

Sandra Martina Schwab

Of Dragons, Knights, and Virgin Maidens

Dragonslaying and Gender Roles
from Richard Johnson to Modern Popular Fiction

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1 Introduction

1.1 Here Be Dragons

*A dragon is no idle fantasy. Whatever may be his origins,
in fact or invention, the dragon in legend is a potent creation
of men's imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold.
(Tolkien, "Beowulf" 16)*

Dragons and other creatures of the imagination were frowned upon by the European Enlightenment with its focus on rational thought and empirical evidence. For decades they slumbered in archives and libraries or stole away to live in the literature of the common people – in folktales, chapbooks, and street ballads. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, though, so-called *Volks poesie* or folk literature garnered new interest. In the 1790s German romanticists re-discovered the appeal of the architecture and literature of the Middle Ages, while at the same time the British upper-class remodelled their homes in the gothic style and put fake medieval ruins into their gardens. In the nineteenth century this gothic revival became a powerful torrent that affected many areas of culture and society, especially in Britain. It not only led to a re-evaluation of medieval literature, but also to a processing of themes and motifs from medieval romances, fairy tales, and local legends in nineteenth-century art and literature. Texts like Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1485), Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) as well as Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812/15) and other collections of fairy tales inspired works like Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Day Dream* (1830/42) and Edward Burne-Jones's *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (1884). In addition, fairytale operas and ballets such as Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* (1893) and Peter Iljitsch Tchaikowsky's *Sleeping Beauty* (1890) enjoyed huge popularity.

At the same time, a new genre of literature grew from the Romantic literary fairy tale: fantasy fiction. "The magic of modern fantasy fiction," writes Ruth Bottigheimer, "is an offspring of the joint parentage of tales about fairies and fairy tales; born in the second half of the nineteenth century, fantasy fiction matured in the twentieth century" ("Fairy Tales" 153). Though fantasy authors use elements from a variety of sources including medieval romances, the gothic novel or the works of Shakespeare, to a large extent they still employ themes and motifs from folk literature.

These can also be found in the genre of popular romance, which in the twentieth century became the bestselling literary genre both in Britain and in the USA. Among the most popular and successful narrative patterns in romance fiction are the story of Beauty and the Beast as well as the legend of Persephone.

One narrative pattern which has remained popular with authors and artists since the Middle Ages, in spite of the Enlightenment's general disdain for imaginary creatures, is the heroic dragonslayer story. It appears not only in medieval literature, but also in neo-chivalric romances, in folk literature, fantasy fiction and popular romance,

among others. As the following study will make apparent, the story of the dragonslayer has undergone significant transformations, many of which are connected to major social and cultural changes that took place within the last 400 years. Especially in regard to gender roles, the dragonslayer story can serve as an example of how art and literature mirror social actualities of their times.

The following analysis does not pretend to present to the reader a complete overview of the history of the dragonslayer story. There are far too many dragons in the world for that – and they would only swallow the unwary critic who would attempt to catch them all. Instead, the study will trace some of the directions in which the development of the dragonslayer story has progressed and will give the reader selected examples from art and literature.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of dragon fights: the heroic battle which we know from fairy tales and which derives from medieval romances, and the unheroic fight, which is won with tricks and cunning, rather than with sword or lance, and which is typical for local legends (see Röhrich, “Drache” 799-801, 803-04). This study will predominantly deal with stories that contain elements of AaTh 300 (“The Dragonslayer”) and 303 (“The Two Brothers”),¹ that is, with texts that tell of a heroic fight between hero and dragon and the rescue of a virgin maiden from the monster. Chapter 3 will concern itself with traditional versions of this story, while Chapter 4 will explore parodies and other revisionist versions.

Apart from making a selection of primary texts based on narrative patterns, it was essential to narrow down the analysis to texts from a specific period of time. The primary sources for this study span the time from the late sixteenth to the early twenty-first century. After a short overview of the development of the dragonslayer narrative in the Middle Ages, the discussion proper opens with Richard Johnson’s *The Seven Champions of Christendom* (1596/7), a seminal, if today largely forgotten text, and closes with Gaalen Foley’s romance novel *Lord of Fire* (2002).

1 The abbreviation AaTh (some critics prefer AT) stands for Aarne and Thompson and refers to folktale types listed in their work *The Types of the Folktale*.