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“Daenerys Targaryen: Transformation to the Monumental”

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Abstract

Daenerys Targaryen’s metamorphosis scene is analyzed in this article in relation to the millennia-old structure of the motif of “the woman and the dragon.” It is suggested here that the visual manifestation of Daenerys in the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, which was changed from George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, reflects the complexity of the image of Daenerys. This essay traces how the figure of Daenerys embodies ancient Greco-Roman and Early Modern art, embedded with the concept of monumentality that is key to the understanding of fantastic art and is demonstrated in Daenerys’s metamorphosis image. The definition of monumentality in art and particularly of a human figure is investigated here and follows Immanuel Kant’s perception of the sublime in stressing how the fantastic creates modern mythologies by presenting “greater than life” figures.

Keywords: Daenerys Targaryen, dragon, *Game of Thrones*, monumentality, sublime, woman.

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Daenerys Targaryen

Transformation to the Monumental

IN THE LAST EPISODE of the first season of the popular HBO series *Game of Thrones*, Daenerys Targaryen, also known as Khaleesi, undergoes a metamorphosis. Her character has a key role in the series written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss (2011–19, 1.10.40–49), adapted from George R. R. Martin’s book *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996, 798–807). At the end of the first season, Khaleesi’s beloved husband, Khal Drogo, has just passed away, and she, in a desperate attempt to save him, has lost her unborn baby. His cremation is arranged in the form of two circles of fire. Daenerys’s wedding gift—three ancient dragon-eggs—are placed on Drogo’s pyre, and the witch Mirri Maz Duur, who intentionally failed to save his life, screams in the background as she is burnt alive with him. Suddenly, Daenerys begins to walk into the fire, as if desperate and longing to die with her lost husband. When the fire dies down and a new day dawns, the audience is surprised to discover that Daenerys Targaryen possesses her ancestors’ powers and has not been harmed by the fire. Even more surprising, three baby dragons have miraculously hatched from the eggs that were thought dead yet were revived by the fire (fig. 1).

In this article I focus on the final image of the scene, in which Daenerys stands with the three newborn dragons, the Dothraki tribe bowing before her. I suggest that the scene demonstrates a common feature of fantastic visual art—monumentality or presenting a figure as larger than life. Using Immanuel Kant’s perception of the sublime as presented in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, I intend to examine and understand the ways this monumentality, a stylistic and conceptual aspect of Daenerys’s figure, shows how her character is rooted in images and aspects of Great Goddesses. This concept is particularly

supported by her connection with the dragons, explored through my investigation of “the woman and the dragon” motif (Kant 1790).

The figure of Daenerys Targaryen has been the object of recent scholarly study. Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik’s *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones and Multiple Media Engagements* (2016) is probably the most important investigation of the subject, especially Schubart’s article “Woman with Dragon: Daenerys, Pride, and Postfeminist Possibilities.” *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by Jes Battis and Susan Johnston (2015), also delves convincingly into the television series. Shiloh Carroll (2018) and Debra Ferreday (2015) also consider gender aspects of the screenwriting and visual production of *Game of Thrones*. Most of these scholarly investigations successfully break down the literary aspects of the book; its visual production, however, is approached only on the level of the narrative and has not yet been explored using an art historical methodology. This is regrettably also the case for the genre of fantastic visual art, for which semi-scholarly books exist such as Sackmann (1986), Boris Vallejo and Doris Vallejo (2000), Frank Frazetta, Arnie Fenner, and Cathy Fenner (1999), and Karen Haber (2011). However, most of these were written by the artists themselves, highlighting the field’s dearth of scholarly research. In that regard, Donald Palumbo’s work (1986) is an exception, in that it considers both visual and textual evidence.

Here, I would like to address the iconology of this scene, which follows the motif of “the woman and the dragon” over time, identifying meanings that endure in its iconography (Panofsky 1955). A portion of iconology is understood here as reception—the preservation and transformation of visual elements over time and between different cultures (Wyke 2013; Maurice 2019). In addition, some aspects of feminist studies, such as Hélène Cixous’ (1975) perception of Great Goddess powers as part of women’s identity, and Kathryn Rountree (1999) are framed as a cultural symptom. Cixous suggests that ancient matriarchal cultures had a system of belief and a language that followed feminine deities. She connects her manifesto to a very long line of studies that saw Medusa as a matriarch goddess severed by patriarchy. She argues that feminism should seek the lost feminine language and the belief in the power of the spirit of femininity. The scene in question represents an on-screen apotheosis. I suggest that the visualization of Daenerys mirrors “Goddess” believers and Cixous’s deepest aspiration and hope.

In modern fantastic art, images of voluptuous women with believable and lifelike images of dragons are an iconographical constant. The two figures, lady and beast, are usually posed in a collaborative and peaceful interaction, and are sometimes even fused, as in paintings such as B. Vallejo's *Flight of the Dragons* (fig. 2), Julie Bell's *Golden Lover* (fig. 3), and Rowena Morrill's *Vision Tarot* (fig. 4). Some would say the eroticism of the women is titillating (Palumbo 1986, 225–35, 95–116); they might, therefore, conclude that fantastic art is a popular artform of a male-dominated culture that serves the demand for erotic, sometimes almost pornographic, material and so cannot be considered fine art. This idea does not hold true, however, when the perspectives of the artists are taken into consideration. B. Vallejo (2000, foreword) expressed great discomfort with giving up erotic elements of his paintings, saying that he paints naked women because of his admiration of the female body; the female artists Bell and Morrill evince equal enthusiasm for eroticizing women, even though female artists themselves. In light of this, it becomes clear that this iconography poses a problem that requires a journey back in time to trace the meaning and function of eroticism within the motif of “the woman and the dragon.”¹

The History of the Motif of “the Woman and the Dragon”

Previous studies of mine analyze images of women with dragons in the Greco-Roman to Early Modern eras, take them apart, compare them, and look for their accompanying signs and symbols. It was ascertained that dragons, which originated from and were often referred to interchangeably with serpents (Khalifa-Gueta 2020), should be viewed differently when conjoined with women than with men: women do not fight dragons! They communicate, unite, fuse with and are constantly assimilated to dragons; the two signs when juxtaposed to one another indicate the androcentric reaction to extremely powerful women in a patriarchal social context.

¹For the quantity of erotic women's images of Julie Bell, see *Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell: Official Fantasy Art Website of Boris and Julie*, <https://www.borisjulie.com/product-category/prints/julie-prints/>; for those of Rowena Morrill, see “Rowena Morrill: Artworks,” *Arthive*, https://arthive.com/artists/64732-Rowena_Morrill/works/type:painting.

The mythological structure of women with dragons relates to their striving for a union that is holy, which happens only if the woman in question is a virgin, but if the woman is sexually experienced, the union becomes defiled, destructive, and dangerous.

The Pythia—the priestess of Apollo in his temple at Delphi—dwells in the cave of the dead dragon Python. She sits upon a tripod mythically considered to be made of Python's bones, which pulls her hair and whispers to her; she listens and prophesizes (Hyginus *Fabulae*: 140–45; Nonnus *Dionysiaca*: 9:547–42; Servius *Servii Grammatici qui Feruntur in Vergilii carmina commentarii*: 3.92, 260, 360, Rhetor *Peri epideiktikon*: 3.17 [says Python is the entire mountain of Parnassos]. Parke and Wormell 1956, 24–26). The Pythia's name alone ties her to Python (Connelly 2007, 2, 44; Fontenrose, 1980, 374–77).

My study suggests that the dragon was a mythological analogy for the Great Mother Goddess (Khalifa-Gueta 2020). Many Great Mother Goddesses metamorphosize into dragons or are anguipedian—part woman part dragon—including Wadjet (fig. 5) and Isis (Neumann 1955; Gimbutas 1982, 112; Johnson 1990; Roberts 1995; Lesko 1999, 69–76). Athena's attribute was the *oikouros ophis*, a real serpent that was worshiped in the temple on the Acropolis in Athens and believed to be a metamorphosis of the goddess (fig. 6) (Herodotus, *The Histories*: 6.60). Athena is also shown riding a chariot driven by dragons, as did Demeter/Ceres and her ambassador Triptolemos (fig. 7). The iconography of Hygieia, the goddess of health, is of her feeding a holy serpent (fig. 8), as did Vesta, Bona Dea and other goddesses. Real women also fed dragons in the form of snakes as part of ceremonies such as the *Thesmophoria* and the *Lanuvium* (Lucian *Lucian*: 7.358–65.2. Joines 1967, 68–145; Johansen 1975; Burkert 1979, 138–40; Pailler 1997, 516–23; Patterson 2005; Bowden 2010, 26–48; Ogden 2013b, 203–6, 347–59). Mythological deities that are not goddesses, such as the Hesperides (Graves 1955, vol. 2, 144–52) and Medea, are also presented in artistic evidence as worshipping and feeding dragons in a sacred manner (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: 7.149–58; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*: 8.54–121. Clauss and S. I. Johnston 1997, 28–29; Ogden 2012, 269).

Every dragon has a mother; Gaia is represented as either the mother or grandmother of these creatures. Repentance to Gaia is required after killing a dragon because the hero or god killed her offspring—even Apollo had to be exiled from his temple at Delphi for several months every year to atone for the slaying of Python. Hera gave birth to

Typhon, through her anger about Zeus's infidelity and his miraculous ability to create life on his own, and gave it to the dragoness Python to raise (*The Homeric Hymns*: 3.242–76, 3.375–87).

I investigated images of Andromeda and Hesione, who were sacrificed to dragons, as a symbol of “the bride of death,” exploring the slaying of the dragon as signifying a break with the woman's previous identity and its connection to the marriage ceremonies (Jacoby 1923: fr. 10; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*: 1.41; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: 4.663–739, 5.1–235. Phillips 1968; Gantz 1996, vol. 1, 307–9; Ogden 2008b, 97–98; Ogden 2013a, 153–78; Ogden 2013b, 118–28. Dowden 1989). This type of woman alludes to the issue of identity: before marriage, the woman has an identity with the option to gain more power by uniting with the dragon and becoming holy. In order for her to be suitable for marriage, the man has to sever this bond and therefore separate the woman from her identity, which is symbolized by cutting the bride's hair before a marriage ceremony in ancient Greece (Rouse 1902, 240–49; Burkert 1985, 70, n. 29; Levine 1995, 82–88, n. 14).

Medea and Medusa, the latter of whom is fused with the dragon, have bad connotations and are powerful and destructive when joined to dragons. The both murderous and rejuvenating Medea ascended in a chariot driven by dragons after she murdered Jason's new bride and her own children (fig. 9) (Euripides, *Medea*: 1259–60; Apollonios, *Argonautica*: 3.1214; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: 7.192–218, 258, 408–16; Seneca, *Medea*: 12–15, 685–704, 950–53. Luschnig 2007, 63–66; Abrahamson 1999; Ogden 2008a, 27–38; Ogden 2012, 245–57; Spaeth 2014, 41). Medusa is a fusion of a woman and a dragon, as are other female monsters such as Lamia (Wilk 2000; Ogden 2013a, 82–97; Ogden 2013b, 86–97). Analysis of these dangerous female figures establishes how stereotypes of the problematic collaboration between women and dragons emerge. The stereotype of “the witch” who communicates and collaborates with dragons springs directly from Medea's figure, the prototype of witches. The “serpents in the soul” bias relates to women's physiology as being controlled by their emotions, particularly rage, analogizing women, serpents, and fire as irrational, uncontrolled, and full of unexpected (emotional) outbursts (Clauss and S. I. Johnston 1997, 219–49). This discussion clarifies the connection between the voluptuous woman, witchcraft, fire, and the dragon, which all come together in Daenerys's image of metamorphosis.

I have elsewhere written about how the motif of “the woman and the dragon” relates to the fear and discomfort of the patriarchy toward women in unusual positions of power, who were so often allegorized to dragons (Khalifa-Gueta 2020). The current study proposes that this motif’s meaning reflects the ways patriarchal societies cope with powerful women who challenged social boundaries.

Eve is another fundamental image exemplifying the communication between women and dragons (Forsyth 1987, 222–35; Joines 1967, 6, 31, 40–41; Batto 1992, 59; C. Johnston 2000, 20–23; Nusboim 2015–16). In the iconography of the Eden myth, an anguipedian she-serpent—who some scholars identify as Lilith—emphasizes the complexity of this union between women and serpent (fig. 10) (Hoffeld 1968, 436).

Saint Margaret is another example of a holy woman with a dragon. Although in her hagiography she is described as summoning and exorcising the dragon, her many images tell the story of a union with the dragon, related particularly to her aspects of apotropaic protection—using monsters’ images to chase away monsters, particularly over childbirth and infants (fig. 11) (Jacobus de Voragine *The Golden Legend*: 93. Albert 1988, 23–25; Pearce 1997; Dresvina 2016).

To conclude this brief historical survey, the interaction between female figures and dragons is mostly one of communication, collaboration, and fusion; they are assimilated to one another, whether they aim to do good or harm (or both). Several goddesses were purported to be mothers of dragons, and riding the dragon is a consistent formula related to fertility that was used to present female power. As its image unfolded through time, the dragon, when depicted together with a woman, became a symbol of women’s powers, indicating access to knowledge and healing and magic abilities, among others; both are positioned as adversaries to men.

The Metamorphosis Scene: Description Versus Image

When George R. R. Martin wrote *Song of Ice and Fire*, he was familiar not only with other fantastic literature but also the visual tradition of the motif in question. The image of Daenerys that Martin describes is vivid and can easily be ascribed to known fantastic images of women with dragons. Nonetheless, the description of this scene in Martin’s

books changed when it became visual in the HBO series, as seen in the following examples. Martin describes the building of Khal Drogo's cremation pyre in his book: "They laid the wood east to west, from sunrise to sunset, . . . north to south, from ice to fire" (1996, 799–800). This passage creates an image of a cross, the pillar of the world (James 1966; R. Cook 1974; Baert 2004). The connotation to Christianity is also suggested when Daenerys is given a boiling bath as part of the purification ceremony prior to that of the cremation. This detail alludes to Saint Margaret being tortured in a boiling bath, which did not harm her and made the crowd who witnessed it spontaneously convert to Christianity (Martin 1996, 801. Ross 1997, 98–104). In his description, Martin prepares the reader for a change of heart that is about to take place, which the Dothraki tribe witnesses along with the reader.

The image that appears after the fire calms down is also different from the one revealed on screen. The hair of Daenerys was not resistant to the fire like the rest of her body and has been burned completely off her head. Hair is a symbol of identity and strength in women's history. An ancient bride would have her hair cut as a symbol for the removal of her familial identity. Khal Drogo's long hair is a symbol of male heroism and victory akin to Heracles's and Achilles's long flowing hair, which is described as making them look fearsome in battle (Levine 1995). There are mythological descriptions of women with long and flowing hair, but they are typically witches or virgins. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when Medea comes to consult the dragons and the agents of the night to make a potion of death and of rejuvenation, the first thing she does is loosen her hair (Ovid *Metamorphoses*: 7.183–190; Seneca *Medea*: 12–15, 950–53). Gananath Obeyesekere's anthropological study *Medusa's Hair* (1981) attests to a similar phenomenon in which a modern-day woman's unbound, untended, and wild uncontrolled hair symbolizes her location on the margins of society. Martin's decision to burn Daenerys's hair has the symbolic meaning of metamorphosis—she is indeed going through a transformation of identity and, like an ancient bride, must shed her previous identity. The other meaning of Daenerys's loss of her hair is to place her figure as far as possible from the connotations of witches. Schubart has sufficiently uncovered the Messianic connections to the Daenerys figure (and Gjelsvik 2016, 120–22), and she concurs that the hairless figure is meant to take the reader as far as possible from the symbol of the witch. The witch, Mirri Maz Duur, herself is

being burned away, physically and metaphorically, as the cremation ceremony takes place.

The mother of dragons is described feeding her dragons thus in Martin's novel: "The cream-and-gold dragon was suckling at her left breast, the green-and-bronze at the right" (Martin 1996, 806). This image connects art historically to the well-established iconography of Cleopatra from the western Middle Ages and Early Modernity. Cleopatra VII Philopator (69–30 BC) was the last descendant of the pharaoh's dynasty that ruled for three millennia. (Approximately thirty-two different dynasties are accounted for in Egyptian historiography yet all are mythologically considered a linear historical line.) Cleopatra formed an alliance with Mark Antony (83–30 BC), who was at the time the most prosperous and decorated Roman warlord and was expected to succeed Julius Caesar. After their military loss, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide. She is remembered throughout western history as an evil, seductive opportunist, as is seen in Boccaccio's defamatory writings about her in his book *Famous Women* (88. Curran 2011, 96–131; Geronimus 2006, 61–64). Her best-known iconography shows a serpent attached to each of her breasts (fig. 12). In Cleopatra's case, this image symbolizes her death, because she committed suicide by allowing herself to be bitten by snakes. However, she is portrayed very much alive and active in this iconography, which, if she is breastfeeding the serpents like Daenerys does in Martin's book, means that there is also a dualistic meaning at play. There are other intriguing resemblances between the characters of Cleopatra and Daenerys: both are the last descendants of a legendary ruling clan; both aspire to reclaim past glory by joining forces with a champion male who was supposed to help them revive their ancestors' past glory, but instead these men died unexpectedly; and both seem to desire death for themselves when their male champions die. The difference between the two women is that the serpents clinging to Cleopatra's breasts are messengers of death, while the dragons leaning on Daenerys's breasts function exactly the opposite way, bringing new life, new hope, and a new identity for the queen. This new identity changes the mind and hearts of the people that surround her and of the reader.

Daenerys's metamorphosis scene in the HBO series *Game of Thrones* introduces several changes from the text. The pyre of Khal Drogo is located in the center of a double-circle fire maze, with connotations of Hindu cremation rituals, during which the wife

usually joins her husband's body and is burned alive (fig. 13) (Howard M. R. Williams [2016] analyzed this scene's resemblance and the elements that are similar to the Hinduism cremation ritual). This is the association the viewer is supposed to understand when Daenerys walks into the fire, as confirmed by the words of Ser Jorah Mormont (an exiled knight in Daenerys's service): "I know what you intend; do not! ... Don't ask me to stand aside as you climb on that pyre. I won't watch you burn." (2011-19: 1.10.44:23-33). But in fact, only the witch is being burned alive with Khal Drogo. The two circles of fire are arranged in the manner that symbolizes mazes in Medieval art (fig. 14). Just like caves, mazes are considered a womb of the earth, which upon entering and exiting lead to an experience of death and rebirth (Kern 2000, 30-31; Ustinova 2009, 3, n. 14). The cycle also alludes to the Ouroboric dragon, which bites its tail to create a full circle, symbolizing time and prudence (A. Cook 1914-40, vol. 1, 197-299; Neumann 1955, 211-39; Fontenrose 1980, 313; Reemes 2015). The maze of fire is the liminal location of Daenerys's metamorphosis and her moment of union with the Great Goddess of fertility. Important to remember is that, within the *Game of Thrones* lexicon, fire is a divine entity worshiped and capable of killing and rejuvenating.

The theme of fertility and infertility reemerges in this scenario, when after losing her unborn human baby, Daenerys becomes the "mother of dragons," giving miraculous and grotesque birth to the three ancient eggs. This, again, reconnects to Saint Margaret: a virgin saint protector over childbirth rituals, able to summon and exorcise the dragon and to be delivered herself from the creature's belly (Price 1985; Albert 1988).

Presenting Daenerys naked, with floating silver hair and holding dragons, is part of fantastic art's long iconographic tradition of erotic women reclaiming their power and reuniting with the dragon—the symbol of the Great Goddess. This image, it is contended here, recalls appreciating the female body and ecstatically elevating the female character to the level of the goddess. It also supports stereotypes of women in unusual positions of power as being dangerous and, in this case, supports Daenerys's opposition to the destructive patriarchal order of Westeros, the continent she wishes to conquer. The Dothraki crowd instantly bows down to her, suggesting that she is placed outside the patriarchal order in which they grew up and associates her within the structure of Great Goddesses. Thus the writer, the director,

and the audience of this series understood this scene as inspiring respect for the motif of a woman with dragons.

The iconology of this scene (fig. 1) presents one tiny dragon in Daenerys's arms, another on her shoulders, and a third climbing up her thigh. Although she is naked, her stable and balanced standing pose does not allude to eroticism; there is nothing in her image that incites the emotions of desire and titillation. Even though she looks fragile and her dragons are tiny, she is transformed in the viewers' minds into a power figure—the chosen one, the worthy one. She stands covered with ash like a Phoenix rising from ashes to reclaim its golden glory.

Daenerys's Metamorphosis and the Motif of “the Woman and the Dragon”

By briefly tracing the motif of “the woman and the dragon” it has been possible here to understand the image of Daenerys's metamorphosis and uncover how deeply the motif is rooted and fundamentally coded with meanings of the godly, sanctity, power, and danger. The meaning of the motif relates to a woman who is at peace with contrasting binary aspects of her persona: she is in harmony with her own body and sexuality, past and future, and darkness and light. The power hiding inside of her has suddenly exploded out, symbolically manifesting in the form of a dragon. At this moment she poses the ultimate threat to the patriarchy of Westeros, but her power is constructed as positive and feminine in contrast to Westeros's destructive and terrorizing masculine domination. Daenerys's power is based in genesis, reemergence from ash, and the ability to give birth, although, as is later elucidated, she too has destructive powers like other Great Mother Goddesses. She is the master of her faith and will never again be sexualized to win the assistance of men.

The paradox is that, at the moment Daenerys emerges from the fire, the dragons are tiny—they can harm and pose danger to no one—so the transformation actually occurs in the mind of the viewer. Like Saint Margaret, Daenerys outwardly materialized her inner self, like a fertility god or, rather, like the Mother of God, creating a magical being that was assumed to have vanished from the world. The connection with the figure of Mary is not only through the dragon, which Mary

is sometimes presented as trampling under her feet (Cohen 2008, 255–56), but also through Christ himself, who was often allegorized as a dragon—particularly as the copper serpent in his image on the cross (Kessler 2009). The analogy between Christianity and the metamorphosis scene alludes to the latter’s sacred elements, reuniting Daenerys with the holy aspects of the interaction between a woman and a dragon.

Another issue necessary to discuss is the masculinized female. Fantastic artists have reacted to the blurred borders between masculinity and femininity. In the 1960s, feminist revolutionaries were said to burn bras (“100 Women”)²—a sign of restrictive female clothing. It became socially acceptable and even fashionable for women to style themselves more androgynously: they cut their hair short and later, in the 1980s, even added shoulders pads to their manly suits, giving the female silhouette a masculine, broad-shouldered appearance. In response to these conditions, fantastic artists created strong, masculine female protagonists. They did not, however, give their women male anatomy, but instead used female body builders as models. These artistic manifestations mirrored social approaches. For example, a woman could only be perceived as strong in the world at large if she adopted a masculine attitude, or, in other words, defeminized herself. These concepts also affected concepts of erotica and sexuality in women.

Daenerys’s images in her metamorphosis and other scenes from season one reflect the twenty-first-century approach to these concepts. Her appearance is of a fragile, very young, and not-quite-mature woman. She is petite and her sand-colored silky dress emphasizes her feminine curves, stressing her non-masculine appearance. When her clothes get burned away in the fire, she is revealed as a woman without strong muscles, and her hair remains long, both choices that further highlight her femininity. The paradox remains that she is shown small, naked, and fragile and giving birth—the most feminine act a woman can perform—yet the manifestation of her union with the power symbol of the dragon forces the viewer to accept binary concepts about her. Her figure is strong but fragile, exposed to the viewer but not open to being touched, matriarchal within the patriarchal, utopian and dystopian. She is not a woman who adopts masculine behavior

²Scholarship is debated whether this actually happened or is it a myth.

and appearance (as Brienne of Tarth and Cersei Lannister do later in the series), but a totally feminine force that comes to challenge masculine power and becomes united with the ancient sacredness of females.

The multiple disparate aspects underpinning this image cause a transformative reaction in the viewer/the reader for her character. They are forced to expand their intellectual approach toward a character with oppositional features and undergo a metamorphosis in their perception of her, reevaluating their judgments and rethinking their categorization of her figure. This metamorphosis disrupts the viewers' established mindset and necessitates a reevaluation of their attitudes, a moment so typical of Martin's series.

The most important issue to understand about Daenerys's metamorphosis scene is the binary structure of the motif of "the woman and the dragon" as good and bad simultaneously, which is a reception concept embedded within the motif that allowed it to be transferred from antiquity. The ancient Greek protagonist Medea is the most interesting figure related to this idea; she was the mistress of the dragon but chose to betray both her father and the dragon when she ran away with Jason. She is a witch with knowledge of the secrets of regaining youth, but cunningly tricks the daughters of Pelias into murdering their father. She was betrayed by Jason, who wanted to marry a princess and get rid of her, so she murdered the princess, her father, and eventually her own children (Gantz 1996, vol. 1, 340–73; Clauss and S. I. Johnston 1997, 5–7; Ogden 2012). Her images on sarcophagi (marble coffins) (A. Cook 1914–40, vol. 1, 211–40, 249–50; Clauss and S. I. Johnston 1997, 217–49; Newby 2016, 327) also demonstrate a story of repentance through the ultimate sacrifice—her children—to gain absolution and consequently *apotheosis* (transformation into a god), which makes Medea both good and bad—a binary figure. Her story of sacrificing her children to regain union with dragons and escaping on a chariot driven by dragons to become a goddess associates her with Daenerys's character. Daenerys loses her baby, perhaps consciously, to save her husband, but ends up losing both. At this lowest moment, she rejoins her bloodline with dragons, and her eventual ability to ride dragons is associated with the concept of apotheosis. The transformation of "the woman and the dragon" motif through time structures Daenerys's character, emblemizing its contradictory nature and conceptually uniting her with Great Goddess aspects.

Similarly, High Renaissance artists' ability to imbue the image of Saint Margaret with binary meaning is another artistic inspiration for the modern motif of "the woman and the dragon." The artists of the High Renaissance were able to create an image that instantaneously epitomizes both positive and negative meanings, forcing the audience to be uncomfortable and unsettled and depicting an image that both mirrors yet undermines the patriarchy of their time. The same is true with Daenerys's character. In the beginning of season one, she acted her part within the patriarchal social structure: being sold to marriage, raped, and subordinated. Her union with the dragons undermines this social structure and raises her status within the hierarchy so greatly that she actually changes the social structure around her.

What can be considered the postfeminist aspects of Daenerys's metamorphosis image is suggested here to be a concept transformed from antiquity and early modern art. The fact that her single image can signify multiple, even contradictory aspects, is in fact suggested here to reflect past concepts embedded in the motif. This scene possesses various contradictory aspects—death and birth, destruction and creation, witchcraft and miracles (both intervention into the natural order), great feminine power and fragility, and the inherited binary connotation of dragons as good and evil—that are characteristics of images of women and dragons going back to ancient times. Multiple concepts and a contradictory nature are embedded in the motif of "the woman and the dragon."

Fantastic Visual Art and the Binary Meaning

Images from Antiquity and Medieval and Early Modern Western Europe, such as those of Medea and Saint Margaret, were embedded with both positive and negative meanings. This ability to represent multilayered meaning in a single image is the inheritance contemporary artists of fantastic art use to reformulate the motif of "the woman and the dragon." The motif has positive aspects of holiness, rejuvenation, protection, healing, and association with Great Goddesses; at the same time, it has negative connections to witches, murderers, temptresses, and women with uncontrolled emotions. Therefore the erotic interaction between a woman and a dragon in modern and contemporary art continues the tradition of containing binary meanings of both good and evil.

Modern images of women and dragons were imbued with concepts from the past but also reacted to changing attitudes toward women in the twentieth century. Neoclassicist artists of the fantastic, according to discussion thus far, not only drew their inspiration and themes from classical as well as Early Modern artistic traditions, particularly Italian art, but also pondered the meaning of this motif. The practice of creating paintings of women with dragons continued into the 1960s and 1970s and endures today, presenting women in erotic scenarios with dragons in which the two entities collaborate, fuse, and rarely fight.

This motif thus has many aspects; however, I now want to explore one of them, namely the motif's connection to the sublime. Kant writes: "If nature is to be judged by us dynamically as sublime, it must be represented as arousing fear" (2000, 128–59, quote from 143); causing the viewer to feel small and helpless in the face of nature's great powers. This awe is related, according to Kant, to the fact that the viewer's eye cannot see the beginning and the end nor grasp the quantified proportions of the massive view in front of him or her. According to Kant, when viewers feel this helplessness, a dynamic process in their minds inspires them to the spiritual and leads to morality (Merritt 2018).

Kant's theory of the sublime is particularly apt when referring to a category defined here as "monumentality." For this reason, I need to delineate the metamorphosis of Daenerys's image. Prior to the metamorphosis moment, Daenerys is a petite and fragile young woman, a foreign wife, who looks abnormally pale surrounded by the large, strong, and dark-skinned people of her Dothraki tribe. She was sold into marriage by her brother, which reflected her gender inferiority and the patriarchal social structure under which she lives. She is also a descendant of a lost civilization that had a primeval connection to dragons but was still extremely patriarchal and was completely obliterated. In the fiery moment when the body of Khal Drogo is being cremated and Daenerys walks into the fire, she is transformed into "the mother of dragons" and a ruler in her own right, to whom all of her Dothraki tribe bow. The addition of three small dragons to her image envelops the watching crowd and television viewer into a structure of power and domination that completely changes her character and the audience's attitude toward her.

In this weighty moment she instantly changes from a queen by marriage and part of a barbarian tribe of little importance to a force

to be reckoned with—a “power figure”—worthy of the longed-for Iron Throne taken from her ancestors. There are several reasons for her transformation in the eyes of the audience, but I contend that the combination of Daenerys’ image with the fantastic sign of the dragons transforms her into a monumental image. This transpires by uniting her with the sign of the dragon, which has multiple aspects of power: physical force, knowledge, healing abilities, and cosmocratic (control over the universe) powers through time, both within the mythology, within the narrative, and in the viewer’s eye. Moreover, she is instantly associated with the previously discussed motif of the woman and the dragon, ascribing to her a range of qualities and superhuman abilities.

The depiction of this fragile girl, standing naked, dirty with ash, and accompanied by tiny dragons, sheds light on new qualities of her character and changes the audience’s attitude toward her, because she has become an abnormality, united with mythological schemes of godhood. She is transformed into an unnatural phenomenon imbued with infinite ramifications and associated with both positive and negative qualities, unexpected and uncontrolled. Her new association with dragons and the notion of the Great Mother Goddess instill in her qualities of the sublime: people around her become conceptually small, fragile, and insignificant in comparison to her, while she, who is still petite and, alongside the tiny dragons, inspires simultaneous fear and adoration. Her infinity is not visual but conceptual—she becomes a force of nature.

Daenerys is still small and pale in this final image of season one (fig. 1), but when all those surrounding her bow, she looks tall and dominant. Her pale skin, despite the dirt that covers it, shines as if she were lit from within, contrasting with the dark surroundings. This is emphasized by the cry of the baby dragon, which, although the creature is tiny, echoes over miles and miles.

The best example to stress this point is a fan culture painting of Daenerys Targaryen by Jason Edminston that responds to her image in that particular scene (fig. 15).³ The text on Edminston’s webpage and the recognizable face of Emilia Clarke (the actress who plays Daenerys) show that this image follows the television series and not merely the novel. (The varied colors of the dragons, however, might suggest

³Jason Edminston illustration:
<http://jasonedminston.com/portfolio/paintings/mother-of-dragons/>

additional knowledge from the books.) In this image of Daenerys, she is presented as a Christian icon painting, particularly because her hand gesture is stylistically akin to the blessing of Christ and the saints (fig. 16) in artistic depictions from the Italian Renaissance. The artist uses techniques of art of the past to visualize monumental images in a formula that is extremely familiar in Western culture: her image occupies the entire frame and seems disproportionately large within and elevated above the background, contrary to rules of perspective; and she stares at the horizon hinting at an eternal gaze. The dragons function as both her attributes and her symbols, alluding to the triple dragons—the symbol of her household—and covering her nakedness in a manner similar to that of images of Venus Pudica (fig. 17). She radiates light that cuts through the rising smoke and the sparks of the flames, and her expression is calm and blank. This painting translates how fan viewers perceive her image at this moment—she is transformed into a goddess depicted with the attributes of whichever godlike image one prefers, in Edminston’s case a Christian god conjoined with a pagan goddess.

Connecting once again to Kant, I suggest that the sublime of nature is transformed into a monumental figure, who possesses the qualities of nature in regard to mankind—a potential of tremendous strength over men—while also, like nature, being unpredictable and uncontrollable. Daenerys is united with an antique concept of the Great Mother Goddess, which is the emblem of nature and of the earth, transforming her image from human to goddess and her figure into a force of nature, unbound, dangerous, and unpredictable. The director uses visual aids such as filming angle and chiaroscuro (emphasis on the contrast between light and dark). But most significantly, Daenerys’s image is the recipient of the iconography and the iconological significance of “the woman and the dragon” motif. These visual aspects combine to apotheosize Daenerys, elevating her to the level of the gods.

To conclude, both Martin and the HBO directors and script writers of *Game of Thrones* react to the conceptual motif of “the woman and the dragon” and, whether consciously or otherwise, manifest the visual iconographic tradition together with its iconological meanings. The ancient motif of “the woman and the dragon” has been embedded with binary concepts of holiness, wisdom, healing, and power, along with negative concepts of defilement, witchcraft, murder, seduction, and temptation. This outline of the motif of “the woman and the dragon”

has shown the ways in which it has been adjusted to different eras and social concepts, particularly in relation to patriarchal social structure and its issues with women with unusual power who challenge the established social order. Furthermore, fantastic visual artists of the twentieth century apply reception of ancient and Early Modern concepts of the motif, as discussed here, and inject into it changing attitudes toward women in their own time. These concepts have been suggested as both positive and negative and more meaningful than is generally presumed. The image of Daenerys, from both George R. R. Martin's book series and the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, is thus the recipient of this long and diverse tradition, operating within the structure this motif carved out over the years.

The stylistic and conceptual visual aids that are applied to Daenerys's image transform her into a sublime character. These stylistic cues, adopted from Italian Renaissance art, are regularly used in fantastic visual art to claim that characters are "larger than life," and particularly in female figures who are monumental and powerful. Ultimately, Daenerys is a woman who challenges the patriarchal social structure that surrounds her. She embodies both positive and negative multilayered qualities because of a metamorphosis that transforms her into a monumental, modern goddess in a contemporary mythology of images and equates her with a force of nature.

List of Illustrations



Fig. 1. Sharon Khalifa-Gueta, *The Birth of the Dragons*, painting after *The Game of Thrones*, season 1: chapter 10: 44.48, HBO Production (June 19, 2011). Self painting.



Fig. 2. Boris Vallejo, *Flight of the Dragons*, from *Mirage*, 1981. Oil on canvas. Permission granted from Artist.



Fig. 3. Julie Bell, *Golden Lover*, 1992, oil on canvas. Permission granted from Artist.

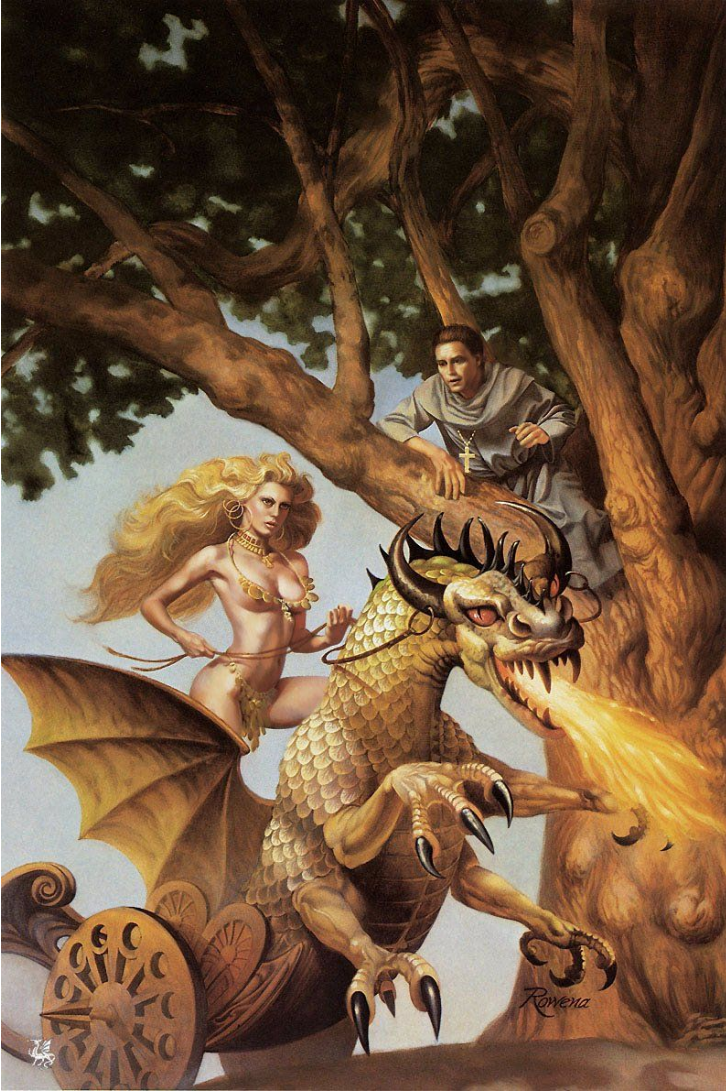


Fig. 4. Rowena Morrill, *Vision Tarot*, second half of the twentieth century, oil on canvas. Permission granted from Artist.



Fig. 5. *Wadjet Breastfeeding Horus*, pendant from the tomb of Tutankhamun, 1323 BC. Gold. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 61952, exhib. 85) © Griffith Institute, University of Oxford.



Fig. 6. *Athena Parthenos Accompanied by the Oikouros Ophis*, Parian marble, second century AD, copy of Pheidias *Athena Giustiniani*, bronze sculpture, late fifth–early fourth century BC, from the temple of Minerva Medica on the Esquiline Hill, Vatican Museums, Rome. © Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 7. *Rape of Persephone*, 160–80 AD, pantelic marble sarcophagus, L. 210 cm, H. 75 x W. 63 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence (I 05111) © Gallerie degli Uffizi.



Fig. 8. *Hygieia*, Roman marble statue, 1st century AD, copy of a Greek statue, third century BC, Hermitage Museum, Saint-Petersburg. © Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 9. *Medea Feeds the Dragon*, 320–310 BC, Paestan red-figured early Apulianizing volute crater, Naples National Museum (82126) © su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli – photo Di Giorgio Alban.



Fig. 10. *Adam and Eve*, 1160–1260, relief under the feet of Mary from the Portal of the Virgin, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris. © Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 11. *Saint Margaret of Antioch*, 1425–75, miniature from book of hours, produced in two stages, Walters Museum, Baltimore (MS 168, f. 222r). © Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 12. *Death of Cleopatra*, 1505, miniature illustration of Antoine Dufour's *Life of Famous Women*, Musée Dobree, Nantes. © Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

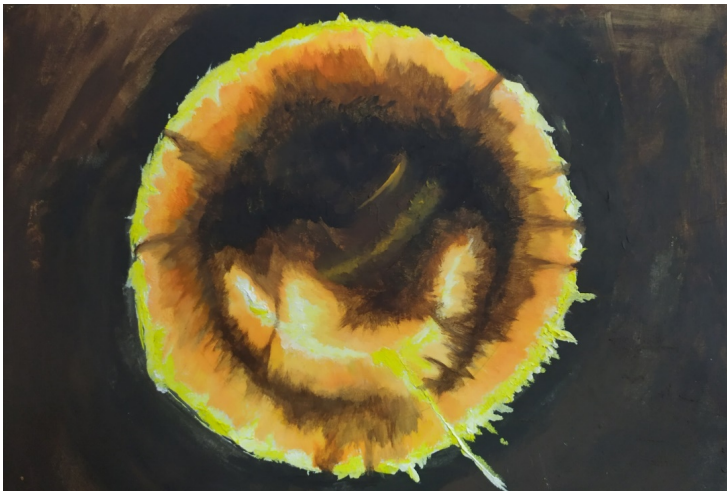


Fig. 13. *Khal Drogo's Cremation*, frame from *The Game of Thrones*, season 1, chapter 10: 47.21, HBO Production (June 19, 2011). Self Painting.

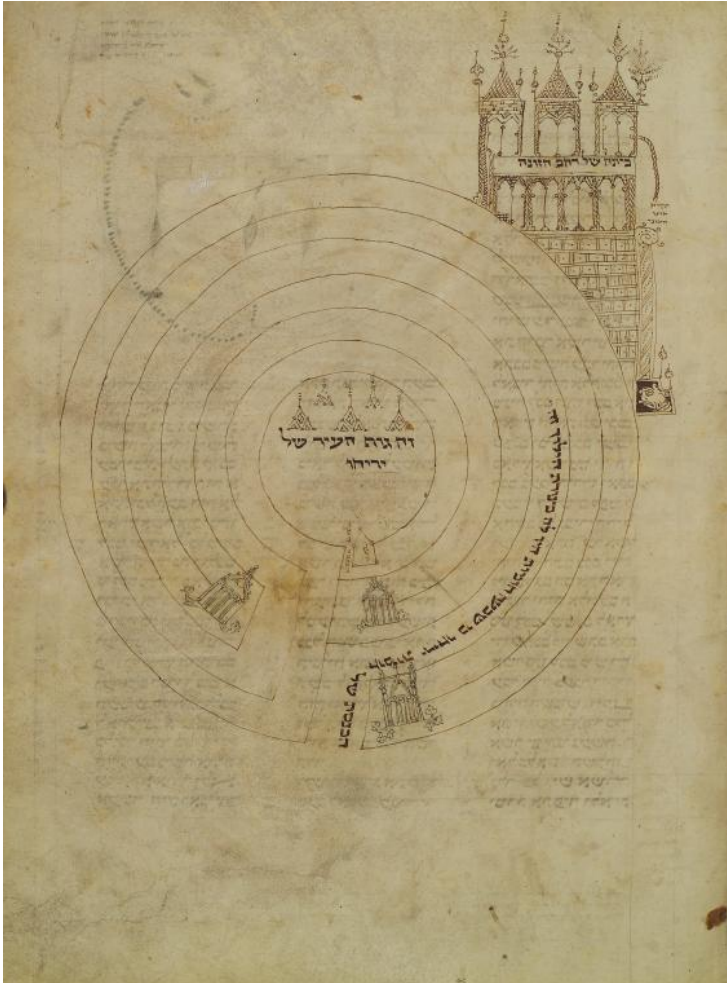


Fig. 14. *The Walls of Jericho*, 1294, miniature illustration pen and ink, 39 x 29.5 cm, Hebrew Bible, fl. Ir, written by Joseph of Xanten, New York Public Library, Spencer Collection.

Public domain. Source: <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-c97d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



Fig. 15. Jason Edminston, *Daenerys Targaryen*, After the last scene of the first season of the HBO series *A Game of Thrones* (2011). Permission granted from Artist.



Fig. 16. Titian, *Salvator Mundi (Christ Blessing)*, oil on panel 96 x 80 cm, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (c. 1570) (-114). © Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

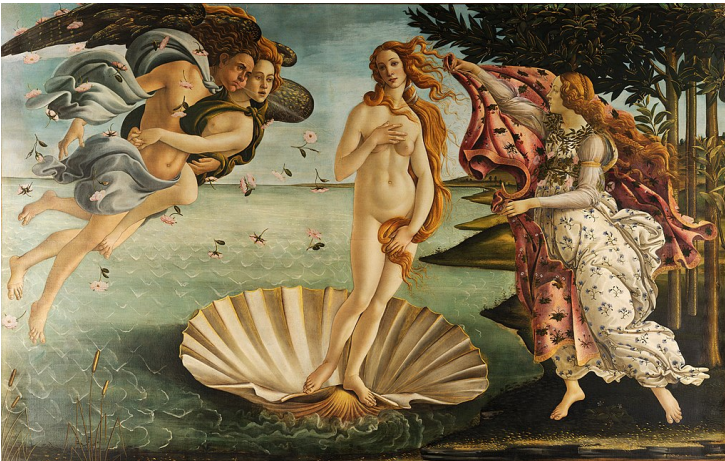


Fig. 17. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, tempera on canvas, H. 172.5 cm x W. 278.5 cm, the Uffizi Gallery, Florence (c. 1485) (No. 00158551). © Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

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