

Here There Be Dragons:

Monsters and Gender in *Possession*

In only the second line of *Possession*, the reader is introduced to a monster: the serpent Ladon, guardian of Zeus' golden apples. Yet Ladon isn't the only mythical being mentioned in the novel; for a story about scholars researching dead poets, *Possession* talks quite a lot about monsters. A.S. Byatt uses three types of monsters to connote gender differences: through Norse myths she underscores how men are proactive, mobile, destructive, and possessive; through Greek creatures and the fairy Melusine she emphasizes women are unaggressive, stationary, creative, and vulnerable; and last of all, she uses Eastern beasts like the phoenix to show that both men and women can change and improve.

Nidhogg and Ragnarok

Almost every culture in the world has some conception of a dragon. The western dragon, in particular, is an embodiment of man's primal desires: they are large, strong, long-lived, difficult to kill, cunning, capable of flight, natural masters of the fire that is man's greatest tool, rich (at least in the myths of Sigurd and Beowulf), and, traditionally, fond of capturing beautiful maidens.

The key here is that dragons embody the primal desires of *man*. In *Possession*, the Western dragon or "fire-drake" is a male symbol. The beasts are mentioned in Ash's poetry (505) and letters to Christabel (217), and are always associated with something destructive. The primary example of a destructive male dragon, however, comes at the beginning of Chapter Three:

In this dim place

The creeping Nidhogg, with his sooty scales

Gnaws at the great Tree's root, and makes his nest,

Curled in the knotted maze on which he feeds

— R. H. ASH,

Ragnarök III

The recent barrage of Marvel movies has made the average person more aware of Norse mythology than before. Still, even if a person is familiar with Thor or even his famous opponents Fenrir and Jormungand, it is highly unlikely that they know about Nidhogg. After all, he is so obscure that a quick Google search will yield only one relevant result outside of Wikipedia, that bane of all research papers. For anything else, the curious mind must seek out a reference on Norse mythology in their local library.

Yet Nidhogg plays an important role in Norse legend, and his presence in *Possession* adds to its overall theme of masculinity. In short, Nidhogg is a dragon eating the World Tree. Someday he will consume the root he is chewing and, according to the *Poetic Edda*, descend upon Midgard, an event widely considered to usher in the battle of Ragnarok. In this battle, the gods are slain, humanity is wiped out, the sun and moon are consumed, the World Tree is killed, and the monsters win. It is perhaps the bleakest ending to any story ever, and Byatt deliberately connected *Possession* to it by having Randolph Ash's masterpiece be a poem about the battle.

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote this description of Norse mythology: "Disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man's precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death" (127). Norse mythology is ultimately hopeless; while pioneering the concept of the traditional Western dragon, it is full of monsters that

aggressively attack and steal what they want, and it is overwhelmingly masculine in its participants.

Ash himself acts a bit dragon-like during the novel: discontent with his wife Ellen's fear of intimacy, he notices Christabel and persuades her to have an affair with him, despite her calling him a "fire-drake" (213), despite her worries that she will be burned. Though the novel suggests they separate by agreement, it is Christabel who has to find her way when she is pregnant with Ash's child, and find a way to care for her daughter.

Through Nidhogg, Ragnarok, and Ash, A.S. Byatt emphasizes the tendencies of men to destroy and possess what is not their own.

Water and Women

While Randolph Ash's masterpiece was *Ragnarök*, Christabel LaMotte's was *The Fairy Melusine*, the beginning of which is included in *Possession*. While Melusine herself demonstrates the theme of women being misunderstood and mistreated, Byatt also presents this connotation through the inclusion of other mythical beings.

Before readers even reaches Melusine, they first encounter a list of monsters and supernatural beings: Medusa, Scylla "in her cave of bones," the Hydra, the sirens, the Sphinx, and Echidna (317). All these creatures are Greek, most are aquatic, most are serpentine, and all of them are female. Though monstrous, they also differ in nature from the Norse monsters. Said Tolkien: "The ruling gods [of Greek mythology] are not besieged, not in ever-present peril or under future doom. Their offspring on earth may be heroes or fair women; *it may also be the other creatures hostile to men*. The gods are not the allies of men in their war against these or other monsters" (121).

Unlike Nidhogg and other Norse monsters, the Greek monsters are not active enemies of mankind, but rather obstacles to be avoided. Yet many of these female creatures nevertheless ended up getting killed by men: Medusa by Perseus, the Hydra by Hercules, the Sphinx by Oedipus. In layman's terms, they were minding their own business until a man came along and killed them.

The previously mentioned Ladon also belongs to this second group, being a Greek monster, serpentine, and a protector. Though its gender is not specified, the presence of the female Hesperidae nymphs helping it guard Zeus' golden apples yet again evokes a stable female presence; the reference of Heracles coming to the garden to steal Ladon's treasure is yet again an example of an active, mobile male coming to possess something from an unaggressive, stationary female.

The fairy Melusine again continues this theme of a woman being betrayed by a man. According to Maud Bailey, Melusine needed to marry a mortal man to gain a soul (38); according to LaMotte's poem itself, Melusine was an angel cast out of heaven and left to become a fairy on Earth (316). Scholar Tom Shippey, speaking on this subject, said: "In some traditions, including early English ones, some of the angels exiled from Heaven with Satan became devils, but others, more undecided or more neutral, became elves. At Judgment Day some of these may regain forgiveness and salvation and return to their old home" (259-260).

If this was the case with Melusine, in spite of having obtained a husband she is denied her reward when he observes her bathing in a transformed, half-serpent form and is revolted by her appearance. After being confronted by him, Melusine again transforms and flees. Yet again in *Possession*, there is a female mythical being—serpentine, associated with a stable location, and aquatic—that is left worse after an encounter with a man.

All these mythical beings highlight the theme of female mistreatment in *Possession*. In contrast to Norse male drakes, which use destructive fire, the female monsters are associated with water, traditionally (and frequently stated in *Possession* to be) a source of life.

Just as Ash's story reflects the destructive nature of dragons, Christabel's story mirrors the female monsters. She was content living in isolation and writing poetry until Ash came; as a result of their affair, she lost her best friend Blanche Glover, endured a stressful pregnancy, and had to give up her child. It could be said that upon accepting Ash's company, the old Christabel "died." Yet this is not the end of LaMotte's story; there are more creatures to come.

Rebirth and Change

So far, two types of creatures have been discussed: the fire-breathing, aggressive dragons that reflect masculine control and destructiveness, and the aquatic creatures that embody feminine desires and vulnerability. Yet there are two more creatures in *Possession* that, while only mentioned in passing, have a significant impact on the novel's overall message: the phoenix and the Eastern dragon.

During Ash and LaMotte's exchange of letters, Ash reassures Christabel she will be safe becoming romantically involved with him by likening her to a phoenix; the fires of their passion will be a pyre from which she will fly up renewed and unchanged (214). Though Christabel seems to resist this comparison at first, by the end of the novel she appears to have accepted it, as seen in her final letter to Ash:

Is not that fine? Did we not—did you not flame, and I catch fire? Shall we survive and rise from our ashes? Like Milton's Phoenix?...I would rather have lived alone, so, if

you would have the truth. But since that might not be—and is granted to almost none—I thank God for you—if there must be a Dragon—that He was You— (546)

The phoenix, like the dragon, is a member of an elite group of mythical creatures so elemental that they need no explanation; phoenix myths are found in both western and eastern cultures, almost always associated with birds and fire and, most importantly, the idea of rebirth.

If LaMotte is a phoenix, the implication is that she was indeed reborn after her affair with Ash. Though she could not be the same as she was before, she knew Ash was alive and happy, as was her daughter Maia, and therefore she was renewed. The connection of Christabel to a phoenix is doubly noteworthy because it is the first association in *Possession* of a woman with a creature of *fire*, not *water*. Unlike the destructive fire-drake, however, a phoenix's flame is restorative.

The very last creature is the Eastern dragon or "*Lung*." Ash mentions this monster in a letter to Christabel (215) and labels it as a creature of water. More importantly, while western dragons were hostile and greedy, eastern *Lungs* were benevolent creatures and bringers of good fortune.

Though the Chinese dragon appears on the dress Maud wears at Sir George's home, *thematically* the creature is best associated with Ash. After he confronts Christabel at the séance, he undergoes a transformation of his own. This is best seen in the post-script, when Ash, who has learned the truth, nevertheless has no desire to take possession of Christabel or his daughter Maia. He is instead content to let them be and live his life in peace with Ellen.

Conclusion

Possession, then, begins by associating men with destructive fire and women with water. By the end of the novel, Ash is a benevolent presence (like a Chinese water-dragon) and LaMotte has been reborn as a fiery phoenix; they both simultaneously undergo a transformation into their opposite element.

Through monsters, A.S. Byatt introduces her desired connotations into the reader's mind as to how she sees the situation of men and women as it has existed over the centuries. These creatures mirror Ash and LaMotte's own behaviors. In addition, Byatt uses more mythical creatures to foreshadow changes in those same characters. In the end, *Possession* is not just an acknowledgement of how things *were*, but a vote of confidence that people can change and improve; that they can forego *possession* and instead be reborn.

Works Cited

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