The role and symbolism of the dragon in vernacular saints' legends, 1200-1500.

Brown, Patricia (1998)

Abstract

This thesis looks at the role and function of the saint's encounter with the monster in vernacular texts, written primarily in the vernacular, between 1200 and 1500. Those connotations accrued by the dragon which are relevant to this thesis are traced from the earliest beginnings. Although by the middle ages the multi-valency of the dragon is reduced to one primary symbolic valency, that of evil and significantly, the evil of paganism, the dragon never loses completely its ancient associations and they help to colour its function within the narrative. The symbolic use of the dragon in vernacular saints' lives is generally consistent, although allowing for different didactic emphases. However, the two legends on which this thesis concentrates are those of St George from Caxton's Golden Legend and St Margaret from the Katherine Group. Each reveals tensions when the dragon's role departs from the familiar hagiographic topos. Firstly, the role of the hagiographic dragon is identified by a comparison with that of the dragon in romance. Allowing for cross-fertilization, this thesis focuses on the significance of the hero's dragon-fight and the saint's dragon encounter to differentiate between the ethos of the romance and hagiographic genres respectively. Tensions are created in the hagiographic text when the romance topos of the dragon-fight is used in conjunction with the hagiographic dragon encounter, as in the legend of St George. Finally, in the legend of St Margaret, the dragon's appearance unbalances and unsettles the perspective of the narrative when its role and function are deployed in the promulgation of virginity.
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