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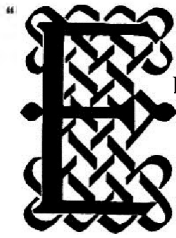
"Enough about Whores": Sexual Characterization in A Song of Ice and Fire

Abstract

George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire series is replete with characters who engage in sexual misconduct and violence. Yet there are subtleties in the intents and effects of their conduct that grant us, as readers, more than mere titillation: increased insight into his characters and themes. Young considers the characteristics of viewpoint characters in Gothic literature and how they engage the sympathies of the reader.

Additional Keywords

Gothic literature; Martin, George R.R. A Song of Fire and Ice; Sexual mores



“ENOUGH ABOUT WHORES”:
SEXUAL CHARACTERIZATION IN
A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

Joseph Young

UPON ARRIVING IN KING'S LANDING in George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*, Eddard Stark faces an immediate headache. He must organize the Tournament of the Hand, an extravagance that strains the finances of the realm and the civil order of the capital. But, notes Petyr Baelish,

“Every inn in the city is full, and the whores are walking bow-legged and jingling with every step.”

Lord Renly laughed. “We’re fortunate my brother Stannis is not with us. Remember the time he proposed to outlaw brothels? The king asked him if perhaps he’d like to outlaw eating, shitting and breathing while he was at it. If truth be told, I oftentimes wonder how Stannis got that ugly daughter of his. He goes to his marriage bed like a man marching to a battlefield, with a grim look in his eyes and a determination to do his duty.” (*A Game of Thrones* [Game] 265)

The council laughs, except Stark, who concludes the meeting by wearily noting “I have heard quite enough about whores for one day” (266). Even at this early stage of Martin’s story, readers could be forgiven for agreeing with him. References to sex, commercialised and otherwise, are an incessant feature of the text. Stannis in fact gets off rather lightly in terms of discussion of his sex life. Renly’s is the basis of an entire subplot and almost everybody else has their sexual mores bared, at least briefly, for the reader’s consideration. Even seven-year-old Bran Stark’s innocence is signalled by his confused observation of Queen Cersei’s infidelity (80). Other children are more precocious, something Cersei refuses to grasp:

“My son is too young to care about such things.”

“You think so?” asked Tyrion. “He’s thirteen, Cersei. The same age at which I married.”

“You shamed us all with that sorry episode. Joffrey is made of finer stuff.”

“So fine he had Ser Boros rip off Sansa’s gown.”

“He was angry with the girl.”

“He was angry with the cook’s boy who spilled the soup last night as well, but he didn’t strip him naked.”

“This was not a matter of some spilled soup—”

No, it was a matter of some pretty teats. (A Clash of Kings [Clash] 480)

Tyrion Lannister keeps the observation to himself, but he is only a focalizer for Martin’s heterodiegetic narrative voice (Napolitano 36). This allows Martin to show him appreciating that his thirteen-year-old nephew is abusing his authority to satisfy his emerging curiosity about the female form—and also to remind readers that such insight stems partly from the Imp’s own partiality to ‘pretty teats.’ The fact that Martin’s subcreation includes an accepted slang term for the objectified female breast demonstrates that this focus on sex is entirely deliberate.

Such discourse has naturally attracted attention, particularly as it has found its way into the television adaptation. Shortly after the premiere of *Game of Thrones*, reviewer Myles McNutt coined the term *sexposition* to describe the supposed practice of the show’s writers sweetening the pill of expository dialogue by pairing it with sexual imagery. Indeed the idea that this discourse is a marketing exercise, a gratuitous sop to unsophisticated audiences, is very much part of the reception of the series (Frankel 7-8). *Entertainment Weekly* has quoted Maisie Williams, who plays Arya Stark, joking that the show’s opening music should be embellished with a lyrical refrain: “Death and boobies, death and boobies, death and boobies.” As the show’s success has invigorated interest in Martin’s books, his sexual discourse has become a focus of scholarly attention as well. Commenting on the prevalence of rape, incest, and martial abuse in this tale, Rosenberg has observed that Westerosi sex serves as a sort of moral litmus test—“it’s sexual misconduct that signifies monstrosity” (17).

The purpose of this article is to use literary theory to demonstrate the extent and purpose of the theme Rosenberg identifies. The first theory employed is Frye’s theory of modes, which demonstrates Martin to be an accomplished employer of ironic narrative. He presents his contrived medieval world in a concertedly negative light, inserting frequent, emphatic references to brutal violence and ubiquitous dirt, much of the latter derived from human bodies. Such intrusions on the self-bestowed dignity of his aristocratic characters remind readers that these grand folk are as human as the peasantry they presume to rule. A character’s sexual imagination often serves to demonstrate the strength, or weakness, of their grounds for such presumption. At this point Iser’s phenomenological model of reading becomes relevant. Although Martin’s sexual discourse is frequently graphic, it often functions most effectively by leaving something to the imagination. Some of Martin’s most vivid characters owe their impact to the hints about their overall personality raised by

descriptions of their sexual behaviour. As readers ponder such ambiguities they are—per Iser—drawn into Martin's creative process. He directs such engagement, furthermore, in a manner that parallels the authorial strategies of the classic Gothic novelists. Concerned, like Martin, with the perceived barbarities of history, Gothic authors typically illustrate their point by contriving situations in which those barbarities are visited on characters who display discernibly modern manners and attitudes, and can thus appreciate the nature of what they are suffering. Martin uses sexual behaviour to set some of his characters up in similar positions, highlighting the crimes of others. Put simply, he uses sex as a way of encouraging readers to consider the way his characters interact with his world.

That world is not a pleasant one. One of the most striking features of Martin's subcreation is its unsanitariness; he seldom misses an opportunity to work some reference to odor, ordure, or squalor into his tale. Cersei Lannister smells "sour wine, bread baking, rotting fish and nightsoil, smoke and sweat and horse piss" (*A Dance with Dragons* [*Dance*] 991) at the beginning of her walk of contrition; by the end she has trodden in urine, been splattered with blood, rotten vegetables, and the effluvia of decomposing cats, and mobbed by pigs, "hags with goiters as big as their heads," and "a man whose cheeks and brow were covered with open sores that wept grey pus" (994-999). Quentyn Martell travels on a ship redolent of "piss and rotting meat and nightsoil [...] corpse-flesh and weeping sores and wounds gone bad" (95). Ser Davos Seaworth visits Sisteron, "a vile town, a sty, small and mean and rank with the odours of pig shit and rotting fish" (143). At times this filth becomes relevant to the plot, as when Daenerys Targarean's liberation of Meereen is stalled by the pale mare, a hellish illness which leaves sufferers "shitting out their lives in stinking streams of brown and red" (554). Note how this dirt is predominantly the result of human activity, or human bodies. Martin shows considerable ingenuity in contriving excuses to have his characters vomit (*Game* 160; *A Storm of Swords* [*Storm*] 2.402; *A Feast for Crows* [*Feast*] 267-268), urinate (*Game* 656-657; *Clash* 377; *Feast* 742), defecate (*Clash* 717; *Storm* 2.208; *Feast* 209-210), lactate (*Clash* 171; *Storm* 2.69; *Feast* 593), menstruate (*Clash* 685; *Storm* 2.278; *Dance* 1,094), lubricate (*Game* 103; *Storm* 1.358; *Feast* 548), ejaculate (*Game* 476; *Clash* 411; *Storm* 1.169), and suppurate (*Clash* 846; *Storm* 1.58; *Dance* 870). The Westerosi not only inhabit a grubby world, they are culpable in making it so.

Such discourse might be attributed to realism. Helen Young cites Martin as a promulgator of "gritty fantasy," whose work constitutes an indictment of earlier medievalist fantasists for their "unrealistic worlds and inauthentic invocations of history" (63). Martin's world may be realistic, but all this filth serves a purpose beyond authenticity. His dirt is carefully deployed to undermine such medieval institutions as aristocracy, chivalry, and monarchy. It

sets up Frye's ironic mode, a narrative perspective from which readers look "down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (Frye 34), about which they are better informed than the characters. Martin's characters typically seek to set about exploits—war, courtly love, statecraft—of concern to the heroes of high mimesis. Martin persistently spoils these efforts by inserting "dispassionate construction[s] [...] born from the low mimetic" (40-41) to reveal that such notions are poorly-grounded, often dangerous pretensions. When, for example, Khal Drogo dismisses a minor injury as "only a new scar to boast of to my son" (*Game* 647), his stoic warrior machismo writes a check his auto-immune system cannot cash; the wound festers and reduces him to a flyblown wreck who will not be telling his son anything (679). The image of Daenerys Stormborn, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Shackles and Mother of Dragons, staggering through the steppe splattered with vomit, menses and diarrhea (*Dance* 1,092-1,094) serves a similar purpose. This grand figure, keen to continue her crusade and seemingly just as keen to give herself airs for it, is a mere person, exactly the same species as Irri, Ygritte, or Shae. Martin's world may or may not be a realistic reconstruction of a medieval civilization, but it is certainly a trenchant interrogation of the pretensions of medieval or medievalist aristocracy, forcing the reader to reassess any romantic notions they might have about such people.¹

Martin's world is also one of "chaotic cruelty" (Napolitano 52). Having used dirt to explode the notion that the various aristocracies of his world are any sort of breed apart, Martin then has them presumptuously dole out shocking forms of corporal and capital punishment. The Wise Masters of Yunkai stone runaway slaves (*Dance* 728-729). Dothraki horselords maim those they view as impudent (*Game* 224) and are famously ingenious in circumventing the sanctuary of Vaes Dothrak (482-483). The lords of Westeros have miscreants flogged (*Storm* 1.56), burned (*Dance* 946-952), and disembowelled (143). King Joffrey facetiously offers a notionally seditious singer the privilege of choosing between losing his fingers or his tongue (*Game* 721). Such unselfconscious violence extends Martin's ironic critique of medieval aristocracy by demonstrating the flimsiness of their claims of inborn moral authority. The chivalric class, who supposedly canalize martial prowess to moral ends, come off no better. When Ser Vardis Egan is tasked with facing Tyrion Lannister in trial by combat he objects not because such duels are juristically nonsensical but because killing the physically incapable Lannister would bring him no honor (*Game* 408). Attempting to demonstrate morality, Egan does the precise opposite with a modally ironic indication that he values an abstract nicety ahead of

¹ This matter is discussed in greater detail in my article "The American Pratchett? Muck and Modality in *A Song of Ice and Fire*."

human wellbeing. The same could be said of Randyll Tarly ordering a prostitute’s genitalia washed out with lye (*Feast* 233). Although careful not to dismiss chivalry out of hand (Hackney 135), Martin emphasises that the moral authority of his invented aristocracy is as suspect as their sanitation.

As Rosenberg asserts, sexual misconduct is a major component of this “indictment of corruption and inhumanity” (27). Joffrey’s order to have Ser Boros strip and thrash Sansa Stark makes discomfoting sense when it is recalled that Joffrey has “always liked” Sansa in the dress, which is “tight across the chest” (*Clash* 440). That is an extremely tart example, though not the only instance of a character’s sexuality being deployed among the low-mimetic intrusions on their high-mimetic claims of moral authority. Tywin Lannister, for example, receives a sustained dressing-down throughout the story. He is the head of one of Westeros’s great houses, proverbially wealthy, a gifted politician famed for restoring his family to greatness after his father let their reputation falter (*Storm* 2.332). Yet a dramatic attempt to assert that status fails for an embarrassing reason:

He rode his warhorse down the length of the hall and dismounted before the Iron Throne. Sansa had never seen such armour; all burnished red steel, inlaid with golden scrollwork and ornamentation. [...]

The Lord of Casterley Rock made such an impressive figure that it was a shock when his destrier dropped a load of dung right at the base of the throne. (*Clash* 817-818)

Acknowledging this would undermine Tywin’s dramatic gesture of high-mimetic self-assertion. So he pretends not to notice it, and his grandson, awash in samite and rubies, tries to do the same. Lannister propaganda thus collapses. Sansa observes not a king bestowing an honor on a hero, but a pair of overdressed snobs pretentiously ignoring the fact that their obviously premeditated stunt has gone pungently awry. Tywin and Joffrey are what Frye calls *alazons*, imposters, victims of the ironic mode, characters whose creator has arranged their story so that the flaws in their inflated self-image are more apparent to their observers than themselves. Martin continues to mercilessly undermine Lannister’s dignity. His death on the lavatory is “not the way a lion dies” (*Feast* 53). His extended lying-in-state spoils the very grandness it was meant to celebrate as his contracting skin robs him of his gravitas (*Feast* 114). Margery Tyrell lays flowers at his bier but keeps one to shield her nose (142) and his grandson—the king—bursts into tears and retches (143). His mourners, gushing about what an “*extraordinary* man” (119) he was, look almost as silly as he does. Lannister’s career demonstrates what happens when straight-faced, high-mimetic pretensions collide with Martin’s black-humoured, bathetic irony.

The presence of Shae in Lannister's bed on the last night of his life contributes significantly to this picture. It dispels much of the mystique he wove around himself; this grim-faced, stoic martinet, who never remarried after the death of his wife, can apparently be swayed by the same pretty face as the son whose libertinism he judged so sternly. Are we really then to believe Shae was the first? And did she come to him willingly? She may have done, but Lannister has a history of abusing his aristocratic authority in sexual contexts, arranging and supervising the gang-rape of an unwelcome daughter-in-law (*Game* 443). Tyrion's explanation of this incident is in fact one of the first sustained discussions of Tywin, serving as a pointed corroboration of Eddard Stark's reservations about him (41-42). By the time Tywin actually appears, 150 pages after Tyrion tells this story, he is therefore already cemented in the reader's mind as a villain. His subsequent follies—refusing to admit that bringing a horse indoors might be unhygienic—demonstrate the brittleness of the persona he hides behind. His tryst with Shae settles the issue. Lannister's sexual imagination moves Martin's critique of the man up a gear, depicting him not merely as a pretentious fool like Khal Drogo but as an actively hypocritical villain, an *alazon* of a particularly despicable type, devoid of the moral authority he pretends to. Sex, indeed, sells, and Martin has used it to sell his readers someone they love to hate.

Though this example obviously vindicates Rosenberg, it is important to observe that sexual discourse can be used to reinforce a positive image of a character. The introduction of House Stark is a good example. Early depictions of the family include several images—squabbles between sisters (*Game* 65-66), teenagers conspiring to feed their elders white lies (91), siblings slipping each other contraband (93), an imaginative lad off in a world of his own (74-76)—that would be apropos in a text such as *The Cosby Show* or *The Simpsons*. The Starks are not just a power bloc but a family, parents raising children, characters designed to provoke knowing smiles from readers who enjoyed such upbringings themselves. Only Catelyn's sharp-tongued antipathy for Eddard's bastard Jon Snow² mars this. Catelyn also, however, provides information that helps solidify her family's wholesome image:

Her loins still ached from the urgency of his lovemaking. It was a good ache. She could feel his seed within her. She prayed that it might quicken there. It had been three years since Rickon. She was not too old. She could give him another son. (55-56)

² The screen adaptation, outpacing its source material, has revealed that Jon is in fact Eddard's nephew. At this writing, it remains to be seen if Martin himself will do the same in prose. Either way, Catelyn lived and—initially—died regarding Jon as an unwelcome half-brother to her children.

These are not the thoughts of an alienated woman coldly performing an aristocratic duty. For all that Catelyn resents Jon, she clearly still desires Eddard. Though this unflinching depiction of the physical realities of sex might seem to contradict the wholesome image of the Starks, it actually furthers that picture. In strict low-mimetic terms, a family is a result of two people making themselves emotionally and physically vulnerable to each other. Depictions of fictional parents doing so with consideration for each other thus connote the integrity of the families they lead by putting to rest any potentially disquieting questions about the origins of those domestic units. The "active, even playful" sex life of Marge and Homer Simpson (in the episode "Whacking Day", for example, they banter discreetly over their preferred tempo of coitus) has been cited as evidence that *The Simpsons* valorises conventional domesticity (Neuhaus 775n2). Such valorisation raises its own questions, but it shows that for all their bickering, the family owes its existence to a relationship of love and respect. The healthy married sex life of the Starks—all but unique in Westeros—does the same for them. As in Springfield, this raises questions about domestic hegemonies. But in a world where the game of thrones frequently overwhelms the supposedly lofty principles of Westerosi aristocracy, this unambiguous ability to uphold some rather more familiar standards of behaviour goes a long way to explaining their resilient stock of reader sympathy. One suspects that, given the choice, Catelyn would have preferred that this matter not be illustrated quite so graphically; Marge Simpson has never had to deal with post-coital leakage. But this low-mimetic intrusion on her dignity provides physical evidence for a crucial aspect of the characterization of her family.

This use of sexual discourse is part of a broader theme in Martin's work. His aforementioned use of violence adroitly demonstrates the moral deficits of Westerosi society, but it cannot simultaneously be used to indicate moral virtue. Such indications are vital to building and prompting emotional engagement in a story, which cannot merely document conflicting agendas; antagonists must be variegated, however subtly, on some sort of moral spectrum (Hogan 93-94). To do this by having a faction of morally assured heroes oppose one of murderous villains would be far too obvious, capping reader involvement rather than encouraging it (Iser 283). Martin is careful to avoid this. Note how even Sansa Stark, criticised both within the text (*Clash* 739) and without (Johnston 139) for her romantic naiveté, animatedly debates how best to display severed heads (*Game* 458). Such discussion, coming from a twelve-year old child, shows Martin's concern for demonstrating the ubiquity of Westeros's culture of violence. As Iser argues, however, narratives with such concerns cannot end with "the penetration of those false appearances that mask all social vices," which would leave the reader with the "possibility that our superiority is also based upon a misunderstanding" (35). Rather they must

prompt the reader to consider and construct models of virtuous behaviour. Such prompting cannot, says Iser, come from the putative subject of the narrative—in Martin’s case, the game of thrones—since that discourse is fully formulated by the author (36). Rather the narrative must “shade off” (31) into areas of implied content with which authors can “gently guide” (37) readers towards conclusions the author wishes them to reach. Catelyn Stark’s post-coital contentment does this. Her docility in her arranged marriage may detract from her feminist credentials, but her sex life solidifies an image of moral authority with which Martin can discreetly keep his readers orientated in his depiction of bloodthirsty aristocratic presumption. This is not an isolated example. Fitting naturally into Martin’s established pattern of low-mimetic constructions, sexual discourse runs parallel to the game of thrones, creating questions that the reader must ponder. Violence makes the Westerosi inhuman; sex encourages and guides speculation as to which of them might be salvageable. It contributes to the resonance of the tale because it prompts genuine, ongoing engagement in what might otherwise be a 4,500-page (and counting) prose pantomime about smelly, vainglorious idiots lopping each other’s appendages off.

Cersei Lannister is an excellent example. Her focalizing contributions to *A Feast for Crows*, ceaselessly laboring the chasm between her self-image as a Machiavellian strongwoman and her mismanagement of the kingdom, await future classroom use as textbook examples of Frye’s ironic mode. Her perceptions of sex play a major part in Martin’s evocation of her folly. Her proto-feminist grievances against Westerosi patriarchy (*Clash* 291, 702) are deflated by striking objectifications of other women. She dismisses wartime rapes, speculating that the victims “are probably praying for a good raping” (*Feast* 474), theorises that lowborn women “bled like pigs” on their wedding nights (462), and gracelessly compares Septa Moelle’s hymen to leather armour (728). In light of such perceptions, her subsequent reflection that “women were always the cruelest where other women were concerned” (*Dance* 994) sharply underlines her lack of self-awareness, intimating the lack of method in her madness. Her relationship with Jaime has an effect precisely opposite to Catelyn Stark’s marital contentment, demonstrating the unwholesome origins of her family, though that in itself appears to be the mere tip of a sinister iceberg. She claims a seemingly mystical connection to Jaime, describing him as a part of her own identity (*Game* 468), yet when he is captured she turns very quickly to her biddable cousin Lancel for sex (*Clash* 405-407). This implies that her relationship with her brother had less to do with specific affection for Jaime than a preoccupation with things that look like her (family resemblances in Westeros being often uncanny). Indeed Martin, by providing glimpses of Cersei torturing the infant Tyrion to assuage her fury at being warned of the potential negative consequences of pulchritude (*Feast* 472), seems to be discreetly encouraging an

impression that her obsession with her appearance is genuinely unhealthy. This has some unsettling consequences for her children. Joffrey, she recalls, had "such lovely lips" (*Dance* 998)—conspicuous given how few other people she is prepared to see as beautiful—and "[n]o man had ever made her feel as good as she had felt when he took her nipple in his mouth to nurse" (*Feast* 206)—an odd comparison. All this is surely guiding the reader towards a worrisome possibility; had he not died, might Joffrey have become another target of his mother's libido? Might this fate still await her other children? By raising such questions without answering them Martin is able to prompt the reader to start wondering exactly where the toxic follies of this self-involved fool might end, and indeed where they might have begun. Cersei becomes a resonant villain because Martin has used her sexual imagination to delegate aspects of her characterization as such to the reader—exactly as Iser argues authors must do (51).

By comparison Jaime comes out fairly well. He drops Cersei more because of the revelation of her infidelity than the incestuousness of the relationship, but drop her he does, in the process switching his energy from insulting Brienne of Tarth's appearance (*Storm* 1.19) to lecturing Peck on treating Pia respectfully (*Feast* 506). This culminates in him considering Cersei's hysterical plea for rescue from her comeuppance long enough for a snowflake to melt on the parchment (761) before rejecting the request. His feelings for Cersei linger, but are not strong enough to sting him into the murderous action he once espoused so casually. Where Jaimie's sexual imagination solidifies an impression of a man pushing himself to act on his reconnection with moral standards, however, Cersei's drops troubling hints of chronic intellectual, moral and indeed psychological deficits.

Sandor Clegane's sexual imagination also shades off in an intriguing way. The Hound's chief purpose in Martin's first volume and a half is to harangue Sansa Stark about the iniquity of the world she lives in:

"There are no true knights, no more than there are gods. If you can't protect yourself, die and get out of the way of those who can. Sharp steel and strong arms rule this world, don't ever believe any different."

She backed away from him. "You're awful."

"I'm honest. It's the world that's awful." (*Clash* 684)

Such pronouncements could serve as cinematic title cards signalling Martin's sceptical medievalism—exactly the sort of didacticism that Iser decries as offering the reader no involvement in the creative process. The cause of Clegane's spite—his grudge against his hypocritical brother—is made clear fairly early in the story (*Game* 293-294). As order falters during the Battle of Blackwater, however, Clegane's character suddenly becomes more complex:

He yanked her closer, and for a moment she thought he meant to kiss her. He was too strong to fight. She closed her eyes, wanting it to be over, but nothing happened. "Still can't bear to look, can you?" she heard him say. He gave her arm a hard wrench, pulling her around and shoving her down on the bed. "I'll have that song. Florian and Jonquil, you said." His dagger was out, poised at her throat. "Sing, little bird. Sing for your little life." (*Clash* 783)

Clegane's intent here is obvious. Yet when Sansa sings a hymn to mercy, he bursts into tears and melts away. Discomforting as it is to consider the effect of an attempted rape on the perpetrator rather than the victim, this is a fascinating nuance to Clegane's characterization. In Westeros, where wartime rape is accepted either casually (*Clash* 27, 801) or fatalistically (739), his instinct to commit such an act is predicable. His inability to go through with it, however, sharply differentiates this self-described butcher in Martin's medievalist abattoir (683) from the army straining at the gates a mile away. The attack is as modally ironic as Tywin Lannister's tryst with Shae, critically undermining Clegane's self-mythology. It calls into question his claims about the awfulness of the world. Are they the exaltations of a pantomime cynic or the complaints of a scared, scarred, confused little boy coping with a profound sense of injustice, a frustrated idealist who once believed in chivalry strongly enough to play with toy knights just as Sansa sang of them? Is this similarity, perhaps, what bought this pyrophobe to her bedroom as wildfire rages over the Blackwater? Did the Hound in fact want a *friend*? Martin is careful not to make this obvious by having him embark on any broader moral awakening—later, in distress, Clegane wishes he had gone through with the attack (*Storm* 2.464)—but he does force the reader to reconsider his statements and motivations in light of a startling qualification on his oft-stated willingness to be part of a problem. Clegane calls himself a dog (2.88), but dogs are, as Varymyr Sixskins observes, "almost human" (*Dance* 9). The scene in Sansa's bedroom creates the "almost" that readers must conjure with, turning Sandor Clegane from a clown in a medievalist pantomime to the sort of hint at virtue that Iser holds is necessary to make such narratives genuinely effective moral indictments.

The sexual discourse of Martin's song therefore promulgates the sort of engagement required by Iser's phenomenological model of reading. Martin's primary subject matter, the game of thrones, is an indictment of a violent, unjust social order. Such an indictment can only fully function in the presence of competing implications of virtue, but making certain characters blameless in that regime would be exactly the sort of stifling compositional over-determination Iser cautions against. Martin therefore provides sexual morality as an alternative spectrum on which to variegate his characters. Such discussion thus becomes a secondary narrative running parallel to the game of thrones,

allowing readers to conjure with characters who might otherwise flatten out into a crowd of tragicomic buffoons and pantomime villains. This grants the readers a creative stake in the characters and therefore deepens their emotional connection to the story. Critics and readers looking for public bases on which to judge these characters would be better-advised to observe what goes on behind closed doors—or rather, the doors Martin carefully leaves ajar.

The cases examined above also reveal an interesting theme. The sexual mores of Martin's characters provide indications of their respective ability to transcend their brutal regime. Tywin Lannister's premeditation of the gang-rape of Tysha demonstrates an apathy for the lowborn; he barely sees his daughter-in-law as having an individual identity (*Storm* 2.498). He is very much a creature of the milieu he inhabits, an agent of the violent, presumptuous culture Martin indicts. So too is Cersei. Her comments about other women demonstrate her inability to connect her own proto-feminist frustrations to any broader pattern, and her solutions to problems—casually threatening to have Margery Tyrell's tongue removed (*Feast* 607) and vowing to "pile dead dwarfs ten feet high" (268) in pursuit of Tyrion—are classic examples of medievalist violence. Cersei feels the pain of medieval injustice, but her seemingly disordered mind responds simply by perpetuating it, even in her home life where (uniquely among Westerosi parents) she employs a whipping boy (386). By comparison Catelyn Stark appears to have transcended the medieval world. Her apparent contentment with an arranged marriage complicates any attempt to frame her as a feminist heroine. Yet that contentment contrasts with the responses of Cersei, or her own sister Lyssa, to similar situations. Both those women, cheated of the men they romantically daydreamed about (*Storm* 2.540; *Feast* 405-406) had their husbands killed, perpetuating traditions of medievalist brutality. Neither prospers as a result. Catelyn has eschewed such violence to cultivate a healthy, happy family. She has been wronged by Westerosi patriarchy, but the best revenge, as they say, is living well. Sandor Clegane's sexual imagination also sets him apart from the violent world he inhabits. Sansa has been warned, all too credibly, to expect no mercy from Stannis's army (*Clash* 739); she receives it from a man who has just spent the last book and a half gloating about how he has none. It would be wrong to praise Sandor for not committing rape; he owes Sansa a profound apology. Yet that apology, were it to eventuate, would have some credibility; the episode highlights both the problem Martin writes about and a thought-provoking qualification on the Hound's willingness to contribute to it. In Martin's song, a character's sexual imagination signals their relationship—instigator, perpetrator, circumventor, malcontent—to his discomfiting milieu.

The marriage of Khal Drogo and Daenerys Targarean is another example of this. By rights Drogo should be a monster. He is a fictionalization of Attila the Hun, his untrimmed hair testifying to a storied career pillaging and raping in accordance with pejorative depictions of steppe cultures (Larrington 192). On his wedding night, however, he makes a patient, careful, notably successful attempt to judge the desires of his terrified teenage bride through a language barrier (*Game* 102-103). Daenerys's evolving ability "to find pleasure even in her nights" (222), and to take charge in finding it (229), are key indicators of her receding culture shock. When she objects to Dothraki rape culture, Drogo applauds her assertiveness rather than defending the gratification of his warriors (646). Drogo's sexual mores are, in fact, the precise reverse of the medievalist brutality of his culture. Widowed at fifteen, Daenerys pursues an active, self-possessed sex life. She experiments with bisexuality (*Storm* 2.418-419), rejects the advances of an unattractive man (2.14), and, confronted with a likelier lad, scarcely lies back and thinks of Westeros (*Dance* 668). Her conquest of Slaver's Bay is begun out of pity for the Unsullied, whose indoctrination begins with the sexual violation of castration (*Storm* 1.326). Daenerys is hardly innocent of medieval violence. But her sexual imagination brings to mind that of an idealistic teenage girl, open-minded, indignant at injustice, unimpressed by presumptions on her affections but open to temptation by a little of what she fancies. Like that of Catelyn Stark, the sexual conduct of Daenerys and Drogo marks them as curiously out of their time.

Precedent for such anachronism can be found in the Gothic tradition. Gothic literature emerged out of a perception of a fundamental break between the Middle Ages and the post-medieval world, and a desire to examine the effect that the perceived iniquities of medieval civilization had on those subjected to them (Byron and Punter 8). It is through that examination that the scheming baron, the depersonalized torturer, and the raven-haunted tower became tropes of medievalism. Between the treacherous Roose Bolton, the mononymous Qyburn and the maester's use of ravens in place of carrier pigeons, Martin perpetuates all of these. He also employs a common Gothic means of emphasizing the effect of these dark images. The typical Gothic fantasy depicts protagonists who are exemplars of well-intentioned, sensible modern mores, then uses plot contrivances to subject these folk to the vicissitudes of the medievalist world. Mighall describes the genre as staging

a confrontation between the heroine of Richardson and a villain taken from the Jacobean stage, who embodies the past and all its terrors. The modern heroine or hero (the reader's counterpart who is equipped with an appropriate sensibility and liberal principles) is located in the Gothic past, forced to contend with the supposed delusions and iniquities of its

political and religious regime. It is the conflict between the civilized and the barbaric, the modern and the archaic, the progressive and reactionary which provide the terrifying pleasures of these texts. (9)

The perceived abuses of the past make their greatest impact, says Mighall, when visited upon those who do not wholly belong to the delusional, iniquitous regime from which they spring. Such characters are not only easier to relate to, their sensibilities highlight the follies and cruelties they encounter. Though hardly a conventionally Gothic author, Martin can be observed using this device; what Rosenberg describes as "monstrosity" (19) might well be reconsidered as medievalism. Spector observes that the sexual violence of Westeros is invariably "uncomfortable rather than titillating" (185), underscoring a medievalist vision that owes more than Martin may consciously appreciate to the Gothic tradition.

Tywin Lannister's aforementioned abuse of Tysha has already been mentioned in this regard, though there are numerous other examples. Hackney (133) identifies Ser Gregor Clegane, with some qualifications, as one of Martin's more historically plausible medievalist grotesques. His crimes—taking advantage of a joust to commit murder (*Game* 286), employing a torturer (*Clash* 376), compelling Vargo Hoat to eat his own extremities (*Feast* 453)—constitute a sort of mordant burlesque of Westeros's culture of violence. He responds to a request ("him being an anointed knight and all") that he intervene in the sexual harassment of a teenage girl by escalating the situation to a pack-rape which he then trivializes with a horrendous joke (*Clash* 423-424). His confession to the rape of Elia Martell (*Storm* 2.401) is identified by Rosenberg as a "triumphant reaffirmation" (23), devoid of contrition. Where the Hound's sex life reveals him as almost human, therefore, the Mountain's turns him into—pun intended—part of Westeros's harsh, immoral landscape. Other characters follow this pattern. Varamyr Sixskins, devolving into the anthropophagous big bad wolf of the Haunted Forest, fondly recalls stalking women in beast form until they take the hint—"Some came weeping, aye, but still they came" (*Dance* 8). Viserys Targarean, the most unhinged of Martin's medievalist *alazons*, seeks to copulate with Daenerys before her wedding to preserve the Targarean tradition of dynastic incest (83). Daenerys's wishes in this regard are unformulated, but Viserys would hardly have respected any veto she might have issued. Then there are the Boltons, a family whose viciousness is the subject of chilling rumour even within Westeros (*Game* 556). Lord Roose practices the medievalist canard of *jus primae noctis* (*Dance* 499-500). Ramsay ensures that the ghoulish tales about his family are well-founded, a pursuit that extends to his marriage to Jeyne Poole:

A tear ran down her cheek. "Tell him, you tell him. I'll do what he wants, whatever he wants . . . with him or . . . or *with the dog* or . . . please . . . he doesn't need to cut my feet off, I won't try to run away, not ever, I'll give him sons, I swear it, I swear it. . ." (794; emphasis added)

Rather than simply demonstrating Ramsay's dehumanizing savagery in the elaborate game of thrones, Martin shades it off into the parallel game of beds, in which readers are impressionistically guided to decide for themselves that Ramsay truly is a creature of Westeros's dark age, a monster on the order of Walpole's Manfred or Hugo's Frollo. Not all characters categorised in this way are male. Cersei recalls her sexual elusions of King Robert thusly:

Ten thousand of your children perished in my palm, Your Grace. [...] Whilst you snored, I would lick your sons off my face and fingers one by one, all those pale sticky princes. You claimed your rights, my lord, but in the darkness I would eat your heirs. (Feast 549)

This may be the most ironic act in the series to date. Robert is a bad husband on various counts, but if Cersei was that unwilling to bear his children, she might have called upon Maester Pycelle (in her family's pocket [*Clash* 372]) to covertly brew her contraceptive moon tea. The reader has already seen Asha Greyjoy take control of her fertility in this way (*Feast* 191). Cersei imagines that her particular method of contraception grants her special dignity and power in a patriarchal system. In fact, compared to Greyjoy's pharmaceutical *nous*, this gloating confines the Queen to a very particular and ironically self-anointed role in Martin's tale—as a nocturnal, child-eating ogress, a medievalist grotesque, as much a monster from Old Nan's stories as Drogon or Varamyr. In this graphic, attention-grabbing way, Cersei betrays herself as part of the problem.

As Mighall observes, that problem achieves full effect when visited on characters of a discernibly modern stripe. Such characters provide the suggestions of virtue necessary for full phenomenological engagement with indictments of faulty mores (Iser 35-36). The unmaking of Robb Stark demonstrates this. Much of his story is dedicated to revealing the truth of Jaime Lannister's observation (*Clash* 720) that, once low-mimetic intrusions are admitted, high-mimetic values serve only to create contradictions. The intrusion that ruins Robb's career is his adolescent sex drive; just as horses defecate, sixteen-year-olds have urges, which may well boil over if a pretty (*Storm* 1.190; 1.194; 1.284; *Feast* 749) friend offers solace at a stressful time. His resulting alternatives—break a marriage contract or consign Jeyne Westerling to ignominious devaluation in a patriarchal sexual economy—are both abstract impositions of Westeros's invidious social order. The militarism of that order

gives Walder Frey intuitive recourse to violent revenge for the Young Wolf's perceived insult. Jeyne, who temporarily eludes commodification by marrying Robb, nevertheless also endures the results of an inhumane medievalist mindset. She suffers not just widowhood but an atrocious breach of trust, doped with contraceptives by a mercenary mother negotiating a more lucrative betrothal (*Feast* 749-750). Note furthermore how little these two care for their medievalist identities. Jeyne rejects her royal title (*Storm* 1.282) while Robb banishes Grey Wind, his dynastic totem, to the kennels because the wolf unnerves her (1.197). One suspects that, like the Gothic heroines Mighall refers to, they would have been far happier among their readers, who would not punish them for being what those readers have been given every encouragement to see them as—a couple of kids doing what comes naturally at a stressful time. It is indicative of Martin's writing that he uses sex to sell this bitter conflict between relatable human characters and an invidious, impersonal regime from the imagined past.

A comprehensive survey of this theme is beyond the scope of a single article. Theon Greyjoy's impulsive objectification of women (*Clash* 152-155; 658; 663; 731-732), Olenna Tyrell's unpretentious perseverance with an oafish husband who was "not unskilled in the bedchamber" (*Storm* 1.84), Tyrion Lannister's evidently genuine affection for Shae (*Clash* 123; 412; 703), and Myranda Royce's flippancy about the death of her husband during intercourse (*Feast* 701-702) all warrant pages of discussion. So too do the screen adaptation's extrapolations on the theme, such as Missendei's insinuation ("My master Kraznyz would sometimes make us play games—only the girls") that she has been a victim of paedophilia. The general point has been made, however; the sex in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is neither a prurient marketing exercise nor a mere indication of how ghastly Westeros is. Martin has employed it skilfully to deepen his critique of that ghastliness. He voices his criticisms via Frye's ironic mode, using low mimetic intrusions to interrogate high mimetic conceits. Those intrusions include explorations of the character's sex lives that variously build up or tear down the given subject's stock of reader sympathy. Frank as that discourse is, it is often staged in a way that begs questions, inviting the reader to consider ambiguities and thus drawing them into the creative process. This adds depth to Martin's characters, inviting the reader to ponder for themselves exactly how deluded, benighted, and bloodthirsty these *alazons* really are. In doing so, the reader is guided to the conclusion that some of Martin's characters are indeed creatures of an uncivilized, inhumane regime, while others are merely living in and coping with it. Though not a Gothic author, therefore, Martin borrows long-standing Gothic ploys to emphasise the extent of the iniquities he indicts. In short, this discourse is what makes Martin's critique resonant, making readers complicit in the interrogation, and providing contexts

in which to judge the brutalities of Westeros. Sex sells *A Song of Ice and Fire* not because it leaves nothing to the imagination, but because it gives the imagination something to do.

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