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April 3, 2004

THE FEMININE DRAGON

Anne McCaffrey has in the last thirty years become one of the most popular female science-fiction writers, by and large due to her *Dragonriders of Pern* series. Most of the main themes that would be expanded upon in the series are laid out in the first novel, *Dragonflight*. While it would be easy to view *Dragonflight*'s worth solely through the introduction of a strong female protagonist—rare in itself within the sci-fi field of the late 1960s—such an analysis would deny the novel's fundamentally feminist perspective. This is seen through McCaffrey's treatment of the other, and the subversion of patriarchal concepts of gender and sexuality through the characterization of the dragons. Also, notions of the linearity and trustworthiness of history, culture and tradition are undermined. The assumptions that *Dragonflight* makes about representations of the feminine and the malleability of history give the novel a deeper worth than simply as an example of a strong female personality.

Dragonflight is the expanded form of two short stories: "Weyr Search" and "Dragon Rider", both of which first appeared in *Analog Magazine* in 1967. The former short story won McCaffrey the Hugo Award, and the later received the Nebula Award, making her the first woman to win either. The novel has been lauded for portraying a strong female protagonist in Lessa, who struggles into a position of power through her own exceptional abilities. Lessa's fiery personality and quick wit eventually win her the respect and love of F'lar, as well as earning her a position of world-wide influence and saving Pern from annihilation. If the purpose of literature is to provide useful roll models, than Lessa is an excellent one for a literary scene, which, at the time of the novel's first publication in 1968, was severely lacking in female characters who had their own agency. However, McCaffrey was not satisfied with just providing a single example of feminine power. In *Dragonflight* she has set up complex and layered social/economic system, and many of the assumptions that allow it to thrive or suffer highlight the problems with a strictly patriarchal world view.

The male characters of the novel seek to push Lessa into the fringes

of whichever social group she finds herself within. It begins when Fax takes over Lessa's family's Hold, the resolution of which occupies the beginning of the novel. In order to save her life, Lessa is forced into the lowest social stratum of the Pernese economic system. Drudges, normally portrayed as less intelligent and unable to appreciate "higher learning", are reminiscent of previous misogynistic views of the female. Drudges are rendered as the other and thus are not considered worthy of humane treatment—they are sub-human and only useful for housework. Even after Lessa impresses Ramoth and becomes Weyrwoman, her male tutors attempt to keep her in a subservient role by giving her substandard education. R'gul expects Lessa to learn the teaching ballads by rote, but not understand them. While R'gul dozes off in his socially promised position of social prominence—meanwhile missing the clues of Pern's imminent danger—Lessa begins to unlock the real meanings to the ballads without male aid. Another restriction placed upon her by the male riders is the rule keeping her from flying her dragon or leaving the Weyr, thereby removing any sort of mobility that she might have gained through her change in circumstances. She is even denied the normal duties assigned to the Weyrwoman since the headwoman Manora is accustomed to the previous Weyrwoman, Jora. Jora is remembered as "obese, stupid, and incompetent" (96), though what she needed to be competent at is a mystery. Lessa has been relegated to the significant other in every role she has thus far been asked to play.

The reader's respect for Lessa comes from her denial of this relegation. She manages to control Fax and F'lar, manipulating them into doing exactly as she wishes. She is rewarded with the Weyrwomanship, which F'lar sells to her as a position of power and further influence. While this initially proves untrue, she is still able to achieve some influence by manipulating male riders into action. The complication of her actions notwithstanding—that is, the rousing of the Lord Holders against the Weyr—she proves her willingness to take action, which further endures her in the eyes of F'lar. He is the one who teaches her to fly and provides answers to many of her questions and access to the ancient records necessary for the plot's resolution. Though his acceptance of Lessa as an equal is gradual, it is much more than most of the other male figures in the novel can hope to achieve. F'lar, as well as serving as the resourceful leader figure, also demonstrates the steps that a male might have to take to let go of his preconceived misogynistic attitudes.

One of the things that help shift F'lar's attitude toward Lessa is the perceptions of his dragon, Mnementh. The dragons in general have a very equalizing conception of their human counterparts. The very language they use renders the object of their discussion no more important than any other; unless the dragon is particularly impressed by an individual, that person's name will not be used. Mnementh is impressed with Lessa's strength just as F'lar is, and usually reacts with amusement at any suggestion that she will mellow. Dragons are more attracted to particular character traits than sex, station, or even species. As an example, the watchweyr, a grotesque senile creature who is Lessa's only companion at the beginning of the novel, is accorded a dragon's tribute when it dies protecting and obeying her.

The dragons' sexuality is experienced by everyone in the vicinity of the event. Queen dragons who are nearing the time of their mating flight

are kept away from the Holds since non-weyrfolk are not used to coping with the increase in sexual feelings. Though this aspect of living amongst dragons is not as dwelt upon in *Dragonflight* as it will be in later novels¹, it is still relevant in McCaffrey's representation of the feminine. Firstly, the female is depicted as sexually aggressive, initiating the mating flight and invoking the attention of anyone able to witness the act. Ramoth's status as the only fertile dragon gives Lessa special clout against the other men. Were she to leave the dragons would inevitably die off. Also, no dragon would dare go against a queen, so in effect Lessa has absolute control of the whole Weyr if she so chose. Moreover, it is through the sexual act that the Weyrleader is chosen—the man cannot have power without the woman. While on the surface it appears that the queen is flown by the strongest and cleverest bronze, it becomes apparent that that is not necessarily true. Intent and preference have more to do with the queen's choice than skill or seniority. Though R'gul is not necessarily the best suited for the position of Weyrleader, he attains that position before F'lar because the older riders could not stomach having a younger rider in charge. Jora is so weak willed that majority consensus rules her queen's decision and the Weyr suffers in moral and in the production of more dragons. In Lessa and Ramoth's case, the opposite occurs. Her preference for F'lar as Weyrleader is stated repeatedly, and he is conveniently Impressed to one of the largest and fittest bronze dragon in the Weyr. While Ramoth does not just let Mnementh catch her, the joining is made on fairly mutual grounds despite the very old fashioned notion of the male chasing down and dominating the female. The interaction of the dragons very much reflects the relationship between their riders. Lessa does not immediately fall in love with F'lar upon the consummation of the mating flight. The only way for F'lar to catch her is to meet her on the same emotional and intellectual level. Much of his emotional confusion is caused by his attempts to keep up with Lessa's resourcefulness and temper. Lessa is troubled by her own attempts to live within her social environment—she is much more used to subverting a repressive force than helping to rebuild. Once she has established herself *and* stopped behaving in a destructive way her relationship with F'lar can move forward.

One of the problems with the dragons' ability to function without humans is that they are unable to see beyond the natural; they live in the here and now with little thought of the past or future. Yet they are also very sensitive to events around them and often perceive things that their human partners have missed. They have a collective consciousness reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's *chora*, which allows them to reach an understanding of the world foreign to the humans trapped in the patriarchal mindset. While most of the humans continue to perceive worth based on class and station, the dragons are able to perceive "actual" worth. Though Lessa makes her presence and aptness for becoming a strong Weyrwoman very obvious to F'lar in *Dragonflight*, it is generally the dragons who find suitable candidates for Impression (something maintained with more continuity in later novels). The qualities that make for a successful candidate are never set down and often are dependent on the individual dragon—they resist quantification and labelling. In *Dragonflight* there

1 This theme becomes very important in the next two novels in the series. *Dragonquest* and *The White Dragon* feature a hold-bred protagonist having to adapt to existing in a much "looser" sexual environment.

does still seem to be some gender determinism dictating the dragons' abilities. The gold dragons are always Impressed by a woman, and all the other colours (which can eat firestone) are Impressed by men. Anything else would seem out of place in the society depicted in the novel thus far. Yet these distinctions can be seen to be imposed by the humans—only women are presented to the golds, and only men are presented to the fighting dragons. These assumptions are proven untrue later in the series. Women are able to Impress fighting dragons, though interestingly men are never allowed to stand as candidates for a golden egg. In *Dragonsdawn*, the story of how humans first came to Pern and the creation of the dragons, sexist tendencies that could be attributed to the dragons are blamed on their very traditionally minded engineer, Kitty Ping. For instance, the infertility caused by chewing firestone is not evident in the species used to create the dragons—the defect is placed within them specifically to keep female riders out of the air. This additional information is essentially backpeddelling on McCaffrey's part to make the series seem more acceptable to more recent standards of social equality.

A recurrent problem in the plot of *Dragonflight* is the interpretation of history as transferred to them through written records, tradition, and song. The records would seem to be the most reliable, but prove to be the least helpful. Tradition is only useful if the reasoning behind it is understood and heeded. Songs, which would seem to be the most vague and the most susceptible to misinterpretation, prove to be the most useful. This is very reflective of the manner in which authority and social position are inflicted on the people of Pern. The written records are the first place F'lar looks for information about how to fight the Threads. Yet the records are incomplete—information that was widely known at the time the records were made was not recorded. In the course of the Long Interval what was once widely known seemed obsolete and was abandoned, such as the ability to make flamethrowers or the meaning of Agenothree (HNO₃). The written word is unable to fully capture the period within which it was written, nor can it be understood without a deep knowledge of that period. The records do not become clear until Lessa brings the other Weyrs forward, becoming the ultimate version of an historian. Of course, it is impossible to have this situation happen in the real world. As F'lar's hard work proves, it is impossible to gain an understanding of a past culture without an eyewitness account. Much of the same problems arise in the interpretation and implication of tradition. The knowledge that made some of these traditions seem like common sense has also been forgotten, which has resulted in some traditions being abandoned, and others misinterpreted. The holders have stopped clearing greenery away from their inhabitations and planting more land than is easily protected. The other Lords generally understand Fax's takeover of seven Holds only as an act of greed because they cannot comprehend the difficulties of managing a single hold during Threadfall. R'gul's insistence that queens only fly to mate is explained to Lessa in terms of tradition but it is really just his experience with Jora. The message is that tradition is fine so long as its origins are remembered with it and it is not adhered to at the expense of new and better ideas. The teaching ballads appear to be the only useful form for the passing on of information to future generations. Each chapter is assigned its own song or songs, and the reader is clearly invited to

interpret the song through the events in the chapter and visa versa. A similar concept of interpretation allows for Lessa's understanding of the Question Song. The song means nothing unless it is seen through the events of the novel. The songs are successful teaching devices precisely because their interpretations can change with the times. The words are set down and preserved by the Harpers, and taught as often as possible. Since the words do not change, the essential meaning is never completely lost. Yet the words are not restrictive in meaning; they can be made to apply to new situations. However, this strength is also a weakness. If the songs are not applied to the correct situation then they are just catchy tunes. Also, like many of the traditions, the songs do not explain why and because of this many of the songs are ignored as obsolete or viewed solely as entertainment.²

Several conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion that demonstrates *Dragonflight's* worth as a standalone novel and for interpreting the rest of Anne McCaffrey's work. *Dragonflight* can be termed a "good" novel on its own because it uses techniques of cognitive estrangement (defamiliarization) to demonstrate the fallacy of using tradition and outmoded ideas to dictate contemporary practice. Since the society depicted is different than ours it is easy to point out where the flaws are. Once the reader recognizes the mistakes made in the fiction, it becomes possible for the reader to then recognize them in his or her own experience. If the purpose of art and literature is to invoke social reform, than the theme of innovation that pervades *Dragonflight* definitely works toward that goal. The novel espouses change on many different levels, changes that are applicable to life in the late 60s. The general concept of letting go of harmful traditional values works with the theme of gender equality. There are, certainly, some problems with interpreting the novel from a feminist perspective. Pernese society is based on a feudal system that is not refuted anywhere in the series. The governmental system is simply altered to accommodate female participants, suggesting that in order to be successful women must learn to speak and think in a masculine manner (Kylara becomes an excellent example, furthered upon in *Dragonquest*). However, many of these inconsistencies are explained or altered later in the series, which leads to the second conclusion of this essay. If someone were to make a survey of Anne McCaffrey's works, analyze the main themes and techniques and then write a text demonstrative of her style, it would probably be very similar to *Dragonflight*. While it is debatable which of McCaffrey's novels are her "best", *Dragonflight* is still a very good example of what one will encounter in any of her series. While books have been written that take place before and after the events of *Dragonflight*, McCaffrey (and most familiar with the series) recommend starting with it and then reading the novels in order of publication rather than chronologically--a very organic way of experiencing a series of

2 The idea of the unreliability of time is explored repeatedly throughout the *Dragonriders of Pern* series. Logistically, the idea that information is lost over time is necessary for the premises that space faring humans made it to this world and then reverted to a near primitive society. This accounts for much of the problems encountered later on as the descendants seek to understand the leftovers of the original settlers of Pern. In *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern*, the expansion of a Ballad eluded to in *Dragonflight* and others, the loss of information has direct bearing on the resolution of the plot. Also, it is revealed that the "true" events of Moreta's tale will be altered to make for a better song. For the Pernese, history is very much as unreliable as myth.

events. If one seeks to interpret McCaffrey's writing than this novel is very useful, if not necessary to reach that understanding.

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