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Abstract

Contests the suggestion that Sansa Stark, a character in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, is a weak and indecisive by analyzing her in relation to William Patrick Day's system of Gothic fantasy. While Sansa is indeed physically passive, she manages to retain her own identity in a challenging literary environment. This physical passivity allows her to assert herself intellectually, analyzing and indicting the misdeeds and abuses she suffers. This combination of passive and active attributes precisely instantiates the skill set of the detective, a species of literary being developed from the Gothic fantasies Day analyses, and makes Sansa a crucial, and surprisingly empowered, element of Martin's literary engine.

Additional Keywords

Martin, George R.R. *A Song of Ice and Fire* (series); Martin, George R.R. *A Song of Ice and Fire* (series)—Characters—Sansa Stark; Gothic literature; Detective fiction



STERNER STUFF; SANSA STARK AND THE SYSTEM OF GOTHIC FANTASY

Joseph Rex Young

AT THE TOURNEY OF THE HAND IN GEORGE R.R. MARTIN'S *A Game of Thrones*, Sansa Stark and Jeyne Poole watch "the heroes of a hundred songs ride forth, each more fabulous than the last" ([*Game*] 284) Raised in the austere Kingdom of the North, Sansa is nevertheless a keen student of Westeros's traditions of chivalric romance and delights in the day's bellicose pageantry:

The jousting went all day and into the dusk, the hooves of the great warhorses pounding down the lists until the field was a ragged wasteland of torn earth. A dozen times Jeyne and Sansa cried out in unison as riders clashed together, lances exploding into splinters while the commons screamed for their favourites. Jeyne covered her eyes whenever a man fell, like a frightened little girl, but Sansa was made of sterner stuff. A great lady knew how to behave at tournaments. (286)

Sansa knows how to comport herself in public. This skill is tested at the tourney, when a young knight is killed in an (apparent) accident "not ten feet from where Sansa was seated." The eleven-year-old girl sits stoically reflecting on the death. Another quotation precisely describes her enacting this capacity for calm in emotionally demanding situations later in her story:

She saw herself in a castle, inhabited by vice and violence, seated beyond the reach of law or justice, and in the power of a man, whose perseverance was equal to every occasion, and in whom passions, of which revenge was not the weakest, entirely supplied the place of principles. She was compelled, once more, to acknowledge, that it would be folly, and not fortitude, any longer to dare his power. (435)

This quotation is not, in fact, from Martin, but from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. It records the impressions of the heroine of that novel, Emily, as she contemplates her captivity in Montoni's castle. Every word of it, however, is applicable to Sansa. By the halfway point of *A Storm of Swords* Sansa is, like Emily, an orphan. Kept as a hostage by the Lannisters, Sansa is rescued by the courtier Petyr Baelish, who ensures the silence of his co-conspirator in her rescue by killing the man. Baelish spirits Sansa away to an isolated castle

and acquires her as a niece when he marries her aunt Lysa for her assets (just as Montoni does to Emily). When Lysa causes trouble Baelish kills her, just as Montoni's mistreatment hastens the death of Emily's aunt. He reveals a plan to restore Sansa to her family estates, but this will involve the disappearance of his prepubescent stepson, Sansa's cousin Robert. Seeing that Baelish's lust for power has overwhelmed any scruples he may have—that, like Radcliffe's Montoni, his passions overrun his principles—Sansa nevertheless understands that she is wholly dependent on him, and calmly accepts his vice and violence. The parallels between Sansa and Emily are remarkable.

The purpose of this article is not to itemize those parallels but to examine Sansa in relation to a literary tradition of which Emily is one of the great exemplars. The objective in doing so is to answer some of the many heterodiegetic complaints about the character. A colleague I inspired to read *A Game of Thrones* declined to read Martin's sequels, not because of the spite, violence, rape and war they record, but because "I really hate that redheaded girl." Susan Johnston ruefully describes Sansa as "foolish" (139). Daniel Hass thinks her naive (177). Valerie Frankel criticizes her for her "irrational optimism" (99) and for "considering herself as an object" (100), citing these attributes as examples of Martin's supposed habit of writing one-dimensional female characters. Larsson writes of the "childishness and hopelessness of her infatuation with all things chivalric" (31). Preparatory to a discussion of the plausibility of Sansa as a medievalist character, Danielle Alesi cites critics describing her as "boring, submissive, vapid, [and] weak" (161). This article proposes a different paradigm, in which this passivity expedites Sansa's crucial function in Martin's narrative. According to William Patrick Day's system of Gothic fantasy, the Gothic heroine asserts her identity by passively suffering pain, while the corresponding hero attempts to assert his will on the situation, and by doing so is drawn into and destroyed by the Gothic world. Sansa's ability to hold onto herself in Martin's story is particularly evident in contrast to the fracturing identity of her sister Arya and the demise of her brother Robb, whose efforts to impose themselves on a dark milieu swiftly become counterproductive. Day does not suggest that this behavior pattern particularly empowers Gothic heroines. It is, however, necessary for Sansa to fulfil her role in Martin's narrative program. Martin portrays a rotten, corrupted chivalric establishment, and skillfully employs expositional techniques that ensure his criticisms are ingrained into the reading process. Sansa is an incisively powerful conductor of this agenda, in large part because she embodies stereotypically feminine passivity. Day argues that the conventions of Gothic fantasy led eventually to the development of the detective, a literary organism he describes as achieving power over the milieu by combining the traits stereotypical of both the heroes and heroines of the tradition. Sansa demonstrates this combination

of attributes to sharp analytical effect in Martin's work. Her passivity is therefore a necessary component of a fundamentally androgynous nature. She both embodies and transcends gender coding, becoming a resonantly effective component in Martin's literary engine.

As a preliminary to this discussion, it is worth explicitly establishing the suitability of Gothic frames of reference to Martin's work. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is more typically compared to works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium, or to actual chivalric romances. The Gothic connection is undoubtedly there, however. David Matthews observes a "fundamental" division in modern depictions of medieval society. Such depictions are typically classifiable as examples of either "romantic" medievalism, depicting organic societies possessing moral literacy the modern world purportedly lacks, or "gothic" (Matthews does not capitalize the term) milieus highlighting historical "threat, violence and warped sexuality" against which modern society supposedly safeguards its inhabitants (15). Martin has spoken in interviews about his suspicion of the former school (Carroll 4; cf Young 33-34). His medievalism bears out Matthews's observation that the behavior of a chivalric class in a modern text is a barometer of the romantic/gothic divide. In Martin's tale knights are (some exceptions aside) the enforcers of a monarchic establishment, as Sansa learns the first time she talks back to her betrothed:

King Joffrey's face hardened. "My mother tells me it isn't fitting that a king should strike his wife. Ser Meryn."

The knight was on her before she could think, yanking back her hand as she tried to shield her face and backhanding her across the ear with a gloved fist. Sansa did not remember falling, yet the next she knew she was sprawled on one knee amongst the rushes. Her head was ringing. Ser Meryn Trant stood over her, with blood on the knuckles of his white silk glove. (*Game* 718-719)

Joffrey is quite capable of being a charming young man when it suits him (142-143; 290). Yet here he preserves his own reputation by having his bodyguard administer the blow. His dignity as king takes precedence, in his mind, over the point of his mother's admonition (that domestic violence is wrong). Readers note this absurdity and decry a culture of morally illiterate violence in which it will go unpunished. Martin's world therefore instantiates Matthews's gothic medievalism. As Johnston observes, furthermore, Sansa's focalization of this world is "medievalist we may say, rather than medieval" (139). She has come to King's Landing with a view of the medievalist world heavily informed by songs and stories "of Florian and Jonquil, of Lady Shella and the Rainbow Knight, of valiant Prince Aemon and his doomed love for his brother's queen" (*Game* 532). These are Westeros's equivalent of chivalric

romances, rhetorically potent components of Martin's energetic world-building. These texts-within-texts owe more to nineteenth-century neo-medievalists such as Tennyson and Scott, definitive proponents of Matthews's romantic medievalism, than to actual medieval literature. Martin therefore very precisely positions Sansa as a romantic medievalist emersed in a gothic medievalism. This contrast activates what Robert Mighall cites as one of the defining features of the Gothic tradition to which Day refers:

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 the reactionary which provides the terrifying pleasure of these texts. (9)

Sansa is a girl with thoroughly romantic neo-medievalist expectations of the medieval world discovering that this world is actually subject to the delusions and iniquities characteristic of gothic medievalism. Although the label may not fit all of Martin's subplots, Sansa's seems, per Mighall, eminently Gothic.

Sansa also slots very neatly into Day's system. Like Radcliffe's Emily she follows Day's schematization of the Gothic heroine, being "well-bred, passive and respectable" (16). The daughter of the Warden of the North, she is "of the highest birth" (*A Storm of Swords 1: Steel and Snow* [Storm 1] 269) and has spent her childhood acquiring an enviable aristocratic skill set (*Game* 66). She plans a respectable career as a chivalric damsel and is thrilled, as only an eleven-year-old girl can be, when she is betrothed to young Prince Joffrey. She "did not really know Joffrey yet," she reflects, "but she was already in love with him" (134). The stereotype of the adolescent in love with love is surely familiar; Day's system reveals how Martin uses it as a building block in a rhetorical statement. In a Gothic fantasy, Day observes, such girls are "thrust into the underworld through no fault of their own. [...] [T]heir virtuousness makes them prey to villains" (16). Sansa typifies this precisely. Her problems begin when her father Eddard breaks her engagement with Joffrey. She complains to Queen Cersei, who thus has warning that Eddard has uncovered her crimes and takes him into custody, a move that leads to his execution (*Game* 529). When Cersei's plans also lead to the death of her husband King Robert, Joffrey (ostensibly Robert's son) becomes king and keeps Sansa as a hostage. Sansa gets into trouble, per Day, due to her subscription to the company line taught to young girls by her patriarchal regime.

Sansa also typifies Day's model of the Gothic heroine by being incapable of "effective action" because she is "by definition passive" (18).

Having had Sansa enter the Gothic world because her respectability makes her prey to villains, Martin then has her assert herself by exercising that respectability; she “uses her romances to help her create a persona that will allow her to survive King’s Landing” (Carroll 30). This strategy benefits from inactivity, as on the infamous occasion on which Joffrey makes her atone for the early successes of her brother Robb’s rebellion:

“Leave her face,” Joffrey commanded. “I like her pretty.”

Boros slammed a fist into Sansa’s belly, driving the air out of her.

When she doubled over, the knight grabbed her hair and drew his sword, and for one hideous instant she was certain he meant to open her throat. As he laid the flat of the blade across her thighs, she thought her legs might break from the force of the blow. Sansa screamed. Tears welled in her eyes. It will be over soon. She soon lost count of the blows.

“Enough,” she heard the Hound rasp.

“No it isn’t,” the king replied. “Boros, make her naked.”

Boros shoved a meaty hand down the front of Sansa’s bodice and gave a hard yank. The silk came tearing away, baring her to the waist. Sansa covered her breasts with her hands. She could hear sniggers, far off and cruel. “Beat her bloody,” Joffrey said, “we’ll see how her brother fancies—”

“What is the meaning of this?” (*A Clash of Kings* [*Clash*] 442-443)

Tyrrion Lannister arrives to put a stop to the beating. Sansa herself does not so much as raise a hand in her own defense, instead taking solace in the thought that her tormenters cannot keep this up forever. Confrontational as it may be, this is good character work by Martin. He has created a heroine deeply invested in conventional notions of female respectability. To have her step outside the bounds of such respectability to defend herself would be inconsistent characterization. Sansa accordingly limits her self-assertion to a gesture of modesty when the beating escalates to sexual assault. In a Gothic fantasy, Day observes, “the heroine accepts domination, accepts the position of masochist, because the assertion of her identity, tied up as it is with the qualities of passivity and respectability, demands she accept this role” (19). Sansa is just such a masochist, concerned more with her respectability than her welfare. This passivity accounts for the sudden appearance (never actually explained in the text) of Tyrrion; Sansa cannot free herself so, per Day (18), circumstance must do so. Sansa’s strategy has undeniable rhetorical effect, furthermore. By wordlessly absorbing Joffrey’s mistreatment, she shows what a good girl she really is and, by implication, how little that counts for. The beating places her virtue and her king’s awfulness on the narrative record. As Day suggests, she asserts her identity by suffering pain.

Sansa does make some efforts to free herself, but they are again characteristic of Day's Gothic heroine, being fixated on respectability. The disgraced knight Dontos Hollard launches a plot to rescue her, and she is initially keen to get involved. Dontos repeatedly slips into his own vices, however. Sansa notices that he is drunk at their first meeting (*Clash* 258) and quickly tires of his boozy familiarity. Eventually she pursues an alternative option, marriage into House Tyrell, committing herself to this despite Dontos's credible observation that the Tyrells want her for her inheritance (*Storm* 1.224). A lady, after all, would not balk at such matters being part of her marriage arrangements, but she might balk at the "wet groping lips" of an "unshaven" drunk (*Clash* 681). When her captors forestall the Tyrell solution by marrying Sansa to Tyrion, she is appalled, but her practical resistance lasts a sentence—she "tried to run, but Cersei's handmaid caught her before she'd gone a yard" (*Storm* 1.384)—after which she goes through with the ceremony largely to avoid causing a scene. Her sole subsequent gesture of defiance is, notably, one of inactivity, refusing to kneel so the dwarfish Tyrion can ceremonially drape a Lannister cloak over her shoulders. "Why should I spare his feelings, when nobody cares about mine?" she thinks as he tugs ineffectually at her skirt (1.386). Sansa seethes at her mistreatment, but her opposition is formulated with concern for appearances and thus essentially passive.

This policy is, counterintuitively, very successful. Day observes that in the Gothic "underworld," where one "asserts one's power either by inflicting or enduring pain" (19), the passivity of heroines ensures "they never manifest the dominating, sadistic side of their own identities" (20). Such women keep hold of their own identities by declining to contribute, at least actively, to the violence and malfeasance that surrounds them. By resisting her documented (*Game* 720; 725) temptation to fight back against Joffrey and his bruisers, Sansa looks at this morally bankrupt regime from without. This contrasts sharply with the perceptions of her sister. Arya Stark escapes Joffrey's court and engages in a long, convoluted attempt to get home. Like Sansa she suffers brutality (*Clash* 202-206), captivity (375), sexual menace (498) and grief (*A Storm of Swords 2: Blood and Gold* [*Storm* 2] 309). Unlike Sansa, however, she hits back. She murders several people and arranges other killings. When she stabs the Tickler it is an act of revenge, not necessity; the last thing he hears is her reciting the questions he asked as Gregor Clegane's torturer, reminding him of why he is dying (2.459), and the Hound must pull her off his corpse. This does more than damage Arya's moral authority. Unlike Sansa, Arya is becoming a part of the Gothic world, asserting herself by inflicting rather than enduring pain. "I'm the ghost in Harrenhal" (*Clash* 425), she gloats after the killing of Chiswyck, explicitly equating herself with a ghost haunting a ruined castle like Udolpho. This submergence in the gothic milieu furthers the etiolation of Arya's identity

implied by her plethora of *noms de guerre*. The abiding question concerning Arya is not whether she will physically survive the Gothic world, but whether there will be anything left of the charmingly bolshie nine-year-old who left Winterfell when she gets home. Sansa's reactions contrast sharply. During the Battle of the Blackwater she rejects Cersei's fatalistic posturing (*Clash* 769) and instead rises, aged barely thirteen, to comfort the ladies of the court (779-780). Such maidenly fortitude would be material for a beautiful song. Sansa's actions echo those of her mother, skilled in de-escalating the excesses of the violent regime that surrounds her (Young 96). Dontos Hollard owes his life to this skill (*Clash* 40-41). By refusing to fight back against the Gothic milieu, Sansa insulates herself against contamination by it. Her travails galvanize rather than corrode her identity.

The contrasting fate of Robb Stark clarifies why her passive methodology is so effective. When Sansa and her father are detained, Robb mounts a rescue mission, which escalates into a full-scale independence movement after Eddard's execution. He spends *A Clash of Kings* tirelessly forging alliances, liaising with lieutenants, attempting bold gambits, winning battle after battle—and completely failing to have any strategic impact on the war he is fighting. He notably fails to prevent Tywin Lannister from riding to defend King's Landing from assault by Stannis Baratheon, who promised he would free Sansa when he took the city. (429) "I've won every battle," Robb complains, "but somehow I'm losing the war" (*Storm* 1.480). In this he typifies Day's formulation of the Gothic hero. Where the heroine asserts her identity via stoic inaction, Day attributes the hero with restless attempts "to dominate his world through action, thus creating his own identity" (19). This is what Robb, reviving the long-dormant title of King in the North, is attempting to do. In Day's Gothic underworld, however, the only applicable actions are to suffer pain or inflict it, to be either masochist or sadist. This is after all a milieu set up, per Mighall, to offend the protagonists, resist rational effort, and frustrate right-thinking sensibilities. Restlessly active characters like Arya and Robb are drawn into the Gothic world, becoming a part of it, their self-assertion gradually mutating into counterproductive replications of the iniquities they sought to end. Day (36) gives the example of Victor Frankenstein, whose attempts to understand nature and conquer death lead to a creation which calls human understanding of nature into question and, eventually, to his pursuit of the monster with the intention of answering its violence in kind. Robb follows the same course. Crowned by his followers, he resolves to be a good, just monarch. Crimes among those followers demand capital punishment, however, and the honorable thing for Robb to do is administer the sentence literally:

The axe crashed down. Heavy and well-honed, it killed at a single blow, but it took three to separate the man's head from his body, and by the time it was done both living and dead were drenched in blood. Robb flung the poleaxe down in disgust, and turned wordless towards the heart tree. He stood shaking with his hands half-clenched and the rain running down his cheeks. (*Storm* 1.282)

Note that Robb achieves his practical objective—the death of Rickard Karstark—in one blow, but is obliged to keep swinging until Rickard's head rolls. This episode thus transcends subjective questions about the morality of capital punishment and shows him participating in Matthews's gothic medievalism, perpetuating the barbarity of execution via public decapitation. Robb inhabits Day's Gothic underworld, where his actions inevitably bend towards violence and sadism. Finally he kicks against Westeros's medievalist custom of arranged marriage, wedding a wife of his choosing rather than one imposed upon him by his allies. In reprisal those allies kill him and his mother (2.133-134). These are the wages of action in a literary space that exists specifically to frustrate, offend, and abuse action. Sansa avoids Robb's fate by keeping to a policy of stoic inaction; as Day argues, her passivity is her great strength.

This does not in itself constitute empowerment. As Day observes (104), the models of respectability to which girls like Sansa cling are patriarchal constructs; attachment to them is a form of subjection. Indeed at the Mythcon 2021 session where I presented these ideas one spectator dismissed Sansa as a "sexy lamp." This is a reference to an informal yardstick of feminist credibility in narrative; does the heroine serve any purpose that could not be served by an attractive lamp? The test (a reference to the stereotype of a hero carrying a heroine to safety like a lamp, as if she cannot even walk without masculine aid) seems fair, but Sansa passes it, for one key reason: lamps cannot think. Sansa seldom acts, but she thinks a great deal. She does so, furthermore, in a way that Day would recognize. Day observes that under the stewardship of Edgar Allan Poe, Gothic fantasy evolved a new literary organism, the detective. He sees the detective as inherently androgynous, combining elements of the Gothic hero and heroine: "From the hero, he takes intellect and egotism; from the heroine, the ability to restrain himself, to be reactive rather than active" (56). The power of this skill set is demonstrated with reference to Tzvetan Todorov's observation that a detective story is an authorial arrangement of two stories. The first story chronicles the crime, an action calculated to offend both diegetic and heterodiegetic observers. This has already happened and cannot be changed; action will no longer avail. The protagonists of the second story, therefore, "do not act, they learn" (Todorov 44), piecing together the first story by analyzing

its legacies. This effort is motivated by egotism, by the assumption the investigator can find the answers via suitably assiduous analysis of the information available, a quality Day describes as stereotypically masculine. To gather evidence, however, the detective must place themselves adjacent to the crime, enduring offence and perhaps danger for the duration of the investigation. This calls for a degree of the passivity and masochism evident in Gothic heroines such as Radcliffe's Emily. Day (54-55) uses the example of Sherlock Holmes enduring the uncanny wildness of Dartmoor in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as a necessary precondition to understanding what happened to Charles Baskerville. The result of this combination of intellectual activity and physical passivity is that emotional affect becomes polemic effect; the reader receives not a description of the uncanny but a reasoned, structured indictment of it. This is what is happening in Martin's story. Sansa's passivity is not complacency, conformism, or cowardice, but a necessary component of a nuanced characterization which achieves an incisive, empowering effect in the broader narrative.

That narrative is built in a particular, recognizable way, to particular, recognizable effect. Martin uses what Farah Mendlesohn calls immersive fantasy rhetoric, explaining his secondary world by having characters reflect on what they already know. This is a direct contrast to the "portal-quest" rhetoric favored by authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, who build worlds by having characters such as Gandalf explain them to neophytes such as Frodo. Neither approach is superior to the other, but they produce different effects. Portal-quest worlds take shape as the focalizer accepts received explanation. Frodo's report of Middle-earth, for example, emerges as a consequence of his doggedly idealistic, goal-orientated pursuit of Gandalf's proposed solution to the problem of the Ring. This permeates such places with a sense of "moral expectation" (Mendlesohn 5), a feeling that there are, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, truths worth clinging to. Martin's favored immersive rhetoric rejects such idealism. Characters rationalistically weigh what they see and hear in relation to what they already know. The reader plays catch-up by interrogating the assumptions evident in their reflections. Sansa's father provides a succinct example of this when King Robert discusses what to do with the son of the late Jon Arryn:

"I had hoped to foster him with Tywin Lannister at Casterly Rock. Jon had no brothers, no other sons. Was I supposed to leave him to be raised by women?"

Ned would sooner entrust a child to a pit viper than to Lord Tywin, but he left his doubts unspoken. (*Game* 41)

This is the first mention of Tywin Lannister, who will appear 550 pages later and become one of Martin's more colorfully nefarious villains. At this stage, however, the reader only knows that he is a major player in Westerosi realpolitik, linked with a location called Casterly Rock, and less reputable to some of his colleagues than others. Readers form this impression by examining the assumptions evident in Eddard's reflection—by critiquing a critique. Mendlesohn (79) likens this technique to the operation of a bain-marie or double-boiler; the world sits in the inner chamber and is prepared for consumption by the interrogative heat exerted upon it from the outer. She associates this method of world-building with Clute's notion of thinning, "the passing away of a higher and more intense reality" (942), one of the key leitmotifs of modern fantasy. To build a world by analyzing evidence and revising received assumption is to eschew the moral expectation that portalquest fantasy builds. Westeros seems "bleak" (Croft 4) because readers and characters alike build it by hiving away from the organic certainties that drive the texts to which it is most commonly compared.

As a focalizer of such a fantasy, Sansa's essential function is to be critical. That criticism is born of the egotism that Day cites as characteristic of the Gothic hero, a belief that she can work this issue out if she keeps trying. Although most of her compatriots share this belief, her investigation takes place in an epistemological context that proves particularly incisive. As Carroll (43) observes, Sansa retains her idealism even after her father's gratuitous execution. She is drawn into Dontos's plan by the prospect of being a real-life damsel in distress ("a shiver went through her" [*Clash* 258]) and to the competing Tyrell solution by the sexual thrill of interacting with the dashing Ser Loras (*Storm* 1.77). These moves are carefully nuanced, however. During her giddily hormonal walk with Ser Loras, she winces at the sight of his colleagues sparring. "They have scarcely finished burying the dead from the last battle, and already they are practicing for the next one" (1.78), she thinks, recalling an event in which her observation of human catastrophes both grand (*Clash* 778) and intimate (783) is directly contrasted with Ser Dontos's infantile romanticism (785). Sansa's idealism endures as a critical tool, a frame of reference. Martin makes that frame wholly explicit. "Knights are sworn to defend the weak, protect women, and fight for the right," Sansa observes after her thrashing from Boros Blount, "but none of them did a thing" (444). This is evident even earlier in her travails when, after her father's execution, Joffrey sends Ser Meryn Trant to fetch her for further humiliation. This is the man who previously struck her, and she hesitates to accompany him:

“Are you refusing to come, my lady?” The look he gave her was without expression. He did not so much as glance at the bruise he had left her.

He did not hate her, Sansa realised, neither did he love her. He felt nothing for her at all. She was only a . . . a *thing* to him. “No,” she said, rising. She wanted to rage, to hurt him as he’d hurt her, to warn him that when she was queen she would have him exiled if he ever dared strike her again . . . but she remembered what the Hound had told her, and so all she said was “I shall do whatever His Grace commands.”

“As I do,” he replied.

“Yes . . . but you are no true knight, Ser Meryn.”

Sandor Clegane would have laughed at that, Sansa knew. Other men might have cursed her, warned her to keep silent, or even begged her forgiveness. Ser Meryn Trant did none of these things. Ser Meryn Trant simply did not care. (*Game* 720)

Sansa’s pain and indignation are real. As the Hound Sandor Clegane has warned her, however, resistance would be futile; Joffrey can have her brutalized at will. She therefore limits her resistance to a verbal observation that Meryn is not behaving as a true knight should. Her frame of reference, her capacity as a young girl raised on romantic niceties, focuses her critique on a key point; chivalry is intended, successfully or otherwise, to prompt moral engagement, to keep those possessed of coercive power thinking about how to use it responsibly. Her emphatic repetition of *Ser* Meryn Trant’s ill-deserved chivalric title in the final paragraph drives home her observation that this is not happening. This pattern is repeated when Ser Dontos enacts his long-promised rescue, and reveals his gallantry was financially motivated—the courtier Petyr Baelish was paying him, and ensures the drunk’s post factum silence by killing him. Sansa cries, “but whether she wept for Ser Dontos Hollard, for Joff, for Tyrion, or for herself, Sansa could not say.” What she can and does say, however, is “Is it *all* lies, forever and ever, everyone and everything?” (*Storm* 2.266) The *it* in question is the polemic ballast of courtly literature, the moral examples and lessons contained in chivalric romances, which she has bought into, but which everybody else seems to have missed. Martin thus launches a particularly striking example of the thinning effect characteristic of immersive fantasy. Sansa’s Mendlesohnian bain-marie runs at a consistently high temperature, her abiding adolescent idealism accentuating the moral deficits she observes. And to torture a metaphor slightly, her steaming indignation locks in a particular narrative flavor. The bleakness of Westeros, its lack of institutional direction and moral vigor, is so vivid because it is shown through the eyes of a character abidingly preoccupied with the gap between what should be and what is.

Sansa therefore parts company with Radcliffe's Emily in her possession of a keen analytical intelligence. As Day observes (45-46), Udolpho remains a mystery because Emily lacks the initiative to place any real analysis of her travails on the narrative record. Sansa by contrast possesses the intellect and gumption required to stand—a bereaved twelve-year-old already nursing a thick ear—and baldly inform the armed man who bashed her exactly what the problem is here. Ser Meryn Trant may not care, but the reader gets the point. Sansa's subplot is therefore neither a scandalous tale of imperiled innocence nor a trip through a school of hard knocks but a rational, rhetorical indictment of a key narrative issue. This can only take practical effect because Sansa apes Emily's physical passivity by becoming exposed to uncanny events. This quality is also evident in Dupin in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Sherlock Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Dan Muldoon in *The Naked City* or V.I. Warshawski in *Deadlock*. Detectives must get down where the action is. They must expose themselves to the offense and danger of an obnoxious world and observe its operations. Radcliffe's Emily does this but, per Day, lacks the intellectual fiber to assess the iniquities that surround her. Sansa has this quality, but it is only from the passive position of the Radcliffian heroine that she can gather the data required to for a proper indictment. Her passivity is therefore a precondition of her active, incisive polemic effect. This discussion of active and passive qualities may or may not benefit from Day's gendering of them. If that code can be accepted, however, Sansa is functionally a highly androgynous character. Her feminine/passive qualities are required for her to ruthlessly deploy masculine/active capacities unrealized by a straightforward Radcliffian heroine. No lamp, sexy or otherwise, possesses this skill set.

This dynamic is particularly noticeable in her dealings with Petyr Baelish. She first meets him at the Tourney of the Hand, where she and Jeyne watch as Ser Hugh of the Vale dies. The death causes Jeyne to weep "so hysterically that Septa Mordane finally took her away to regain her composure" (*Game* 286). Nobody could blame an eleven-year-old child for such a reaction to a sudden, gory death at such close quarters. Sansa's reaction, by contrast, is to reflect calmly on the death, not as a snuffing-out of a human life but as a frustrating instance of bathos—"there would be no songs sung for him. That was sad" (287). She forgets Hugh the moment the dishy Ser Loras appears, however. In the primary world this could reasonably be taken as cold, deluded, or perhaps evidence of precocious libidinousness. In novelistic rhetoric, however, it is an exercise in irony, drawing reader attention to Sansa's mindset by contrasting it with Jeyne's more relatable distress (Booth 68). Via this contrast Martin signals the extent to which Sansa is emotionally invested in romantic neo-medievalism. That investment keeps her at the tourney, composed and ladylike, ten feet from a puddle of a young man's lifeblood. This is the

feminine/passive side of her character on display, marking her as someone who, by prioritizing respectability, immerses herself in a violent, abusive milieu. Those who would dismiss this as stupid or conformist neglect that Sansa needs to stay at the tourney in order to exercise the masculine/active side of her character a page later:

When Sansa finally looked up, a man was standing over her, staring. He was short, with a pointed beard and a silver streak in his hair, almost as old as her father. "You must be one of her daughters," he said to her. He had grey-green eyes that did not smile when his mouth did. "You have the Tully look." (*Game* 288)

It is worth briefly comparing Sansa's first impression of Baelish with that her father provides when introducing the reader to the character. Eddard Stark dislikes Baelish for the "sly arrogance" he displays in raising the fact that he was once a contender for the hand of Eddard's wife (Sansa's mother) Catelyn (186). This focalization belongs in one of Sansa's songs, communicating a suitably romantic grudge between two members of a warrior aristocracy. It is therefore character work revealing more about the fiercely honor-bound Eddard than what he is looking at. Sansa's reading of the man is more critical, and reveals something about the object of focalization—this man's eyes do not fit with his expression; his emotions are faked. This impression belongs in a crime novel. It is a detective sizing up an underworld contact, assessing the extent to which she can trust him—which is, even at this first glance, not a great deal further than she could throw him. This critique demonstrates Day's point about the dual nature of the fictional detective. Sansa would not have been present to meet Baelish if she had retired in distress with Jeyne. Her criticisms only come because she accepts an offensive milieu; her power stems from her combination of active and passive qualities.

This capacity for noticing oddities in Baelish's behavior continues when he ensconces her in the Eyrie, the castle of her neurotic aunt Lysa, whom he marries. When Lysa proves a liability, Baelish tosses her through the Moon Door (the door over the precipice upon which the Eyrie is built), tortures a confession out of a retainer, and sets himself up as lord of this prestigious manor (*Storm* 2.541). The local gentry are suspicious and arrive at the Eyrie with an army to take Lysa's sickly son Robert into their guardianship. Baelish invites them to a parley. On the appointed day, Sansa spots him again smiling with his mouth but not his eyes (*A Feast for Crows* [*Feast*] 374). The meeting goes ahead, with Sansa (posing as Baelish's illegitimate daughter) delving into her conventionally feminine skill set and working as a diligent young chatelaine. From this undercover position she again assesses these people, particularly noting the peculiar smile of the oddly belligerent Ser Lyn Corbray (380). As the

parley grows frosty Ser Lyn draws his sword and threatens Baelish before storming out. This atrocious breach of Westeros's laws of hospitality gives Baelish the moral authority to dismiss the other lords without addressing their concerns. This bothers Sansa, who later tosses and turns in bed, "worrying at it like a dog at some old bone" (385). Eventually she confronts Baelish and accuses him of paying Corbray to cause the ruckus and thus rob his colleagues of the moral initiative. *Now* Baelish smiles properly, "the candlelight dancing in his eyes" as he confesses, clearly genuinely delighted in his own cleverness. Sansa has once again established the nature of a problem; Westerosi chivalry is not only morally apathetic, but evidently for sale. This does not happen in the televisual iteration of the meeting ("The Mountain and the Viper"). Screenwriters David Benioff and D.B. Weiss excise Ser Lyn from the story altogether and have Sansa defuse a strained discussion by revealing her true identity to the assembled lords. This attempt to show Sansa's mature self-assertion creates subsequent inconsistencies (the revelation has no subsequent effect; Sansa in being pushed around a few episodes later) and squanders the effects Martin achieves in prose. Only by working undercover is Sansa free to gather evidence of Baelish's malfeasance. She is thus resisting the Gothic world, not in the manner of her (defeated) brother or (ontologically imperiled) sister, but via the methodology Day identifies in the literary detective. She does not attempt to solve the problem, but to think it through, and by so doing structure a dramatic indictment of it.

It is therefore worth noting that Sansa *twice* blows the case wide open. Her father went south to find out who killed Jon Arryn, but courtiers effectively stymie this investigation. He succeeds only in learning something Arryn discovered—that Joffrey and his siblings are the results of incest between the Lannister twins—making this breakthrough thanks to Sansa's indignant criticisms of Joffrey's ostensible father (*Game* 462). Eddard accordingly surmises that the Lannisters had Arryn poisoned to protect their secret. The actual assassin, however, is identified by Sansa, when she witnesses an argument between Petyr and his newly-acquired wife, Arryn's widow Lysa. "There's no cause for all these tears," Petyr tells Lysa.

"Tears, tears, tears," she sobbed hysterically. "No need for tears . . . but that's not what you said in King's Landing. You told me to put the tears in Jon's wine, and I did. For Robert, and for us! And I wrote Catelyn and told her the Lannisters had killed my lord husband, just as you said. That was so clever . . . you were always clever, I told father that, I said Petyr's so clever, he'll rise high, he will, he will . . ." (*Storm* 2.540)

So Arryn's death was only tangentially related to the conspiracy Eddard discovered. Petyr used Lysa's affection for him to convince her to use

the poisonous Tears of Lys to murder Arryn in order to bring Eddard to the capital where he could discover Arryn's secret, become a threat to Queen Cersei, and be killed, rendering Catelyn single again. Petyr, who loved Catelyn as a boy, could then presumably swoop in and marry her; moments after Lysa's confession he tips her off a cliff. Baelish is ultimately to blame for the series of events that have thrown Westeros into turmoil and conflict. It is crucial to observe that Sansa is only on hand to overhear Lysa's confession because of a pattern of passivity; she rolled with the punches in King's Landing, co-operated with Dontos's escape plan, kept her hair on when Petyr revealed himself to be behind that plot and allowed him to sequester her in an isolated castle. She is on hand to hear Lysa's confession because she obeyed her aunt's summons, opened the Moon Door at her insistence, and stood close enough that she lost a shoe over the precipice (2.538-2.540). Readers learn the motivation for the entire plot of *A Song of Ice and Fire* thanks to Sansa's combination of practical passivity and intellectual criticism—thanks, that is, to her capacities as a perfect, androgynous Gothic detective as schematized by Day.

The diminished impact of the later seasons of *Game of Thrones* is probably due in part to the screenwriters' abandonment of that model. On screen Sansa participates in Westeros's pattern of transactional violence by having her abusive second husband mauled to death by dogs ("The Battle of the Bastards"). Swank (120) labels this as a maturation, but in Day's paradigm it turns her from a detective to a vigilante and detracts from the impact she brings to Martin's novels. In prose, Sansa's diminished presence in Martin's more recent work (three chapters in *A Feast for Crows*; none in *A Dance with Dragons*) also leave those books noticeably less pointed in their polemic thrust. Brienne of Tarth arguably fills in for Sansa, but is a less effective investigator of medievalist iniquities. Jumped by Shagwell, a bandit dressed as a jester, she demands he laugh as she stabs him "until her hand was red up to the wrist" (*Feast* 333). The incident recalls Arya's revenge on the Tickler; her restless, futile quest to find Sansa recalls Robb Stark's campaign. Like Robb and Arya she is drawn into the Gothic world; her story currently stands on a cliffhanger in which she appears to have become party to a monstrous revenge plot (*A Dance with Dragons* 752). Invidious as it may be to say so of a character struggling to transcend her gender, Brienne is too active—too masculine, in Day's terms—to do Sansa's job. This would be why reviewer Andrew Leonard felt that *A Feast for Crows* "didn't seem to be headed *anywhere* in particular"—an authorial investigation into the shortcomings of romantic medievalism and the nature of its gothic opposite is missing its crack investigator. The draft material Martin has released for his forthcoming novels include passages focalized by Sansa. One might reasonably hope, therefore, that these books will benefit from her uniquely potent skill set. Her sensibilities get her into trouble, then endure as a frame of reference for her

to make incisive sense of that trouble. She is crucial to the impact of the tale. Martin's seamless slotting of an "achingly human" (Mantoan 56) character into a polemic role is something for which he deserves far more credit than he has received.

Sansa's passivity should not be confused with despair, furthermore. The Gothic heroine submits herself to the depredations of the world, Day observes, in the expectation of eventually being released to pursue her own agenda. This is a masochistic act, but also an optimistic one. She battens down the hatches in confidence that the storm will pass, and that when it does so her own identity will abide. In doing so she lets herself in for indignation, fear, pain and misery, but also demonstrates a faith in her eventual deliverance. As such she embodies the confidence that has always led authors to contrast the present with the barbarities of the aestheticized past, the reassurance that while those crimes may surface to trouble the present, contemporary rationality will prevail over atavistic brutality. By enduring the horrors of her creator's darkly medievalist world, Sansa Stark is acting on a belief that she—and by implication the reader and their world—is indeed made of sterner stuff.

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