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Dragon-riding: Live and Let Fly

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Abstract: This article examines the dragon rider as a recurring trope within contemporary fantasy fiction and film. While considerable scholarship has focused on dragons in literature, the subject of dragon riders has been neglected, an oversight this article seeks to redress. My research utilises Jonathan D. Evans' application of Validimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale to construct a formula reflecting this narrative pattern. It also draws on human-animal studies, particularly the work of Phillip Armstrong and J. M. Coetzee. Through these theoretical lenses I interrogate the relationship between dragon and rider, exploring how the relationship forms as well as the power dynamic between the participants.

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The tradition of dragon-slaying, despite being thousands of years old in story, is being supplanted in modern adaptations of the medieval fantasy by a different narrative, that of the dragon-rider. The exploits of dragon slayers such as Saint George, Beowulf, and Marduk have attracted the attention of both creative writers and scholars. Ernest Ingersoll's *Dragonlore*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, and Jacqueline Simpson's *British Dragons* are three prominent texts exploring dragons and dragon-slayers.

This research on dragon-slaying is complemented by scholarship focusing on dragons in children's and young adult fiction. As early as the 1970s Bruno Bettelheim discussed the young dragon-slayer in *The Uses of Enchantment*. More recently, John C. Stott interrogates the use of the dragon in children's fiction in his 1990 article '"Will the Real Dragon Please Stand Up?" Convention and Parody in Children's Stories' and Emily Midkiff focuses on the uncanny dragon in her 2014 *Fafnir* article "'Dragons are Tricksy': The Uncanny Dragons of Children's Literature". Despite the continued interest, however, there has been a paradigm shift in contemporary literature and film that requires a new lens of analysis. Warriors no longer do battle with dragons; they now do battle *upon* dragons.

A dragon-rider gains his or her title through a close association with dragons, but more specifically it is riding a dragon, in the same way that a knight would ride a horse, that confers this status. The idea of dragon riding has its origins in early Chinese myth with figures such as Yu and

his companion the *Ying Lung* who would adventure together performing great deeds (Palmer and Xiaomin 67). Outside of Oriental tradition there do not appear to be many direct models of this narrative, although in Classical mythology the Roman Goddess Ceres rode in a chariot pulled by winged snakes (Lippencott 13). From a Germanic/Nordic standpoint there is little that seems to indicate the same level of cooperation. This is understandable as in such traditions dragons are either guardian creatures of hoards—such as the dragon of *Beowulf* (Heaney 155) and this journal's own mascot Fafnir (Morris 98)—or figures of antagonism, like the Midgard Serpent, Jormungand (Mills 245) and the great world destroying force Nidhogg (Taylor and Auden 153). In terms of contemporary English language literary models, the dragon riding tradition appears to have its origins in the 1960s with Anne McCaffrey's novel *Dragonflight* (1968), the first of her *Dragonriders of Pern* series.

The idea of a hero fighting from a dragon's back—popularised by McCaffrey—has become prevalent in modern fiction, both in text and film. This popularity can be seen in various media: Margeret Weis and Tracey Hickman's *Dragonlance* series, particularly *Dragons of Spring Dawning* (1985); Raymond E. Feist's *Riftwar Cycle*, including *Darkness at Sethanon* (1986); the videogames *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) and *Drakengard* (2003); and the children's television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (USA 2005-2008) and *Jane and the Dragon* (Canada and New Zealand, 2005-2006). The aerial nature of a dragon places the rider above mere mortals, setting him or her as a hero apart from the standard convention of a hero upon a horse. While men dominate the dragon-slaying tradition, when it comes to dragon-riders the gender gap is fairly negligible (particularly with protagonists). Bruno Bettelheim's Freudian reading of the young dragon-slayer narrative provides a justification for this.

> The story implies: it's not the Father whose jealousy prevents you from having the Mother all to yourself, it's an evil dragon—what you really have in mind is to slay an evil dragon (Bettleheim 111).

The counterpart narrative for girls, by contrast, typically involves a wicked stepmother or enchantress (Bettelheim 113). Therefore, the Oedipal nature of such dragon-slaying indicates that the traditional positioning limits male and female roles within such narratives, limitations which are removed in the dragon-riding narrative.

Dragon-riding can be indicative of the right to lead or reign, drawing from the associations of dragons and leadership in Imperial Chinese and post-Roman British tradition. In taming a dragon, a hero is acknowledged as having the right to rule. In certain circumstances, depending on the cultural context of the story, this particular right is also interpreted as divinely mandated. Within Chinese tradition the belief that the *long* is a divine animal and that some dragons, particularly *tien lung*, are emissaries of the gods, gives this perception merit. Additionally, since a dragon can be described as power made manifest, by riding a dragon a hero proves his or her strength by being seated above the dragon; rather than besting them in combat he has "broken it into saddle."

In a more problematic interpretation, the dragon ridden in this way can be perceived solely as property or as an extension of the rider. This resonates with the ideas raised by author J. M. Coetzee in his parable *The Lives of Animals*, where humans regard captive animals with contempt, reducing them to slave populations (59). Coetzee's narrative is often cited by human-animal studies theorists, such as Margo DeMello and Philip Armstrong, who critique the anthropocentric depiction of animals. Following this line of thought, the "taming" of a dragon can be read as the wild "other" being controlled and forced into following the rider's cultural customs and norms. As a consequence, the dragon's own beliefs, such as hoarding treasure and considering non-dragons to be

a free meal, are suppressed (which many humans would find a relief). While the hero's status markedly increases through this relationship, the question is: does the dragon's decrease? In such an occurrence does a dragon become little more than an exotic form of horse? The texts that depict a dragon and rider raise complicated issues about whether there is a hierarchy between dragon and rider, what the nature of the partnership is, and if dragons are to be glorified mounts or characters in their own right.

Perhaps because of the relatively recent emergence of the dragon-riding motif, there is little by way of critical material on the subject, a gap in scholarship that this article hopes to fill in relation to English language texts. I will begin by detailing an overall structure that these narratives follow based upon Proppian morphology, providing textual examples from McCaffrey's foundational narrative *Dragonflight* and two more recent texts where the structure is completed in its entirety, Christopher Paolini's novel *Eragon* (2003) and the film *How to Train Your Dragon* (USA 2010) directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois. I will then examine George R.R. Martin's series *A Song of Ice and Fire*—which remains in-process at the time of writing this article—in order to explore how the narrative structure can provide insight into the story. Throughout, my analysis will seek to both construct a useful tool of analysis for this type of narrative and deconstruct the human-dragon relationship through the lens of human-animal studies.

The blending of human-animal studies with the ideas inherent in Proppian structures is not entirely radical; some ground has already been broken by Sandra Unerman. Unerman's article "Dragons in Twentieth Century Fiction" provides a middle ground linking ideas of human-animal study to the Proppian understanding of stories having structures and motifs.

She argues that the "changing role of dragons in modern fiction expresses deeper changes in society". In particular is the recognition that animals are different rather than good or evil and that "fictional evil is more convincing and frightening when people, not dragons, are the true enemy." (Unerman 100).

Dragons are now often perceived as animals who can be tamed rather than monsters to be slain. This builds on an increasing preference for depicting dragons in the Tolkienian fashion of intelligent, powerful creatures, with whom communication is possible.

How to Become a Dragon-rider in Five Easy Steps

In his article "Semiotics and Traditional Lore in the Medieval Dragonslaying Tradition", semiologist Jonathan D. Evans categorises the components of the Germanic dragon slaying story using similar components laid down by Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of Folklore*. The story begins with the *preparation*, where the dragon slayer must ready himself to travel out to do battle with his foe, be it gifting of a weapon or devising a strategy or receiving a blessing of some kind. The next component is *travel*, as dragons tend to live in isolated areas beyond civilisation. The next two components are closely intertwined they are the *combat* and the *slaying*. The final stage of the story is the *reward*, where the hero acquires his gold, bride or lands or whatever variation thereof. An optional component is known as the *dismemberment*, where, prior to the *reward*, the dragon-slayer will remove part of the dragon as a token of his victory.

Inspired by Evans' process, I have devised a formula to which most of the dragon-rider narratives that I have researched conform, using the first major dragon-riding text, Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonflight* as a model. This formula moves through five key stages. The first stage is always the *encounter*, where the prospective rider first meets the dragon, be it at the dragon's

hatching or in the wilds where the dragon is fully grown. In McCaffrey's narrative the heroine Lessa's *encounter* begins when she attends the hatching of her gold dragon, Ramoth.

The next stage is typically *bonding*, wherein the prospective rider builds a rapport with the dragon; sometimes this is a mundane friendship, while in other situations it can be a mystical bond that develops and ties the two together. In McCaffrey's novel this *bond* occurs at the moment of hatching when Ramoth and Lessa are mentally joined.

> A feeling of joy suffused Lessa; a feeling of warmth, tenderness, unalloyed affection, and instant respect and admiration flooded mind and soul. Never again would Lessa lack an advocate, a defender, an intimate, aware instantly of the temper of her mind and heart, of her desires. (McCaffrey 86).

This particular *bond* is of the mystical variety and occurs before the *observation*; it differs from *bonds* based on mutual trust, as the connection is due to a psychic link between dragon and rider. This joining results in not only the rider and the dragon acquiring the ability to communicate telepathically, but also a sharing of emotions between the pair. Such a connection blurs the line between rider and dragon implying a symbiotic relationship. The positions of bond and observation are reversed which is when the bond is one of friendship and trust, as opposed to a psychic link. A question that arises from the dragon and rider partnership is: what is the nature of the relationship? Is the dragon a domesticated beast or an equal partner?

A crucial issue is whether this means that the rider has mastery over the dragon. The relationship cannot exclusively be seen as that between a knight and horse. The dragon is (usually) intelligent, larger and much more powerful than any other kind of mount. Part of how the relationship is defined depends upon the dragon's depiction within the text. If the dragon is not properly characterised, then it can appear as little more than a glorified horse, or flying super weapon with wings serving a human master. Ideally when the dragon is properly characterised the partnership is one of equals.

Human-animal studies scholar Phillip Armstrong notes that attempts to control the "wildness" of the animal leads to it breaking loose, sometimes unpredictably (189). Applying this theory to dragon-riding, readers are forced to question whether dragons can ever be said to be truly tamed and domesticated, even when they permit a rider to mount them? These are not comparatively small horses that can be broken into saddle. The dragon is an ancient reptile with enormous amounts of power at their disposal; to tame such a thing is a daunting task. McCaffrey's *Dragonflight* provides one such example during the dragon's hatching. The babies, in search of their destined companion, pay no heed to anyone who gets in their way and maim or even kill out of ignorance and a desire to find their companion: "Before Lessa could blink, it shook the first girl with such violence that her head snapped audibly and she fell limply to the sand." (McCaffrey 85).

It is the dangerous, wild, nature of the dragon which highlights the importance of this *bond*. Bettleheim argues that animals within stories are reflections of human instinctual nature and that the most dangerous of these animals symbolizing the "untamed id" (Bettelheim 76). In terms of dragon and rider, the need for the rider is to reign in and act as ego and superego to the dragon's id. Together they form a whole and balanced psyche. While Emily Midkiff's focus is predominantly grounded in the uncanny, rather than id-ego-superego, her argument that "dragons are doubles for humanity" supports this hypothesis (Midkiff 43). Therefore the Freudian nature of the dragon-rider's bond is not terribly farfetched.

The third stage in my proposed dragon-rider formula is *observation*, where the rider learns about the dragon, and comes to an understanding of it and its physical capabilities. The *observation* occurs in McCaffrey's novel during Lessa's caring for a young Ramoth, feeding her and learning

about the young dragon as she grows to adulthood. At this stage in their relationship the power lies with the human as the dragon relies upon the rider to survive. The *observation*, in this instance, can be interpreted as a parent watching a child grow, as well as the human partner learning about rearing and care, due to their role in the dragon's infancy.

The penultimate stage is the *ride* where the rider and his or her dragon first take flight and the rider often has a change of perspective from the back of the dragon. This can work tandem with the fifth stage—the *reveal*—where the dragon and rider are shown to be together in the wider world, which often responds to their appearance with awe. The power dynamic between the dragon and rider is not static. At times it appears as if the rider is controlling the dragon as a mount but, as I will highlight later in the article, this is not always the case. The *ride* and *reveal* occur simultaneously in McCaffrey's narrative when Lessa rides above the Weyr upon Ramoth's back in defiance of the patriarchal male riders who had previously informed her that gold dragons only fly to mate.

> The spectacle of the queen aloft had quite an effect on all beholders. F'lar was aware of its impact on himself and saw it reflected in the faces of the incredulous Holders, knew it from the way the dragons hummed, heard it from Mnementh. (McCaffrey 147).

This act shows to Lessa, as well as the male dragon-riders, that she does not need to be constrained by their outdated traditions; nor will she be cowed into submission for disobeying their instructions.

This type of story has changed the face of fantasy work, as now there can be warriors fighting upon dragons. The effect is to diminish the significance of the dragons as separate and "other". If there are human characters that spend a significant amount of time alongside these creatures, they cannot be termed as creatures of mystery and faerie, particularly if they meekly allow a mortal to learn their secrets and utilise them like a glorified horse. Honegger writes that the overuse of the dragon "de-mythologizes" them, taking a powerful, mysterious figure and reducing it to merely an 'exotic other' with a consequent loss of "the power to 'enchant' the reader." (Honegger 54).

The dragon-rider does, however, serve as a bridge between the worlds of dragon and human, erasing many of the distinctions and enabling a greater understanding between the two. In certain incarnations this does imply a level of domestication with the dragon. The vision of a person seated atop a creature, regardless of that creature's intelligence, conveys an air of dominance. When viewed through the lens of human-animal studies these narratives can be troubling, as the wildness, difference and animal otherness of the dragon is progressively erased as the animal is tamed.

Boy meets dragon (and world)

The five-part structure outlined above repeats itself throughout other texts that I have researched, particularly Paolini's *Eragon* and the film *How to Train Your Dragon*. These texts also show that the dragon and rider bond does not just alter the dragon. Just as the dragon can be reduced and domesticated through the relationship with the rider, so too can the rider be changed as he or she taps into the wild energy of the animal. A symbiosis is reached in which both dragon and rider are simultaneously *less* and *more* and anything that threatens this symbiosis can be deadly to both parties.

The *encounter* in Christopher Paolini's *Eragon*, the first novel in his *Inheritance Cycle*, is much like *Dragonflight*. It occurs when the mysterious stone that Eragon finds hatches into a baby dragon. This encounter with the dragon at infancy can give a parental dynamic to the dragon-human relationship, where the human partner is the guiding figure in the creature's life. "Standing in front of him, licking off the membrane that encased it, was a dragon." (Paolini, *Eragon* 37). Being at the

hatching of his dragon, again, Eragon is in a position of power over the young dragon and is the dominant figure in their relationship. Hatching is not the sole method of encounter in dragon-rider narratives, as encounters do not have to occur at hatching; they can even take place when the dragon is, arguably, fully grown. The film *How to Train Your Dragon* is one of the best examples of this variation. The *encounter* occurs when Hiccup refuses to kill the dragon who will later be named Toothless, and it shows that the two meet as equals rather than one asserting a place of dominance over the 'other' at an early age.

Only by coming to understand the dragon is it possible for a character to actually bond with them. This is why *observation* is a key stage in the dragon-rider narrative. It is especially important for a bond that it is built upon trust and friendship as the duo do not have a psychic link to smooth over any misconceptions. In *How to Train Your Dragon* the *observation* is presented through Hiccup's drawing and note taking about the dragon.In an attempt to understand it he also reads through the fictive Viking "Book of Dragons" and asks the dragon-slaying mentor Gobber for information on dragons. For Eragon, the *observation*, in contrast, takes place with his feeding of the dragon Saphira and his attempts to know more about dragons, where he questions the storyteller Brom: "How big were the dragons?" "When did they mature?" "Did dragons live very long?" (Paolini, *Eragon* 52-53). Eragon's questions show that even linked riders need to spend time observing and understanding their dragons, particularly when they meet their dragons as hatchlings. The *observation* does not need to be direct observation, but can also include research and fact finding to aid the rider in understanding their dragon.

For a human and a dragon to work together requires an explicit *bond* between the two. This bond will occur at the beginning of the relationship between the two characters and involves the pair becoming linked in a manner that will allow them to operate as a cohesive unit. This bond manifests differently in texts from the magical to the mundane, and while generally a positive thing can have significant ramifications.

McCaffrey and Paolini both show this connection through creating a deliberate telepathic link between the rider and dragon. Through their link, the pair can share their thoughts and emotions, as well as to simply communicate. McCaffrey, as discussed earlier, reveals this bond as a type of telepathy that enables communication between the dragon and rider. Paolini adds a more mystical dimension to this bond. The bond between dragon and rider also transforms the rider, as he or she becomes affected by the dragon as a magical entity. Eragon first notices this ability when his dragon is a hatchling: "Something brushed against his consciousness, like a finger trailing over his skin." (Paolini, *Eragon* 39). This involves a change, with the rider gaining the ability to use magic and speak telepathically, as well as possess magically enhanced strength, speed and grace. This link shows that the consequences of the bond with a dragon is that while a rider has power, they can changed so much that their humanity can potentially be called into question. In Paolini's second book such an event transpires for Eragon: "Please excuse my impertinence, sir, for I am ignorant of the ways of Riders, but are you not human? I was told you were." (Paolini, *Eldest* 578).

While the link is a great asset to the dragon and rider, when it is as intimate as a psychic connection, it is also hazardous. When severed by the death of either rider or dragon, the trauma of the split can cause depression and even the death of the surviving partner. In *Eragon*, the character Brom is one of the few dragon-riders to survive the shock of his dragon's death. 'The pain is shock enough – although it isn't always a factor – but what really causes the damage is feeling part of your mind, part of your identity, die.' (Paolini, *Eldest* 281). Even though Brom remains a skilled warrior and magician, he is still bitterly affected by the loss of his dragon, driven by a need for vengeance against those responsible for her death. Within *Pern* another example of a character

affected by the loss of his dragon is Lytol. The man is routinely depicted as gloomy and miserable, unable to stand living among the dragon-riders anymore, dedicating himself to being a weaver and later the Warder to a Lord Holder instead. "Occasionally a dragonless man remained living, such as Lytol, Ruatha's Warder, but he was half shadow and that indistinct self-lived in torment." (McCaffrey 97).

For the dragon, however, this link, once severed, almost always results in death, either by shock or suicide. The dragons of *Pern* take their own lives following the death of their riders. *Inheritance Cycle* dragons, without fail, die from the shock of their rider's death, except in situations where their soul enters and is permanently confined to an *eldunari* (a magical stone that holds a dragon's consciousness).

How to Train Your Dragon exhibits a subtler and arguably safer bond than telepathy. The *bonding* takes place when Hiccup shares food, and earns the dragon's trust through his attempts to get the crippled dragon to fly again. Instead, the connection is one built upon domestication, training, and a mutual trust. The dragons are trained to work with their riders and operate as friends, rather than as extensions of each other's consciousness. The *bond* between Hiccup and Toothless is an especially good example of this cooperation. In *How to Train Your Dragon 2* (Dean DeBlois, USA 2014), in an attempt to better understand his dragon, Hiccup constructs a flight suit so the pair can glide together. By operating on trust, the two are not explicitly linked, but they are so close that, in the sequel film, Hiccup can break the mind control of an Alpha Dragon over Toothless: "This is what it is to earn a dragon's loyalty." (*How to Train Your Dragon 2*). Regardless of how the *bond* manifests in dragon and rider, it is crucial for the pair to operate as without a legitimate bond the hero cannot be called a dragon-rider, they are instead just a person who rides a dragon.

Taking flight from a dragon's back is the ultimate expression of the *bond* between the dragon and the rider. Their first flight or *ride* is treated as an important and defining moment for the characters. As mentioned previously, the *ride* causes a change in perspective for characters and can be treated as a rite of passage; they journey into a different world, arguably (considering the age of most riders in these narratives) that of adulthood. The *ride* occurs in *How to Train Your Dragon* when the artificial tail fin crafted by Hiccup allows him to work together with Toothless to fly. This ride also shows that the pair can only fly together, affirming the closeness of their bond. This connection is further deepened by the end of the first film; in the course of their battle against the Red Death, Hiccup loses his leg. At the end of the film Hiccup and Toothless share the symmetry of two disabled characters who, working together, can fly.

The *ride* for Eragon occurs when he has to flee his home after creatures hunting for him burn down his house. Saphira makes him climb atop her back and they fly as far as she can carry him. "Eragon yelled as the ground dropped away and they rose above the trees. Turbulence buffeted him, snatching the breath out of his mouth." (Paolini, *Eragon* 71). This flight is not the epiphany of wonder that is seen with Hiccup and Lessa, but a harsh and brutal awakening to the dangerous realities of the world in which Eragon now lives. Saphira's protective nature in this flight also reveals the degree of the bond between rider and dragon, showing a shift in the relationship from Eragon as Saphira's carer to the two becoming equals. "You would not have been alive if we had stayed." (Paolini, *Eragon* 78). Saphira shows that she is no longer dependent upon Eragon for food or shelter. Now both dragon and rider contribute to their relationship.

The *reveal* is perhaps the least necessary component of the dragon-rider narrative. It is, however, the component that shows the dragon-rider's status compared to regular society and shows how he or she has become set apart. The *reveal* within *How to Train Your Dragon* occurs when Hiccup, upon the back of Toothless, shows to the Vikings what a dragon and human in cooperation

are truly capable of by slaying the monstrous Red Death. This *reveal* not only provides a solution to the long-standing conflict that has gripped the humans and dragons, but also demonstrates Hiccup's worthiness as a ruler and future chief of his tribe. As Midkiff states in regards to Cressida Cowell's novel on which the film is based "The protagonist boy and dragon both learn to define themselves individually rather than purely through antagonism and fear of each other as doubles." (Midkiff 50). For Eragon, the *reveal* does not truly occur until he arrives at the rebel stronghold of Tronjheim and is seen and acknowledged as a dragon-rider by the resistance to the Empire. For the majority of the book, Eragon has had to hide the fact that he is a rider and slowly learn what this means. By making his identity and status public, he discovers his new-found place within the world as a powerful figure who ostensibly holds a position beyond even lords, kings, and emperors. He is now a key member of war councils and a person who is respected and even revered by the common folk: "despite your protests, the people here have certain expectations of you. They are going to bring you their problems, no matter how petty, and demand that you solve them." (Paolini, *Eragon* 415). This is especially apparent after his defeat of the Shade, Durzha, wherein Eragon gains the title of Shadeslayer after he and Saphira work together to destroy the evil sorcerer.

The structure in progress (sex, lies, and dragons)

George R.R. Martin's currently incomplete series *A Song of Ice and Fire* provides an example of the dragon-rider narrative structure in progress but not yet fully realised. Within the universe of *A Song of Ice and Fire* dragon-riders existed in the past, and over the course of the first four books a dragon-rider narrative is emerging focused around one of the many protagonists, Daenerys Targaryen. Martin's series is also significant as it follows a similar trajectory of the heroine growing up, yet removes the dragon-riding trope from the young adult narrative and places it within the framework of an adult fantasy novel.

The *encounter* occurs at the end of *A Game of Thrones* (1996) with the hatching of Daenerys' dragon eggs:

> As Daenerys Targaryen rose to her feet, her black [dragon] hissed, pale smoke venting from its mouth and nostrils. The other two pulled away from her breasts and added their voices to the call, translucent wings unfolding and stirring the air, and for the first time in hundreds of years, the night came alive with the music of dragons. (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 780).

The connection between Daenerys and the dragons at her breasts gives the impression of her as a maternal figure towards her dragons; their *encounter* is the act of her now possessing three children, in the aftermath of her miscarriage. The particular phrasing "music of dragons" also brings to mind that this is a momentous occasion which may have some spiritual significance, foreshadowing the later revelation that Daenerys is a figure of prophecy, the fabled "Prince that was Promised". (Martin, *A Feast for Crows* 588). Of all of the *encounters* with dragon-riders that I have analysed, this is the most compelling and memorable.

The *observation* and *bonding* are somewhat tame compared to the *encounter* and take place over the course of *A Clash of Kings* (1998), with Daenerys noting the colours and temperaments of her dragons, particularly her closeness to the black dragon Drogon, which comes to a peak when they must escape the Warlocks of Qarth. In terms of their *bond*, however, Drogon, despite being raised by a human, is still a dragon and, in this setting, has the mind and muteness of an animal. This leads to him being unable to distinguish between people and other animals. With the exception of his adopted mother Daenerys, to Drogon they are all food. This is particularly apparent in the events leading up to the *ride* when he kills and eats a young child, and later attacks a gladiatorial

arena and devours both the gladiator and the wild boar she was fighting (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 881).

The power of a dragon has its appeal, but as noted in *Game of Thrones* (USA 2011-), the television adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, "They are dragons . . . they cannot be tamed." ("The Ghost of Harrenhall"). Although the narratives featuring dragon-riding may thus appear to create a paradigm of domesticated dragon and controlling rider, this is perpetually undercut and complicated. Even in these texts the dragons remain a symbol of what Armstrong terms "the wildness" (189).

The ride finally occurs in *A Dance with Dragons* (2011), when Daenerys flies on Drogon's back out of the gladiator pits that he has just destroyed: "The air was thick with sand. Dany could not see, she could not breathe, she could not think. The black wings cracked like thunder, and suddenly scarlet sands were beneath her." (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 884). This freeing from the dust and sand also liberates Daenerys from a stagnating place in her life, where she had halted her march towards the land of Westeros and her rightful throne to try to bring peace to Slaver's Bay. Her ride is a moment of clarity, enabling her to realise her position as a descendant of the dragon-riders, House Targaryen, providing insight to her heritage and quest.

A Song of Ice and Fire does not yet have an example of the *reveal*. However, judging from the course of the narrative, this series will follow the pattern that I have noted. This *reveal* will undoubtedly show Daenerys' arrival in a populated area and will cause many to submit to her as a figure who is not only "The Mother of Dragons," but also the rider of a dragon and true heir to her dynasty. This is also a clue that Daenerys may emerge as the ultimate victor in the "game of thrones". Understandably, as Martin has yet to complete the series proper and, indeed is struggling to achieve this, the *reveal* is currently speculation. Within the television adaptation of Martin's series, however, this situation has already occurred, as the show has since outpaced its source material. The reveal can be considered to have occurred in the episode "Battle of the Bastards" where Daenerys rides Drogon into battle and reduces several enemy ships to burning wrecks, effectively ending her conflict with the Slave Masters (Sapochnik). That the show writers also engaged with a dramatic *reveal*, despite Martin not yet having written this particular part of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, shows the resiliency and embeddedness of what I have identified as the key structure of the dragon-rider narrative.

Conclusion

Since the 1960s there has been considerable creative expansion and adaptation of the once, quite static, form of story-telling that is dragon-slaying. This is necessary for the type of narrative to survive in a changing literary landscape, particularly given recent shifts in perspective towards dragons. The dragon-slaying trope is likely to continue to have a place in literature, as it has shown over the millennia to be a durable archetype. However, perceptions of dragons are not as fixed as they once were. The dragon-riding phenomenon emerges from the current climate of changing views towards dragons, reflecting the human-animal studies' trend of downplaying the monstrous "other" and highlighting the points of connection between people and other animals. This sentiment is reinforced by Sandra Unerman's comments about morphing attitudes towards dangerous animals, which are no longer viewed as reflections of morality, but instead as creatures that live in a different fashion; for true evil humans must look at themselves.

Dragons are now often perceived on a spectrum, from animals that can be tamed, to the Tolkienian model of intelligent, powerful creatures, with whom communication is possible. While

the dragon-riding story reflects current thinking about the relationship between human and animal, examining the narrative through the lens of human-animal studies reveals the problematic way in which this trope works to deconstruct the dragon's wildness. The dragon-riding narrative, particularly when incorporating Emily Midkiff's idea of dragons as "doubles for humanity"(43), diminishes the significance of the dragon as separate and "other".

Dragons arguably cannot be termed as creatures of mystery and faerie if they will so meekly allow a mortal to learn their secrets and utilise them like a glorified horse. The dragon is a paradoxical creature; it is both completely animal in appearance and yet frequently features as a human double in terms of intelligence. The dragon-rider narrative exists in an equally paradoxical state, on the one hand representing the confining and weakening of the animal, and on the other emphasising the connection and understanding that can eventuate from cooperation with the 'other'.

Acknowledgments

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