

## DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN ENGLISH AND POLISH DRAGON LEGENDS

*THE DRAGON OF WANTLEY AND THE WAWEL DRAGON**Marina CHIRNIȚCAIA**Catedra Filologie Engleză*

În articolul dat se analizează etimologia cuvântului „dragon”, imaginea și simbolul dragonului în istoria și folclorul popular. Sunt prezentate similitudinile și deosebirile dintre legenda engleză „Dragonul din Wantley” și legenda poloneză „Dragonul din Wawel”.

People have been asking themselves questions about what dragons are for thousands of years and have not had any definitive answer yet. Maybe there is no “final” answer to the questions - maybe dragons are both part of our collective history as a figment of our imaginations and real monsters in the real world [1].

Myth and history play host to a variety of dragons [2]. In order to study dragon history archaeologists have often looked for clues in ancient folklore. It begins with all the stories about Creation, the dragons that caused the creation of Earth itself. Dragons have represented **chaos**, and lack of any kind of order”.

The dragon is the great-great-grandfather of all monsters before the daemon, the vampire, the werewolf and the giant. “In the beginning, when all was dark and formless, two primal beings came into existence. One was male, the spirit of fresh water and the void, the other was female the spirit of salt water and chaos, and it was a Dragon”. “It was composed of elements of dangerous creatures yet to come: it possessed the jaws of a crocodile, the teeth of a lion, the wings of a bat, the legs of a lizard, the talons of an eagle, the body of a python, the horns of a bull. The Dragon's name was Tiamat” [3].

The dragon’s image has crawled across cave paintings 25,000 years old, dwarfing mammoths. It has slithered across Chinese rock art in Shanxi province 8000 years before Christ. It haunted the Sumerians and the Babylonians, was worshipped by the Aztecs and feared by the Celts. In the east a glittering rain god, in the west a flame spewing, maiden devouring monster. It is found in every culture on earth. The immortal dragon has its fangs and claws deep in the psyche of mankind. And it is still seen today [4].

As there is not a set definition of “dragon”, there is no clear historical sameness [1] so the dragon comes in a dazzling array of forms. The best known in the West is the *true dragon*, the *heraldic dragon* or *fire Drake*. This is the classic dragon: a gigantic reptile, with vast bat like wings and four legs, armed with razor teeth and claws, a head with horns or a crest, and a mighty spined tail, its main weapon was the white-hot jets of flame it gouted at its victims. These monsters were considered to be the most magical of beasts with powers such as shape-shifting, self-regeneration, and mind reading attributed to them. They were covered in impenetrable scales and had only one vulnerable spot [5].

In European folklore, a **dragon** is a serpentine legendary creature. The Latin word *draco*, as in constellation Draco, comes directly from Greek *δράκων*, (*drákōn*, *gazer*). The word for dragon in Germanic mythology and its descendants is *worm* (Old English: *wyrm*, Old High German: *wurm*, Old Norse: *ormr*), meaning snake or serpent. In Old English *wyrm* means “serpent”, *draca* means “dragon”. Finnish *lohikäärme* means directly “salmon-snake”, but the word *lohi-* was originally *louhi-* meaning crags or rocks, a “mountain snake”. Though a winged creature, the dragon is generally to be found in its underground lair, a cave that identifies it as an ancient creature of earth. Likely, the dragons of European and Mid Eastern mythology stem from the cult of snakes found in religions throughout the world.

English “dragon” derives from Greek *dracon*, “serpent, dragon”; the Greek word derives from Indo-European *\*derk-*, “to see”, and may originally have meant something like “monster with the evil eye.”

Though the Latin is *draco*, *draconis*, the word *dragon* comes from the Old Norse *draugr*, which literally means a spirit who guards the burial mound of a king. How this image of a vengeful guardian spirit is related to a fire-breathing serpent is unclear. Many others assume the word *dragon* comes from the ancient Greek verb *derkesthai*, meaning “to see”, referring to the dragon's legendarily keen eyesight. In any case, the image of a dragon as a serpent-like creature was already standard at least by the 8th century when *Beowulf* was written down. Although today we associate dragons almost universally with fire, in medieval legend the creatures were often associated with water, guarding springs or living near or under water.

Dragons of Slavic mythology hold mixed temperaments towards humans. In Bulgarian, Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian and Serbian lore, a dragon, or “змеј” (Bulgarian), *zmey* (Russian), *smok* (Belarusian and Polish) *zmiy* (Ukrainian), *змај/zmaj* (Serbian) is generally an evil, four-legged beast with few if any redeeming qualities [6].

The European dragons were the major characters in stories [3]. Every time there was a natural disaster, dragons and their mischief were blamed. For instance, a river might overflow and flood a town after a huge rainfall. It was always assumed that far upstream there must be a Dragon, playing and smashing the water with his tail. Bad weather might cause a famine. So a dragon's mischief was accepted as the reason for the people's starvation. A dragon was thought to be eating the livestock with its huge appetite, or scorching the land with its fiery breath, or poisoning the wells [7].

Most often the legends show that the inhabitants of small towns had a pecking order for sacrificial feeding of dragons. A town would first feed them all of their livestock, and then start with the young maidens [3].

Dragons often laid waste to vast areas and put whole communities under siege. They were also attributed magical powers such as invisibility and self healing and the true dragon was almost impossible to kill as it his vulnerable spot was usually well hidden. This was the ultimate challenge for a folk hero or knight [4]. Knights who slayed a dragon were heroes, and any who managed to stay alive were treated like royalty. They were usually rewarded with feasts and riches [3].

According to Jacqueline Simpson, dragon stories have served three functions: to provide the hero with a worthy opponent, to explain a coat of arms or a crest with a dramatic story, and to offer explanations of material objects, place name and topographical features [8, p.135].

There is probably no more entertaining dragon tale in Britain than the ballad of *the Dragon of Wantley* [8, p.139-142] which first appeared in the 1699 edition of *Wit and Mirth: Or, Pills to Purge Melancholy* and was reprinted by Thomas Percy in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765. The legends seems absolutely true as “...seeing how many parallels the poem has with traditional tales elsewhere, it is obvious that whoever wrote it had a sound knowledge of dragon legends and did not invent his plot out of the blue; more likely there already was a legend either at Wantley or nearby, which a clever writer versified...” [8, p.135-136].

The most famous Polish dragon is the Wawel Dragon or *Smok Wawelski*, the Dragon of Wawel Hill. It supposedly terrorized ancient Kraków and lived in caves on the Vistula river bank below the Wawel castle [9].

Below you can see the table, comparing the two legends according to some basic criteria.

Table

	<i>The Dragon of Wantley</i> (The English legend)	<i>The Wawel Dragon</i> (The polish legend)
<i>Attributes of the dragon</i>	It was with seven heads, and fourteen eyes, two furious wings, each one upon each shoulder, with a sting in his tail, as long as a flail, long claws, and in his jaws four and forty teeth of iron, a hide as tough as any buff, which did him round environ. It is nearly of the size of the Trojan horse that held seventy men in his belly. From his nose arose a smoke.	An immense creature which body was covered with green and yellow scales, and a row of sharp thorns protruded from its back. From his paws, which in size resembled the trunks of young oak trees, grew out mighty crooked claws. Its mouth was full of huge fangs and the dragon was spitting fire and smoke. .
<i>Emergence of the dragon</i>	Unclear. Some say it was a witch. The others say it was or a devil.	Unclear. Some say the river current had brought it along; the others say the dragon has emerged from the very core of the earth.
<i>Activities of the dragon</i>	He stole and ate all sorts of cattle, three children, the trees, forests, houses, churches.	The dragon stole and ate people's animals, villagers.
<i>Habitat of the dragon</i>	In Yorkshire, near fair Rotherdam, on the hill's edge	Cave at the foot of the Wawel Hill in Krakow
<i>Alarm and looking for the hero</i>	Men, women, girls and boys heard about a strong knight, so they came to his lodging, sighing and sobbing and begged the man to slay the dragon.	An apprentice to one of the basket-makers discovered the cave and the news about the dragon spread quickly all over the area and reached the king Krak, who had a meeting with his advisors and knights. The following day three courageous knights went to dragon's dwelling but were not back. The people were warned about the danger and a reward was

		offered for killing the creature. As no one could cope with the dragon, Krak decided to fight it himself. Meanwhile, a youngster insisted on seeing him.
<i>Status and the attributes of the hero</i>	The hero was a furious knight More of More-Hall.	Young humble-looking fair-haired shoemaker, who invented a way to slay the dragon.
<i>Means and ways of killing the dragon</i>	More of More-Hall went to Sheffield to get new armour with sharp and strong spikes of steel all about, both behind and before, arms, legs, and all over, some five or six inches. He scared the people and the animals around in his look, drank six pots of ale and a quart of aqua-vitae. The knight crept down into a well, where the dragon used to drink from. When the creature came to the well, the man rose up and cried, boh, and kicked it in the mouth. The dragon cried and turned six times together, sobbing and tearing, cursing and swearing. Finally he shook his head, trembled and quaked, laid down and cried, first on one knee, then tumbled on the back, groaned, kicked and died.	The shoemaker killed a sheep, took off his skin, filled it with mixture of sulphur and tar and then nicely sewed the skin back again. When dusk had fallen, he went near the dragon's cave and put the stuffed lamb in front of it. In the morning the dragon saw the sheep, devoured it, and the sulphur which was in it started burning his insides like fire so in order to quench this painful thirst, it had gone to the river Vistula and drunk so much water that it had loudly burst and died.
<i>Reward for killing the dragon</i>	All the goods and a lady.	Marrying the pretty princess and receiving a half of the King's realm.

As it can be seen from the table, the English and the Polish legends are similar and represent the most important stages of encountering a problem, looking for the solution and the ways of overcoming the situation created. Both the dragons in the legend are represented as huge and terrible monsters, which spit fire and have thorns over their bodies.

It is not clear how the dragons appeared at those places. In the English legend there are more magical explanations (it was a witch, or a devil), while in the Polish one the guesses are more down-to-earth (it was brought down by the river, or it appeared from the earth). Both the dragons live away from the people though not very far. One lives on the hill, the other one in a cave, which proves the idea that dragons in both cultures were thought to be creatures of earth.

In the *The Dragon of Wantley* the villagers knew the person they could address to protect them, it was a furious knight and they implored him to save them, while in *The Wawel Dragon* the hero was not known and it was necessary to find a brave man to fight it<sup>4</sup>. And it turned out to be a youngster from the commons. In both legends we can see that the heroes realizing that they couldn't fight the dragon physically, have gone apart from the traditional ways of killing the beast and chose to use their wit, which was the best solution.

The ways of dealing with the creature are a little different. In the *The Dragon of Wantley* the hero meets the beast face to face, scaring him and beating, while in *The Wawel Dragon* the hero doesn't have any direct contact with it. So, in the first legend the dragon sees his enemy and dies because of hitting, while in the second one it has an indirect contact with the hero through the sheep full of sulphur and bursts because of drinking too much water to quench his thirst. Both the heroes get the reward for saving the people and the community. The moral of the legends is that it is not the strength that always wins, but the wit.

Legends about dragons may vary from culture to culture, from nation to nation. Concerning the English dragon legend *The Dragon of Wantley* and the Polish dragon legend *The Wawel Dragon*, both similarities and differences can be found and explained, bearing in mind cultural differences and background of the folklore of these two countries. However, no one explanation is likely to hold the key to the riddle of the dragon itself. Dragon lore is a rich tapestry with many finely woven strands, which has always been with us throughout recorded history and back into the pre-historic times and it is likely to remain no matter what changes might come.

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