

Mating Habits of the Common Draccus: Community and the Subversion of the Dragon Theme in *The Name of the Wind* (*The Kingkiller's Chronicle*) by Patrick Rothfuss

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the subversive folk-tale conventions of overcoming the monster in the unfinished fantasy cycle *The Kingkiller's Chronicle* by the American writer Patrick Rothfuss, where an intriguing dragon episode in the first part of the series, *The Name of the Wind*, calls for an interpretation and invites the reader to use it as a key to the understanding of the nature of the narrative. The significance of the community as both a character in the story and the narratee of the fairy tale seems to be a major clue in the present investigation.

Keywords: dragon, quest, subversion, folk tale, fantasy, Rothfuss

In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, Maria Tatar (2015: 16) claims that “[f]airy tales are always more interesting when something is added to them.” The purpose of this paper is to explore a specific addition to the folk-tale conventions in the unfinished fantasy cycle *The Kingkiller's Chronicle* by the American writer Patrick Rothfuss, where an intriguing dragon episode in the first part of the series, *The Name of the Wind*, calls for an interpretation and invites the reader to use it as a key to the understanding of the nature of the narrative. The significance of the community as both a character in the story and the narratee of the fairy tale seems to be a major clue in the present investigation.

“Overcoming the monster” is the first of the seven basic plots discussed by Christopher Booker, who, supporting his claim by reference to Jungian archetypes, propounds a theory that the plots of all the stories in the world can in fact be reduced to seven patterns. He analyses diverse narratives strewn across time, space and genre, from epic to cinema, in order to prove his point about the universality of each plot type. Discussing the plots centred around the overcoming of a monster, from *Beowulf* to *Jaws* and, with more emphasis on distance and quest, from *Gilgamesh* to *Dr. No*, he proposes a pattern that could be summarised as:

[T]he peace of the little [...] community [...] is rudely shattered by the arrival of [...] a monster of almost supernatural power, who lives in the depths of a [wilderness.] The

inhabitants [...] are thrown into a stew of fear and confusion as [the monster] makes his mysterious attacks [...]. Finally, when the sense of threat seems almost too much to bear, the hero [...] sets out to do battle [...]. There is a tremendous climactic fight [...] until at last [the monster] is slain. The community comes together in jubilation. The great threat has been lifted. Life [...] can begin again (Booker 2004: 1–2).

This consistent plot blueprint emphasises the fact that the primary reason for overcoming the monster is its threat to the community, even though later Booker's exemplifications of monster plots show that the public interest in their destruction may not always be so easily discerned.

The dragon, even though prominent enough as a monster to be overcome, shares the category *Mythical Beasts and Hybrids* (Motifs B10–B19.11) with such hostile and hybrid creatures as, for example, the basilisk, the unicorn, or the behemoth in the “nearly exhaustive taxonomy of mythical animals” in the *Motif-Index* by Stith Thompson, who lists nine “sometimes overlapping categories,” where Motifs B11–B11.12.7 refer to various dragon-like monsters (De Rose 2005: 67). Motif B11 refers to dragons as “composite creatures” of “reptilian nature,” mostly male, in some cultures benevolent, but in European folk tradition hostile (Birkalan, Garry 2005: 73). This negative connotation may be partially attributed to the influence of the allegorical representations of the devil as dragon in the Revelation and “mistranslations of various Hebrew words as ‘dragon’” (Evans 2000: 235). “By the end of the Middle Ages well over 100 saints had been credited with critical encounters with diabolical foes manifest in the form of a dragon or monstrous serpent” (Evans 2000: 235). J. R. R. Tolkien points out that the dragon in hagiographical context develops from a real if theologically applicable beast to sheer allegory (Tolkien 2006a). Mythologies and heroic songs also abound in dragon fight motifs: “The *Motif-Index* lists ‘fight with dragon’ as a motif (B.11.11). It is also a major tale type (AT 300)” (Birkalan, Garry 2005: 74). Folk tales featuring the dragon are also common and “The Dragon Slayer (AT 300) is a central folktale type in Europe” (Birkalan, Garry 2005: 75). Thomas Honegger points out that from scanty medieval material it is evident that folk tales about overcoming the dragon vary in their use of the method, from an almost heroic stand to entirely “dishonourable” acts of trickery. He quotes a story which exists in several versions in which the heroic dragon killing seems to degenerate into a trick (Honegger 2019: 63–80). Similar dynamics are at play in the Polish foundation legend of the city of Cracow and its famous Dragon of Wawel. In a medieval chronicle by the bishop Wincenty Kadłubek, the beast is killed in an epic way, whereas the subsequent development of the story results in a folk tale featuring a clever cobbler and a sheep carcass stuffed with poison. Both stories, interestingly, firmly present the dragon as a threat to the local populace.

However, it is important to note that the dragon/monster in folk tales is not invariably presented as a threat to the community the folk-tale hero has to defend.

Both Booker and Hande Birkalan and Jane Garry provide lists of characters, stories and reasons for the overcoming of the dragon.

“The dragon, then, is one of those elements that has been floating around in the Cauldron of Story since time immemorial, and it does not come as a surprise that it ended up in a great number of soups” (Honegger 2019: 68–69). The genre of fantasy, so immensely prolific in the last 100 years, has definitely become part of the “soup” where the dragon is especially likely to be found. However, the treatment of this theme in *The Kingkiller’s Chronicle* is unusual enough to deserve special attention.

The connections between folk and fairy tales and fantasy have been a matter of both debate and consensus since Tolkien’s famous and seminal lecture *On Fairy-Stories*. Interestingly, one of the conventions of the new genre seems to be the existence of a metafictional interrelationship between the story and the tales shaping the cultural horizon of its secondary world. The richness and intricacy of the significance of both high genres and folk tales and songs for the interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* (Kokot 1996: 79–98) is rarely even approached in prominent works of fantasy. Rothfuss seems to be an exception to this rule, however. His use of the motif of overcoming the monster displays very unusual features and exists both as a feature of the plot and the subject matter of stories told in the secondary world.

The novels *The Name of the Wind* (2007) and *The Wise Man’s Fear* (2011) constitute the first two volumes of Rothfuss’s unfinished cycle *The Kingkiller’s Chronicle*. The third volume, already announced by the publisher under the title *The Doors of Stone*, has been repeatedly postponed with increasingly discouraging publication dates tentatively suggested by the sellers. Rothfuss may have been put off from continuing the series by a sense of a lack of artistic freedom imposed not merely by the readers’ expectations, but predominantly by the shackles of the narrative conventions he has chosen for his work.

The story is told from two distinct vantages of time: a third-person narrative creates the story’s present, where the main character, and the narrator of the second story line, the ex-arcanist Kvothe, is telling his tale. As it transpires, Kvothe has apparently accomplished great deeds, caused the disasters he, and everyone else, are currently reaping the consequences of, and now, with a price on his head, is a recluse, assuming the new identity of a quiet innkeeper, Kote, shielding him from both hostility and fame. Manipulated to tell the story of his life, he proceeds orderly, starting *ab ovo*, but feels free to elaborate on his favourite reminiscences, as well as to stress all the pivotal experiences setting the course of his life, and, as far as we can judge, the history of his country.

The reader is told all that in the first chapters of the first novel, and by the end of the second, Kvothe’s story, or at least its focal points, remain practically untold. We are left in the dark, but the path through this darkness has been set. It is quite reasonable to expect the cycle to follow that circular path and lead us back to the point

in time and space where and when the storytelling commenced, to the inn in Newharre and to Kvothe who has become Kote. To make things more tedious for Rothfuss, who has thus made himself follow this set path, Kvothe's narrative is expected to be comprehensive and complete, as he has actually been found by a very famous scholar, an investigator of myths and folk tales, the Great Debunker himself, Devan Lochees, Chronicler, and his tale is meant to be presented to the public in the form of a scholarly book. In a situation where his life has become a public property, told, re-told, re-edited, manipulated and distorted, Kvothe is offered by Chronicler an opportunity to present his own, presumably true, version of the story. He rises to the bait, but only under his own conditions. He will not allow Chronicler to change anything in the narrative and audaciously demands three full days of storytelling. Chronicler, although claiming to be pressed for time, agrees. Thus, apparently, *The Kingkiller's Chronicle* is set to consist of three volumes, each devoted to the portion of the story told in one day. What is more, Kvothe starts his tale with a catalogue of his deeds, again, apparently, setting a blueprint for the chronicle, and curtailing the artistic freedom of the novel's author.¹

Because of this circular pattern, the story seems more unfinished than a regular linear, or even a more typically constructed, epic *in medias res* narrative could have been. The circle of Kvothe's life remains broken, we see (do we, though?) the final outcome, we are also told how it began and started to develop, even though we may, by the end of the second volume entertain increasingly serious doubts about the story's reliability. What started as an attempt to show the true Kvothe to the community involved in Kvothe's decisions and deeds, has slowly been transformed into a mixture of very subjective reminiscences and increasingly involved and playful interaction with his immediate audience, Chronicler and Bast. Be that as it may, we are left in the cold by the abrupt termination of the trilogy/cycle.

In this context, the story of the dragon (or rather draccus) of Trebon from the second half of *The Name of the Wind* is refreshingly if quizzically complete. This completeness in itself, however, may seem suspicious in its clearly conscious manipulation of typical folk- and fairy-story motifs and structure. The questions of who is manipulating whom and to what extent will probably remain unanswered. Is it Rothfuss sporting his sense of humour and extensive knowledge of the history of storytelling in our own culture, or is it also Kvothe making fun of Chronicler, or does the whole design have another purpose?

¹ As the third volume does not exist, we cannot say whether Rothfuss intended to follow this path making Kvothe and Chronicler keep the agreement, or whether some unforeseen turn of events would change the design (in the second novel small but significant indications in the story's present might have been placed there to open up such an alternative way out). All that, however, remains in the sphere of conjectures, and I would gladly be proved wrong in all my interpretative guesses for the price of having the remaining volume(s) in my hand, of which, unfortunately, I despair.

At the very beginning of his tale, Kvothe stresses that he is one of the Edema Ruh, travelling performers and expert storytellers, both sought by the community as the repositories of folk wisdom and despised or even persecuted as vagabonds living outside the community's moral and social boundaries. The motif of rejection by the established social structures is a common theme in Kvothe's tale, perhaps also one of the strongest points in his apology. The subsequent story reveals also his other talents of shaping the tale, as he unashamedly admits to being a consummate liar and manipulator, who has always enjoyed his notoriety and has often consciously contributed to the growing body of tales, rumours and scandal accumulating around his person. "I am a myth [...]. A very special kind of myth that creates itself. The best lies about me are the ones I told" (Rothfuss 2007: 45). His tale is therefore very precisely and skilfully composed by someone inherently versed in the art. That he is not merely boasting becomes clear very soon. The process of storytelling is set in a very precise and realistic frame of a day in a village inn, and is occasionally interrupted by both mundane and unusual, sinister or grotesque episodes. They include also acts of storytelling performed by the local worthy and apart from the heroes of old, their subject is also the famous and notorious Kvothe the Arcane.

In the catalogue of his deeds presented to Chronicler as an introduction, Kvothe mentions his burning of the town of Trebon, which, by its context, sounds like some atrocious war crime or a feat of magic worth of the heroes of old:

I have stolen princesses back from sleeping barrow kings. I burned down the town of Trebon. I have spent the night with Felurian and left with both my sanity and my life. I was expelled from the university at a younger age than most people are allowed in. I tread paths by moonlight that others fear to speak of during day. I have talked to gods, loved women, and written songs that make the minstrels weep. You may have heard of me (Rothfuss 2007: 53).

The catalogue does not mention the dragon, which by itself is strange, as the dragon slaying is definitely more fundamental for the construction of the image of the hero than any of the other things he lists. This oddity becomes evident only in hindsight, after he has supplied the details of the burning of Trebon, which included the encounter with the dragon-like beast. The ground for the story is prepared earlier, when the existence of such a creature is mentioned twice in a way which makes it an objective fact. Telling the story of his life at the University, where he studied to be an arcanist, Kvothe mentions a book written by Chronicler, intriguingly called *The Mating Habits of the Common Draccus*. He does not elaborate on the said habits, or indeed on the draccus itself, perhaps to the reader's regret, but at this point it has to be recollected that Chronicler has admitted earlier that he had made a journey to investigate and perhaps to debunk the stories about the dragon and has been