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Abstract

Considers the influence of some of Tolkien’s earliest childhood reading, the Andrew Lang fairy books, and the opinions he expressed about these books in “On Fairy-stories.” Examines the series for possible influences on Tolkien’s fiction in its portrayal of fairy queens, dragons, and other fantasy tropes.

Additional Keywords

Lang, Andrew—as collector of fairy stories; Lang, Andrew. The color fairy books; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of Andrew Lang; Tolkien, J.R.R. “On Fairy-stories”

TOLKIEN AS A CHILD OF *THE GREEN FAIRY BOOK*

RUTH BERGDAN

IN HIS ESSAY "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien identified himself as one of Andrew Lang's intended audience (39)—he was born in 1892, in the same year as *The Green Fairy Book*, the third in Lang's series of 12 "color" anthologies of fairy tales. In part, this reference to Lang was not much more than a courtesy, for the essay originated as the "Andrew Lang Lecture." (It was given at the University of Saint Andrews in March 1939, when he had already begun work on *The Lord of the Rings*.) Tolkien disliked much in Lang's work, and was by no means a follower of Lang, especially in 1939, when he was trying to write *The Lord of the Rings* as a story for adults, and so particularly resented the assumption that fairy tales were necessarily children's literature.

But in part the reference was a genuine tribute, not just a courtesy, for although Tolkien might rebel against much of what he found in Lang, he also found much to admire and use. Being one of the *Green* children was an important part of his growth as a writer. His use of Lang's anthologies in "On Fairy-Stories" was thorough-going, citing not only Lang's *Green* preface, but also the *Blue*, *Violet*, and *Lilac* prefaces, and discussing in some detail Lang's choice of contents for the *Blue* and *Lilac* volumes; he also commented on *The Chronicles of Pantouflia*, two of Lang's own fairy tales. Lang was thus for Tolkien both an important example to follow—and to defy.

He blamed Lang for not taking his own interest in fairy tales seriously, and for feeling compelled to apologize for it, as something not appropriate for modern adults to like, except as a matter of scholarship, and as something not to be taken seriously, but available to modern writers only as a vehicle for wit and satire (as in the stories of *Pantouflia*). For Tolkien, the satiric side of Lang's *Pantouflia* stories—and of the French¹ models Lang drew on—was detrimental. He admired the joyous moment in *Prince Prigio* when the dead knights come to life, but complained that "the main bulk of the story [...] is in general more frivolous, having the half-mocking smile of the courtly, sophisticated *Conte*

¹ Tolkien disliked things that were French, in any case, a cultural bias he could not explain, except so far as it was a reaction to the mocking attitude he complained of in the *Contes*. He disliked the French language, as he wrote to Deborah Webster (*Letters* 288), and he specifically disliked French fairy-stories, as he mentioned in a letter to Forrest J. Ackerman (*Letter* 274).

[tale]" ("On Fairy-Stories" [OFS] 69). And it was these *Contes* that dominated Lang's first color collections and remained a large proportion of their contents throughout the series.

The French fairy tales that Lang chose were, at first, not only a large proportion of the total, but were largely chosen from the literary fairy tales² of the eighteenth century, not from "folk" tales. These literary fairy tales did not try to record folktales directly (as the Grimm Brothers tried to do in the early nineteenth century), nor did they take the emotions that could be roused by a "wonder tale" seriously, as the Romantics of the early nineteenth century did (and as their descendants did—such writers as George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde, or Lang himself in some moods—and as Tolkien intended to do). Rather, they took fairy tales as a satiric form, well adapted to social criticism and instruction. This emphasis, although little to Tolkien's taste, was popular in its time, and many of the stories that resulted have remained popular ever since. Translations and re-tellings keep coming out of the fairy tales of Charles Perrault (e.g., "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," "Little Red Riding Hood"³), Mme. D'Aulnoy (e.g., "The White Cat"), Mme. de Beaumont or Mme. de Villeneuve (who both wrote versions of "Beauty and the Beast").

Tolkien—perhaps a little grudgingly—said that it was a just choice "in some ways" (OFS 11) for Lang to have selected so many French fairy tales for *The Blue Fairy Book* (the first of the color collections). They did not quite make up a majority of the contents, but they had a plurality. Of the 37 stories, 15 were French, including all the French authors and stories mentioned above. There were also six Grimms, four Scandinavian tales, three from the *Arabian Nights*, and one Arabian story recorded by a modern collector, three English, two Scottish, two with no sources mentioned, and one Greek myth, the story of Perseus, the only story in the book retold by Lang himself. (Although Lang edited the series, most of the translating and re-telling was done by his wife and other writers.)

² A recent modern anthology of the eighteenth-century French fairy tale (with stories dating from 1690-1790) is *Beauties, Beasts, and Enchantment, Classic French Fairy Tales*, translated and edited by Jack Zipes.

³ Lang didn't try to key the colors of the stories to the colors of the volumes. The first of them, the *Blue*, besides "Little Red Riding Hood," had such stories as "Felicia and the Pot of Pinks," "The Yellow Dwarf," "The Black Bull of Norway," and "The Red Etin," with only "Blue Beard" to match with the title. The *Green* had "The Blue Bird," and the *Yellow* had "The Little Green Frog," "Alphege, or the Green Monkey," and "The Blue Mountains"; the only approximation to a yellow story in the *Yellow* volume was "The Golden Crab," although there were many "Gold" stories in the series as a whole. The *Violet*, however, was at least dedicated to Violet Meyers. The complete series of colors was *Blue* (1889), *Red* (1890), *Green* (1892), *Yellow* (1894), *Pink* (1897), *Grey* (1900), *Violet* (1901) *Crimson* (1903), *Brown* (1904), *Orange* (1906), *Olive* (1907), and *Lilac* (1910).

In the *Green*, the third of the series, Lang was still drawing a good deal from the French. Of the 43 stories, the largest single group was German (20 tales, 16 of them from the Grimms, with another, Ludwig Bechstein's "The Three Dogs," incorrectly identified as from the Grimms). The German tales were probably more to Tolkien's taste. Fourteen more were from the French language, including nine from the eighteenth century ("The Blue Bird" by d'Aulnoy, four by the Comte de Caylus, one by Archbishop Fénelon, and three anonymous). Of the other five, three were folktales recorded by French folklorist Paul Sébillot, and two were by the Belgian Charles Deulin; and these five were similar to the other French tales in their comic tone.

In the later volumes, Lang used fewer stories from the French. In the *Violet* (1901), he had none, except for a version from the French of Jules Brun and Leo Bachelin of a Romanian story, "The Girl Who Pretended to Be a Boy." In the *Lilac* (1910, the last of the series), eight of the 33 stories were French. But by then he was aiming at a much wider sampling of cultures, and none of the eight was a literary story composed by an individual author: three were folktales recorded by Sébillot, and five were Breton folktales. The other stories included Afghan, Swahili, Indian, Australian, and South Seas tales. (The *Green* collection, in contrast, had only one non-European tale, from China.) Indeed, Lang's sample had become so wide that Tolkien complained (OFS 15) that some of the stories were not properly fairy tales at all. "The Monkey's Heart," said Tolkien, was a Beast-fable, like *The Wind in the Willows*, or most of Beatrix Potter's stories, and not a fairy-story. This kind of distinction, however, is difficult to make and to maintain. Although Tolkien likened *The Wind in the Willows* to "The Monkey's Heart," as a Beast-fable and therefore not a fairy-story, he also contrasted it with the dream-structure of the *Alice* books, thus by implication counting it as a fairy-story in comparison to a dream-vision (OFS 75).

In spite of his dislike for Lang's humor and Lang's fondness for a kind of story that seemed to Tolkien "superficial, even frivolous" (OFS 69n37), Tolkien was moved by "the deeper spirit of the romantic Lang" underlying the comic material. And in spite of his irritation at Lang's inability to explain *why* a modern adult such as Lang or Tolkien should be so strongly drawn to material that Lang considered more suitable for children and primitives, the example of Lang's devotion to the study of the material was a powerful one, showing that a scholar could devote much of a career to the study of fairy tales and the creation of original fairy tales, and that British audiences would accept the results as worth reading.

The fairy tales that Lang chose, in turn, gave Tolkien examples of the kinds of magic and wonder he would want for his own work, helping to shape his tastes in fantasy. As a scholar, Tolkien was soon able to go directly to Lang's sources, and to other sources that Lang doesn't seem to have studied (Lang was

more interested in Greek mythology than in Germanic). The fairy tale elements that Tolkien used in his work were greatly influenced by material that Tolkien found outside of Lang, or found in more concentration outside of Lang. Scandinavian trolls and Germanic dwarves could be found in Lang's collections, but Tolkien as a child would also have had access to collections of Scandinavian and German fairy tales; and as he grew up he began to examine such sources in greater depth. Mythological systems were also an important influence. His elves and wizards owe much to ancient goddesses, gods, and angels. But the fairy tale influences are obviously important, as well.

Galadriel, in *The Lord of the Rings*, and such figures as Lúthien and Melian in *The Silmarillion*, in their power, beauty, and mystery, and their benevolence and wisdom in giving the gifts which will be most useful, resemble the good fairies who populate fairy tales—and French fairy tales, especially. In the French and German versions of "Cinderella," for example, it is the French version that uses a fairy godmother to give Cinderella magical assistance; the Grimm Brothers' version uses a magical hazel tree and white dove.⁴ In Lang, Tolkien would have met many examples of good fairies giving gifts and counsel, such as the Queen of the Woods (in "Felicia and the Pot of Pinks," by d'Aulnoy, in *Blue*), Paridamie (in "Rosanella," by de Caylus, in *Green*), the Fairy of the Meadows (in "Sylvain and Jocosa," de Caylus, in *Green*), or Douceline (in "The Golden Branch," by d'Aulnoy, in *Red*). Galadriel, especially, is like these good fairies in her magical, nurturing assistance to young heroes. Lúthien the Elf and Melian the Valar, wooed by Man and Elf, more closely resemble the Fairy Queens wooed by mortal knights in medieval romances. But in their roles of counselors and gift-givers they, too, are like Galadriel, resembling the fairy godmothers of fairy tales.

The fairy tales Lang collected, and especially the French tales, also show several examples of magic rings, including rings of invisibility. Fénelon's "The Enchanted Ring" foreshadows not only Bilbo's ring of invisibility, but also Frodo's discovery that it is too powerful to use safely. Rosimond gives it back to the Fairy in the woods, saying, "Oh! how dangerous it is to have more power than the rest of the world! Take back your ring" (*Green* 144). There is also a ring of invisibility (to help the prince win the princess) in another French tale, "Prince Narcissus and the Princess Potentilla" (*Green*), given to the prince by the good fairy Melinette. An Estonian story, "The Dragon of the North" (*Yellow*) presents yet another ring of invisibility too powerful to be kept, King Solomon's magic ring. The prince is taught how to use it by a wise magician, who is able to read

⁴ A helpful modern edition is *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, translated by Margaret Hunt, revised by James Stern.

the secret writing engraved on the ring (as Gandalf does with Bilbo's ring), and in the end the prince gives it back to the witch-maiden after he has used it to help him slay the dragon.

The oldest ring of invisibility known is the Ring of Gyges, a classical legend told by Plato (in *The Republic*) and also by Cicero ("De Officiis"). (Resemblances between Gyges' ring and the One Ring are discussed in a short article by Robert E. Morse, "Rings of Power in Plato and Tolkien"). Such rings are common in medieval romance, as well as in many legends and fairy tales. Lang included one such romance as a fairy tale in the last of the "color" series, "The Lady of the Fountain" (in *Lilac*, 1910), the story of Owain from the *Mabinogion*. (Essentially the same story is told also in *Yvain*, by Chrétien de Troyes.) By the time the *Lilac* volume appeared Tolkien was 18, and more likely to be making his acquaintance with medieval romances and the Classics directly, rather than through re-tellings, but his first acquaintance with magic rings of invisibility was more likely to have come in childhood through Lang's *Green Fairy Book*.

Dragons, the fairy-tale element most strongly associated with Tolkien, appear in Lang's collections, and, paradoxically, they play both a small and a large role there. Dragons had not shown up much in nineteenth-century fantasy. Near the end of the century, inspired by the discovery of dinosaurs, artists began to put dragons into their illustrations, but it was not until the very end of the century, with the publication of Kenneth Grahame's "The Reluctant Dragon" (1898) and E. Nesbit's *The Book of Dragons* (serialized in the *Strand*, 1899; in book form, 1900), and, in America, with the Purple Dragon of L. Frank Baum's *A New Wonderland* (1900), that dragons became prominent again in stories.⁵

When Lang began bringing out his color fairy books in 1889, dragons were still rare in writing. Lewis Carroll might mention a dragon in a single sentence of *A Tangled Tale* (6)—and the illustrator, A. B. Frost, might seize on the single sentence for a delightful full-page illustration ("Balbus and his mother-in-law attempting to convince the dragon" 5). Rarely, a writer of fairy tales such as Henry Morley might include dragons among several menaces for his hero to overcome ("The Cunning of Sissoo," in *The Chicken Market and Other Fairy Tales*). But far more often, Victorian fantasists who wanted monsters either invented their own (such as George MacDonald's patchwork beasts in *The Princess and Curdie* or Lewis Carroll's Jabberwock and Snark—although Tenniel drew the Jabberwock to look like a sort of dragon), or made use of less familiar mythical beasts (such as the Gryphon/Griffin of Carroll and Frank R. Stockton). Lang

⁵ This difference between artists and authors was noted by Stephen Prickett, in his *Victorian Fantasy*. I discussed further examples and possible causes in "Victorian Dragons, the Reluctant Brood," and further discussed the role of Tolkien and Lewis in making dragons a major element in modern fantasy, in "Dragons for Tolkien and Lewis."

himself shied away from dragons in his own fairy tales. In *Prince Prigio* (1889), the fight between the Remora and the Firedrake could have been a fight between an ice-dragon and a fire-dragon, for the glacial Remora is described as a giant snake, a legless, crawling creature that winds its coils around its prey to kill, while “drake” is etymologically the same as “dragon,” but Lang did not choose to apply the word “dragon” to either one, and his Firedrake sounds more bull-like, having both hoofs and horns. Even after the turn of the century (in *Tales of a Fairy Court*, 1906), Lang introduced a dragon only briefly, as one of the disguises of “The Magician Who Wanted More.”

In re-telling folktales Lang at first was cautious in including dragons, but he grew more confident as he went on. The *Blue* dragons were minor characters three French stories, d’Aulnoy’s “The Story of Pretty Goldilocks,” “The Yellow Dwarf,” and “The White Cat” (and H. J. Ford included the dragons in his illustrations to the first two); Lang did not choose to identify the “sea creature” Perseus slew as a dragon, in “The Terrible Head” (the only one of the stories in the volume re-told by Lang himself).

In the *Red* collection (1890), dragons were minor characters in d’Aulnoy’s “The Princess Mayblossom,” and in a Romanian tale, “The Enchanted Pig.” And there was one major dragon, from another non-French source, setting Tolkien’s notion of what a dragon ought to be for good and all, in “The Story of Sigurd,” Lang’s own abridgement of William Morris’s translation of *The Volsunga Saga*. The influence of Norse saga on Tolkien has been—rightly—much studied. Tolkien found Norse sagas much more to his taste than French *contes*. But he probably met Fáfir first not as part of a saga, but as a *Red* fairy tale. “The world that contained even the imagination of Fáfir was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril,” said Tolkien (OFS 41), and Sigurd’s slaying of the dragon by stabbing up at him from under the cliff as the dragon goes to the river became Tolkien’s model for Túrin’s slaying of Glaurung in *The Silmarillion*.

In the *Green* collection, in the year of Tolkien’s birth, Lang felt confident enough over his use of “frightful monsters” to defend them in the preface, saying that grown-ups should not worry that the story might be too frightening for children: “[T]hey do not frighten you now, because that kind of monster is no longer going about the world, whatever he may have done long, long ago. He has been turned into stone, and you may see his remains in the museum” (x). Tolkien did not like identifications of dragons with dinosaurs as a defense of dragons; it obscured the real differences between them, he felt, and took away the wonder of the dragon’s other-than-real beauty (OFS 79). But Tolkien gave much the same answer himself to the question of whether fairy-stories were too frightening for children: “The answer: ‘There is certainly no dragon in England today,’ is all that they want to hear” (OFS 41n26); the implication, that there may have been dragons in England in the past, does not make much sense unless he is

expecting the children to think of those museum remains). There was only one story in the *Green* collection with a dragon as a major character, "The Three Dogs,"⁶ but there was another of the one-line dragons giving rise to a full-page illustration in "The Heart of Ice," by de Caylus. Ford's splendid illustration of the Fairy Gorgonzola riding off on her long, spiky, fire-breathing dragon appeared twice in the book, not only as the full-page illustration to the story, but also as the frontispiece to the entire collection. The volumes that followed had a good many dragons as major characters in stories from both French and non-French sources in the text, not just in the illustrations.

Some other elements in Tolkien which are related to elements in Lang's fairy tale collections (although the resemblances are much slighter than in the cases of good fairies, magic rings, and dragons) are goblins, wizards, and shining trees. In the case of goblins, Tolkien probably looked to other fairy tales for examples. There are a few goblins in Lang's collections (for instance, in an Estonian tale, "The Grateful Prince," *Violet*), but not many. Tolkien wrote to Naomi Mitchison that he took his goblins from "tradition [...] especially as it appears in George MacDonald [in *The Princess and the Goblins*]" (*Letters* 178).

Lang had many enchanters (or magicians, or sorcerers, or wizards) in his collections, especially in the French fairy tales, although there were a good many in tales from other lands, as well (such as the Estonian tale, "The Dragon of the North," already described). But the fairy tale enchanters do not seem to have as much power (either as magic-workers or as sizable roles) as Gandalf and Saruman. They are consulted, but they do not go with the heroes on their adventures or put in dramatic re-appearances to rescue them. Tolkien's wizards are closer to Merlin and other wizards in medieval legends and romances than to the wizards in fairy tales.

There are many trees of silver and gold in Lang, and they resemble Tolkien's Telperion and Laurelin, the trees from which grew the fruits that became the moon and the sun of Middle-earth. For example, a tree with leaves of silver and fruit of gold appears in "Little One-Eye, Little Two-Eyes, and Little Three-Eyes" (a Grimm story, included in *Green*); the leaves of the trees underground are sprinkled with silver, gold, and diamonds in "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" (a Belgian version, by Charles Deulin, *Red*; in the Grimms' version, "The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces," the leaves themselves are made of silver, gold, or diamonds); the tree in "The Bones of Djulung" (a South Seas tale, *Lilac*) has an iron trunk, silk leaves, gold flowers, and diamond fruit. Even closer to Telperion and Laurelin than these metal-leaved trees are the trees

⁶ Lang incorrectly identified "The Three Dogs" as a Grimm fairy tale. "Die drei Hunde" was recorded by a younger German folklorist, Ludwig Bechstein, whose *Deutsches Märchenbuch* appeared in 1857.

with apples of gold. The classical example of the golden apples, which Tolkien no doubt knew from original sources, grew in the Garden of the Hesperides of Greek myth. But the Garden of the Hesperides would probably have been known to him even earlier, in childhood, from Lang's version of the story of Perseus, "The Terrible Head" (*Blue*). He would also have found trees with apples of gold in Lang in "The White Snake" (Grimm, *Green*), "The Three Brothers" (Polish, *Yellow*), "The Nine Pea-Hens and the Golden Apples" (Serbian, *Violet*), and "The Death of the Sun-Hero" (Ukrainian, *Yellow*; in this version, the tree is specifically called the Tree of the Sun).

For Tolkien's generation, it was primarily Lang who made such figures and talismans as good fairies, wizards, dragons, goblins, magic trees, and magic rings common knowledge to readers from childhood on. Tolkien quarreled with much of what Lang had to say, but he was, as he described himself, one of the children Lang was addressing—and he listened.

NOTE

An earlier version of this article was accepted for the planned but not so far published Tolkien memorial issue of Ed Meskys' fanzine, *Niekas, Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

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