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Lexine Lynner

University of Minnesota, Morris

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Lexine Lynner

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Dragon Slayers: Remastering and Redefining the Enduring Struggle

When thinking of fairy tales, what comes to mind? For some, the most obvious examples are the Disney movies they grew up watching. Others may answer with stories read to them as children, such as the works of Hans Christian Andersen, or Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book*. But for many, the classic tale of a princess who is captured by a dragon and rescued by a knight in shining armor comes to mind. This is, perhaps, the oldest and most well-known of fairy tale plots. Dating back to at least the first century AD, this type of tale has a long and varied history in Europe. Clearly, something about this tale sticks with people enough for them to keep it alive and going through the generations. There are many different interpretations of what the dragon-slayer tale represents. But it is in fact this flexibility in the meaning of the tale that allows us to continue to relate to the story and its characters, despite the vastly different cultures and times that have produced its variations.

The basic tale is very simple. A woman is kidnapped or otherwise held captive by a dragon. A young hero saves her from the dragon by slaying it. By defeating the dragon, he wins her hand in marriage and the two prance off into the sunset to live happily ever after. However, that same basic plot has been changed and added to throughout history by cultures around the world, leaving us with a myriad of different tales with similar themes and characters, but adapted to fit the narrative style of the society they are a part of. And yet, the core characters and elements of the story remain the same: the feminine maiden needs to be saved, the dragon guards her until he is slain, and the hero is the one to kill the dragon and win her hand, with the dragon

and the hero representing two different aspects of masculinity and the maiden serving as the only example of femininity in the story.

One of the earliest known iterations of this type of fairy tale is the story of Perseus and Andromeda. Written down by Ovid as part of *Metamorphoses* and published in 8 AD, the story is a quintessential example of the Aarne-Thompson fairy tale type 300, “The Dragon Slayer.” The plot follows very closely to the core storyline with very little added except the detail of the dragon being a sea monster instead of the stereotypical European dragon.

Another example of the dragon slayer type fairy tale comes from the Norse saga of Ragnar Lodbrok, written in the 13th century. In this saga, a baby dragon had been given to a woman named Thora by her father. Thora had raised the dragon, but it quickly grew too large to be contained and now holds her captive in her room (or bower), keeping everyone else out. Ragnar slays the dragon and receives Thora’s hand in marriage, as well as the hoard the dragon had magically produced. This, again, follows the classic dragon slayer storyline. However, it introduces an interesting twist in that Thora was the one to raise the dragon, rather than it just being some random dragon that showed up to torment her and her people.

A third example of this is the tale of “The Two Brothers,” which is part of the Grimms’ collection of fairy tales and folklore (1857). In this story, the core element of the princess being kidnapped by a dragon and the hero saving her remains as part of the story. However, the rest of the story becomes much more complex as a variety of other elements are added, making for a much longer and more detailed tale. The protagonist gains a brother, animal friends, magic powers, and wealth. This tale seems to be an amalgamation of other stories, combined into a plot that roughly coheres. And yet, what is perhaps the most compelling part of the narrative follows very similarly in structure to Perseus and Andromeda, despite being recorded almost 2000 years

later. The tale follows the protagonist and his brother from childhood, as they acquire the power to produce gold while asleep, learn to become expert hunters, obtain a variety of animal helpers, and then split ways. One of the brothers goes to a town where a princess is about to be sacrificed to a dragon. With the help of his animal sidekicks, he slays the dragon and rescues the princess. But he is betrayed by the king's chief advisor (who wants to marry the princess). Eventually, he and his animal sidekicks are able to rescue (again) the princess and after some other shenanigans they live happily ever after.

These stories, along with many others, follow a straightforward central narrative of a princess needing to be saved by a man from a dragon who threatens her safety. While each tale devotes a different portion to detailing this basic plot, it is clearly included and kept intact by the authors. So what can we learn about history, people, and cultures from this narrative? One interesting thing that can be examined is what it tells us about gender roles and expectations in the societies that these tales are from. Even with vastly different cultures, the basic characters of the story remain very similar—a princess or maiden, who needs to be rescued, a dragon, who needs to be slayed, and a hero, who needs to slay the dragon and rescue the maiden. This consistency in characters can tell us a lot about the cultural significance of each of the character types and the gender roles and expectations of each. However, that cultural significance isn't shared amongst all people through all of time.

There are many different interpretations of what the characters in dragon-slayer stories represent to people. Some folklorists and historians see the story as allegory for a father giving up his daughter to a worthy suitor and worries about that choice. Others, such as Joseph Campbell, argue that the stories represent an internal struggle against greed (represented by the

dragon).¹ Others argue for other interpretations. However, it is just this flexibility in meaning that has allowed the dragon-slayer story to remain relevant and intriguing to a variety of people over the millennia that such stories have been told. For different people in different times and cultures, the story can mean something entirely different. From overcoming a large obstacle to escaping from a confining situation to giving up something precious, the symbolic significance of the dragon slayer tale type is adaptable and therefore pervasive throughout time and space.

The princess or maiden in each of these three example tales plays a small role in the actual story, but an important one nonetheless. She is named in two out of three of these examples (Andromeda, from *Perseus and Andromeda*, and Thora, from the saga of Ragnar Lodbrok) and is not unique in being unnamed in the Grimms' "The Two Brothers" as none of the characters in their version are named. This suggests that the princess character is, indeed, important, though this importance may be due more to her status as a princess than her individuality and autonomy as a human being. And indeed, her status as princess is clearly highlighted in each of the stories.

In *Perseus and Andromeda*, it is noted that Andromeda is the daughter of the King of Ethiopia and his wife Cassiopeia. In this story, Andromeda's qualities of beauty and modesty emphasized multiple times. These, indeed, are her defining features in the story. After she is found by Perseus, chained to a rock, he tells her she is beautiful, doesn't deserve her fate, and that he wants to know her name. In response, "At first she was silent: a virgin, she did not dare to address a man, and she would have hidden her face modestly with her hands, if they had not been

¹ Joseph Campbell, "Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth- The Hero's Adventure," interview by Bill Moyers, Moyers and Company, June 21, 1988, accessed December 14, 2017, <http://billmoyers.com/content/ep-1-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-the-hero%E2%80%99s-adventure-audio/>.

fastened behind her. She used her eyes instead, and they filled with welling tears²” Eventually she does give in and tell him her name, where she is from, and why she is there, but her first reaction is one of modesty.

This seems like an odd reaction for someone who is chained to a rock confronted by a stranger who knows nothing about the situation. Granted, most people would probably be shy and want to avoid Perseus and his questions, but it might seem odd that this would be attributed to modesty over fear. Especially when the tale goes so far as to point out that “she would have hidden her face modestly with her hands.” However, this reaction and the way it is described fits well within the gender expectations of women in ancient Greek and Roman societies. Women were not legally eligible to be citizens in these societies, even if they were of royal or upper-class ancestry. Being modest, respectable, and reflecting positively on their husbands and fathers was valued as a feminine ideal in Roman society, as was modesty. This story, therefore, portrays Andromeda as an “ideal woman” of the time, who is modest, has committed nothing wrong, is of noble birth, and submits to the hero of the story, Perseus.

The character of Thora is similar to that of Andromeda in many ways, being noted for her beauty and virtue. However, she is different in that her beauty was not the cause of her imprisonment by the dragon. Rather, the dragon was a gift from her father, one she raised so well that it grew from a tiny baby dragon to one too large to fit in the house. Women in Ancient Norse cultures were had significantly more social standing than their Roman counterparts, especially if they belonged to the upper class. As such, it makes sense that Thora might have a bit more influence in her situation when compared to Andromeda. They were of great influence within their homes and upper-class women held sway over the community and could inherit

² Ovid, and A.S. Kline. *Metamorphoses*. IV. 663-705.

wealth from their fathers or husbands. “Most women’s lives were bound by hearth and home, but they had great influence within this sphere. The keys with which many were buried symbolize their responsibility for, and control over, the distribution of food and clothing to the household.”³ Thora, as an upper-class woman, would have had influence over the events of the household. Since she remains at home throughout this part of the story, it makes sense that she would have some control over her situation and would have played a part in it.

“The Two Brothers” also stresses the importance of the princesses’s chastity to the point that the doubt of her chastity causes a feud between the brothers and one gets his head cut off (he gets healed again—don’t worry). The princess, as usual, is beautiful and virtuous. She is probably the least interesting character of these three selected examples, as she really doesn’t get very much attention and the story she is part of is much longer and more complex than the others. In fact, the most important thing she does in the story is delay marriage and protect her chastity until she marries the true hero of the story. This is consistent with the values of middle-class German families during the mid-nineteenth century, when the story was recorded by the Grimms. And indeed, this sort of passivity of females is clear in many German tales of the time. Folklorist Ruth Bottigheimer argues that this is the case for both German and German-influenced tales, such as the Grimms’s fairy tales. She writes that in the nineteenth century, “the weaknesses ascribed to women also characterized the majority of German or German-influenced tale collections”⁴. In German stories of this era, as in middle-class society writ large, women were the ones to stay home and behave, and not to fight battles or raise dragons. Therefore, it makes sense that the princess would not have had much control or influence in her situation and would

³ Judith Jesch. “Viking Women” *BBC* last modified March 29, 2011.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/women_01.shtml

⁴ Ruth B. Bottigheimer, “Fertility Control and the Birth of the Modern European Fairy-Tale Heroine,” *Marvels & Tales* 14, no. 1 (2000): 75.

instead be in a position of remaining obedient, pretty, and chaste. It would have been odd if she had fought back against the dragon or outwardly protested or rebelled against her situation.

Instead, her quiet protecting of her chastity makes sense within the historical context.

The maiden is clearly important for her royal status, as well as her chastity, in these stories. These things make her desirable as a reward for defeating the dragon, but they are also what make her valuable to the dragon itself. Otherwise, the dragon would just go for someone else—say, a lonely old woman who is cast out from society.

The expectations of idealized females are clear and unchanging throughout these three stories: remain chaste, be beautiful, and wait to be rescued. This is consistent with a variety of fairy tales throughout time, as Bottigheimer claims, “The pen, nearly always held by a male hand, inked directions for what women should and shouldn’t do and what constituted feminine and unfeminine behaviour.”⁵ What the women in these stories do is based on real social ideals of what women ought to do in such a situation and how they ought to behave. Despite subtle differences in the characterization of femininity in these tales, the core of their behavior is the same. And it is surprisingly consistent throughout all three narratives, spanning over a millennia. However, these stories also present a confining narrative of ideal masculinity through their portrayal of the hero. Whereas women are expected to be chaste, beautiful, and passive, men in these stories must be active, brave, and selfless. They must risk danger and possibly even temporary death in order to save the maiden. They are not given much choice in the situation. After all, the maiden needs rescuing and no one else is going to do it. They are often the only ones equipped and able to fight the dragon, whether through training, intelligence, supernatural

⁵ Ibid., 65.

help, or a combination of these. To disregard this and ignore the dragon would make them less human—a failure. And so they must sacrifice themselves in an attempt to rescue the maiden.

Each hero in these three stories must slay the dragon and win the hand of the maiden. Thus, he takes the role of a successful suitor to the maiden, proving himself to her and to her father and kingdom. The exact method in which the dragon is slain is different in each tale, but in all three cases, the hero is seen as virtuous for having killed the dragon and saved the maiden. It is a common trope in fairy tales that the male hero exemplifies bravery and fighting skill in order to win the hand of the maiden, as this is seen as the correct action for a young man to do in the same way that keeping chastity is the correct thing for a female to do.

Dragons, in these stories, represent a different aspect of masculinity. They represent a rival for the maiden's honor, a challenge to the hero. There seems to be a clear link between dragons and fathers in tales of this type. Folklorist Vas DaSilva argues that, "...an identity between the father and the dragon as inappropriate suitors who (despite themselves) give away the object of their wooing to a lawful husband."⁶ Similarly to a father, the dragon keeps the maiden away from society, and therefore, away from the hero. They guard her against any that might come to take her away until a suitable man arrives and is able to defeat them and win the hand of the maiden. The dragon is obviously an unsuitable suitor for the princess (the two being different species and all), as a father is also an unsuitable suitor for his daughter. The two both, however, want to keep the maiden and prevent another from winning her hand in marriage. In this interpretation, then slaying the dragon is symbolic of a man's transition from a young suitor to an adult, perhaps even a father figure. For after he slays the dragon, the hero then takes on the role of protecting the maiden. Suzanne Magnanini argues that, "So closely intertwined are their

⁶ Francisco Vaz da Silva, "Complex Entities in the Universe of Fairy Tales," *Marvels & Tales* 14, no. 2 (2000): 234.

fates that some critics have suggested that the monster is simply an extension of the hero, an alter ego or a sort of brother-father figure that must be slain so that the hero can achieve his goals” (167-168). Therefore, the dragon and the hero are closely connected through not only their desire of the maiden, but also their shared fate: either kill the other or be killed yourself. The slaying of the dragon is also a transitional period for the hero—one in which he takes over the dragon’s role and ceases to be young and innocent.

The dragon, however, can also symbolize greed, as Joseph Campbell argues:

Dragons represent greed, really. The European dragon guards things in his cave, and what he guards are heaps of gold and virgins. And he can’t make use of either of them, but he just guards. There’s no vitality of experience, either of the value of the gold or of the female whom he’s guarding there. Psychologically, the dragon is one’s own binding of oneself to one’s ego, and you’re captured in your own dragon cage⁷.

Here, Campbell argues that the dragon represents one’s own greed-hoarding things that one has no use for. This interpretation of the dragon changes the meaning of the story to one of overcoming one’s own internal flaws. The story then takes place completely in one’s own head, and it is the good part of one’s self that must overcome the bad part of one’s self in order to live happily ever after. Rather than only being able to relate to the character that specifically matches one’s own situation in a particular moment of one’s life (as is the case with the interpretation of the story as a metaphor for a father giving up his daughter), this interpretation of the story is one with far more universal reach. Everyone is able to relate to all of the characters, since all of the characters are parts of one’s self. It is a story about overcoming flaws in one’s character in order to become a better person. This interpretation could also be extended to a view in which the

⁷ Joseph Campbell, "Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth- The Hero's Adventure," interview by Bill Moyers, Moyers and Company, June 21, 1988, accessed December 14, 2017, <http://billmoyers.com/content/ep-1-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-the-hero%E2%80%99s-adventure-audio/>.

dragon represents any challenge, internal or external, that someone must face in order to find happiness, fulfillment, a partner, status, or riches in life. Therefore, slaying the dragon is equivalent to overcoming the challenge and earning a just reward for doing so.

Another potential interpretation for dragon-slayer stories is one in which the hero represents humanity, and the dragon represents monstrousness. This interpretation was argued by Jonathan D. Evans, who claims that semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, rather than folklore studies, is more important when looking at dragon-slayer tales. His concern is with what the dragon symbolizes, rather than the significance of plot within a dragon-slayer tale. He asserts:

But when we begin to recognize that most elements encoded in the semantics of /dragon/ and in the structure of the dragon-slayer episode serve to delineate a sharp demarcation between the human and monstrous, we are able to reinterpret the formulas and segments denoting the hero's traveling to the fight as significant to this demarcation: the dragon's habitat is remote (on land, in forest, in mountains or caves, in or near bodies of water), in direct contrast to the social surroundings from which the hero travels to encounter the dragon.⁸

Here, the dragon represents the monstrous, the other, the wild, whereas the hero represents the human, the familiar, the civilized. This interpretation of the story means it is about taming the wild and overcoming the monstrous things in the world in order to make it safe. In this case, the story is one of man making the world more human—of overcoming nature. The dragon, then, is a symbol of the monstrous, which must be overcome by the hero in order to prove himself.

The theme of overcoming an obstacle is present in each of these interpretations and is indeed difficult to avoid when examining dragon-slayer tales. However, the specifics of what obstacle must be overcome and by whom vary. This malleability, indeed, is the heart of what makes fairy tales so pervasive throughout time. The basic tales can be adapted to tell myriad

⁸ Jonathan D. Evans, "Semiotics and Traditional Lore: The Medieval Dragon Tradition," *Journal of Folklore Research* 22, no. 2/3 (1985): 91.

stories with myriad lessons to take away, all while remaining with the same basic plotline. This is because different stories can have different meanings to different people across different times, cultures, classes, political situations, and ages. Emphasizing different aspects of any story or combining it with other stories can change what listeners will take away from it. Fairy tales, are, after all, excellent for imparting lessons through a lens of fantasy. They have an appeal which has not faded despite millennia of being told. This is due to the relatability of their characters and plots. But the plots and characters need not be confined to only one real-life scenario. This flexibility in meaning allows for the same tale to remain important throughout such different times and cultures and to become so pervasive within a culture. After all, very few people have slain a dragon, but everyone has faced some sort of major obstacle which certainly felt like slaying one.

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