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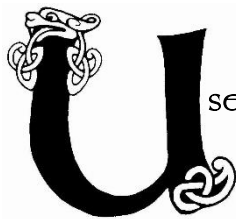
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Useful Little Men: George R. R. Martin's Dwarfs as Grotesque Realists



USEFUL LITTLE MEN:
GEORGE R.R. MARTIN'S
DWARFS AS GROTESQUE REALISTS

Joseph Rex Young

EXAMINING DAENERYS TARGARYEN'S CAREER in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Karin Gresham observes that Mikhail Bakhtin's pattern of grotesque realism is "a key component of even her most positive moments" (167). The pattern is, indeed, pervasive. Daenerys's first marriage is presaged by her menarche; her acclimatisation to her husband's culture begins with calluses and leathery skin and ends with her consumption of raw offal. Her sexual assertion of agency within her marriage takes place in the steppe equivalent of Bakhtin's medieval market square; her miscarriage is described in harrowing detail; the hatching of her dragons is accompanied by hair loss and hyperbolic lactation. She conquers Astapor with eunuch soldiers; these troops enter Meereen through its sewers; a virulent diarrhoeal plague complicates her attempts at a reconstruction. Daenerys's first flight on Drogon is a very carnal, seemingly orgasmic experience. Her hike back to civilisation is punctuated by descriptions of sputum, diarrhoea, menses, and the consumption of more, half-charred horseflesh. Gresham's argument that Martin employs Bakhtin's system of imagery to empower Daenerys "to challenge and redefine order" (152) is highly convincing.

This theme is apropos to the function of Daenerys's subplot within Martin's broader narrative. Daenerys's adventures centrally concern the rearing of her dragons, wonders absent from her world for over a century. They are, furthermore, actively *missed*. "Even those who bent their knees may yearn in their hearts for the return of the dragons" (*A Storm of Swords 1: Steel and Snow* [Storm 1] 320), observes the aging idealist Ser Barristan Selmy, with demonstrable justification. Ser Jorah Mormont falls "to his knees" (*A Game of Thrones* [Game] 780) in reverence at the sight of Daenerys's children. "I should like to see a dragon," notes the apprentice maester Roone. "I should like that very much" (*A Feast for Crows* [Feast] 1). "Magic began to go out of the world the day the last dragon died," observes Wisdom Hallyne, the apparent charlatan whose alchemy is working now that Daenerys's infant dragons are, unbeknownst to him, thriving a continent away (*A Clash of Kings* [Clash] 647-648). Daenerys's prodigies enact what Clute calls healing (339), addressing

abject problems with the fabric of the written world, a key function of fantasy. As Gresham observes, the grotesque realism of Daenerys's subplot identifies her as "the one who has been able to transform Martin's disillusionment into true heroic potential" (167-168). Daenerys's dragons serve as vivid evidence of healing, providing a thrill of hope to a world in sin and error pining (Young 188-189). Their fire challenges both the ice of the Others and the self-servingly rigid, morally bankrupt regime which is failing to respond to that threat. Bakhtin observes that medieval folk humour and carnival traditions focus on the opening of orifices (oral, genital, or anal) and acts of eating (taking the world into the body), excretion (expelling it back out again) and copulation. These blur the boundaries between the individual body and the outside world. Such smudging asserts and celebrates a kinship with "the great generic body of the people" for which "birth and death are not an absolute beginning and end but merely elements of continuous growth and renewal" (*Rabelais and His World* [Rabelais] 88). "Transposed" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* [Problems] 122) into literature, such traditional images vividly evoke transitions and cycles in a narrative by aping lived and sensual experience of kinship with this body. Mocking the notion that the extinction of the dragons was an absolute end, Daenerys is exactly the sort of character whose characterisation would profit from Bakhtin's system of grotesque images.

But this triumphant leap is only the second half of Bakhtin's equation. To emerge from the grave, the written subject must first be put there. The tradition of folk humour Bakhtin analyses therefore inherently incorporates aspects of violence or degradation. "By cutting off and discarding the old dying body," he observes, "the umbilical cord of the new youthful world is simultaneously broken" (*Rabelais* 206). There is therefore a strong parallel between grotesque realism and Clute's concept of healing, which he cites as an essential feature of modern fantasy narrative, and describes as necessarily proceeding from a state of "thinning." According to Clute, a written world must hurt if it is to heal, and tales of healing must therefore begin with the discursal establishment of a "fading away of beingness" (339). The near-extinction of the Jedi in George Lucas's early *Star Wars* films and the moribundity of English magic in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* demonstrate the pattern. Healing involves the reversal, diking, or, at worst, bottoming-out of thinning. Both Bakhtin's and Clute's paradigms emphasise damage or degradation as necessary preconditions for recovery.

What Gresham has established, therefore, is that the interdependent fall and rise implied by grotesque imagery evokes an essential point of narrative flux—Clutean healing—in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that Martin repeatedly uses the same pattern of imagery, and in its entirety, to evoke the thinning that such healing remedies. In his 2018 book *Fire*

and Blood, Martin itemises that thinning in great detail. The book is a history of the first seven Targaryen kings of Westeros, Daenerys's ancestors, as written by Archmaseter Gyldayn and "transcribed" (1) by Martin. Gyldayn spends the first half of his book on the first 120 years of Targaryen history then the second half on the course and aftermath of a short but ferocious war of succession between Aegon II and his half-sister Rhaenyra. Dragons are, it transpires, glass cannons, acutely vulnerable to the destruction they dish out. In two years of turmoil and violence, sixteen of the twenty Targaryen beasts are killed; three more go wild or disappear, leaving only Morning, a hatchling bonded to a descendent of the losing party in the war, to embody the mystique the dynasty once enjoyed. There is no apparent way to reverse this loss. Never again will Targaryen kings be able to descend upon a castle from the air, have the populace "gape" (260) at the sight of these grand beasts, and demonstrate the cosmic privilege (and coercive leverage) engendered by their partnership with the great reptiles. This is a downward shift through Northrop Frye's hierarchy of modes, from the romantic (a demonstrable, fundamental superiority to other people) to the high mimetic, in which the dynasty must assert itself by embodying esteemed virtues (Young 68; cf Frye 33-34). Given Martin's ongoing critique of the literary depiction of aristocracy, this is an important business. It is therefore important to give proper scholarly attention to the complete Bakhtinian movement—grotesque rise and fall—evident in the thinning that Daenerys remedies.

Getting grotesque discourse into *Fire and Blood* poses an interesting challenge. By presenting his work as a piece of fictional historiography, Martin essentially turns the entire book into one long Bakhtinian "character-zone" in which the narrative voice is not directly his own but a "parodically polemicized" (Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" 47) representation of somebody else's. That somebody is closely tied to a particular worldview established in Martin's pre-existing volumes. Gyldayn is a maester, one of the polymathic academics of Westeros. Serving principally as physicians, they constitute "caricature[s] of the professional narrow-minded doctor," who reject the "popular elements" Bakhtin identifies in Rabelaisian physicks (*Rabelais* 179). They wear their chains of office day and night, the equivalent of a primary-world doctor displaying a framed medical licence to assert authority over their patients. Maester Pycelle treats the stricken Gregor Clegane with boiling wine (antiseptic) and bread mould (penicillin), suggesting he practices a rough equivalent of modern medicine (*Storm* 2.425-426). It is Qyburn, disbarred by the maesters for unhallowed experiments, who observes Glegane's pyuria (*Feast* 124-125), "read[ing] his patient's fate" in his urine as a Rabelaisian sawbones might (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 180). If this occurred to Pycelle he does not mention it. The at least notional celibacy of the maesters (*Storm* 1.317) is also significant. Their genitals do not generate; they are sealed from the generic body of the

people and thus do not actively participate in cycles of death and rebirth. As such they tend to regard the thinning of their world as irreversible. Maester Cressen assures to Shireen Baratheon that the dragons are dead and gone ("we have talked about this before," *Clash* 4). His colleague Luwin reiterates the point to Bran Stark (401). Those who assert otherwise are marginalised iconoclasts (*Feast* 9). Cowlshaw (62-63) cites such conservatism as evidence of the ineffectiveness of the maesters in Martin's tale of Clutean healing, and in Bakhtinian terms he has a point. These men are what Bakhtin calls *agelasts* ("Prehistory" 58), those who do not laugh, champions of the "petrified seriousness" Bakhtin cites as characteristic of "official medieval culture" (*Rabelais* 73). Maesters speak "an official language that would deny the body, the cyclical nature of human life, and the triumph of the species over the death of the individual" (Glazener 113). Gyldayn demonstrates the pattern. He essentially apologises to his readers for raising the sexual precocity of Princess Saera: "And now, I fear, we must turn our attention to one of the most troublesome and distasteful chapters in the long reign of King Jaehaerys" (*Fire and Blood* 315). Saera's dalliances certainly cause her parents trouble, but for a trained physician to describe them as distasteful betrays the moral sympathies of a Bakhtinian *agelast*. Having Gyldayn articulate grotesque realism would detract from the effectiveness of the character-zone he serves to create.

Martin's solution is one Bakhtin would recognise. Most "serio-comical" genres, Bakhtin observes, are "characterized by a deliberate and explicit autobiographical and memoirist approach" ("Epic and Novel" 27). The resulting familiarisation of the subjects accords the novelist scope for self-insertion denied by the authors of purely serious genres. So it is with *Fire and Blood*. Martin writes Gyldayn as an empirical historian such as Otto von Ranke rather than a medieval chronicler like the Venerable Bede. His discourse includes deductions from evidence, assessments of competing accounts, and critiques of sources. Such mock historiography allows Martin scope for self-insertion. Much of Gyldayn's information about the war comes from

The Testimony of Mushroom, based upon the verbal account of the court fool (set down by a scribe who failed to append his name) who at various times capered for the amusement of King Viserys, Princess Rhaenyra, and both Aegons, the Second and Third. A three-foot-tall dwarf possessed of an enormous head (and, he avers, an even more enormous member), Mushroom was thought feeble-minded, so king and lords did not scruple to hide their secrets from him. Whereas Septon Eustace records the secrets of bedchamber and brothel in hushed, condemnatory tones, Mushroom delights in the same, and his *Testimony* consists of little but ribald tales and gossip, piling stabbings, poisonings, betrayals, seductions and debaucheries one atop the other. How much of this can

be believed is a question the honest historian cannot hope to answer, but it is worth noting that King Baelor the Blessed decreed that every copy of Mushroom's chronicle should be burned. (356-357)

Gyldayn thus repeatedly affects the language of a character who revels in grotesque realism. This begins with Gyldayn's paraphrasing of Mushroom's autobiographical discourse. His very name references a lifeform that springs from decomposing matter. It thus has significance in Bakhtin's system of imagery before one even begins speculating as to whether the appellation refers to his huge head or reputedly matching genitals. That Gyldayn's discussion of Mushroom prompts such speculation constitutes a perfect example of how the downward movement of grotesque realism is created, tipping the reader's gaze from the face to the lower, fertile bodily stratum where excretion and generation are effected, returning identities to base matter so they can create themselves anew (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 370-371). Gyldayn's reliance on Mushroom's catalogue of grim death (stabblings and poisonings) and vivacious license (seductions and debaucheries) engenders many Bakhtinian movements in his historical narrative.

Such discourse enters the tale at an apropos moment in Targaryen history. King Viserys, who first employs Mushroom, enjoys "the apex of Targaryen power," a point symbolised by there being "more *dragons* than ever before" (*Fire and Blood* 352) in Westeros. His successors engage in the civil war that thins those dragons out, however; Viserys's failure to address an ambiguous succession gives rise to two competing factions, the "blacks" supporting his daughter Rhaenyra and the "greens" supporting her half-brother Aegon. These two parties turn their glass cannons on each other, and kill off enough dragons that House Targaryen must subsequently reinvent itself. By making Gyldayn dependent on Mushroom, Martin studs the maester's discourse with Bakhtinian character-zones of grotesque realism whereby the agelast, in spite of himself, evokes the fluidity of Clutean thinning.

One of the more vociferous blacks, for example, is Rhaenyra's uncle Daemon. To assess why Daemon supported his niece, Gyldayn must weigh conflicting accounts of their relationship, including Mushroom's. Daemon and Rhaenyra were, the dwarf suggests, sexually involved, a scandal not because it is incestuous (the Targaryen practice of dynastic incest being enshrined in law) but because Daemon is already married. Gyldayn's consideration of *The Testimony of Mushroom* means that his discourse on the affair features various elements of grotesque realism. Daemon began the affair, says Mushroom, by giving Rhaenyra "kissing lessons."

From there the prince went on to show his niece how best to touch a man to bring him pleasure, an exercise that sometimes involved Mushroom himself and his alleged enormous member. Daemon taught the girl to disrobe enticingly, suckled at her teats to make them larger and more sensitive, and flew with her on dragonback to lonely rocks in Blackwater Bay, where they could disport naked all day unobserved, and the princess could practice the art of pleasuring a man with her mouth. At night he would smuggle her from her rooms dressed as a page boy and take her secretly to brothels on the Street of Silk, where the princess could observe men and women in the act of love and learn more of these “womanly arts” from the harlots of King’s Landing. (368)

Despite their physical proximity to the aristocracy, fools are lowly members of Westerosi society. Maester Cressen observes that “*even for a fool*, Patchface was a sorry thing” (*Clash* 3; emphasis added). Exaggerating the extent of Cersei Lannister’s promiscuity, Tyrion suggests his sister has copulated with Moon Boy (*Storm* 2.492). Tyrion thus proposes a *mésalliance*, a meeting of people normally separated by social strata. Mushroom’s supposed involvement of Mushroom in Daemon and Rhaenyra’s trysts is another *mésalliance*. Such meetings combine “the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 123) and are cited by Vice (152) as one of the key elements of grotesque discourse. They challenge the boundaries of station and estate by presenting radical, lived alternatives, demonstrating the artificiality of hierarchies and thus challenging them to renew themselves. The notion that brothel harlots would have anything to teach a Valyrian princess is an example of such a meeting. Mushroom’s account of Rhaenyra and Daemon’s trysts also contain strong grotesque-realist evocations of fertility and rebirth. Gyldayn’s mention of Mushroom’s “alleged enormous member,” here apparently receiving tactile stimulation, conjures the image of the erect phallus, a venerable emblem of fertility. The image of fellatio, combining elements of feeding and sex, is a clear marker of Rhaenyra’s involvement in the generic body (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 88). It is also an example of a grotesque-realist downward motion as she, and the reader, explore “the depths of the body” (371), where generation is effected. The liaison between niece and uncle contributes greatly to the outbreak of the war, and thus to the thinning of the world and the subsequent reinvention of the Targaryen dynasty. Martin evokes this notion, per Bakhtin, with reference to a series of evocations of the grotesque body.

The pattern continues. Various sources link Rhaenyra romantically to Ser Criston Cole of the Kingsguard. Gyldayn weighs two competing reports of this association. One tells of Ser Criston begging Rhaenyra to elope with him; she refuses (*Fire and Blood* 370-371). The tale is not far from one of courtly love.

But Gyldayn spends more time on Mushroom's "very different tale" in which Rhaenyra visited Ser Criston and "slipped off her cloak to reveal her nakedness beneath."

Yet for all her beauty, her entreaties fell on deaf ears, for Ser Criston was a man of honor and true to his vows. Even when Rhaenyra used the arts she had learned from her uncle Daemon, Cole would not be swayed. Scorned and furious, the princess donned her cloak again and swept out into the night [...] where she chanced to encounter Ser Harwin Strong, returning from a night of revelry in the stews of the city. Breakbones had long desired the princess, and lacked Ser Criston's scruples. It was he who took Rhaenyra's innocence, shedding her maiden's blood upon the sword of his manhood [...] according to Mushroom, who claims to have found them in bed at break of day. (371)

The comparison of the tale of courtly love with a gory depiction of a broken hymen turns Gyldayn's assessment of Rhaenyra's eventful evening into something akin to the "consular diptychs" Bakhtin discusses. Such artefacts depict an idealised mythological scene on one panel and ribald parodies thereof "relocated in a specifically prosaic reality" ("Prehistory" 56-57) on the other. The latter liberates the former from the "narrow frames" of literary pretension while reiterating the symbolic kernel of the subject story. The pattern is evident here. Martin uses Mushroom to create a Bakhtinian character-zone whereby Gyldayn describes Ser Harwin and Rhaenyra's liaison in a way that explicitly replaces courtly niceties (Harwin "lacked Ser Criston's scruples") with the anatomical realities of slap and tickle. Mushroom furthermore describes Harwin's interaction with Rhaenyra as a stab to her groin. This is hardly an innovative way of writing coitus, but it constitutes a forthright Bakhtinian debasement, focusing attention on the princess's lower anatomical stratum and what comes out of it. Rhaenyra is now not only a locus of fertility, a symbolic burden borne by all menstruant women, but potentially pregnant. Harwin's actions "have here a broadened, symbolic, ambivalent meaning; they at once kill and regenerate, put an end to the old life and start the new" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 205). The image of the couple being found abed by a lowly jester completes the volte-face, evoking an act of violence and destruction, then turning it into one of laughter and potential rejuvenation.

Rhaenyra, now damaged goods, is married off. Though her marriage produces three children, her husband dies young, and she turns back to Daemon, having further children with him. Not all of them survive. Gyldayn defers to Mushroom's eyewitness account of Rhaenyra miscarrying as Aegon is crowned:

The princess shrieked curses all through her labour, calling down the wraith of the gods upon her half-brothers and their mother, the queen, and detailing the torments she would inflict upon them before she would let them die. She cursed the child inside her too, Mushroom tells us, clawing at her swollen belly as Maester Gerardys and her midwife tried to restrain her and shouting "*Monster, monster, get out, get out, GET OUT!*"

When the babe at last came forth, she proved indeed a monster: a stillborn baby girl, twisted and malformed, with a hole in her chest where her heart should have been, and a stubby, scaled tail. Or so Mushroom describes her. (402-403)

This traumatic experience links Rhaenyra with Daenerys, who delivers a stillborn and, reportedly, deformed child (*Game* 731). This is an example of the grotesque-realist emphasis of the symbol of the open, unfinished body as "an incarnation of this world at the absolute lower stratum, as the swallowing up and generating principle, as the bodily grave and bosom, as a field which has been sown and in which new shoots are preparing to sprout" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 27). From the blow of her grotesque stillbirth, Daenerys rises, per Bakhtin, with new strength, finding "solace and strength in her dragon eggs, the symbol of her earlier identity" (Gresham 158). The experience, in Gresham's estimation, prompts her to hatch her three dragons, and thereby prompt to "the birth of a new community" (159) of followers who follow the mother of dragons, healer of a thinned world. Rhaenyra's actions after her miscarriage are comparable. She rises from her bloody bed to attend a black war council. Those who attend this meeting, like those who follow Daenerys into the Red Waste (*Clash* 171-175) know this is a do-or-die moment. Rhaenyra's half-brother is now King Aegon II, and by throwing their lot in with the princess they are attainting themselves. Like the piddling *khalassar* Daenerys leads, their army "leaves something to be desired" (*Fire and Blood* 403) But again like Daenerys, Rhaenyra has dragons, possibly three times as many of these potent weapons as the greens. "That," she says, "is how we shall win this war" (405-406). Rhaenyra, like Daenerys (Gresham 162), is acting like a true Targaryen, utilising her kinship to dragons at a crucial point in her career. Like Daenerys, Rhaenyra is empowered to become her true self via an authorial exercise in Bakhtinian grotesque realism.

The green party has its part in the thinning of the world. Martin's construction of character-zones of grotesque realism within Gyldayn's narrative allows him to sneak in some choice tales about their leader as well. The broad similarity of such tales to that of Rhaenyra's miscarriage is worth noting. Aegon initially cannot be located on his father's death:

Princess Helaena was breaking her fast with her children when the Kingsguard came to her [...] but when asked the whereabouts of Prince Aegon, her brother and husband, she said only “He is not in my bed, you may be sure. Feel free to search beneath the blankets.”

Prince Aegon was “at his revels,” Munkun says in his *True Telling*, vaguely. *The Testimony of Mushroom* claims Ser Criston found the young king-to-be drunk and naked in a Flea Bottom rat pit, where two guttersnipes with filed teeth were biting and tearing at each other for his amusement whilst a girl who could not have been more than twelve pleased his member with her mouth. (397-398)

In Bakhtinian terms Queen Helaena’s statement is a billingsgate, a semi-ritualised insult. She knows full well that Aegon is likely to be practicing Westeros’s (much-discussed; Carroll 96-100; Spector 182-183; Young 60-61) sexual double standard. Helaena’s politeness (“you may be sure [...] feel free [...]”) is “excessively servile” (Vice 158) a rhetorical affectation “ironic and ambivalent [and] on the brink of abuse” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 165)—she is drawing attention to Aegon’s infidelity. For a woman to presume to do so overturns gender hierarchies by highlighting their iniquities, and thus challenges them to reform themselves. Helaena challenges her husband in this way as he faces another challenge to the privilege of his gender in the form of Rhaenya’s claim to the throne. Helaena knocks Aegon down, per Bakhtin, so that he can rise to this challenge. The challenge extends to the Kingsguard. “Curses,” Bakhtin observes, “always indicate a downward motion, directed to the ground, the legs, the buttocks” (*Rabelais* 166). Blankets do not cover the head, accentuating the face as a crown might. They gesture towards the lower bodily stratum, the buttocks and genitals whereby one is linked with the generic body of the people, often while actually in bed. By inviting the Kingsguard to root around in bedding, Helaena imposes a similar downward motion upon those who—as the bodyguards—must help Aegon assert his claim.

If Helaena’s billingsgate seems subtle, Mushroom’s is not. The phrase “Flea Bottom rat pit” is a list of grotesque-realist evocations. The slugfest Aegon was reputedly watching is a blur of compromised somatic integrity, combatants “biting and tearing at each other,” each using orifices to rip open the other’s body. This violent image is quickly followed by a *mésalliance* as the girl unites the great with the insignificant via her act of fellatio. Both Helaena’s passive-aggressive observation and Mushroom’s ensuing story throw the subject down to earth to effect its rejuvenation; the prince emerges from the stews as a king who can press his claim to the throne. That contest has dire consequences for Martin’s invented cosmos. In Aegon’s camp as well as Rhaenya’s, therefore, as the cosmic flux of Clutean thinning begins, bodies open, jibes achieve deep-

seated symbolic significance, and the topsy-turvy effect of grotesque realism, privileging the lower stratum, comes into effect, evoking the cosmic shift.

Billingsgate against Aegon's party is not restricted to the king himself. When Lucerys, Rhaenyra's son, flies to Storm's End on his dragon Arrax to rouse the support of House Baratheon, he encounters Prince Aemond, the king's brother, who has just agreed to wed one of Lord Borros Baratheon's daughters and thus secure his support for the green party. Aemond, blinded in one eye by Lucerys in a childhood brawl, demands satisfaction from his cousin, and Lucerys leaves. "And there it might have ended," observes Glydayn, who relies on Mushroom's account of the encounter,

but for the girl Maris. The secondborn daughter of Lord Borros, less comely than her sisters, she was angry with Aemond for preferring them to her. "Was it one of your eyes he took, or one of your balls?" Maris asked the prince, in tones sweet as honey. "I am *so* glad you chose my sister. I want a husband with all his parts." (421)

Maris's insult is another billingsgate, couching abuse in tones "sweet as honey." Aemond rises to Maris's challenge. Having arrived at Storm's End on his own dragon, Vhaegar, he pursues Lucerys and Arrax over Shipbreaker Bay and kills both dragon and rider. Aegon welcomes Aemond home as "the true blood of the dragon" (422). Maris Baratheon, as quoted by Mushroom, knocks Aemond down so he can reconstruct himself, and what he reconstructs himself as is a dragonslayer.

The blacks suffer further attrition. Another of their dragons (and its rider) are killed in a dogfight with Aegon and his beast, Sunfyre (434-435). Although Aegon is gravely wounded, the loss leaves the blacks wary of pressing their advantage. Glydayn credits Mushroom, privy to the black war councils, with finding a solution. The fool echoes Rhaenyra's plan for finding riders for the wild dragons that haunt Dragonstone; these new dragon-riders, he quotes himself as saying, will be found "under the sheets and in the woodpiles, wherever you Targaryens spilled your silver seed" (440). The image of semen trickling over bedding and firewood is another evocation of lower, open, fertile bodies. This pattern of imagery is continued in "the Sowing of the Seeds," the search for Targaryen bastards willing to try to approach the wild dragons that haunt Dragonstone. The name once again evinces a downward movement, the deployment of potential into the fertile earth to effect regrowth. Not all sprout; various would-be dragon-riders are eaten by these ferocious, unpredictable beasts. Mushroom himself claims to have tried his luck and been sent "running across the ward of Dragonstone with the seat of his pantaloons on fire" for his troubles. Glydayn describes this as "a droll moment in what was otherwise a ghastly business" (441), providing the corrective laughter required to turn death

and destruction into an occasion of rebirth in which a few dragons do consent to being ridden by little-known individuals. Mushroom's lavatorial mindset and flammable trousers therefore cast black hopes into the earth so that they may leap back out of the fertile grave, whereby the blacks to shore up their faltering draconic assets.

The democratization of such assets leads to two disastrous instances of thinning, however. Firstly, it emboldens Rhaenyra to descend on King's Landing. She captures the city without fire or blood, though also without the king. Aegon is spirited into hiding by loyalists, leaving only "his bed, empty, and his chamberpot, full" (455)—another downward movement that fertilises Westeros for his eventual re-emergence. Rhaenyra takes the throne, but like Cersei Lannister in Martin's other novels, her lust for power outruns her capacity to govern. Order in King's Landing falters, and Lord Celtigar, her covetous treasurer, is lynched. Large crowds fall under the sway of an orator Mushroom names as the Dead Shepherd, "filthy and unwashed and smelling of the sty," missing a hand and "as pale and foul as a corpse fresh-risen from its grave" (493). Under his influence King's Landing descends into anarchy. "The Shepherd held sway over half the city," Gyldayn reports,

whilst strange lords and kings of misrule squabbled o'er the rest. Hundreds of men gathered around Wat the Tanner, who rode through the streets on a white horse, brandishing Lord Celtigar's severed head and bloody genitals and declaring an end to all taxes. In a brothel on the Street of Silk, the whores raised up their own king, a pale-haired boy of four named Gaemon, supposedly a bastard of the missing King Aegon II. Not to be outdone, a hedge knight named Ser Perkin the Flea crowned his own squire Trystane, a stripling of sixteen years, declaring him to be a natural son of the late King Viserys. (510)

Three demagogues—the Shepherd, Gaemon, and Trystane—thus rule petty urban kingdoms amid the disintegrating Targaryen regime. During this anarchy a mob, whipped into a frenzy by the Shepherd, storms the Dragonpit, the great dome where the Targaryen dragons lair, and kill the five beasts resident there amid great loss of human life (518-520). When her own dragon Syrax is killed, Rhaenyra flees the city.

The storming of the Dragonpit obliterates a third of Westerosi dragonkind; no single incident in Glydayn's history is a more effective example of Clutean thinning. It is therefore noteworthy that the riot takes place as Martin effects Bakhtin's notion of carnival time, a concept closely associated with grotesque realism. Carnival is that period in which the high seriousness of the agelasts is replaced by ritualised evocations of such realism, which cast down existing hierarchy to challenge them to reiterate themselves (Bakhtin, *Problems*

126-127). The crowning of a temporary mock king, a master of revels who overturns stated hierarchies by his low station and topsy-turvy policies, is one of the key rituals of this “piece of mythicised literary history” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 124; cf. Vice 150). Martin punctuates the undermining of Targaryen power by crowning three such lords of misrule. The Dead Shepherd—filthy, named for a humble plebeian profession, noted for his grotesquery and physical incompleteness—is “not separate from the rest of the world” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 26). He exhorts his flock to “walk barefoot through the world” (*Fire and Blood* 525), erasing their own divisions from the earth. Gaemon passes “one decree after another [...] each more outrageous than the last” (525), overturning various axioms of Westerosi government, notably its patriarchy. He attracts followers when “an army of whores bestowed their favors freely on any man willing to swear his sword” (512) to the young potentate, the source of his power signalled by his nickname “King Cunny.” Bodies “not separated from the world by clearly-defined boundaries” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 27) thus secure the suspension of the existing regime. Trystane meanwhile becomes a puppet of Larys Strong, King Aegon’s spymaster, who emerges from “wherever he had been hiding” (*Fire and Blood* 524) when Rhaenyra flees. Strong, like his latter-day equivalent Varys, is physically deficient, being lame in one leg and nicknamed Clubfoot. With this inscrutable cripple whispering in his ear, Trystane overturns the rationally quantifiable fiduciary basis of the Targaryen regime, repealing taxes and cancelling debt (525). This trio of mock kings all embody, or take their strength from incidences of, grotesque realism. From a Clutean perspective, this makes sense. House Targaryen, which previously owed its supremacy to its draconic assets, will have to reconstitute its power on human principles. Gyldayn, an agelast, cannot see the rebirth Bakhtin identifies in carnival, hence his damning of the mock kings as outrageous. Nor could he credibly evoke the possibility of renewal without recourse to *The Testimony of Mushroom*, whose author witnessed this misrule. Mushroom appreciates that “[c]arnival is not just time wasted but time filled with profound and rich experience” (Clark and Holquist 302), chiefly that of the potential for rebirth inherent in the levelling of institutions. The fool saw the Dragonpit burn and collapse from a neighbouring hill, and Gyldayn quotes him as saying “Never have I seen a sight more terrible, more glorious” (522). With this character-zone Martin allows his sceptical focaliser to evoke both the power of the turb that overturns the basis of Targaryen regime and that of the family to be reborn from its ashes.

The other noteworthy consequence of the Sowing of the Seeds is the empowerment of two lowly individuals whose attempts to crown themselves bring about a similar moment of thinning. The great dragons Vermithor and Silverwing consent to be ridden by Hugh Hammer and Ulf White, a pair of illiterate plebeians. Sent to buttress black forces holding the town of Tumbleton

against Prince Daeron and his dragon Tessarion, they promptly defect and help Daeron capture the town, hoping for better rewards from the greens. The ambitions of the “Two Betrayers” swiftly run away with them, however, and Hugh begins styling himself as a king-in-waiting (526-527). As members of the green party conspire to deal with these upstarts, further black re-enforcements unexpectedly arrive, led by Ser Addam Velaryon riding the dragon Seasmoke. Hugh and Prince Daeron are killed by conspirators while hastening to mount their dragons, while Ulf White spends the battle “sleeping off a night of drinking at an inn called the Bawdy Badger” (530). Thanks to the hubris of the Two Betrayers three riderless dragons—Vermithor, Silverwing, and Tessarion—take to the air to oppose Seasmoke. Tessarion and Vermithor bear him to the ground and kill him, but both are mortally wounded in the crash; Silverwing goes feral, never to be ridden again (533-534).

Martin has Gyldayn heighten the pathos of this episode by suggesting Silverwing tried to coax Vermithor back into the air, not realising he was dead (536). With regard to the anthropoid authors of this horrendous episode of thinning, however, Gyldayn defers to Mushroom, who provides “most of what we know” (482) about the Two Betrayers, and who true to form wallows in grotesque realism. Hugh Hammer, he claims, is killed by green-party hardliner Jon Roxton, who thrusts his sword “deep into Hammer’s belly, before opening the bastard from groin to throat.” Tardily intercepted by bodyguards, Roxton supposedly fights bravely but “died when his foot slipped on a coil of Hugh Hammer’s entrails” (531). Note the repetition of a violation of the pattern that Mushroom reports with regard to Harwin Strong and Rhaenyra (371). Just as Mushroom’s grotesque-realist evocation of Rhaenyra’s violation launches a process of thinning, so the culmination of that process is evoked by references to the violation of the lower bodily stratum. The undoing of Ulf White is similar. Ser Hobart Hightower, a knight of dubious repute, brings him a gift of (poisoned) wine. Ulf warily insists Ser Hobart drink with him. Gyldayn reiterates Mushroom’s report of how the knight therefore

let the squire fill his cup, drank deep, and asked for more. Once he saw Hightower drink, Ulf the Sot lived up to his name, putting down three cups before he began to yawn. The poison in the wine was a gentle one. When Lord Ulf went to sleep, never to reawaken, Ser Hobart lurched to his feet and tried to make himself retch, but too late. His heart stopped within the hour. “No man ever feared Ser Hobart’s sword,” Mushroom says of him, “but his wine cup was deadlier than Valyrian steel.” (536-537)

Gyldayn agrees that Hightower redeems his dubious reputation. That he does so with his fingers down his throat, frantically trying to vomit, echoes the death of Jon Roxton. Mushroom again leavens a tale of violence with reference to the organs of digestion and excretion. Like the storming of the Dragonpit, the Second Battle of Tumbleton is, in Clutean terms, an occasion of terrible thinning, but those dragons die so that Daenerys can, generations later, heal an ailing world. Per Bakhtin, Martin punctuates Gyldayn's narrative with a character-zone in which grotesque realism evokes the potential for rebirth amid destruction.

The blacks eventually lose the war. Aegon resurfaces, captures Rhaenyra, and feeds her to his dragon Sunfyre, crippled in a succession of dogfights. The victory is pyrrhic, however. Sunfyre succumbs to his injuries and Aegon has been shattered by his own. His sons were killed in the war, and when he dies less than a year later he is succeeded by Rhaenyra's son, also named Aegon. From a Bakhtinian perspective, however, Aegon the Younger is better-qualified than his uncle to enact a reconstruction. During the war, as Gyldayn relates, he was caught in a naval battle while being ferried to safety in Essos. He witnesses the death of his older brother Jacaerys (shot down with his dragon) but mounts his small dragon Stormcloud and flies to safety on Dragonstone. Stormcloud, wounded in the escape, "died within the hour, hissing as the hot blood gushed black and smoking from his wounds." His nine-year-old rider was "white with terror, Mushroom tells us, shaking like a leaf and stinking of piss" (445). The detail of hysterical urination subjects the pathos of Stormcloud's death and Jacaerys being "swallowed by the sea" (447; note further references to eating), to the corrective of grotesque realism, as enacted by Aegon's open body. Bakhtin identifies "drenching in urine" as a form of grotesque debasement, and thus as a literary act that has an "essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare" (*Rabelais* 148). This is significant because the reconstitution of the Targaryen dynasty rests on the shoulders of this poor lad. Princess Rhaenyra's ultimate victory comes not through her dragons, as she predicted, but through a son capable of enacting a new, post-draconic future for the dynasty. Aegon III is empowered in the same way Daenerys is generations later—via his kinship, discussed by Mushroom, to the generic body of the people, for which death is a milestone rather than a conclusion.

Crowned at age ten, Aegon III clashes repeatedly with his regents. The most serious such incident comes when they remove his Hand of the King, Thaddeus Rowan, from office in an attempted palace coup (681-682). The eleven-year-old king barricades himself in Maegor's Holdfast, the royal castle-within-a-castle, demanding Rowan's reinstatement. When soldiers try to winkle the boy out of his stronghold, they are confronted by his bodyguard, the mysterious foreign gladiator Sandoq the Shadow.

Black of skin and black of hair, he stood almost seven feet tall. His face, which he oft kept hidden behind a black silk veil, was a mass of thin white scars, and his lips and tongue had been removed, leaving him both mute and hideous to look upon. It was said of him that he had been the victor of a hundred fights in the death pits of Meereen, that he had once torn out the throat of a foe with his teeth after his sword had shattered, that he drank the blood of the men he killed, that in the pits he had slain lions, bears, wolves and wyverns with no weapon but the stones he found upon the sands. (683-684)

Sandoq evinces various points of contact with grotesque realism. As a fictional gladiator he inescapably recalls his historical equivalents in ancient Rome, whose career arc—disenfranchised men placed in situations of mortal danger in order to show “enough courage to be granted [their] life” and thus be socially reborn (Wiedermann 165)—Bakhtin would recognise. His mouth is incapable of expressing his individuality via speech; it is good only for consuming, an activity for which it is always open, rendering him permanently part of the generic body. He actively pursues this role, biting flesh and drinking blood, turning his body into a conduit for repurposing living matter as fertiliser in which new bodies may be born. And he stoops to find stones with which to counteract danger in the arenas of Meereen, voluntarily descending to the earth and rising equipped to counteract attempts to toss him there permanently. Gyldayn relies on Mushroom’s eyewitness account of what happens when the soldiers rush him, resulting in a character-zone replete with further Bakhtinian images. “It did not look so much like a swordfight,” Mushroom avers, “as like a farmer reaping grain. With every stroke more stalks would topple, but these were living men who screamed and cursed as they fell” (684). Mushroom’s ability to find replenishment in destruction turns this violence into an act of medievalist catering. The impression is furthered when Sandoq begins booting men off the drawbridge and onto the “hungry” spikes below, again describing combat as a prandial exercise. This symbolic dinner came, according to Mushroom, with a matching floor show; “The Shadow made a dance of it.” When Aegon subsequently demands that Lord Rowan be released, Gyldayn reports that “His words rang across the inner ward, and in that moment, the broken boy Aegon III seemed every inch a king” (690). Small wonder therefore that when Aegon achieves majority he has Sandoq with him, glowering over his shoulder, as he dismisses his regents (704; cf. illustration 705). The Shadow is grotesque realism incarnate, turning violence into rebirth, empowering the young reformer to “challenge and redefine order” (Gresham 152) much as Daenerys later does.

Traumatised by the war, Aegon III matures into something of an agelast, a rigidly reserved man noted for never laughing. Mushroom, says Gyldayn, despaired of such an audience and skipped the country (*Fire and Blood* 706). From Martin's perspective, the fool is redundant. Vice (25) notes that in Bakhtinian terms characters exist to create literary discourse, not vice versa. Mushroom is a tool whereby Martin can impose character-zones of grotesque realism upon Gyldayn's history, evoking the dynamism of Clutean thinning as the agelast focaliser cannot credibly do himself. With Westeros's dragons all but extinct by Aegon III's majority, that thinning is done, and Aegon must build a new regime in place of what has been lost. Having empowered the king to make that shift, Mushroom's purpose in the narrative is complete.

It is worth noting, however, an incident in Martin's main sequence of novels in which a dwarfish jester uses grotesque realism to rescue a thinned world from agelast officialdom. Tyrion Lannister is well aware that his physical irregularity allies him in the popular imagination with "capering fools in motley" (*Game* 53)—the Mushrooms of Martin's medievalism, or the mock kings and feasting fools of Bakhtin's. He leans into this role via his drinking, womanising and wisecracking. Tyrion's chapters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are character-zones in which an unpretentious hedonist speaks truth to the power of a frequently hypocritical post-draconic regime. It is he, for example, not the evasive and pretentious Cersei, who observes the likelihood that Joffrey's decision to have Sansa Stark publicly stripped was motivated by Joffrey's interest in Sansa's body and thus raising the matter of the thirteen-year-old king's own developing lower stratum (*Clash* 480). Defending this regime, he loses his nose, a worry given Bakhtin's equation of the nose with the phallus (*Rabelais* 316), though the subsequent depiction of his erection—"ugly, thick and veined, with a bulbous purple head" (*Storm* 1.394)—carefully places his enduring fertility on the narrative record. When he attacks the regime, he does so by killing his father while the elder Lannister is seated on the lavatory:

The proof was the sudden stench, as his bowels loosened in the moment of death. *Well, he was in the right place for it*, Tyrion thought. But the stink that filled that privy gave ample evidence that the oft-repeated jape about his father was just another lie.

Lord Tywin Lannister did not, in the end, shit gold. (2.499)

The death of Tywin, the most poker-faced agelast of the post-draconic Westerosi establishment, is marked with toilet humour. Rather than simply alleviating the gravity of Tyrion's parricide, such comedy provides a material demonstration of victory over the fear that the regime Tywin self-servingly upheld is a permanent state of affairs, a central function of Bakhtin's pattern of images (Glazener 113-114). Tywin joins the generic body and provides fertiliser within

which a new regime can germinate. Having started this process, Tyrion then begins his long journey to join forces with Daenerys and thus link her with the thinned land she must heal. Martin uses one dwarf with a prominent penis and a good line in smutty jokes to empower one Targaryen to adjust to the loss of the dragons; he uses another to empower the dynasty to bring them back.

This accounts for the impact of Martin's narrative. The tale resonates due to the vividness of his characters and their aggressive, often brutal struggle. In *Fire and Blood* the toxic ambition that fuels Aegon II and Rhaenyra's war is made all the more apparent by the alacrity with which they abuse their cosmically privileged position in relation to the dragons, and thus squander these irreplaceable wonders. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, meanwhile, characters such as Tywin Lannister (*Storm* 1.263) and Hizdahr zo Loraq (*A Dance with Dragons* 812) have their mean-spiritedness and lack of insight and gnosis signalled clearly by their refusal to engage with the reawakening of the world demonstrated by the re-emergence of dragons. That is to say that Martin makes use of formalised Recovery, the neo-Romantic notion that the supernatural accentuates the natural, identified by Tolkien (146) as a key function of modern fantasy narrative. The vividness of the emotions and ambitions that drive these plots derives from the fact that both the events of *Fire and Blood* and the game of thrones are taking place in relation to drastic changes in the fabric of the written world—Clutean thinning in the former case, the healing that thinning implies in the latter. As identified by Gresham, the healing phase of this history is clearly evoked via Martin's use of grotesque realism in his depiction of Daenerys's body and what comes out of it. As shown here, the thinning required to enable that healing is similarly evoked by such matters as Rhaenyra's liaison with Daemon, her miscarriage, the billingsgate against Aegon II and Aemond, the Sowing of the Seeds, the outbreak of carnival time in King's Landing, and Aegon III's choice of coercive leverage in asserting his right to reconstruct the dynasty after the war. Wheels are evident within wheels here. Both the thinning and healing of this world—and the human emotions and drives they serve to Recover—are evoked by the full pattern of death and rebirth implied by Bakhtinian grotesquery.

The excuse for such discourse is another recognisable cog in a Bakhtinian machine. Choosing to focalise the thinning from the perspective of an agelast, Martin inserts purpose-written character-zones in which he affects the language of Mushroom, just as he uses Tyrion Lannister to speak truth to the agelast regime that succeeds the faltering Targaryens. These discursal plaques allows the literary effects Gresham identifies to come into effect—and indeed to signal the capacity of the thinning as a precondition of the healing. Westeros hurts, as so many fantasy worlds do, so that it can heal. Bakhtin's process of symbolically interdependent destruction and renewal is a fitting

pattern of imagery for a narrative principally concerned with human responses to a process of death and rebirth. Martin's use of libidinous, physically deficient, slyly irreverent commentators to voice it demonstrates his understanding of the rhetorical value of these "little men with foul tongues" (*Fire and Blood* 706).

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MYTHOPOEIC SOCIETY POSITION OPENING: RECORDING SECRETARY

THE DUTIES OF THE RECORDING SECRETARY ARE:

1. MINUTES: Take and write up the minutes from the quarterly Steward Meetings per year held via conference call. After the Call to Order, the Recording Secretary takes attendance and reports to the President the names of the attending Stewards. The previous meeting minutes are then voted on for acceptance with or without corrections. If corrections, additions, etc., need to be made, the Recording Secretary will make any changes, corrections, etc., and then post the amended minutes to the Steward's List. The February meeting's focus is the annual budget for the Society. The July or August meeting usually takes place at Mythcon.

2. ANNUAL REPORT: Every year, each Steward writes a report for the Society's Annual Report (AR). As a non-profit organization, the Society is mandated by California law to write and submit an AR. The Recording Secretary creates a short summary of the year's meeting minutes.

3. ELECTION RECORDING: Every three years, the Society holds an election for all the Steward offices. The Membership Steward creates both an electronic and paper ballot which is sent to all members. Any member can choose to run for any Steward office. The election period is generally a month long (1 November - 1 December). The Recording Secretary reads and records all submitted ballots. At the end of the election period, the election results are tabulated by the Recording Secretary and reported to the Stewards via the Steward's List. The results are published in *Mythprint*, the Society newsletter.

Members who are interested in applying should contact the 2020 Chair of the Council of Stewards, David Emerson, at webmaster@mythsoc.org.