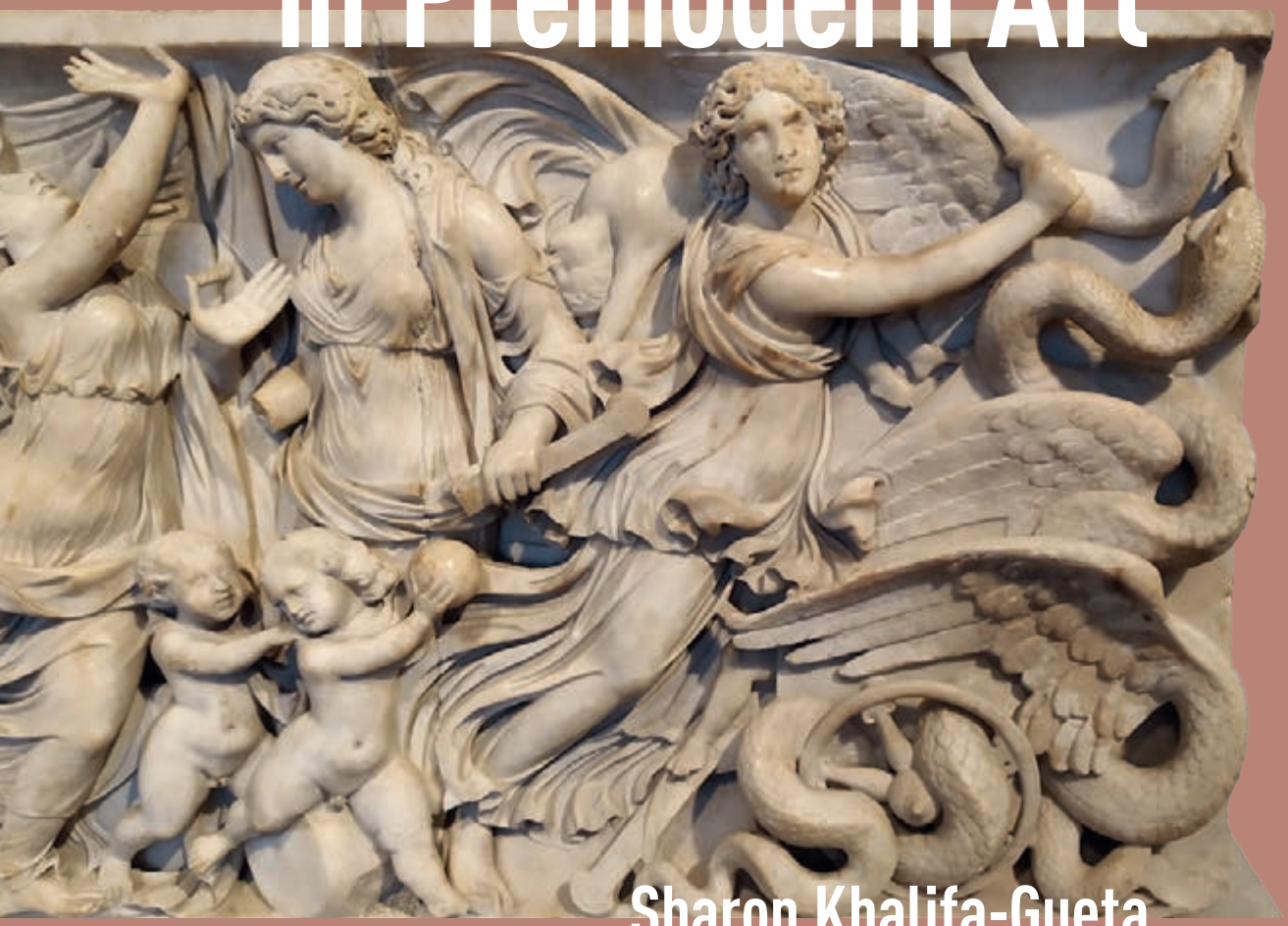
The Woman and the Dragon in Premodern Art



Sharon Khalifa-Gueta

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Introduction

What could a Libyan princess, a Corinthian witch and a female saint from Antioch possibly have in common? Although these figures may well appear unrelated, they all share a similarly intimate acquaintance with dragons. Engaging in an in-depth exploration of representations of Andromeda, Medea, St. Margaret, and additional mythological figures, this book seeks to elucidate visual manifestations of the motif of the woman and the dragon, whose roots go back to Near Eastern, ancient Egyptian, neo-palatial Minoan, and Greco-Roman antiquity. Yet despite its rich and complex history, this motif has received almost no attention as a distinct topic worthy of scholarly examination, and has been largely subsumed into the study of male dragon-slayers and their representations. By shifting the spotlight to the female protagonists of these archetypal visual narratives,[1] the current study offers a different perspective, delineating the unique meanings pertaining to their relationships with dragons. One of the most remarkable aspects of such relationships is that, in contrast to their male counterparts, women do not fight dragons.[2] Instead, they are depicted as communicating, collaborating, assimilating into, and fusing with these mythological creatures, in ways that are both benevolent and malevolent.

At the core of this investigation is the revelation that the encounter between women and dragons is a holy one, which long predates the dualistic Christian conception of good and evil and the association of dragons with the latter category. Nevertheless, as the discussion unfolding throughout the book will reveal, this pagan conception of the relationship between women and dragons in Mediterranean antiquity endured in Western Europe throughout the early modern period.

In analyzing each of the figures and situations examined in the course of this study, I attend both to the meaning of this union, and to the individual significance

1 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace; Jovanovich, 1982); Alvin A. Lee and Jean O'Grady, eds., *Northrop Frye on Religion: Excluding the Great Code and Words with Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Robyn Cadwallader, *Three Methods for Reading the Thirteenth-Century Seinte Marherete: Archetypal, Semiotic, and Deconstructionist* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), pp. 16–26, 239–249.

2 One exception to this statement is the Ugarit goddess Anat of the seventh century BCE, who is said to have fought a dragon, see Andrée Herdner, ed., *Corpus des tablettes en cuneiformes alphabetiques: decouvertes a Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 a 1939* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1963): 3.3.35–4.47. Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 61.

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of each, while questioning the nature of their relationship. As this book reveals, dragons are closely related to great fertility goddesses, and are thus associated with ancient matriarchal concepts that continued to influence and challenge patriarchal structures over the course of many centuries. As the analysis focuses on visual representations and material culture, this motif shows the interaction between the two is one of communication, collaboration, assimilation, and even fusion, but rarely animosity. Although this study is based on visual materials, it relies in part on literary texts, and discusses the dissonance between visual and textual depictions that will be studied: occasionally, the hostility between the woman and the dragon that is present in textual accounts, yet is absent from their visual counterparts. Related visual symbols, such as the cave and the tree, will be shown to enrich and elaborate this motif by embedding it with additional layers of meaning, and revealing both its complexity and the changes it underwent as it resonated in different cultural environments.

Aims of the Book

The primary goal of this book is to illuminate the importance of visual materials whose importance pertains to a large geographical area over a long historical period, while addressing profound cultural concepts and concerns. Although it relies extensively on studies of literary and historical sources, the investigation unfolding throughout the book centers on visual materials, and is based on the study of hundreds of images. Forming a bridge connecting written legends, artists and recipients, these images relayed information more effectively than any other means, binding together mythical narratives with social, religious and gender-related concerns in changing cultural contexts. In some cases, artistic representations reveal different aspects of a given narrative, which are unaccounted for in the surviving written text. For instance, the image of the maiden calmly seated on the dragon that confronts Cadmos on a red figured bell-krater dated to 443–430 BCE, and now at the Metropolitan Museum, New York (fig. 8), is unattested for in literary sources, while making manifest profound ideas concerning the intimate and sacred relationship between them. Ever since antiquity, artistic imagery has migrated from one medium to another, extending in some cases over long periods and thus allowing art historians to make large temporal and cultural leaps, while tracing the evolution of a single topic in order to acquire a wider perspective concerning the subject in question.

The main branch of dragon studies revolves around the interaction between a man and a dragon, which is a central recurrent theme from antiquity onwards in Mediterranean cultures, as elaborated in Chapter One's discussion of the dragon-slayer

topos.[3] This topos, in which the dragon holds an important symbolic function, remained highly popular over many centuries. The related motif of the woman and the dragon will be examined in depth in the current study as building on the separate topos of the dragon-slayer, while developing as a distinct motif in several different cultural contexts

This exploration will offer a detailed micro-analysis of specific figures and themes, while providing an outline of more general meanings related to this motif, and tracing the cultural concepts embedded in the visual materials.

By identifying the evolving meanings and concepts attached to and embedded in the motif of the woman and the dragon, as well as changing cultural stereotypes related to their union, this study forms an axis on which further studies of this motif can be structured. The book will also trace the formation of stereotypes concerning women and dragons and the context for their development, such as the erotic stereotype that immediately comes to mind when imagining a woman with a dragon. This study provides methodological tools for approaching images and stories concerning women and dragons differently than narratives centered on men and dragons.

Outline

The book is composed of six chapters, which follow the chronological development of this motif from the fifth century BCE to the fifteenth century. Chapter One is devoted to the image of the dragon as it evolved from perceptions concerning snakes/serpents, exploring the different symbolic meanings that have accrued surrounding this mythological creature based on the biological and physiological characteristics of existing reptiles. This chapter then goes on to attend to the topos of the dragon-slayer and its evolution from Mediterranean antiquity to early modern Europe, thus offering a basis for a comparative understanding of its relationship to the motif of the woman and the dragon, whose study must be approached independently and using different tools.

The motif of the woman and the dragon is an extension of the dragon-slayer topos, yet as this study insists, images of women and dragons should be approached independently and using different tools. The second to fourth chapters examine three types pertaining to this motif in an ancient Greco-Roman artistic context, with forays into Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Minoan art. I devote an entire chapter to each type, focusing in every case on one or more mythical figure.

Chapter Two examines the visual interaction between dragons and holy female figures, as exemplified by goddesses, oracles, priestesses, and mythological female

3 For the definition of topos see, "topos," in *Oxford English Dictionary*: https://www.oed.com/.

protagonists and their sacred collaboration with dragons, focusing on the myth of Cadmos and the myth of Apollo and Python. This chapter considers images depicting the collaboration of a woman with a dragon as relating to sacred oracular events and fertility goddesses, hence the definition of this type as "the holy woman." In this context, I turn to the myth of Cadmos and its visual iconography, exploring images of Cadmos confronting a woman seated on the dragon Drakōn. The related myth of Apollo and Python/Delphyne further probes the ritualistic functions of the Delphic Pythia as reflecting the combat between Apollo and the dragon Python, and as related to "the previous owner" myth of Delphi, which asserts that Apollo appropriated a temple previously dedicated to the Great Mother goddesses Ge/Gaia or Themis. An investigation of ceremonies involving sacred dragons establishes the similarly sacred status of the women who served, communicated and collaborated with them in Greek antiquity. The discussion suggests that these rituals originated in the cults of Great Mother goddesses of fertility, whose endurance conflicted with the later patriarchal hierarchy of Greek gods. This chapter also addresses several related signs that consistently accompany these figures, most notably the cow and the cave, exploring in depth the symbolic and ritual functions of this site, which was understood in ancient Mediterranean cultures as the womb of a Great Mother goddess.

Chapter Three contrasts the second female type, "the good wife," as exemplified by Andromeda in the Perseus myth, with "the dangerous woman," as represented by Medusa. This chapter follows the sequence of the Perseus myth, which includes the encounter of a male hero with two opposite types of women who form unions with dragons. The analysis of the Andromeda myth investigates the meaning of the theme of "the bride of death," the concern with marriage and fertility symbolized in her iconography, and the structure of "the good woman" type, who must be detached from the dragon in order to become eligible for marriage. The discussion then goes on to examine the mythological narratives and visual typologies related to Medusa, examining this figure through the prism of feminist studies and gender-related concerns, and identifying in her imagery residues of earlier matriarchal concepts, which explain the many contradictions inherent to her representation. Medusa's iconography is identified with the type I defined as "the dangerous woman," or as "the holy-defiled woman," whose sanctity was sexually violated. The comparison between Andromeda and Medusa highlights the juxtaposition between "good" and "bad" women in a Greco-Roman cultural context, leading to an understanding of Medusa as an emblem of a woman too powerful to exist with the patriarchal order. Medusa's image thus elicited both fear and a desire to dominate the entity representing the fusion of a woman and a dragon. This third type is a woman who was once holy and united with a dragon. In this case, however, their collaboration with it is interrupted, usually by a sexual event that defiles the woman and threatens

the social order. This type, which I call the holy-defiled woman, is also exemplified by Medea, Eve and Lilith.

Chapter Four turns to explore the multiple binary meanings of the figure of Medea, another instance of the holy-defiled woman, while probing the meanings of defilement and redemption, the bias against women in general and particularly toward women in unusual positions of power, and the stereotypes attached to this motif. This chapter analyzes a number of myths pertaining to Medea, while pondering her relationship with dragons. It suggests that she was originally associated with the holy woman type, while underscoring her powerful, dangerous, and destructive abilities, which are associated with the prototype of the witch. As I will demonstrate, these characteristics form the basis of what I call the "Medea bias," referring to the perception of powerful women as dangerous and destructive. Medea's connection with the Colchis dragon reveals the tree as another complementary symbol related to this motif, as seen in depictions of the Colchis dragon wrapped around the tree with the Golden Fleece. The Medea myth as represented in Corinthian art and literature also suggests her function in apotropaic rituals of children and infant protection, and in relation to formulations of salvation, as well as her contribution to the creation of stereotypes of women as unrestrained and irrational, and specifically to the concept of "serpents in the soul" – the idea that women are imbued with passion and rage.

Chapter Five turns to explore the visual culture of Christianity from late antiquity to the early modern period, centering on representations of Eve as another iconographic construct building on the ancient fusion of a woman and a dragon. As this chapter reveals, images of Eve were designed as a reaction against certain elements of this motif, while continuing to encompass them. This case study, which begins with an analysis of early Christian sarcophagi, marks the first stages in the transformation and Christianization of the motif. The discussion goes on to probe the later split of Eve into images of Eve and Lilith, and further reveals how concepts, themes, and symbols pertaining to social stereotypes of women and to childbirth rituals continued and evolved over the centuries. In exploring images of Lilith and related fertility demons, the discussion draws an evolutionary line from the apotropaic functions of Medusa and Medea images to the representations of fertility demons that flourished in medieval and early modern folk beliefs in Western Europe. As I suggest, the anguiped or *dracontopede* imagery representing the fusion of a woman and a serpent, which symbolized the threat to childbirth and infants while offering apotropaic protection against them, is the same imagery depicted in the Eden iconography.

Chapter Six investigates the iconography and iconology of Saint Margaret, identifying several visual patterns and types and examining deviations from them. It outlines the saint's hagiography and the development of her visual typology

from the tenth to the fifteenth century. The iconography of Saint Margaret is also compared to that of Saint George and the Archangel Michael, further accentuating the differences between them while attending to other female saints depicted with dragons. As I argue, the popularity of visual images portraying Margaret as emerging from the body of the dragon, and the refutation of that scenario in literary sources, indicates a dissonance stemming from the affiliation of the saint's visual representations with ancient concepts and rituals embedded in the motif of the woman and the dragon. The role of Saint Margaret in childbirth rituals further emphasizes this gap by turning the discussion to the saint's cultic role as the protector of childbirth and infants.

This series of case studies, selected from a remarkably extensive corpus, offers the most striking and salient examples of the motif in question. It provides both a synchronic and a diachronic investigation of the motif in the Greco-Roman and Western European cultural context, while considering additional, related cultural contexts and locations in which this mental construct developed in the realms of religious and folk rituals, philosophical inquiry, political debate, material culture and literature. Such an investigation sheds light on the convergent structures that may have developed in relation to the same mental concept.

Methodology

By examining a wide range of artistic mediums and material artifacts, and in some cases relating them to literary texts, over a time period spanning close to two millennia, this study offers multiple perspectives on the subject in question, while relying on a number of methodologies. Since the motif of the woman and the dragon is a category distinct from the dragon-slayer topos, which gives rise to a disparate set of signs, typology, iconography and iconology, are all recruited to examine this motif.

Chapter One analyzes the evolution of the concept of the dragon, which predates the modern separation between a mythical, imaginary creature and the zoological creature known as a "snake/serpent." As this chapter reveals, literary references to "dragons" appeared at the same time as visual representations of serpents or other reptilians and marine creatures. The discussion delineates how the biological qualities of serpents gave rise to the symbolic qualities of dragons. My research builds on a number of different approaches, combining the study of iconography and iconology with Structural and semiotic methods. Reliance on these approaches allows for the inspection of minute details with highly specific meanings, alongside the detection of wide-ranging patterns, which together form a rich and compelling tapestry depicting the visual and conceptual symbiosis of women and dragons.

Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky's pioneering studies of iconography and iconology, which have been further elaborated on by later scholars, both attend to the reception of ancient signs and motifs in early modern art.[4] The iconographic method that seeks visual patterns and deviations from these patterns, and the iconological method that looks for the cultural-historical context of these patterns, are both essential to this study, and involve studying the motif as the basic visual pattern, while examining both consistency and diversity in its representation. An iconological approach is applied when exploring additional visual or textual evidence that can shed light on the meaning of the images. Of particular interest to this study is Warburg's analysis of "pathos," a term he uses to refer to an indirect, implicit reception of ancient concepts in a later cultural context.[5]

Hans Belting's combined study of iconography and anthropology, and his theory concerning the symbolic placement of an image as an ontology capable of substituting for a lost essence,[6] is particularly valuable for studying instances in which the dragon functions as a symbolic substitute for a Great Goddess. This approach is relevant to the discussion evolving throughout this book – a perspective that stresses art can reveal pathways of meaning and concepts that remain elusive in the domain of literature, while coming to the fore in the domain of art history. In deconstructing the motif of the woman and dragon and analyzing it as a codified topos, this study compares and contrasts visual evidence found in ancient art, breaking up the visual motif into signs, studying the patterns in which one sign is

4 Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, intro. Kurt W. Forster, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999); Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms; Aby Warburg's History of Art*, trans. Harvey L. Mendelsohn (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017). Newer studies that follow this approach are exemplified by Barbara Baert, Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Jenke Van Den Akkerveken, and Niels Schalley, *New Perspectives in Iconology: Visual Studies and Anthropology* (Brussels: Academic and Scientific Publishers, 2011); Lena Liepe, "The Study of the Iconography and Iconology of Medieval Art: A Historiographic Survey," in *The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art: Iconography, Iconology, and Interpreting the Visual Imagery of the Middle Ages*, ed. Lena Liepe (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2019), pp. 16–34. For reception studies of ancient art in renaissance art, see Luba Freedman, *The Revival of the Olympian Gods in Renaissance Art* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Mina Gregori, ed., *In the Light of Apollo: Italian Renaissance and Greece, 22 December 2003–31 March 2004* (Milan: Silvana; Cinisello Balsamo; Athens: Hellenic Culture Organization, 2003); Phyllis P. Bober, Ruth Rubinstein, and Susan Woodford, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources* (London: Harvey Miller, 2010).

5 Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte schriften* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1932), II, pp. 443–449; Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, comm. Fritz Saxl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986), p. 179.

6 Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*; Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, pp. 67–173; Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

replaced by another, identifying typologies, and looking for additional meanings embedded in the motif.

Although often critiqued, Lévi-Strauss' Structuralist method, which identifies similarities among related myths and then seeks to expand their connection to additional myths and life experiences, and broadens the scope of their understanding by delineating their structure, remains an effective way of understanding myths and their role in society. The current study makes use of the Structuralist process of disassembling the visual makeup of a myth and widening the scope of investigation to related myths and rituals, while focusing on their visual manifestations. Anthropology also serves as a point of reference in the examination of rituals and folk traditions associated with the motif, with a focus on magical artifacts.[7]

Chris Knight's article "Lévi-Strauss and the Dragon: Mythologiques Reconsidered in the Light of an Australian Aboriginal Myth" has successfully examined the advantages and disadvantages of the Structuralist method, demonstrating how each interpreter can weave the evidence differently and obtain dissimilar results.[8] Thus, the current investigation also applies a semiotic method, which requires consideration of all the surviving material evidence that can be obtained in order to create a hypothesis. The semiotic (or semiology) method consists of the study of signs and symbols by disassembling single signs, entire sentences (textual or visual) and complete images. This study disassembles the selected images into smaller units and performs a microanalysis into the meaning of a single unit, such as the cave, and then reassembles the image while identifying how a single sign's meaning impacts the interpretation of other related signs in the same image. It is based on the exploration of hundreds of images, belonging to a rich and relatively large corpus of material evidence, in order to arrive at the most accurate interpretation possible. The signs chosen as the focus of my analysis throughout the book were selected due to their widespread recurrence in this corpus of images, along some atypical depictions that were selected in order to shed light on the more prevalent types.

7 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Broole Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic, 1963–1983); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (London: Cape, 1978); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 1979); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); Jonathan Culler, ed., *Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 2006). Relevant examples of historical anthropology can be seen in Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987); John Sturrock, *Structuralism* (London: Fontana, 2003); Baert, Lehmann, Jenke Akkerveken, and Schalley, *New Perspectives in Iconology*.

8 Chris Knight, "Lévi-Strauss and the Dragon: Mythologiques Reconsidered in the Light of an Australian Aboriginal Myth," *Man: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18.1 (March 1983), pp. 21–50.

Umberto Eco's claim in his book *A Theory of Semiotics*, that "the whole of culture *should* be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on signification systems,"[9] supports such a process of interpretation, which includes the careful examination and didactic identification of the codification process, while taking into account the presence of the scholar as a receptor who does not exist in a vacuum. Eco's cultural semiotic theory sees the sign's meaning as including both naturally formed and artificially constructed meanings within a given cultural context. In addition, he notes that the sign and its meaning exist within a code system that is related to any number of social and cultural phenomena.

This book relies substantially on epistemological feminist theory,[10] which shifts the focus and perspective of past and present studies from male to female protagonists. For example, by shifting the focus from Perseus to Andromeda in their shared myth, a significant aspect of the narrative, which concerns the meaning of the dragon to Andromeda, can be revealed.

State of the Arts and Theoretical Background

The current study embraces an understanding of myth as containing culturally shaped structures that reflect various social and cultural concerns and struggles. Accordingly, I explore diverse cultural elements to interpret the signs in question, following the lead taken by earlier studies. One scholarly discipline central to the discussion unfolding throughout this entire work is that of dragon studies, which has lately become an independent field of study. This book examines the development of dragon symbolism in Western cultures, and surveys images of dragons and women from antiquity to medieval and early modern Europe, studying the symbolic functions and meanings of dragons from comparative cultural and folkloric perspectives.

Foremost among these is Daniel Ogden's *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, which surveys myths along with folkloric sources and material culture to analyze the meanings attached to representations of dragons,

9 Umberto Eco, *La struttura assente* (Milan: Bompiani, 1968); Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale* (Milan: Bompiani, 1975); Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), quotation p. 22; Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Umberto Eco, *Kant e l'ornitorinco* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997); Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 299–340. On the connection between iconography and semiotics, see Arlette David, *Renewing Royal Imagery: Akhenaten and Family in the Amarna Tombs* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2021).

10 Marjorie L. DeVault, "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis," *Social Problems*, 37.1 (1990), pp. 96–116.

particularly those present in ancient texts.[11] This study is complimented by Ogden's *Drakōn* and *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds: A Sourcebook*, which survey and explore the meaning and function of the dragon with an emphasis on the Greco-Roman cultural context.[12] Ogden's aim, alongside surveying and defining the epistemology of dragons in ancient Greco-Roman cultures, is to delineate the "fire against fire" concept – the idea that "it takes one to kill one," and identify related cultural patterns in dragon myths. Although Ogden also attends in a thorough manner to visual manifestations, he is mainly concerned with literature, demonstrating how myths and folk traditions reflect approaches toward additional themes such as the Greco-Roman attitudes toward death and the dead.

Also important in this context is Neil Forsyth's *The Old Enemy*, which views dragons and other monsters as part of a royal lexicon that presents the king as a military commander, builder of cities, and judge, a figure who combats chaos and rebellion in all spheres of life. Forsyth uses a large literary corpus to examine the evolution of the male dragon-slayer motif throughout various civilizations and in different periods.[13] Like Ogden, Forsyth examines the conceptual structure of the adversary in myths as a basis for his methodology. Ken Dowden's *Death and the Maiden* applies similar methods of investigating Greek myths in order to explore attitudes toward women and marriage.[14]

A notable example of such a structural analysis of a myth is Joseph Fontenrose's *Python*, which focuses on Apollo combating Python; Fontenrose performs a focused analysis of textual evidence pertaining to the myth in a literary and cultural context, and broadens the scope by performing a comparative analysis with many other dragon-slayer myths from different Mediterranean places and eras.[15]

Another example is Bernard F. Batto's *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*, which explores the dragon-slayer topos in a biblical context.

11 Daniel Ogden, *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Daniel Ogden, *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

13 Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*; Ogden, *Drakōn*.

14 Ken Dowden, *Death and the Maiden: Girls' Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1989); Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Daniel Ogden, *Night's Black Agents: Witches, Wizards and the Dead in the Ancient World* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2008); Daniel Ogden, "Medea as Mistress of Dragons," in *Contesti magici*, eds. Marina Piranomonte and Francisco Marco Simón (Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2012), pp. 267–277; Ogden, *Drakōn*. For further examples, see Oliver Taplin, *Comic Angels: And Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Paintings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Robert A. Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1999); Jennifer Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion: A Cognitive Approach* (London: Routledge, 2016).

15 Joseph Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

Like other scholars, Batto studies recurrent manifestations of dragon figures in the Bible, while comparing them to broader and local traditions. This comparative analysis assists Batto to contextualize these myths geographically and historically, offering a theoretical tool for deciphering the Bible.[16]

Calvert Watkins's *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* studies the linguistic transformation of accounts concerned with dragon slayers that go back to ancient Sanskrit. By following this linguistic tradition, Watkins in fact follows cultural concepts that migrate among cultures, surviving over long periods of time.

Additional important studies in this field are Ariane Delacampagne and Christian Delacampagne's *Here Be Dragons*, which follows the transformation of dragon figures from antiquity to medieval and early modern Western Europe. This volume examines dragons alongside other monsters and mythical creatures, broadening the scope to include Eastern cultures.[17] Also noteworthy are Jonathan D. Evans's *Dragons: Myth and Legend,* and Martin Arnold's *The Dragon: Fear and Power*, which examine the development of dragon symbolism over time, with a special emphasis on its literary and broader cultural aspects.[18]

Yet whereas the focal point of all these studies is the dragon-slayer topos, which involves the mythical creature's interaction with a male protagonist, the motif of the woman and the dragon has been almost completely neglected. In the chapter "Masters and Mistresses of *Drakontes*" in his book *Drakōn*, as well as in his article "Medea as Mistress of Dragons," Ogden points out that interaction between a dragon and a female is abnormal, but does not take this observation any further.[19] The few studies that do address this motif are Waldemar Deonna's art oriented study "L'arbre, le serpent et la jeune femme," which attends to a miniature statue representing a female figure alongside a tree encircled by a serpent, and Jean-Marie Pailler's "La vierge et le serpent de la trivalence à l'ambiguïté," which explores the status of the Vestal Virgins and their symbolic connection to mythical and ritual traditions of virgins and serpents. These articles aim to explain particular visual and textual sources concerning women and dragons, yet relate to these instances as specific and local.[20]

16 Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

17 Ariane Delacampagne and Christian Delacampagne, *Here Be Dragons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

18 Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jonathan D. Evans, *Dragons: Myth and Legend* (London: Apple, 2008); Martin Arnold, *The Dragon: Fear and Power* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

19 Ogden, "Medea as Mistress of Dragons"; Ogden, *Drakōn*, pp. 192–214.

20 Waldemar Deonna, "L'arbre, le serpent et la jeune femme," in *Mélanges Henri Grégoire*, ed. Henri Gregoire (Brussels: Secrétariat des Éditions de l'Institut, 1949), pp. 197–205; Jean-Marie Pailler, "La vierge et le serpent de la trivalence à l'ambiguïté," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome antiquité*, 109 (1997), pp. 513–575.

The current study, by contrast, offers a comprehensive exploration of this motif, while exploring previously researched documents in a new light. Another unique aspect of this book, in contrast with other studies of dragons, is its focus on art and on visual and material culture. At times, this focus also serves to reveal the dissonance between textual and visual evidence, as demonstrated in Saint Margaret's case. It is my hope that the choice to focus on visual evidence will make a substantial contribution to this field of study.

Key concepts

A book that investigates the sign *woman*, and relates gender stereotypes and biases, as part of the motif of the woman and the dragon, must inevitably incorporate aspects of gender studies, and more specifically, historical women's studies. Important works in this context include Miriam R. Dexter's "The Ferocious and the Erotic: 'Beautiful' Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake," which examines the earlier evidence of Medusa's image and outlines her ancient matriarchal aspects;[21] Madeleine M. Henry's *Prisoner of History: Aspasia of Miletus and Her Biographical Tradition*, which investigates the bias that grew against a woman who challenged the social borders of fifth-century BCE Athens, and sheds light on the condition of women in that particular patriarchal context;[22] and Joan B. Connelly's *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*, which investigates the many ritual functions of women within the Greco-Hellenistic religious structure.[23] In turning to the Christian context, particularly helpful is Robyn Cadwallader's *Three Methods for Reading the Thirteenth-Century Seinte Marherete: Archetypal, Semiotic, and Deconstructionist*, which critically examines three different methods for analyzing this saint's hagiography.[24] Especially influential for the current study are Jacqueline M. Musacchio's *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* and *Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace*, which bring together art, ritual, and religion, particularly in the domestic realm and as they relate to women.[25]

21 Miriam R. Dexter, "The Ferocious and the Erotic: 'Beautiful' Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* 26.1 (Spring 2010), pp. 25–41.

22 Madeleine M. Henry, *Prisoner of History: Aspasia of Miletus and Her Biographical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

23 Joan B. Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

24 Cadwallader, *Three Methods for Reading the Thirteenth-Century Seinte Marherete.*

25 Jacqueline M. Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989); Jacqueline M. Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). For other researchers of women historic perspectives, see Elizabeth

As this study suggests, many of the motivations, signs and symbols that were attached or detached from this motif over time reflect central paradigmatic shifts, alongside the endurance of its meaning and function throughout the medieval and early modern periods by means of folk traditions, rituals, and various concepts regarding women. The evolution of myths and their meanings, as their narratives and iconographies consistently change and develop, offer valuable information used to pinpoint changing cultural attitudes. For example, the humanizing and beautifying of Medusa in the fifth century BCE points to the didactic use of her image during that period.[26] Another example is Medea's popularity in the context of funerary practices in the Roman Imperial period, attesting to the attention paid during this era to the concept of salvation and its relation to images of Medea and the dragon-driven chariot. At the same time, a study that follows the development of a single motif in various geographic and cultural contexts requires a measure of generalization.

The use of the term "patriarchy" in this study also deserves some attention. Throughout the book, patriarchy refers to the propensity to "retain gender as a central organizing feature, maintaining a *hierarchical* emphasis and focusing on *social systems* and *social arrangements* that reinforce domination."[27] Although various patriarchies with different features have existed historically in different cultural contexts, the male-dominated social structure, or androcentric hierarchical structure, is a central feature of all the societies in question. Although the use of this term has received considerable criticism, recent theories of patriarchy suggest that such universality and simplification can sometimes be useful and effective in intercultural studies.[28] While every culture has a unique and diverse social

A. Petroff, *Consolation of the Blessed: Women Saints in Medieval Tuscany* (New York: Alta Gaia Society, 1979); Elizabeth A. Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Jane T. Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Cynthia Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Saints' Lives and the Female Reader," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 27.4 (1991), pp. 314–332; Rosemary R. Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More, eds., *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600–1530* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011); Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

26 Kathryn Topper, "Perseus, the Maiden Medusa and the Imagery of Abduction," *Hesperia: Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, 76.1 (January–March 2007), pp. 73–105.

27 Gwen Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence Against Women: Resurrecting 'Patriarchy' as a Theoretical Tool," *Violence Against Women*, 15.5 (2009), pp. 553–573, particularly p. 554.

28 Veronica Beechey, "On Patriarchy," *Feminist Review*, 3.1 (1979), pp. 66–82; Sylvia Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Ibid., pp. 553–573; Pavla Miller, *Patriarchy* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

structure, this study centers on sociocultural contexts in which the main feature of the family hierarchy is its governance by men, a leadership role that is reflected in the overall social structure.

The current analysis acknowledges that the myths and images of the Greco-Roman era were mostly (if not entirely) created, written, and illustrated by men. They are therefore prone to present a male perspective concerning femininity, and the related fear of a matriarchal threat. The examination of the three types encompassed within the motif of the woman and the dragon, and of their place within patriarchal orders, as well as the epistemological approach applied to the study of women's interactions with dragons, are thus also inevitably related to the author's perspective as a woman. It is my belief that a feminist perspective was essential to noticing the lacunas and inconsistencies and raising the questions that this book intends to resolve. The themes and images were carefully selected from a comprehensive analysis of hundreds of images and narratives portraying women with dragons, in order to best demonstrate the three types elaborated on throughout.

My hope is that the current study will foster further reflection on additional motifs and images centered on female figures, which continue to be largely investigated from a male perspective, giving rise to various misconceptions. Such a perspective is critical to an understanding of images uniting women with dragons, whose resonances continue to populate contemporary culture.