

Stefanie Lethbridge

Entangled Agency: Heroic Dragons and Direwolves in *Game of Thrones*

In the typical chivalric tale, the hero goes out to slay the monster that threatens a community and often rescues a beautiful damsel in distress as he goes. The hero does so in service of the king. George R.R. Martin's record-breaking fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, along with the HBO television adaptation *Game of Thrones* (2011–), systematically discredit traditional notions of the chivalric hero as an honourable fighter and protector of the weak, especially women. Instead, the series offers commonly marginalised beings, among them animals, as heroic agents. The contrast between deficient knights who are little more than animalistic killers and animals that are ready to sacrifice themselves for humans reverses a standard hierarchy which imagines humans to be 'more civilised' creatures than animals. At the same time, the combination of the animals' independent heroic agency and their dependence on their human 'owner' which *Game of Thrones* depicts, foregrounds the position of heroes as tools within existing or emerging power structures. All these animals are subjected to serving their owners and frequently used to forward their owners' power strategies; like the chivalric hero, they do not fight for virtue alone – they fight for the king (or queen).

This paper will focus on the roles and actions of the three dragons bred and owned by Daenerys Targaryen, Mother of Dragons, and the direwolves owned by the Stark children as represented in the HBO adaptation of Martin's *Ice and Fire* saga.¹ Close links between humans and animals are not uncommon in fantasy literature.² Unlike many fantasy animals, however, the dragons and direwolves in *Game of Thrones* do not speak or act as quasi-humans; they retain their status as clearly different species. At the same time, both as symbolic extensions of their owners and as agents acting on their own volition, these animals adopt stereotypical heroic behaviour patterns and tropes. Their representation in *Game of Thrones* foregrounds the fact that heroes, human and non-human alike, operate in networks of actants and meaning systems which determine whether their actions can

be described as heroic or not. Presenting heroic action as the outcome of entangled agency, the series propagates a holistic, unexclusive ideal of social relations which includes animals (and even plants) as crucial components in productive biosocial structures.

Discrediting the chivalric hero

Game of Thrones persistently questions the possibility of heroism and presents it as a concept that is outdated, unrealistic or even counter-productive. The type of heroism that is rejected in such terms is firmly linked to the idea of the chivalric hero. These heroes are prodigies of a legendary age, 'The Age of Heroes', and as such appear in untrustworthy history books or songs. They become the unrealistic dreams of children, like Sansa Stark who, inspired by romantic songs and tales, "exists in a murky might-be, could-be, chivalric *never-was* temporality" (Leederman 198) and pictures herself and 'her prince', Joffrey Lannister, in such rosy colours that she is initially blind to Joffrey's cruel character. Her brother Bran dreams about knighthood:

Bran was going to be a knight himself someday, one of the Kingsguard. Old Nan said they were the finest swords in all the realm. [...] Bran knew all the stories. Their names were like music to him. (*GT* 77)

Even the more sceptical Arya idealises the famous warrior lady Nymeria of the Rhoynar, and hopes to be rescued by knights at Harrenhal while she is trying to escape Cersei's minions:

[T]he knights would escort her home and keep her safe. That was what knights did; they kept you safe. (*CK* 213)

All of these dreams and hopes are shattered. The children are cruelly tortured at Harrenhal, Bran is pushed off a tower by a knight of the Kingsguard, Jaime Lannister, and can no longer use his legs, and Sansa is beaten and abused

by Joffrey and his guards. “What kind of knight beats a helpless girl?” Tyrion asks of Ser Meryn, who beats Sansa on Joffrey’s orders, because ironically, Joffrey considers it improper for a king to beat his betrothed. “The kind who serves his king, Imp” (GoT 4.2) is Ser Meryn’s insolent answer. This points to the conflicting elements of the knightly code, on the one hand demanding loyalty to the king, on the other protecting the weak – though in this case, the king’s order also caters to Ser Meryn’s profound enjoyment of violence against women. The chivalric hero has been placed into a network of meaning relations that, through force or willingly, turns him cruel. The conflicting demands on the ‘honourable’ knight in the end make it impossible to be honourable, as Jaime Lannister points out to Catelyn Stark:

So many vows. They make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Obey the king. Obey your father. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. But what if your father despises the king? What if the king massacres the innocent? It’s too much. No matter what you do, you’re forsaking one vow or another. (GoT 2.7)

While the nature of the monarch determines the nature of the knight that follows him, the choice of admirable leaders is apparently extremely limited. Ser Barristan Selmy longingly expresses a wish to find a master that is worth serving:

[A] man of honor keeps his vows, even if you’re serving a drunk or a lunatic. Just once in my life, when the war is over, I want to know what it’s like to serve with pride, to fight for someone I believe in. (GoT 3.5)

Ser Barristan finds such a mistress in Daenerys Targaryen, who provides a space for him that offers an alignment of virtuous action and loyalty, and enables Ser Barristan to live and die for his chivalric ideals. But this combination is rare and has little long-term effect (though he does save Grey Worm’s life): the next insurrection of the Sons of the Harpy follows as soon as the last one is crushed. Thus, even when successful within the parameters of chivalric heroism, these noble ideals seem to have few benefits for either individual or community: as Ser Jorah points out, “Rhaegar fought valiantly, Rhaegar fought nobly, Rhaegar died” (GoT 3.3), and with his death, Rhaegar also lost the Iron Throne for the Targaryens. Daenerys herself goes so far as to claim that she dislikes heroes:

You know what I like about you? [...] You are not a hero. Heroes do stupid things and they die. (GoT 7.6)

One of the few truly honourable warriors in the Martinverse, Brienne of Tarth, the lady knight, concludes resignedly that “the good lords are dead and the rest of them are monsters” (GoT 5.1). Brienne, like Ser Barristan, also eventually finds rewarding service in pledging herself to a mistress (Sansa Stark) rather than a master, though in her heroic efforts to serve, she repeatedly fails. With the exception of Sansa’s rescue from pursuit by Ramsay Bolton’s men and dogs, Brienne’s exploits become more a series of impressive gestures rather than an efficacious means to achieving an end: she thus fails to protect Renly, Catelyn or even Arya, and she does not manage to recruit support for Sansa from Riverrun.³ In the end, she is forced to put loyalty aside for the fight against the army of the dead: “Fuck loyalty!” she shouts at the astonished Jaime who, for once, is trying to honour his oath; “This goes beyond houses and honor and oaths” (GoT 7.7). Even for Brienne, the chivalric code has reached its limits. More aggressively, Sandor Clegane, nicknamed ‘The Hound’, exposes the nature of chivalric heroism as mere window dressing and persistently refuses to be knighted himself:

A knight’s a sword with a horse. The rest, the vows and the sacred oils and the lady’s favors, they’re silk ribbons tied round the sword. Maybe the sword’s prettier with ribbons hanging off it, but it will kill you just as dead. (SS 466)⁴

Throughout the series, the ideals of chivalry are associated with the aristocratic culture of the southern parts of the Seven Kingdoms (Larrington 119), a culture that is also exposed as deeply corrupt. If the series questions ideals of chivalry, it does not completely depose ideals of heroism. Instead, it displaces heroic behaviour from the many knights in shining armour onto marginalised characters, as G.R.R. Martin himself described the strategy in an interview:

[M]y heroes and viewpoint characters are all misfits. They’re outliers. They don’t fit the roles society has for them. They’re ‘cripples, bastards, and broken things’ – a dwarf, a fat guy who can’t fight, a bastard, and women who don’t fit comfortably into the roles society has for them. (Hibberd)

Amongst these “outliers”, though Martin does not mention them here, are animals.

Dragons and direwolves within the parameters of heroic action

Game of Thrones repeatedly presents plot constellations that position the dragons and direwolves in the series as heroes coming to the rescue. Initially, the animals are rescued by their respective owners and depend on ‘their’ humans for survival. The Starks find the direwolf pups next to their dead mother and each of the Stark children, including Jon Snow the bastard, brings up its own wolf. Even more radically, after dragons have been extinct for hundreds of years, on the funeral pyre of her husband Drogo, Daenerys manages to hatch three dragons from petrified eggs. Having lost her own child to the blood magic of Mirri Maz Durr, she becomes ‘the Mother of Dragons’ and the baby dragons initially depend on her for survival. When the dragons are abducted to the House of the Undying (GoT 2.7 and 2.10), for instance, they pine without their ‘mother’, and the warlock Pyat Pree is forced to bring Daenerys back to her dragons, which enables her to free them. This constellation reverses the standard trope of the damsel in distress held captive by a malevolent dragon and in need of rescue.⁵ Instead, the damsel rescues the dragons in distress. This early dependence of the animals on humans also forms a very intense bond between human characters and their animals. Daenerys calls the dragons ‘her children’. She is able to give them commands which they follow and even seems to be able to communicate with them over distance. In the case of the Starks, the wolves not only follow commands, they maintain a bond with their wolf siblings over distance, aware, for instance, when one of them is killed many miles away. The Starks can also ‘warg’ (or skinchange as the books call it) into their wolves, i.e. their minds can slip into the bodies of their wolves, seeing and experiencing the world through wolf perceptions.⁶

As wolves and dragons grow older and stronger, they become rescuers in their turn. Thus, Arya’s wolf Nymeria interferes when prince Joffrey threatens Arya with his sword (GoT 1.2). Bran’s wolf Summer rescues Bran from an assassination attempt when his mother is no longer able to fight off the assassin (GoT 1.2). Summer also fights the wights who attack the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven and delays them long enough for Bran to make his escape (GoT 6.5). Jon Snow’s wolf, Ghost, defends him against the wight who has entered Castle Black (GoT 1.8) and guards Jon Snow’s body against his murderers who wish to burn him (GoT 6.1). Independent of his owner, Ghost also prevents members of the Night’s Watch from raping Gilly after her physically weak human defender, Samwell

Tarly, has been knocked down (GoT 5.7). Even more dramatically than the various wolf rescues, Daenerys’s dragon Drogon flies into the fighting pit at Meereen to rescue Daenerys when she and her human defenders are surrounded by the hostile Sons of the Harpy and have no chance of escape (GoT 5.9). Drogon also shields Daenerys with his wing when he is forced to crash-land during the Battle of the Goldroad and defends her against the attacking Jaime Lannister with a blast of his fiery breath (GoT 7.4). Again, as with the reversal of chivalric rescue of the damsel in distress, the images reverse a classic constellation: instead of rescuing the damsel who is held captive by the dragon, the knight in shining gold armour rides on his white charger to kill the beautiful queen who is instead rescued by her fiery monster. Traditionally perceived as monstrous animals, both wolf and dragon turn into rescuers for those who are assaulted and under threat after human defences and defenders have failed. The dragons Rhaegal and Viserion also come as the last-minute rescue when Jon Snow and his companions are surrounded by the army of the dead on their excursion north of the Wall (GoT 7.6). The monster animals are the only chance the humans have to escape violence or death: the monsters take the place of heroes.

The wolves and the dragons are able to come to the rescue due to their superior physical strength or extraordinary abilities (like flying and spewing fire), which make them effective even after human defenders have failed. Despite their physical superiority, their rescue actions entail a considerable risk of bodily harm to themselves. It is this vulnerability which makes their efforts heroic rather than just the actions of a physically superior machine. The animals are clearly sentient and they need courage to face an enemy that can seriously hurt or even destroy them. Summer is killed by the wights as he fights to keep them away from Bran. Drogon is hurt by arrows in both rescue scenes – hurt seriously enough to make him thoroughly bad-tempered and uncooperative during his recovery after the escape from the fighting pit (GoT 5.10). And Viserion is killed during the rescue of Jon Snow (GoT 7.6). The series not only presents the actions of these animals within established plot parameters of chivalric rescue, it also makes their status as heroic agents explicit: Meera Reed, for instance, lists Summer among three beings, two of them humans, who sacrificed themselves for Bran, placing the non-human Summer on the same level with humans who heroically sacrificed their lives: “My brother died for you! Hodor and Summer died for you! I almost died for you!” (GoT 7.4).⁷ On another level of presentation, the grand, full orchestra soundtrack (music by

Ramin Djawadi) emphasizes Drogon's heroic status upon his return to Dragonstone after the Battle of the Goldroad. Nonetheless, the question of subjectivity and agency, and thus the very possibility of heroic action for an animal, remains a troubled one.⁸

Animals as symbols of heroism

To read animals as symbols of human character, and thus, as extensions of human agency, sidesteps the issue of animal agency. Such a symbolic or allegorical reading beckons especially in the context of animal representation in non-realistic literary forms. Dragons and wolves have a long history of symbolic meaning, usually as monsters that evoke human heroism and that have been used to define the human against the animal.

The dragon "is a ubiquitous phenomenon that figures in virtually all literary and artistic genres, where it embodies all that is 'other' than human" as Maik Goth observes (45). A popular explanation of why dragons figure in almost all cultures is what Friedhelm Schneidewind has termed the "natural forces hypothesis", which reads dragons as personifications of destructive natural forces like wind, water, volcanoes or earthquakes. Both eastern and western mythologies include narratives where monsters in the shapes of dragons or giant snakes are the cause of natural disasters (Schneidewind 8). In *Game of Thrones*, a reading of the dragons as embodying the natural element fire is already signalled by the title of Martin's original saga, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The destructive forces of extreme winter, represented by the White Walkers (also called the Others) who invade the lands south of the wall, bring death with them in the form of ice. Fire is one of the few weapons that can destroy the wights, which constitute the White Walkers' zombie army. The White Walkers themselves can be killed with dragonglass, which is 'fossilised fire', and Valyrian steel, which is forged under extreme heat. In this context, the dragons as the bringers of fire represent a life-giving force as they destroy death (literally, by spewing fire on the zombie army). It is Daenerys, 'Mother of Dragons', herself immune to the destructive force of fire, who brings survival to the north as she rescues Jon Snow and his companions from destruction (GoT 7.6); she will presumably contribute significantly to the fight against the army of the dead (in the upcoming season 8). Unlike the traditional opposition between humans and monstrous otherness embodied by dragons, Daenerys' role as creator and protector of fire/life creates a bond between human and monster

animal. Just as the plot constellations create an inversion of the common trope of damsel in distress and monstrous dragon, the association of dragons with life-preserving rather than life-destroying forces once again queries stereotyped assumptions about the symbolic meaning of dragons. In addition, Daenerys' alignment with the dragons destabilises the association of femininity with weakness.

A similar inversion can be observed in other areas of traditional symbolism associated with dragons. In medieval representations dragons frequently symbolise avarice, signalled by the fact that dragons usually guard large treasures, like in *Beowulf*. Avaricious rulers are sometimes transformed into dragons by their greed: for instance, Fafnir in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. In Christian iconography dragons tend to be associated with the forces of evil generally and are commonly the opponents of saints – famously, of course, St George (Honegger 30). When Christian heroes overcome dragons, they frequently do so with the help of divine grace more than with martial prowess – thus Edmund Spenser's Redcrosse Knight in *The Faerie Queene* defeats his own sinfulness and pride when he defeats the dragon. The traditional association of dragons with evil might account for the fact that in web fora, Daenerys is persistently discussed as the (secret) villain of *Game of Thrones* (which, of course, she might still turn out to be, cf. DeRuyter). The inversion and realignment of traditional value ascriptions has seen quite a boom in recent decades. Vampires and werewolves have been revalued as attractive and positive beings in, among others, the *Twilight Saga*, and the *Harry Potter* series dramatically improved the cultural status of witches and wizards. Broadly speaking, such revaluations question procedures of value ascription and hegemonic knowledge. While this is no doubt also the case for *Game of Thrones*, the dragons retain an element of ambiguity that questions not only value ascriptions but the positions of heroes more generally.

It is worth noting that the monsters (animal or otherwise) that cause the greatest damage in *Game of Thrones* have all been created by those against whom they eventually fight. The most blatant example is Ramsay Bolton, who trains his hounds to maul people and who is eventually torn to pieces and devoured by them himself (GoT 6.9). In such cases the monsters were created by characters who planned to use them to serve their own greed for power. But monsters also turn on their well-intentioned owners/creators: in the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven, Bran discovers that the Children of the Forest created the White Walkers in a desperate effort to defend themselves against the First Men who were

cutting down the weirwood forests (GoT 6.5). And Daenerys has hatched and nurtured dragons, at least one of which has now been instrumentalised by the Others to bring down the Wall (GoT 7.7). Monster-heroes, in the same way as evil monsters, can easily turn into a source of destruction when they reel out of control. This indicates the potential ambiguities of the heroic: actions which are judged to be heroic attain this meaning only within a network of relations to other people, intentions and outcomes. It is only the overall positive network relations that make heroic ascriptions possible.

Critics have pointed out that the intensity of the bond created between the dragon fighter and the dragon during their encounter frequently transforms the hero at least partly into a monster himself. The battle between the antagonists depends on “mutual and violent attempts at invading each other’s spaces” and thus in monster battles, the knight becomes infected with the characteristics of the monster, “letting him partake of its infernal and monstrous nature” (Goth 65).⁹ Even before Viserion is turned into an ice dragon by the Night King, the dragons in *Game of Thrones* are not unilaterally positive. Apart from destroying ill-intentioned antagonists, like the slave trader Kraznys mo Nakloz (GoT 3.4) or the army of the dead (GoT 7.6), they also cause significant collateral damage, burning not only goats and sheep but also the occasional child (GoT 4.10) when hunting for food. Daenerys herself, as far as she knows the last Targaryen (who claim to be of dragon blood), initially “cringes from her birthright” (Frankel 150) of violence, which to her is primarily represented in her brother’s aggression; she is horrified when her dragon kills the child. But as the dragons grow stronger, she takes on some of the more violent character traits of her ‘children’ and her house, whose sigil is, after all, the dragon: she burns down the Khals of the Dothraki who hold her prisoner (justly according to their law, GoT 6.4); she crucifies randomly selected slave owners in order to make a statement against slavery; she executes the former slave boy Mossador, who has killed one of her enemies against her explicit instruction (GoT 5.2); and she executes the Tarlys, father and son, by burning them alive (GoT 7.5). In each case other characters query her reaction as being too absolute and as bordering on a tyrannical use of power so typical for the Targaryens. In fact, she penalises behaviour that is partially justified: the Tarlys are loyal to their oath, the Dothraki follow their own laws and customs, and Mossador was actually trying to help Daenerys. The symbolic force of the dragons as an extension of Daenerys’s personality thus points both ways. It enables Daenerys to develop the strength of a

ruler and revalues the position of a woman in the power struggle of the houses, while also revaluing the meaning of dragons from malevolent monsters to heroic fighters. But it also brings with it some of the self-righteousness and cruelties associated with House Targaryen.

The sigil animal of the Starks is the direwolf and, as in Daenerys’s case, their sigil animal is used as an indicator of Stark qualities. When the Starks find a dead direwolf with six live pups, they immediately interpret this as portent. Direwolves have not been seen south of the wall for hundreds of years and the sudden appearance of this animal out of its place signals that “winter is coming”, the Stark family motto. What is more, the direwolf they find was killed by the antler of a stag. As the current king, Robert Baratheon, whose sigil is the stag, has just announced his visit to the Stark family seat, Winterfell, the death of this direwolf seems to foretell danger for both houses (though in the end it is House Baratheon that is destroyed, not House Stark). The Stark children develop a strong bond with their wolves and are frequently merged with them in the eyes of their followers. Thus, Robb becomes “the young wolf” during his triumphant military campaign against the Lannisters. When Jon Stark is elected King of the North, Lord Glover dubs him “the white wolf” (after his white direwolf, Ghost). The Starks also actively model themselves on their sigil animal: “I am a direwolf. Direwolves don’t cry” (CK 35), Arya tells herself when she is beaten by Yoren. As the wolves come to the rescue on several occasions, they enact the heroic character traits of their respective owners: Robb’s determination to defeat the Lannisters against all odds, Arya’s combativeness, Jon Snow’s courage and dedication. The very naming of the wolves expresses the characteristics of both wolf and owner:

Ghost, Grey Wind, and Shaggydog all represent physical characteristics in the wolf, often a feature that gives him advantages in battle and/or behavior in the field. (Leederman 196)

Grey Wind is swift, Ghost is silent and blends in well with his environment (snow) and Shaggydog is shaggy and aggressively protective of his owner, Rickon. These characteristics reflect the roles of their owners – Robb as victorious leader of an army, Jon as member of the Night’s Watch, Rickon as the little boy who spends his life in furtive flight from forces that want to kill him. The wolves of Sansa, Arya and Bran (Lady, Nymeria and Summer)

are representative of their human’s dreams of future becomings, of hope and potentialities. (Leederman 197)

In accordance with this close bond between human and animal, when their owners die, the wolves' lives are also endangered, or vice versa: Grey Wind is killed with Robb at the Red Wedding, Shaggydog is killed just before Rickon is handed over to the Boltons who will kill him, Summer dies after Bran has been touched by the Night King, and Sansa's wolf Lady dies when she relinquishes her independence to the Lannisters. Overall, the bond to their wolves makes the Stark children stronger. In a sense it extends the family clan by doubling each child with a wolf. Through the connection between the Stark children and their direwolves, Martin

provides portraits of compassion, heroism, and love that furnish hope even in the face of seemingly impenetrable darkness. (Leederman 189)

By the end of season 7, however, the direwolves maintain their position almost exclusively on a symbolic level, as the Stark girls recall their father's admonition for family unity: "When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives." (GoT 7.7). In actual fact, when the remaining members of the Stark family reunite at Winterfell to gather the forces which are to fight the army of the dead, their wolves are no longer with them. Ghost remains behind at the Wall, Nymeria refuses to accompany Arya back to Winterfell after their chance meeting in the woods, and the other four wolves have been killed. At this stage, the direwolves have returned largely to their symbolic meaning as sigil animal.

In contrast to dragons, direwolves are not fantasy animals. Direwolves (*canis dirus*) are prehistoric wolves that lived in North America in the Pleistocene era (Larrington 58). Their descendants (grey wolves) still exist in our world, though most people will be more familiar with literary wolves than their real-life counterparts. Wolves dominate western culture largely as symbolic signifiers of wilderness or wildness (Robisch 5–6). With such connotations European mythologies "overwhelmingly endowed [wolves] with a negative symbolic mystique" (Van Horn 207), associating the wolf with savagery and beastliness. In recent decades, however, as efforts are being made to resettle the wolf in areas where it has become extinct, the associations with wilderness and wildness have come to signify a link to a more balanced ecosystem, and wolves are frequently used as icons in environmental campaigns against the destruction of wilderness in the name of 'progress'.

Wolves have been a critical species for representing conflicting claims about human relationships to the lands of the United

States, serving as the 'other' to be reviled or championed – an icon of threat and disorder to some and beauty and harmony to others. (Van Horn 205)

Within such potential (and conflicting) interpretive frameworks, the direwolves in *Game of Thrones* activate a positive symbolism through their heroic acts of rescue and defence of the Stark children. They represent a positive coding of the North (Eberhard 72) as loyal, incorruptible, willing to endure hardship, and firmly lodged within ancient and sacred traditions. This contrasts with the decadence and softness of the south, notably the southern knights and warriors – the army of Stannis Baratheon, for instance, succumbs to the cold more than to the forces of the Boltons. Most importantly, the wolves symbolise connections, not only between the members of the Stark clan but also to the older forces of the forest and the old magic.

The most important players [in *Game of Thrones*] are the ones who recognise the melody of this song [of Ice and Fire], who hear harmonies in the beating of wings and the howling of wolves. The North remembers. Indeed. Direwolves see deep in the forest, their eyes perceive things invisible to the most perceptive of human beings. (Pearson Moore, quoted in Eberhard 73)

Significantly, Summer helps Bran to find the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven. This connection to the old, more earth-bound magic represented by the old gods to which the northerners pray gives the symbolic meaning of the direwolves an important spiritual component.¹⁰ It is a spirituality that signals a biosocial organization which includes both animals and plants as equals rather than dominated life forms, a form of social organisation favoured by ecologically aware activists. It is also represented by the Children of the Forest, a species of non-humans whose original name means "those who sing the song of the earth" (DD 491). The Children of the Forest have been nearly eradicated in the name of conquest and progress as the First Men cleared the forests of Westeros. The circumstances of the endangered (humanoid) Children parallel concerns of environmentalists, who worry about the eradication of humans if the ecosystem is destroyed. As Leaf, one of the Children, explains, there was only ever a small number of their species, "lest we overrun the world as deer will overrun a wood where there are no wolves to hunt them" (DD 497). One could read this as a nod towards Aldo Leopold's influential concept of "thinking like a mountain" (in *A Sand County Almanac*), which puts forward precisely this argument: that a

balanced ecosystem is in danger when wolves are killed and the woods are overrun by deer in consequence. The direwolves in *Game of Thrones* thus symbolize the ideals of a quasi-spiritual connection, not only between family members, but between human and non-human parts of nature – a connection which the earth needs to survive.

However, reading animals only as symbols or metaphors is a reduction that critics practice all too often, limiting animals to supplementary forms of human subjectivity (McHugh 7). Such “death by allegory” (Honegger 27) does not allow animals their own spaces and it does not do justice to the role animals play in *Game of Thrones*. While there are strong symbolic components to the representations of wolves and dragons, the sigil animals of the houses Stark and Targaryen, the series also endows these animals with heroic agency in biosocial networks.

Animals as network agents

Unlike other fantasy stories, *Game of Thrones* does not anthropomorphise or ‘disneyfy’ its animals. We share the perceptions, even the fears, of Smaug, Tolkien’s dragon in *The Hobbit* – among the most influential dragon depictions in fantasy (Bonacker 192) – and we are given full-blown conversations between dragons and humans for instance in Kenneth Grahame’s *The Reluctant Dragon* (probably the first friendly dragon in fantasy history).¹¹ In contrast, the dragons or wolves in *Game of Thrones* do not communicate in human languages. Nor are they turned into harmless and cute pets. On the contrary, the destructive and violent side of their behaviour is repeatedly foregrounded. The non-human animals in *Game of Thrones* are allowed their own spaces, social behaviour patterns and perceptions, which are clearly different from those of humans.

Despite their lack of human language, the wolves and dragons in *Game of Thrones* do communicate through growls, roars, howls or movements. More importantly, through the practice of warging, when the warg assumes an animal body, the viewer of the series is also given an opportunity to share the animal’s point of view. Bran frequently slips into Summer’s body and through this merge between human and wolf he directs Summer’s actions (for instance, when Summer helps to defend Jon Snow when the wildlings turn on him, GoT 3.10), while also experiencing the world through the perceptions of the wolf:

As he slipped inside Summer’s skin, the dead woods came to sudden life. [...] Familiar scents filled his nostrils: wet leaves and dead grass, the rotted carcass of a squirrel decaying in the brush, the sour stink of man-sweat, the musky odour of the elk. *Food. Meat.* [...] He shook the snow off his muzzle. The wind was gusting, so the smells were hard to follow. (DD 71-72)

The viewer of the TV series is allowed to share in some of these sense perceptions, as a subjective camera assumes the height of the wolf moving through the forest. From this subjective ‘wolf’ point of view, we see how blood drips from its muzzle (GoT 4.2) or how a trap snaps (GoT 4.4).

In a Cartesian framework, animals are considered to be fundamentally different from humans because they lack the faculty of reason, and therefore a soul. They become machines:

[Descartes] denied souls to animals because they exhibited no behaviour which could not be accounted for in terms of mere natural impulse. (Thomas 33).

Denying animals the faculty of reason also discounts their subjectivity, and with this, their ability to make intentional choices. Such intentional choices are often considered to be preconditions for heroic action (though this excludes accidental heroes). In *Game of Thrones*, consistent with its (pseudo-)medieval setting, the division between humans and non-human animals falls on a spectrum rather than being a mere binary opposition. On several occasions, for instance, humans are described as having animal (or beastlike) characteristics. As Ser Jorah explains, “There is a beast in every man and it stirs when you put a sword in his hand” (GoT 3.3). Humans are not only described as animals, but also treated as such. Joffrey Lannister, for instance, persistently refers to his bodyguard Sandor ‘The Hound’ Clegane as “my dog”, and when he wants to placate him, he throws “a bone to his dog” (CK 59). In order to stay human, characters are encouraged to curb their animalistic tendencies. When Bran spends too much time warged into Summer, Jojen Reed warns him of the dangers of becoming like the wolf and forgetting his human nature (GoT 4.2). While there is thus a clear hierarchy in the difference between human and non-human animal in *Game of Thrones*, there is no absolute separation: the boundaries between human and animal are presented as fluid, precisely because one can turn into the other with comparative ease.

Treating people like animals is designed to subjugate them. Thus, the Unsullied are given animal names “to remind them they are vermin”

(GoT 3.5). But subjecting others, human or animal, also diminishes the oppressors. “Zaldrīzes buzdari iksos daor – a dragon is not a slave”, Daenerys points out on several occasions (GoT 3.4, 7.7), and as she explains to Jon Snow,

[t]hey were terrifying, extraordinary. They filled people with wonder and awe. And we locked them in [the dragon pits]. They wasted away. They grew small. And we grew small as well. We weren't extraordinary without them. (GoT 7.7)

Daenerys's attempt to connect to her dragons while allowing for their otherness opens up spaces for heroic action, as well as for a fuller life for humans – it enables the exceptional.

Along the spectrum of gradual differences between human and animal, animals are not excluded from independent action. Throughout the series, animals are shown to make their own choices about how to act and who to side with. Thus Drogon does not want to submit to captivity and breaks free, but chooses to return to Daenerys and save her when she is surrounded by enemies in the fighting pit. On the other hand, after this rescue, when he is nursing his wounds in the wilds of the Dothraki grass lands, he refuses to take her back to Mereen or even to hunt for food as she requests. The direwolf Nymeria also clearly makes a choice when she declines to accompany Arya back to Winterfell and decides to stay with her pack instead, and Arya understands and accepts this choice. While animals are not shown to have the same kind of subjectivity and agency as humans, they are presented as having a range of options; they are not mere machines.

Recent critical discussions of animal agency have stressed the importance of effect or efficacy over the role of intention in the assessment of agency (see for example McHugh). Thus, while we cannot access an animal's reasons for acting in a certain way, we can observe the effects of these actions. In *Game of Thrones*, heroic action becomes possible for animals within a “network of actants” and in such contexts, animals “act as catalysts for wider, ramifying webs of cause and effect” (Armstrong 196). The dragons and direwolves in *Game of Thrones* acquire forms of “entangled agency” and “embodied agency”.¹² Entangled agency refers to the network of animate as well as inanimate actants that make the action as a whole possible and meaningful. Embodied agency focusses on the materiality of the action – in this case, the significance of the animal body as it effects and is affected by an action (Roscher 58–59). When Daenerys flies into the Battle of the Goldroad on Drogon, for instance, neither of them alone produces the

necessary results: destroying their enemies by fire requires Daenerys giving directions plus Drogon having the intelligence to follow her orders as well as the physical capacity to carry them out. In addition, the narrative has positioned Daenerys as the side that deserves to win, the ‘good side’, against the Lannister soldiers who serve the selfish aims of their Queen Cersei. A comparison between the actions of the dragon and the employment of the anti-dragon weapon nicknamed ‘the scorpion’ is instructive in clarifying the higher degree of agency of the dragon, who is presented as more than a mere machine in the hands of Daenerys.¹³ Bronn operates the scorpion, a giant crossbow with arrows capable of piercing dragon bones, and shoots at Drogon. When Drogon is hit, he crashes to the ground and exposes Daenerys to the attack of Jaime Lannister. Drogon smashes the scorpion to pieces with his tail and spews fire at the approaching knight. While the scorpion is passive and absolutely dependent on the operations of Bronn in order to have an effect, Drogon is shown to react to the situation of his own volition; in contrast to other occasions, Daenerys does not give her famous command, “dracarys”, to spit fire. Though Bronn and the scorpion also form a network of actants, the scorpion cannot act heroically, because it cannot act of its own volition. Similarly, in the battle against the army of the dead, Viserion fights without rider and, with great precision, independently manages to eliminate the wights while sparing the men in the middle of the battle field. Again, the dragon's embodied capabilities, combined with Daenerys' leadership (from a distance) and the perspective of the narrative, which positions the viewer on the side of the living, combine to create a framework for heroic action. When Viserion is turned into an ice dragon and comes under the command of the Night King, the same action (precise employment of fire power) is no longer heroic within the context of the narrative – because he is now fighting for the ‘wrong’ side. The animals act in a network which gives meaning to their actions. As the knight sworn to an evil king cannot be a hero, neither can the dragon. On the other hand, acting in a positively coded network, animals, like humans, achieve heroic agency.

Conclusion: The pack survives

The last season (to date) of *Game of Thrones* leans very heavily on the idea that the survival of the living in their fight against the dead and the Others is only possible if the living band “together”. Jon Snow convinces some of the wildlings to

come south of the wall with him and fight against the coming dangers of winter together with the people of the North. While the majority of wildlings do not take up his offer, the force of his argument is immediately brought home as those who do not (or cannot) leave with Jon Snow are wiped out by the attack of the army of the dead at the Battle of Hardhome (GoT 5.8). Jon Snow also travels south to get help from Daenerys (successfully) and at least a truce from the Lannisters (unsuccessfully, though Cersei pretends to join). His efforts to build a large army, including wildlings, Daenerys' remaining dragons and his own wolf, to fight against the threat from beyond the wall, hold at least some promise of success, and emphasise the urgent need for an extended network of cooperation – their chance at survival lies in fighting “together”.

During the finale of season 7, Jaime Lannister points out to his sister, Cersei, that “the monsters exist, the songs are true” and we see Jaime, the Kingslayer and oathbreaker, ride north to keep his oath to help fight the army of the dead and perhaps live up to his potential as chivalric hero. As T. A. Leederman claims:

Increasingly, *A Song of Ice and Fire* suggests that hegemonic knowledge alone cannot solve our problems; we must look back, to earlier eras now wreathed in legend, and sideways, to other species, for new conceptual tools and ways of being in the world. (Leederman 193)

What holds true for *A Song of Ice and Fire* also seems to apply to the HBO adaptation. This “look sideways” includes the possibility of allowing animals that are commonly associated with monstrosity to play the role of heroes. *Game of Thrones* presents a world where the boundaries between human and animals are more fluid than they would be in a post-Enlightenment worldview. The incorporation of animal perspectives and actions in the form of entangled agencies which enable a close cooperation between animals and humans seems to promise a chance for survival of the threatened world of Westeros. By extension, the threat of nature-turned-monster (the ice represented by the White Walkers) is a stern reminder of the ecological dangers brought about by the subjection and exclusion of other species in our own world and that acknowledging the rights of other species might save us as much as it might save Westeros. But this is a conclusion that is too straightforward for *Game of Thrones*. “You should never believe a thing simply because you want to believe it”, as Tyrion notes (GoT 7.3). Allowing monsters to be heroes might also just create new monsters, as the re-definition and subjection of Viserion

as ice dragon in the service of the Night King amply demonstrates. It is the constructive networks, so difficult to achieve, between humans and non-humans, between memories of the past and courage in the present, between men and women, that make heroic action possible and promise survival for the Westerosi. As the knights remember their job and two wolves and two dragons are left to fight on the side of the living, we are at any rate left with the hope the two Stark sisters share as they intone the formula for survival that their father taught them: “When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives” (GoT 7.7).

Stefanie Lethbridge is professor of English Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Freiburg. She is a member of the Collaborative Research Center 948 “Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms”. Her current research focus is on British hero cultures of the 18th and 19th centuries. She has also published on heroes in contemporary popular culture.

1 As at this point in time the storyline of the TV series significantly departs from the book version of Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*, and also extends further than the books, this paper will draw on the books only where they supplement the TV series.

2 For instance, in Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy, where animals serve as the embodiment of the soul of the characters; in Barbara Hambly's *Winterlands* series, the witch Jenny merges her mind with that of a dragon; in Christopher Paolini's *Eragon*, the boy Eragon forges a bond with the dragon Saphira.

3 In the books, Brienne is killed at the orders of a zombie version of her own former mistress, Catelyn Stark. To date, she is still alive in the TV series, which thus allows for a slightly more hopeful conclusion for Brienne's chivalrous ambitions.

4 On the “clash between high idealism and grim reality” in the depiction of chivalry in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, see Hackney.

5 Though as Michelle Superle points out, the initial rescue of the animal hero by their future owner is a standard plot element in dog-hero stories.

6 All the Stark children are skinchangers in the books. In the TV series, only Bran's warging is developed (so far), though the other Starks also maintain a close emotional connection to their wolves.

7 Interestingly, Meera does not mention Leaf, one of the Children of the Forest, who on this occasion also sacrifices herself for Bran and his mission by exploding a grenade in her hand, thus turning herself into a fire bomb, in order to delay the wights.

8 The literature discussing animal agency is vast and the discussion cannot be reproduced here. For a succinct summary of major positions, see for instance Kurth, Dornenzweig and Wirth.

9 For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Teichert.

10 I thus cannot follow Andrew Zimmermann Jones' assessment that the direwolves in *Game of Thrones* are “a great disappointment” (110). Similarly Igor Eberhard, “Die Direwolves bleiben lange am Rand der Erzählung” (“The

dire-wolves remain at the margins of the narrative', 73). This is neither borne out by the books, where the Stark children frequently think of their bonds with their wolves (even after, as in Sansa's case, that wolf is dead), nor by the TV series, where the wolves are only sidelined in seasons 6 and 7. Eberhard concedes that despite existing at the margins of the narratives, the wolves remain significant throughout as connectors to magic and the old gods (ibid.).

11 For a discussion of the development of increasingly tamed dragons in literature, especially young adult literature, see Bonacker and Petzold.

12 These terms are two of five concepts put forward by Mieke Roscher (57–61) for the study of agency in animals. The other three concepts are relational agency, animal agency and historicising agency.

13 Though in terms of Actor–Network Theory, which influenced the position of animal studies on the question of animal agency, the scorpion is also an actant.

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