

Mythmoot VI: Dragons!

Abstracts for Sunday, June 30, 2019

Academic Presentations (9:00 – 10:30 am)

Main Room

The Quest for the Kosher Dragon: Looking for the Jewish in Tolkien – *Arthur Harrow*

As a Jewish reader of fantasy literature, it can sometimes be a little frustrating when allegory and religious references pop up and they are either from Christian literature or are Christian interpretations of Jewish literature. Knowing that Tolkien was a trained scholar who was not only Catholic but would have been aware of Jewish scholarly work, I set myself the quest of finding a religious reference or allegory that not only spoke to me as a Jew but also is consistent with Tolkien's background and education. I wanted to find something in the works of Tolkien that as a Jewish reader I can identify with. And I wanted to find this entirely within the text of the published works (*The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of The Rings*) without having to try to divine authorial intent. In the course of this search, I have looked at possible Jewish references that would be horrifyingly offensive; possible Jewish references that are positive but are definitely from the non-Jewish perspective, and finally something that is both positive, Jewish, and most importantly consistent with the Jewish point of view. And it was unexpected, counterintuitive, and very gratifying. One might even say eucatastrophic. Please join me on this epic journey.

Dr. Harrow is a graduate of Rice University and the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas; he practices Internal Medicine in Baltimore, where he is on faculty at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. He has been reading "speculative literature" since the early 1960's and is proud to be able to list on his CV "Supervillain, retired."

How to Define Your Dragon – *Nathaniel Goldberg & Elizabeth Anne Teaff*

"Dragons are not noted for shy, bashful behavior, which is why the [Medieval French] *guivre* is so unusual example," remarks Karl Shuker in *Dragons: A Natural History* (16). What is a usual example of a dragon, and how many are unusual? Images of dragons appear in classic literature and art from Africa, East and South Asia, North and South America, and Europe. Dragons also feature in more contemporary writings of Tolkien, Lewis, Le Guin, and Martin. Dragon depictions differ wildly across place and time. Dragons can be symbols of wisdom or fear. They can exist on top of the highest mountains or in the ocean's darkest depths. Sometimes dragons have wings and can fly; other times they don't and can't. In some traditions, dragons breath fire and loathe water. In others—like the Medieval French tradition of the *guivre*—they swim. What do all these

depictions have in common? How can we define your (and the rest of our) dragon?

Our paper has two parts. First, we sample dragon depictions in classic and contemporary texts and visual representations. Second, we distill from those necessary and sufficient conditions of counting as a depiction of a dragon. This leads to the startling conclusion that, other than those common to animals generally, there are no characteristics common to all dragons. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would put it, the concept of a dragon is a “cluster.” As we explain, that is because how to define your “dragon” says more about your lived experiences than it does about the very idea of a dragon.

Nathaniel Goldberg is Professor of Philosophy at Washington and Lee University. He is the author of *Kantian Conceptual Geography* (Oxford University Press 2015) and with Chris Gavalier *Superhero Thought Experiments* (University of Iowa Press 2019). He likes cats. Elizabeth Anne Teaff is Associate Professor and Head of Library Access Services at Washington and Lee University. She likes spiders and cats.

Dragons as Portals in Modern Fantasy – Katherine Sas

In the Syfy television show *The Magicians*, adapted from Lev Grossman’s book trilogy of the same name, postgraduate researcher and Draconologist Poppy Kline explains that, “[Dragons] are gatekeepers, you know? They don’t just make portals. They are portals.” In the world of the *Magicians*, this role is taken literally, with dragons not only possessing the ability to open doors to other worlds but acting as portals themselves: the souls of those they eat are transported to the Underworld. This ability might seem a new and unique twist on the typical mythology of dragons in the western fantasy tradition, but closer examination indicates that it is instead a manifestation of an already-present and recurring motif in modern fantasy. While the dragons of *The Magicians* may serve as a physical gateway to the Underworld, dragons are often used as portals in a more abstract sense. Metaphorically, modern dragons may act as gateways to maturation and self-discovery, new worlds or states of being, and even for the pleasures of reading. This talk will examine the theme of “dragons as portals” — both literally and figuratively — in modern works of fantasy. Neil Gaiman, in a notable paraphrasing of G.K. Chesterton, asserted that fairy tales show us not that dragons “exist” but that they “can be beaten”. This paper will take the theories of Gaiman, Chesterton, and others into account in considering the significance of dragons in the fantasy tradition. In addition to *The Magicians*, specific examples will be drawn from the works of influential fantasy authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Ursula Le Guin; popular series such as George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as well as its HBO adaptation *Game of Thrones*, *Doctor Who*, and *Harry Potter*; and lesser-known works such as Catherine Valente’s *Fairyland* series.

Kat works at the University of Pennsylvania and volunteers for Signum University’s M.A. program, of which she is an alumnus. She blogs about speculative literature, TV, and film at ravingsanity.wordpress.com, co-hosts the podcast Kat and Curt’s TV Re-View, and co-leads the Mythgard Movie Club.

Breakout Room 1

Magic, Dragons, & Great Britain: Napoleon's Worst Nightmare – *Emily Austin*

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell by Susanna Clarke and *His Majesty's Dragon* by Naomi Novik feature the same historical location and moment—England around the time of the Napoleonic Wars. However, each author remixes that basic setting with an element of the fantastic and a unique writing style. Clarke reimagines England of the nineteenth century as a place where long-suppressed magic is resurging. Novik introduces a speculative component in the form of intelligent dragons, whose presence adds new dimensions to the war strategy and new challenges for society.

Clarke's tale, while frequently whimsical, is filled with mystery and hints of fay darkness. The struggle against Napoleon is important to the narrative, but used primarily as a situation in which the magicians Strange and Norrell may develop theories and spells, and squabble with one another, while fairies and ancient kings vie for power on a larger scale. Novik's story, by contrast, is more serious and martial, but also more intimate and character-driven. Captain William Laurence and the dragon Temeraire join with other dragons and their crews to affect the course of the war, but the real focus of Novik's novel is the deep and emotional bond of friendship the two form in the process.

My paper will compare and contrast these two texts in terms of style and theme. Though Clarke and Novik write very differently, both root their stories in historical details which create an air of authenticity. The two also share several themes, from assumptions and expectations surrounding gender, to other issues of prejudice and discrimination that twenty-first century readers may find quite relevant. With such a mix of history, speculation, and contemporary applicability, it is small wonder both of these works have earned a place of recognition in circles of contemporary fantasy.

Emily Austin is a visual artist and a student in the Signum MA program, studying Tolkien's writings along with his visual art. She lives in northern Indiana with her husband Ryan, where she happily paints, reads, watches British dramas, and attempts to keep houseplants alive.

Consideration of Divinity and the Transcendent in and through Sanderson's Cosmere – *Kevin Hensler*

In the last few years, the new fantasy series, or perhaps super-series, which has gripped me most is that of Brandon Sanderson's Cosmere. The Cosmere is the setting of Brandon Sanderson's most famous independent works (i.e. unrelated to the works of other authors), especially the Mistborn and Stormlight Archive series. It straddles the genres of sci-fi and fantasy, being set in a dwarf galaxy or large star cluster across a

number of different planets, the technologies of most of which so far do not, however, go beyond that equivalent of earth in the late medieval or early modern, though Sanderson apparently has ambitions explore greater technological development in later series.

Each of the individual planets within the Cosmere is set up by Brandon Sanderson as a distinct fantasy setting with their own distinct and elegant magic systems to go along with the rich cultures and societies he creates. Sanderson is a master world builder, and one of his principle concerns is developing the religious traditions of each of these worlds, but behind each of these lie real beings of immense power and transcendence, effective deities known as “Shards of Adonalsium”, whose power is the source of the various magic systems in the Cosmere. Both the religions in the Cosmere and the apparently “true” religion of the Shards are incredible thought experiments into the question of what we really mean when we think about divinity and the transcendent. In a paper I hope to present at Mythmoot 6, I would like to explore Sanderson’s concepts of divinity and the transcendent and see how they map on to those of other authors and of religious traditions in our world.

Kevin Hensler is a doctoral student in Religion at Temple University who has presented at a number of Mythgard events in the past.

Breakout Room 2

Repulsed With Heavy Losses: A (very) short introduction to the Finnish language (and why it is so challenging to learn as an adult) – Peter Rybski

"I made a wild assault on the stronghold of the original language and was repulsed ... with heavy losses." – JRRT on the Finnish language.

Finnish is a complex language, spoken as a mother tongue today by only about five million people. As a non Indo-European language, it bears little resemblance to the languages of nearby Russia and Sweden but has not been eclipsed by these, either. In a short presentation, I intend to take a look at the fascinating Finnish language. First, I will discuss its place in the family of languages, from its earliest days through how it came to eclipse Swedish and become the national language of Finland. I will then give an overview of Finnish pronunciation and take a necessarily cursory look at its grammar (including the extensive use of noun cases). Then, I will look at some practical examples- from the Kalavala, the Finnish translation of The Hobbit, and Lord of the Rings Online.

During the past two Mythmoots I've fielded many questions about the Finnish language, and hope to provide a quick overview to all those who are interested in it. 20 minutes is a rather short time for such a complex subject. If there is enough interest, I might be able to do it as a workshop, similar to what Marc Okrand did last year.

Peter Rybski. Pete is an U.S. Naval Officer and Engineer with an interest in Tolkien, old books,

and languages. He currently works at the U.S. Embassy in Finland, an assignment for which he had to learn the Finnish language.

Who is Wagner's Siegfried Really? – Timothy “Timdalf” Fisher

[Presentation Handout](#)

Since *Dragons* is the theme of the Conference -- I would like to examine who the greatest Dragon killer of myth and a major character in Wagner's Ring Cycle really is if given a close reading of the Wagnerian verbal and musical texts.

This is a significant question.

First, because of the great importance of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* of dramas in 19th and 20th culture -- both mythopoetically and generally speaking. Especially for the leading Inkling, CS Lewis. The Cycle is the only serious rival or counterpart to Tolkien's Ring epic.

Secondly, because Siegfried as the main hero of the Norse, and Teutonic Great Myth of his life (the other great mythic hero in the West being King Arthur) and as presented in Wagner is much mischaracterized as a loud and violent bully -- a blond beast. I will show how wrong this misconception is, with 3 examples in text and music, taken from the 3rd drama of Wagner's Cycle of which he is the central and eponymous character. I will thus show he is not a simple obvious character, but complex and presented with great subtlety by the composer.

This talk forms the second of a triptych of the 3 major Wagner Ring characters: Brünnhilde, Siegfried and Wotan. All of whom are generally superficially mischaracterized due to a lack of close reading of the musical and verbal texts.