“Of Women & Dragons: 
Pride, Postfeminism, and the Female Fantasy Hero in *A Game of Thrones* (1996) and First Season of *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011)”

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And there came a second crack, loud and sharp as thunder, and the smoke stirred and whirled around her and the pyre shifted, the logs exploding as the fire touched their secret hearts. She heard the screams of frightened horses, and the voices of the Dothraki raised in shouts of fear and terror and Ser Jorah calling her name and cursing. No, she wanted to shout to him, no, my good knight, do not fear for me. The fire is mine, I am Daenerys Stormborn, daughter of dragons, bride of dragons, mother of dragons, don’t you see! Don’t you SEE? With a belch of flame and smoke that reached thirty feet into the sky, the pyre collapsed and came down around her.

In the last episode of first season of HBO show Game of Thrones (2011–), princess Daenerys enters the blazing pyre of her husband. People around her think she is crazy and about to commit suicide when she walks into the fire. “I am Daenerys Stormborn,” she tells herself in the novel on which the television show is based, “daughter of dragons, bride of dragons, mother of dragons.” She believes fire cannot harm her and, indeed, after the fire dies out she is miraculously alive and holding three newly hatched dragons. Although I am no particular fan of fantasy, I recall feeling thrilled and barely able to wait until next season. I also recall thinking Daenerys was the most intriguing female hero I had met on television. But what, exactly, made her so appealing? What was different?

The show is adapted from George R.R. Martin’s book series A Song of Ice and Fire which has become the most popular fantasy series since Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. One explanation for its success is an unorthodox take on fantasy and, especially, the female hero. Daenerys is one of the series’ many male and female protagonists, and though it remains to be seen if she wins the game of thrones, she is a
prominent character. Here, we shall look at Daenerys as female hero in the book *A Game of Thrones* (1996) and season one of the HBO show *Game of Thrones* (2011–). Drawing on genre theory, cognitive theory, and postfeminism, I will examine her as female fantasy hero, discuss the emotion of pride, and, finally, ask in what way she represents a development in postfeminist culture.

The Genre: High Fantasy

But first an introduction to *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Daenerys rather solemnly introduces herself several times in the novel, first when she silently comforts herself on her wedding night, then when she addresses her people before she enters the pyre, and last as she, again silently, reminds herself of her royal descent before walking into the flames. “I am Daenerys Stormborn, Daenerys of House Targaryen, of the blood of Aegon the Conqueror and Maegor the Cruel and old Valyria before them. I am the dragon’s daughter.”

She exists in the world of Westeros, which appears to be on primordial Earth. She belongs to House Targaryen, which is one of seven royal families who struggle over the Iron Throne in the Seven Kingdoms. The Seven Kingdoms were long ago united by Aegon the Conqueror who commanded dragons and they have since been ruled by House Targaryen. That is, until the throne was seized by Robert Baratheon, who at the start of the series has ruled for thirteen years. Thus begins *A Game of Thrones* (1996), the first book.

The genre is *high fantasy* which takes place in a secondary world. The scale of events is epic, which means they involve everyone and are narrated in rich details demanding a long story format such as the novel. Typical themes are the grand battle of good and evil, a coming-of-age story, and a quest. High fantasy combines elements from several genres. First, from *myth and legends* high fantasy has archetypical figures like dragons, witches, wizards, and so forth. Second, from *the medieval romance*, we find a heroic struggle where “a protagonist either has or develops great and special skills and overcomes insurmountable obstacles in extraordinary situations to successfully achieve some desired goal, usually the restitution of order to the world invoked by the narrative.”¹ The “romance” of high fantasy is thus not that of today’s romantic comedy, but that of medieval legends and stories of Arthurian knights. Third, high fantasy shares what John F. Cawelti calls the moral world of *the melodrama*, which has plural characters and stories intertwining in a grand scale of events, an underlying moral principle, and a heightened dramatic impact. “In fact, its chief characteristic is the combination of a number of actions and settings in order to build up the sense of a whole world bearing out the audience’s traditional patterns of right and wrong, good and evil.”²
A fourth and, in our context, crucial generic element is the naïve stance of the fairy tale. We can call this a stance of wonder and optimism. Where the melodrama may come to a tragic end (reminding us of the world’s “proper” moral order), fantasy usually, like the fairy tale, has a happy ever after. After all, Daenerys doesn’t die in the fire, she is resurrected and rewarded for her test with three dragons. The utopian view in the fairy tale favors “little people” over those in power. Marxist sociologist Ernst Bloch sees this as a subversive and enlightening quality of fantasy and the fairy tale: “consider yourself as born free and entitled to be totally happy, dare to make use of your power of reasoning, look upon the outcome of things as friendly.”

Literary critics discard this naïve attitude as infantile, but marxist theory and fairy tale researchers consider it humanistic, politically subversive, utopian, and even messianic in elevating the weak and providing hope. “Tolkien sees the world as a prison and as irrational. Fantasy is a form of protest against irrational confinement,” says fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes in a discussion of Tolkien. “Fantasy is liberating and can be shared. As it takes the form of a fairy tale, it provides three nurturing and civilizing qualities: recovery, escape, consolation.” Recovery means a recuperation of fantasy (which is confined in our modern society), escape means escape from a modern world (which has become an irrational prison), and consolation means providing hope of creating or at least envisioning a different world. In short, fantasy is heroic and melodramatic, it offers figures from myth and legends, and it is narrated in the naïve stance of the fairy tale, yet rooted in our real world. “Fairy tales are unreal but they are not untrue; they reflect essential developments and conditions of man’s existence.”

So, returning to A Song of Ice and Fire, although George R.R. Martin is credited with twisting the genre into a realistic and morally grey-scale world, we will see the underlying workings of the generic rules of high fantasy. The overarching story is a struggle for the Iron Throne with House Lannister cast as the evil characters and House Stark as the good characters. In the first book king Robert is murdered, probably by his queen, Cersei, who wants the throne for her son Joffrey. When Robert seized the throne he killed the Targaryen family except for a pregnant queen and her son Viserys, who fled across The Narrow Sea. The queen died giving birth to Daenerys. When Daenerys is old enough, prince Viserys trades his sister to a warlord for an army. Viserys plans to return to Westeros to claim the throne. Our hero seems to be the noble Lord Eddard Stark, a friend of king Robert. But when Joffrey accuses Eddard of his father’s murder he – much to our surprise – beheads what we believed was our protagonist. And then war erupts. From the north, Eddard’s son leads an army. Across the sea, the Targaryen sieblings plan an attack. And after decades without supernatural powers, dragons come alive as does other undead creatures and black magic long thought dead.

The series was planned as a trilogy but grew into seven books of which five have been published. From being relatively unknown it reached bestseller lists by fourth book and has sold more than fifteen million copies. Martin had won prices for
his short stories and novels in science fiction and fantasy, and he had worked in Hollywood as a consultant and writer on series like *The Twilight Zone* and *Beauty and the Beast.* We see his fondness for the short story format in the design of his books where each chapter is narrated from a character’s first person perspective. *A Game of Thrones* is narrated by nine characters, seven from House Stark, one from House Lannister, and the last is House Targaryen, the princess Daenerys, who narrates ten of the book’s 72 chapters. After the fourth book, development of the HBO show started in 2007 and premiered in 2011, winning two Emmy Awards, a Golden Globe, and awarded Outstanding New Program by the Television Critics Association. A second season came in 2012 and a third premieres March 31, 2013. Each season follows a book and an overall change is to postpone events by three years and make characters three years older. Thirteen-year old Daenerys is thus sixteen in the show.

**The Female Fantasy Hero**

What, then, does the female fantasy hero look like? Well, as a trueborn Targaryen Daenerys has lilac eyes, silver-pale blond hair, and is stunningly beautiful. She is thirteen, skinny, and terrified when Viserys sells her to the thirty-year old horselord Khal Drogo, who commands a fierce, nomadic warrior people.

Dany looked at Khal Drogo. His face was hard and cruel, his eyes as cold and dark as onyx. Her brother hurt her sometimes, when she woke the dragon, but he did not frighten her the way this man frightened her. “I don’t want to be his queen,” she heard herself say in a small, thin voice. “Please, please, Viserys, I don’t want to, I want to go home... We go home with an army, sweet sister. With Khal Drogo’s army, that is how we go home. And if you must wed him and bed him for that, you will.” He smiled at her. “I’d let his whole khalarar fuck you if need by, sweet sister, all forty thousand men, and their horses too if that was what it took to get my army.”

In the first book and the first season, Daenerys grows from an insecure girl bullied by her brother into a self-confident young woman, a khaleesi of the Dothraki people, and, when Drogo dies, a widow and mother of dragons.

Daenerys combines traits from a universal hero with the fairy tale heroine. In his classic study *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1993, original 1949) Joseph Campbell describes the archetypical adventure of the universal hero as “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return.” This structure – departure, initiation, return – is found in myths and legends across the world. The journey mirrors an inner transformation which ends with the hero’s discovery of his hidden powers: “He is ‘the king’s son’ who has come to know who he is and therewith has entered into the exercise of his proper power – ‘God’s son.’” Campbell describes his hero as a man and his trials as confrontations with a father: “the work of the hero is to slay the tenacious aspect of the father (dragon, tester, ogre king) and release from its ban the vital energies that will feed the universe.” The underlying story is both religious – a god/son revelation – and psychological – “The mighty hero of extraordinary powers... is each of us: not the physical self visible in the mirror, but the king within.” This “king within” is a savior-figure who “brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole.” Like Campbell’s hero, Daenerys, too, was raised in exile and sent on an unwilling journey. She, too, is the chosen one, not the son of a god, but the daughter of a family
who once commanded dragons. And she, too, must face numerous trials in an initiation into heroism and self-awareness. Her trials, however, are atypical for a hero and instead typical for a fairy tale heroine.

There is an overlap between adventure and fairy tale, as protagonists in both genres face trials, tests, and supernatural events. An important difference, however, is that where adventure has a male hero, the fairy tale has a hero and a heroine with different initiations. Both, says fairy tale scholar Maria Tatar, must learn humility and compassion if they are to pass the three tests. But where the fairy tale hero gains a kingdom, a princess, and the power to rule, the heroine may win a husband but loose what power she had. Also, the way she learns humility and compassion is different from a fairy tale hero. He just needs to befriend the magic beings he encounters on his way to solve the tests later on. Fairy tale heroines, in contrast, must be beautiful and good, and are often also vain and proud. For the latter, vanity and pride, they are severely punished. Tatar says they are “humbled in the course of their stories. In fact, humbled is perhaps too mild a term to use for the many humiliations to which female protagonists must submit.”

If fairy tale heroes are happy-go-lucky, heroines are “victimized” and “abased and forced to learn humility.” They pick lentils in the ashes, are imprisoned in high towers, must be silent for six years, and are almost burnt at the stakes. Thus, their stories, tests, and prize differs from the hero’s. They are initiated into a life of marital submission, as feminists have pointed out. And their tests require abasement and deprivation rather than slaying dragons.

When it comes to initiation, fantasy is less rigorous than the fairy tale. Campbell says the initiation is “a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials.” Where the fairy tale is short, initiation in adventure can be stretched out indefinitely (or into seven books). After her wedding, Daenerys leaves the free cities where she has spent her entire life and travels across a vast continent of golden plains and mountains to the far-away city of Vaes Dothrak. Her challenges are not in the distinct form of the test, yet I will nonetheless summarize them into three distinct challenges: she must stand up to her brother, face her husband, and kill a witch.

**The Test of Character**

The second phase – the initiation – is a learning process in both the adventure and the fairy tale. When the universal hero passes the threshold, he experiences “the ‘purification of the self’” and his “senses are ‘cleansed and humbled’.” So, too, the fairy tale heroine learns “compassion and humility, which are both acquired characteristics rather than innate traits.” Tatar divides fairy tale tests into an initial test of character where the hero must show compassion and humility to befriend magic helpers, next an impossible task which he solves with the aid of these helpers, and last a trial where he faces the ultimate advisory. Looking at Daenerys’ ten POV chapters, her initial test is to deal with her eight-year older brother which she does in chapters one, three, four and five. Here, the emotion of pride at stake.

Viseris is arrogant and humiliates and beats Dany, and he is her first adversary. He doesn’t see how other people perceive him, but is vain and proud. He feels he is better than everyone else and especially better than the proud Dothraki people. When Daenerys has had beautiful Dothraki clothes made for him, he calls them “rags” and sneers “next you’ll want to braid my hair.” But the Dothraki warriors’ braids with ringing bells are signs of victories won. “You have no right to a braid, you have won no victories yet,” Daenerys responds. “I am the Lord of the
Seven Kingdoms, not some grass-stained savage with bells in his hair,’ Viserys spat back at her. He grabbed her arm. ‘You forget yourself, slut. Do you think that big belly will protect you if you wake the dragon?’ Viserys’ pride is the kind that psychologists Jessica L. Tracy and Richard W. Robins call hubristic pride. Hubristic pride is based on internal and stable traits, such as one’s birth or one’s innate abilities (say, being beautiful, intelligent, or having a beautiful singing voice), in contrast to authentic pride which is based on one’s achievements. Hubristic pride is narcissistic, it considers oneself better than others, and it is often distorted into an aggrandized self-esteem. It is fragile in the sense that it turns into shame when it is challenged. It is also maladaptive because it blames and antagonizes others. Authentic pride, instead, is acquired through one’s efforts to achieve things. It is, in the language of evolutionary biology, prosocial and adaptive because it marks a proud person as being hardworking and competent and an achiever. Authentic pride “contribute to the development of a genuine and deep-rooted sense of self-esteem.” It sends a positive signal which prevents exclusion from a group. Khal Drogo’s hair has never been cut for he has never been defeated and his long braid with bells mark him as a warrior who is khal by achievement. Viserys, on the other hand, has never entered a battle, but takes his birthright to the throne for granted.

So, in her first test Daenerys must learn the difference between hubristic and authentic pride, two versions of pride that according to Tracy and Robins are complexly linked in a single emotion. Psychology only recently added pride to the basic human-universal emotions which are recognizable across cultures by physical features: pride is signalled by a head held high, an expanded chest, an upward gaze, a smile (imperceptible or small), and a straight body posture. “You still slouch. Straighten yourself,” Viserys corrects her in her first chapter. In chapter three she has embarked upon her journey and rides across the plains with Drogo’s seed growing inside her. The open landscape stimulates her senses with new experiences: “The air was rich with the scents of earth and grass, mixed with the smell of horse-flesh and Dany’s sweat and the oil in her hair. Dothraki smells. They seemed to belong there. Dany breathed it all in, laughing.” She has commanded to be left alone in the high gras and when Viserys interrupts and hits her, she shoves him back for the first time in her life. “Have you forgotten who you are,” he screams, “look at you. Look at you!” Daenerys is barefoot and dressed in Dothraki clothes, “she looked as though she belonged,” while he is “soiled and stained in city silks and ringmail.” Because she is establishing a new, sensual relation to her surroundings, the nature, the people, and the situations, she can suddenly see her brother with different eyes. “He was a pitiful thing. He had always been a pitiful thing. Why had she never seen that before? There was a hollow place inside her where her fear had been.”

Becoming a khaleesi puts Daenerys in a different position. It is not so much that her status has changed (although she now can command servants to punish Viserys for hitting her) as it is a new attitude to the world which allows her to see. “He could not lead an army even if my lord husband gave him one,” Dany tells Ser Jorah after the confrontation in chapter three. “He will never take us home.” Daenerys doesn’t beg for her brother’s life when he at a big feast held in the honor of her unborn child, drunk and mad with jealousy, holds a sword to her belly and demands the army Drogo promised him. Drogo pours a crown of melted gold over his head, and Daenerys watches her brother die screaming. “He was no dragon, Dany thought, curiously calm. Fire cannot kill a dragon.”

In this first test, Viserys is her adversary and Drogo her helper, the latter because he represents the sensations and emotions of a Dothraki attitude which helps
Daenerys let go of fear. In contrast to Campbell’s hero and the fairy tale heroine, Dany doesn’t learn humility and compassion, which she already possesses in full; instead she learns to understand emotions. Thus, she can recognize the difference between on the one hand a maladaptive and hubristic pride and on the other hand an authentic pride built from achievement. She also learns to control her emotions and shut off humility and compassion when the situation calls for it. An important lesson for anyone wanting to rule a kingdom. And, as the psychological view would say, for anyone wanting to rule themselves.

**An Impossible Task**

The second test, says Tatar, is an impossible task solved with the aid of the helpers the hero befriends. This is when our hero must empty a lake with a perforated spoon or our heroine spin a mountain of straw into gold overnight. Campbell reads the dragons, guardians, goddesses, good fairies, and witches as symbols of paternal and maternal forces. I shall read the task and the helpers and adversaries more pragmatically as exemplary of how the world works and what the hero must learn in order to master it. Daenerys’ task is not to sort lentils in the ashes or be silent for six years; it is to live with a husband who takes what he pleases. The task is about sex, intimacy, and adapting to a foreign culture.

As noted earlier, test and task are entwined and by solving the test and internalizing the Dothraki way Daenerys develops a self-esteem which enables her to stand up to her brother. This self-esteem again helps her tap into her biological genes as blood of the dragon. So, Drogo (and the Dothraki culture he represents by extension) is both her task and her helper. The task and its solution are crystallized in two scenes which we shall examine closely, as the adaptation from words to images changes several aspects of the task.

The first scene is on Daenerys wedding night. During the feast, the warriors have sex with female slaves in public, in front of the khal and his bride and their guests. Ser Jorah explains to Daenerys that Dothraki culture is different from that of Westeros: “The Dothraki mate like the animals in their herds” and “there is no privacy in a khalasar, and they do not understand sin or shame as we do.” Indeed not. Drogo is described as tall, hard and muscular, with “cruel eyes” and a braid that has never been cut because he is undefeated. Yet this fierce warrior takes his teenage bride to a private place in the mountains and spends the night caressing her until she willingly surrenders:

> He stopped then, and drew her down onto his lap. Dany was flushed and breathless, her heart fluttering in her chest. He cupped her face in his huge hands and she looked into his eyes. “No?” he said, and she knew it was a question.
> She took his hand and moved it down to the wetness between her thighs. “Yes,” she whispered as she put his finger inside her.34

Although theirs is an arranged marriage and Drogo leads a macho warrior people, he treats her with a romantic gentleness we must ascribe to the generic rules of the romance and melodrama (we recognize, of course, the theme of beauty and the beast and the trope of the exotic dark sheik). Still, even if Daenerys surrenders, she doesn’t enjoy their sex life. “He always took her from behind, Dothraki fashion, for which Dany was grateful; that way her lord husband could not see the tears that wet her face,
and she could use her pillow to muffle her cries of pain.” She is contemplating suicide when one night she has a dragon dream where “she opened her arms to the fire, embraced it, let it swallow her whole, let it cleanse her and temper her and scour her clean . . . she felt strong and new and fierce.” The next day she stands up to Viserys and the same evening asks her handmaid to show her how to please a man. Her solution of the impossible task happens that night when instead of having sex inside the tent, she takes Drogo outside and makes love to him in full view of the khalasar, the Dothraki way, only now she mounts him and looks him in the eyes:

When he tried to turn her over, she put a hand on his chest. “No,” she said. “This night I would look on your face.” There is no privacy in the heart of the khalasar. Dany felt the eyes on her as she undressed him, heard the soft voices as she did the things that Doreah had told her to do. It was nothing to her . . . when she mounted him she saw something there that she had never seen before. She rode him as fiercely as ever she had ridden her silver, and when the moment of his pleasure came, Khal Drogo called her name.

The task is at one level to bed a king and learn to do it to her satisfaction, at another level to accept a culture and live not with it but in it. Assimilate it. It is more than learning, it is adapting. In order to solve her task the female fantasy hero must change her perspective from that of victim to one of agency. As she mounts Drogo, he falls in love with her and she with him. He calls her the “moon of my life” and he becomes her “sun-and-stars” and when he is dying from an infected wound she willingly gives her unborn child in a blood-sacrifice to try and save him. This initiation process could not have begun without Viserys and Drogo. In each their way they push the female hero out of her comfort zone. Drogo represents sexuality, power, authentic pride, and freedom, the latter signaled also by his wedding gift, a beautiful mare, on which he places her at the wedding feast. Sitting on the silver horse, “for the first time in hours, she forgot to be afraid. Or perhaps it was for the first time ever.”

As noted earlier, a general change was to make characters three years older in the HBO show. The books have several child protagonists between seven and fifteen, which all become older, and most are played by even older actors. Thus, Daenerys is made sixteen which changes sex with a minor to sex with a girl the age of consent (which in Denmark is fifteen and in the US varies between sixteen and eighteen). The roles of Daenerys and Drogo played by respectively British twenty-four year old actress Emilia Clarke, who doesn’t look like a teenager but a young woman, and thirty-two year old Hawaiian actor Jason Momoa, six feet and two inch tall (1.93 meter). Also, we note how the fairy tale’s theme of a king who marries a young maiden (in the fairy tale she is often fifteen) merges with the trope of the dark-skinned sheik and his white female captive.
In the adaptation not only her age but also the matter of consent is altered: In the show Daenerys doesn’t consent but cries and tries to cover herself as Drogo undresses her and mounts her from behind – instead of gently pulling her on his lap and facing her, as in the novel. The wedding night in book and show – raising ethics of respectively sex with a minor and marital rape – has been hotly debated. Some feminist bloggers see the show’s wedding sex as a clear example of marital rape: “The beautiful setting and soft music is a subliminal cue . . . you give when the romantic leads are about to kiss and fully recognize their passion for one another. In this scene, those cues are perverted with a message that rape is romantic, rape is love.”

Other feminists (who have read the books) interpretate Martin’s depiction of how men treat women, be they Queens or high Ladies or prostitutes, as a critical portrayal of women’s oppression in a patriarchal world: “the canard of the woman who falls in love with her rapist is extremely difficult to overcome . . . [yet] by creating such diverse and fully rendered female characters and thrusting them into this grim and bitter world, Martin has created a subversively feminist tale.” Other critics evade the ambiguity of the wedding sex – rape or cultural custom? – and discuss instead a later situation where Daenerys saves women from rape in a city her husband has conquered. In “Dany’s Encounter with the Wild: Cultural Relativism in A Games of Thrones,” philosopher Katherine Tullmann thus concludes that, “In the end, we must reject moral relativism. No matter what culture we’re in, some actions are wrong. Which actions are those? . . . Rape? Definitely.”

However, the situation which Tullmann discusses (the women in the conquered city) is a clear example of aggressive rape, and when she discusses the wedding night she examines the morality of public sex (finding open fornication a cultural custom and not a crime) and doesn’t discuss the sex between Drogo and Daenerys to which the answer may not be a “definitely.” Neither the book nor the show endorse the cultural praxis of arranged marriages, but they portray this differently: in the book we understand it is a costum and that Drogo is gentle with his young bride – which other men in the series are not – whereas the show presents it as a clear example of marital rape. Ethically, the book endorse a cultural relativism with a humanistic ethic at its core while the show has a more straight forward middleclass Western moralism.

Also, solutions differ. In the book, Daenerys has sex in public, “it was nothing to her.” Later, in her chapter five, when she is visibly pregnant, she is described as naked and – after having ceremonially bathed in the Womb of the World – she again has sex with Drogo in full view of the Dothraki people. This sexual behavior is not in the show and not hinted at. Instead, in the second episode, “The Kingsroad,” the maid Doreah instructs her in a scene where the two women, fully clothed, are in bed with one another:

“No! Tonight I want to look at your face,” Dany tells Drogo.
MAID: No, *khaleesi*, you must look in his eyes always. Love comes in at the eyes. It is said that Irogenia of Lys could finish a man with nothing but her eyes.


MAID: Kings travelled across the World for a night with Irogenia. Magisters sold their palaces. Khals burned her enemies just to have her for a few hours. They say a thousand men proposed to her and she refused them all.

DAENERYS: Well, she sounds like an interesting woman. I . . . I don’t think that Drogo will like it with me on top.

MAID: You will make him like it, Khaleesi. Men want what they’ve never had. And the Dothraki take slaves like a hound takes a bitch. Are you a slave, Khaleesi? [Daenerys shakes her head]. Then don’t make love like a slave . . . Out there he is the mighty khal but in this tent, he belongs to you.

The novel doesn’t use the word “love” about Daenerys and Drogo’s relationship. In the novel, the maid explains to Daenerys what tricks to do and theirs become a passionate relation. In the show, the maid instructs the khaleesi how to make the khal fall in love with her. “No! Tonight I want to look at your face,” Dany tells Drogo. She has sex with Drogo inside the tent and they embrace with a conventional romantic kiss. Thus, where the book grants Daenerys agency through the means of sex, the show changes their relationship from non-consensual sex into romantic love.

The book shows how an arranged marriage through the female hero’s active choices may develop into love (which ultimately leads to Drogo’s downfall). The show, on the other hand portrays an arranged marriage with marital rape which, also through the female hero’s actions, develops into (romantic) love. Neither versions endorse arranged marriages, however, in the book the characters have a more transgressive sexual behavior than in the show.

To solve the task Daenerys must change behavior and worldview. Seen from her perspective – and from a culture of arranged marriages – Drogo doesn’t rape her. Rather, this is the way of their world. Viserys arranged her marriage to Drogo as Eddard arranged his daughter Sansa’s engagement with Joffrey and as Robb was promised to a Frey daughter in return for military help. It isn’t *fair*, but then the world isn’t fair. The hero’s task is to adapt. Where we are unable to change circumstances we must change our actions.

**A Postfeminist Interlude**

Before we come to Daenerys’ trial, I wish to situate her in the context of postfeminism, a term becoming widespread in the nineties when George R.R. Martin wrote *A Game of Thrones*. Postfeminism is a diffuse concept which, as British gender scholar Stéphanie Genz puts it, “does not exist as a bounded philosophy or ideology, nor can it be discussed as an organized political movement.” The term indicates an attitude, an openness to new ideas, and an optimism about the future. It has been called “a frontier discourse” that embraces plural femininities and rejects binary dichotomies and grand narratives. It speaks not from a center of meaning but investigates borders in search of
“conflict, contradiction and ambiguity.” Postfeminism believes in agency, choice, plurality, and freedom to choose our actions, our selves, and our social roles. The term is often confused with third-wave feminism, however, where feminism is a political movement, postfeminism isn’t a movement in the sense of being collective or organized. It is an individual and loosely-defined attitude to society and culture with keywords being globalisation, choice, fragmentation, and individualism.

Culturally speaking, postfeminism and feminism overlaps. However, feminism tends to view things as either pro- or antifeminist, as the comments to Daenerys’ wedding sex show. It is to this either-or approach that postfeminism offers a both-and alternative. In my work on female heroes I have used the term “in-betweenness” to capture the ambiguity of a both-and approach to, say, a female hero who is both a sexualized spectacle (young, beautiful, sexy) and active, able, and independent. “In-betweenness is the space between us two usually joined poles – male-female, active-passive.” The Bride in Kill Bill (2004) and the pirate king Elizabeth Swann in Pirates of the Carribean: At World’s End (2007) are examples of such inbetweenness which “presents viewers with a polysemic image that enables both reactionary and progressive readings” Because these heroes have multiple and (it seems) contradictory traits they offer not one, but many readings. Thus, where a feminist reader may reject a hero as being antifeminist another might see the same hero as being feminist or postfeminist. Postfeminism captures this pluralism, ambiguity, and conflictedness.

Genz links postfeminism to the political third wave represented by British sociologist Anthony Giddens and head-of-states Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, the latter two authors of the manifesto Europe: The Third Way from 1999. They suggest “it is the state’s responsibility to act as an agent for employment and put in place a framework that enables individuals and businesses alike to fulfill their potential and root out poor achievement.” Key words are “new individualism,” “tolerant traditionalism,” postmodernism, globalism, pluralism, and multi-culturalism. Like postfeminism, the third wave is a both-and response to changes in a world with shared market economy but conflicted political interests. “[T]he state should not row, but steer; not so much control, as challenge . . .” Postfeminism doesn’t aim for the Grand Utopia of a just world with just gender politics. It acknowledges conflicts of interest, the absence of a center perspective, and the lack of clearly defined goals and enemies. More than ever, third wave politics are operative in a post 9/11 world, where Grand Utopias more than ever seem a thing of the past. Historian Jay Winter instead coins the term minor utopias for smaller political struggles, such as the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions. In the third wave, as in Winter’s minor utopias and in postfeminism, politics is both something “structurating” the individual as well as collective action. Politics are both macro-politics – meaning large-scale and institutional – and micro-politics – meaning in the hands of the individual. We may speculate that they can be linked: Daenerys is both a teenage wife and a dragon princess. Drogo is both a man and a khal.

Returning to Daenerys, we can ask if she represents a postfeminist politics. One feature that makes her different from Xena, Sabrina, Buffy, the Bride, and other contemporary female heroes, is an unconventional mix of generic codes. Thus, A Song of Ice and Fire exchanges the usually “light” fantasy tone for a “realistic” verisimilitude. Thus, because we think Lord Eddard Stark is our protagonist, we are genuinely surprised when he is executed. Politics unfold with a Machiavellean logic where the naive king Robert is murdered, the idealist Lord Eddard is executed, and the old world warrior Drogo will die in the next section of this paper, none of them
able to adapt to new world politics. Daenerys, on the other hand, learns to adapt and act as an individual, which is precisely what a postfeminist attitude is about.

So, let us turn to the trial and see how she kills a witch.

**The Trial and the Witch**

The trial, says Tatar, is no different from the former two tests in that we find “the rewarding of good will and the punishment of treachery,” only that it “intensifies the reward (a princess and a kingdom) and the punishment (death)” to provide “finality” to the tale.

With Viserys gone and Drogo tamed, Daenerys could have been content. “If I were not the blood of the dragon, she thought wistfully, this could be my home. She was khaleesi, she had a strong man and a swift horse, handmaids to serve her, warriors to keep her safe. . . . That should be enough for any woman … but not for the dragon. With Viserys gone, Daenerys was the last, the very last. She was the seed of kings and conquerors, and so too was the child inside her. She must not forget.’’ She takes up Viserys’ ambition for the Iron Throne and also his hubristic pride. She feels there is more to her life than to rule a primitive, nomadic people on a far-away continent.

She asks Drogo to conquer the Iron Throne which he refuses. “The Stallion who mounts the world has no need of iron chairs.” For someone who fights and rules from a horse, a chair in a castle holds no appeal. But after an assassin sent by Robert Baratheon attempts to poison Daenerys, Drogo declares war: “I will kill the men in the iron suits and tear down their stone houses. I will rape their women, take their children as slaves, and bring their broken gods back to Vaes Dothrak.” Daenerys is happy he will do this for her. Ironically, had he taken only what he wanted, he might have lived. But ignoring his warriors’ protest, he grants Daenerys more power than women usually have in the Dothraki culture. He will learn that choices have consequences, and so will Daenerys. She thinks, naively, that it is possible to wage war without paying the costs of war. But as she rides into a foreign city she sees Drogo’s warriors rape women.

Across the road, a girl no older than Dany [fourteen] was sobbing in a high thin voice as a rider shoved her over a pile of corpses, facedown, and thrust himself inside her. Other riders dismounted to take their turns . . . I am the blood of the dragon, Daenerys Targaryen reminded herself as she turned her face away. She pressed her lips together and hardened her heart . . . She wanted to cry, but she told herself that she must be strong. This is war, this is what it looks like, this is the price of the Iron Throne.

Dany can’t help responding to the girl’s “heartrending sound” and claims all the raped women as her slaves, whom the men can only have if they take them as wives. “You have a gentle heart, but you do not understand,” says Ser Jorah, “those men have shed blood for the khal. Now they claim their reward.” A warrior explains, “she is nothing, Khaleesi. The riders do her honor.” And Drogo says: “This is the way of war. These women are our slaves now, to do with as we please.” “It pleases me to keep them safe,” says Dany and Drogo grants her the women.

One is Mirri Maz Duur, a godswife and healer, and she is Daenerys’ third adversary. She offers to heal khal Drogo who has been wounded. Drogo’s bloodriders refuse to let her touch the khal. “I say kill this maegi and wait,” but Daenerys ignores
their advice because “this old, homely, thick-bodied woman did not look like a maegi to her.” Yet the homely-looking woman is precisely a witch and her treatment of Drogo’s wound lead to infection. In a desperate attempt to save him, Daenerys asks the witch to perform a bloodritual. This leaves Drogo brain-dead and costs Daenerys her unborn son. “You did this, as much as the other,” the warriors accuse her and most of the tribe leave when she is sick with fever after the bloodritual. From having it all, Daenerys has only a few slaves, a few faithful warriors waiting to take her to Vaes Dothrak, the knight Ser Jorah – and the witch. Dany doesn’t understand why Mirri Maz Duur would lie and deceive her, murder Drogo and claim her unborn son. Why, when Dany had saved her from being raped. “‘Saved me?’ The Lhazareen woman spat. ‘Three riders had taken me, not as a man takes a woman but from behind, as a dog takes a bitch. The fourth was in me when you rode past. How then did you save me?’”

The witch’s objections make perfect sense: Drogo had killed her people, made her a slave, and for this she expects gratitude? Daenerys thought she knew what it was like to be a victim because she was a princess in exile and had been married against her will. These are, however, the pains of the privileged. Mirri Maz Duur teaches her the pain of the oppressed. Daenerys smothers Drogo with a pillow and builds him a pyre. She is no longer soft-hearted. “I am tired of the maegi’s braying,” she says to Jhogo who silences Mirri Maz Duur with his whip. The female hero didn’t rescue anything. The young girl Daenerys rescued was raped when Daenerys was sick with fever. “They were six. When they were done with her, they cut her throat.”

Like the former two tests, the trial is not about compassion or humility but about seeing the world. Dany places the dragon eggs next to Drogo’s body and has the witch tied to the pyre too. “Dany poured the oil over the woman’s head herself. “I thank you, Mirri Maz Duur, ” she said, “for the lessons you have taught me.”

The lesson is about naivety and the complexity of the world. Daenerys didn’t foresee the consequences of her ambition for the Iron Throne. Also, she took gratitude for granted. If the test was about family and the task about foreign culture, the trial is about politics: If you want to be a Queen you must think as one. “A prince should seem to be merciful, faithful, humane, religious and upright, and should even be so in reality; but he should have his mind so trained that, when occasion requires it, he may know how to change to the opposite.”

From a micro-perspective, Daenerys did a good deed when she saved the women from being raped, however, from a macro-perspective she was the cause of their suffering. Now, “All her fear was gone, burned away.”

The trial is about ambition, fearlessness, and vengeance, and, again, to put aside a soft heart and good intentions. Daenerys lights the pyre and enters the flames.

The Meaning of Magic
When the fire dies out, Daenerys is naked and alive with two dragons suckling at her breasts and a third draped around her shoulder. In the novel her hair has been burnt away, in the show it is still golden and braided. Ser Jorah falls to his knees and declare, “blood of my blood.” Everyone fall to their knees in awe. “And after them came her handmaids, and then the others, all the Dothraki, men and women and children, and Dany had only to look at their eyes to know that they were hers now, today and tomorrow and forever, hers as they had never been Drogo’s.” Returning to genre and the female fantasy hero and to postfeminist politics, we will look at the meaning of magic.

The hatching of the eggs draws links generic conventions from adventure, the fairy tale, and the melodrama. First, this is precisely what a universal (male) hero does, giving up life to be born again with new powers. The fire links the burning of a witch with magic, rebirth, and cosmic energy. We had of course suspected a revival of the dragons, since they are common in fairy tales and we know Daenerys has felt the eggs becoming warm even if they were cold to anyone else’s touch. And then the heightened emotions of danger, death, and awe come from the melodrama, whose underlying moral order finally reveal itself as not all cynical and pragmatic, but also holding out utopian promise. In the fairy tale we would not be exhilarated about magic, since it is ordinary here. In *A Game of Thrones*, on the other hand, I remember how the magic felt exhilarating and uplifting and truly miraculous, a feeling enhanced by solemn orchestral music picking up force as the camera backtracks and circles a naked woman getting to her feet amidst a circle of worshippers. The novel’s last words are “. . . and for the first time in hundreds of years, the night came alive with the music of dragons.”

The magical order of the world also serves to further characterize the female hero. According to French sociologist Marcel Mauss, magic is individual in contrast to religion which is organized. Magic is “private, secret, mysterious and approaches the limit of a prohibited rite.” In a religious mind, the individual has no special powers, but in a magical mind, “isolated individuals can affect social phenomena.” Anyone may try their hand at magic. Magic, says Mauss, belongs to the disempowered, to women, children, old people, odd people, and the disabled. It is a protest against the limitations of our social circumstances and as an exiled dragon princess, a widow queen, and a teenage mother, Daenerys is well-suited for magic.

Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski furthermore points out magic’s relation to passion, desire, and hope. What we passionately desire but cannot obtain within our social setting, the primitive mind uses magic to reach. Magical rituals, says Malinowski, are the “extended expressions of emotion in act and in word.” Rather
than seeing magic as superstition, Malinowski views it as an enforcement of the individual’s emotional belief, of our subjective sense of being-in-the-world-ness. Magic connects to myth and “the function of myth is not to explain but to vouch for, not to satisfy curiosity but to give confidence in power, not to spin out yarns but to establish the flowing freely from present-day occurrences, frequently similar validity of belief.” Magic does not establish an institutional structure as does religion, it is the means of the dis-empowered to achieve change outside of institutions.

Magic is well-suited for postfeminist politics. It belongs to the individual, it is free, and it is an unlimited source of energy. Whether it is good or evil is up to the hero and literary scholar John H. Timmerman stresses the use of magic is a free choice: “The fantasy hero, it must be made clear, is individually free to choose, must choose, but his choices have consequence far beyond the confines of his one life.” By choosing fire, Daenerys is reborn. Her powers are now both inherited and earned, giving her authentic pride and self-esteem, head held high, gaze towards the horizon, her dragons hissing in the air.

**Conclusion: Women With Dragons**

“Every fairy tale is, in its own way, something of a dragon slayer.”

Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time*

There are no myths or legends about heroic female dragon slayers. Daenerys presents us with the very opposite, a dragon maker. Entering the fire, she says to herself, “I am Daenerys Stormborn, daughter of dragons, bride of dragons, mother of dragons.” It is time to ask what her dragons signify.

In Western mythology, dragons are monsters to be slain. Ancient Greece had dragons as did the Romans, who used them as a sigil on banners, claiming the strength of dragons when they were at war. In Norse mythology dragons are monsters too, slain by legendary hero Beowulf. In Christian myth, the dragon was the devil in disguise to be slain by Saint George and the knights in chivalric literature and Arthurian legends.

Psychoanalytically, Campbell reads the dragon as a “self-generated double monster – the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id).” The dragon is a monster but, more importantly, also a symbol of internal fears and desires which the hero must overcome. Leaving aside such psychoanalytical readings which I am not concerned with here, we can say dragons act as mythic monsters, strong, powerful, and dangerous, and in Western mythology they are often also intelligent. In medieval romance the dragon (related to the devil) can thus talk. They are a force to be overcome, proving the hero an able and worthy leader. Lately, in a reversal of tropes, dragons have become the hero’s pet, friend and helper in films such as *Dragonheart* (1996), *Shrek* (2001), *Eragon* (2006), and *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010). Still, they belong to men and boys and are an extension of their (male) powers, both as friends and as weapons. In myth and romance, women are...
threatened by dragons and could, as eight century Saint Margaret, even be eaten by them.

In Daenerys’s arms the dragons take on different meanings. They are less monsters than magical beings, almost miraculous, the size of infants who flap their wings and hiss expectantly to the world. These baby dragons are less cute (as baby Eragon in the movie of the same name) than small and in need of parental protection. When they were eggs, they filled Dany with “wonder” and were “the most beautiful things she had ever seen.” The hatched dragons are not an obstacle or an adversary but her prize and boone and represent the power and wisdom which must be restored to society. As magical beings, dragons are neither good nor evil but, rather like today’s nuclear weapons, holding the power to alter world politics. You can win wars with dragons. The dragons thus empower the female hero and here, in her arms, they signal her status as the Chosen One. Daenerys stands straight and gazes into the sky, a pride display. We see “the pride display,” says Tracy and Robins, “in spontaneous nonverbal behaviors shown in response to a pride-eliciting event, such as successful completion of a task.” Daenerys’ nudity is truly a polysemic sign just like the dragons; being reborn she is “cleansed” of former social roles, vulnerable and pure, yet the dragons mark her magical power to endure fire. She is, of course, also a spectacle and on display, however, her naked body is less an icon of beauty than a sign of social power, the proud body attitude “signaling an individual’s success to others and thereby informing onlookers that the proud individual merits increased status and acceptance.” Among animals, the evolutionary theory goes, social emotions are transmitted on the body as displays communicating to our peers in the group. This, her pride display promises, is a woman ambitious to rule.

It remains to be explored in following books and seasons what kind of ruler Daenerys will be. Here, she has learned to manage her emotions, to manage her actions, and to see the complexity of the world. The third test taught her that benevolent maternalism doesn’t foster gratitude and gratitude is no foundation to rule from anyway. The last chapter hints at a choice politics combined with unquestioned leadership. Before she enters the pyre she addresses her people: “I see the faces of slaves. I free you. Take off your collars. Go if you wish, no one shall harm you. If you stay, it will be as brothers and sisters, husbands and wives . . . To each of you I say, give me your hands and your hearts and there will always be a place for you.” If they stay, it is by choice. The last chapter also promises a postfeminist politics when Daenerys asks each of her three Dothrakien guards to be her bloodrider – an honor they decline because it can only be given to a man – and promises Ser Jorah he shall lead her Queensguard (echoing the Kingsguard in The Seven Kingdoms). After the fire, she has sworn bloodriders, a leader of her Queensguard, and a people who is hers by choice, not by ancestry or geography or conquest.

Speaking of identity in a global age, Giddens uses the term “hyphenated identities.” When we ask “who are we?” Americans are Native-American, or Afro-American, or something else. Today, says Giddens, Europeans can think of themselves as Asian-British or, in my case, European-Danish. A singular identity is a thing of the past. In similar fashion, the female hero is not an either-or figure or even a both-and figure, but can best be understood in hyphenated terms, as a composite figure uniting learned and innate traits, biological possibilities, and chosen belongings. In Daenerys case, she is Targaryen-Dothrakian-Stormborn, the first her genetic family, the second her social family, and the third her freely chosen name because she was born during a storm. Daenerys doesn’t promise socialist or democratic rule. Her keywords are choice, freedom, agency, dignity, individualism,
multi-culturalism and cosmopolitanism, and she will rule with pride, an experienced heart, and a passionate ambition for power. In Machiavellian terms, she represents a monarchy with the support of the common people. If we examine her generic building blocs bric by bric, most are well-known except for the magical birth of dragons. As a hyphenated identity, however, she is a new figure in fantasy as well as in popular genre fiction. The reverse romance (conquoring, then loosing, a lover) combined with an upside-down fairy tale morality (learning pride and ambition) and a gender-bender universal hero (releasing an “inner Queen” rather than inner king and making instead of slaying dragons) are pieces in a new and unseen puzzle.

Do we want to join her? I believe that, like magic, the character of Daenerys holds a promise. Namely that as individuals we can affect change. What the final picture of a female hero will eventually look like, however, is a different puzzle for each of us.

Bibliography


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1 Thomas Sobchack, “The Adventure Film,” quoted in Steve Neale, *Genre and*


3 Ernst Bloch, “The Fairy Tale Moves on its Own in Time” (1930), quoted in Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk & Fairy Tales* (Lexington: University of Press of Kentucky, 2002 [1979]), 153. Bloch includes fantasy such as Jean Cocteau’s film *Beauty and the Beast (La belle e la bête*, 1946) and Jules Verne’s novels *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864).

4 Zipes, *Magic Spell*, 162. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories” was given as a lecture in 1939, later revised several times and published in 1964. In his definition of fantasy Tolkien includes both fairy tales and contemporary fantasy literature for adult. Tolkien had participated in the First World War and was aware of the buildup to the Second World War when writing *The Hobbit* in the thirties. A different political stance is found in Robert E. Howard’s tales of Conan the Barbarian, also written in the thirties. Fantasy worlds come in many political versions.


Dragons, was printed in several hundred thousand copies. Miller, “Collecting Ice and Fire.”

7 George R.R. Martin has written and produced his own television series, one of which had a pilot produced which, however, was not aired. After this he returned to writing full time.

8 By book five the series has seen more than thirty first-person POV characters.


11 Campbell, Hero With a Thousand Faces, 39.

12 Ibid, 352.


14 Ibid, 38.


16 Tatar, “Test, Tasks, and Trials,” 38.

17 The fairy tale heroine pick lentils in the ashes in “Cinderella,” she is imprisoned in a high tower in “Rapunzel,” and she must keep silent for six years and is almost burnt at the stakes in “Six Swans.”


19 Campbell, Hero With a Thousand Faces, 97.


21 Tatar, “Test, Tasks, and Trials,” 35.

22 A Game of Thrones, Daenerys, chapter four, location 6843.


26 A Game of Thrones, Daenerys, chapter one, 750.

27 Ibid, Daenerys, chapter three, location 4093.

28 Ibid, Daenerys, chapter three, location 4106.

29 Ibid, Daenerys, chapter three, location 4120.

30 Ibid, Daenerys, chapter three, location 4163.

31 Ibid, Daenerys, chapter five, location 8634.

32 ***Daenerys’ other helper is Ser Jorah, an exiled knight who is travelling with Drogo. At first, Ser Jorah swears loyalty to Viscerys but leaves him when he can see Daenerys is more fit to rule. Ser Jorah (still alive at the end of book two which is where I have come in the series) is her knight and defender as well as her council.
Daenerys, chapter two, 1960.

Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, location 2063. *

Ibid, location 4056. *

Ibid, location *

Ibid, location 2024. *

I am here considering as child protagonists those characters who have first person narrative chapters: Bran (seven), Arya (nine), Sansa (eleven), Jon (fourteen), and Daenerys (thirteen).

The casting director for *Game of Thrones* (2011) was also casting *Conan the Barbarian* (2011) and was so impressed with Jason Momoa’s audition for the series that he chose him for the title role of the *Conan* reboot.

“Daenery’s Wedding Night, or This is Not a Rape Scene,” blog entry by ElegantPI, April 25, 2011, accessed from [http://elegantpi.dreamwidth.org/747684.html](http://elegantpi.dreamwidth.org/747684.html) on February 15, 2013.


The book may be WASP as well, just less rigidly so. Here, too, is a passionate love story between Daenerys and Drogo, it is just not as conventionally Western romantic as in the show. The public sex, for instance, is unconventional but Drogo only has sex with his queen, which seems to contradict the sexual costum or raping and taking which is several times explicitly advocated by both the khal and his warriors.

Here, a new generation of heroes provided fantasy women like *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and the British pop group *Spice Girls* launched the idea of “girlpower.”


Genz, missing.


Genz, 334.


Note missing*

*Genz, missing.*
If dragons serve women, women are witches, a trend which (to my knowledge) may have started with Disney’s interpretation of the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*. In the Brother Grimm’s tale, there is a witch but no dragon. In the film, the witch is given a name, Maleficent, and the ability to transform into a fire-blazing dragon. It is announced that Maleficent will appear in her own movie, *Maleficent* (2014), starring Angelina Jolie as the witch. On the poster, Maleficent fixes us with a proud and defiant look, a gigantic dragon hoovering behind her.