UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Speaking with dragons

A study of gendered language in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*

MA Programme in English Studies
Master's thesis

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22.6.2025
Helsinki

Abstract

Faculty: Faculty of Arts

Degree programme: MA Programme in English Studies

Study track: N/A

Author: Niina Lämsä

Title: Speaking with dragons: A study of gendered language in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*

Level: Master's Thesis

Month and year: June 2025

Number of pages: 62

Keywords: Christopher Paolini, Rebecca Yarros, gender performativity, conversation analysis, feminist literary criticism, fantasy literature, dragons

Supervisor or supervisors: Merja Polvinen

Where deposited: University of Helsinki e-thesis database

Additional information:

Abstract:

This thesis examines how gender and species shape the portrayal of relationships between dragons and dragon riders in *Eragon* by Christopher Paolini (2002) and *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros (2023). Focusing on the themes of power, vulnerability, protectiveness, agency, and trust, this thesis investigates how both gender and species shape communication between human riders and their dragon companions. The aim is to show how these novels reflect and challenge gender and species norms through interspecies relationships and dialogue.

The primary material consists of selected conversations between riders and dragons in both novels. Those are analysed using a combination of feminist literary criticism, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and embodied discourse analysis. Central theoretical frameworks include Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Deborah Tannen's work on gendered communication and Robin Lakoff's work on women's speech. These approaches allow this thesis to examine linguistic expressions of power and care, how such dynamics appear in the literary depictions of non-verbal communication, and how these are influenced by gender and species roles.

The analysis finds that while gendered language patterns, such as male-coded assertiveness and female-coded emotional support, are present, power in these relationships is shaped more decisively by species than by gender. Rather than being dictated by gender alone, authority and influence are co-constructed across species lines, with dragons' physical and symbolic dominance often overriding human social hierarchies. These dynamics shift over time, influenced by narrative context, emotional development, and mutual dependency. Both novels portray dragons as independent agents capable of emotional and strategic influence, complicating traditional notions of dominance and expanding the category of the gendered subject beyond humans. These findings contribute to the field of feminist literary studies by demonstrating how fantasy literature can challenge norms and suggest alternative models of power and personhood based on mutual respect and interdependence.

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1 Introduction

Dragons have long been present in the mythologies of ancient cultures, taking on vastly different meanings depending on region and worldview. For example, while the Chinese or "Oriental" dragon is typically seen in a "kindlier light", the Western or "Occidental" dragons came to embody danger and destruction (Stableford 2009, p. 191-193). According to Phil Senter, Uta Mattox and Eid Haddad (2016, p. 71), these two dragon examples have no direct historical or symbolic link to each other, but by accident, after the Middle Ages, these different dragons came to resemble each other in art. As Christianity spread across medieval Europe, these folkloric figures were reinterpreted through a theological lens. The dragon became a symbol of ultimate evil, as exemplified in *Revelations* 20:2 (King James Bible, 1769/1800): "And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan, and bound him a thousand years." As Christianity spread through medieval Europe, this connection influenced how dragons were depicted in religious and cultural texts. According to Emily Midkiff (2014), Western dragon legends became strongly linked to the Devil and that association made them too symbolic and allegorical for use in ordinary, non-religious stories. This association of dragons with the Devil himself clarifies the meaning behind medieval depictions of angel-dragon battles. As Thomas Honegger (2019, p. 41) explains, these scenes were not originally intended as symbolic representations of good versus evil, but as literal portrayals of the archangel Michael battling the Devil. This framing casts medieval dragons as embodiments of ultimate evil rather than mere allegorical monsters.

This negative reputation of dragons carried into the early traditions of modern fantasy literature. According to Romuald I. Lakowski (2015) J. R. R. Tolkien described dragons to be serpent-like creatures with four legs, claws, and a long, powerful tail. Some have wings, and many are fire-breathing "fire-drakes" whose breath can cause destruction. Another description of a dragon by Brian M. Stableford (2009, p. 115) states that a dragon is a mythical creature, a massive fire-breathing reptile with wings. Dragons are often characterised by malice and greed, hoarding treasures they cannot use, and possessing a keen sense for detecting thieves. However, according to Midkiff (2014), dragons began to be freed from their symbolic association with evil in the late 1800s particularly through Kenneth Grahame's secular story "*The Reluctant Dragon*" where the titular dragon preferred poetry and spectacle over fighting, marking a departure from the traditional view of dragons as embodiments of evil.

In contemporary fantasy, dragons are no longer portrayed as inherently evil, but instead, as companions to humans in the portrayal of dragons and dragon riders. This thesis examines two such companion pairings in *Eragon* by Christopher Paolini (2002) and *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros (2023). These pairings offer a unique opportunity to examine how gender and species shape interspecies communication and power dynamics in fantasy literature. Both novels, the first in their respective series, feature young protagonists who bond with dragons, initiating a journey of mutual growth and understanding. The unique gender dynamics of these pairings, *Eragon*'s male rider and female dragon versus *Fourth Wing*'s female rider with both male and female dragons, make them compelling subjects for my analysis.

This thesis argues that power, agency, care, and vulnerability in rider-dragon relationships are not fixed but negotiated through shifting dialogue and narrative progression. Using feminist theories, theories of human-animal relations, and discourse analysis, it explores how these dynamics are constructed and evolve, revealing alternative models of power and emotional partnership across species. Dragons are treated not as metaphorical beasts or narrative tools, but as agents capable of speech, resistance, and care. This framing challenges both patriarchal and anthropocentric views that place humans at the top of social and moral hierarchies.

Rather than presenting gendered or species-based roles as static, both *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing* depict dominance, trust, and emotional connection as relational and shaped by context. Rider-dragon interactions evolve from hierarchical beginnings to mutual partnerships, where identity and power are co-constructed. Gender-coded behaviours, such as protectiveness or vulnerability, appear across species and roles, not confined to male or female characters.

A constructionist view of gender serves as the theoretical foundation of this research. This view, according to Jennifer Coates (2004, p. 7) emphasises that gender is not a fixed trait but rather a fluid and performed identity shaped through social interactions. The constructivist perspective allows for a nuanced examination of how gendered behaviours and roles are constructed and reflected in the relationships between human characters and their dragons. It also highlights the broader societal expectations embedded within these interactions, revealing how the novels engage with gendered power dynamics and authority. This thesis explores how these novels represent cross-species relationships and how they navigate and challenge traditional gender roles within their fictional worlds.

While much has been written about dragons in fantasy literature, less attention has been given to the relationships between human and dragons, and on the question whether gender or

species influence these dynamics in contemporary narratives. While gendered representations through speech have been researched before in fantasy literature (see Eberhardt, 2017) in a case study of the Harry Potter-series which concluded that traditional representations of idealised fictional characters help recirculate traditional gender ideologies, less attention has been given to how these dynamics intersect with species. This thesis contributes to feminist literary studies by demonstrating that fantasy literature can model equitable, emotionally intelligent relationships that include non-human agents as meaningful and ethical participants. Through a close reading of these "fantastical" companionships in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, the thesis reveals how fantasy challenges both gender binaries and the boundaries of personhood.

1.1 The novels

Fantasy is often defined by the presence of the impossible and unexplainable, setting it apart from genres like science fiction, which seeks to provide rational explanations for irrational elements (Murphy 2017, p. 115). The term has also been used broadly to describe literature that departs from realistic representation. The chosen novels belong to the genre of fantasy, both being high fantasy novels as they are situated within an entirely fictional world with its own rules of magic, history, and societies.

The Old English poem *Beowulf* contained a dragon to be slayed. According to Edward James (2012), early critics deemed stories about monsters and dragons "terribly silly," and concluded that a poem centred on such elements could not be taken seriously, but J. R. R. Tolkien challenged this view, arguing that *Beowulf* was a great poem by a single author and that through its fantasy elements, including killing of a dragon, the poet conveyed deep truths about courage, loyalty, and duty. For Tolkien, according to James (2012), fantasy was uniquely capable of expressing such themes more powerfully than realism. In European legend dragon-slaying is the greatest portrayal of heroism, and dragons deserved to be slain because either they did predatory activities or hoarded gold and jewellery (Stableford 2009, p. 115). This portrayal of dragons as evil adversaries, closely aligned with Christian imagery, helped solidify the role of the dragon as a symbol of danger. However, as fantasy literature evolved, so did the figure of the dragon. From being voiceless beasts to be slain, dragons increasingly became characters with intelligence, language, and even moral authority. In Western literature dragons speak and their language is superior to humans, as they often speak in eloquent riddles and wield language as a tool and a weapon (Midkiff 2014). Traditionally,

this speech reinforced dragons' cunning nature, aligning them with danger or deception, but over time, language came to signal wisdom and depth of character. In modern fantasy, according to Stableford (2009, p. 191-193), the trend for dragons has been more towards dragons being "high-minded creatures blessed with uniquely ancient wisdom". This trend is also visible in both *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*. A model for wise dragon was written in *Earthsea* series by Ursula Le Guin in 1968 and around the same time *Dragonriders of Pern* series by Anne McCaffrey was also launched, the latter telling stories about dragons and dragon riders having symbiotic relationships and fighting battles together (Stableford 2009, p. 191-193). Thus, humans riding dragons is not an invention unique to either *Eragon* or *Fourth Wing*, but more a continuation of a literary tradition.

According to Brian Attebery (2014, p. 13–15), the fantasy genre can reimagine gendered relationships, enabling critical engagement with social norms that realist fiction often leaves unexamined. In *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, these "reimaginings" are further complicated by intergenerational dynamics embedded in rider-dragon bonds. By layering age and experience differences onto gendered interactions, the novels create spaces where care, power, trust and vulnerability can be explored in ways that would be ethically or emotionally fraught in a realist young adult setting. These fantasy relationships allow gendered traits to be expressed more freely, without resistance from real-world expectations.

1.1.1 Eragon

Eragon (2002), the first book in Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle,* introduces readers to a fantasy world where dragons were once common but are now nearly extinct. It tells the story of a young farm boy named Eragon who discovers a mysterious egg that hatches into Saphira, a powerful dragon who is one of the last of her kind. The bond that forms between Eragon and Saphira marks him as the first new dragon rider in generations, thrusting him into a political and magical conflict that spans across the kingdom.

The world of *Eragon* is shaped by the rarity and near-mythic status of dragons. As such, Saphira and Eragon's relationship is burdened with the weight of legacy and exceptionalism. Eragon must train rapidly to meet the expectations of being a Rider in a world still haunted by the betrayal of some of the previous dragon riders including the last known dragon rider, now King Galbatorix. Eragon and Saphira's journey is defined by mutual growth, as Eragon transitions from boyhood to young adulthood under Saphira's guidance, while Saphira herself

learns to work in partnership with a human. The story is a journey of self-discovery, adventure, and conflict.

I have chosen *Eragon* for this research because of the dynamic and intricate relationship between Eragon, the young male rider, and Saphira, the female dragon. Their connection is central to the novel's themes of power, responsibility, and transformation, and it provides a framework for exploring how the gender and species influence the interactions between dragon and rider.

1.1.2 Fourth Wing

Fourth Wing (2023) by Rebecca Yarros is the first book in the *Empyrean* series, set in a world where military training and dragon riding are central to the survival of the human empire. The story follows 20-year-old Violet Sorrengail, who against her own desires is thrust into the dangerous world of dragon riding. Violet's bond with her dragons evolves through intense challenges and emotional growth, creating a compelling narrative of trust, power, and most importantly survival. The themes of strength, and vulnerability are explored as Violet must reconcile her own agenda and new powers with the responsibilities she faces as a dragon rider. Unlike *Eragon*, where only few dragons remain, *Fourth Wing* presents a world where dragons are numerous but selective of their human riders.

I have chosen *Fourth Wing* for this research as it presents a counterpoint to *Eragon* by pairing a female rider, Violet, with a male dragon, 'Tairneanach' or 'Tairn'. The novel also features a younger female dragon, 'Andarnaurram' or 'Andarna', as Violet's second dragon. This gender-reversal between rider and primary dragon offers an opportunity to analyse the differences and similarities in how male and female riders interact with their dragon(s) across both novels, and how these relationships are influenced by species, societal expectations and individual identities.

1.2 Theoretical background

This thesis investigates the gendered and species dynamics in rider-dragon relationships within *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, with a focus on themes of dominance-submission, protectiveness-vulnerability, and agency-trust. These themes are examined through interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, including feminist literary criticism, conversation analysis (CA), discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and embodied discourse analysis.

Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how language, power, and gender are constructed and reflected in these narratives.

At the foundation of this analysis is the constructionist view of gender, which rejects the notion of gender as a fixed, biological attribute. Instead, and following the premises of feminist thinking since Judith Butler (1990), this thesis takes gender as a socially constructed identity, performed through actions, interactions, and cultural practices. This performative understanding underscores how societal expectations shape behaviours, roles, and language, while also highlighting the potential for subversion. As Brigitta Busch (2020, p. 335) has pointed out, Judith Butler's theory of performativity can be used in literary analysis to highlight how fictional characters' interactions can reinforce or challenge established hierarchies, showing how gendered roles are created, maintained or disrupted. This perspective is adopted because the characters are constructed by the author, who assigns their gender as part of the creative process. Since gender is performed through language in literature, it is important to consider how linguistic features may or may not reflect gendered identity. According to Rocío Montoro (2014, p. 356-357) previous research has found that no conclusive linguistic markers have been found to distinguish gender in writing, reinforcing the idea that linguistic choices are shaped more by context than by gender itself.

As an intellectual framework, feminism aims to explore how relationships between women and men are shaped in various societies. According to Deborah Cameron (1992, p. 4) it operates on the assumption that these dynamics are socially constructed rather than naturally determined. Feminist literary criticism serves as a foundational framework for analysing dominance and submission in the chosen novels. Feminist literary criticism focuses on how gender influences texts and how narratives reinforce or challenge societal gender norms. It examines power dynamics, gender roles, stereotypes, and character agency within texts. According to Cameron (1992, p. 84), central to this approach is the understanding that gender is not merely a difference but a hierarchy, with masculinity historically positioned as superior to femininity. As Dorin Schumacher (1975, p. 32) describes, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "self" and "other" highlights how men are often portrayed as the standard of rationality and agency, while women are relegated to the "other," embodying emotionality, passivity, and dependence. According to Cameron (1992, p. 84) de Beauvoir's concept underscores how men define women as everything they are not: if men are active, women are passive and if men are rational, women are emotional. Within this hierarchy, qualities deemed masculine such as assertiveness, control, and rationality, are valued more highly than those associated

with femininity, such as empathy, vulnerability, and emotionality. These attributes are not only socially constructed, but also entrenched in cultural narratives that perpetuate inequality. In linguistic behaviour, gender differences are particularly susceptible to being framed as a matter of “norm” and “deviation”, as according to Cameron (1992, p. 58), gender differences are often treated as natural and self-evident, prompting us to seek them out and interpret women as "the sex" (gender) that deviates. Such stereotypes are reinforced through language, where women’s communication styles are often dismissed as less authoritative. For example, Robin Lakoff (1975, p. 56) states that the infantilisation of women through terms like "girl" positions them as incapable of leadership, a dynamic reinforced by societal constructs like the "First Lady," which lacks a male equivalent. Another stereotype of this is Lakoff’s “good woman”, who embodies traits like refinement, excessive politeness, and exaggerated positivity. For example, according to Penelope Eckert (2004, p. 165-166), all the way from childhood, boys and girls are socialised differently, with boys encouraged to express playfulness and mischief, behaviours often perceived as enhancing their status, and girls engaging in similar behaviours are judged as immature and redirected toward gendered activities emphasising appearance and compliance. This early imposition of gender norms restricts girls’ freedom and reinforces societal expectations of femininity, which continue to shape behaviours and roles into adulthood.

Previous research on animals in children’s literature reveals how species and gender intersect. According to Elizabeth Grauerholz and Bernice A. Pescosolido (1989, p. 124), because children’s literature often centres on play, excitement, and adventure, it more easily includes assertive and daring girl protagonists, but, adult women and animals, often coded as female, are still largely excluded from roles that challenge traditional gender norms. According to David Rudd (2009, p. 242) genre traditions and Romantic ideals have historically impacted animal and child portrayals, as both have been positioned closer to nature and further from culture. These portrayals reflect broader social dynamics in which dominant groups, such as males, maintain status by being distanced from animals and children. Tessa Wotherspoon (2024, p. 491) argues that (dominant) masculinity in Western societies is often tied to detached and controlling attitude towards non-human animals, which reinforces gender hierarchies through interspecies relations. This ideology could strip animals of individual subjectivity and reduce them to symbols. Annie Potts’ (2024, p. 472) writing about chickens in Western culture illustrates how animals have not only been degendered, losing culturally attributed traits like hens’ maternal devotion and roosters’ leadership, but also have been de-

animalised and objectified for human use. In this reinforcing of hierarchy, language plays a central role, as Rudd (2009, p. 250) explains that distinctions like “pork” instead of “pig” obscure the sentient lives behind the labels and even the category of “animal” becomes something from which humans distance themselves. In the context of fantasy literature, this thesis approaches dragons not as pets or passive animals, but as socially and ethically engaged subjects whose gendered identities emerge through emotional, social, and ecological entanglements. By combining feminist theory with species discourse, this thesis challenges fixed distinctions between humans and animals and reimagines interspecies relationships beyond traditional hierarchies. As Potts (2024, p. 472) notes, gender is a human invention, and thus, treating dragons as gendered individuals in the novels aligns with the fact that these characters, both humans and dragons, are also human inventions with their assigned genders.

Sociolinguistics examines how language reflects and reinforces such societal norms, particularly those related to gender. According to Cameron (1992, p. 57), historically, men’s speech has been treated as the normative standard, with women’s linguistic behaviours framed as deviations requiring explanation, perpetuating stereotypes that diminish women’s credibility. Deborah Tannen (1992, p. 24-25) highlights that men often approach conversations as negotiations for status, using direct and assertive language to assert dominance, while women prioritise connection and collaboration, employing more indirect and accommodating speech patterns. These differing communication styles are not inherent to gender but are shaped by societal norms that assign distinct values to masculine and feminine behaviours. However, according to Tannen (1992, p. 224-225) also, this male-centric lens often misinterprets women’s indirectness as a lack of confidence or authority, overlooking its role in fostering mutual understanding and relational harmony.

Language in general serves as both a tool and a battleground for power. As Norman Fairclough (2001, p. 28-29) emphasises, those who wield power through language must continuously defend and enhance their position, reflecting broader societal hierarchies. Politeness, a key aspect of gendered communication, further illustrates these dynamics. According to Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987, Ch 3.1.1.), women are often expected to exhibit greater politeness, particularly in interactions involving higher-status individuals, reflecting societal expectations of deference while on the other hand, men may use less polite language to assert dominance. However, Lakoff’s (1975, p. 87) view is that this reinforces gender inequality by positioning women as requiring special treatment. These norms perpetuate a double standard, where behaviours seen as powerful in men are often

labelled as powerless or inappropriate in women, reinforcing gendered hierarchies in communication.

This thesis integrates the dominance and dynamic approaches to gender and language as defined by Coates (2004, p. 5-7). The dominance approach highlights how linguistic differences reflect male dominance and female subordination, often linked to societal power structures. In contrast, the dynamic approach views gender as a socially constructed, fluid identity, emphasising how individuals "do gender" in their interactions. Combining these perspectives allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the interplay between structural inequalities and the fluid nature of gendered behaviour. These perspectives are chosen as they are present in Robin Lakoff's works in woman's speech. According to Cameron (1992, p. 71), Lakoff argues that women are often excluded from using "powerful" speech styles that convey authority and credibility, aligning her work with the dominance perspective. However, an alternative view by Cameron (1992, p. 71) suggests that men's speech is not inherently more credible and rather, men leverage their socially dominant positions to assert linguistic privileges. Mary Bucholtz (2004, p. 125-126) confirms the viewpoint of Lakoff's analysis as combination of dominance, discourse and difference approaches, but states that Lakoff's work resonates with the framework of gender being socially constructed. In addition to that, his thesis derives from the Third Wave feminism approach where gender is seen as a variable defined by for example race or class and local conditions instead of being "stable unified variable" as Montoro (2014, p. 350) defined it.

This thesis acknowledges key insights from feminist human-animal studies, particularly those concerning care ethics and interspecies relationality. According to Erika Cudworth, Ruth E. McKie and Di Turgoose (2022, p. 9), in feminist animal studies, the gendered ethics of care connects women to the care of nonhuman animals. Scholars such as Cudworth, McKie, and Turgoose (2022, p. 3-4) and Ouellette-Dubé (2022, p. 35-39) have demonstrated that feminist care theory challenges rationalist ethics by emphasising the emotional, embodied, and reciprocal nature of multispecies relationships. These frameworks argue that ethical care is grounded in attentiveness, empathy, and interdependence, and that both humans and animals can be participants in shared practices of care (Cudworth et al., 2022, p. 3-4; Ouellette-Dubé, 2022, p. 35-39). Although these theories often address real-world animals who lack speech and legal recognition, this thesis focuses on fictional beings who, while coded as nonhuman, are fully communicative and socially embedded. Rather than treating dragons as animals within a human-animal hierarchy, they are approached as ethically and socially capable

partners. Rider-dragon relationships are thus analysed as intersubjective alliances, operating on a shared ontological footing.

Because rider-dragon relationships cross both gendered and species boundaries, analysing them requires tools sensitive to power, authority, interaction, and social meaning. According to Jack Sidnell (2012, p. 78-79), conversation analysis provides a methodological framework for examining how communication patterns reveal social structures, including power dynamics and authority. This thesis applies CA to explore whether conversations between riders and dragons are gendered and how these interactions evolve throughout the narrative. By analysing speech, CA sheds light on how gendered language is performed and the extent to which it aligns with or challenges societal norms, and that is one of the interests in this thesis, as according to Cameron (2012, p. 167), fiction often reflects the societal realities which include the multitude of stories where men shape women to fit their desires. According to Sidnell (2012, p. 78-79) key strength of CA lies in its reliance on naturally occurring conversations, allowing researchers to identify patterns and practices as they emerge organically and that includes analysing how specific actions, such as requests or commands, are performed and understood in interaction. However, CA's focus on micro-level interactions has been critiqued for its limited connection to broader societal and institutional structures, according to Fairclough (2001, p. 9-10) and while CA is good at highlighting the intricacies of conversational behaviour, its ability to address the "why" behind these patterns often requires complementary approaches to situate interactions within their wider social and political contexts. That is why discourse analysis is used in this thesis as a broader theory to complement CA by considering the broader social and political implications of the language use. As Susan A. Speer (2005, p. 1) states, discourse not only reflects but also perpetuates societal power dynamics, including those related to gender and species. Embodied discourse analysis extends the focus beyond language to include nonverbal communication, such as gestures, posture, and spatial arrangements. According to Busch (2020, p. 329), these elements are crucial for understanding themes of protectiveness and vulnerability, which often involve physical actions rather than verbal expressions. This is studied in this thesis from the descriptions surrounding the conversations in novels. As traditionally conversation analysis is done from naturally occurring conversations, this thesis will utilise conversation analysis as a partial tool, because all of the conversations in this thesis are imaginary conversations that are written and crafted by authors thus not naturally occurring but only simulated conversations.

1.3 Methodology

This study draws on a qualitative and interpretive approach to analyse how language constructs power, trust, and emotional relationships between riders and dragons in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*. The primary data consists of selected sections of dialogue between the central rider-dragon pairs in both novels. The conversations analysed in this study were collected manually through close reading of both novels. During the first full reading, every interaction (both verbal and not) between riders and dragons was identified and noted. In the second reading, each conversation was thematically categorised based on its relevance to the study's research aims. A third reading was then conducted to refine the selection, focusing on conversations that exhibited interpersonal power dynamics: explicit negotiation of decisions, emotional reassurance or withdrawal, acts of protection, admissions of weakness, or breaches of trust. Both important narrative moments and more minor exchanges were included to capture a broad range of occurring conversations.

These collected conversations are examined using a combination of conversation analysis, discourse analysis, politeness theory, feminist literary criticism, and elements of embodied discourse analysis. These chosen frameworks enable a wide understanding of how power, vulnerability, protectiveness, agency and trust are constructed through verbal and non-verbal interactions. It is acknowledged that all dialogue in this study is fictional and crafted by authors rather than spontaneously occurring speech. Therefore, conversation analysis is applied as a tool to interpret narrative dialogue, rather than as a strict methodological framework tied to naturally occurring interaction.

First, the CA analysis identifies patterns in conversational features. CA's emphasis is on "noticings", as described by Sidnell (2012, p. 88), which are initially unremarkable features in talk that allows later for detailed observation of interactional practices, can reveal how riders and dragons negotiate power, trust, and relational dynamics in dialogue. Patterns and practices are identified through contextualised close reading and comparison of multiple examples, enabling insights into how conversational strategies reflect or challenge traditional power dynamics.

Discourse analysis complements these readings by situating the micro-level interactions within broader societal contexts, examining how language both reflects and contests traditional ideologies (Fairclough 2001, p. 91-92). Key linguistic features, such as vocabulary, grammar, and speech acts, are analysed alongside non-linguistic elements including embodied

interactions, providing a comprehensive view of how societal norms and ideologies are embedded in the texts. Special attention is paid to linguistic choices that encode power relations, such as the use of authority-related nouns (“master” and “leader”) or verbs of control (“command” and “obey”), as well as passive constructions that imply a lack of agency (“was forced” and “was allowed”). These features are analysed across both texts to uncover the ways language performs and negotiates social roles. Special attention is also given to how species-based hierarchies, such as dragons being structurally dominant, are expressed through language, behaviour, and narrative framing. This allows for an intersectional analysis of how species and gender together influence conversational power.

As a central aim of this study is to investigate how gender and species influence communication within the rider-dragon relationships, drawing on sociolinguistic theories, feminist literary criticism and theories of human-animal relations is crucial. The analysis explores how characters embody or challenge societal expectations of both gender and species, paying attention to their linguistic behaviours. Politeness strategies are examined briefly, as according to Brown and Levinson (1987, Ch 3.1.1.) they reveal how conversational dynamics align with or resist traditional gender norms. The use of modal verbs such as “must”, “should”, “might” and “can” are analysed to determine whether “speakers” express obligation, permission, or uncertainty. This approach is especially relevant in examining gendered language use, as female-coded characters may soften directives with politeness strategies, while male-coded figures often deploy more imperative constructions. Exclamation marks, hedging, and tone markers also provide insight into whether speech is framed as assertive or deferential. Although commonly applied to spoken discourse, politeness strategies and modal verb usage are here examined within literary dialogue to uncover how character speech encodes obligation, submission, or authority.

Non-verbal expressions of agency are examined through embodied discourse analysis, which considers the physical and spatial dynamics of interaction. This includes descriptions of posture, size, and bodily gestures, such as dragons shielding riders. These embodied actions reinforce or complicate the verbal messages and often serve as metaphorical enactments of protection, vulnerability, dominance or interdependence.

These methods are applied to specific chapters determined by their thematic priorities. In chapter 2, which focuses on dominance and submission, the analysis investigates who controls the progression of conversations and how power is maintained or disrupted. This

includes identifying assertive speech acts, the use of imperatives, and whether characters comply with or resist commands. The study also looks at lexical patterns that reflect hierarchical roles. Gendered roles and stereotypical associations, for example protector vs. caregiver, are also examined to understand how control is related onto gendered bodies and behaviours. Chapter 3, which centres on protectiveness and vulnerability, draws on feminist narrative analysis to assess how emotions are encoded in language and how care is expressed or withheld. The chapter explores how characters communicate protection through both speech and embodied gestures, including phrases like “I’ll keep you safe” and actions such as dragons shielding their riders. Vulnerability is studied through admissions of weakness, fear, or doubt, and the responses these evoke, whether they prompt reassurance or dismissal. The gendered framing of emotional expression is a key focus, as the interest is in whether vulnerability is portrayed as weakness or strength, and how this portrayal varies between male- and female-coded characters and across species. In chapter 4, which is about agency and trust, the focus is on how characters assert autonomy or surrender control within evolving relationships. Agency is marked by linguistic choices that signal independence (such as “Let me handle this” or “I’ll decide”), while trust is revealed through statements of belief or emotional risk-taking (such as “I trust you”). The analysis examines moments when characters share secrets, perform acts of emotional or physical vulnerability, or take risky actions as a sign of commitment. The intersection of gender, species, and agency is explored to determine whether female-coded or human characters assert themselves primarily through nurturing behaviours, and whether male-coded or dragon characters more often claim direct control, or whether these patterns are subverted across the novels.

2 Dominance and submission

In *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, the relationships between riders and dragons are marked by power struggles, where dominance and submission are constantly negotiated. Unlike traditional human-animal hierarchies, these novels portray dragons as intelligent and independent beings who challenge their riders' authority from the beginning, using both language and non-verbal power strategies to assert control. In Eragon (Paolini, 2002, p. 57), the protagonist is aware of Saphira as his equal, and in Fourth Wing (Yarros 2023), dragons are beings that need to be given the utmost respect, or they will scorch you. This sets the stage for the interactions in each novel. This chapter explores who holds the power in the conversations between the dragons and their riders, how that power is enforced and whether gender influences these dynamics. Chapter 2.1. examines how dominance and submission appear in linguistic features such as commands, resistance and interruptions, and chapter 2.2. focuses in detail whether power dynamics differ based on gender or if the hierarchy of species is the dominant force in shaping authority.

Throughout this thesis, gender is understood as a performance rather than a fixed identity. As Scott F. Kiesling (2004, p. 230) notes, masculinity is not tied to men, nor is femininity confined to women, but both traits can be expressed across genders where women can be masculine and men feminine. This thesis adopts that framework and applies it to both human and non-human characters. Wotherspoon (2024, p. 491) argues that dominant forms of masculinity in Western, colonial societies are culturally produced and closely tied to emotional detachment and control towards non-human animals, and hegemonic masculinities are often associated with aggression, dominance and a rejection of vulnerability. This framework serves as the basis for how masculinity is understood and analysed as a stereotype in the context of this thesis.

2.1 Dominance and submission in language

In both novels, species hierarchy is an implicit foundation for dominance. Dragons, by virtue of their size, magical powers, and cultural reverence within each narrative, are structurally positioned as the superior species. This framework shapes the linguistic and nonverbal strategies used by both dragons and riders. While humans may attempt to assert authority, the dragons’ species status often enables them to resist or reassert dominance. Direct commands become one of the key methods through which this interspecies tension plays out. All riders

and dragons are seen using direct commands to their respective pair, but with strategies. Eragon's speech is portrayed using intensifiers, especially the word "now", and exclamation marks pointing out his dominance when giving orders to Saphira.

> [ERAGON] "Saphira!" He pointed. "Get me down there, Now!" . . .
> [ERAGON] "Land in the fields!" (Paolini p. 77; see also p. 126)[1]

In these one-sided conversations Eragon is seen as the dominant one, while Saphira is submitting by following Eragon's order by actions. That submission shows also in the conversations below, where Saphira listens Eragon's direct commands and follows them through narration.

> [ERAGON] "*Now let him by! I can't do this alone. Besides, he saved our lives."*
> Saphira growled again, but folded her wings and backed away. (Paolini p. 268)

> [ERAGON] "*Attack now!* he cried. *But let them escape if they run."*
> She immediately folded her wings and plummeted downward. (Paolini p. 330)

All of these situations are, however, related to battle situations, where disagreeing could lead to defeat or even death. In such battle situations Eragon is verbally in the dominant position as he is giving Saphira commands, but in action they are working as a team, regardless of gender and species.

On the other hand, in some cases, it could be argued that Eragon's use of language needing exclamation points is a result of having difficulties asserting authority over Saphira in situations where she shows resistance to Eragon's commands, similarly to above, where she growled but backed away.

> [ERAGON] "*We have to go back*," he pleaded. "*The strangers are coming to the farm. Garrow has to be warned. Turn around!"* There was no answer. He reached for her mind, but was blocked by a barrier of roiling fear and anger. (Paolini p. 71; see also p. 372, p. 155)

Saphira demonstrates here non-verbal defiance, ignoring directives and asserting her agency by acting without his consent. In terms of the discussion presented by Fairclough (2001, p. 29) concerning how those who exercise power by language are in a constant struggle with

[1] The data from the sources is presented here adopting the following principles: The dialogue marker is added to emphasise who is saying the line. Quotation marks are added to the lines from Eragon as the original source does not have them, but Fourth Wing has, and italics here represent telepathic communication same way both original sources indicate it. The line breaks for dialogue are added to both source texts for clarity as the original sources sometimes use conversations as a part of body text without line breaks.

others to defend or lose their position of power, here Eragon is struggling as his dominant language is not having the effect he is hoping for. As Wotherspoon (2024, p. 491) notes, dominant masculinity is often expressed through control over non-human animals, an ideal Eragon attempts to inhabit. However, I argue that Saphira's ability to resist him is enabled not only by her personality but also by her species status. Within the storyworld, dragons are revered and feared, and her physical superiority gives her the power to reject Eragon's authority. Thus, species difference functions as a structural enabler of agency, complicating traditional masculine dominance.

While Eragon as the rider is shown to dominate his dragon with commands, Saphira also presents dominance and direct commands towards Eragon. She uses high certainty and modal verbs requiring obligation, such as "will" and "must" and also similar intensifiers and exclamation point tactics as Eragon.

> [SAPHIRA] She snarled and snapped her teeth by his ear. "*Do you really believe that?*" she asked. "*Tomorrow you will ride me–not that pitiful deer-animal you call a horse–or else I will carry you in my claws. Are you a Dragon Rider or not? Don't you care for me?"* (Paolini p. 158; see also p. 301)

> [SAPHIRA] "*Eragon!*" said Saphira sharply. "*This is an elf. She cannot be allowed to die. Tired or not, hungry or not, you must save her. I will meld my strength with yours, but you are the one who must wield the magic*."
> [ERAGON] *Yes…you are right*, he murmured, unable to tear his eyes from the elf. (Paolini p. 315)

> [SAPHIRA] "*Enough!*"
> He futilely tried to push Saphira's muscled leg off his chest and saw that Murtagh was likewise pinned. Saphira roared again, snapping her jaws. She swung her head over Eragon and glared at him.
> [SAPHIRA] "*You of all people should know better! Fighting like starving dogs over a scrap of meat. What would Brom say?*" …
> [SAPHIRA] "*Now, if you don't want to spend the night under my foot, you will politely ask Murtagh what is troubling him… And tell him that I won't stand for insults from either of you*." (Paolini p. 343)

It should be noted, however, how Saphira here employs more explanatory discourse when asserting control, justifying her demands rather than issuing them bluntly. This aligns with Brown and Levinson (1987, Ch 3.1.1.) as women are often expected to exhibit greater politeness than men, reflecting societal expectations of deference while men may use less polite language to assert dominance as Eragon can be seen using. In contrast, Tairn, the male dragon in *Fourth Wing*, frequently issues imperatives with no mitigation, establishing absolute authority over the subject. His speech is continuously using dominant orders with

one verb and negative command structure, reinforcing his dominance over Violet. The dominance is also made visible through the narration and conversation, as it uses verbs such as "will not", exclamation points, and descriptions of the commanding tone of the dragon's voice.

> [TAIRN] "*You can trust her,"* Tairn says, and I startle, dropping the orange.
> [VIOLET] *"She hates me."*
> [TAIRN] *"Stop arguing with me and eat something."* There's zero room for debate in his tone. (Yarros p. 212)

> [TAIRN] *"You will not unseat yourself!"* (Yarros p. 391; see also p. 286, p. 331)

Direct commands are an important method of asserting power, as seen in Tairn's first words to Violet:

> [TAIRN] "*Step aside, Silver One*," a deep gruff, definitely male voice orders.
> I blink. Wait. *What?* Did he just speak to me?
> [TAIRN] "*Yes. You. Move.*" There's zero room for argument in his tone, …
> (Yarros p. 180)

Tairn's choice of words reinforces his dominant status, expecting immediate obedience. The first communication also specifies Tairn as a male to the reader. The strength of his statements and the absence of justification to his words mark a speech that portrays authority and that according to Montoro (2014, p. 350-351) is a sign of speech considered masculine. The lexical power of the word "move" carries a weight of authority, eliminating negotiation and positioning Tairn as a dominant character. The below conversation portrays of another example of Tairn's dominant characteristics.

> [TAIRN] *"Try again."*
> [VIOLET] *"I don't have enough control –"*
> [TAIRN] *"Try again!"* Tairn demands. …
> [TAIRN] *"Again!"* (Yarros p. 505)

Turn-taking patterns further illustrate power hierarchies. In above example, Tairn frequently interrupts Violet's speech, enforcing his authority through repetition. The repetition of the command, coupled with the immediate interruption of Violet's self-doubt, enforces Tairn's dominance through linguistic means. This aligns with Tannen's (1992, p. 24-25) explanation of male conversational dominance, where men are negotiating status in their speech and here Tairn negotiates dominance. Wotherspoon (2024, p. 491) argues that masculinity is often tied to a controlling attitude toward non-human animals. In *Fourth Wing*, however, masculine dominance extends beyond species boundaries, with Tairn exerting control not just as a male

figure, but as a dragon. This suggests that power in these interspecies relationships is not solely a function of gender, but emerges from the combined force of species difference, physical superiority, and cultural reverence for dragons that is established in the novel.

Tairn is also asserting his dominance through treating Violet's morality as a weakness as shown below.

> [TAIRN] "*You should end the enemy at your feet*." …
> [VIOLET] "I can't kill an unconscious man." …
> [TAIRN] "*He would kill you if given the same chance*." …
> [VIOLET] "Well, that's a statement on his character. Not mine." (Yarros p. 180)

His imperative "should end" uses a modal verb that implies obligation rather than suggestion, reinforcing his superior role in decision-making. In contrast, Violet resists through argumentation, using "can't" to limit her agency, positioning her refusal within ethical rather than hierarchical terms. Violet's use of hedge term "well" points out, according to Lakoff (1975, p. 79), that she is uncertain about what she is saying, which leads to slight submission. As the expectation in *Fourth Wing* is that humans must obey dragons, this positions dragons as a dominant species whose authority is structurally assumed rather than earned. Although Violet is instructed to respect and submit to dragons, she consistently resists this expectation, suggesting that species hierarchy operates as a precondition for dominance, but she continues to actively negotiate it.

There are instances where Violet is the one commanding, but those instances are mostly tied towards commanding the second, younger dragon Andarna, not Tairn.

> [VIOLET] *"*Go roll." I point to the mud. *"*Unless that's going to mess with your wings? It's the scales on your belly I'm most worried about being easily spotted."
> [ANDARNA] *"No problem!"* (Yarros p. 386)

> [VIOLET] *"Stay with Tairn,"* I tell Andarna.
> [ANDARNA] *"I will."*
> Gods, I should have left her at Basgiath…
> [TAIRN] *"It was never your choice,"* Tairn lectures. *"Humans, even bonded ones, do not decide where dragons fly. Even one as young as Andarna knows her own mind."* (Yarros p. 468)

Violet's choice of words and choice to minimise her assertiveness to Andarna suggests her use of vocabulary that is tied to "women's language" as Lakoff's (1975, p. 79) describes. In the second example, Violet's attempt to control however are met with direct resistance from Tairn, showing how dragons maintain the ultimate authority in *Fourth Wing*. Tairn's

dismissive response to Violet's command underlines his dominance, using a "lecturing speech" that reinforces his position of control over both Violet and Andarna, but also Andarna's control over Violet.

While Tairn's dominance over Violet is ongoing endeavour, he is not in control all the time. As could have been expected similarly to Eragon, in *Fourth Wing* Tairn and Violet are working together as a team in battle situations such as in the excerpts below.

> [TAIRN] "*I've already told Fuil. She'll protect Soleil,"* Tairn says, angling towards the threat.
> [VIOLET] *"Get us away from the crowd." (*Yarros p. 500)

> [VIOLET] *"Let's climb so we can get a better count of what we are facing." ...*
> [VIOLET] *"Liam needs help!"* I rush to explain.
> [TAIRN] *"On it,"* Tairn says, flipping us in midair. (Yarros p. 508)

Violet here seems to give commands using direct command such as "get us" and text having exclamation points, but I would categorise these as working together as a team as these are life and death situations. In these battle situations, Tairn allows Violet to take a lead regardless of their gender and species.

While direct speech such as commands, imperatives, and assertive statements act as indicators of dominance, non-verbal strategies further establish power hierarchies within these novels. Silence and ignoring operates as a tool for both resistance and control. Saphira's refusal to answer Eragon's commands forces him into a position of submission against his will.

> Saphira took off without warning and wheeled back towards the Urgals.
> [ERAGON] "No!" cried Eragon, shouting with his mind, "*Come back!"* but she continued, heedless to his pleas. (Paolini p. 372; see also p. 71, p. 155)

These acts of power force Eragon into a position of submission, as he is left without the ability to negotiate Saphira's decision. Silence in this instance acts as a refusal to engage, reinforcing Saphira's independence and autonomy. Unlike Tairn, who insists on immediate submission, Saphira's dominance emerges through withholding engagement by stereotypically feminine silent treatment, while Eragon still acts like he is in charge.

The act of resisting commands and defying them is different within Violet and Saphira. Violet's resistance is primarily verbal, expressed through plea.

> [VIOLET] "*Don't hurt him," I* beg Tairn. "*He saved me."* (Yarros p. 250)

The use of pleading rather than direct command "beg" reinforces traditional feminine speech patterns, aligning with Lakoff's (1975, p. 78-82) examples that women's language is often structured to maintain social harmony and being polite rather than directly assert authority. The use of "beg" makes Violet as submissive but the speech act as a way to influence Tairn, while Saphira defies Eragon's order by following it but with attitude.

> [ERAGON] "*Saphira! Urgals! Keep Brom safe*." …
> [ERAGON] "Stop. It's me!" he yelled.
> [SAPHIRA] "*Oops*", said Saphira.
> [ERAGON] "Oops!" growled Eragon, running to her. "You could've killed me! Where's Brom?" …
> [ERAGON] "Let him go!", said Eragon, exasperated. "Didn't you tell him?"
> [SAPHIRA] "*No*", she said sheepishly. "*You just said to keep him safe*." (Paolini p. 229)

Eragon's growled response suggests a frustration with lost control, reinforcing that even when he commands, Saphira's compliance remain conditional and not submissive, as her responding "sheepishly" suggest defiance.

While dragons assert dominance early through speech and silence, over time these power relations become more nuanced. In both novels, especially during battle scenes, riders and dragons act more as equals, relying on teamwork rather than control. This shift shows that power is situational and co-constructed rather than strictly gendered or species-based. Saphira's sarcastic defiance softens into strategic cooperation, and even Tairn begins to accept Violet's commands during crisis, indicating that mutual trust gradually dilutes his dominance.

While initial rider-dragon dynamics reflect clear hierarchies, especially through command structures, both novels portray evolving relationships marked by trust, cooperation, and mutual growth. Dragons' structural dominance serves not only as a power differential, but also as a narrative mechanism that fosters the human protagonists' emotional development.

2.2 Gendered power dynamics

In discussion on dominant gender ideology, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2013, p. 1-36) highlight how society constructs male and female identities through a series of oppositional traits. They state that in Western contexts, men are typically described as strong, brave, aggressive, rational, direct, competitive, practical, and rough, whereas women are often described as weak, timid, passive, emotional, indirect, cooperative, nurturing, and gentle. These traits act as a base for all the stereotypical gender behaviour in this thesis.

While the general hierarchy in these relationships is dictated by species, where dragons wield greater authority than their human riders, this section shifts focus from structural power and conversational tactics to examine how gender expectations shape the expression and negotiation of that power.

A key element of gendered power dynamics in the novels is how riders attempt to assert authority over their dragons. While Eragon frequently assumes a position of control over Saphira as stated in the previous subchapter, on the other hand, Violet resists the authority of Tairn. She openly argues against his demands, as seen in below.

> [TAIRN] "*Trust him,"* Tairn demands.
> [VIOLET] *"It's not that easy."*
> [TAIRN] *"It has to be for now."* (Yarros p. 243)

Violet is seen here talking back to Tairn's direct demand and that shows that Violet is not accepting traditional submissive role of female. However, despite her resistance, Tairn maintains dominance through direct, unquestionable commands such as below. As Fairclough (2001, p. 38-39) mentions, power in discourse is showed through powerful participant constraining and controlling the input of non-powerful participant, which Violet here appears to be.

> [VIOLET] "*I can't use that*." I shake my head. "*It's not allowed*."
> [TAIRN] "*I decide what's allowed and what's not." Tairn growls, lowering his head to my level and blasting me with a chuff of steam. "There is no rule that says a dragon cannot modify their seat to serve their rider. You have worked just as hard–if not harder– than every rider in this quadrant. Just because your body is built differently than the others doesn't mean you don't deserve to keep your seat. It takes more than a few strips of leather and a pommel to define a rider.*" (Yarros p. 383-384)

In both novels, dragons exhibit protective instincts toward their riders. Tairn frames his authority over Violet as necessary for her survival as seen below.

> [VIOLET] "*You're a menace. Stop it," I say*.
> [TAIRN] "*Tell him if he harms you, I'll scorch the ground where he stands.*"
> [VIOLET] "*Oh, for fuck's sake, Tairn*." …
> [TAIRN] "*Word for word, Silver One*." …
> [VIOLET] "*Happy now*?" (Yarros p. 230)

This resembles paternalistic protection which appears as traditional masculinity as a provider of safety and control. Violet initially resists this dominance but ultimately acknowledges his

superior position in matters of survival. Saphira also protects Eragon, but her approach is less controlling. Instead of enforcing obedience, she guides and advises him of her thinking.

> [SAPHIRA] "*What are you thinking*?" …
> [ERAGON] "*That was murder yesterday. I've no other word for it*."
> [SAPHIRA] "*It was a hasty deed and ill considered, but Murtagh tried to do the right thing. The men who buy and sell other humans deserve every misfortune that befalls them. If we weren't committed to helping Arya, I would hunt down every slaver and tear them apart!*"
> [ERAGON] "*Yes*", said Eragon miserably, "*but Torkenbrand was helpless. ...*
> [SAPHIRA] "*Eragon, even if Torkenbrand had fought, the results would have been the same. You know as well as I do that few can equal you or Murtagh with the blade. Torkenbrand would have still died, though you seem to think it would have been more just or honorable in a mismatched duel*."
> [ERAGON] "*I don't know what's right*!" admitted Eragon, distressed. "*There aren't any answers that make sense.*"
> [SAPHIRA] "*Sometimes*", said Saphira gently, "*there are no answers. Learn what you can about Murtagh from this. Then forgive him. And if you can't forgive, at least forget, for he meant you no harm, however rash the act was. Your head is still attached, yes?*" (Paolini p. 354-355)

Here, Saphira acts less like female, as according to Lakoff (1975, p. 95), women have historically been stereotyped as lacking aggressiveness and one of the strategies to fight that has been proving they could be just as assertive as men. Saphira portrays male assertiveness being vicious but still showing co-operation and persuasion which according to Tannen (1992, p. 24-25) are linked to more female-coded communication. As Saphira is however a dragon which typically is seen vicious creature, it can be argued that her being a dragon is influencing the dynamics.

A notable contrast appears in how dragons express authority based on gender. As we have seen, while Tairn asserts dominance through protection and control, Saphira embodies a more nurturing yet authoritative role. Violet's interactions with Andarna further highlight maternal-coded leadership dynamic as seen below.

> [VIOLET] *"*I'm glad you made it." … "But maybe you should fly off next time someone suggests you save yourself, eh?"
> [ANDARNA] *"Maybe I was saving you." ...*
> [VIOLET] "Didn't anyone tell you that you're not supposed to speak to humans who aren't your rider? Don't go getting yourself in trouble, Goldie." (Yarros p. 189)

Violet's female authority is not however enough over Andarna as Tairn is giving the final agreement to discussed issue, maintaining Tairn's dominant role over both females.

> [VIOLET] "*Stay here and hide*." …
> [ANDARNA] "*Stay here*," she grumbles sarcastically in response. …
> [TAIRN] "*Agreed*." … "*You're a target, little one*."
> [VIOLET] "I mean it," I order Andarna, stroking my hand over her scaly nose. (Yarros p. 495)

Saphira's leadership in some way differs from traditional maternal stereotypes as rather than shielding Eragon from the world, she acts like a mentor who advises rather than controls.

> [ERAGON] "*What's that for?"* he asked, frowning.
> [SAPHIRA] "*Wear it. You are a Rider and should bear a Rider's sword. Zar'roc may have a bloody history, but that should not shape your actions. Forge a new history for it, and carry it with pride."*
> [ERAGON] "*Are you sure? Remember Ajihad's counsel."*
> [SAPHIRA] "*Wear it, Eragon. If you wish to remain above the forces here, do not let anyone's disapproval dictate your actions." (*Paolini p. 439)

A key question here is if species hierarchy overpowers gendered norms. Both Eragon and Violet ultimately submit to their dragons, regardless of gender. I argue that while linguistic strategies may be gendered, power in these relationships is primarily dictated by species hierarchy rather than traditional gender roles. Where Eragon's dominance is sometimes just overlooked by Saphira, Violet's dominance attempts are dominated with more force by Tairn. This contrast reflects traditional gender dynamics, in which the male rider is granted more autonomy while the female rider must repeatedly justify her authority. Although the riders may resist their dragons, their protests are ultimately falling into deaf ears within the greater structure of dragon dominance. However, these dynamics do not remain fixed throughout the novels. Violet and Tairn's relationship in particular shifts from one of near total dragon control to a more negotiated balance, especially as Violet grows in confidence and capability as she also gains her powers. Saphira and Eragon also move toward deeper emotional interdependence as their journey progresses and balance between motherly and friendship type of communication occasionally. Ouellette-Dubé (2022, p. 44-45), drawing on Aristotle's typology of friendship, notes that many human-animal relationships are often misidentified as friendships when they are in fact instrumental and are motivated by utility or pleasure rather than mutual regard. True friendship, according to this view, requires reciprocity, trust, and care for the other's sake. Based on these criteria, I argue that Eragon and Saphira's relationship does fulfil the conditions of genuine friendship. Their bond demonstrates mutual emotional investment, evolving trust, and care that is not reducible to instrumental goals, suggesting that such characteristics of friendship can transcend species boundaries in fictional contexts. On the other hand, Violet and Tairn's relationship begins as hierarchical and

asymmetrical, with Tairn asserting dominance and Violet struggling to assert control. However, as the narrative progresses, their bond becomes more cooperative and mutual. Trust, respect, and shared goals gradually replace initial power imbalance, suggesting a shift from dominance-based interaction to a more balanced partnership. While their relationship may not fully meet the criteria for Aristotelian friendship early on, it evolves toward one marked by interdependence, care, and growing reciprocity and accountability.

While species hierarchy remains the dominant force, gendered dynamics and stereotypes are gradually complicated by evolving relationships, suggesting that plot development plays a key role in reshaping both dominance and personhood. Communication patterns are not fixed, as they shift in response to character growth and narrative progression. The evolving rider-dragon dynamic in both *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing* challenges conventional gender roles and complicates assumptions about dominance in general. Nevertheless, species hierarchy appears to consistently structure these relationships more strongly than gender alone, an observation that aligns with Fairclough's (2001, p. 28-29) claim that power in discourse is shaped by broader social hierarchies rather than individual speech patterns. Yet even within these dynamics of dominance and submission, moments of mutual dependency, particularly in high-stakes situations such as battles, underscore the cooperative foundation of the rider-dragon bond. This balance between hierarchy and collaboration illustrates how both species and gender interact fluidly within the power structures of these fantasy worlds.

3 Protectiveness and vulnerability

This chapter explores the complex dynamics of protectiveness and vulnerability within rider-dragon relationships in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*. While traditional gender norms often frame protection as masculine and vulnerability as feminine, and dragons are often assumed to dominate due to species-based superiority, this chapter investigates how these roles are enacted, shared, and subverted across both gender and species lines. In this chapter, I examine how language, physical action, and narrative structure contribute to the portrayal of these themes. The analysis is divided into three subchapters which are verbal vulnerability and emotional connection, embodied acts of care and protection, and gendered expectations of these behaviours.

According to Erika Cudworth (2022, p. 119) feminist conceptions of care work are expanded to include interspecies relationships. Although dragons in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing* are not real-world animals, their status as nonhuman beings raises questions of species that are relevant to care, hierarchy, and vulnerability. Rather than interpreting these relationships through the lens of traditional human-animal theories, this chapter approaches dragons as "companion species" in Haraway's (2010, p. 54-55) sense meaning beings who become with each other through shared histories, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities. Their roles as protectors and nurturers in narrative development mean that species difference, while structurally present in the form of dragon dominance, becomes entangled with gendered and emotional dynamics rather than operating as a simple human-animal binary.

3.1 Vulnerability as connection

Verbal admissions of need and fear serve as key moments of connection between riders and dragons. In *Eragon*, the protagonist openly expresses his dependence on Saphira in emotionally vulnerable moments. He pleads and admits his need for help multiple times in the novel with the verb "need" and expression "your help".

> [ERAGON] "*Saphira, where are you? I need your help*." (Paolini, p. 300; see also p. 481, p. 78)

> [ERAGON] "*Help me, Saphira," he implored. "I am too weak to do this alone.*" (Paolini, p. 269)

The open expressions of being vulnerable and admitting his weakness to someone else are not typically male coded when we compare those to the characterisations by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013, p. 1-36), as masculinity is seen being the strong protecting one who does not need anyone's help. These expressions of weakness are met with reassurance from Saphira, establishing a bond based on trust and emotional support. Saphira is below reasoning with Eragon and giving support showing that they are a team together showing protective language towards Eragon with "You have me" showing Eragon is not alone in his quest.

> [SAPHIRA] "*Remember what you said in the Spine? How you reminded me of my duty as a dragon, and I returned with you despite the urging of my instinct? So, too, must you control yourself. I thought long and deep the past few days, and I realized what it means to be dragon and Rider: It is our destiny to attempt the impossible, to accomplish great deeds regardless of fear. It is our responsibility to the future."*
> [ERAGON] *"I don't care what you say; those aren't reasons to leave!"* cried Eragon.
> [SAPHIRA] "*Then here are others. My tracks have been seen, and people are alert to my presence. Eventually I will be exposed. Besides, there is nothing here for you. No farm, no family, and–*"
> [ERAGON] "*Roran's not dead!*" he said vehemently.
> [SAPHIRA] "*But if you stay, you'll have to explain what really happened. He has a right to know how and why his father died. What might he do once he knows of me?*" …
> [ERAGON] "*Am I strong enough for this?*"
> [SAPHIRA] *"You have me."* (Paolini, p. 92-93)

This dynamic of Eragon showing his need for help openly challenges the stereotype of male emotional stoicism, aligning more closely with feminine-coded openness. The same dynamic is further reinforced by below conversation where both Eragon and Saphira admit to each other that they made mistakes.

> [SAPHIRA] "*Are you sure you aren't hurt*?"
> [ERAGON] "*Not on the outside…but I'm not sure about the rest of me.* "
> [SAPHIRA] "*I should have been there sooner*."
> [ERAGON] "*Don't feel bad. We all made mistakes today. Mine was not staying closer to you.*" (Paolini, p. 138)

In *Fourth Wing*, Violet exhibits vulnerability with more limitations than Eragon. In the beginning of the novel Violet is described with an adjective of fragility, being weak, and having consistent pain just when existing. Below conversation is from the beginning of the novel and portrays a clear picture of Violet knowing she is weak and in a disadvantage, when it comes becoming dragon rider.

> [VIOLET] "Are you calling me weak?"
> [MIRA] "No." Mira [Violet's sister] squeezes my hand. "Just…fragile."
> [VIOLET] "That's not any better." Dragons don't bond *fragile* women. They incinerate them.
> [GENERAL SORRENGAIL, VIOLETS'S MOTHER] "So she's small." (Yarros, p. 5)

This dynamic of Violet being always weak is consistent through the whole novel. Violet also herself points that out and is vulnerable by admitting her low self-esteem and weakness as seen below.

> [TAIRN] … *"Now get in the seat and actually hold on this time, or no one is going to believe that I've actually chosen you,"* he growls.
> [VIOLET] *"*I still can't believe you've chosen me!" …
> [TAIRN] *"Grip harder with your knees. I can barely feel you back there."*
> [VIOLET] "I'm trying." … "I'm just…not as strong as other riders."
> [TAIRN] "*I know exactly who and what you are, Violet Sorrengail."* (Yarros, p. 185)

This acknowledgment of her perceived inadequacy and Tairn's reassuring response that he knows exactly who he chose reinforces the emotional support that strengthens their bond. The exchange embodies what Busch (2020, p. 330) describes as the relational value of vulnerability, as it opens a space for solidarity and recognition.

In the example below Violet shows her vulnerability through a plea or an order that Tairn should not leave her.

> [VIOLET] *"Don't leave me,"*
> [TAIRN] *"Never. I'll burn him alive before he takes a single step toward you."* (Yarros, p. 416)

This shows a moment of emotional exposure that evokes a protective and dominant response from Tairn. The emotional stakes are high, yet the exchange also reveals Tairn's deep investment in Violet's safety and survival. Tannen (1992, p. 26–27) argues that women often seek intimacy through communication, while men pursue independence and authority. Below Saphira is showing similar protectiveness towards Eragon as Tairn is showing to Violet.

> SAPHIRA: *"Eragon!"* came Saphira's alarmed cry. "*What happened?"*
> ERAGON: *"Broke my wrist…did something stupid…fell."*
> SAPHIRA: *"I'm coming,"* said Saphira.
> ERAGON: *"No–I can make it back. Don't…come. Trees too close for…wings.*
> SAPHIRA: She sent him a brief image of her tearing the forest apart to get at him, then said, *"Hurry."* (Paolini, p. 229)

As seen above, both dragons respond with protective intensity, blurring these stereotypical lines of male authority. These moments of verbal vulnerability also demonstrate the trust that underpins rider-dragon bonds, revealing emotional dependency of each other regardless of gender.

The vulnerability between dragon and their rider is mutual in Eragon when Saphira herself reveals physical limitations as can be seen below.

> [SAPHIRA] *"I must stop. My wings are tired and Brom needs attention. I discovered a good place to stay, about two miles ahead of where you are."* (Paolini, p. 271; see also p. 309, p. 374)

In *Fourth Wing* Tairn is seen most of the time upholding the traditional male role where admitting weakness is seen as a flaw, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013, p. 1-36) describe weakness being feminine trait. There are still exceptions to that as can be seen below as Tairn is being described having panic in his tone as he is worried Violet will die before the human male main character "Xaden" can save her.

> [TAIRN] *"He's almost there!"* Tairn promises, panic lacing his tone. (Yarros, p. 238)

These admissions reflect a more nuanced portrayal of dragons, mostly only Saphira, where they are not invincible creatures, but sentient beings as described with emotional and physical thresholds. The mutual recognition of vulnerability builds trust between rider and dragon which is necessary for their survival together in battle situations.

> [ERAGON] *"Are you all right?"* asked Eragon, concerned. …
> [SAPHIRA] *"I'll live,"* she said grimly, "*but the front of my armor has been crushed together. It hurts my chest, and I'm having trouble moving."*
> [ERAGON] *"Can you get us to the dragonhold?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"…We'll see."* (Paolini, p. 485)

The survival is important in battle situations. In above conversation is after a battle situation and while Eragon shows concern to Saphira by asking if Saphira is all right, he is not comforting Saphira but just asking if she can continue to get them to safe place where that can further investigate the damages. Saphira is admitting her vulnerability but still puts a strong face by at least trying to fly them to safety. Both of them are focused on survival in a battle situation but they still show care for each other.

In conclusion, the contrast between Eragon and Violet's approach to vulnerability reveals different types of navigating weakness within their narratives. Eragon demonstrates an

openness in expressing emotional and physical vulnerability, and this transparency strengthens his bond with Saphira. Violet, on the other hand, acknowledges her limitations but resists revealing them to others. Rather than openly seek support, she masks her weaknesses and develops alternative strategies for survival, like poisoning her opponents in duels, accepting extra training sessions and getting modifications from her dragons that others do not receive. While Eragon's trust in his support system is outward and verbalised, Violet's journey is defined by internal resilience and a refusal to appear dependent, even when the help is essential for her. These differing responses to vulnerability reflect broader gendered expectations of strength, self-reliance, and the performance of capability. Over time the expressed vulnerabilities in both novels become a shared space of connection rather than a sign of inferiority. While Saphira shows her vulnerability as a dragon admitting her physical hurt and limitations, Tairn on the other hand does not show any physical vulnerabilities. Tairn's only vulnerability seems to be Violet, and Tairn's downfall seems to only be if something happens to Violet. Violet's vulnerability throughout the plot is deepening their connection but that is one sided vulnerability compared to Eragon and Saphira being both vulnerable and open to each other. These differences serve the plot for both novels. In *Eragon,* Eragon and Saphira grow together to their roles as dragon and rider, but in *Fourth Wing,* Tairn is the most powerful dragon available for bonding and he chooses what seems outside the weakest, most vulnerable rider, making Tairn and Violet together an unconventional pair in the storyworld, but a compelling story of underdog growing to be the hero for the readers of the novel.

3.2 Physically embodied care

Physical actions often carry as much narrative weight as dialogue in depicting protectiveness and vulnerability. In *Eragon*, Saphira frequently uses her body to shield and support Eragon. These embodied gestures extend beyond language and resonate with Busch's (2020, p. 331-332) concept of embodied discourse, where nonverbal acts and emotions are shaped by discourse. An example of that is seen below, where Eragon and Saphira state verbally the situation and Saphira reacts to that portraying a literal bodily action.

> [ERAGON] *"Saphira, are you injured?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"No, but you and Brom are."* She was crouched over Eragon, wings spread protectively on either side. (Paolini, p. 267)

Dragons also physically manipulate their riders' environment to care for them in both novels.

> [ERAGON] … *"I'm going to freeze unless you make me a shelter or hollow so I can stay warm. Even a pile of pine needles and branches would do."*
> [SAPHIRA] … "*There is no need. I will curl around you and cover you with my wings–the fire inside me will stay the cold." …*
> [ERAGON] *"Fine, but scrape the snow off the ground. It'll be more comfortable."* (Paolini, p. 73)

> [TAIRN] *"You are a rider, are you not?"*
> [VIOLET] "That seems up for debate at the moments." My heart thunders. Is he going to cook me alive for being too slow?
> A low, frustrated grumble sounds in his chest, and then he shocks me to the core as he stretches forward, his front leg becoming a ramp. Dragons never supplicate for *anyone*, and yet here he is, bowing to make it easier for me to climb on. (Yarros, p. 182)

Throughout *Eragon*, Saphira is doing physical gestures towards Eragon, for example sheltering him with her wings, keeping him warm and carries him in her back. Tairn on the other hand, lowers his body like a ramp to allow Violet to climb more easily, defying dragon customs where they do not make usually these modifications to anyone. In *Fourth Wing,* dragons are supposed to test their riders and "weed out" the weak riders as only strongest ones are deemed to be worthy. These actions from Tairn, showing resign and somewhat submission, are against the novel's typical dragon behaviour and also masculinity in general like Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013, p. 1-36) present masculinity. These protective gestures are taken by Eragon and Violet as gestures they are thankful for. In some instances, according to Tannen (1992, p. 35), protective gestures that defy traditional gender roles, such as female protecting the man, are not taken positively and might lead to strained relationship, but in these examples Eragon as a male takes Saphira's physical protection as a help for him.

Saphira is seen giving emotional support in physical form.

> [SAPHIRA] A shadow fell on him as Saphira loomed overhead, sheltering him with her wings. *"Take comfort; all may not be lost."* He looked up at her, searching for hope. "*Examine the trail; my eyes see only two sets of prints. Garrow could not have been taken from here."* (Paolini, p. 78; see also p. 77)

Saphira is in both examples giving silent support to Eragon. These physical gestures become a form of communication in themselves, aligning with Busch's (2020, p. 331-332) emphasis that nonverbal features are important in interactions. Physical gestures also act here as a portrayal of nurturing, caring dragon, which in some stereotypes is not the most familiar portrayal of dragon.

Tairn, too, engages in physical acts of care for Violet. When she struggles to stay seated while flying, he wraps "energy bands" around her legs and arms to keep her secure.

> [VIOLET] My legs shake until they lock, the muscles freezing in place as though bands have been wrapped around them, but there's no pain. I glance over my shoulder and see his morningstar tail, what feels like miles behind us. He's doing this. He's holding me in place. (Yarros, p. 185)

This act, while controlling, is also protective. It evokes traditional fatherly authority, with Violet positioned as both partner and a figure in need of safeguarding against the likely demise.

The embodied care is usually shown from dragons towards their riders. That can be explained by dragon's sheer size making for example hugging them difficult. In few instances however, Eragon is shown embodied care towards Saphira after emotional and vulnerable discussion from Saphira.

> [SAPHIRA] *"I don't know how I did it,"* she stated calmly. *"It just happened."*
> [ERAGON] "*Could you do it again, but this time make water?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Eragon,"* she said, looking him squarely in the face. *"I've no more control over my abilities than a spider does. Things like that occur whether I will them or not. Brom told you that unusual events happen around dragons. He spoke truly. He gave no explanation for it, nor do I have one. Sometimes I can work changes just by feel, almost without thought. The rest of the time–like right now–I'm as powerless as Snowfire."*
> [ERAGON] *"You're never powerless,"* he said softly, putting a hand on her neck. (Paolini, p. 322; see also p. 284)

This example shows that while dragons are mostly the ones showing embodied care, riders do show embodied care even though they are not grand gestures, but a simple touch sometimes means a lot too. In both *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, embodied care plays a central role in conveying protectiveness, emotional intimacy, and power dynamics between dragons and their riders. These physical gestures that are ranging from shielding wings and stabilising grips to silent proximity and small acts of touch, serve as powerful nonverbal cues of affection and concern.

While dragons more frequently initiate these acts of care, Eragon also responds with nurturing gestures, illustrating that protectiveness is mutual and contextually performed rather than rigidly divided by gender. These interactions complicate traditional associations of physical dominance with masculinity and emotional care with femininity as according to Tannen (1992, p. 35) the traditional role for male is a protector and if female shows protective

gestures, they might be viewed as they are protecting a child, which makes males traditionally resist such protection. Instead in these novels, the narrative presents embodied protectiveness as a vital, reciprocal part of rider-dragon bonds, reshaping the traditional ideas who gets to express care and how. In both novels, the embodied care is more about interdependence than dominance. Early on, dragons act to protect their riders, reinforcing species hierarchy, but at least Eragon as a rider returns this gesture to Saphira, shift the dynamic towards mutual responsibility and care of each other. In *Fourth Wing,* Tairn's physical care keeping Violet in his back acts towards the plot where it would not make sense after underlining Violet's weakness that she would be able to stay in dragon's back with her own strength.

As Cudworth (2022, p. 121-122) notes, the concept of carework involving animal companions complicates traditional feminist understandings of care, which have typically centred on gendered, human-to-human labour within the domestic sphere. While care has often been framed as something women perform toward domestic animals, this view can be expanded to recognise care as a gendered social practice more broadly. However, in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, care is not exclusively associated with women or directed toward passive animal companions. Instead, care is enacted physically and reciprocally across both gender and species lines. The rider-dragon bond is characterised by mutual, embodied acts of care that challenge fixed categories of caregiver and dependent, complicating conventional readings of gendered labour or species hierarchy. I argue that physical care in these novels is not assigned permanently by gender or species, but it emerges contextually based on situational needs.

3.3 Gendered perceptions of societal norms

While protectiveness and vulnerability are shared across characters, their gendered framing within the narrative remains notable. Saphira is nurturing and emotionally supportive and often guiding Eragon through moral dilemmas. Yet she also expresses fierce protectiveness and assertiveness, which challenges the stereotype of maternal figures as solely gentle figures. Her combination of aggression and care exemplifies Tannen's (1992, p. 128-129) observation that women balance connection and authority in complex ways. These below conversations showcase Saphira portraying variety of behaviours.

> [ERAGON] Eragon threw a concerned look at Brom–he had never seen Saphira this angry–then asked, "*What's wrong?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"You,"* she growled. *"You are the problem."* ... As soon as his feet touched the ground, Saphira swept his legs out from under him with her tail and pinned him with her talons. "What are you doing?" he yelled, struggling to get up,

> but she was too strong for him. … Saphira swung her head over Eragon until they were eye to eye. He squirmed under her unwavering glare. "*You! Every time you leave my sight you get into trouble. You're like a new hatchling, sticking your nose into everything. And what happens when you stick it into something that bites back? How will you survive then? I cannot help you when I'm miles away. I've stayed hidden so that no one would see me, but no longer! Not when it may cost you your life."*
> [ERAGON] *"I can understand why you're upset,"* said Eragon, "*but I'm much older than you and can take care of myself. If anything, you're the one who needs to be protected.* (Paolini, p. 157-158)

In this conversation Saphira is behaving angry because all she wants to do is to protect Eragon and when Eragon does not follow the behaviour Saphira expects of him, she gets worried, and all her worry bursts out as anger. This is stereotypically a feminine reaction to the situation although anger is more masculine reaction, and Eragon's response telling basically "he knows what he is doing" is typical male behaviour to think he would know better than her. This idea comes, according to Montoro (2014, p. 349), from societal constrains and patriarchal values which position men as default decision makers and historically having thus superior knowledge, and Eragon tries to mirror that ideology towards Saphira. Below are similar examples of Saphira giving advice but Eragon is not wanting to believe the advice.

> [SAPHIRA] *"It's a trap,"* warned Saphira before Eragon could say anything. "*Don't listen to him."*
> [ERAGON] *"At least let's find out what he has to say,"* he reasoned, curious, but extremely wary. …
> [SAPHIRA] *"No!"* cried Saphira, but it was too late. (Paolini, p. 232)

> [SAPHIRA] *"Careful,"* warned Saphira. … "*You're overdoing it. Don't say anything you'll regret. They will remember every word they can use against you."*
> [ERAGON] *"This is difficult enough without you making comments!"* he snapped. (Paolini, p. 447)

In these conversations the relationship dynamic resembles of mother and child relationship where Saphira acts as a maternal figure and Eragon portrays a child, not wanting to take a heed of Saphira's opinions and teachings. Saphira seems to mean well with her protective actions, but Eragon is not wanting to believe them, and is showcasing more trial-and-error type of behaviour.

The feminised expressions of care are visible in Saphira's pet names ("little one"), her emotional intelligence, and her ability to comfort through both speech and silence.

> [SAPHIRA] *"All will be well, little one,"* said Saphira gently. (Paolini, p. 151; see also p. 392)

> [SAPHIRA] *"It is good to see you well, little one,"* she said tenderly.
> [ERAGON] *"And you too, but how–?"* (Paolini, p. 495)

However, these "pet names" are paired with assertive speech acts and physical strength, such as when she pins Eragon to the ground and lectures him on recklessness (Paolini, p. 158). Also, the use of "little one" highlights that Saphira either uses it to highlight their size difference or more likely to highlight that she is in charge. Saphira's maternal strength defies the binary of nurturing versus commanding. Tairn is also using pet names for both Violet and Andarna.

> [TAIRN] *"Don't worry, Silver One,"* Tairn interjects, his tone resolved. *"Everything is as it should be."* (Yarros, p. 463; see also p. 513)

> [TAIRN] *Let's go, Golden One,"* Tairn says, and they all bend slightly, then launch, wind gusting against my face. (Yarros, p. 255)

Although Tairn's use of "pet names" in his speech and encouraging speech acts make the language similar to feminine language. I would argue that the use of pet names is universal to caring of one another. The more visibly powerful ones, Tairn and Saphira as dragons, are the ones using pet names, implying that in order to create connection to their riders, they need to foster nurturing connections to their traditionally weaker counterparts in order to have a working relationship as their life in battle situations is dependent of each other. Notable in Tairn's pet name "Silver One" is that he could have had the opportunity to use for example "Silver Girl" which would have been according to Lakoff (1975, p. 56) diminishing woman's competence and maturity. This makes Tairn appear more respectful and treating Violet as a partner regardless of her gender.

In contrast to Saphira, Tairn's protectiveness and care still often comes in the form of unilateral commands.

> [TAIRN] *"Get away from the wall! Don't let them trap you!" ...*
> [VIOLET] *The window!*
> [TAIRN] *"It's too high. You'll fall to the ravine, and I can't get there fast enough!" ... "No more throwing things. Keep ahold of the weapon!"* (Yarros, p. 237)

> [TAIRN] *"We're going to have to put on a show."*
> [VIOLET] "Awesome." …
> [TAIRN] *"You will not fall. I will not allow it."* The bands around my legs extend to my hands, and I feel the pulse of invisible energy. "*You will trust me."* Not a question. An order. (Yarros, p. 186)

These speech acts reinforce masculine-coded dominance, yet his emotional investment in Violet's safety adds a paternal tone. According to Tannen (1992, p. 35) a protective gesture from male reinforces the traditional gender roles where males protect females.

Both Saphira and Tairn portray also sarcasm included in their protecting and caring speech acts that play into their gendered roles.

> [SAPHIRA] *"This is your own fault."*
> [ERAGON] *"Yes! I know. Are you going to get me down or not?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"If I weren't around, you would be in a very bad situation." ...*
> [ERAGON] *"You don't have to tell me."*
> [SAPHIRA] "*You're right. After all, how can a mere dragon expect to tell a man like yourself what to do? In fact, everyone should stand in awe of your brilliance of finding the only dead end. Why, if you had started a few feet in either direction, the path to the top would have been clear."*
> [ERAGON] *"All right! I made a mistake. Now can you please get me out of here?"* he pleaded. (Paolini, p. 190)

Saphira is here using sarcasm as a conversation strategy where she tells that "how can a mere dragon expect to tell a man like yourself what to do", when she is meaning that Eragon should have listened to her as she knows better. Her calling Eragon a man, instead of Eragon, little one or hatchling that she normally uses, adds to that sarcastic/mocking tone telling Eragon that she does not appreciate what Eragon did against her guidance. This does not correlate directly to either feminine or masculine behaviour, as her goal is to make Eragon admit she was right and he was not. Still, traditionally, according to Tannen (1992, p. 127-128) women tend not to wield their expertise as power like men tend to do, but Saphira here challenges that while Eragon is reacting dismissively to Saphira's expertise. Tairn uses similar sarcastic commenting tactic as Saphira, which does not directly correlate to masculine or feminine behaviour as it combines both.

> [TAIRN] *"You're hurt,"* Tairn accuses. (Yarros, p. 519)

> [TAIRN] *"And you need to sleep,"* Tairn replies. "*You've been up all night."*
> [VIOLET] *"I'll sleep when you do." ...*
> [TAIRN] *"I can go for days without sleep. I'd rather you not fire off lightning bolts out of sleep deprivation."* (Yarros, p. 467)

Tairn accuses Violet of being hurt, which combines both feminine language meaning caring and nurturing when someone is hurt, but accusing someone being hurt plays into masculine traits as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013, p. 1-36) define stereotypical gender roles that women are nurturing but men are aggressive. He also uses similar sarcasm as Saphira, telling

Violet she should sleep as he does not want her shooting lightning bolts when she is tired. Both of the dragons use sarcasm to enforce that they are right, and their riders are wrong, meaning they are reinforcing their dominance through sarcasm and humour. Based on this I argue that use of sarcasm by dragons is reinforcing dragon's role and power over humans, instead of it being tied to the gender.

Violet's language often defies expectations of femininity as her language contains profanities.

> [TAIRN] ... *"Have it your way."* The bands fall away.
> [VIOLET] *"Thank yoooooh shit!"* ... There's a disgusted roar of something I don't understand in my head. "*What the hell does that mean?"* ...
> [TAIRN] *"The closest translation for humans is probably 'for fuck's sake.' Now. Are you going to stay in your seat this time?"* ... (Yarros, p. 216-217)

> [VIOLET] "*Oh, for fuck's sake, Tairn*." … (Yarros p. 230)

> [VIOLET] "I think he has commitment issues," I whisper.
> [TAIRN] *"I heard that."*
> [VIOLET] *"Then stay out of my head."* ... *"Don't be an ass."* (Yarros, p. 274)

Her use of profanities like "fuck", "shit" and "ass" contrasts with Lakoff's (1975, p. 44-45) description of women's speech as polite and deferential and how "shit" for example is a part of "men's language". Instead, Violet's swearing asserts her emotional honesty and determination, illustrating how her gender performance resists traditional norms. This also challenges the idea that powerful speech is reserved for male characters. Tairn is also using the word "fuck", but he comes off as just male as according to Lakoff (1975, p. 44-45) it is the societal expectation that allows males express themselves more forcefully than women. Although Violet is portraying masculine language, her use of "I think" presents Lakoff's (1975, p. 79) "woman's language" where the use of that term is used to appear less asserting. In *Fourth Wing*, Violet is though challenging these societal expectations. Saphira is also showcasing a small sliver of less polite language.

> [SAPHIRA] *"ERAGON!"* ...
> [ERAGON] *"Saphira?"* he asked anxiously. …
> [SAPHIRA] *"Yes, stone ears."* ...
> [ERAGON] *"Where are you?"* ...
> [SAPHIRA] *"I tried to contact you many times, but you were beyond reach."* (Paolini, p. 88)

In above example Saphira calls Eragon "stone ears" as she is worried about Eragon not answering to her as he was sick. The language itself is not feminine, but the care behind of that language still portrays nurture and worry for her rider. Another example of more male-

coded language that play's into Lakoff's (1975, p. 44-45) descriptions of powerful speech reserved to males and females are not supposed to use that language is Andarna's response to Violet after Violet portrays nurturing language telling Andarna to hide.

> [VIOLET] *"Find a good hiding place, Andarna. I can't stand the thought of you being hurt."*
> [ANDARNA] *"Go for the throat,"* she says, walking into the abandoned outpost. (Yarros, p. 498)

Andarna's response to Violet is not feminine language as Kiesling (2004, p. 230) suggests that Lakoff's view of feminine language means it is not rough language. This conversation between Violet and Andarna acts like an encouragement but is a direct insinuation to use violence in order to accomplish a goal which in this context is to defend people from attackers.

As we have seen before, Saphira's qualities are not always directly caring, nurturing and feminine, but the below example portrays a different side of femininity.

> [ERAGON] … *"I'll talk to you in the morning. Right now I'm not thinking too clearly."*
> [SAPHIRA] *"You've been drinking,"* came the accusing thought. … Her disapproval was clear, but all she said was, "*I won't envy you in the morning."*
> [ERAGON] *"No,"* groaned Eragon, *"but Brom will. He drank twice as much as I did." ...*
> [ERAGON] "*What was I thinking?* wondered Eragon in the morning. …
> [SAPHIRA] *"How are we feeling?* asked Saphira smugly. Eragon ignored her. (Paolini, p. 249-250)

Saphira's portrayal of "nagging female" stereotype is visible through her smug tone and accusing of drinking as well as her choice of words saying accusingly Eragon has been drinking. This is traditional female response for male drinking, complaining about drinking and laughing for their state in the morning.

Andarna's language, fits a more traditionally feminine style. She reflects generally what Lakoff describes as the "good woman" persona, characterised by empathy, sensitivity and politeness, but as was mentioned previously, has also some masculinity to it.

> [VIOLET] "I'm glad you made it." … "But maybe you should fly off the next time someone suggests you save yourself, eh?"
> [ANDARNA] She blinks. *"Maybe I was saving you." ...*
> [VIOLET] *"*Didn't anyone tell you that you're not supposed to speak to humans who aren't your rider? Don't go getting yourself in trouble, Goldie," I whisper. (Yarros, p. 189)

> [ANDARNA] *"You are sad?"* Andarna asks, her voice soft.
> [VIOLET] *"Just visiting the Archives. No need to worry,"* I tell her.
> [ANDARNA] *"It's hard to love a second home as much as the first."*
> [VIOLET] I swallow. "*It's easy when the second home is the right one."* (Yarros, p. 224)

Here Violet and Andarna both show towards each other care, empathy, and nurturing. Violet is showing protectiveness to Andarna and Andarna returns that protectiveness back stating that maybe she was saving Violet instead. Andarna hence does not accept that she is the one being taken care of but aims to swap the roles with Violet. Violet and Andarna's conversations are open and vulnerable, both showing the other empathy, a traditionally feminine quality as Cudworth, McKie and Turgoose (2022, p. 3) state, second-wave ecofeminist thought emphasised empathy and care as gendered products of women's roles.

Importantly, both novels show that protectiveness and vulnerability are not fixed traits linked to gender but are instead performed based on context and relationship. This aligns with Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, which suggests that gendered behaviour is not innate but enacted. For instance, Eragon's willingness to admit pain and seek comfort is not a sign of weakness but part of his evolving identity. Similarly, Tairn's fatherly protection does not diminish his authority, it strengthens it, although it plays directly into traditional masculinity as well.

Although Tairn is constantly being portrayed as masculine character who is dominant, he too shows his vulnerability to Violet. In the example below, Tairn can be seen being vulnerable although it is masked behind dominance.

> [TAIRN] *"You will burn out, Silver One!"* he growls, dodging a flame Xaden misses. "*You already walk the edge." ...*
> [VIOLET] *"This is the only way I can save them. I can save Sgaeyl. You just have to decide to live, Tairn. Even if I don't."*
> [TAIRN] *"I will not watch another rider die because they do not know their own limitations. One more strike could be your last. I feel your waning strength."*
> [VIOLET] *"I know exactly what I'm capable of,"* I promise as energy fills my body once again, and my heart jolts, struggling to find the right rhythm. … "*I'm not Naolin." ...*
> [ANDARNA] "*Let me help!"* Andarna shouts, and my heart swells even as it stutters from the energy flowing through my veins. …
> [VIOLET] "*Only what I need,"* I say to her. (Yarros, p. 522-523)

Tairn shows his vulnerability by stating that he will not watch another his rider die, and he will then want to die too as Violet tells him that he needs to decide to live even if she does

not. Tairn masks this deeply emotional vulnerability behind the authority and dominance as he tells Violet he feels how her strength is waning, and Violet should not continue to use her powers. On the same, Violet shows protectiveness also towards Tairn with her comments as she could sacrifice herself for Tairn to live. Similar protection towards their dragon is shown in Eragon's conversations and actions with Saphira.

> [ERAGON] "*I forgot. You're injured!"* he exclaimed, getting up with an effort. *"I'd better heal you."*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Be careful. It's easy to make mistakes when you're this tired."*
> [ERAGON] *"I know."* (Paolini, p. 386; see also p. 310)

> [ERAGON] *"Are you all right?" ...*
> [SAPHIRA] *"I...I think so." ... "Nothing's broken–I couldn't do anything; the wind wouldn't let me go. I was helpless."* With a shudder, she fell silent. …
> [ERAGON] *"Don't worry, you're safe now."* (Paolini, p. 127)

Eragon shows caring towards Saphira in multiple occasions, blending into more feminine nurturing role as a role of healer has traditionally been reserved for females. Eragon shows nurturing language towards Saphira, saying she is safe now, which is not traditionally masculine. Eragon is therefore blending gender roles depending on the situation as care can be also towards your platonic partner, not just maternal or paternal. Emotional care is traditionally seen as feminine, and below Eragon's response highlights that tradition.

> [ERAGON] "*How am I supposed to get up there?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"If you find a clearing, I'll come down and get you."*
> [ERAGON] *"No,"* he said, eyeing the cliff, *"that won't be necessary. I'll just climb up."*
> [SAPHIRA] *"It's too dangerous."*
> [ERAGON] *"And you worry too much. Let me have some fun."* (Paolini, p. 189)

Eragon's response to Saphira's worry resembles the thought of excessive, feminine care where the child in the situation is fighting against the authority who "always ruins the fun". This showcases the pattern where emotional care is feminine and undervalued, but in some instances Eragon values tremendously the emotional care and protection Saphira gives him, as seen below.

> [ERAGON] *"You could walk unhindered in the riverbed,"* he said as she was forced to smash through a dense web of branches.
> [SAPHIRA] *"I'll not leave you with him."*
> [ERAGON] Eragon was glad for her protection. "*Morzan's son!"* (Paolini, p. 370)

In *Fourth Wing*, the repeated framing of Violet as fragile (for example her mother's remark, "So she's small") sets her up as an unlikely hero, but her bond with two dragons and eventual

leadership challenge these assumptions. Dragons, who are bound by no human norms, treat her worth as rider not by physical strength but by emotional resilience and loyalty. This rejection of physicality as the sole measure of competence subtly challenges patriarchal values. These portrayals suggest that while species hierarchy (dragon dominance) is a consistent structural element, gender still shapes how characters express care and vulnerability. As Fairclough (2001, p. 29) notes, power in discourse is both enacted and resisted through language.

Across *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, rider-dragon dynamics evolve from gendered binaries, such as male protectors and female nurturers, into complex partnerships. Saphira moves from a maternal figure to a strategic equal, challenging Eragon to grow emotionally and ethically. Similarly, Violet gains strength and authority, while Tairn becomes more emotionally responsive, reflecting a shift toward mutual influence. These arcs demonstrate that protectiveness and vulnerability are shared, not inherently gendered, traits. Taken together, these examples show that protectiveness and vulnerability are shaped by a dual structure, where dragons' species-based dominance gives them narrative space to assert or withhold care, while gendered expectations influence how that care is expressed, received, and interpreted. The combination of these forces results in relationships that are not reducible to hierarchy or binary roles but evolve through shared emotional labour and trust.

Although dragons are fictional constructs, within the storyworld they are not mere symbols of protectiveness or power. Instead, they function as companions and co-agents in the protagonists’ growth. This chapter has therefore focused not on species difference per se, but on how gendered traits of protectiveness and vulnerability are negotiated across species lines. These relationships are shaped less by human-animal hierarchy and more by emotional and ethical partnership. Species, in these novels, provides a structural backdrop, such as dragon dominance, but it does not confine the dragons to fixed roles. Rather, dragons operate as narrative agents whose interactions with human riders offer nuanced models of interdependence and care, transcending rigid species or gender norms.

4 Agency and trust

This chapter examines how language constructs trust and negotiates agency in rider-dragon relationships within *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*. Agency, according to Rodney H. Jones (2024, p. 13), refers to the capacity to act with autonomy and taking charge of the process, while trust in this context is an emotional and communicative foundation that makes negotiations and shifting agency possible. Through conversation, silence, resistance and cooperation, riders and dragons shape the power dynamics of their bonds.

This chapter explores how trust is built, withheld, and tested. It explores how agency shifts and how these processes are complicated by gender norms and expectations. Because in battle situations agency normally becomes synchronised, those situations are not analysed in this chapter in detail.

4.1 Trust in language

Trust between riders and dragons often begins with vulnerability and develops through reassurance and emotional validation. Naming is one of the symbolic acts of connection, although it normally happens with human-animal relationships and not equal partnerships. When Eragon offers Saphira male names before realising she is female, his assumptions of the dragon are disrupted.

> [ERAGON] "You need a name. I heard some interesting ones today; perhaps you'll like one." … "What do you think of Vanilor or his successor, Eridor? Both were great dragons?"
> [SAPHIRA] *"No,"* said the dragon. It sounded amused with his efforts. "*Eragon*."
> [ERAGON] *"*That's my name; you can't have it," he said, rubbing his chin. "Well, if you don't like those, there are others." … "There was Ingothold, he slew the…" A revelation stopped him. "*That is the problem! I've been choosing male names. You are a she!"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Yes."* …
> [ERAGON] "Are you Saphira?"
> [SAPHIRA] *"Yes."* (Paolini, p. 58-59)

Eragon attempts to name Saphira, initially choosing male names, reflecting gendered assumptions of power and identity. Eragon's use of "well" portrays more feminine language as according to Lakoff (1975, p. 79) the use of hedges of various kinds convey that the speaker is uncertain about what they are saying. Saphira's refusal and self-naming reclaims agency while challenging Eragon's assumed dominance. Trust begins here not through agreement although they reach an agreement at the end, but through honest resistance. While

Eragon's control is rooted in social convention humans naming animals, Saphira's response reshapes the power dynamic from a passive recipient to an equal partner, similarly as Eragon mentioned earlier them being equal. It is unclear if Saphira already had a name as she only approves Eragon's suggestion, but in Fourth Wing, dragons come with pre-existing identities and names.

> [TAIRN] *"My name is Tairneanach, son of Murtcuideam and Fiaclanfuil, descended from the cunning Dubhmadinn line." ... "But I'm not going to assume that you'll be able to remember that once we reach the field, so Tairn will do until I inevitably have to remind you."* (Yarros, p. 182-183)

Above, Tairn introduces himself with full ancestral authority. His agency is tied to a legacy of power, yet he adapts it for Violet's benefit to use a shortened version of his name. This signals cooperation, equality and emerging trust as this is their first interactions with each other.

In *Fourth Wing,* dragons choose their riders (Yarros, p. 185) and riders present themselves to the dragons while battling each other for the best dragons. In *Eragon,* the setting is different and sets expectations for trust differently.

> [SAPHIRA] *"Eragon, I chose you from within my egg. You have been given a chance most would die for. Are you unhappy with that? Clear your mind of such* thoughts. They cannot be answered and will make you no happier.
> [ERAGON] "*True,"* he said glumly. "*All the same, they continue to bounce around within my skull.*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Things have been…unsettled…ever since Brom died. It has made me uneasy,"* acknowledged Saphira … (Paolini p. 429-430)

Choosing a rider reverses traditional power dynamics as she asserts autonomy for a time when she was an egg. Her honest expression of unease following Brom's death also shows emotional vulnerability and openness which fosters deeper emotional trust.

Trust can also be broken or withheld. When Saphira flies Eragon away without warning the following conversation happens.

> [ERAGON] *"Why do the strangers frighten you?*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Murderers,"* she hissed.
> [ERAGON] *"Garrow is in danger and you kidnap me on this ridiculous journey! Are you unable to protect me?* She growled deeply and snapped her jaws. "*Ah, but if you think you can, why run?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Death is a poison." ...*
> [ERAGON] *"Saphira, look where we are! The sun is down, and your flight has stripped my legs as easily as I would scale a fish. Is that what you wanted?"*

> [SAPHIRA] *"No."*
> [ERAGON] *"Then why did you do it?"* he demanded. … She looked away and refused to answer. (Paolini, p. 73)

This moment shows Saphira exercising independent judgment while distancing herself emotionally that acts as an example of agency and a breach of trust. Such moments are common across both novels. Saphira's actions breach Eragon's trust for her and she acts independently for what she perceives as Eragon's safety. What she fails is to explain herself which withholds trust and emotional transparency and can be seen as power move. Her silence at the end of conversation becomes an act of control. This echoes Jones' (2024, p. 13) view of agency as performative and what could be embedded in silence or resistance.

As easily trust can be broken, it can be also built through reassurance and recognition.

> [SAPHIRA] *"You killed them?* Saphira sounded surprised. …
> [ERAGON] *"*Somehow*."* …
> [SAPHIRA] Saphira said gravely, *"You have grown."* (Paolini, p. 136)

> [VIOLET] *"We have to take out the riders,"* I whisper.
> [TAIRN] *"Yes."* Tairn agrees, following my thoughts. "*Excellent idea."*
> [VIOLET] *"You're willing to gamble your life on it?" ...*
> [TAIRN] *"I will bet my life on you as I have from the first day,"* he says, … (Yarros, p. 520)

Both statements acknowledge change and affirm loyalty. These moments serve as turning points where emotional bonds are solidified and supported by language that communicates pride, belief, and mutual dependence. "You have grown" verbalises that Eragon first was against killing anyone, but he has grown to be closer to Saphira's view of killing, when necessary, although gravely implies that Saphira has serious tone, and this issue is important for both of them. These conversations function as affirmations of earned trust. Saphira is retrospective in her affirmation while Tairn is more anticipatory and binding in his reassuring words "I will bet my life on you". These bring out the emotional depth in each bond.

Another way to build trust shown in both novels is through compliments and emotional encouragement.

> [ANDARNA] *"You're doing great,"* Andarna assures me in the happiest of tones. (Yarros, p. 342)

> [SAPHIRA] "*You fought well,"* she said. He smiled. (Paolini, p. 244)

These moments reinforce emotional trust. Compliments, especially from dragons to their riders, tip the presumed power hierarchy towards dragons. Though dragons are dominant in strength, they still validate the emotional journey of their riders. Andarna's language is nurturing, while Saphira's is pragmatic, and both of their lines convey care and are reassuring sentences.

Positive reinforcement builds trust and confidence. It is particularly important in these novels where riders frequently question their worth.

> [SAPHIRA] *"We are becoming more powerful, Eragon, both of us. Soon no one will be able to stand in our way.*
> [ERAGON] *"Yes, but which way shall we choose?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Whichever one we want,"* she said smugly, settling down for the night. (Paolini, p. 142)

This phrasing signals shared agency. The "we" marks partnership and "we are in this together "-mentality. Saphira's use of "whichever we want" is affirming, but also subtly dominant as she guides the conversation toward assertiveness, possibly compensating for Eragon's uncertainty. The similar happens in Fourth Wing where Tairn reassures his trust in Violet through honest interactions both in the beginning of their journey together and towards the end of the novel.

> [VIOLET] "I'm sorry. I just didn't think I'd make it this far." …
> [TAIRN] *"I didn't think I would, either, so we have that in common."* (Yarros, p. 186)

> [VIOLET] *"Tairn, I can't aim."*
> [TAIRN] *"You will,"* he says like it's a foregone conclusion. (Yarros, p. 499)

Tairn's absolute belief in Violet despite her uncertainty affirms the kind of trust that reinforces agency. In above, a moment of shared doubt turned to reassurance. Honesty from both sides strengthens their mutual bond and shared trust and agency.

Saphira's language often comes with dominant tones, while she still asserts loving partnership to Eragon.

> [SAPHIRA] *"If anything happens, I'm going to pin you to my back and never let you off.*
> [ERAGON] *"I love you too."*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Then I will bind you all the tighter.* (Paolini, p. 174)

This is deeply affectionate but carries hints of controlling agency. Saphira's protectiveness borders on possessiveness as she does not ask for consent. While rooted in care, it's a power assertion, suggesting agency can be loving but coercive. The tone subverts typical gender dynamics where the female-coded dragon exerts total control over her male rider. But this is also a trust building example as the language suggest that Eragon takes Saphira's remark as loving and caring which translates to trust for him, but for Saphira she does not trust Eragon to allow him to make decisions freely.

Similar distrust in a sense appears in Fourth Wing, where dragons are not granting their riders "powers" until the riders are deemed worthy and ready.

> [TAIRN] *"You held your own and controlled your temper,"* Tairn says, an immense swell of pride flooding my chest.
> [ANDARNA] *"She's ready,"* Andarna add with a giddy jolt of joy that makes me instantly light-headed.
> [TAIRN] *"She's ready,"* he agrees. (Yarros, p. 289)

This signals official endorsement and that trust is being given when it is earned. The dragons bestow symbolic agency upon Violet. This reinforces dragon authority but also highlights how trust is used to unlock human agency. "She's ready" is a reassurance phrase and through the narrative it seems that dragons are happy how they can trust this gift of power to Violet finally. This moment marks a transition from dependence to empowerment, sanctioned by those in power, dragons.

While dragons are powerful beings, they offer emotional reassurance in feminine-coded ways. This challenges simplistic gender binaries by showing strength and nurturance coexisting. Language also builds trust through negotiation and shared control.

> [VIOLET] "Care to add to the discussion?"
> [TAIRN] *"Not yet. I'd prefer you to come to your own conclusion. I chose you for your intelligence and courage, Silver One. Don't let me down."* (Yarros, p. 481)

Rather than to correct Violet or direct her, Tairn withholds input to encourage independent thinking. This restraint functions as trust in action, allowing Violet's agency to emerge without interference. By withholding comment, Tairn empowers Violet to lead which seems like a significant gesture in a hierarchical world. In contrast, distrust can appear through resistance and secrecy.

> [SAPHIRA] Saphira said pointedly, "*If you had explained what you were planning to do, none of this would have happened. I would have told you it was a bad idea not to kill the Urgals. I only agreed to do what you asked because I assumed it was halfway reasonable!"*
> [ERAGON] *"I don't want to talk about it."*
> [SAPHIRA] *"As you wish,"* she sniffed. (Paolini, p. 238)

Trust erodes here through mismatched expectations. Saphira's phrasing conveys disappointment and a breakdown in communicative alignment. The passive "as you wish" marks relational distance also in her speech. She is disappointed to Eragon's distrust towards her as Eragon withheld information from her that she would have had something to say to it. According to Tannen (1992, p. 27) women feel natural to consult their partner in every decision but for men tend to make decisions without consulting their partner. This could also be a valid explanation for Saphira's disappointment.

Another example if distrust in language in *Eragon* is the following conversation.

> [ERAGON] *"You should land somewhere now and hide. We're going in."*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. Again,"* she said sourly. (Paolini, p. 173)

This conversation is less about reprimand and more about a reminder of past errors. Though she doesn't stop Eragon, the narrative "said sourly" reveals lingering distrust towards Eragon's actions and decisions.

A common occurrence in both novels is dragons keeping secrets from their riders. That is another level of distrust as the agency is fully on dragons' court. In *Fourth Wing,* Tairn and Andarna hide a secret from Violet which they know Violet would not take lightly.

> [VIOLET] *"Tairn."*
> [TAIRN] *"Silver One?"*
> [VIOLET] *"They all carry rebellion relics,"* I tell him. *"Everyone in this squad besides me is the child of a separatist." ...*
> [TAIRN] *"Yes. They are,"* he agrees, resignation in his tone. …
> [VIOLET] *"You and Andarna lied to me, too." ... "You knew what he was doing."*
> [ANDARNA] *"We both chose you,"* Andarna says, like that makes it any better.
> [VIOLET] *"But you knew." ...*
> [TAIRN] *"Dragons are bound by bonds,"* he explains as Xaden approaches. "*There is only one other bond more sacred than that of a dragon and its rider."* (Yarros, p. 478)

> [ANDARNA] *"We know we didn't lie. We just didn't tell you everything."* …
> [VIOLET] *"That is lying by omission,"* I argue. …

> [TAIRN] *"She is right, Golden One." … "You have every right to be angry." … "We made a choice to protect you–without your consent. It was an error, and one that I won't make again."* (Yarros, p. 484)

This is a clear articulation of protective betrayal. By hiding the truth, Tairn and Andarna act paternalistically as in their mind they are protecting Violet. But their acknowledgment and apology model an emotionally intelligent form of trust repair by validating Violet's feelings. It challenges masculine tropes by validating emotional fallout rather than challenging it as according to Tannen (1992, p. 129) typical male behaviour is to challenge women. Tairn's mature response to broken trust repairs said trust by ownership as he tells Violet he will not be doing that again, expressing his willingness to grow. After this interaction would be natural for Violet to be distrusting as she shows in the below conversation.

> [VIOLET] *"Did you know?"*
> [TAIRN] *"I suspected. Why do you think I've been so hard on you during flight maneuvers?"*
> [VIOLET] *"You and I are going to have to work on our communication skills."*
> (Yarros, p. 496-497)

This interaction reintroduces the theme of incomplete trust to their dynamic. Tairn's partial transparency, again justified as protection, creates friction but not rupture. Violet's sarcasm about "communication skills" reflects the need for emotional equality as Violet does not want to be left out of the information she deems important for her.

Violet is not alone being lied to. Eragon also figures out that Saphira has been directly lying to him.

> [SAPHIRA] *"Brom is a magician! That's how he was able to light the fire on the plains. He doesn't just know about magic; he can use it himself!"*
> [ERAGON] Eragon's eyes widened. "*You're right!"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Ask him about his power, but be careful of what you say. It is unwise to trifle with those who have such abilities.* (Paolini, p. 140)

In above example early in the novel, Saphira is sharing to Eragon that she came into conclusion that Brom (their human companion for their journey at the moment) is magician and tells Eragon how he should ask Brom about his powers. This seems, in a conversation level, to be a moment of shared agency and trust building moment as they share a secret When looking more deeper, the below example shows that Saphira is lying here to Eragon and has her own agency that she shares with Brom.

> [SAPHIRA] *"I knew what he was the moment he touched me at your farm.*
> [ERAGON] *"And you didn't tell me? Why?*

[SAPHIRA] *"He asked me not to,"* she said simply. … (Paolini, p. 282)

Saphira withholds crucial information, positioning herself as the one with knowledge. While her secrecy violates Eragon's expectations, her logic is trusting another person than her rider. This tension reflects how agency can conflict with relational harmony. Saphira respecting other person than her rider in her rider's expense and choosing to outright lie to him shows that her agency is not always in the teamwork. In *Eragon*, Saphira knew that Brom was a dragon rider, not magician, before the page 96 in the novel, but she still chose to make Eragon oblivious to that he is travelling with another dragon rider. In both of the novels, dragons act like a dominant party as they choose within their agency what information they will share with their riders.

In both *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, trust is not granted without an issue, but it is built, broken, and rebuilt as those relationships evolve over time. Early interactions are shaped by uncertainty, withheld truths and testing boundaries. However, as the novels progress, dragons and riders begin to work towards mutual connections, shared decision-making and more open emotional exchange. This progression works in favour of the plot as the pairs are expected to fight together as a team (victoriously) and trust is an inherent piece of working well together. These progressions demonstrate that trust, like power, is not static element. It deepens over time, allowing both parties to share vulnerability and confront challenges together. The relationships reflect a transformation from initial alliances to bonds grounded in emotional growth and mutual respect, meaning that narrative development reconfigures the gendered and species dynamics of trust in these novels.

4.2 Negotiating agency

While trust sets the foundation for interspecies bonds, agency emerges through ongoing negotiation. This section examines how riders and dragons test, assert, and adjust their authority across different contexts. Negotiating agency refers here to how riders and dragons collaboratively or independently assert power, make decisions, and maintain boundaries. In both *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing* there is a continuous interplay of influence in which dragons and riders assert and adjust their authority.

As language acts as a mediator for agency, one example of that is literally negotiating and getting verbal promises.

> [ERAGON] "But what if you're attacked or there's an accident? I won't be able to get there in time and–"
> [SAPHIRA] *"Exactly my point, little one." ...*
> [ERAGON] *"Okay, I'll do it. But let me up."*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Give me your word."*
> [ERAGON] "*Is that really necessary?"* he demanded. Saphira blinked. "*Very well. I give you my word that I will fly with you tomorrow. Satisfied?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"I am content."* (Paolini, p. 158)

This conversation holds a negotiation, where Saphira is setting boundaries and authority over Eragon. The use of "pet name" positions Saphira with seniority and protectiveness and her insistence for a verbal confirmation asserts authority. This showcases the need for verbalised negotiation being necessary for their relationship, as actions have not been enough to create trust and shared agency.

Another way dragons assert agency is through the selective withholding of knowledge or power. When Saphira reveals she knows more than she initially disclosed about Brom's identity, Eragon responds with frustration.

> [SAPHIRA] *"He told me,"* said Saphira.
> [ERAGON] Eragon grew angry. *"Why did he trust you, but not me, with all this knowledge?" ...*
> [SAPHIRA] "*After we left Teirm and were attacked by the Urgals, he told me many things, some of which I will not speak of unless necessary. ... Brom also wanted you to know that all of the people in Alagaësia, he believed you were the best suited to inherit the Rider's legacy. ...*
> [ERAGON] *"A responsibility I will bear honorably."*
> [SAPHIRA] *"Good."* (Paolini, p. 282)

Saphira's selective withholding of information places her in a role of authority. While Eragon views this as unequal treatment, Saphira frames it as protective foresight. Her agency here manifests through control over knowledge. If the expected authority in the rider and dragon relationship is in a human, Saphira's actions challenge this phenomenon putting dragons to a role of narrative power.

Tairn in *Fourth Wing* exercises similar control being the gatekeeper of power for Violet.

> [TAIRN] *"Then stay on next time."*
> [VIOLET] *"Start channeling and maybe I'll be able to,"* I counter. …
> [TAIRN] "*You're not ready to channel yet, Silver One."* (Yarros, p. 282)

Tairn delays Violet's access to "magical power" not out of dominance, but mentorship. This agency over timing repositions dragons as stewards of power rather than simple enablers. In

Fourth Wing traditionally dragons have a power they are gifting to their riders and that gift manifests in riders different ways. As can be seen here, the power is not negotiated, but dragons choose when they think their rider is ready for that responsibility. Both dragons protect information and access to literal power, both being powerful things, but they do that for reasons they justify as protective. These acts affirm their agency. Tairn's way of negotiation agency here is mentoring as Saphira's is more protecting. Both dragons act not to dominate, but guide, which reinforces their status as independent beings with their own agency while being tied to duo's shared agency.

Agency shifts fluidly between riders and dragons and is constantly renegotiated. Negotiation of agency also manifests in mutual planning and shared decision-making as below.

> [ERAGON] … *"I'm going to ride Cadoc tomorrow. Before you protest, know that I am only doing it because I want to talk with Brom.*
> [SAPHIRA] *"You should ride with him every other day. That way you can still receive your instruction, and I will have time to hunt."*
> [ERAGON] *"You won't be troubled by it?"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"It is necessary."* (Paolini, p. 168)

This conversation shows both Eragon and Saphira communicating their needs and adjusting their behaviour based on the discussion. Saphira doesn't resist but contributes to the plan Eragon is proposing. Their shared logic builds mutual respect and shared agency. This concept is echoed in *Fourth Wing* through Andarna's explanation of why she bonded with Violet.

> [TAIRN] *"Exactly. Bonding too young allows them to give their gift directly, and a rider could easily drain them and burn out."*
> [VIOLET] "I would never!" I shake my head.
> [ANDARNA] *"That's why I chose you."* (Yarros, p. 253)

> [ANDARNA] *"And now we can stop it [time]." ...*
> [VIOLET] "And if I use it too much, I can kill you," I say softly to Andarna.
> [ANDARNA] *"Kill us." ... "But I know you won't."* (Yarros, p. 254)

Agency here is with the dragon in the beginning. Andarna selects Violet, reversing assumptions about power flowing from human to dragon as discussed before. The act of choosing is positioned as both emotional and strategic. This conversation blends emotional reassurance and the sharing of high-stakes knowledge. The mutual risk involved strengthens their bond and signals that agency is shared and earned as they all know their responsibilities and results if they overexert their limits. The aspect of time stopping is also a secret from other people is an example of trust building towards shared agency.

Agency acts as a social dynamic which is constantly reshaping through conversations. The below conversation portrays an example of shifting dominance and testing boundaries.

> [TAIRN] *"You only fell only about a dozen times that trip,"* Tairn remarks as we land on the flight field.
> [VIOLET] "*I can't tell if that's a compliment or not." ...*
> [TAIRN] *"Take it as you wish."*
> [VIOLET] *"Besides, you could make it easier, you know."*
> [TAIRN] *"Oh, I know."*
> [VIOLET] *"I'm not the one putting us into spirals with steep banks while Kaori is teaching plain dives." ...*
> [TAIRN] *"I'm training you for a battle. He's teaching you parlor tricks." ...*
> [VIOLET] *"Do you think we can get Andarna to join us next week? Even if it's just to fly along?" ...*
> [TAIRN] … *"And I wouldn't ask Andarna to join us unless she requested it. She can't keep up the speed, and it would only draw unwanted attention."*
> [VIOLET] *"I never get to see her,"* I blatantly whine. "*I'm always stuck with your grumpy ass."*
> [ANDARNA] *"I'm always here,"* Andarna answers, but there's no flicker of gold. …
> [TAIRN] *"This grumpy ass just caught you dozen times, Silver One."*
> [VIOLET] "*Eventually you could call me Violet, you know." ...*
> [TAIRN] *"I know,"* he repeats. *"And I could call you Violence like the wingleader."*
> [VIOLET] *"You wouldn't dare." ... "And you know how much that ass annoys me."*
> [TAIRN] "*Annoys you?" … "Is that what you call it when your heart rate–"*
> [VIOLET] *"Don't even start with me."* (Yarros, p. 229-230)

Through teasing and linguistic play, Violet attempts to reclaim power over her name while Tairn resists. This exchange illustrates agency as a social dynamic which is shifting and renegotiated through humour. In this conversation both dominance and endearment coexist while agency is negotiated. Tairn is training Violet to be ready for battle while Violet is trying to gain some dominance and say to this situation. Banter here acts as a way to test boundaries of power without fracturing trust, but as Cameron (1992, p. 12) voiced, women stereotypically lack the power and authority of men.

Compliments and affirmations play a vital role in affirming a rider's growing autonomy.

> How ironic. Tairn is the most celebrated dragon in the Vale, and I'm the most unlikely rider in the quadrant.
> [TAIRN] *"You are the smartest of your year. The most cunning." ... "You defended the smallest with ferocity. And strength of courage is more important than physical strength. Since you apparently need to know before we land." ...*
> Oh shit. I hadn't spoken those words. I'd thought them. He can read my thoughts.
> [TAIRN] *"See? Smartest of your year." ... "You'll never be alone again."*

> [VIOLET] *That sounds more like a threat than a comfort,"* I think. (Yarros, p. 187-188)

Although it seems that dragons act as a dominant party in many conversations, these verbal acknowledgments solidify the rider's place as a respected equal. Tairn's reinforcement of Violet's intelligence functions as both emotional support and a recognition of earned competence. According to Tannen (1992, p. 128-129) women do not get credit when it is due as males typically challenge the authority, but this is because of respect. I would argue that in this conversation Tairn still shows respect by giving Violet some credit rather than challenging her. This is especially important gesture as Violet is often underestimated and described weak, so Tairn here builds Violet's confidence and shared agency is negotiated. Below is another example of confidence building through humour.

> [VIOLET] *"And yet you two chose me?" ...*
> [TAIRN] *"You're worthy. At least I think you are, but you apparently don't pay attention in class."* (Yarros, p. 215)

Humour softens praise, making it feel here more accessible but also intimate. Tairn balances encouragement with critique, engaging in trust-building while preserving a tone of equality by dampening the compliment with critique. This keeps Tairn still as equal and does not put Violet above him.

Dragons also act autonomously for safety they deduct to be the best course of action.

> [VIOLET] *"You have to take us back!"*
> [TAIRN] *"I have done everything I can and will not risk your life." ... "Now, hold on so we can outfly them."* (Yarros, p. 374)

Tairn takes unilateral action for safety, exercising his own judgment instead of listening to Violet. Though it overrules Violet's agency, the rationale is care which is a familiar dynamic in partnerships. His unilateral action underlines independent agency and the boundary between his guidance and co-operation, and override. Tairn's decision to override Violet's wishes for safety asserts a protective form of dominance. This isn't framed inherently as paternalism, but as an act of love grounded in experience.

Tairn's protective limits above express independent decision-making. Saphira also asserts boundaries with Eragon.

> [ERAGON] *"Come!"*
> [SAPHIRA] *"No, I will watch for a time."*
> [ERAGON] *"Why!"*

> [SAPHIRA] *"Because of the slaughter at Dorú Areaba.* (Paolini, p. 96)

Here, Saphira actively resists Eragon's urgency. Her refusal and rationale signal internal logic, which translates her not being an obedient partner but an autonomous actor in the relationship dynamic. In this example Saphira is vague in her explanation for her reasoning, but that is not always the case.

> [ERAGON] *"*Don't do that!" he cried. "I feel like I'm going to fall off."
> [SAPHIRA] "*You must become accustomed to it. If I'm attacked in the air, that's one of the simplest maneuvers I will do,"* she replied. … "*Let me show you what flying is really like."* (Paolini, p. 162)

In this conversation, Saphira explains her logic behind her actions. Physical training becomes a metaphor for emotional trust. Saphira's guidance requires Eragon's submission for her being in control, but not as subordination, but as mutual co-operation for future situations.

Dragons also exert physical and symbolic agency, as seen when Tairn reveals that his saddle was designed to accommodate his autonomy.

> Twenty minutes later, we're in the flight field, and to my surprise, Tairn is saddled.
> [VIOLET] *"How the hell did you do that?" ...*
> [TAIRN] *"As if I'd let them design something I couldn't figure out how to get on myself. Remember where you get your power from, Silver One."* (Yarros, p. 415)

Tairn ensures his saddle is usable without humans which is a statement of independence. This reinforces dragons as full participants in combat logistics, not mere mounts. Tairn's words signal a refusal to be dependent on humans and affirms his individual agency. He is making accommodation for Violet by having a saddle on him (the other dragons do not do that in *Fourth Wing*), but he reclaims the control over the situation entirely to him.

In contrast, riders assert themselves by resisting or questioning their dragon's choices. In the conversation below, Eragon is giving Saphira a "pep talk", which turns into a moment of shared agency.

> [ERAGON] "*I know you don't want to, but you must. Both of us carry an obligation to Garrow. ... What will be said of us in years to come if we don't return–that we hid like cowards while my uncle was in danger? I can hear it now, the story of the Rider and his craven dragon! If there will be a fight, let's face it and not shy away. You are a dragon! Even a Shade would run from you! Yet you crouch in the mountains like a frightened rabbit*." …
> [SAPHIRA] "*Blood will meet blood. I will fight. Our wyrds–our fates–bind us, but try me not. I will take you because of debt owed, but into foolishness we fly."*

> [ERAGON] “Foolishness or not”, he said into the air, “there is no choice–we must go.” … “*This time*,” he told her, “*fly lower and faster. Time is of the essence*.”
> [SAPHIRA] *Don’t let go,* she cautioned, then surges into the sky. …
> [ERAGON] “*Faster, faster,* he urged. (Paolini, p. 76)

Here, urgency compresses their decision-making into parallel imperatives. Trust is implied, not discussed, while agency becomes shared through necessity. Rather than top-down command, this coordination conversation shows the duo as tactical equals.

Equality is also shown in the following conversation.

> [ERAGON] *“If there’s trouble, I’ll be ready for it.”*
> [SAPHIRA] *“As will I,”* said Saphira. (Paolini, p. 164)

This is a verbal handshake of readiness. It shows equal participation in risk, reflecting shared confidence and mutual accountability. Both being ready for trouble and they share an agency for it confirming it with short negotiation if they are on the same page on this.

All in all, agency in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing* is not a binary state but a fluid process that is being expressed, challenged, negotiated, and sometimes overridden. Trust enables this negotiation, but it is through linguistic exchanges, moral reasoning, and physical autonomy that agency truly manifests. Saphira’s style of negotiation is reasoning instead of direct commanding, while Tairn leans towards more commanding negotiation tactic which is in line with the fact that in *Fourth Wing* dragons have the power to decide when their rider is getting their power manifested meaning they hold the power in the early relationship. In *Eragon*, the rider has the physical magical power in then already which shapes the early stages of relationship to a direction where in order to have a respectful bond, dragons do not hold any power over the rider making their negotiations of agency more equal.

Throughout both novels, agency begins as asymmetrical, where males often act as dominant figures who guide or override the female characters. However, as the narratives progress, the relationships between riders and dragons become more reciprocal. Eragon, initially in charge of Saphira, lets Saphira become a strategic and emotional partner, making decisions alongside her. Violet, frequently undermined early in *Fourth Wing*, gains control over her powers and makes decisions as trust grows between her and her dragons. I argue here that agency is also not static but negotiated and re-negotiated through shared experiences and communication. These developments support the argument that agency is relational and fluid, shaped more by plot evolution and emotional trust than is fixed by gender or species roles.

4.3 Societal expectations of gendered agency

Societal expectations can shape how agency is expressed, challenged, or reinforced through gender-coded behaviour. Tannen (1992, p. 128-129) observes that while men often strive to gain respect and assert status, women more frequently prioritise relational harmony and seek connection. These competing goals manifest in how rider-dragon dynamics are framed across *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing*, particularly through word choices and the emotions they convey to the reader.

One example of traditional gender behaviour could be argued to be feminine lecturing.

> [ERAGON] *"I won't forget that again,"* he thought grimly.
> [SAPHIRA] *"You shouldn't have forgotten in the first place,"* Saphira inserted pointedly. *"First the dirt at Gil'ead and now this. Weren't you paying attention to anything Brom told you? You'll kill yourself if you keep this up.*
> [ERAGON] *"I paid attention,"* he insisted, rubbing his chin. "*It's just been a while, and I haven't had an opportunity to think back on. I've never used magic at a distance, so how could I know it would be so difficult?"*
> [SAPHIRA] She growled. "*Next thing I know you'll be trying to bring corpses back to life. Don't forget what Brom said about that, too."*
> [ERAGON] *"I won't,"* he said impatiently. (Paolini, p. 362)

Saphira's reprimand towards Eragon portrays an assertive but scolding speech which is more often associated with masculine authority than feminine nurturing. However, her motivation behind it is care, creating a hybrid agency that blends maternal protection with commanding critique. This duality challenges stereotypical expectations that female-coded figures must be polite and ladylike, like Lakoff's (1975, p. 95) "good woman" observation points out.

More societally expected wording and narration from Saphira is seen below.

> [SAPHIRA] *"Go on,"* urged Saphira gently. (Paolini, p. 406)

Here, Saphira switches tone entirely being soft, encouraging and almost parental. This demonstrates the fluidity of gendered language as a character, here a dragon, may occupy both authoritative and supportive roles within the same relational framework, as Montoro (2014, p. 350-351) suggests.

Saphira's language also portrays a traditionally masculine trope of "who hurt you".

> [SAPHIRA] *"Are you hurt?"* she asked, rage boiling in her voice.
> [ERAGON] *"No,"* he assured her as he laid Brom on his back.
> [SAPHIRA] She growled and exclaimed, "*Where are the ones who did this? I will tear them apart!"* (Paolini, p. 135)

This raw and aggressive reaction is framed through the said trope although it is not directed towards her rider but their companion. Saphira's rage channels stereotypically masculine protectiveness, underscoring that feminine figures can be both fierce and emotionally expressive, even though that is traditionally connected to maternal protection.

Tannen (1992, p. 129) explains that men are typically socialised to seek respect and assert status, while women are often taught to prioritise connection and likability. These patterns play out in how both dragons and riders speak and make decisions. Saphira regularly exhibits authority and strategic thinking, which are traits traditionally connected to masculine roles.

> [SAPHIRA] *"And what will we do if the Kull attack Murtagh?"*
> [ERAGON] *"Fight them, of course! I won't let him and Arya be captured or killed,"* said Eragon indignantly.
> [SAPHIRA] There was a touch of sarcasm in her words. *"How noble. Oh, we would fell many of the Urgals–you with magic and blade, whilst my weapons would be tooth and claw–but it would be futile in the end. They are too numerous…We cannot defeat them, only be defeated."*
> [ERAGON] *"What, then?"* he demanded. *"I'll not leave Arya or Murtagh to their mercy."*
> [SAPHIRA] Saphira waved her tail, the tip whistling loudly. *"I'm not asking you to. However, if we attack first, we may gain the advantage."*
> [ERAGON] *"Have you gone crazy? They'll…" ... "They won't be able to do a thing,"* he concluded surprised.
> [SAPHIRA] *"Exactly,"* said Saphira. *"We can inflict lots of damage from a safe height."* (Paolini, p. 364)

Here, Saphira uses sarcasm and reasoned analysis to reframe Eragon's emotional impulse. Her authority in combat strategy positions her as an equal, even superior, tactician. Her role is not merely supportive but she drives the decision-making. This active, assertive stance challenges the expectation that female-coded characters should defer to others in planning or leadership. According to Tannen (1992, p. 225), women's language is often perceived as powerless. However, Saphira repeatedly demonstrates that her speech carries authority and influence, even in comparison to the male-coded Eragon. While her gender may play a role, her species and the associated power dynamics arguably have a greater impact on her linguistic dominance.

In *Fourth Wing*, Violet challenges expectations by embracing profane, emotionally charged speech as has been discussed before using sentences such as "Don't be an ass" (Yarros, p. 274) and "Oh, for fucks sake" (Yarros, p. 230). Lakoff (1975, p. 44-45) argues that traditional "women's language" avoids strong language and favours politeness and uncertainty.

> [TAIRN] "*Not entirely,"* Tairn grunts.
> [VIOLET] *"No comments from you, not after you almost let me hit the side of a mountain today."* (Yarros, p. 281)

Violet, however, deploys swearing and stronger language to try to claim authority and agency, rejecting passivity and asserting emotional honesty.

On the other hand, Tairn's protectiveness often appears more traditionally masculine, such as when he says he will not allow Violet to fall (Yarros, p. 186). Tairn's protective language is delivered with rigid confidence which is a classically masculine speech act according to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013, p. 1-36). He yet also offers encouragement to Violet when Violet is asking for reassurance.

> [VIOLET] "*Tairn?"* It's not just me going to war.
> [TAIRN] *"We will feast on their bones, Silver One."* (Yarros, p. 494)

Tairn's line portrays a hypermasculine type act, but he offered it in a moment of team spirit to boost group morale. Power and caring act can work together as he asserts strength while including Violet in the outcome. But Tairn has also solely caring, more feminine coded side.

> [TAIRN] *"You'll like it,"* Tairn promises. "*It's unique."*
> [VIOLET] *"I'll like what?"* (Yarros, p. 205)

This mix in Tairn's speech reflects Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity where gendered agency is enacted situationally rather than fixed as he portrays both masculine and feminine traits.

Traditional feminine expressions of affirmation and emotional support can be seen in Andarna's speech.

> [TAIRN] "*You did what was necessary,"* Tairn says, ...
> [ANDARNA] *"You saved your friend,"* Andarna adds. …
> [VIOLET] "You need to get some rest, don't you?"
> [ANDARNA] *"I'm proud you're mine."* ... (Yarros, p. 394)

Andarna's delivery towards Violet is gentle and supportive, evoking maternal tones and reinforcing care as agency. Tairn and Andarna's responses demonstrate also traditional stereotype of emotional labour being divided between the genders as Tairn's response is reassuring but very on point as Andarna showed empathy towards Violet. Andarna's response mirrors softer and nurturing qualities but with protective air. This plays into Eckert and

McConnell-Ginet's (2013, p. 1-36) insights into women's roles as caregivers and emotional mediators.

By contrast, Tairn uses also deeply emotional language to affirm trust.

> [TAIRN] "*I will bet my life on you as I have from the first day*." (Yarros, p. 520)

This statement, while grand and protective, is also deeply vulnerable. Tairn presents his faith not as an order, but as a promise which presents a nurturing form of masculine agency that is not traditionally masculine and dominative.

Gendered assumptions play a part in the conversations.

> [SAPHIRA] *"I like him,"* said Saphira quietly.
> [ERAGON] *"Of course you do; everyone enjoys flattery."* (Paolini, p. 99)

This short exchange subtly reveals the gendered assumptions that still underline some of the rider-dragon dynamics. Eragon's remark of everyone enjoying flattery directed at Saphira, presumes that her interest is rooted in vanity or emotional indulgence. The gendered undertone is important as Saphira is coded as a female, and Eragon's comment reflects a stereotypical view that women value compliments. This aligns with Tannen's (1992, p. 128-129) observation that male speakers often misinterpret female-coded communication through a status-oriented lens. While Saphira expresses simple appreciation, Eragon filters it through a dismissive frame, subtly undermining her emotional agency.

Such small moments reflect how trust and agency are negotiated continually, not only in grand decisions but also in subtle language choices. While early character interactions often reflect stereotypical gender norms, these conventions are gradually complicated over the course of both novels. Saphira emerges as a strategic leader with an aggressive side while Tairn offers reassurance and gentle words that break traditional masculine ideology. As the narratives unfold, all characters shift from performing socially expected roles to enacting more nuanced identities that blend care with strength. This transformation reinforces the view of gender as performative and context driven. As relationships develop, trust is no longer granted based on status or species dominance but earned through vulnerability, honesty and shared experiences. The narrative movement toward mutual trust and distributed agency further supports the idea that gendered hierarchies, while present early on, are increasingly destabilised as the characters grow together. These examples reveal that agency is still gendered in some rooted beliefs but inherently tied to the power and role of the character.

5 Conclusions

This thesis has demonstrated that power, agency, trust, protectiveness, and vulnerability in rider-dragon relationships in *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing* are not fixed traits, but emerge through relational, gendered, and species-based negotiations over time. Drawing on feminist theory, theories of human-animal relations, and discourse analysis, it examined how dominance, care, vulnerability, trust, and agency are performed and co-constructed in dialogue between dragons and humans. Rather than presenting these dynamics as predetermined, the thesis traced how they evolve across each narrative, revealing alternative models of gendered power and non-human personhood. The analysis moved beyond static power structures to show how identity, care, and authority shift through narrative development and interpersonal interaction.

The theoretical lens of this thesis was essential to uncovering these patterns. The theory of gender performativity illuminated how gender is enacted through repeated behaviours rather than static traits. Theories of human-animal relations challenged the divide between animals and humans, and offered tools to treat dragons not as metaphorical beasts, but as beings capable of identity, intention, goals and participation. The feminist view helped frame vulnerability and care as not only feminine weaknesses. These perspectives collectively allowed this study to go beyond analysing character roles and instead focus on how those roles are actively both resisted and revised.

This thesis approached dragons as more than just fantasy animals. Drawing on human-animal theory, dragons were treated as beings with their own identity. Their personhood, while fictional, challenges traditional Western hierarchies that associate animals with instinct and humans with reason. In both novels, dragons express care, make moral decisions, and assert their independence, often resisting their riders' authority. This is notably important as dragons break away from the "animal" or the "pet" role and present themselves as fully developed social beings. In this way, *Eragon* and *Fourth Wing* engage with the idea that gender identity and personhood itself are not exclusive to humans.

In chapter 2, the analysis of dominance and submission revealed that while rider-dragon relationships often begin within hierarchical structures, these power relations are frequently challenged and reshaped over time. In both novels, battle situations present themselves as moments of teamwork, softening earlier patterns of control. Over the progression of the plot, Eragon and Saphira shift from a "command and obey" type of dynamic to one of mutual

respect, while Violet and Tairn's relationship moves from rigid authority to more flexible negotiation. This development supports the central argument that dominance is not rooted in gender but constructed through situational negotiation. Species, however, appeared as a strong factor for dominance.

Chapter 3 expanded that theme by exploring protectiveness and vulnerability. While these traits are traditionally coded as masculine and feminine respectively, both were expressed by male and female, human and dragon characters across the texts. Saphira shelters and lectures Eragon, embodying both maternal care and assertive authority. Violet expresses physical and emotional vulnerability while simultaneously protecting Andarna and confronting danger head-on. These dynamics deepen as the novels progress when protectiveness evolves into more mutual responsibility and vulnerability is not framed as weakness but as a condition for trust. This narrative trajectory reframes care as a shared act of strength, not a gendered imbalance.

In chapter 4, the focus turned to trust and agency, including how they are both gained and withheld. Early in both novels, dragons assert their dominance by withholding power or information. Riders, in turn, struggle for autonomy. But as the stories unfold, agency becomes co-constructed. Trust is no longer passive acceptance but is earned through mutual growth and tested through disagreement. Both Tairn and Violet, as well as Saphira and Eragon, begin to share decision-making and respect each other's capacities. By the end of each novel, both pairs function less as leader and follower and more as equals not depending on gender or species, and whose agency is relational, context-driven, and shaped by narrative development. Gendered norms remain present as an undertone, but they are softened and redefined through the emotional intimacy and evolvement of partnership.

The analysis demonstrated that neither novel presents a fixed system of gendered power. Instead, dragons and riders negotiate authority relationally, through dialogue, action and emotional connection. While masculine-coded traits like aggression and dominance do appear, they are not exclusively performed by male characters and on the other hand are feminine-coded traits like nurturance and empathy only confined to female-coded characters. Rather, these traits are distributed across species and character roles, often changing as the plot progresses. As such, equality in these novels is not based on sameness, but on a system that allows for difference in gender and species while still enabling mutual respect and cooperation.

In both novels, the rider-dragon relationships are presented as relatively equal. Not because the characters are the same, but because their differences are respected and balanced. Gender is not explicitly emphasised as a source of hierarchy and instead, power and influence are shared based on trust, capability, and emotional connection, rather than rigid gender roles. The conversational dynamics are shaped by mutual bickering, self-doubt, and most of all teamwork. However, both motherly and fatherly patterns emerge in how dragons and riders care for one another. In *Eragon*, Saphira displays a motherly and nurturing role toward Eragon, often portraying herself as more knowledgeable and experienced. While Eragon thinks himself as the leader, as he is also older, it remains unclear whether this is tied to age, or to gender or species hierarchy. Saphira's frequent use of caring nicknames for Eragon and her instructive behaviour suggest that her actions informed partly by traditional gender coding but also by her accumulated wisdom while in her egg, playing to the contemporary "wise dragon" idea.

In *Fourth Wing*, Tairn assumes a fatherly, commanding role over both Violet and the younger dragon Andarna. Tairn's language is commanding and authoritative, positioning himself as the knowledgeable protector, while Violet often struggles between asserting her independence and submitting to the dragon's authority. Violet's relationship with Andarna also mirrors a mother-daughter dynamic, in which Violet shows nurturing behaviour towards the younger dragon. However, despite the affection and cooperation, dragons in both novels withhold critical information from their riders, exercising agency by controlling the flow of knowledge.

It is important to remember that the conversations analysed are fictional, constructed by individual authors, and are not naturally occurring speech acts. Therefore, while applying discourse and conversation analysis, one must acknowledge that author's intent and narrative needs shape the dialogues, rather than spontaneous interaction as in naturally occurring speech. Limitations of this study include the reliance on fictional dialogue, given that traditional conversation analysis is typically applied to real-life language use. Additionally, the focus on only two novels limits the generalisability of the findings to broader patterns of communication in fantasy literature. Nevertheless, because this area remains underexplored, the analysis contributes to opening the field by revealing that communication in these texts is not inherently gendered but shaped more by species dynamics and character relationships.

Future research avenue could be expanding this study by comparing a wider variety of fantasy novels with dragons or similar type of companionships to see if similar gendered or species tied dynamics recur. Further work could also explore how conversations would differ if the conversation were happening between a dragon and a human who is not bonded with said dragon, and they do not share a common agenda.

In conclusion, this thesis shows that Eragon and Fourth Wing construct complex and relational models of conversation between dragons and riders. Power dynamics are fluid and negotiated through emotional connection, protective instincts, and strategic resistance, rather than simply replicating traditional gender and species hierarchies. The power in these relationships is tied to more species than gender, but at the same time it is dynamic, negotiated and shaped by mutual trust and evolving understanding. Dragons are not passive creatures or mere extensions of their riders. Instead, they are agents capable of speech, resistance, care, and negotiation. In granting dragons such narrative and conversational agency, the novels reject the pet and the master ideology and expand the category of the gendered subject. Dragons are not simply animals defined by biological sex, but narrative agents whose identities complicate conventional gender roles.

Importantly, equality in these relationships does not emerge from sameness, but from a mutual capacity to accommodate difference[2]. The novels present a model of partnership in which emotional intelligence and interdependence replace fixed hierarchies. This challenges both patriarchal and human-centric notions of dominance and offers alternative viewpoints of power, care, and most importantly, personhood. These findings demonstrate that fantasy literature has the potential to rethink not just gender roles, but who or what can be considered a gendered subject. Even in worlds shaped by magic and mythical animals, these findings contribute to understanding how literature can challenge or reframe societal expectations around gender, species and communication.

[2] This thesis is dedicated to my beloved dog, Woolly Bohemia's Savage Starlight. May you rest in peace.

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