstly, though the fantastic had to withdraw from the sciences, it preserved its explanatory factor in literature. As Donald E. Morse observes, fantasy enables writers "to express ideas, emotions, and insights not available through mimesis" (19). Similarly, Olga Nagy, a Transylvanian folklorist assumes that despite being unreal, folktales may grasp the core of reality (*Hősök* 6). Secondly, fantasy leads to a condensation of images which may compensate the excessive categorisation of technology in an imaginary return to the long-lost unity of mythological thinking.

Considering these factors, it comes as no surprise that dragons have not only survived technology, but they have an on-going renaissance in popular culture. However, it should be admitted that their present significance is not necessarily equivalent with that of mythological times. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims, the monster is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment", a composite entity that reflects the time, feeling and place in which it is born (4). This being said, one may wonder whether it is possible to look on the *Beowulf* dragon from the tenth century and Tolkien's Smaug or Rowling's Hungarian Howler as belonging to the same species. The answer can be in the positive, since in addition to the representation of the cultural milieu in which they are born, dragons also refer to something more general, to a meaning that has been part of human experience in all ages. Thus, the dragon does not only preserve the specific qualities of a certain community but it is also capable of linking seemingly distant cultures – an ability which seems highly useable in our multicultural world.

The present paper attempts to cast light on this two-fold role of dragons as cultural signifiers through the comparison of two culturally and historically distinct texts: *Beowulf* and

the Hungarian folktale “Fehérlófia.”² The reasons for this seemingly awkward choice are the following. Firstly, as it is observed above, dragons are kept alive by the human yearning for the fantastic and literary reflections of these creatures have obviously preserved more of the desired ambiguities than a visual representation can ever aspire for. Secondly, even though they are centuries apart, both texts have grown out of an oral tradition, and thus they may include a fair amount of information about the beliefs of the community which created them. Thirdly, such an unusual comparison may reveal some previously unnoticed aspects of the otherwise frequently analysed *Beowulf* dragon, and hopefully, it will help to win some critical attention for the hardly-known dragons of Hungarian folktales.

II. The Dragon as Palimpsest

In his influential essay, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the monster’s body is always a cultural body (4). According to him, this means that the monster’s features reveal important details about the circumstances in which it was born and thus culture can be read through it (4). However, cultures can hardly be dealt with as separate categories, since they are in continuous interaction, affecting and rewriting each other. This seems to be in accordance with Cohen’s remark about the monster’s ability to refuse easy categorization (6). Consequently, it can be assumed that when the monster is found in a literary text it may be read as a simple text but its true nature is closer to a palimpsest: different stages of culture can be revealed through reading it if one is careful enough to look behind the top layer. In the following, these observations will be applied for the dragons in “Fehérlófia” and *Beowulf*. First, I will try to set them in a wider cultural scheme, and then I will observe the possibilities of reading them as palimpsests.

It seems that even the identification of the primary cultural setting is problematic concerning these appearances of the dragon. László Arany’s “Fehérlófia” fits more or less comfortably into the list of tales collected by nineteenth century folklore enthusiasts, yet the question of authority still remains open considering the common practice of literary folklorists who had a tendency of modifying their material according to their personal preferences. In the case of *Beowulf*, the situation is far more complicated. Despite being written in Old English, the events take place in the distant lands of Danes and Geats, moreover, several theories exist concerning the date of its actual composition. By a generous simplification of these issues one

² “Fehérlófia” will be dealt with as a single text in the way it appeared in László Arany’s 1865 collection, entitled *Eredeti népmesék* [Original Folktales].

may end up calling the *Beowulf* dragon *the Anglo-Saxon dragon* and the “Fehérlófia” dragons *the Hungarian dragon*.

However comfortable this labelling may seem, it definitely leads to further confusion, since neither the Anglo-Saxon, nor the Hungarian culture has ever existed as a separate entity. The *Beowulf* dragon is fairly similar to the dragon of the Völsungs, Fáfnir, which is actually referred to in the poem. If it is observed in a wider cultural context, it may also be linked to the dragons of Norse Mythology: the Midgard serpent that encircles the world and Nídhöggr, the dragon that gnaws at the roots of the world tree, Yggdrasil. Though the dragons of “Fehérlófia” are somewhat more isolated, they still have their relatives in Eastern European traditions: for instance, they seem to be fairly close to the multiple-headed, heavily anthropomorphic dragons of some Tartar folk tales.³ Thus, Sándor Solymossy’s categorization of European dragons may appear appropriate. In his basic essay about the dragons in Hungarian folktales, he speaks about the Indo-Germanic tradition by which he means the dragons of practically all the rest of Europe and sees the Hungarian dragon as a fairly isolated example of what he calls the Ural-Altai type (132). Solymossy senses an important distinction as far as the dragons’ physical representation is concerned (the Indo-Germanic type shows more bestial features, whereas the Ural-Altai is more anthropomorphic), yet he disproportionately oversimplifies the issue of other European dragons by placing them in a single category.

These observations do not necessarily mean that an analysis of dragons is obliged to refrain from all categorisation. On the contrary, it is essential to find out basic distinctions between different types and to know with which culture they have closer or more remote connections. The point is, however, that the categories created by such observations should not be seen as fixed. For instance, it is important to recognize that the *Beowulf* dragon incorporates Germanic, Nordic and Anglo-Saxon elements but labelling it as any of these three would limit the horizon of possible interpretations.

Nevertheless, even if we adopt such a broad cultural perspective, the dragons in the Hungarian folk tale and the Old English heroic poem remain quite separate from each other. The Hungarian and the English cultures hardly had any contact with each other: very little through the nineteenth century folklore movements and definitely no interaction at the time

³ For more information about the dragon in Tartar folktales consult: Dallos, Edina. *Természetfölötti Szereplők a Tatár Varázsmesékben*. Doctoral Dissertation (ELTE, Budapest 2005): ELTE BTK. N.p., n.d. <http://doktori.btk.elte.hu/folk/dallos/diss.pdf>. Web. December 27, 2012.

when *Beowulf* was composed. The cultures related to them were equally isolated: it was very unlikely for Hungary to receive cultural influence from Scandinavia; similarly, English poets hardly received their inspirations from Tartar folk tales.⁴

However, there was a very significant common influence which a strict categorisation would ignore: that of Christianity. Both *Beowulf* and “Fehérlófia” grew out of pagan oral tradition and received but a semi-baptism: though they are blurred or hidden behind the text, pre-Christian elements are still perceivable. The question is what effects such a conversion had on either of the dragons and whether these brought the two types closer to each other.

The most interesting difference Christianity shows as opposed to most pagan traditions in Europe is that it flattens out the superhuman sphere. In a human being good and bad qualities can be found at the same time but anything that is beyond human experience is either good or evil. More precisely, anything that falls into the category of abnormality belongs to the devil. As opposed to this, pagan transcendence is hardly that simplified. From Zeus to Thor god figures remain morally ambiguous and even lesser supernatural beings, such as fairies, cannot clearly be categorised as good or evil.

According to the standards of Christianity, dragons definitely fall into the category of evil. Firstly, they show obvious physical abnormalities: they are reptiles with wings, or they have multiple heads. If they are also capable of breathing fire, they hardly escape association with the devil. Secondly, nearly all dragon narratives involve a combat in which a hero defeats the dragon. Since Christian discourse has a tendency of reducing any conflict to a fight between good and evil (just think of the justification of the Crusades), the dragon inevitably becomes the negative character.

Both “Fehérlófia” and *Beowulf* have been subject to a Christian reinterpretation, yet in each case the observant eye may glimpse at the remnants of pagan times. In *Beowulf* such relics can be revealed if we contrast the dragon’s case with that of Grendel. The latter monster is clearly identified as being one of Cain’s race (l. 107) and thus an enemy of God. As opposed to this, when the dragon is introduced, there is no reference to its origins, and the dragon’s deeds are not clearly evil, either. He occupies a hoard that has been abandoned by people long ago, moreover, it is mentioned that the barrow stood open when the dragon found it: “... *Hordwynne fond / eald ūhtsceaða opene standan*” (The old ravager by night found the

⁴ A single yet important exception is the German influence on Hungary which has been present ever since the Hungarians established their country in the Carpathian Basin. It is partly through this connection that Hungarian culture was introduced to western representations of the dragon. This inevitably meant the mingling of the two traditions, yet it seems that folklore more or less clearly preserved the more archaic forms.

delightful hoard standing open) (ll. 2270-71).⁵ Though his raids over the Geats seem evil, he may be excused in a pagan context, since he only takes revenge for the stolen cup. The picture becomes even more ambiguous if we consider what happens to the dragon after his death. Firstly, the poem provides a ten line long lament over the perishing of the hoard guardian (ll. 2826-2835). Secondly, the Geats dispose of the dragon's body in the following manner: "... dracan ēc scufun, / wyrm ofer weallclif, lēton wēg niman, / flōd fæðmian frætwa hyrde" (the dragon they also pushed, the serpent over the cliff, let the wave take, the flood enfold the treasure guardian) (ll. 3131-3133). The method the Geats apply and the lofty tone of these lines distantly resembles the sea burial of Scyld at the very beginning of the poem. All this entails a certain admiration of the dragon on the part of the people, which a strictly devilish creature would hardly deserve.

The mingling of pagan and Christian elements in the representation of the *Beowulf* dragon initiated long critical debates. In his basic lecture of 1936, J.R.R. Tolkien described it as "a personification of malice, greed, destruction," a malevolent creature that "approaches *draconitas* rather than *draco*" (114). Some critics adopted his views, whereas others, such as T.M. Gang, argued that the dragon should not be seen as a universal enemy of humanity and that dragons "were solid enough fact for the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" (8). In 1953, Adrien Bonjour tried to pour oil on the troubled waters of *Beowulf* criticism by claiming that "Tolkien's high-flying and transcendent dragon is quite as legitimate as Mr Gang's more solid and pedestrian monster" (312). However, even after Bonjour's essay, critics tried to categorise the *Beowulf* dragon either as a quasi-Christian metaphoric manifestation of evil or a more or less pagan monster that was once believed to be physical reality.

The "Fehérlófia" dragons incorporate similar ambiguities. One of the observations of Olga Nagy reveals interesting details about the pagan origins of Hungarian folktale dragons. She argues that the folktale dragon is actually a descendant of the more archaic mythical dragon (*A táltos* 52). About the mythical dragon she claims that the three highly anthropomorphic dragons, together with their wives and their witch mother were associated with the seven planet gods (*Hősök* 26). The remnants of this belief are still traceable in some Hungarian folktales such as "Az égig érő fa" [The Tree That Reached Up to the Sky] in which the dragon dwells in the heavens upon the world tree. However, in most stories, including "Fehérlófia", dragons were moved from the branches of the world tree to the roots and became lords of the Underworld – and thus they can hardly escape association with the devil. Yet even in such

⁵ Prose translations from the Old English *Beowulf* are mine.

tales there may be relics of the dragon's semi-god origins. For instance, in "Fehérlófia" the three-, six- and twelve-headed dragons own copper, silver and golden estates respectively. As János Berze Nagy points out these metals used to be related to planets: copper meant the Venus, silver was associated with the Moon and gold referred to the Sun (91). Moreover, these three embodied the three types of heavenly lights, the stars, the moon and the sun without which human life is impossible.

Therefore, the dragons in "Fehérlófia" and *Beowulf* have been subject to a similar process. It is interesting, however, that this process was not complete, since Christian influence failed to fully terminate the ambiguous morality of the dragon. Its interpretation slightly moved towards the devilish side, but its transformation remained incomplete. The acceptance of the dragon's ambiguity in each tradition could put an end to the critical debates over its morality and would open new perspectives in its readings as cultural signifier. Instead of calling the dragon either the personification of the devil or a mischievous pagan god, critical attention should focus on understanding all of its occurrences as cultural palimpsests.

III. Neither Human Nor Animal

In addition to blurring the boundaries between cultures and religions through the texts in which it is represented, the dragon's very body is also a mixture of different elements. As Cohen points out, "[m]onsters are never created ex nihilo, but through a process of fragmentation and recombination" (11). In the dragon's case this means that it is constructed out of bestial and anthropomorphic elements in such a peculiar way that it actually belongs to neither category.

The proportion of these components shows a remarkable difference concerning the dragons of this analysis. The *Beowulf* dragon is a fifty-feet long, fire-breathing, winged reptile, whereas the dragons in "Fehérlófia" have three, six and twelve heads, respectively; they own castles, they wield weapons and each of them kidnaps a human princess to be his wife. If there is any possibility to clearly distinguish between the two types of dragons, it is this: the *Beowulf* dragon is closer to a mythical animal, whilst the "Fehérlófia" dragons are more like somewhat beastly men who have supernatural power.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the *Beowulf* dragon has no anthropomorphic features or that the "Fehérlófia" dragons can be seen as human beings. This becomes clear if they are compared to dragons of related traditions. The dragons that are closest to the one in *Beowulf* seem to be equally bestial: the Midgard Serpent of Norse mythology is a snake-like

creature that encircles the world and the Germanic Fáfnir is represented as a reptile similar to the bane of the Geats. Yet the Midgard Serpent is born of Loki and the giantess Angrboda (Lindow 42) and Fáfnir was originally a dwarf who turned into a dragon through his greed. Even though *Beowulf* does not mention any similar origin for the dragon, some anthropomorphic features are perceivable in the way he acts. For instance, he is capable of enumerating the treasure he finds within the barrow; moreover, he seems to be able to distinguish between items, otherwise he would not know that the slave took the cup and not something else. Though these features prove the existence of the anthropomorphic side of the *Beowulf* dragon, it can still be assumed that the bestial feature is overwhelming in its character.⁶

With regard to the dragons in “Fehérlófia”, the situation is even more peculiar. Hungarian folklore actually has two types of dragon-like creatures; one fairly bestial, the other highly anthropomorphic. According to Géza Róheim, the former starts its life as a snake. This snake hides in a marsh or within a crag, and in seven years, during which it never sees human beings, it turns into a dragon (98). As opposed to the other type, it only has one head. This is also the creature that folk tradition generally associates with storm and hail. Interestingly enough, this kind of dragon is usually not killed by a hero but is caught and used by the mysterious wandering student of Hungarian folklore, the *garabonciás* (Róheim 34-35). In some texts this type is called *sárkánykígyó* (dragon-snake) which refers to its origins and differentiates it from the more anthropomorphic type. The problem is, however, that this term is not used consistently; and quite frequently both kinds of dragon are simply called *sárkány* (dragon). In addition to this, visual representations tend to mingle the two types. Multiple-headed dragons are often pictured as huge, green, winged reptiles with multiple necks attached to a weird, bulky body.

Yet this does not mean that the “Fehérlófia” dragons cannot be seen as highly anthropomorphic creatures. One of the most interesting features of this folktale is that it remains extremely tight-lipped about the dragons’ physical characteristics. The reader learns that the dragons have great power in fight, they seem to travel their land very fast since they arrive home the very moment they are mentioned, and the third of them, the twelve-headed dragon, owns a mace, which he throws into the castle’s gate from twelve miles. The text does not mention any claws, fangs or wings, not even fire-breathing. The reader (or the listener) is

⁶ For more information on the anthropomorphic qualities of the *Beowulf* dragon consult Raymond P. Tripp’s *More about the Fight with the Dragon: Beowulf 2208b-3182* in which he argues that the Old English poem represents a man-dragon.

given relative freedom in imaging the character and thus a close-to-human picture of the dragon is fairly possible.

The proportion of bestial and anthropomorphic elements mingled in its body fundamentally influence human encounter with the dragon. With regard to its appearance, the *Beowulf* dragon is clearly non-human, and it seems to be a mere recombination of existing animals with extraordinary physical power and the special skill of fire-breathing. Thus, if this dragon is no more than an exaggerated beast, it seems possible for a human, the master of beasts, to slay it. The only condition is that the man who fights it should be as unusual among men as the dragon is unusual among animals.

Even though *Beowulf* seems to fit this requirement, the dragon's case is hardly that simple in the Old English poem. The dragon is not only a beast of mighty power, but it is also a rare one and its origins are unknown. Despite its cultural relatedness to the Midgard Serpent and Fáfnir, it cannot be assumed that the *Beowulf* dragon is begotten of a mischievous Norse god or it is a distorted dwarf, since no evidence is provided in the text. Yet the dragon's representation as a nocturnal creature and the fact that it occupies a human burial site seems to surround the character with an otherworldly atmosphere, as if it came either from pagan transcendence or Christian hell. Consequently, it seems possible that the *Beowulf* dragon has not always been a winged, fire-breathing reptile, or that it is not the only form which it may take. This possibility may justify the elaborate lament over the dragon's death as well as the Geats' quasi-burial of its body.

Fehérlófia's encounter with the dragons is slightly different. If one persists on following the text word for word and thus leaves out claws, fangs and wings, the "Fehérlófia" dragons can be seen as mighty humans who have multiple heads. Probably they are larger in size than ordinary men but not too large for wrestling with Fehérlófia. Even their marvellous speed can be explained in anthropomorphic terms. As Olga Nagy points out, the *táltos ló*, the magic horse of Hungarian folktales, generally belongs to the dragons (206). This magic horse can be as fast as thought, which is an interesting feature to consider, since in "Fehérlófia" the dragons arrive home the moment they are referred to. But even if they do not ride horses, their appearance is overwhelmingly anthropomorphic.

One of the most striking anthropomorphic features that clearly differentiate them from the *Beowulf* dragon is that they are able to communicate with humans. Whilst the former dragon can only express its rage by ravaging the Geats by night, the six-headed dragon, the second combatant of Fehérlófia, can easily give his reason for fighting the hero: "te ölted meg az öcsémet, ezért meg kell hálnod" (it was you who killed my little brother, and for this you shall

die) (Arany 211). However, the verbal skills given to the dragons do not ease the situation. All three times, the dragon's speech does not extend beyond a formal accusation and challenge for combat – fighting is inevitable.

The question of gender is a further feature in which the “Fehérlófia” dragons are clearly more anthropomorphic than the *Beowulf* dragon. Though in both texts the dragons can be identified as masculine, this characteristic hardly means more than grammatical gender with regard to the *Beowulf* dragon. Firstly, both “wyrn” (snake) and “draca” (dragon) are masculine nouns in Old English. Secondly, when the dragon is referred to in a more metaphoric way with such compounds as “ðēosceaða” (ravager of a people) (l. 2278) or “hordweard” (guardian of a hoard) (l. 2593), the grammatical gender is equally masculine, since both “sceaða” and “weard” are masculine nouns. Beyond this, the dragon's gender has practically no role in the poem: it seems that dragons are solitary creatures of unknown origin that may comfortably spend three hundred years sleeping in a barrow without the urge to seek for a mate. At least the text remains consistent about its grammatical gender, unlike in the case of Grendel's mother, who, as Jane Chance notices, occasionally receives a masculine pronoun (155). As opposed to this, the “Fehérlófia” dragons' masculinity is fairly obvious: they kidnap the princesses to be their wives and not to consume them, as some most bestial dragons would do.

Considering all these, it seems that it is mainly the number of heads that differentiates Fehérlófia from his combatants. Therefore, while the *Beowulf* dragon is closer to a beast and thus it is apparently lesser than a human being, the dragons of the Hungarian folktale seem to be something more than human. It is not uncommon for supernatural beings to have extra body parts. For instance, even the *táltos*, the shaman figure of Hungarian mythology, is said to be born with teeth or he has six fingers on one hand and these extra bones signify his connection with the magical world. Similarly, Olga Nagy refers to Mongol folktales in which the magic horse has eight legs (*Hősök* 201). The extra limbs signify the horse's speed and when one of them is broken, it slows down (*Hősök* 201).⁷

This remark of Olga Nagy may contribute to a better understanding of the “Fehérlófia” dragons' multiple heads. In the horse's case, the legs mean speed, and the more it has of them, the faster it becomes. Thus, if we figure out what the heads signify, we will know which quality of the dragon increases with the number of its heads. If they were more beastly dragons, the heads would only mean three-, six- and twelve-times more fangs and fire, yet

⁷ The magic horse may also have an extra leg in Hungarian folktales, for instance in (insert title) the hero gains hold of a five-legged horse.

such details are not mentioned in “Fehérlófia”. The picture is altered if we consider that as part of the human body the head is where the mind resides. Probably, it would be a needless exaggeration to attach extraordinary wisdom to these dragons on this account. However, it should not be ignored that picturing the multiple-headed dragon as a creature of dim intellect is a relatively new phenomenon in Hungary and the text of “Fehérlófia” does not exclude the possibility that the three dragons have knowledge beyond human perception. More importantly, the mind can also be associated with the soul. This would mean that the “Fehérlófia” dragons have three, six and twelve souls respectively. Since death is nothing else than the parting of the soul from the body, such a head-soul equivalence may explain the way in which a multiple-headed dragon is killed. Whenever a head is cut, the dragon loses one of its souls, and when all its heads are gone, it has to die.

The question is how all these anthropomorphic features may affect Fehérlófia’s fight with the dragons. One could say that the Hungarian folktale hero’s killing of the quasi-human dragons is morally more ambiguous than Beowulf’s killing of his beastly combatant. Yet, it should be born in mind that Fehérlófia is always involved in a fair combat: the three dragons order him to go to their copper, silver and golden farmyards and fight for his life. As opposed to this, Beowulf seeks out the dragon by daylight and forces it to fight on the ground, which means that it is at double disadvantage.

On the whole, the proportion of anthropomorphic and bestial elements seems to be a basic distinction between the dragons of the Hungarian folktale and the one in *Beowulf*. Therefore, it seems possible that a more in-depth analysis of this aspect would reveal further details that are unique to the cultural context in which these texts were created. However, if the issue of anthropomorphic and bestial components is approached on a more general level, it can be assumed that though the percentage of humanness in the dragon’s representation may flavour the hero’s encounter with the dragon, it does not have a significant effect on the outcome. Whether it is a beast or a monstrous human, the dragon is doomed to be slain by the hero. In this respect, the proportion is fairly unimportant and the emphasis falls on the mingling of elements, through which the dragon becomes a species between species, a creature that is below and beyond humans at the same time – a “harbinger of the category crisis” (Cohen 6).

IV. The Treasure: Object of Human Desires

Thus far it has been demonstrated that their shared ambiguity is probably the only feature that may link the *Beowulf* dragon to the three combatants of Fehérlófia. They are found in historically and culturally distant texts, and their physical appearances significantly differ. Yet both types can be read as cultural palimpsests at a meeting point of cultures and religions, and both texts represent the dragon as a creature in which anthropomorphic and bestial elements are mingled. In the following, the analysis will deal with a single feature that may establish a closer connection between the dragons of the Hungarian folktale and the Old English poem.

Sándor Solymossy argues that the main distinction between what he calls the “Indo-Germanic” and the “Ural-Altaian” dragon is that while the former is frequently associated with guarding a hidden treasure hoard, no such thing is mentioned in connection with the latter type (121). Hungarian folklore seems to validate this claim, since there are stories about treasures hidden underground, but in most cases they are left unguarded and can only be found by the ‘táltos,’ the shaman figure of pagan times, who is capable of seeing underground treasure (Róheim 22). However, Solymossy seems to have ignored the fact that even if the typical Hungarian folktale dragon does not possess a pile of precious things, he guards something mostly appreciated by humans in nearly all tales. For instance, in different variations of the folk tale “Szépmező Szárnya” [Wing of the Fair Meadow], three dragons steal the stars, the moon and the sun, and the hero’s responsibility is to win these back by defeating the dragons. In other cases, the dragon owns a bird the song of which keeps people young, he may also have a magical horse in his stall, and quite frequently he kidnaps a princess who shall be rescued by the hero. Therefore, underground treasure hoards may be reserved for Solymossy’s “Indo-Germanic” dragons, but they definitely share the role of guarding with the dragons of Hungarian folktales.

With regard to “Fehérlófia” and *Beowulf*, a similar connection can be observed. The *Beowulf* dragon guards its hoard of heathen treasure, whereas the “Fehérlófia” dragons can be seen as guardians and keepers of their estates and of the princesses they have kidnapped. The fact that the possessions of the “Fehérlófia” dragons are made of precious metals (copper, silver and gold) may also establish a link between the two types. Further similarities are to be found if one considers the value of the items guarded by these dragons. In each case, the dragon’s treasure is a manifestation of human desires: gold and jewellery, castles with large estates and a beautiful wife of noble origins are all possible components of a happy life. It is interesting to notice that the precious items guarded by the dragon also fit into the cultural background in which the texts were created. Concerning the treasure in *Beowulf*, Leslie Webster remarks that it is described in such detail that it was probably intended to be recognisable by the audience (223). With regard to “Fehérlófia”, the dragons are represented as quasi-feudal lords of flourishing estates, a life which was probably a distant desire of the folktale’s peasant audience.

If the dragon has in its keeping all that is humanly desirable it is a relevant point to consider whether it is a rightful owner or a usurper of these things. In the case of the “Fehérlófia” dragons, Olga Nagy suspects that in mythological thinking the dragons of Hungarian and related traditions were rightful owners of their wealth, but later they lost their semi-god qualities and were transformed into thieves (*Hősök* 132). This can be clearly seen if we compare the mythical dragon’s representation as a planet god to the folktale dragon that steals the heavenly bodies in certain tales. However, as it is mentioned above, references to the sun, the moon and the stars are only hardly perceivable relics incorporated into the images of the dragons’ estates in “Fehérlófia,” and the text does not provide any information about how the dragons have come into possession of them. Nevertheless, their thievery is obvious, since they take the three princesses by force from their father’s castle.

The question of rightful ownership is fairly ambiguous with regard to the *Beowulf* dragon. Its hoard belongs to a people who perished long ago and it does not even have to break into the barrow, since it stands open. Moreover, this dragon seems to be harmless if it is not disturbed: “Swā se ðēodsceaða þrēo hund wintra / hēold on hrūsan hordærna sum / ēacencræftig...” (So the ravager of people mightily occupied the earthen treasure-house for three hundred winters...) (ll. 2278-80). Interestingly enough, in this respect the bestial-looking *Beowulf* dragon is less dangerous for the human world than the anthropomorphic dragons in “Fehérlófia.”

In both cases, however, the dragon’s right for the treasure is ambiguous and this may account for the character’s frequent association with the devil. Moreover, treasure itself becomes morally suspicious in a Christian context. Either it is simple material wealth, like the heathen gold of the *Beowulf* dragon, or one of the more metaphoric treasures of Hungarian folktale dragons, like the water of life, the magic horse or the three princesses; desire for the treasure equals greed, one of the seven deadly sins. From such a perspective, the *Beowulf* dragon may truly appear as a personification of evil and it is also understandable why some Hungarian folktale variants replace the treasure guarding dragon with a hairy devil (Nagy, *Hősök* 131).

The place in which the dragons keep their precious possessions may also link the combatants of Fehérlófia to the Anglo-Saxon hoard guardian. In both texts the treasure is found underground, though in a slightly different sense. The precious hoard of the *Beowulf* dragon is inside a barrow, but despite the fact that it is under the surface of the earth, it is a man-made object within the boundaries of human experience. As opposed to this, in “Fehérlófia” the hero goes down to the Underworld through a great hole in the ground and there he finds the estates of the three dragons. What may still connect these two places is definitely their otherworldly, basically pagan atmosphere. The *Beowulf* dragon occupies a heathen burial site upon which an ancient curse was laid. The Underworld in “Fehérlófia” is, similarly, not a Christian hell but a marvellous yet fairly dangerous mythical world inhabited by supernatural creatures, like the Hétszűnyű Kapanyányimonyók, the dragons and the griffin.

In theory, these places are separated from the human world, yet it is exactly the clash of human and non-human territories that leads to a conflict in both texts. And the sole reason for breaking these seemingly set boundaries is the treasure. In *Beowulf*, the dragon arrives in the land of the Geats in search of the treasure, and the “Fehérlófia” dragons ascend to the human sphere merely to kidnap the princesses. Thus it seems that in each case the dragon is dependent on our world through the treasure it guards.

This dependence is more evident concerning the *Beowulf* dragon, since its very existence seems to presume a pile of gold to be guarded. In accordance with this, the Old English poem known as *Maxims II* provides the following description of dragons: *Draca sceal on hlāwe, / frōd, frætwum wlanc* “The dragon must dwell in a barrow, old and proud of its treasures” (Jack 14). Similarly, *Beowulf* claims that: “... *Hē gesēcean sceall / h[o]r[d on h]rūsan, þær hē hāðen gold / warað wintrum frōd; ne byð him wihte ðy sēl*” (He shall seek hoard underground, guard heathen gold through winters old, but to no avail) (ll. 2275-2277). It is also important to notice that the treasure is the only possession of the *Beowulf* dragon.

Compared to this, the dragons in “Fehérlófia” could live a comfortable life in their magical estates without ever interfering with the human world, yet they ascend from the Underworld to kidnap princesses. But why would a dragon need a human wife? If we recall Olga Nagy’s above mentioned claim that the mythical dragons together with their mother and their wives meant the planet gods (*Hörsök* 26); it is obvious that in their more archaic form the dragons’ wives were not human beings. Considering this, it seems possible that when prelogical thinking gradually lost its power and the dragons were banished from the Upper World, they also lost their supernatural mates, and therefore they are forced to replace them by humans. If it is so, it is no surprise that their choice falls on women of the highest possible social rank.

Considering all the above mentioned aspects of the dragon’s precious possessions, it seems that both for the *Beowulf* dragon and the dragons in “Fehérlófia” the treasure is a basic necessity and not a sign of their reckless greed. This dire need for it may also account for the dragons’ strong attachment to the treasure. The *Beowulf* dragon seems to know each and every item of his hoard and becomes furious when he recognises that the cup was stolen. Attachment to the treasure is slightly different for the “Fehérlófia” dragons, mainly due to the fact that instead of material objects, their precious possessions are animate beings. Interestingly enough, the princesses are respected by the dragons: they should not fear being eaten as is found in many European dragon tales, and they may enjoy relative freedom as ladies of magical castles. Olga Nagy even suggests that the dragon is attached to its princess with true love (128). For this latter claim there is no clear textual evidence in “Fehérlófia,” yet the immediate arrival of each dragon after the hero has entered the castle may refer to the dragon’s fear for his wife.

But either it is a simple though fairly human obsession with certain material objects or a more or less emotionally conditioned relation to a human being, their attachment to the treasure is strong

enough in both cases to urge the dragons to action. In both the folktale and the heroic poem the dragons are ready to fight for their treasure till their last breath. This means that their combat with the hero is inevitably fatal. However, it should be seen clearly that it is not merely the taking of the treasure for which the dragon has to pay with his life. He has to be destroyed because through gaining the precious items he becomes a transgressor, he suspends the boundaries of the human and the supernatural world and by doing so, he poses a potential threat on society.⁸

V. “For the Glory of Winning”

We have seen that the dragon refuses to fit in cultural and religious categories, it smashes the distinction between humans and animals, and it transgresses the boundary of the human and the supernatural. However, this does not mean that this creature, which Tolkien called the “potent creation of men’s imagination” (113), is actually impotent and lurks aimlessly beyond a single function to fulfil. The dragon perfectly finds its place in the narrative of the dragon-slaying story: he is the grand enemy of the hero, and thus he functions as a most appropriate tool in illustrating heroism. In the following, the analysis will attempt to show in what respects the hero and the dragon are matching opponents, and how the dragon-slaying episode fits into the quest of the hero.

If the dragon can hardly be seen as devil proper in “Fehérlófia” and *Beowulf*, the hero is similarly not the embodiment of the *athlete Christi*. Both Fehérlófia and Beowulf are fairly individualistic heroes, and the benefits of humanity are far from being their main motivation. Beowulf only faces the dragon when the creature hurts his pride as a monster-slaying hero by burning his very hall, and Fehérlófia simply comes across the three-headed dragon’s copper estate. Their fate is to engage in fights with monsters and their main ambition is to pursue “the glory of winning”.⁹ From early childhood on their life is a continuous sequence of challenges; and once their fame is established, they have to protect it till their last day. In some respect they become similar to their enemies: if the dragons are obsessed with their treasure, the heroes are equally obsessed with triumph. Their concern for combat may also account for their apparent lack of ordinary human desires concerning the treasure. Even though they are informed about what the dragon guards (Fehérlófia even learns from the first princess what reward the king will give him if he takes home all the princesses), their foremost ambition is fighting the dragon.

⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen formulates a similar claim about monsters, when he associates them with the repressed: “The monster is transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker, and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed” (Cohen 16).

⁹ The term is from Seamus Heaney’s verse translation of *Beowulf* (l. 2514). It appeared to be appropriate for the purposes of the present analysis, yet in the original the meaning is slightly different: “mæ̃rðu fremman” (to accomplish a glorious deed).

Apart from their obsession with “the glory of winning,” the way in which their superhuman power is described also brings Fehérlófia and Beowulf closer to their grand enemies. Firstly, both have a tendency to fight with bare hands. Beowulf boasts to fight Grendel without weapon (ll. 433-441), and he regrets that he has to use weapons when facing the dragon (ll. 2518-2521). Fehérlófia fights his later companions Fanyűvő, Kőmorzsoló and Vasgyúró without weapons, he uses his hands when he punishes Hétszűnyű Kapanyányimonyók, and moreover, he also wrestles with the three dragons. Secondly, the description of their strength almost exclusively focuses on physical power. About Beowulf the reader learns that “...hē þrītiges / manna mægencyft on his mundgripe / heaþorōf hæbbe” (he has thirty men’s strength in his hand-grip) (ll. 379-381), while Fehérlófia also seems to be renowned for his bodily strength, since all three of his later companions greet him the following way: “Hallottam hírét annak a Fehérlófiának, szeretnék vele megbirkózni” (I have heard about Fehérlófia and I would like to wrestle with him).

Such aspects make their power slightly bestial, which is understandable in the case of Fehérlófia, since he is literally born of a white mare, but it is quite ambiguous with regard to Beowulf, whose strength is described as coming from God. This paradox may be released if we consider that both hero figures are descendants of the heroes of pagan times, who frequently have bestial strength or they can even appear in animal shapes.¹⁰ Similarly to the dragons, the heroes lost most of their pagan connotations, and the more archaic elements were mingled with the influences of Christianity.

On the basis of the above mentioned parallels, hero and dragon can be seen as proper combatants. However, in order to let the dragon enfold all its narrative qualities, the placing of the dragon-slaying episode within the storyline is equally important. In both cases, the dragon is the last opponent of the hero and the outcome of their fight is the conclusion of their narrative.

Nevertheless, the plot of the dragon fight is not exactly the same, and this is partly due to the age of the heroes. Tolkien makes the following remark about the dragon plot in *Beowulf*: “Disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme.” (127). When the king of the Geats prepares to face the guardian of the hoard, the reader already knows that the combat will result in Beowulf’s death. The dragon’s main role in the hero’s quest is to provide him with a marvellous death. As opposed to this, “Fehérlófia” is a coming-to-manhood story; the hero is a young man who is eager to fight any monsters he finds. Thus, in the folktale’s plot the dragons are involved to illustrate how much Fehérlófia’s strength has increased since his first failed attempt of peeling the tree’s bark and that he has matured into manhood. This age difference may account for the fact that while Fehérlófia has a central role in all three dragon-slaying episodes, Beowulf’s role is somewhat lessened during the dragon fight, especially if we compare it to his combats in his youth. In “Fehérlófia” the hero is both the trespasser and the dragonslayer, whereas in *Beowulf*, the slave is the trespasser and even during the final combat the hero

¹⁰ With regard to this, it is interesting to notice that both heroes have animalistic names. The name Fehérlófia is a very obvious reference to its bearer’s origins. Beowulf proved to be a bit more difficult to decipher, yet each interpretation of the compound is an animal.

is aided by his faithful retainer, Wiglaf.¹¹ Similarly, the reward that the heroes gain by killing the dragon is appropriate to their age. The elderly king of the Geats passes away in a way that befits his life, whereas Fehérlófia can begin his adult life as king of half a kingdom and husband of the most beautiful princess. In this respect, the dragon, a creature that always stands at the border of categories, also seems to mark the boundaries between the different phases of human life.

VI. Ever Alive, Never Complete

On the whole, despite the differences in their representation, the dragons in “Fehérlófia” and *Beowulf* have similar functions as cultural signifiers. Both types refuse exact cultural categorisation, since they include the footprints of a wider cultural context and do not belong exclusively to a single community. Interestingly enough, though the texts are centuries apart, both stories represent a transitional period between paganism and Christianity. Remnants of mythological thinking have been baptised, but in both case some of them are still perceivable. The physical characteristics of the dragons in “Fehérlófia” and *Beowulf* seemed to be a feature that can clearly differentiate the two types. However, as it has been demonstrated, both texts mingle anthropomorphic and bestial elements in their description of the dragon. It is only the proportion of these components that is responsible for the difference. Thus far, the most obvious connection between the two types appeared to be their resistance to proper categorisation.

The dragons also showed a remarkable difference in the items they guard: the *Beowulf* dragon sleeps over a pile of heathen gold, whereas the “Fehérlófia” dragons kidnap princesses and keep them in their castles. However different the dragon’s precious possessions may be in the two stories, the role of guarding is definitely a shared feature and an essential connection between the two dragon types. In both cases, it is due to the treasure that the dragon ever gets into contact with the human sphere, and this is how it may fulfil its role as the proper combatant of the hero. Thus, on a more general level, the dragon may be seen as a mysterious usurper of humanly valuable things that has to pay with its life for its interference with the human sphere.

Yet, despite this similarity in their basic function, it would be a mistake to ignore the obvious differences between the dragons in “Fehérlófia” and *Beowulf*. The dragon may have a

¹¹ Daniel L. Barnes also notices this difference. In his essay, “Folktale Morphology and the Structure of *Beowulf*,” he claims that *Beowulf* can be seen as the “seeker hero” in the first two moves, but in the dragon episode he is the “victim hero” (427). In the following, Barnes remarks that the slave also fulfils the function of a “victim hero” (428).

general, underlying meaning, but it still is “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling and a place” (Cohen 4). Moreover, it is possible that the dragon’s ability to stay alive in cultural memory even after it has been pierced and beheaded a hundred times, lies in its two-fold nature of being unique and universal at the same time. The dragon is never the same, yet it returns from age to age, and when it comes it brings “a fuller knowledge of our place in history,” it bears “self-knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside” (Cohen 20). This is the kind of knowledge that is “not available through mimesis” (Morse 19), a knowledge that will never be explained by science, since it cannot be objectified.

Following from these observations, the dragon, like other signifiers, is constantly in the process of making: ever alive, never complete. Dragons, as Cohen remarked about monsters, “are our children” (20). They will stay until there are people to keep them alive. Times have changed since *Beowulf* and “Fehérlófia” were written, and dragon tales are no longer told round the fire or in a kingly hall. However, the dragon successfully conquered virtual reality and it firmly set its foot in fantasy literature. It was adapted to our modern needs and will probably be reinterpreted by the next generation. Yet, either as a guardian of a hoard or an opponent at a wizard tournament, the dragon will live ever after.

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