

Dragon-Slayer vs. Dragon-Sayer:

Reimagining the Female Fantasy Heroine

For girls like us who grew up loving fantasy, there weren't very many role models in the books we read. The novels we absorbed were almost always about boys who were chosen by some mystical force to accomplish some great quest or task. The girls in the books were always very pretty and waited around to be rescued or married off; for sure, they didn't go riding off with the boys to find a magic ring or pull a sword out of a stone. We didn't want to be the girl who waited, we wanted to be the hero.

Fortunately, in the late 1900s, a revolutionary new type of female heroine emerged in adolescent fantasy. Robin McKinley, one of the authors who created this previously rare leading character, calls her protagonists "Girls Who Do Things," noting in her Newbery Medal acceptance speech her desire as an adolescent reader for female heroes: "I wished desperately for books like *Hero* when I was young: books that didn't require me to be untrue to my gender if I wished to fantasize about having my sort of adventures, not about wearing long, trailing dresses . . . and . . . [thinking] about my lover who is off somewhere having interesting adventures." McKinley found her first model in Eowyn from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, but was dissatisfied with the character's lack of development. She chose to create female heroes, rather than heroines, such as the protagonists in her Damar novels *The Blue Sword* and *The Hero and the Crown*. Harry (a nickname for Harriet) in *The Blue Sword* inwardly resents the genteel, lady-like role required of her when living at a provincial military outpost. She—and the reader—are somewhat relieved when she is kidnapped by a local chieftain and

trained as a warrior to protect the local population from the menace of evil's dark forces. Not only does she become a warrior after much labor and practice, she becomes the best in the kingdom save only for the king, and is given a storied sword with which she leads her forces to victory. The source of the sword is the nucleus of *The Hero and the Crown*, a prequel that focuses on the heroic dragon-slaying woman Aerin. Critic Anna Altmann has noted how closely Aerin's adventures follow the quest pattern that Northrop Frye identifies in *The Anatomy of Criticism*:

The central form of quest-romance is the dragon killing theme exemplified by the stories of Saint George and Perseus. A land ruled by a helpless old king is laid to waste by a sea monster, to whom one young person after another is offered to be devoured, until the lot falls to the king's daughter: at that point the hero arrives, kills the dragon, marries the daughter, and succeeds to the kingdom. (quoted in Altmann, 145)

The central inquiry of Altmann's article is whether Aerin is simply "a male quest hero in drag"; has McKinley, in fact, really fulfilled her plan to write "books that didn't require [her] to be untrue to [her] gender"? In other words, Altmann asks, has McKinley simply "welded brass tits on the armor" of her female hero? There is much evidence that supports this, in that Aerin's adventures do follow the typical elements of the male quest story. The popularity of McKinley's books testifies to their appeal as a powerful model for many young female readers who find it empowering to take on the role of the traditional "dragon-slayer" and demonstrate strength through physical power as well as mental cunning. Tamora Pierce's popular Song

of the Lioness series illustrates this type of female hero as well: Alanna switches places with her brother so that she may be trained as a knight rather than as a sorceress. Pierce carries the “in drag” element even further by disguising her protagonist as a boy: neither of McKinley’s female heroes ever pose as anything but women, though they adopt masculine behaviors, and Harry has a masculine name.

While some female readers find the dragon-slayer model attractive and empowering, others resist it, feeling that such female heroes are unrealistic and subvert what they find powerful and attractive about being women. Why, they ask, must girls become boys to have adventures and be successful? Altmann cites one of her students as complaining about McKinley’s *The Hero and the Crown*:

“This book isn’t about a woman. . . . This book doesn’t talk about me. A book that really has a woman as a hero would validate women’s lives as we live them, would recognize that what women actually are and do is worthwhile and central. I don’t ride war-horses and fight dragons and wear armor. I’m sick of books that make women heroes by turning them into men.” (quoted in Altmann, 144)

This student’s desire is reflected in another model of protagonist, a girl who rejects the stereotypic masculine approach to conflict and danger (typically, overpower and conquer) and instead substitutes traditional feminine values of nurturing and caretaking to achieve her goals. Such girls seek to connect and form relationships. Carol Gilligan and her colleagues at Harvard discovered through extensive research in the late 1980s that this is a primary need for adolescent girls as they mature. However, in the search for connection and relationship, Gilligan recognized a dichotomy that many girls feel is difficult to resolve. They must either be selfless (“a good woman”) or face being labeled “selfish,” if they seek to develop their sense of self rather than focusing on the welfare of others (10). The key to successfully negotiating this dilemma, Gilligan posits, is learning to balance self-development while embracing the nurturant aspect of the self. The dichotomy is false, and both quali-

ties need to be achieved.

Heroines such as Menolly in Anne McCaffrey’s Harper Hall trilogy as well as Kaeldra in Susan Fletcher’s *The Dragon Chronicles* offer a melding of these qualities of nurturing and self-development, relying on traditional feminine values to accomplish their quests. They represent an alternative feminist heroism, one not dependent on assuming the traditional masculine role of a dragon-slayer, an armed warrior who conquers through violence. Instead, both of these heroines become “dragon-sayers,” literally taming dragons through communicating with and physically and emotionally nurturing infant dragons. Menolly and Kaeldra become mothers of dragons, offering readers a positive heroism based on love and female identity rather than one based on absorption into male roles of violence and destruction (however self-defensive). In both series, the protagonist takes on three major roles as caretaker of young dragons: she must feed them, heal them, and protect them from harm. By doing so, she develops strengths she did not have (or realize she had) before, thus acquiring agency in influencing others around her: she moves from a passive unhappiness over her lot in life (both Menolly and Kaeldra are victimized by oppressive parent figures) to an ability to direct events as an active participant.

The experiences of Menolly, the heroine of *Dragonson* (McCaffrey, 1976/2003), follow the dragon-sayer pattern closely. She desires to be a Harper (a musician), but is forbidden to make music by her parents, who think only men can become Harpers.

Each time Menolly is beaten down by her parents, the novel gives her the opportunity to reaffirm her sense of self through contact with “fire-lizards,” the local miniature dragons. After her father beats her for unconsciously making up her own tunes, she leaves home for an afternoon and discovers a group of fire lizards bathing by the seaside. When Menolly accidentally cuts her hand badly, her parents’ resistance to her ambition to be a musician is so great that they even go so far as to purposely allow her hand to heal improperly so she will no longer be able to play music. Yet

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Menolly realizes that her hand may be less damaged than she thought when she rescues a clutch of fire-lizard eggs from an incoming tide; her desperation while saving the eggs makes her forget the physical limitations of her injury. Frustrated by her parents' treatment and desperate to make music, Menolly runs away from home. She comes across the rescued eggs just as they hatch and feeds the hungry dragonet hatchlings so that they will not leave the cave and die in Threadfall, a planetary scourge that destroys living things. Thus Menolly twice saves the small dragons' lives; she develops personal agency only when she leaves home and is forced by desperate circumstances to preserve and protect the lives of infant dragons.

The next section of the novel portrays Menolly's development as a mother of dragons. Initially, her primary role is to feed them; however, she is also rewarded with affection from her dragon children, something she has not received from her parents:

Menolly had been absolutely stunned to wake with the unaccustomed weight of warm bodies about her. Scared, too, until the little creatures roused, with strong thoughts of renewed hunger and love and affection for her As the days went by their appetite drove Menolly to lengths she wouldn't have attempted for her own comfort. The result was that she was kept entirely too busy to feel either sorry for or apprehensive about herself. Her friends had to be fed, comforted and amused. She also had to supply her own needs—as far as she was able—and she was able to do a lot more than she'd suspected she could. (93)

This nurturance results in a strong connection with the creatures, but more importantly teaches Menolly that she has competencies that she did not realize. She hunts for her charges to feed them and undertakes the difficult process of rendering fish oil to keep their hides healthy as they outgrow their skin. Furthermore, she communicates with them through thought and music, and the fire-lizards begin to accompany her when she sings. Thus, Menolly makes the nurturant connections Gilligan identifies as psychologically necessary for girls—but with dragons rather than people. In the sequel, *Dragonsinger*, Menolly is offered musical training at Harper Hall, where she finds a

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place within a human community in which to grow the self-confidence she needs to develop the artist within herself. She continues to nurture her fire-lizard friends, whom the rest of the community also reveres. McCaffrey clearly suggests that cultivating traditionally female traits, like nurturance and relationship, has strong positive consequences.

Susan Fletcher's *Dragon's Milk* also exemplifies the dragon-sayer pattern: in fact, it coins the term. Kaeldra is an outsider in her own village; descended from the Kargs, a tall, blonde people, she physically stands out from the small, dark Elythians. Kaeldra has unknowingly inherited an unusual Karg power—she is a “dragon-sayer,” one who can sense the thoughts of dragons and speak with them. When Kaeldra's stepsister Lyf becomes desperately ill, the only possible cure is the milk of a mother dragon. Trying to please her suspicious and unloving stepmother by attempting to save her stepsister, Kaeldra risks her own life by traveling to the hills where she has sensed a recent, and very rare, dragon birth. Kaeldra strikes a bargain with Fiora, the mother dragon: Kaeldra will “babysit” the infant dragons so that Fiora may hunt for their food, and in return, Fiora will share some of her milk to heal Lyf.

As temporary substitute dragon mother, Kaeldra enacts the feminine nurturing role: she feeds the draclings by snaring small animals for them to stay their hunger until their mother returns with bigger game. She also discovers that she can communicate with them through her thoughts, which deepens her emotional bond with them. She assumes the role of protectress of the young by driving off wolves that menace the draclings. When Fiora is slain by local youths, Kaeldra decides she must protect the three orphaned draclings and get them to other adult dragons, despite the dangers of travel and the pursuit of a dragon-slayer.

The rigors of the journey—providing for the draclings and keeping them safely hidden from the people who would destroy them—tax her ingenuity. At journey's end, she must call the adult dragons by activating her powers as a dragon-sayer, in long-established Kargish tradition. The journey widens Kaeldra's

experiences of others and thereby deepens her understanding and acceptance of herself:

Kaeldra thought of all the folk she had seen on this journey, folk of every height and girth and complexion. *I belong to the earth.* She tried on the thought as she would try on a new gown. She had never considered it quite that way before. (235)

Kaeldra here exemplifies Gilligan's point, quoted earlier, that girls have a "need to find connection in the face of difference" (10). She can now accept those who are different from her and equably accept her own differences as a Karg living in a village of Elythians. The Epilogue to the novel shows Kaeldra as wife and mother and seer, able to see the dragons she loves through her visions. Fletcher thus implicitly values the traditional feminine roles through the way she sets up the novel's conflict and resolution. Kaeldra, like Menolly, is certainly what McKinley would call a "Girl Who Does Things," but her adventures all occur with the purpose of protecting the dragons she mothers, rather than assuming the warrior role of the girls in McKinley's books.

Rather than masculinist action masquerading as androgyny, McCaffrey and Fletcher's novels celebrate an alternative feminism—which may in its turn offer a similar model for boys within the fantasy tradition. Notably, the male protagonists of Jane Yolen's *Dragon's Blood* and Christopher Paolini's popular *Eragon* nurture and raise baby dragons, although with a different aim in mind than their female dragon-sayer counterparts. Jakkin, of *Dragon's Blood*, steals a hatchling dragon to raise and train in secret so that it may fight other dragons in competitions when it is grown; if successful, he will be able to buy his way out of servitude and into master status through the winnings of his dragon. Eragon, the eponymous hero of Paolini's novel, accidentally acquires a blue stone, but when it hatches, he discovers it is a dragon egg. Both boys follow the same nurturant pattern described above: they must solve the difficulties of feeding a growing dragon of large appetite, protect the infant dragon from natural enemies, and heal

the dragon from injuries. Both boys have the crucial telepathic communication skills with their dragons common to the dragon-sayer girls. But there is a distinct difference: the boys are raising their dragons for combat. Jakkin intends to use his dragon as a fighter against other dragons in the traditional combats on his world. Eragon trains his dragon Sapphira so that he may ride her as he fights evil forces in true dragonrider tradition. He is aware of his dragon's potential from the moment she hatches: "By raising a dragon, he could become a Rider. Myths and stories about Riders were treasured, and being one would automatically place him among those legends" (40). The dragon becomes half partner, half weapon for the boys, whereas the girls value their dragons as companions. The boys do not become traditional dragon-slayers, *per se*, but their nurturing has an ulterior motive: they do not subvert the traditional role of the male as fighter; rather, they embrace the role of the hero as destroyer of evil. The dragons are the means by which they do so, rather like exceptionally intelligent and useful war-horses. The girls, however, are not destroyers of evil so much as they are defenders of the good.

There is one further example in popular fantasy of a male who embraces the mother role entirely, to the point that it blinds him to the serious dangers that a real dragon poses. This is, of course, Hagrid in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Hagrid openly takes on the role of mother to his Norwegian Ridgeback dragon hatchling, calling himself "Mummy" on several occasions. He researches the

requirements of his new "child" in *Dragonbreeding for Pleasure and Profit*, so that he can properly feed it ("a bucket of brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour" [170] when it first hatches, followed by "dead rats by the crate" when it is slightly older [173]). He names the baby "Norbert," talks to it in baby talk, and sings it lullabies (172–3). Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, are dumbfounded by Hagrid's adoption of the egg and the dangers posed by raising a dragon in a wooden house (171), especially given that the baby shoots sparks when it sneezes

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just moments after hatching (172)! Hagrid is brought to recognize only with significant prodding from his young friends that the dragon is growing too fast and is too dangerous to keep (especially given the number of times it bites Hagrid and, eventually, Ron). But Hagrid fears (like any good parent would) what might happen were he to turn the “child” out before it has grown. Harry and his friends are thus the ones who arrange to transport Norbert to Ron’s brother Charlie, who is studying dragons professionally in Romania. Hagrid goes along with the plan only reluctantly, and packs the dragon up as he would a baby: “‘He’s got lots o’ rats an’ some brandy fer the journey,’ said Hagrid in a muffled voice. ‘An’ I’ve packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely’” (175). Hagrid, though male, obviously embraces the mother role even more self-consciously than the girls in McCaffrey’s and Fletcher’s novels, feeding and protecting the dragon baby, yet he is not the protagonist of the novel, nor is the reader invited to identify with his stance; rather, we agree with Harry and his friends that Hagrid “has lost his marbles” (172) in his desire to mother a dragon. He is not placed in a heroic mode: he is a figure of absurdity in his ambition, and must be rescued from it by his more clear-thinking child companions.

Our brief survey of these eight novels suggests that current popular writers of fantasy have constructed the heroic mode for girls in multiple ways. One, of course, is the traditional masculine dragon-slaying tale of martial valor, but a newer template offers a protagonist who chooses to embrace traditional feminine roles and values as a dragon-sayer. The dragon-sayer girls are not passive models who stay home and wait for men to rescue them; rather, this type of female hero who “does things” uses communication, nurturance, and protective love as means to achieving personal agency and the development of self-knowledge, confidence, and competence. We also see that mothering dragons is no longer only the province of girls in fantasy; both genders are offered the opportunity to

nurture the infant stages of these most powerful creatures of our imagination (though boys notably only within a context of masculine warrior culture). This is an encouraging trend, and one that should be useful in offering girls multiple lenses in seeing themselves as protagonists in the fantasy they read.

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