

Maimed Bodies in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
at
Rhodes University

By Amy Caroline Goodenough

December 2016

Supervisor: Dr Jamie McGregor

Abstract

George R.R. Martin's fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, has joined franchises like *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* at the forefront of popular culture. Unlike other popular fantasy franchises, however, *Song* is notably 'gritty' – inspired as much by the realism of historical fiction as it is by its fantastical predecessors. The novels focus on a massive struggle for power, and that struggle is a famously bloody one: the violence of the novel's medieval-inspired world and of medieval warfare, is placed front and center. This thesis argues that *Song* portrays this excessive violence with a view to more than mere sensation. The body is central to Martin's text, and since power is the object of Martin's characters, he depicts the way in which power interacts with the body with sophistication. The use of capital and corporal punishment is foregrounded frequently in the text, and presented as central to the process of ruling, but horrifying in its potential for injustice. For all that these acts of maiming – public execution, public torture – may be presented as ceremonies of justice, Martin makes it evident that they are in fact rituals of power. The spectacular display of maimed bodies occurs frequently – so frequently that it is clearly ordinary to Martin's characters – and nearly always with a view to creating a perception of power. Heads are spiked on castle walls, gibbets hung in town squares, and slaves crucified on road-signs, and these all speak not of the criminality of the victims, but of the power of those doing the punishing. While such displays may be successful, they usually signal weakness to the reader: Martin writes numerous characters whose acts of violence come as misplaced reactions to their own vulnerability. This dynamic comes to the fore most powerfully in the absurd performances of violence by Theon Greyjoy, and, later, in his torture by Ramsay Bolton.

Acknowledgments

With thanks, firstly, to my parents, without whose boundless support I would have had nothing to eat but my words; to Jamie, who guided me through this, no matter how many bad jokes I made, or how many times I spelled his name wrong; to Rosa, Chloe, Celia, Athena, and Joanne, who are accidentally to blame for this; to Lara, Jeannie, Erika, Sam, Cait, Grant, Brendan, and Natalie, whose kindness got me through it; and to Shaun with the bullet round his neck, who first showed me *A Game of Thrones*, and told me it was part of a trilogy. This is for AJ, who was taken by the Drowned God, and for Elsie, who went with the Lady of Lys.

Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Contents	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: “a piece of prince”, “a chunk of king”, and a “dung-encrusted crown”: Martin’s Ignoble Bodies	11
Chapter Two: “With mine own hand I take your life”: Justice and the Rending of Flesh	28
Chapter Three: “How they loved to promise heads”: Maimed Bodies Displayed	69
Chapter Four: “it rhymes with weak”: The Violent Performance of Ramsay and Reek	98
Conclusion	125
Works Cited	127

Introduction

The past twenty years or so has seen something of a renaissance in fantasy media. From the astounding popular success of the *Harry Potter* novels, to the reinvigoration of Tolkien's legendarium through Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, and then more dubiously *The Hobbit*, to the resurgence of interest in fantasy roleplaying games like *Dungeons and Dragons*,¹ fantasy has migrated, at least in part, from the ghetto of cult following to the suburbs of popular culture. Bestselling fantasy novelist Lev Grossman has mused on this dramatic shift:

When I was a kid in the 1980s, fantasy was not entirely OK. ... to be a fantasy fan was not to be a good, contented hobbit, working his sunny garden and smoking his fragrant pipeweed. It was to be Gollum, slimy and gross and hidden away, riddling in the dark. ... In the wider world, of which I was reluctantly a part, a love of fantasy was a sign of weakness.

But that has changed. Something odd happened to popular culture, somewhere around the turn of the millennium: Whereas the great franchises of the late twentieth century had tended to be science fiction – *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *The Matrix* – somewhere around 2000 a shifting of the tectonic plates occurred. The great eye of Sauron swiveled, and we began to pay attention to other things. What we paid attention to was magic. (“How Magic Conquered Pop Culture”)

We may ask, with Grossman, “why fantasy? And why now?” (ibid.), but regardless of the answer we give ourselves, it is clear that fantasy is, at least for the moment, perceived not as simply the purview of the bespectacled basement dweller, nor as rightly belonging to children.² J.R.R. Tolkien, arguably the greatest of the founding fathers of modern fantasy, who lamented that “[i]t is usually assumed that children are the natural or the specially appropriate audience for fairy-stories,” would have been delighted, although the subject matter of some of these stories might well have alarmed him.

¹ The Player's Handbook for the 5th edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* enjoyed brief success at the top of the Amazon sales charts when it was released in 2014 – a feat which would have seemed impossible for what is “essentially a niche gaming product” not long before (McIlwain). But the resurgence in interest in Tabletop Roleplaying Games is most clearly evidenced by – and likely fuelled by – their appearance in popular television shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, and *Stranger Things*.

² Grossman's own answer is that in our age of cyber-connection and social disconnection, “Fantasy holds out the possibility that there's another way to live”, much as it did for the first modern fantasists, who longed for a connection to a pastoral world lost to war and technological revolution. The proposition seems not untrue, but nevertheless unsatisfyingly vague, and a little at odds with the some of the bleaker kinds of fantasy that have been gaining attention.

No franchise exemplifies the current state of this rise to popularity as much as George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. As of April 2015, the books had sold over 58 million copies in 45 languages (Flood). HBO's television adaptation, *Game of Thrones*, has been the most pirated television series every year since 2012 (Van der Sar) – a truly 21st-century achievement. Lily Rothman observed that “the slightest hint that Martin may be typing anything is met with near universal glee” from fans of the show. The franchise has spawned numerous memes,³ board games, video games, role-playing games, and at least three cookbooks.⁴ Martin has inspired not only countless fan-sites – a fact which is not particularly surprising in the current state of fan culture – but also a slew of anti-fan-sites: a “shadow fandom”, as Laura Miller calls it, “devoted to taunting Martin, his associates, and readers”, especially over the constant delays to the publication of the rest of the series. The *Game of Thrones* phenomenon is a strikingly modern one, and quite impossible to miss.

In 2005, just after the release of the fourth novel in the series, *A Feast for Crows*, and some time before HBO turned Martin's moderate popularity into global mania, Lev Grossman proclaimed Martin “the American Tolkien”, but cited as the secret to Martin's appeal his dissimilarity to Tolkien:

What really distinguishes Martin, and what marks him as a major force for evolution in fantasy, is his refusal to embrace a vision of the world as a Manichaeian struggle between Good and Evil. Tolkien's work has enormous imaginative force, but you have to go elsewhere for moral complexity. Martin's wars are multifaceted and ambiguous, as are the men and women who wage them and the gods who watch them and chortle, and somehow that makes them mean more. *A Feast for Crows* isn't pretty elves against gnarly orcs. It's men and women slugging it out in the muck, for money and power and lust and love. (“The American Tolkien”)

Joe Abercrombie made a similar claim:

In the broader consciousness, *Lord of the Rings* was how people saw fantasy. Detailed, focused on the setting, a lot of complexity, a good-versus-evil narrative. *Game of Thrones* has given people an alternative way of looking at epic fantasy. We've gone from orbiting one sun to orbiting two. (qtd. in Flood)

³ “You know nothing, Jon Snow”, and “Winter is Coming” are probably the most recognizable and repeated memes, but *Know Your Meme* lists several others (“Game of Thrones”).

⁴ An incomplete list of these products can be found on Martin's website (“Merchandise”).

These are grand claims to make of a series as yet untested by time, and which may well fade from public consciousness after the final book – or, more likely, the final season. But whether or not it will be remembered, it certainly deserves to be: Martin’s work is original, complex, engaging, and a worthy figurehead for the current state of the fantasy renaissance.

Song, as I will refer to it frequently for the sake of brevity, is also very different from the popular fantasy narratives that have preceded it. The dedication of the third novel in the series, *A Storm of Swords*, reads

for Phyllis
who made me put the dragons in

It is perhaps a surprising introduction to a work of fantasy that the dragons were, at an early stage of the first novel’s creation, optional.⁵ Dragons are now essential to the story, but the original possibility of their being merely the heraldic symbol of the Targaryens speaks to the origins of Martin’s story, not as fantasy, but as pseudo-history.⁶ Martin at one point considered writing historical fiction – being dissuaded primarily by the impossibility of plot-twists (“George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview”) – and one can see the influences: in Stark and Lannister, one hears echoes of York and Lancaster; in the Red Wedding, one sees the Black Dinner; and the Wall is clearly Hadrian’s, made fantastically large.

Like so much epic fantasy following Tolkien, *Song*’s setting is primarily inspired by more-or-less medieval Europe. There are numerous inconsistencies, and Martin draws widely from other historical periods and places, but his discussions focus on the resemblance of the Seven Kingdoms to medieval Europe.⁷ He particularly wanted to create a world which reflected that period more accurately than the fantasy genre often does:

⁵ It took a conversation with writer (and friend) Phyllis Eisenstein to convince him that the dragons should be included (“George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview”).

⁶ Dragons are now essential to the text’s past, present, and future: it was dragons that made possible Aegon’s Conquest, which founded the Seven Kingdoms, and the impact of Valyrian Dragonlords on Essos is palpable, so dragons fundamentally shaped the novels’ setting; the “Ice and Fire” of the title seem to refer to the reappearance of the wintery Others and of dragons over the course of the first novel; and seems almost certain that Daenerys will (in future books) walk in Aegon’s footsteps and conquer the Seven Kingdoms with her dragons.

⁷ Carlyne Larrington’s *Winter is Coming* provides an extensive examination of how Westeros and Essos reflect various real world geographical and historical realities, as websites like *History Behind Game of Thrones* have attempted to do in blog form (Adair). Jessica Walker has examined how Martin’s text is inspired particularly by the Shakespearean take on medieval history, and not simply the history itself. Benjamin Breen has argued that one of the series’ charms is that it has been heavily influenced by the expanding global view of the early modern period. Finally, Michail Zontos has (apparently uniquely) examined the influence of American history on the novel, in the thematic presence of the American frontier at Martin’s Wall.

The contrast between [historical fiction] and a lot of fantasy ... was dramatic because a lot of the fantasy of Tolkien imitators has a quasi-medieval setting, but it's like the Disneyland Middle Ages. ("GRRM Interview")

Fantasists, Martin complains, use the trappings of the middle ages, but ignore its horrors, and its sensibilities, particularly concerning class structure:

they had ... [t]he trappings of a class system, but they didn't seem to understand what a class system actually meant. ... It was like a Ren Fair Middle Ages. Even though you had castles and princesses and walled cities and all that, the sensibilities were those of 20th century Americans. You didn't see that in good historical fiction. ("George R.R. Martin, Author")

Martin, with *A Song of Ice and Fire*, was trying to write

[i]n my kind of cross-genre/genre-bending kind of way ... an epic fantasy that had the imagination and the sense of wonder that you get in the best fantasy, but the gritty realism of the best historical fiction. (ibid.)

His world is all the more horrifying for it: the medieval world, Martin claims, "had teeth" ("GRRM Interview"), and in his work, it bites – poverty, famine, disease, war, and rape drive this story, far more than the dragons do.

War is the principal subject. Martin's tale takes place primarily on the continent of Westeros, made up almost entirely by the Seven Kingdoms – a single kingdom formed out of seven separate kingdoms by the dragon-riding Aegon Targaryen nearly three-hundred years before the events of the series. A civil war, fifteen years before the start of the first novel, deposed the Targaryen kings, and raised Robert Baratheon to the throne. Now, a complicated series of circumstances, arising from political tensions, individual ambitions, and sheer bad luck, lead to yet another war, in which numerous factions vie for rule over part or all of the kingdom. In the meantime, winter (which in this world lasts an indeterminate number of years) approaches, and with it, the unexpected threat of the Others, or White Walkers – a race of humanoid creatures, not seen for millennia, who kill indiscriminately, and raise armies of the dead.

Despite being the greater threat, the Others are peripheral to the text so far.⁸ Though it seems clear that the series is moving toward direct conflict with these icy supernatural

⁸ Of the seven novels planned, only five have been released.

invaders, it is the conflict within the Seven Kingdoms that dominates the reader's attention. Initially, the war is fought between the Stark and Lannister families, but it rapidly spreads, and though it becomes known as the War of the Five Kings, for the five men who crown themselves and vie for power,⁹ the belligerents are more numerous, and their motivations more complex than can be summarized easily. In this war, there are few clear villains, and there is no clearly right side, and the reader is constantly called upon to empathize with characters who are in conflict with one another.

The narrative form reflects this complexity. The prologues, which appear in every book, and the epilogues, which appear only in the third and fifth novels, are told always from the point of view of characters who are brought to the fore for a single chapter only, usually having been introduced for the first time in this chapter. The reader is given a brief introduction to a new situation which will soon affect the novel's main characters, in the style of a cold open, but the focalizer always dies, either at the end of the chapter, or soon thereafter. The main body of each novel, on the other hand, consists of chapters focalized through a rotating cast of main characters, with each chapter named for its focalizer. There are no fewer than nine focalizers in each novel, who are often in direct conflict with one another, allowing Martin to give us a sometimes fragmented, sometimes interwoven, perspective of events, resulting in a text which is constantly in conversation with itself.

A Song of Ice and Fire needs unpacking – a fact that its fans know well, to judge by the endless amount of discussion occurring online. Fans unpick strands of the tale to speculate about the story's future, past, and even present: Who will sit the Iron Throne? Who is the Harpy? Is Young Griff truly Aegon Targaryen?¹⁰ Fan sites like *Westeros.org* and *Tower of the Hand* host blogs where contributors analyse textual themes, forums where fans discuss theories and debate interpretations, and extensive encyclopaediae of information about the novels, and the world contained therein. Amateur blogs provide chapter-by-chapter analyses, and professional news websites scrutinize episode-by-episode. Yet while popular attention has been astounding, and fan engagement is massive, traditional academic criticism has been slow to catch on: some twenty years after the publication of *A Game of Thrones*, and five years

⁹ That is, Joffrey Baratheon, Renly Baratheon, Stannis Baratheon, Robb Stark, and Balon Greyjoy.

¹⁰ Daenerys, Galazza Galare, and No.

after the TV series premiered, there has been very little good criticism written on Martin's text.

Writers like Steven Attewell, Ed West, Marc N. Kleinhenz, and Valerie Estelle Frankel have published (sometimes self-published) books of essays analysing the history, politics and symbolism of *Song* and *Game of Thrones*, often drawn from their work elsewhere. Works like these are not particularly sophisticated as literary criticism – some have been astonishingly poor – but represent concerted effort by readers to unpack this considerably dense text. Anthologies of criticism have also appeared, such as James Lowder's *Beyond the Wall*, and two books edited by Kleinhenz for the fan-site *Tower of the Hand*. These works have tended to be stronger – the essays usually brief and lacking rigour, but they offer engaged and intelligent responses to the text nonetheless. Long-running podcasts like Sean T. Collins and Stefan Sasse's *Boiled Leather Audio Hour*, and the sprawling, collaborative podcast, *Vassals of Kingsgrave*, produce a lively, ongoing conversation between fans about all aspects of the *Game of Thrones* franchise. The vast majority of interpretive work on *Song* occurs in this way: online, in a haphazard, but immensely prolific space, quite a considerable distance from the realm of academic peer-review.

The study of *Song* in more traditionally academic spaces is nonetheless growing. The adaptation of the novels into other formats – television, computer games, board games, and so on – has attracted interest in the field of transmedia studies (e.g. Shacklock; Schröter; Verma). There are the beginnings of a strong presence of fandom and audience studies in the franchise (e.g. Young; Fathallah; Švelch; Howe), including the ambitious *Game of Thrones Research Project*, an ongoing quantitative project examining viewer responses to the HBO show. Examinations of the text through a political or historical lens have begun to appear (e.g. Walker; Zontos), including Carolyne Larrington's *Winter is Coming*, which explores in detail the parallels between Westeros and medieval Europe – one of the few books on Martin written by a single author on a single subject. Discussions of ethics (e.g. Stanton; Hovey; Hackney) and religion (e.g. Wittingslow; O'Leary) have also appeared.

The portrayal of women – and particularly violence against women – is probably the most contested subject of research into *Song*. Martin's world is an immensely misogynistic one, and the question of whether the text critiques or merely reproduces that misogyny has been hotly contested: his female characters “have been read as both feminist and antifeminist, as subversive and repressive” (Schubart and Gjelsvik 1), his portrayal of sexual abuse as both

gratuitous and exploitative, and central to his criticism of the medieval world. It has been journalists and bloggers, such as Sady Doyle and Alyssa Rosenberg (“Feminist media criticism”; “Men and Monsters”), who have led this debate, but the release of Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart’s anthology *Women of Ice and Fire* in 2016 signals the growth of a more nuanced and rigorous discussion.

The aim of this thesis is to look not at sexual violence, but at violence of a different order which is extremely frequent in Martin’s text: the maiming of bodies, and the display of maimed bodies, as a tool of power. Power is a central object of the text. There are two driving narratives in *Song*: the impending war against the Others, and the ongoing wars between human beings. Despite the obvious sentience of the Others, they represent the *environmental* threat of eternal winter (a threat which reflects the real-world threat of global warming). With the exception of certain chapters featuring the Night’s Watch, it is the *political* struggle of human wars which dominates the reader’s attention. Our eye – and the eyes of most of the characters in the text – is on the Iron Throne, and who will sit it.¹¹ This is a question of power on two fronts: who will win the power that the throne entails, and who has the power to do so? Power is both the object and the means by which it is taken.

The means is usually bloody in *Song*. This might sometimes be the violence of battle – Martin does not shy away from the violence of medieval warfare – but very little of the text is actually concerned with battle itself. There are many important battles which appear in the text, from various perspectives, and battles often mark significant turning points in the fortunes of belligerents – but they are not the *only* turning points, or even the most dramatic ones.¹² Military force, and strategic and tactical skill have their importance in the text, but

¹¹ This throne – the seat from which the kings of the Seven Kingdoms rule – is not the common object of every faction, but it is symbolically at the heart of the wars in this text. The various Lannister and Baratheon kings (and the Targaryen Queen) seek to rule from the Iron Throne, while the Stark and Greyjoy kings seek to wrest power away from the Iron Throne.

¹² Narrating battles from various perspectives, and in a variety of ways, was an important concern for Martin early in the development of the text – usually for the simple purpose of keeping the reader engaged. In an early interview with fans, Martin described choosing three different approaches for the three battles in *A Game of Thrones*:

The first battle (the Green Fork) was fully dramatized. The second (the Whispering Wood) was presented by someone who *heard* the battle more than saw it ... summarized rather than dramatized, relying on only one sense. The final battle (the Camps) was presented in dialogue, when a courier reported the result to Lord Tywin. (“Transcript of Chat”)

These variations on perspectives are used all the more obviously in the Battle of the Blackwater – the largest of Martin’s battles, in terms of textual presentation – which is told from three different perspectives over the course of five chapters.

power here is not won simply by force well-wielded. Power here is *transient* – we see countless rises to and falls from power – but it is also almost *unreal*: “a shadow on the wall”, Varys calls it, existing not of its own accord, but because it is *believed* to exist (*Clash* 97).¹³ One of the ways in which Martin’s characters *direct* that belief, or *attempt* to direct that belief, is through the display of power upon the bodies of others.

The body, and bodily concerns, are fundamental to Martin’s text. One of the most common subjects of Martin scholarship not discussed above is the portrayal of disability in *Song*. Martin, like Tyrion, seems to have “a tender spot in [his] heart for cripples and bastards and broken things” (*Game* 244) – the novels feature an astonishing number of disabled characters, and Charles Lambert, who writes on this subject, notes that novels sustain “a constant low-key attention to what being differently abled entails” (31). Beth Kozinsky claims that Martin, unlike many authors in the fantasy genre (and other genres), resists the medieval connection between disability and moral corruption, inviting “new interpretations on the malleable form and substance of his characters” (173). Both authors will be drawn upon extensively over the course of this thesis, but, as I will argue in Chapter One, Martin’s use of corporeality as the grounding reality of his text is far more extensive than simply the portrayal of the disabled body. Throughout the text, the reader’s attention is drawn back to the body – to its functions, to its disfunction, to its *fleshiness* – in ways that are sometimes humorous and sometimes horrifying.

Chapter Two examines the ways in which justice is performed upon the body in two ceremonies: in the use of public executions as punishment, and in the use of trial by combat as a method of adjudication. The performance of public executions is treated as an essential part of ruling: the earliest scene in the novel’s creation, and one of the earliest scenes in the books, features such an execution, and the lessons in rulership surrounding it. Death, dealt as righteous retributive justice, forms a part of the moral landscape of the text. More often, however, the execution is presented as justice gone awry. The trial by combat, too, which makes death not only the punishment, but part of the judgment itself, becomes something truly monstrous, with only the barest semblance of an ethical act. Martin draws to the reader’s

¹³ In order to spare my reader too many lengthy citations, the primary sources of this thesis will all be abbreviated: *Clash* for *A Clash of Kings*, *World* for *The World of Ice and Fire*, and so on. Since I reference the two-volume edition of *A Storm of Swords*, these are referred to as *Storm 1* and *Storm 2*.

attention how easily justice becomes merely violence: death and maiming, devoid of moral reason.

Chapter Three turns to the maimed body as spectacle. Essential to the many acts of capital and corporal punishment in *Song* is the need for them to be *seen*. One sees clearly in Martin's work the systems of punishment of the feudal world described by Michel Foucault, in which the body is the object of theatrical torture. While even the worst violence in *Song* pales against the torturous historical executions that Foucault examines in *Discipline and Punish*, one sees the same need for the exhibition of maimed bodies:

public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost at its triumph. ... Hence no doubt those tortures that take place even after death: corpses burnt, ashes thrown to the winds, bodies dragged on hurdles and exhibited at the roadside. (34)

Severed heads, gibbeted men, flayed slaves, and burnings at the stake are all on display in Martin's text, all to the purpose of showing the power of the punisher, belonging, as Foucault puts it, "to the ceremonies by which power is manifested" (47). Given the tenuousness of power for all of Martin's rulers, these displays are particularly important.

As horrifying as these gruesome displays are, they are, in the same moment, contemptible. The need to transform acts of (supposed) justice into performances of power usually signals weakness to the reader. Chapter Four examines this by looking at the violence performed by Theon Greyjoy and by Ramsay Bolton. Theon's rise to and fall from power in *A Clash of Kings* shows clearly how Martin signals the weakness of characters through their aggressive displays of power. Similarly, Ramsay Bolton's degradation and torture of Theon is presented as an almost absurd performance of power – driven by Ramsay's monstrous sadism, certainly, but also by his need to affirm his fragile power. The reader observes in this display the way in which torture, to use Elaine Scarry's formulation, "allows real human pain to be converted into a regime's [or, in this case, a man's] fiction of power" (18). Ramsay's deconstruction of Theon's body and identity serves not simply to maim his victim, but to reconstruct himself.

Scarry and Foucault both inform this thesis, as do numerous works on Martin's text. My intention, for the most part, however, is not to attempt to place Martin within the frame of any particular theory, but to let him speak for himself. At this early stage, when there has been so

little serious work done unravelling the narrative threads of this story, and how they interconnect, calling to, and critiquing one another, this is the more urgent object of criticism. Violence is everywhere in *Song*, and the text is littered with bodies maimed and broken by it. It is my hope here that by looking at the ways in which these bodies and their maiming are written, I can show that this violence has a purpose beyond horrifying the reader: it is part of a surprisingly sophisticated examination, told in this multifaceted tale, of how power is grasped at, in a story which is all about grasping for power. These maimed bodies, in other words, are not set dressing, but centre stage.

Chapter One

“a piece of prince”, “a chunk of king”, and a “dung-encrusted crown”: Martin’s Ignoble Bodies

In 2012, a parodic YouTube video featuring a George R.R. Martin impersonator reading nursery rhymes in the style of *A Song of Ice and Fire* included the following tale:

Little Miss Muffet
sat on her tuffet
eating her curds and whey
and honeyed lemon cakes, thin leek soup, followed by a salad of green
beans, onions ... mounds of mashed turnips, jellied calf’s brains, a thick
venison barley stew, snails in honey ... pigeon pie, and a leche of
stringy beef.
Along came a spider
who sat down beside her
and shot her through the bowels with a crossbow. (The Big Honkin’)

This reimagining of “Little Miss Muffet” couples Martin’s penchant for excessive descriptions of food with his use of sudden, gruesome death. Silly as it is, this makes it a surprisingly useful introduction to a feature of the novels: this text is fundamentally rooted in the bodies of its characters. When discussing accusations that his depictions of sex were ‘gratuitous’, Martin claimed, “if I’m guilty of having gratuitous sex, then I’m also guilty of having gratuitous violence, and gratuitous feasting”¹⁴ (“George R.R. Martin on Sex”). Sex is certainly present in the text (though not nearly so prominent as Martin’s critics and adaptors might lead one to believe), food is magnificently detailed (and not without purpose, as Duncan Hubber’s discussion of the connection between food and ideology illustrates),¹⁵ and violence, as will be examined here in detail, is rampant. The video matches the latter two features precisely. But the video also matches a common trajectory in Martin: the exultant descriptions of feasting,

¹⁴ Martin’s final response to these accusations – that “detail is necessary ... and nothing is gratuitous” – is an interesting one, particularly when applied more specifically to Martin’s depiction of sexual assault.

¹⁵ As Hubber notes, food, and particularly feasts, are used by characters in the novels to display power. Martin also uses contrasts between meals to signal and emphasize contrasts between noble houses, while depictions of starvation among Westeros’s poor stand as an indictment against the lavish food culture of its wealthy. Martin’s descriptions of food are thus linked to the ideological texture of the text.

and the predictable rhythms of the nursery rhyme, are suddenly cut short by the unexpected, gruesome, and irreverent violence. Martin does this again and again, taking glory, power, beauty, romance, and suddenly bringing it low with a reminder of bodily reality.

I'm done with fields of battle, thank you. I sit a chair better than a horse, and I'd sooner hold a wine goblet than a battleaxe. All that about the thunder of the drums, sunlight flashing on armor, magnificent destriers snorting and prancing? Well, the drums gave me headaches, the sunlight flashing on my armor cooked me up like a harvest day goose, and those magnificent destriers shit *everywhere*. (*Clash* 40)

So Tyrion Lannister dismisses the glory of battle: with self-deprecation and scatological humour. Tyrion makes constant use of such mockery, and not without purpose: "We all need to be mocked from time to time," he tells Jorah Mormont, "lest we start to take ourselves too seriously" (*Game* 205). One is left with the impression throughout *A Song of Ice and Fire* that Martin does not want us to take *anyone* too seriously, and he is quick to remind us, with both humour and horror, of the bodies of his characters. This is a powerful tactic, quite well exemplified by the Ironborn:

Ironborn captains were proud and wilful, and did not go in awe of a man's blood. The islands were too small for awe, and a longship smaller still... when you have seen your kings shit over the rail and turn green in a storm, it was hard to bend the knee and pretend they were gods. (*Clash* 123)

Scatology abounds in *Song*, and often as a humorous means to deromanticize rulers who might otherwise seem simply noble or terrible: Walder Frey dismisses Stannis and Tywin as "bungholes who think they're too noble to shit" (*Game* 649); after the Riot of King's Landing, when King Joffrey is pelted with excrement, he is described as wearing a "dung-encrusted crown" (*Clash* 436), an image which seems apt given Joffrey's monstrous, and illegitimate rule; the statue of King Baelor the Blessed, a king whose legendary piety seems more and more like cruelty the more we learn of him, is the victim of birds "shitting on his holy head" (*Feast* 158). With irreverent reference to bodies and bodily functions, Martin brings kings low.

The subject of the most repeated scatological joke in *Song* is Tywin Lannister:

A fool more foolish than most had once jested that even Lord Tywin's shit was flecked with gold. Some said the man was still alive, deep in the bowels of Casterly Rock. (*Game* 611)

From Harrenhal to Qarth across the Narrow Sea, we hear the jest repeated frequently, but it is in conjunction with this legendary punishment – and Lord Tywin's unwillingness to be laughed at – that we first hear it. The need for those in power to avoid being the subject of humour is a common theme in *Song*. As Catelyn advises Robb: “The day will come when you need them to respect you, even fear you a little. Laughter is poison to fear.” (600) and as Will reflects, “It is hard to take orders from a man you laughed at in your cups,” (3) In Tywin Lannister, Martin presents the fear of being laughed at – and therefore of losing power – as a supreme, and monstrous drive.

In Tywin Lannister, Martin presents a man who is, in many ways, an exemplary lord. He commands great respect throughout Westeros, is a formidable general, served as Hand to three kings, and championed the restoring of his house to wealth and power, after its waning under the rule of his father, Lord Tytos. It is in this last – Tywin's father, and Tywin's perception of his failure – that the key to his hatred of mockery lies. Tytos's willingness to be laughed at is made a matter of historical importance in *The World of Ice and Fire*:

His lordship wants only to be loved. So he laughs, and takes no offense, and forgives, and bestows honors and offices and lavish gifts on those who mock him and defy him, thinking thereby to win their loyalty. Yet the more he laughs and gives, the more they despise him. (*World* 201)

Kevan Lannister, Tywin's younger brother, and one of the few characters who speaks of him with affection, also explains Tywin's intolerance of their father's softness:

Tywin seems a hard man to you, I know, but he is no harder than he's had to be. Our own father was gentle and amiable, but so weak his bannermen mocked him in their cups. Some saw fit to defy him openly. Other lords borrowed our gold and never troubled to repay it. At court they japed of toothless lions. Even his mistress stole from

him. A woman scarcely one step above a whore, and she helped herself to my mother's jewels! It fell to Tywin to restore House Lannister to its proper place. (*Storm 2*: 348-349)

Tywin is a character who is easy to view monumentally: he is powerful, cruel, and a legend in his own lifetime. We will return to his power and his cruelty later,¹⁶ but for the moment it is worth noting that Martin several times undercuts that monumental impression by use of scatological and obscene humour.

After the Battle of the Blackwater, for instance, Tywin, who has been lauded (largely falsely) as the architect of the Lannister victory, makes a grand entrance into the throne room that is humorously undercut by reality:

He rode his warhorse down the length of the hall and dismounted before the Iron Throne. Sansa had never seen such armor; all burnished red steel, inlaid with golden scrollwork and ornamentation. His rondels were sunbursts, the roaring lion that crowned his helm had ruby eyes, and a lioness on each shoulder fastened a cloth-of-gold cloak so long and heavy that it draped the hindquarters of his charger. Even the horse's armor was gilded, and his bardings were shimmering crimson silk emblazoned with the lion of Lannister.

The Lord of Casterly Rock made such an impressive figure that it was a shock when his destrier dropped a load of dung right at the base of the throne. Joffrey had to step gingerly around it as he descended to embrace his grandfather and proclaim him Savior of the City. (*Clash* 662-663)

After Martin's lengthy descriptions of the beautiful raiment of those in attendance, and particularly this superlative description of Tywin's splendour, the sudden intrusion of this grotesque comedy symbolically shatters the illusion of a glorious victory. "Horseshit," Martin seems to be saying, and this is not unwarranted. For a start, the reader will be, at best, ambivalent about the Lannister victory, given that it represents a significant loss for the Stark faction,¹⁷ which we are clearly intended to regret.¹⁸ But more significant still is the sense that

¹⁶ See pp. 73-74

¹⁷ It is actually Stannis Baratheon who is defeated on the Blackwater, and not Robb Stark, but Stannis's unexpected defeat nevertheless weakens Robb's position in the South.

¹⁸ Martin puts a great deal of effort into portraying the individual motivations and traumas of each focal character. It would be plainly false, then, to claim that Martin wishes us to *side* in any complete sense with the Stark faction – we are encouraged all too much to love Daenerys and Tyrion, and any individual reader might side with nearly any faction, since Martin gives us reason to love (and hate) each one. Nevertheless, it is with

there is something altogether rotten in this ceremony: from the absence of Tyrion Lannister, to whom the victory belongs, to the hollowness of lands and titles awarded to men dying of their wounds, to the presence of the illegitimate and monstrous King Joffrey, whose tantrum at the defiance of one of Stannis's knights leads him to cut himself on the Iron Throne: a sign (by Westerosi superstition) that "the throne denies him" (668). The ceremony seems a farce to the reader, and the horse's farcical interjection seems only appropriate.

It is primarily in death that Tywin Lannister becomes the butt of Martin's joke. As Tywin meets his end – perhaps inevitably in *Song*, which has from the outset been quick to bring low those we might expect to survive – Martin is quick to remind us of the man's *corporeality*, with black humour, and for one last time, the infamous joke is referenced:

‘...Do me a kindness now, and die quickly. I have a ship to catch.’

For once, his father did what Tyrion asked him. 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 the 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. (*Storm 2: 522-523*)

It is a death which more resembles Joycean than Tolkienian creation: "In a Greek watercloset he breathed his last ... with upstuffed omophorion, with clotted hinderparts." (Joyce 44) In their essay on romanticism in *Song*, Linda Antonsson and Elio M. García (Martin's collaborators on *A World of Ice and Fire*) connect this death to the broader trend of larger-than-life characters coming to ignominious ends:

No matter how much characters in the Seven Kingdoms, and the readers of the novels, might romanticize these "great men," might romanticize their past and present wars, might find endless virtues to praise, they're all brought down to earth: Tywin is killed on a privy, Robert's gutted by a boar, Robb Stark is betrayed and his corpse desecrated.

the Starks that the novels begin; they are, at least initially the most heavily represented faction; we are rarely encouraged to see them as aggressors or villains in the novels; and even if we perceive their victories often from the perspective of their enemies, their downfall is told in such a way as to be undeniably tragic. As such, it seems likely that Martin intends us to feel at least somewhat regretful of the Lannister victory.

The indignity of Tywin's death, however, is extended far beyond that of Robb's desecration and Robert's poetically gruesome death.¹⁹ His corpse becomes a horror, drawn out at great length over the first chapters of the following book.

For Cersei Lannister, who makes much of her father's indomitability, there is something particularly horrifying about the location of his death: "*No, that cannot be.*" She thinks, "*That is not the way a lion dies*"²⁰ (*Feast 58*) – the glorious illusion of superhuman grace and power, embodied by the heraldic lion of Lannister, is utterly shattered by the all-too-human location of Tywin's demise. Martin goes on to present the corpse with astonishing bluntness:

His bedrobe was hiked up around his chest, leaving him naked below the waist. The quarrel had taken him in his groin between his navel and his manhood, and was sunk so deep that only the fletching showed. His pubic hair was stiff with dried blood. More was congealing in his navel. (60)

Not simply naked, but "naked below the waist" – which is far less dignified than total nudity – the bare fact of Tywin's bodily existence is presented to us, and the result is somewhat absurd. Stripped of dignity in death, he is difficult to mythologize, and faced with this, Cersei's immediate response is not simply to cover him, but to re-glorify him through clothing:

How could you leave him like this? My father was Hand to three kings, as great a man as ever strode the Seven Kingdoms. The bells must ring for him, as they rang for Robert. He must be bathed and dressed as befits his stature, in ermine and cloth-of-gold and crimson silk. (60-61)

Cersei – already unstable and paranoid – is horrified by her father's death, but her horror focuses on his body,²¹ naked and foul-smelling, and similarly on the presence of Shae – an

¹⁹ Poetically, in that a man so given to excess is killed, unexpectedly literally, by his food, in the form of the boar he is hunting.

²⁰ The lion is the heraldic symbol of the Lannister family. Frequently the members and soldiers of noble families will be referred to only by such symbols: Lannister men become "lions", Stark men become "wolves", Clegane men become "dogs", and so on.

²¹ Cersei's nightmare, which opens this chapter, is filled with horror at her *own* body, which suggests a broader pattern here:

The lords and ladies began to chuckle too, hiding their smiles behind their hands. Only then did the queen realize she was naked.

unexpected sign of her father's sexual appetite. Her monumental father – whom she thinks of with such conflicting feelings of admiration and terror – is made all too uncomfortably *body*.

All attempts to cloak the horror of Lord Tywin's physicality are futile, as, later, the corpse on display in the Grand Sept decays:

The King's Hand was rotting visibly. His face had taken on a greenish tinge, and his eyes were deeply sunken, two black pits. Fissures had opened in his cheeks, and a foul white fluid was seeping through the joints of his splendid gold-and-crimson armor to pool beneath his body. (155)

Such decay is clearly not expected: Pycelle later notes that “every care was taken” (298) to preserve the corpse, and the wakes that we have previously seen have never been so horrifying. Martin chooses Tywin in particular to make such a horror, and his message is clear: under the “splendid” armour, even such a man as Tywin Lannister is flesh, and flesh rots.²² Martin makes a gruesome joke of this, and even Tywin's corpse seems amused: as his corpse dries, his lips pull back into a smile that is quite uncharacteristic of the man.

The putrefaction of Tywin Lannister is only one of many incidents in which the ultimate fate of the body is central. Death is frequent in the text, and corpses litter all of the novels, but in *A*

Horried, she tried to cover herself with her hands. The barbs and blades of the Iron Throne bit into her flesh as she crouched to hide her shame. Blood ran down her legs, as steel teeth gnawed at her buttocks. When she tried to stand, her foot slipped through a gap in the twisted metal. The more she struggled the more the throne engulfed her, tearing chunks of flesh from her breasts and belly, slicing at her arms and legs until they were slick and red, glistening. (*Feast* 55)

Numerous bodily fears are evident here. Cersei has previously advocated turning sexual objectification into a weapon – something which here turns against her, as her nakedness is scorned (this will prove prophetic in her later shaming by the High Sparrow). Her sexuality is profoundly warped – her thoughts on sexuality mingle uncomfortably with thoughts of violence and death – and for all her insistence on its power, it is evident to the reader that it leaves her vulnerable, which comes through clearly in this dream. There are also hints here of adolescence in the (symbolically menstrual) blood running down her legs – adolescence having differentiated her from her male twin, and initiated her into the traumas of womanhood. Finally, there is the threat of annihilation, but moreover, of being cut to pieces, an annihilation of the wholeness of self, of a reduction to parts.

²² One can additionally read this, as Beth Kozinsky does, as a reflection of the medieval belief that “[t]he corrupt body reveals... moral corruption” and that “the rotten nature of the man seems to be on display here” (177). It certainly does seem to be, while Tywin the man's moral corruption is elsewhere horrifying, here it is positioned as an embarrassment – perhaps a fitting end for a man who wrought so much suffering for the sake of family pride.

Feast for Crows, Martin makes of the corpse the central, titular leitmotif. Crows have been a persistent presence since the early chapters of *Game*, almost always in conjunction with the threat of death, as is evident in one of Old Nan's cautionary tales: "a story about a bad little boy who climbed too high and was struck down by lightning, and how afterward the crows came to peck out his eyes." (*Game* 80). In *Feast*, however, carrion crows are, symbolically, omnipresent.

Often they are invoked as a somewhat grandiose metaphor for death and destruction, as when Jaime Lannister, observing his sister's growing paranoia, thinks, "*The crows will feast upon us all if you go on this way*" (*Feast* 292). At other times, players in the 'game' are equated with crows. Lord Rodrik Harlaw, whose nickname, "The Reader", and the propensity that led to it, is undoubtedly intended to engender trust,²³ uses this comparison as an admonition of those still fighting during the events of *Feast*:

'We had one king, then five. Now all I see are crows, squabbling over the corpse of Westeros.'
'...I'll sit the Seastone Chair.'
'Then you are just another crow, screaming for carrion.' (206)

Jaime Lannister makes a similar comparison, placing the crow among the sigils of those engaged in fighting: "*This is a time for beasts*, Jaime reflected, *for lions and wolves and angry dogs, for ravens and carrion crows.*"²⁴ (564) Euron Greyjoy, often called "Crow's Eye", takes this comparison with pride:

Crow's Eye, you call me. Well, who has a keener eye than the crow? After every battle the crows come in their hundreds and their thousands to feast upon the fallen. A crow can espy death from afar. And I say all of Westeros is dying. Those who follow me will feast until the end of their days. (345)

²³ Martin makes a great deal of reading, particularly in the world of *Song* where it is so scarce. From Tyrion's advocacy in *A Game of Thrones* ("a mind needs books as a sword needs a whetstone" (124)), and Jojen's in *A Dance with Dragons* ("A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies" (452)), to the unbridled wonder that Samwell shows in the library of Castle Black (*Clash* 69), Martin usually associates reading with his most beloved characters.

²⁴ Crows, like lions, wolves and dogs, are heraldically symbolic, being the sigil of House Morrigen. "Crow" is also used commonly by the Free Folk as a nickname for Night's Watchmen. Neither of these meanings is likely to have been intended by Jaime or Martin.

The reader will side with The Reader, rather than the Crow's Eye: the cost of the war to the kingdom and its people has already been made clear to us, and it will be reiterated throughout *Feast*. Four books on, the war's futility is abundantly clear to us: much has been lost, and nothing gained. The focus of the novels shifts in the course of the latter part of *A Storm of Swords*: we are no longer rooting for the campaigns of would-be-rulers – the king we liked is dead, and the queen we like is far from the war – instead, we are witness to the monstrous suffering of the smallfolk in a society broken by a war which has accomplished nothing. This futility resonates in the crow metaphor:

The smell [of Lord Tywin's corpse] reminded Jaime of the pass below the Golden Tooth, where he had won a glorious victory in the first days of the war. On the morning after the battle, the crows had feasted on victors and vanquished alike, as once they had feasted on Rhaegar Targaryen after the Trident. *How much can a crown be worth, when a crow can dine upon a king?*²⁵ (*Feast* 151)

Jaime's cynicism seems warranted: with the present state of Westeros, the crown seems of little value. Brienne's thoughts are more succinct: "*Friend or foe, the crows care not.*" (162) Death, Martin reminds us, is inevitable, and undiscerning. It echoes the High Valyrian words, *Valar Morghulis* – all men must die – a phrase which has been prominent since *A Clash of Kings*, the fact of which Martin has been so diligent in reminding us since the unexpected, yet inevitable death of Eddard Stark. Martin does not flinch from the mortality of his characters.

When Gared is beheaded, we see his head bounce (*Game* 15). When Oberyn Martell loses to the Mountain, we see his eye sockets penetrated and his teeth broken, and hear the crunch of his skull being crushed (*Storm* 2: 420-421). *Song* is blunt about the injuries inflicted on its characters, constantly grounding us in the bodily existence of the world. In HBO's adaptation, *Game of Thrones*, Jaime Lannister expresses this succinctly:

It's a strange thing, the first time you cut a man. [You] realize we're nothing but sacks of meat and blood and some bone to keep it all standing. ("The Kingsroad")

²⁵ There is an echo here of the Shakespearean, from Richard II's "hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king" (3.2.160-161) to Hamlet's warning that "a king may go a / progress through the guts of a beggar" (4.3.30-31).

These are not Martin's words, but the sentiment is recognizably Martinesque.

Martin can be almost theatrical in his presentation of the meat and blood and bone of his characters. The theatre of punishment and of execution is the most obvious, and will be discussed in detail later, but another theme in *Song*, and one which more closely aligns itself with the "feast for crows" metaphor, is that of cannibalism. The legends and histories of Westeros (it is virtually impossible to distinguish the two)²⁶ often touch on cannibalism. The tale of the Rat Cook is a particular favourite of Bran Stark:

The Rat Cook had cooked the son of the Andal king in a big pie with onions, carrots, mushrooms, lots of pepper and salt, a rasher of bacon, and a dark red Dornish wine.²⁷ Then he served him to his father, who praised the taste and had a second slice. (*Storm 2*: 203)

The Skagosi of the isle of Skagos are said to be cannibals, although Martin gives us good reason to doubt the veracity of such tales:

Some songs said the Skaggs were cannibals; supposedly their warriors ate the hearts and livers of the men they slew. In ancient days, the Skagosi had sailed to the nearby isle of Skane, seized its women, slaughtered its men, and ate them on a pebbled beach in a feast that lasted a fortnight. Skane remained unpeopled to this day. (*Feast 274*)

²⁶ The history that comes across in the main text of *Song* is a deeply contested one. It is often unclear whether certain events and historical characters are real or legendary, and Martin makes a feature of this uncertainty. This is most clear in the case of the White Walkers, which the reader knows to exist for a certainty, but which characters might believe are historical, or entirely mythical. Their uncertainty adds a great deal of tension to the text. Such uncertainty abounds, however, and *Song's* more literate and knowledgeable characters frequently debate historical truth. Even *The World of Ice and Fire*, which purports to be objective, contains a great deal that the reader will know to be erroneous, so that it becomes yet another contestable narrative in this contested history. Little work has been done on this unreliable narrative, although Adam Whitehead makes a valiant, though all-too-brief, attempt to outline this historical uncertainty, and Brian Cowlshaw touches on how this uncertainty reflects the reader's own uncertainty, which is so vital a part of Martin's text.

²⁷ This culinary detail – which resembles more ordinary feasts that Martin describes – makes this description all the more gruesome.

Martin betrays his love of the gothic in the cannibalistic Danelle Lothston, a figure no doubt inspired, with her bat sigil, by the legends surrounding Elizabeth Bathory, and her connection to vampire lore.²⁸

He found himself remembering tales he had first heard as a child at Casterly Rock, of mad Lady Lothston who bathed in tubs of blood and presided over feasts of human flesh within these very walls. (499)

Cannibalism is not relegated only to the histories and legends of Westeros (though this prevalence in the kingdom's subconscious is notable, if not markedly different from European stories).²⁹ The threat of cannibalism is a very real and present one. Poverty, war, and winter all drive characters in *Song* to resort to cannibalism. In *A Clash of Kings*, which notably contrasts grand feasts with starvation and bread riots in King's Landing, Tyrion fears that the smallfolk are likely to turn to cannibalism:

‘Last night a baker was roasted in his own oven. The mob claimed he charged too much for bread.’
‘Did he?’
‘He’s not apt to deny it.’
‘They didn’t eat him, did they?’
‘Not that I’ve heard.’
‘Next time they will’ (196)

Sieges create similar threats, as happens during the Siege of Astapor – one of the most horrifying military actions in the series.³⁰ It is, however, the years-long winter of Westeros that

²⁸ Bathory was a Hungarian countess, famed for numerous atrocities (many of which were probably fictional). One of these included the rumour that she bathed in the blood of virgins. She is frequently cited as an influence for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. (Joshi 6)

²⁹ The Rat King, for instance, recalls both Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and its own origins in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

³⁰ We spend most of the Siege of Astapor at a great distance, learning of it through Daenerys, who refuses to send aid to the city. There are only a few fragments of information that come through, until, suddenly, Quentyn Martell reappears as a Windblown soldier, after Astapor has fallen, and we are given one appalling paragraph describing the horrors of the city:

The Red City was the closest thing to hell he ever hoped to know. The Yunkai'i had sealed the broken gates to keep the dead and dying inside the city, but the sights that he had seen riding down those red brick streets would haunt Quentyn Martell forever. A river choked with corpses. The priestess in her torn robes, impaled upon a stake and attended by a cloud of glistening green flies. Dying men staggering through the streets, bloody and befouled. Children fighting over half-cooked puppies. The last free king of Astapor, screaming naked in the pit as he was set on by a score of starving dogs. And fires, fires everywhere. He could close his eyes and see them still: flames whirling from brick pyramids larger than any castle he had

is the most obvious cause of cannibalism. Food, and the lack thereof is a great concern to Martin's characters, and the increasing harshness of the season (exacerbated by the war)³¹ has resulted in several cases of cannibalism, from the warg³² Varamyr Six-Skins, who consumes human flesh – including that of an infant – while in a wolf's skin (*Dance* 4), through the Wildlings stranded at Hardhome who begin to eat their dead (782), to the case during King Stannis's march from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell:

Asha had been as horrified as the rest when the She-bear told her that four Peasebury men had been found butchering one of the late Lord Fell's, carving chunks of flesh from his thighs and buttocks as one of his forearms turned upon a spit, but she could not pretend to be surprised. The four were not the first to taste human flesh during this grim march, she would wager – only the first to be discovered. (816)

The case of the Peasebury men is an aberration – a result of Stannis's deadly march through the snowbound North – but cannibalism may well occur in more ordinary times among the poorest of King's Landing: it is suggested that human flesh is sometimes used in one of the city's pot-shops – where communal stewpots feed the poor – and Tyrion Lannister uses this fact to dispose of the body of the singer, Symon Silver Tongue (*Storm* 1: 457). He later refers to the ubiquitous “brown” of King's Landing as “singer's stew” (*Dance* 867) – a joke that only he and the reader are privy to.

While cannibalism from necessity is an unsurprising presence in a world of such a perilous winter, and of such extreme poverty, cannibalism is present also as a weapon of rage and vengeance. The bestial Biter often attacks by biting and eating the flesh of his victims – at least twice eating the breasts of women (*Storm* 1: 310; *Feast* 579) in acts that combine

ever seen, plumes of greasy smoke coiling upward like great black snakes. (*Dance* 322)

³¹ The destruction of harvests, especially in the Riverlands, is presented as an immensely egregious act in the text – all the more so with winter coming.

³² The term “warg” in Westeros refers loosely to *any* skinchanger – that is, a person able to enter the minds of other animals and control them – but more properly to a skinchanger who enters the mind of a wolf or a dog.

cannibalism with sexual sadism.³³ On the other hand, Cersei invokes a symbolic cannibalism as vengeance in eating Robert's semen after he rapes her:

*Ten thousand of your children perished in my palm, Your Grace ...
Whilst you snored, I would lick your sons off my face and fingers one
by one, all those pale sticky princes. You claimed your rights, my lord,
but in the darkness I would eat your heirs. (Feast 603)*

More notable, however, is the cannibalism that is not performed by the aggressors, but forced upon their victims, as occurs in the tale of the Rat King, with the Andal King being forced (through ignorance) to eat his own son.

Lord Wyman Manderly – a man whose cunning and desire for vengeance are repeatedly underestimated by his foes – almost certainly mimics the tale of the Rat King by murdering Rhaegar, Symond, and Jared Frey, and baking them into three pies which are served at Ramsay Bolton's wedding to the false Arya Stark. This is not explicitly stated in the text, but the evidence for it is overwhelming. Manderly expresses ambiguous threats against the Freys and Boltons to Davos – threats which focus on the need to gain revenge against them for the Red Wedding, the violation of guest right³⁴ which resulted in the deaths of his son, Wendel, and his liege-lord Robert, and which seem to have something to do with the guest-gift of three horses to the three Frey guests (*Dance* 389-392). When the three disappear on the road to Winterfell, it is assumed by Roose and reader that Wyman murdered them, and Manderly presents at the Wedding Feast an ominous dish:

three great wedding pies, as wide across as wagon wheels, their flaky crusts stuffed to bursting with carrots, onions, turnips, parsnips, mushrooms, and chunks of seasoned pork swimming in a savory brown gravy. Ramsay hacked off slices with his falchion and Wyman Manderly himself served, presenting the first steaming portions to Roose Bolton and his fat Frey wife, the next to Ser Hosteen and ser Aenys, the sons of Walder Frey. 'The best pie you have ever tasted, my lords,' the fat lord declared. 'Wash it down with Arbor gold and savor every bite. I know I shall.'

³³ In Westeros.org's *So Spake Martin*, an unofficial, but reliable repository of fan accounts of Martin's public appearances, two fans report Martin explaining that Rorge raised Biter ferally to fight in a dogfighting ring. This goes some way to explain his nature. ("The Citadel: So Spake Martin – January 2006")

³⁴ Guest right is a sacred custom of hospitality, by which any guest who is offered food cannot be harmed by, nor bring harm to, their host.

True to his word, Manderly devoured six portions, two from each of the three pies, smacking his lips and slapping his belly and stuffing himself until the front of his tunic was half-brown with gravy stains and his beard was flecked with crumbs of crust. Even Fat Walda Frey could not match his gluttony, though she did manage three slices herself. (493)

The ingredients are almost identical to those of the Rat King's pies, and although Lady Dustin mistakes Manderly's drunken behaviour for cowardice ("Drowning his fears. He is craven to the bone, that one." (494)), the reader will know better, and when he drunkenly calls for "a song about the Rat Cook" (495), we get the joke.³⁵

This episode is satisfying on two fronts: first because it presents a puzzle to be uncovered,³⁶ and secondly because we will take pleasure in this vengeance, which is a symbolically potent one. On the one hand, Manderly consumes the flesh of his enemies, and forces other enemies to participate in this "abomination",³⁷ but on the other, he very precisely reflects, through emulating the Rat Cook, the violation of guest-right for which he is taking revenge. As Old Nan tells the legend,

It was not for murder that the gods cursed him ... nor for serving the Andal king his own son in a pie. A man has a right to vengeance. But he slew a *guest* beneath his roof, and that the gods cannot forgive.
(*Feast* 203-204)

As an act of vengeance for a violation of guest right, then, Manderly reflects such a violation, without actually violating it himself (since the giving of guest-gifts signals the end of guest right). It is cunning, and the reader takes a certain guilty pleasure in this vicious act of defiance against the Bolton-Frey-Lannister alliance that has claimed victory (hopefully temporarily) in the North, and which the reader has few reasons to love.

³⁵ There is some confirmation of this outside of the text: as part of a competition leading up to the release of *A Dance with Dragons*, Martin's editor, Anne Groell, gave a short list of causes-of-death which would appear in the novel, and this included being "baked in a pie" (St. Denis).

³⁶ Martin often includes such puzzles, and uncovering them is one of the joys of his text.

³⁷ The Prologue of *A Dance with Dragons*, already alluded to, in which Varamyr Six-Skins engages in cannibalism, uses this word several times, placing "abomination" very much in our minds throughout the rest of the novel.

Ordinarily – and the fact that one can use the word in such a context says much about *Song* – acts of forced cannibalism are simply abominable. There are several cases of such acts, and they are almost always horrifying. Euron Greyjoy claims to have committed such an atrocity:

I came upon ... four warlocks who told a curious tale. One presumed to threaten me, so I killed him and fed him to the other three. They refused to eat of their friend's flesh at first, but when they grew hungry enough they had a change of heart. Men are meat. (*Feast* 549-550)

“Men are meat”, he claims, as HBO’s Jaime claims that men are “sacks of meat and blood and some bone” (“The Kingsroad”), and to reduce men to food is to make them *merely* meat – to symbolically annihilate the *person*. Such threats are made with frequency – though often it is animals called upon to do the eating. Joffrey at one point imagines feeding Robb to wolves (*Clash* 31) – which would be symbolic cannibalism, since Robb is, heraldically, a “wolf”, and pseudonymously, “the Young Wolf”,³⁸ but which more importantly makes a meal of him. It is a power fantasy – something which Joffrey is fond of – which threatens to reduce Robb (whose person is a very real threat to Joffrey) to merely flesh. Lady Dustin speaks of her wish to locate Eddard Stark’s missing remains, and feed his bones to her dogs (*Dance* 547). In *The World of Ice and Fire*, one reads that King Joron I Blacktyde killed King Gyles II Gardener, and “had his corpse cut into pieces so that he might bait his fishhooks with ‘*a chunk of king*’ [emphasis added]” (181). The phrase (presumably Joron’s) recalls Ramsay Bolton’s inclusion of “*a piece of prince*” – a scrap of Theon Greyjoy’s skin – with his threats to the ironborn (*Dance* 332), and though only Joron makes food of his royal victims,³⁹ both emphasise something that goes on throughout all of these cases: the division of the whole body into parts, to pieces, which is to say, the implied destruction of the human.

³⁸ Assuming that Robb, like his siblings Bran, Arya, and Jon, is a warg, then he is wolfish in that magical sense, too.

³⁹ Though Ramsay does feed the bodies of women to his dogs (*Dance* 391), and threatens specifically to cut off Lady Dustin’s breasts to feed them (424).

One strangely prevalent threat is that of feeding the castrated penis of victims to others, or to them, either literally or symbolically. Shagga constantly threatens (and once tries (*Game* 677)) to feed severed male genitalia to goats. Hali tells Wallen to “cut [Bran’s] little cock off and stuff it in his mouth” (404), making of it both literally a gag and symbolically food. After Yellow Dick, one of the “Bastard’s Boys”, is killed by Rowan, his penis is cut off and shoved forcefully into his mouth (*Dance* 610). A similar fate is (again, symbolically) brought upon the eunuch Stalwart Shield:

‘his killers had forced the genitals of a goat down the throat of your servant Stalwart Shield...’

They could not feed him his own genitals. The Astapori left him neither root nor stem. (33)

The act is intended as a profound indignity: the penis, almost always referred to as the “manhood” and always signifying manhood,⁴⁰ is not simply removed (which makes the man no longer a man), but utterly destroyed by being made meat.

A most horrifying case of men made meat concerns Vargo Hoat, known as the Goat, the leader of the Brave Companions, whom Tywin Lannister sends out to pillage in the Riverlands. He is among Martin’s few unredeemed characters: despicable in his actions and loathsome in his manner. Yet, as he is wont to do, Martin denies his reader any satisfaction at his demise: Gregor Clegane, yet another unredeemed monster, and Hoat’s former commander, cuts Hoat piece by piece, and his body is used in a particularly gruesome act of cruelty:

‘One of the captives was always begging food,’ Rafford admitted, ‘so Ser [Gregor Clegane] said to give him roast goat. The Qohorik [Hoat] didn’t have much meat on him, though. Ser took his hands and feet first, then his arms and legs.’

‘The fat bugger [Wylis Manderly, a prisoner of Clegane] got most, m’lord,’ Shitmouth offered, ‘but Ser, he said to see that all the captives had a taste. And Hoat too, his own self...’ (*Feast* 499)

⁴⁰ The absolute equation of manhood with the penis is common in Westeros and beyond – in this sense, it is not unlike our own. Eunuchs are frequently referred to as not being men – a feature of the rigidly gendered societies that Martin creates and unpacks. There is much work to be done exploring Martin’s treatment of eunuchs and the symbolism surrounding genitalia.

The act of amputating feet and hands is one for which Hoat himself is famed, and Gregor initially turns this practice on him. He goes further: Hoat is not merely crippled, but dismantled; piece by piece, he is reduced to a minimum – everything extraneous is made meat. This forced autosarcophagy is an act of ultimate degradation: Hoat is made to engage in an act of literal and symbolic self-annihilation.

There is something undeniably theatrical in these acts of making-meat. While in most of the cases discussed, those consuming are almost certainly unaware of what it is that they are eating, Clegane's men, Wyman Manderly, the Crow's Eye, and all these others, are all engaged in a kind of performance. The act of forced cannibalism serves two functions: it reduces the bodies of those being eaten to flesh, while reducing those eating to bodily need. There is, in this act, a dual destruction of humanity: those eaten, and those eating, are rendered flesh.

This is a curious combination of subjects – the scatological body, the decomposing body, and the destroyed body – but all three serve to introduce how firmly Martin's text is rooted in the body. Martin does not flinch from the processes of the body: he famously gives us characters who copulate, but he also gives us characters who masturbate, who urinate, who defecate. Again and again, he brings us away from political scheming, and ideological arguments, back to the body. Often he does so in ways that shock: with the comic intrusion of dung, or the horrific intrusion of gore. The story – the 'song' – which is told across two continents is also told upon the body. It is to what that story says about *power* and the body that we will now turn.

Chapter Two

“With mine own hand I take your life”: Justice and the Rending of Flesh

A Game of Thrones, the first novel in the series, begins with a massacre, followed closely by an execution. We may set aside the “cold butchery” of the prologue (10): Martin certainly does. He introduces us to three Night’s Watchmen, who investigate the slaughter of a group of Wildlings, only for two of them to be killed in turn by the icy, dead-raising Others. Dan Hemsath points to Martin’s history of writing for television as a strong influence on this narrative technique, which resembles the “common trend for television shows ... to preface the show with a vignette related to the story, to drop the viewer into the world with a ‘cold open’.” It “sets a tone that subconsciously sticks with the reader, one that might get muddled in the Machiavellian machinations of the throne-swapping and civil war: the supernatural exists and is an imminent threat.” (“Cold Open”) This will colour with irony the rest of the narrative, as the reader is distracted from the supernatural North by the world south of the Wall.

This begins with the execution of Gared, the only survivor of the events of the Prologue, by Lord Eddard Stark, as witnessed by his seven-year old son, Bran. Martin has cited this event as a fundamental part of his initial conception of *Song*, and the earliest chapter in the book’s creation. The significance of the event was obvious from the chapter’s inception:

And then one day this chapter came to me, this scene about a young boy going out with his father in the snows, to see a man executed. ... it came to me so vividly: I could see the scene, I could see the snow, I could feel the cold, I could see the blood when the sword took off the man’s head, and feel the boy’s feelings about this – because he was a young boy, and this was the first time his father had let him participate in this *rite of adulthood* [emphasis added] of seeing an execution. (“Episode 1”)

From the outset, then, this was intended to be an almost pedagogical scene: an introduction to justice for both boy and reader.

Appropriately, given that death will become so commonplace throughout *Song*, there is a certain matter-of-factness about the opening of this introductory chapter:

The morning had dawned clear and cold, with a crispness that hinted at the end of summer. They set forth at daybreak to see a man beheaded, twenty in all and Bran rode among them, nervous with excitement.
(*Game 13*)

It proceeds as a lesson: Bran tries to face the execution without showing his youth (“trying to seem older than seven, trying to pretend that he’d seen all this before” (14)), while his half-brother Jon Snow coaches him through the beheading (“‘Keep the pony well in hand,’ he whispered. ‘And don’t look away. Father will know if you do.’” (14-15)). For Bran, this is a rite of passage, and an important moment in his education. The reader learns the lessons with him: that the execution block, the sword, and the severing of the neck amount to the “king’s justice”, and that dispensing death is a part of what it means to be a man of noble birth. We will see such executions again and again in *Song*, and justice will take many violent forms, but this first death warrants close study.

He took hold of Ice with both hands, and said, ‘In the name of Robert of the House Baratheon, the First of his Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, by the word of Eddard of the House Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, I do sentence you to die.’ He lifted the greatsword high above his head. (14)

So Eddard Stark, with the instrument of justice already in his hands, proclaims the sentence. The first-time reader has no inkling at this time who Robert Baratheon is, nor who the Andals, the Rhoynar, or the First Men are; excepting only what may be gleaned from the prefatory map, the reader knows nothing of the Seven Kingdoms, or of Winterfell; and so this barrage of opaque names gives the reader no real information beyond giving the collective impression of a particular system of rule, of law, of justice – that is, a system of *power* – lurking behind them.

This system – its form, its failings, its corruption, and the perversities that, at turns, both threaten it and form its very fabric – will be laid bare over the course of these novels. We will learn a great deal about the king, his ascension to the throne, and his subjects; we will have numerous opportunities to consider whether he might be considered a good, or a bad king, and what criteria should determine such a question; much of the plot will be concerned about who *should*, and, more pressingly, who *will* succeed him. But Martin is also at great pains to consider what it is that makes kings: this is not simply the history of an ascension to the throne, but also considers what makes such ascensions – and such thrones – possible.

For now, however, what we have is a sentence, and an irony that should already be apparent to the reader: for all that this execution takes place in the name of the “Protector of the Realm”, it is quite contrary to the realm’s protection. Gared, the last witness to the return of the White Walkers, and thus the only man who might warn of the threat against the Seven Kingdoms, is summarily executed, within a few pages of our meeting him, his warning unheard and unheeded. His execution, “the fourth this year” (24), allows the threat beyond the wall to slip out of sight, even from the reader: Bran, the reader’s current witness to these events, “afterward ... could not recall much of what had been said”. Beyond Eddard’s later allusion to “[s]omething [that] had put a fear in him” (ibid.), the existence of the White Walkers is entirely dismissed, relegated to the realm of madness, and to the back of the reader’s mind. Martin’s story will proceed for over two thousand pages before any of the characters designated “Protector of the Realm” move to meet the threat beyond the Wall.

Quite plainly, Martin does not want us to take this (ultimately disastrous) execution for granted. When Eddard and Bran discuss the purpose of the execution, there is further irony:

‘Do you understand why I did it?’

‘He was a wildling,’ Bran said. ‘They carry off women and sell them to the Others.’

His lord father smiled. ‘Old Nan has been telling you stories again. In truth, the man was an oathbreaker, a deserter from the Night’s Watch. No man is more dangerous. The deserter knows his life is forfeit if he is taken, so he will not flinch from any crime, no matter how vile. But you mistake me.

The question was not why the man had to die, but why *I* must do it.' (16)

If Eddard intends his response as an explanation for Gared's execution, then it is a poor one: the circular reason is utterly ignored. Of greater concern – or, at least, more immediate concern – to Eddard is the question of who should perform the act of killing itself. The lesson – that “the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword” (16), that responsible justice entails performing justice oneself⁴¹ – is an important theme in the books, and a departure from the feudal justice it draws on. The reader notes, however, that the question of *why* death is meted out as justice has been raised, but it has not been very well answered.

We can easily guess at a better answer: the necessity of the Night's Watch to protect against the threat beyond the Wall (even if that threat has been largely forgotten) is no doubt at the heart of the matter. It is vital that the men of the Night's Watch keep their vow, and execution is an effective, if brutal, deterrent. The promise of death to deserters is a vital part of what holds the watch together, and we see this pattern repeated: many of the military forces of the world of *Song* are held together by such threats, from the “culling” of the Unsullied (*Storm* 1: 337) to the threats against the bannermen who fail to aid their lords. The purpose of the execution, this public killing, is theatrical: it is a *performance* of power; a performance whose stage is the execution block, and the gallows, and the body of the condemned.

Gared's execution is Bran's introduction to this theatrical practice of law, as a practice that he, as a boy of noble birth, is expected to one day perform. Bran's own journey leads him away from this system of law, in a trajectory that bends northward towards Bloodraven, the Children of the Forest, the Old Gods, and a future about which the reader can only speculate. So far, with the exception of a few poignant, but for the moment, irrelevant, scenes in *A Game of Thrones* and *A Clash of Kings*, Bran does not experience rulership, and he never sits in judgment, so we have yet to see the effects of this lesson – if we ever will. However, Eddard's

⁴¹ This departs, dramatically, from the philosophy behind the modern separation of powers.

older sons, Robb and Jon, and his ward, Theon Greyjoy, will each go on to sit in judgment as rulers later in the text, and Eddard's influence will be clear in each case.

The last to sit in judgement is Jon Snow – Bran's co-educator at Gared's execution. Soon after Jon's election as Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, he comes into conflict with Janos Slynt. Slynt, former commander of the City Watch at King's Landing, who has already marked himself as Jon's enemy, and is known to the reader for his part in the downfall and death of Eddard Stark, as well as for arranging the murder of Robert Baratheon's bastard daughter, Barra. An "oaf" (*Clash* 94), "a hollow suit of armor who will sell himself to the highest bidder" (*Storm* 1: 465), "venal and corrupt" (*Storm* 2: 535), "frog-faced" (*Game* 621, 746; *Clash* 90), and as two-faced as the god his name recollects, Janos Slynt is hardly a character with whom the reader is likely to sympathise. When, in *A Dance with Dragons*, he refuses to obey Jon's order to take command of the bleak post at Greyguard, Jon must determine his punishment:

'Please take Lord Janos to the Wall –'
– *and confine him to an ice cell*, he might have said. A day or ten cramped inside the ice would leave him shivering and feverish and begging for release, Jon did not doubt. *And the moment he is out, he and Thorne will begin to plot again.*
– *and tie him to his horse*, he might have said. If Slynt did not wish to go to Greyguard as its commander, he could go as its cook. *It will only be a matter of time until he deserts, then. And how many others will he take with him?*
'– and hang him,' Jon finished. (110)

It is a fate the reader is inclined to feel he deserves, and seems all the more appropriate because it is reasoned out, step by step, in front of the reader – even if the reasoning has more to do with preventing political instability than justice.

When it comes to the execution itself, however, Jon reneges on his initial order, and instead chooses to perform the execution himself. Although there is no direct reference to Eddard's lesson, it is evident that Jon is emulating his father: his change of heart is signalled

by the thought “*This is wrong,*” (111) and he goes on to behead Slynt with his own sword, in much the same fashion as Eddard.

This is another rite of adulthood, in a chapter which has focused on one vital (and painful) aspect of what adulthood will mean for Jon: the necessity of cruelty to his duties as Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. For the protection of Mance Rayder’s son, he must separate Gilly from her child (96-97); for the protection of the realm, he must order his friend, Sam, on a hazardous journey across the Narrow Sea (101). All of this he does while recalling Maester Aemon’s advice: “Kill the boy” (97, 102, 103) – that is, kill Jon’s own boyhood – a phrase which conflates symbolic violence with maturity. It is fitting that this chapter which focuses on killing the boy concludes with Jon killing a man.

This induction into the rule of law closes with the response of Stannis Baratheon, who has been observing from the steps of the King’s tower: “Jon glanced back at Stannis. For an instant their eyes met. Then the king nodded and went back inside his tower.” (111) It is an interesting, though understated exchange, which emphasizes the importance of this act of execution to legitimize Jon’s position as a leader: an expression of approval from an established ruler. That it comes from *Stannis* only strengthens its significance: Stannis, after all, approves of very little, but more importantly, stands above all characters in *Song* as something of a paragon of the law. His adherence to the law is famously absolute, nearly merciless, often to the point of folly, but for all that his relentless righteousness is distinctly a flaw in him, and the cause of much conflict between Stannis and Jon, this moment of acknowledgement from Stannis is its own rite of passage.

The act of killing itself is remarkably matter-of-fact, going virtually undescribed, reduced to a subordinate clause:

Longclaw descended. ‘Can I have his boots?’ asked Owen the Oaf, as Janos Slynt’s head went rolling across the muddy ground. ‘They’re almost new, those boots. Lined with fur.’ (ibid.)

Owen's haggling over Slynt's boots betrays a certain callousness,⁴² but the execution is clean, easy, and far from horrifying by Martin's standards. In many ways, the death is satisfying, marking an important and positive development for Jon as a leader and also serving as an instance of cosmic retribution: we see Eddard Stark's son executing a man who betrayed him. Doubtless, Martin intends his readers to take a small (and exceedingly rare) degree of satisfaction from his death, and because Jon takes no pleasure in the act, and because he is forced into it despite giving Slynt numerous opportunities to renege on his defiance, we are more likely to accept it. Pop culture critic Sean T. Collins observes that often, in fiction,

retributive or redemptive violence against the 'bad guys' is just par for the course, and ... in those situations, there is no doubt whatsoever that it's the right thing to do to kill certain people. It's a closed moral calculus and that's how the variables work out. And you see Martin playing with that from time to time. (Collins & Sasse, "The Quality of Mercy")

Jon's execution is one such case where he plays with the idea of moral executions, and the result is that it feels like a victory.

By contrast, the first execution performed by Robb tastes of defeat. The moment arrives at the end of a series of blunders, failures, and misfortunes that have greatly weakened Robb's rule: his marriage to Jeyne Westerling, which constitutes a breach of his oath to the Freys and costs him that alliance; his mother's unsanctioned release of the prisoner Jaime Lannister, and Robb's failure to punish her; the invasion, in his absence, of his kingdom by men of the Iron Islands; the supposed deaths of his brothers (and heirs), at the hands of his foster-brother, along with his wife's failure to conceive; and a series of strategic choices which have led his campaign to the edge of defeat, despite the fact that he has won every battle. It is at this moment, when Robb is at his weakest, that Rickard Karstark, one of Robb's bannermen, and

⁴² One might chalk this response up to Owen's limited mental faculties (*Storm 2*: 182), but Owen is far from unique in responding to killing as mundane.

seven of his men murder Tion Frey and Willem Lannister: young boys taken as hostages by Robb at the Battle of the Whispering Wood.

The decision to execute Karstark is a difficult one. For all the monstrosity of his crime, Robb and his advisors are keenly aware that by performing justice, they lose the alliance with the Karstarks, which further weakens their all-but-doomed position. Briefly, the possibility of keeping Karstark as a hostage to his heir's loyalty – a common strategy for utilizing the body of others in order to maintain power – is discussed. In the end, however, Robb is adamant that even though the execution is so damaging to his cause, he must nevertheless order it:

It does not change what I must do... In battle I might have slain Tion and Willem myself, but this was no battle. They were asleep in their beds, naked and unarmed, in a cell where I put them. Rickard Karstark killed more than a Frey and a Lannister. *He killed my honor.* I shall deal with him at dawn.⁴³ (*Storm 1: 297-298*)

This conclusion is an interesting one, and a fascinating explanation for what Robb perceives as a need for justice-through-violence. Clearly the necessity for Karstark's death (at least as far as Robb understands it) has nothing to do with the consequences of executing him: Robb performs the execution in spite of them, on behalf of an imperative that is bound up with this stain on Robb's honour.

Martin hints at the complexities of this imperative, which has more to do with the structures of power in Westeros than morality. The murder of Tion and Willem is so abhorrent to Robb, so ruinous to his honour, for the twofold reason that the boys are under his protection ("in a cell where I put them"), and because they are murdered by Robb's own bannerman – by an individual who is, politically speaking, within the feudal system of the Seven Kingdoms, an extension of his own person. As such, these murders become, in some sense, Robb's own.

⁴³ Contrastingly, Robb, makes the decision to keep Theon Greyjoy hostage after he murders two young boys (see p. 120).

This problem for rulers appears elsewhere in *Song*. We see it in Roose Bolton's discussion of Vargo Hoat's maiming of Jaime Lannister: "For he is my man, as I am King Robb's man. Thus his crime is mine, or may seem so in [Lord Tywin's] eyes." (*Storm* 1: 546). For Bolton, the danger lies only in that he may *seem* to have committed the crime; he feels no shame at all in the occurrence of the crime. It would be far too cynical, by comparison, to think that Robb performs the execution only for the sake of appearance: it is evident that the shame goes to the heart of him, and that for him, the only response to that shame can be the execution. Whether because he must respond to the crime with strict adherence to the law, or because the offending bannerman (an offending part of himself) must be removed from the world, there is something in the world that makes Rickard Karstark's death *necessary*: the web of social expectations, laws, and beliefs, which come together to form something called 'honor',⁴⁴ require the execution.

Whatever we think of Robb's murdered honour, it does seem to require him to perform the execution himself, as his father would have, and Karstark is, curiously, grateful, perhaps seeing the deed as a mark of respect:

Long Lew waited beside the block, but Robb took the poleaxe from his hand and ordered him to step aside. 'This is my work,' he said. 'He dies at my word. He must die by my hand.'

Lord Rickard Karstark dipped his head stiffly. 'For that much, I thank you. But for naught else.' (298)

⁴⁴ What is called 'honor' in *Song* is not always intuitive. That this is the case is nowhere more evident than in Qhorin Halfhand's order to Jon Snow to desert the Night's Watch: "Our honor means no more than our lives, so long as the realm is safe," (*Clash* 692) he tells Jon, implying that Jon harms his honour by being *perceived* to desert, even though (at least for the moment), he *must* be perceived to break his vow in order to keep it. To some readers, this may seem counterintuitive: since Jon in fact stays true to his vow, he holds to honour, but some other thing – something bound up with reputation – is lost.

As part of his attempt to outline how honour operates in Westeros, Stefan Sasse argues that honour "serves as an instrument of separating classes", and that "[o]nly nobles can have honour". This is an unsatisfying idea, but Sasse is making the important observation that honour, for those in the Seven Kingdoms, is so bound up with existing structures of power as to be inseparable from them ("The concept of honor"). In his paper on chivalric virtues in *Song*, Charles H. Hackney calls honour "a troublesome concept", pointing to the fact that although "in medieval thought, it is common to see issues of honor linked to issues of social prestige and reputation ... [t]he notion that chivalric honor is a matter of social status (lineage and deeds) exists in an often uneasy balance with the idea that nobility is owed more to virtue and personal integrity than status and reputation" (138-139). This tension is particularly uneasy in *Song*, but Martin is far from cynical about honour: both Hackney and Susan Johnston have argued that Martin constructs a truer kind of honour – and characters who are truly honourable, despite the brokenness of their world, and the contradictions of its ideals.

Though the reader may see this decision as a moral victory, the rest of the execution feels like nothing more than defeat. For all Karstark's almost petty accusations of kinslaying ("We are kin, Stark and Karstark. . . . no man is so accursed as the kinslayer." (298-299)), the reader is unlikely to view the execution as a crime. But one may well be left with the sense that Robb *is* "accursed": there is nothing triumphant in this dispensing of justice. The reader may accept the execution as *necessary*, but it is a bitter business:

'Rickard Karstark, Lord of Karhold.' Robb lifted the heavy axe with both hands. 'Here in sight of gods and men, I judge you guilty of murder and high treason. In mine own name I condemn you. With mine own hand I take your life. Would you speak a final word?'

'Kill me, and be cursed. You are no king of mine.'

The axe crashed down. Heavy and well-honed, it killed at a single blow, but it took three to sever 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 to the heart tree.⁴⁵ He stood shaking with his hands half-clenched and the rain running down his cheeks. *Gods forgive him*, Catelyn prayed in silence. *He is only a boy, and he had no other choice.* (299)

The execution of Rickard Karstark is bleak and destructive, but nevertheless, somehow it is required of him. The reader is apt to agree, but the idea that Robb has "no other choice" is something we should be aware of, because it is something that we will see again, at an execution that we are far less likely to endorse.

Theon Greyjoy, though Eddard's ward and hostage, rather than son, will go on to "swing the sword" himself as a result of Eddard's influence, but in a radically different spirit. While Robb and Jon perform their executions with their own hands out of a need (instilled in them, clearly, by their father) to take responsibility for the life they take, Theon's actions and thoughts declare an outright abdication of responsibility. Where his foster brothers act out of a real desire for justice, Theon is at every step seeking to avoid justice against his own person.

⁴⁵ The heart tree is the representation of the 'old gods' that Robb worships, and so this action is likely a forlorn call for guidance.

The complexities of Theon's desperate clutching for power in *A Clash of Kings* will be discussed at length later,⁴⁶ but this execution is relevant to our current purpose.

Driven by a complex combination of character and external constraints, Theon is forced, or at least sees himself as forced, to order the killing of two young boys and pass them off as Bran and Rickon Stark. To prevent this deception from being revealed, he arranges the murders of the men who helped him kill them. Then, because he must be seen to do justice for those murders, he accuses and sentences to death Farlen, the kennelmaster:

He could not let the killings go unpunished. Farlen was as likely a suspect as any, so Theon sat in judgment, called him guilty, and condemned him to death. Even that went sour. As he knelt to the block, the kennelmaster said, 'M'lord Eddard always did his own killings.' Theon had to take the axe⁴⁷ himself or look a weakling. (*Clash* 587)

Theon feels himself *compelled* to perform each of these actions: if he does not kill the miller's sons, if he does not hide his deception, if he allows the murder of his men to go unpunished, he will seem weak, and in his situation, as is so often the case in *Song*, to *seem weak* is to be weak, because the appearance of power is vital to maintaining power.

Theon takes up the axe because he has been steadily driven to it by a fear of appearing weak, and a desperate and futile need to remain in control. The result is a bloody business:

His hands were sweating, so the shaft twisted in his grip as he swung and the first blow landed between Farlen's shoulders. It took three more cuts to hack through all that bone and muscle and sever the head from the body, and afterward he was sick, remembering all the times they'd sat over a cup of mead talking of hounds and hunting. *I had no choice*, he wanted to scream at the corpse. *The ironborn can't keep secrets, they had to die, and someone had to take the blame for it.* (ibid.)

Throughout *A Clash of Kings*, Theon has blundered from one atrocity to another, and his insistence that he has no choice is repeated often. For all that Theon is reactionary,

⁴⁶ See pp. 99-115.

⁴⁷ Jon and Eddard perform their executions with their own swords, while Robb and Theon use axes belonging to others. There is something distancing in this: both Eddard's and Jon's swords are very personal objects – as occurs frequently in fantasy, they are almost totemic, and become important extensions of the characters wielding them.

narcissistic, selfish, impetuous, and insecure, and for all that the reader can see clearly how his resulting *choices* have brought him to this point, there is something compelling about Theon's profession of helplessness. This execution, like so many of his actions as Prince of Winterfell, is a reaction to a slight on his honour, to a perception of his own weakness, and he performs it in a misguided – but, within the logic of the ironborn and Westeros as a whole, entirely logical – attempt to reassert his power.

In one way or another, all three of Eddard's 'children' *must* perform these executions. Jon considers other possibilities, but decides that killing Slynt is necessary. Robb, too, comes to the execution because he feels he can do nothing else. Theon executes Farlen out of cowardice, but in a sense, he does not have a choice. The reader will feel very differently about each of these *necessities*: it is *satisfying* that Jon must kill Slynt, *tragic* that Robb must kill Karstark, and *pitiful* that Theon must kill Farlen. Still, *performing* justice – and each of these executions *is* a performance, given before an audience of the executioner's subjects – is a necessary part of power. Soon after the execution of Janos Slynt, Jon accepts wildlings into the service of the Night's Watch with the warning, "Disobey an order, and I'll have your head off. Ask my brothers if I won't. They've *seen* [emphasis added] me do it." (*Dance* 274) This life that he has taken, this blood, is a part of the currency with which he buys power. The fact that this violent justice is displayed is an integral part of it: the Night's Watch have seen him do it, and that reinforces his power over them. These displays are an integral part of the struggle for power that makes up *Song*.

Within the exceedingly violent context of Westeros – and Martin does not shield us from the brutal reality of this violence, but presents it to the full extent of its horror – the executions of Janos Slynt, Rickard Karstark, and even that of Gared, despite its harmful consequences, seem more or less acceptable. We may react to these executions – to this response to a crime

against one's liege⁴⁸ in the form of the fatal severing of head from neck – as abhorrent from a modern perspective, but we can acknowledge a certain rectitude and righteousness in these acts, in particular because of the moral responsibility taken by those doling out death. The ideal that “the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword” is one clearly inspired by a disillusionment with modern violence:⁴⁹

Taking human life should always be a very serious thing. There's something very close up about the Middle Ages. You're taking a sharp piece of steel and hacking at someone's head, and you're getting spattered with his blood, and you're hearing his screams. In some ways maybe it's more brutal that we've insulated ourselves from that. We're setting up mechanisms where we can kill human beings with drones and missiles where you're sitting at a console and pressing the button. We never have to hear their whimpering, or hear them begging for their mother, or dying in horrible realities around us. I don't know if that's necessarily such a good thing. (“George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview”)

One perceives a profound and particular horror at post-9/11 (American) warfare in Martin's words, but there is an echo also of an almost Foucauldian perception of modern punishment:

Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process. ... As a result, justice no longer takes public responsibility for the violence that is bound up with its practice. If it too strikes, if it too kills, it is not as a glorification of its strength, but as an element of itself that it is obliged to tolerate, that it finds difficult to account for. ... the publicity has shifted to the trial, and to the sentence; the execution itself is like an additional shame that justice is ashamed to impose on the condemned man; so *it keeps its distance from the act, tending always to entrust it to others* [emphasis added], under the seal of secrecy. (Foucault 9-10)

Martin, as we have observed, is sceptical of that very distance. There is an important dichotomy in *Song* between those rulers who perform their own executions, and those who make use of a headsman. We learn this lesson with Bran from Eddard in that first, pedagogical scene:

‘King Robert has a headsman,’ he said, uncertainly.

⁴⁸ Gared's crime is against his order, and more generally against the kingdom and the king.

⁴⁹ The medieval world has few precedents of rulers performing executions, and so Martin's decision to foreground this is deliberate, rather than an artefact of the setting.

‘He does,’ his father admitted. ‘As did the Targaryen kings before him. Yet our way is the older way.’⁵⁰ The blood of the First Men still flows in the veins of the Starks, and we hold to the belief that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. If you would take a man’s life, you owe it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words. And if you cannot bear to do that, then perhaps the man does not deserve to die.

‘One day, Bran, you will be Robb’s bannerman, holding a keep of your own for your brother and your king, and justice will fall to you. *When that day comes, you must take no pleasure in the task, but neither must you look away* [emphasis added]. A ruler who hides behind paid executioners soon forgets what death is.’ (*Game* 16)

There we have our golden mean: a succinct expression of one of the virtues by which Martin (and therefore his readers) will judge the rulers we observe throughout *Song*. The good ruler does not delight in the violence required of him, but neither does he look away from its severity. Jon and Robb seem to have acted in accordance with this idea, but this is far from the norm in *Song*.

That King Robert keeps a headsman – that he participates only minimally in justice – will prove to be a symbol and symptom of his detachment from rule. He will be absent from nearly every decision made by his court throughout *A Game of Thrones*, hiding behind paid executioners, counselors, and the ever ready, and not always unjustified, scapegoat of the Lannisters. Faced at one point with his own failure as a king, he betrays the cause of it in the same breath as he promises to be better:

Ah, say that I’m a better king than Aerys and be done with it. You never could lie for love nor honor, Ned Stark. I’m still young, and now that you’re here with me, things will be different. We’ll make this a reign to sing of, and damn the Lannisters to seven hells. I smell bacon.
(310)

Robert is not unwilling to face rulership, but bored by it, and easily distracted from it by his own “huge appetites” (42).

⁵⁰ Eddard shows a scepticism here (felt throughout his chapters) for the more ‘modern’ ways of the South. The cultural division between North and South has historical origins in the text – in the invasion of the Andals, which was halted at the Neck, so that the culture of the First Men dominates the North. Initially, the reader is disposed to distrust the culture of the South – particularly as concerns justice – especially because the novels focus so closely on the Starks, who embody a very positive view of the North. This will become complicated in later novels, as the both southern and northern regions become more differentiated, and we become aware of the bloodier side of this older way, from the tradition of First Night, to the use of flaying, to the practice of human sacrifice.

There is an element of the comic about Robert, and also of the pitiful – largely because we observe his character primarily through the eyes of his friend, Eddard Stark – but we cannot escape how totally he fails as a king, particularly as concerns justice.⁵¹ The first such failure that we observe is in the case of the fight between his son, Joffrey, and Eddard’s daughter, Arya, which leads to Joffrey being wounded by Arya’s direwolf, Nymeria. The dispute is – for all the gravitas that it is given by the framing events – a small one, but the judgment takes place nevertheless in front of a crowd, in a manner which reflects what we will later see in the court at King’s Landing. The ‘trial’ – and it follows the form of a trial – is a farce: lies win out, dissent is sown, and worst of all, Lady, Sansa’s direwolf, is killed deliberately in Nymeria’s place. For this obvious injustice, Robert takes no responsibility at all:

The king looked at them for a long moment, then turned his eyes on his wife. ‘Damn you, Cersei,’ he said with loathing.

Ned stood, gently disengaging himself from Sansa’s grasp. All the weariness of the past four days had returned to him. ‘Do it yourself then, Robert,’ he said in a voice cold and sharp as steel. ‘At least have the courage to do it yourself.’

Robert looked at Ned with flat, dead eyes and left without a word, his footsteps heavy as lead. (158)

Lady’s death is an act of cruelty which can be laid at the feet of the Lannisters, but it is Robert’s unwillingness to engage with the process of justice that makes it possible.

Robert’s emotional absence from justice will be reflected later in his literal absence when villagers from Sherrer testify to the attacks made by Gregor Clegane and his men on their village. These attacks are perhaps the greatest atrocity to occur in this first novel, with the exception of the Dothraki attacks on the Lhazareen,⁵² and the King’s absence from this

⁵¹ Robert’s failure as a king has significant consequences in the text, but his personal failings are worth noting: his relationship with his children is destructive, his relationship with his wife abusive. For all that he is viewed sympathetically in Eddard’s chapters, the trauma he causes casts a shadow over Cersei’s.

⁵² One could make interesting observations of the cultural politics at play in these two massacres, which are remarkably similar. The attack on Sherrer is presented as an aberrant event, a horror which shocks all but its perpetrators. On the other hand, the attack on the Lhazareen village is presented as par for the course for the Dothraki. This can be read as both a deliberate indictment by Martin of the hypocrisy of the Seven Kingdoms – which is far more barbaric than it pretends to be – and a sign of problematic racial politics in Martin’s text. The latter should be acknowledged: Mat Hardy has provided an exemplary – if occasionally overzealous – catalogue of Martin’s Orientalism in his “Game of Tropes” (though his focus is not on the Dothraki) and numerous pop culture critics, such as Saladin Ahmed, Adam Serwer, and Nina Rastogi, have all argued that HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (and its source) makes use of racist tropes in its portrayal of the Dothraki. Helen Young has examined how these racial politics spill over into the fandom, with a focus on *Westeros.org*.

moment, though coincidental, is significant. Justice falls, in the end, to Eddard, and the justice initiated here is exemplary. Ned refuses to let justice become conflated with vengeance (“Vengeance? I thought we were speaking of justice. Burning Clegane’s fields and slaughtering his people will not restore the king’s peace, only your injured pride.” (469)), but nevertheless gives a severe sentence: “I denounce him, and attain him, and strip him of all rank and titles, of all lands and incomes and holdings, and do sentence him to death.” (470) It is an appropriate sentence, given the horror visited by the Mountain on Sherrer and neighbouring villages, but has a radical effect in two respects: firstly because, through a combination of his rank and Robert’s failure, Gregor has so far escaped justice for his numerous crimes,⁵³ and thus Eddard’s actions disrupt an ongoing pattern of injustice, and secondly, because it will result in the creation of one of the most radical – and the most radically optimistic – organizations in Westeros – the Brotherhood Without Banners.

To dispense this justice upon Gregor Clegane, Eddard sends a party of men to apprehend him, and since he is unable to take on the task himself, being wounded, he places them under the command of Lord Beric Dondarrion:

In the name of Robert of the House Baratheon, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, by the word of Eddard of the House Stark, his Hand, I charge you to ride to the westlands with all haste, to cross the Red Fork of the Trident under the king’s flag, and there bring the king’s justice to the false knight⁵⁴ Gregor Clegane, and to all those who shared in his crimes. (470)

It is the king’s justice, and done in the king’s name, but the King himself is absent from the process – absent, in fact, because he is engaged in a hunt, that indulgent performance of royalty that will very soon kill him. But even once both the king and his hand are dead, Dondarrion and his men proceed in the pursuit of a kind of justice which is otherwise almost entirely absent from Westeros: one which, while performed ostensibly in the name of a king, takes seriously, to the profound risk of its agents, the idea that justice must be done for the *smallfolk*.

⁵³ His maiming of his brother, Sandor; his (presumed) murder of his father, sister and wives, as well as several servants; his numerous crimes in war; and, notably, the rape and murder he committed during the Sack of King’s Landing. (*Game* 313-314)

⁵⁴ This accusation echoes medieval romance, which contrasts “true” and “false” knights, although the near absence of “true knights” from *Song* – which is foregrounded in Sansa’s lamentably naive, and ever thwarted, search for one – makes this designation seem oddly hollow.

Dondarrion disappears for a long time from the narrative after his departure from King's Landing under Eddard's command, and is heard from only in rumours, as a brigand who can rarely be found, and never killed. He returns in *A Storm of Swords*, when Arya, now tragically well-acquainted with the horrors of war, meets him as a kind of messianic Robin Hood: the frequently resurrected leader of the Brotherhood Without Banners, who travel through the Riverlands as a strange corollary to the Merry Men, killing the rich who have harmed the poor.⁵⁵ There is reason to criticize the justice performed by the Brotherhood but there is a profound idealism, a kind of heroism, about the Brotherhood that is hard not to admire:

When we left King's Landing, we were men of Winterfell and men of Darry and men of Blackhaven, Mallery men and Wylde men. We were knights and squires and men-at-arms, lords and commoners, bound together only by our purpose. ... Six score of us set out to bring the king's justice to [Gregor Clegane]. ... Six score brave men and true, led by a fool in a starry cloak⁵⁶ ... More than eighty of our number are dead now, but others have taken up the swords that fell from their hands. ... With their help, we fight on as best as we can, for Robert and the realm. (*Storm* 1: 490-491)

The band's relationship with the smallfolk is almost symbiotic, unlike the parasitic relationship of most armies⁵⁷ – they seem as much concerned with feeding the people as feeding themselves. Even their movement through the landscape is radically different, as they move through pockets of resistance and sanctuary that are created outside of the expected

⁵⁵ This description somewhat elides the immense tragedy of the Brotherhood without Banners, who are neither particularly merry, nor likely to make the reader merry. This tragedy will be addressed later (see pp. 51-57).

⁵⁶ The "fool in a starry cloak" refers to Dondarrion himself, who speaks here.

⁵⁷ The parasitism of armies on the march is observed by Arya during her travels in *A Clash of Kings* and the early part of *A Storm of Swords*. Armies live by foraging, which in most cases amounts to little more than pillaging from the smallfolk. Villages aid these soldiers under threat of death, and may be punished for doing so. The Brave Companions – who, as one of the worst and most prominent mercenary bands, are the antithesis of the Brotherhood – exemplify this parasitism:

The Brave Companions did most of the foraging for Harrenhal, and Roose Bolton had given them the task of rooting out Lannisters. Vargo Hoat had divided them into four bands, to visit as many villages as possible. He led the largest group himself, and gave the others to his most trusted captains. She had heard Rorge laughing over Lord Vargo's way of finding traitors. All he did was return to places he had visited before under Lord Tywin's banner and seize those who had helped him. (*Clash* 649-650)

systems of protection⁵⁸ – the keeps of lesser lordlings, inns, even (in an unusually whimsical scene) a village hidden in the upper branches of a forest, connected by rope walkways (317).

Initially, the Brotherhood perform justice in Robert's name, but Robert himself had no part in its creation, and his absence from justice, both literally and figuratively, is keenly felt even after his death. Faced with Dondarrion's above declaration, Sandor Clegane expresses that absence brusquely:

Rocks and trees and rivers, that's what your realm is made of⁵⁹ ... Do the rocks need defending? Robert wouldn't have thought so. If he couldn't fuck it, fight it, or drink it, it bored him, and so would you ... you *brave companions*.⁶⁰ (491-492)

He is almost certainly incorrect about what Robert would have thought, but his words reemphasize the king's distance – his willful and disastrous distance – from the responsibilities of the throne.

We observe Robert taking an active hand in the governing of the kingdom in three matters only: in his insistence on naming Jaime Lannister Warden of the East, in his command that a ruinously expensive tournament be held in Eddard's name, and in his desire to assassinate Daenerys Targaryen. In this latter desire, we observe a rage, and a personal vendetta that evidently motivates him, rather than the threat that Daenerys might pose:

'This *child* will soon enough spread her legs and start breeding more dragonspawn to plague me.'

'Nonetheless,' Ned said. 'The murder of children ... it would be vile ... unspeakable ...'

'*Unspeakable??*' the king roared. 'What Aerys did to your brother Brandon was unspeakable. The way your lord father died, that was unspeakable. And Rhaegar ... how many times do you think he raped your sister? How many *hundreds* of times?' (*Game* 112-113)

For all that Robert and his counsellors later frame the assassination of Daenerys as a means to prevent war ("Should the gods in their caprice grant Daenerys Targaryen a son, the realm must bleed." (353-354)), we are hardly likely to believe them. The decision causes an immense (though short-lived) rift between Robert and Eddard, and we inevitably side with

⁵⁸ The various massacres of villagers accustom readers to the fact that these expected systems of protection – that is, the expectation that feudal lords will protect their own smallfolk – usually fail. This fact is made clearest at the raid on Saltpan: "Ser Quincy Cox ... barred his gates when the outlaws entered the town and sat safe behind stone walls as his people screamed and died." (*Feast* 579)

⁵⁹ People are notably absent from Sandor's description of the realm.

⁶⁰ Clegane ironically names them "brave companions" – insultingly comparing them to Vargo Hoat's mercenary band – a grave insult, since they oppose them, both literally and symbolically.

Eddard, in part because Daenerys is one of Martin's most frequent and sympathetic focalizers, but primarily because the act is tainted by Robert's personal desire for vengeance. For all that this order is one of *assassination*, rather than *execution* – a matter more directly concerned with politics than justice – we nevertheless see Robert calling for death in his capacity as Protector of the Realm – and doing so poorly.

Robert is incompetent in the matter of justice, but what we see of the law in Westeros is more often defined by tyranny and sadism than ineptitude. Westerosi law is violent – it is the axe, the sword, the noose, hot iron, the lash – and we rarely see it wielded with a view to the good of the realm. Perhaps most indicative of the absence of moral responsibility from the law is the fact that, particularly in the south, the term “Justice” tends to refer, not to the process of adjudication, nor to some moral restoration, but to the *executioner*, or to the weapon of execution. The term “King's Justice”, at least in the royal capital, refers rarely to the systems of law and punishment that flow from the throne, and nearly always to Ser Ilyn Payne – the terrifying mute who serves as the royal headsman.

Lysa Arryn, when threatening Tyrion with execution, exclaims, “Behold the *king's justice*,” (*Game* 421) and what she indicates is the Moon Door: a door that opens over the cliffs of the Eyrie, six hundred feet over the valley below, through which those sentenced to death are thrown. Here, “justice” is once more the name given to the means of execution, and this door exemplifies the means by which rulers distance themselves from the deaths they command: the breaking of the body of the condemned occurs at the greatest possible remove from the ruler who orders it, and no hands need do the breaking.⁶¹ In HBO's adaptation, Lysa Arryn proclaims of this method, “Life is more elegant here” (“A Golden Crown”), and this elegance is appalling to us. By this means, in the mind of the lawgiver at this time, the sickly and sickening Robert Arryn,⁶² the brutality of the law is transfigured into a child's fantasy: “Mother, I want to see him fly!” (414)

⁶¹ Only the shoving – a far cleaner process.

⁶² Not to be confused with King Robert Baratheon, Robert Arryn is a child clearly indulged, and prone to tantrums, leaving the formidable power of the Vale in the hands of a child “prone to weep if you take his dolls away” (*Game* 365), curbed only by the mother who is paranoid, proud, and disinclined to deny him anything. Our introduction to the young lord is illuminating – Lysa insists on his strength, while shielding him from the realities of the war, and, when he cries, comforts him with an act of somewhat nauseating infantilization:

‘Don't be afraid, my sweet baby,’ Lysa whispered. ‘Mother's here, nothing will hurt you.’ She opened her robe and drew out a pale, heavy breast, tipped with red. The boy grabbed for it eagerly, buried his face against her chest, and began to suck.
(376)

In the Eyrie, the “king’s justice” is a door; in King’s Landing, it is a voiceless and inhuman man,⁶³ but both are, for a significant time, under the control of boys, and their mothers: the Moon Door is controlled by Robert Arryn, and Ser Ilyn Payne by King Joffrey, who assumes the throne after King Robert dies. The two are intriguingly paralleled: both are relatively young, at least to a modern reader; they are rulers by right of birth, with no talent for ruling; each is a tyrant, with his cruelty heavily influenced by his age – Robert with his entitled tantrums and playful murderousness, Joffrey with his adolescent sexuality transforming into a burgeoning sexual sadism; both of their fathers have recently died, both of supposedly natural causes, but in fact – as the reader knows – murdered; both have overprotective and unstable mothers, whose relationships to their husbands, and sons, are defined by sexual transgression,⁶⁴ and who attempt to rule through them, but are unable to control them. In them Martin gives us a horrifying picture of the worst possible result of the feudal primogeniture in Westeros: a situation in which the protection of the people and the rule of law falls to the whims of children, and monstrous children at that.

It is at the whim of King Joffrey that one of the most memorable – and lamentable – enactments of the King’s Justice occurs. Towards the end of *A Game of Thrones*, Eddard stands accused of treason against Joffrey, and to save his family, he agrees to confess, and join the Night’s Watch. This outcome will seem only natural to the reader: it would see the man who appears to be the principal character of this novel⁶⁵ thrust into the midst of the most important unresolved plot thread in the novel – the imminent threat of the Others beyond the Wall. But this is not what Martin writes:

Joffrey ... stepped out from behind the shields of his Kingsguard. ‘My mother bids me let Lord Eddard take the black, and Lady Sansa has

⁶³ *Feast* expresses it best: “With his grim face and deep-sunk hollow eyes, Ser Ilyn might have passed for death himself ... as he had for years.” (487) He is always described in skeletal terms, but more particularly, it is his silence which makes him seem inhuman. Unlike Wex – also mute and illiterate – who is nonetheless remarkably expressive, Ser Ilyn communicates virtually nothing. The only time he performs any kind of illocutionary act is when he laughs at Jaime’s wishes and confessions, the sound always described as “clacking” (494, 570) – a distinctly skeletal sound.

⁶⁴ Lysa’s premarital relationship with Littlefinger (a violation of the chastity expected of unmarried noblewomen) results in pregnancy. She is forced to abort the child – something which may well have led to her inability to bear a healthy child, and which certainly leads to her overprotectiveness of Robert. On the other hand, Cersei’s incestuous – but consensual – relationship with Jaime transgresses norms in numerous ways, while her husband’s rape of her is socially acceptable: a source of trauma for her, which is partially the cause for her overprotectiveness of her children by Jaime – not to mention the murder of Robert’s (both symbolically, in the case of his semen, and literally, in the case of his bastards).

⁶⁵ Eddard is the focalizer for the greatest number of chapters in *Game*, but he is also a particularly sympathetic character, given his moral sensibilities, and given that, unlike Catelyn, Daenerys and Tyrion, who also have a large number of focal chapters, Eddard is never directly opposed to another focal character.

begged mercy for her father.’ He looked straight at Sansa then, and *smiled*, and for a moment Arya thought that the gods had heard her prayer, until Joffrey turned back to the crowd and said, ‘But they have the soft hearts of women. So long as I am your king, treason shall never go unpunished. Ser Ilyn, bring me his head!’

...The High Septon clutched at the king’s cape, and Varys came rushing over waving his arms, and even the queen was saying something to him, but Joffrey shook his head. Lords and knights moved aside as *he* stepped through, tall and fleshless, a skeleton in iron mail, the King’s Justice... Ser Ilyn Payne climbed the steps of the pulpit. (*Game* 726)

Susan Johnston calls this the first sign that *Song* is “a form of fantasy ‘how fallen! How changed’” (134):

[Eddard’s] point of view and story arc seem to promise salvation, of a kind at least, for a diminished and decaying realm, a counterweight of honor and duty to the king’s disdain for the ordinary work of peace, order, and good government. His death, then, shocking to us as it is to his eldest daughter, Sansa, is, in the Tolkienian view, more than a twist in the tale; it is a chill premonition of what Tolkien calls ‘universal final defeat’. (ibid.)

Here, Johnston alludes to Tolkien’s conception of *dyscatastrophe* – the inevitability of defeat and despair – which allows for the power of *eucatastrophe* – “the sudden joyous ‘turn’”, the “sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur” (Tolkien 60). By comparison, in Martin’s *Song*, that grace can never be counted on to occur at all, and Eddard’s death, despite the hope that has been offered to us, is one of the reader’s first, and hardest lessons to that effect.⁶⁶ Characters who do not deserve death – and who, in a less brutal story, would escape death – often die.

Martin has stated that this is deliberate: that he wants readers “to be afraid to turn the next page because the next character may not survive it” (“The Man Whose Darkest Secret”). Interestingly, Martin’s dyscatastrophic tendency arose in part as a response to Tolkien:

⁶⁶ This is not Johnston’s conclusion. Rather, she sees the frankly alarming number of thwarted hopes and dead characters as the way in which Martin “restores the sudden joyous turn of the eucatastrophe, and in doing so, rekindles the hope that Tolkien saw at the heart of fantasy” (134), for “the joy of the eucatastrophe depends indeed on the potentially endless night” (135). Martin achieves this, Johnston claims, by restoring the suddenness and surprise – the *evangelium* – of eucatastrophe, and by a reconstitution of honour and heroism unbound from chivalry. What is missing from Martin’s story, however, which Johnston does not directly address, is the *grace* – in the theological sense – which is bound up with eucatastrophe for Tolkien, and with the very idea of evangelium. Tolkien proposed that eucatastrophe would give us “a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world” (60), a glimpse which the metaphysical *Lord of the Rings* certainly offers, but which Martin, for whom joy is always *of the world*, never does.

Much as I admire Tolkien, I once again always felt like Gandalf should have stayed dead. That was such an incredible sequence in *Fellowship of the Ring* when he faces the Balrog on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm and he falls into the gulf, and his last words are, ‘Fly, you fools.’

...What power that had, how that grabbed me. And then he comes back as Gandalf the White, and if anything he’s sort of improved. I never liked Gandalf the White as much as Gandalf the Grey, and I never liked him coming back. I think it would have been an even stronger story if Tolkien had left him dead. (“George R.R. Martin, Author”)

While there may be resurrections in *Song*, death is a real threat to its protagonists, and Eddard’s, the first major death, is a sudden, and shocking lesson to this effect.⁶⁷ King Joffrey, who has no right to the throne he sits,⁶⁸ sends forth the “King’s Justice”, armed with Eddard’s own sword, Ice⁶⁹ to decapitate the man we hoped, expected, believed, would cheat death, on the steps of a temple.

Despite how shocking this death is, the severing itself is a mild affair. We are spared, along with Arya, the sight of it. Yoren shields her vision, and our own: “‘Shut your mouth and close your eyes, *boy*.’ Dimly, as if from far away, she heard a ... a *noise* ... a soft sighing sound, as if a million people had let out their breath at once.” (*Game* 727) Sansa, on the other hand, is a witness to her father’s death, but her memory of it is expressed to us with the details elided by her trauma:

⁶⁷ As a deliberate counterpoint to the “improved” Gandalf the White, Martin’s resurrected characters are dramatically changed, and not for the better:

My characters who come back from death are worse for wear. In some ways, they’re not even the same characters anymore. The body may be moving, but some aspect of the spirit is changed or transformed, and they’ve lost something. (“George R.R. Martin, Author”)

Khal Drogo, Beric Dondarrion, and Catelyn Stark all return from the dead, but are profoundly less than they were. Of Dondarrion, Martin claims, “Bits of his humanity are lost” (*ibid.*), and this is even more true of Catelyn, a character who in life is motivated by a profound compassion for her children and those of others, but who, after death, is rechristened Lady Stoneheart, and moved entirely by revenge. Drogo, when reborn, is least of them all – merely alive, but nothing more, presented as a lesson: “see what life is worth, when all the rest are gone.” (*Game* 760)

⁶⁸ Joffrey is the bastard born of incest between Queen Cersei and her brother Jaime, and this secret, which Eddard uncovers, threatens his claim. His birth is not what makes Joffrey monstrous to the reader, however: the novels do a great deal to emphasize that the legitimacy of any ruler is always created by political victory, rather than being sanctioned by some higher power. Robert Baratheon became king through war; Aegon I Targaryen through violent conquest and unification; and every conflict of succession in the history of the Seven Kingdoms – there are many – is won through political success, rather than god-given right.

⁶⁹ Ice, Eddard’s totemic sword, which has symbolized Eddard’s justice, is now turned to injustice. Later, it will be melted down to form Joffrey’s sword, Widow’s Wail, with which he promises to sunder the magic sword Lightbringer, but does nothing more than destroy a rare book (*Storm* 2: 244), and Jaime’s sword, which he gives to Brienne, asking her to name it Oathkeeper, so that she can protect Eddard’s daughter with Eddard’s own steel (455). This is an interesting trajectory, half of which (so far) suggests a restorative arc. The fate of both swords in later books will be worth watching.

Waking or sleeping, she saw him, saw the gold cloaks fling him down, saw Ser Ilyn striding forward, unsheathing Ice from the scabbard on his back, saw the moment ... the moment when ... she had wanted to look away, she had *wanted* to, her legs had gone out from under her and she had fallen to her knees, yet somehow she could not turn her head, and all the people were screaming and shouting, and her prince had smiled at her, he'd *smiled* and she'd felt safe, but only for a heartbeat, until he said those words, and her father's legs ... that was what she remembered, his legs, the way they'd *jerked* when Ser Ilyn ... when the sword ... (741)

By Martin's standards, this is hardly descriptive at all. We have seen other deaths far more clearly: when Ser Hugh dies, we are told "[t]he point of Ser Gregor's lance had snapped off in his neck" (295); the assassin sent after Bran is killed by the direwolf Summer, who "wrenched back its head, taking out half his throat" (133); the spearwife, Hali, dies with Summer "slamming her backward, teeth tearing at her belly" (405), and then "savaging Hali, pulling glistening blue snakes from her belly" (406).

Eddard's decapitation occurs when we are not looking, and the accounts we have of it share little of him. Eddard's head is severed from his shoulders, and he is severed from the narrative. The reader is given fifteen chapters from Eddard's perspective, but there are no final thoughts and no last words – an absence which will be keenly felt. Eddard is suddenly, startlingly, *gone*. With Sansa, we will be shocked, and with Sansa we will despise the king, and the king's 'justice' – both the man, Ser Ilyn Payne, and the process he stands for. The whole of *Song* turns on this one event. As a result of this death, the Stark family, our chief protagonists, are scattered, Robb becomes King in the North, and the war, already beginning, becomes inexorable.

The swinging of the sword is here an act of tyranny, rather than justice. There is nothing here of the "retributive or redemptive violence" that Martin was playing with in the execution of Janos Slynt. Instead, what we see is an act of tyranny, vengeance, and bloodlust, as well as a childish and destructive attempt by the king to display his power. Such acts are far more common in *A Song of Ice and Fire* than are acts of justice. The execution block and the gallows are frequently the site of posturing.

Even the deaths that seem like justice turn sour on us. The Brotherhood Without Banners, who have already been considered for their attempts at justice-for-the-people, takes

on a very different nature at the end of *A Storm of Swords*, when we discover that the messianic Beric Dondarrion is finally dead,⁷⁰ and that the Brotherhood has changed greatly. We first encounter the Brotherhood through Arya, and although there is a disillusionment to Arya's experience of them,⁷¹ we still have an opportunity to admire them. When we meet them again, after Beric's death, it is through a very different focalizer: in an epilogue, told through the eyes of Merrett Frey, a bitter alcoholic who suffers from chronic migraines as a result of an injury. His chapter features a stream of self-pity so voluminous and venomous as to be comic, despite any justification for his grievances. He is a character for whom the reader will likely feel a combination of pity and scorn, one whose experiences with the Kingswood Brotherhood left him with none of the romantic views of the outlaw band that influence the reader's experience of Beric and his men. The reader is primed to loathe Merrett – partly for his character, and partly for his complicity in the Red Wedding – and so when he is sent to negotiate the release of another Frey prisoner from the Brotherhood Without Banners, the reader will be on their side, rather than his.

The emotional significance of this epilogue will, however, be far more complex. The first indication of this is given with our first glimpse of the brotherhood: of Tom of Sevenstreams, sitting on the sepulchre of King Tristifer IV Mudd at Oldstones, singing "*High in the halls of the kings who are gone, Jenny would dance with her ghosts*" (*Storm 2: 574*). Given the sheer volume of *Song*, it is quite possible, on first reading, to miss the significance of this, but by setting this event *here*, at Oldstones, with this particular song, Martin weaves this moment into a story that he has been carefully telling, bit by bit, throughout *A Storm of Swords*. The reader has encountered Jenny, and Oldstones, and King Tristifer before, and their reappearance here gives a sense of great tragedy to this encounter.

It is worth looking at these connections to understand the emotional resonance of this reappearance of the Brotherhood. Jenny's song we first encounter with Arya, travelling with the Brotherhood in search of Beric Dondarrion. At High Heart the Brotherhood stop to talk with an old dwarf woman, in a scene far more significant than can be outlined fully here,⁷²

⁷⁰ In the epilogue of *Storm*, Tom of Sevenstreams says only that "Lord Beric was needed elsewhere" (2: 575), but it is clear from Thoros's later words that Beric is dead by this time.

⁷¹ Arya is initially moved by the romantic ethos of the Brotherhood, but is disillusioned when she learns that they intend to ransom her to her family, rather than simply take her home.

⁷² In short, it may be noted that this scene involves our first introduction to a Child of the Forest – a member of the magical elf-like race of beings thought to have disappeared from Westeros thousands of years ago – and a great deal of prophecy, all of which has already come true, or will come true, within the course of *A Storm of Swords*.

who gives them information in exchange for a song “so soft and sad that Arya only heard snatches of the words, though the tune was half-familiar” (*Storm* 1: 321). We hear it again when the brotherhood returns to High Heart with Beric, and the song is identified by the woman, as “My Jenny’s song” (*Storm* 2: 25). The song is mentioned a third time when Robb and Catelyn travel through Oldstones, on their way to the Twins for the wedding that will be their end:

‘Oldstones, all the smallfolk called it when I was a girl, but no doubt it had some other name when it was still a hall of kings.’ She had camped here once with her father, on their way to Seagard. *Petyr was with us too...*

‘There’s a song,’ he remembered. “‘Jenny of Oldstones, with the flowers in her hair.’”

...She had played at being Jenny that day, had even wound flowers in her hair. And Petyr had pretended to be her Prince of Dragonflies...

Robb studied the sepulcher. ‘Whose grave is this?’

‘Here lies Tristifer, the Fourth of His Name, King of the Rivers and the Hills... He ruled from the Trident to the Neck, thousands of years before Jenny and her Prince, in the days when the kingdoms of the First Men were falling one after the other before the onslaught of the Andals. The Hammer of Justice, they called him. He fought a hundred battles and won nine-and-ninety, or so the singers say, and when he raised this castle it was the strongest in Westeros... He died in his hundredth battle, when seven Andal kings joined forces against him. The fifth Tristifer was not his equal, and soon the kingdom was lost, and then the castle, and last of all the line. With Tristifer the Fifth died House Mudd, that had ruled the riverlands for a thousand years before the Andals came.’ (60-61)

So the end of the First Men of the riverlands intersects at Oldstones with the tragedy of Jenny of Oldstones, which the reader will not understand until *A Dance with Dragons*, when we learn of the tragedy wrought by her marriage to Prince Duncan Targaryen,⁷³ and of her tragic connection to the dwarf woman who requests her song:

‘...A woods witch had told [Jahaerys II] that the prince that was promised would be born of [Aerys II and Rhaella’s] line.⁷⁴ ... She came to court with Jenny of Oldstones. A stunted thing, grotesque to

⁷³ “The Prince of Dragonflies loved Jenny of Oldstones so much he cast aside a crown, and Westeros paid the bride price in corpses” (*Dance* 875).

⁷⁴ That Jenny of Oldstones connects to the prophecy of the prince that was promised makes her seem all the more significant, since there is every indication that this prophecy is central to the events unfolding in *Song*.

look upon. A dwarf, most people said, though dear to Lady Jenny, who always claimed that she was one of the children of the forest.’⁷⁵

‘What became of her?’

‘Summerhall.’ The word was fraught with doom. (300-301)

And so, the tragedy at Summerhall, the mysterious conflagration that killed so many of the Targaryen line, is also bound up with Jenny, and Oldstones, and so is connected to King Tristifer IV Mudd, and the lost childhood of Catelyn Stark, and the heartrending end of King Robb Stark. Within the space of a few lines, then, Martin catapults us from the self-centred, jaded and bitter thoughts of Merrett Frey, into the midst of this relentless cycle of tragedy. This primes the reader for further loss.

Inevitably – Martin’s prologues and epilogues always end badly – Merrett’s attempt to ransom (the colourfully named) Petyr Pimple turns sour: Petyr has already been hanged by the brotherhood. Lem’s response to Merrett’s outrage is telling:

‘You... you had no right.’

‘We had a rope,’ said yellow cloak. ‘That’s right enough.’ (576)

The means of execution is “right enough” to perform it: this is a very different form of justice from what we formerly saw with the brotherhood. The brotherhood make to hang Merrett for his part in the Red Wedding, and he calls on their former justness:

They say Lord Beric always gives a man a trial, that he won’t kill a man unless something’s proved against him. You can’t prove anything against me. ... *you have no witness.* (579)

But the brotherhood present him with a witness, and so the chapter ends with one of the most startling and horrifying turns in the whole of *A Song of Ice and Fire*:

When she lowered her hood, something tightened inside Merrett’s chest, and for a moment he could not breathe. *No. No, I saw her die. She was dead for a day and night before they stripped her naked and threw her body in the river. Raymund opened her throat from ear to ear. She was dead.*

Her cloak and collar hid the gash his brother’s blade had made, but her face was even worse than he remembered. The flesh had gone pudding soft in the water and turned the color of curdled milk. Half her hair was gone and the rest had turned as white and brittle as a crone’s. Beneath her ravaged scalp, her face was shredded skin and black blood where she had raked herself with her nails. But her eyes were the most terrible thing. Her eyes saw him, and they hated. (ibid.)

⁷⁵ There is a great deal more detail concerning Jenny, the Prince of Dragonflies, and the woods witch, extraneous to our purposes, in *The World of Ice and Fire*.

So Catelyn Stark returns to the narrative, utterly changed, the embodiment no longer of motherhood as compassion, but the embodiment of motherhood as vengeance, known from hereon primarily as “Stoneheart”, but also “The Silent Sister”, “The Hangwoman” and “Mother Merciless” (*Feast* 785).⁷⁶ Her desire is not justice, but a recreation of the violence done upon her: “She wants her son alive, or the men who killed them dead... She wants to feed the crows, like they did at the Red Wedding.” (797) It represents a terrible change from the Catelyn who spoke out so frequently against such retribution:

‘you will have your vengeance.’
‘Will that bring Ned back to me?’ (*Game* 785)

More bloodshed will not bring your father back to us, nor Lord Rickard’s sons. (*Clash* 83)

This is both a tragedy and a horror. Catelyn and the brotherhood have both been warped since we last saw them, and they appear here, acting against villains of a sort, but cruelly, vengefully. This is not the justice we know, but something else. Brienne of Tarth, one of the novels’ few true idealists,⁷⁷ will discover what has become of the Brotherhood’s justice in *A Feast for Crows*, in one of the scenes which gives that novel its name:

...hardly a hundred yards went by without a corpse. They dangled under ash and alder, beech and birch, larch and elm, hoary old willows and stately chestnut trees. Each man wore a noose around his neck, and swung from a length of hempen rope, and each man’s mouth was packed with salt. ... Some of the dead men had been bald and some bearded, some young and some old, some short, some tall, some fat, some thin. Swollen in death, with faces gnawed and rotten, they all looked the same. *On the gallows tree, all men are brothers.* (680)

The reader will not mourn the deaths of these men – they are, Brienne and her companions realize, the men who raided Saltpans in one of the most horrifying atrocities of the war.⁷⁸ Martin has, however, already committed us to feeling a profound sense of *pity*, however:

⁷⁶ The “Silent Sisters” are an order of women within the faith of the Seven, who take vows of silence and chastity, and whose primary role is in caring for the remains of the dead. This name applied to Stoneheart is an ironic reference to that order.

⁷⁷ This idealism is a force for good in Brienne. Charles Hackney claims that Brienne’s “devotion to the chivalric vision serves to craft [her] into [a person] of impressive moral character” (135). Jaime Hovey calls her a “genderqueer knight to Sansa’s normatively cisgendered Lady” (90), and the comparison is appropriate: Brienne and Sansa both maintain naively idealistic views of knighthood – Sansa seeking a “true knight” to rescue her, while Brienne harbours ambitions to become such a knight. Since Brienne is set upon a quest to find Sansa, it is likely that Martin is not finished with this comparison.

⁷⁸ Saltpans is particularly horrific due to the indiscriminate attacks on children, and particularly the accounts of rape and sexual mutilation committed by Rorge and Biter.

“*Broken men*”, Brienne calls them (ibid.), and this connects it to an earlier passage – one of Martin’s most poignant – which deserves quoting at length.

The singers love to sing of good men forced to go outside the law to fight some wicked lord, but most outlaws are more like this ravening Hound than they are the lightning lord.⁷⁹ They are evil men, driven by greed, soured by malice, despising the gods and caring only for themselves. Broken men are more deserving of our pity, though they may be just as dangerous. Almost all are common-born, simple folk who had never been more than a mile from the house where they were born until the day some lord came round to take them off to war. Poorly shod and poorly clad, they march away beneath his banners, oftentimes with no better arms than a sickle or a sharpened hoe, or a maul they made themselves by lashing a stone to a stick with strips of hide. Brothers march with brothers, sons with fathers, friends with friends. They’ve heard the songs and stories, so they go off with eager hearts, dreaming of the wonders they will see, of the wealth and glory they will win. War seems a fine adventure, the greatest most of them will ever know.

Then they get a taste of battle.

For some, that one taste is enough to break them. Others go on for years, until they lose count of all the battles they have fought in, but even a man who has survived a hundred fights can break in his hundred-and-first. Brothers watch their brothers die, fathers lose their sons, friends see their friends trying to hold their entrails in after they’ve been gutted by an axe.

They see the lord who led them there cut down, and some other lord shouts that they are his now. They take a wound, and when that’s still half-healed they take another. There is never enough to eat, their shoes fall to pieces from the marching, their clothes are torn and rotting, and half of them are shitting in their breeches from drinking bad water.

If they want new boots or a warmer cloak or maybe a rusted iron halfhelm,⁸⁰ they need to take them from a corpse, and before long they are stealing from the living too, from the smallfolk whose lands they’re fighting in, men very like the men they used to be. They slaughter their sheep and steal their chickens, and from there it’s just a short step to carrying off their daughters too. And one day they look around and realize all their friends and kin are gone, that they are fighting beside strangers beneath a banner that they hardly recognize. They don’t know where they are or how to get back home and the lord they’re fighting for does not know their names, yet here he comes, shouting for them to form up, to make a line with their spears and

⁷⁹ The “lightning lord” refers to Beric Dondarrion, while the “ravening Hound” refers to the leader of the raiders on Saltpans, presumed (falsely) to be Sandor Clegane. The confusion occurs because the broken man Clegane’s abandoned helm (shaped like a hound’s head) is picked up by Rorge. Later, it will be taken by the Brotherhood’s Lem, to Thoros’s sorrow. Like Ice, the totemic helm has its own trajectory, becoming symbolic of the legacy of violence being played out around it.

⁸⁰ Or, indeed, a steel hound’s head helm.

scythes and sharpened hoes, to stand their ground. And the knights come down on them, faceless men clad all in steel, and the iron thunder of their charge seems to fill the world ...

And the man breaks.

He turns and runs, or crawls off afterward over the corpses of the slain, or steals away in the black of night, and he finds someplace to hide. All thought of home is gone by then, and kings and lords and gods mean less to him than a haunch of spoiled meat that will let him live another day, or a skin of bad wine that might drown his fear for a few hours. The broken man lives from day to day, from meal to meal, more beast than man. Lady Brienne is not wrong. In times like these, the traveler must beware of broken men, and fear them ... but he should pity them as well. (464-466)

Faced with these corpses in the trees, the reader will remember these words, offered by Septon Meribald, one of Martin's most strikingly benevolent characters,⁸¹ himself a reformed broken man. The deaths of these men is not "retributive or redemptive", but only more violence in this relentless history of violence.

When Brienne meets Thoros of Myr, one of the brotherhood, his words echo the tale of the broken man:

We were king's men when we began... but king's men must have a king, and we have none. We were brothers too, but now our brotherhood is broken. I do not know who we are, if truth be told, nor where we might be going. I only know the road is dark. The fires have not shown me what lies at its end. (790)

"*I know where it ends*", Brienne thinks, "*I have seen the corpses in the trees*" (791). The "brotherhood is broken", and this is one of Martin's greatest tragedies: the nobility, companionship, kindness, justice – the romance of the Brotherhood Without Banners – is overrun by vengeance. The sense of loss is reiterated as the brotherhood plan to pass judgment on – of all people – the squire Podrick Payne:⁸²

'Podrick Payne is just a boy ... Have pity.'

'My lady,' Thoros said, 'I do not doubt that kindness and mercy and forgiveness can still be found somewhere in these Seven Kingdoms, but do not look for them here. This is a cave, not a temple.'

⁸¹ Meribald, like the Brotherhood before the fall, moves through the land in unusual ways, travelling between "villages too small to have a name" (*Feast* 461), barefoot, as penance, offering blessings to the smallfolk. His interactions with the humblest of Westeros's people are uniquely kind and open-handed: when given clams by women of the Bay of Crabs, he gives them oranges, "though clams were as common as mud, and oranges were rare and costly." (*ibid.*)

⁸² Like Brienne, Pod represents a reinvigoration of chivalric ideals: awkward, shy, and unattractive, he is nevertheless the epitome of the dutiful squire.

When men must live like rats in the dark beneath the earth, they soon run out of pity, as they do of milk and honey.’

‘And justice? Can that be found in caves?’

‘Justice.’ Thoros smiled wanly. ‘I remember justice. It had a pleasant taste. Justice was what we were about when Beric led us, or so we told ourselves. We were king’s men, knights, and heroes ... but some knights are dark and full of terror, my lady. War makes monsters of us all.’ (792)

The justice of the Brotherhood becomes something monstrous, and this chapter concludes with Brienne and Podrick – characters as far from warranting judgment as any – with the Brotherhood’s nooses around their necks.⁸³

But I have discussed this tragedy as though what is lost for the Brotherhood is something uncomplicatedly good; as though the sense of justice that they possess before the resurrection of Stoneheart were something we can admire wholeheartedly. This is not the case. We see Beric Dondarrion perform one trial only: the trial by combat against the Hound, Sandor Clegane. While Arya travels with the Brotherhood, they capture the Hound, who formerly served King Joffrey, but defected after the Battle of the Blackwater.⁸⁴ After accusing him of crimes that properly belong to his brother Gregor, the brotherhood try him on Arya’s claim that he murdered the butcher’s boy, Mycah. To judge the Hound’s guilt or innocence, since they cannot determine it by means of witnesses, Beric sentences him to trial by battle. In such a trial, the accused (or their champion) fights their accuser (or their champion), and the survivor is presumed to have been aided by divine intervention, thus making the result a judgment from god or gods.⁸⁵ The brotherhood call on the god, R’hllor, to pass judgment, and through some magic Beric sets his sword aflame with his own blood, before the trial begins. After much difficulty – not least due to his pyrophobia – the Hound kills Dondarrion, and is declared innocent. In the surprising conclusion to the chapter, Beric Dondarrion reappears, raised from the dead.

Martin gives his readers good reason to believe that the outcome of that trial is just: Clegane is judged innocent, not because he did not kill Mycah and many others (he certainly

⁸³ They avoid death.

⁸⁴ Sandor’s story is very much that of the “broken man” discussed above. Despite his numerous evil actions, we pity him greatly for his abuse by his brother, and may grudgingly love him for the way in which he protects Sansa Stark from Joffrey’s abuse – although his own treatment of her verges on abusive in itself.

⁸⁵ There is some indication that trials by combat are not always fought to the death, but every trial by combat within the novels has been.

did), but because his profound fear and mental anguish already constitute punishment enough; he does not deserve to be sent to hell, because he is already in a hell of sorts (*Storm* 1: 501). Because we approve of the outcome, and because we see the magic of Beric's sword, which breaks, allowing Clegane to win, and then the miracle of his resurrection, we may well believe that the trial really did involve divine intervention, and that the Hound's release really was a judgment by the god Rh'lor. If this is the case, however, then it is the only case: all other trials by combat are presented as profoundly unjust, in a way which should cast doubt even on this outcome.

The reader's first encounter with the trial by combat takes us back to the Eyrie, and to the justice dispensed by Lysa Arryn through the monstrous person of her son. It is into their presence that Tyrion Lannister is brought, a prisoner of Catelyn Stark, to face the (false) charge of conspiring to murder Brandon Stark. Lysa usurps this trial, and further accuses Tyrion of conspiring in the murder of Jon Arryn,⁸⁶ and so keeps Tyrion as her own prisoner. Tyrion, who frequently expresses scepticism of the law and the political structures from which it arises, becomes the subject of an absurd injustice. Knowing that he will get no justice in a trial presided over by the sadistic child lord, he demands a trial by combat instead. The response from those observing is interesting:

'The gods know the truth of my innocence. I will have their verdict, not the judgment of men. I demand trial by combat.'

A storm of sudden laughter filled the high Hall of the Arryns. Lord Nestor Royce snorted, Ser Willis chuckled, Ser Lyn Corbray guffawed, and others threw back their heads and howled until tears ran down their faces. Marillion clumsily plucked a gay note on his new woodharp with the fingers of his broken hand. Even the wind seemed to whistle with derision as it came skirling through the Moon Door. (*Game* 421)

The courtiers perceive the request as comically futile: Tyrion, a dwarf (in the medical, rather than traditionally fantastical sense), has no hope of victory in such a combat. This response, and the entire procedure surrounding this trial, exhibits something profoundly wrong in the law in Westeros: no one objects to the trial by combat as a means of adjudication, but no one seems to believe that the gods have any part in the outcome.

⁸⁶ The murder of Jon Arryn is the central mystery of the first novel, though it has yet to be fully uncovered. In *A Storm of Swords*, it is revealed that Lysa herself murdered her husband at the behest of Petyr Baelish (2:565), though his motives for this are unclear, except in that it causes political chaos that he uses to his advantage. "Chaos isn't a pit. Chaos is a ladder," Baelish claims in the series, *Game of Thrones* ("The Climb"), and this murder may have simply been an attempt to climb. Lysa's reasons for accusing Tyrion are unclear.

Victory assured, courtiers leap to serve as Lysa's champion, but it is the worldly Lyn Corbray whose offer is most illustrative: "The gods favor the man with the just cause ... yet often that turns out to be the man with the surest sword." (422) Ser Vardis Egen, the one man who refuses the 'honor' of serving as Lysa's champion, who is "singularly silent" (ibid.), claims that "It would be shameful to slaughter such a man and call it justice." (ibid.) Even when Tyrion has a champion in the sellsword, Bronn, the certainty of Lysa's courtiers that Tyrion will lose has nothing to do with his guilt or innocence, and neither do Catelyn's doubts:

'...if his champion should prevail here—'

'Small chance of that, my lady,' Lord Hunter assured her, patting her shoulder with a liver-spotted hand. 'Ser Vardis is a doughty fighter. He will make short work of the sellsword.'

'Will he, my lord?' Catelyn said coolly. 'I wonder.' She had seen Bronn fight on the high road; it was no accident that he had survived the journey while other men had died. He moved like a panther, and that ugly sword of his seemed a part of his arm.

Lysa's suitors were gathering around like bees round a blossom. 'Women understand little of these things,' Ser Morton Waynwood said. 'Ser Vardis is a knight, sweet lady. This other fellow, well, his sort are all cowards at heart. Useful enough in a battle, with thousands of their fellows around them, but stand them up alone and the manhood leaks right out of them.' (435)

The divine appears only twice in this trial. The first instance is when the septon speaks his blessing before the battle:

In a high, solemn, singsong voice, the septon asked the gods to look down and bear witness, to find the truth in this man's soul, to grant him life and freedom if he was innocent, death if he was guilty. His voice echoed off the surrounding towers. (438)

We do not even hear his words, and they are met by a joke from Tyrion and a laugh from Bronn,⁸⁷ bringing this appeal to higher judgment to an irreverent close. The gods' only other appearance is in Lysa Arryn's frustrated explanation to her son that, "The gods have seen fit to proclaim him innocent, child. We have no choice but to free him" (443). She does not believe her own words, and is quick to undermine the outcome of the trial by sending Tyrion to his certain death (she presumes) on the high road.

⁸⁷ "When the last echo had died away, the septon lowered his crystal and made a hasty departure. Tyrion leaned over and whispered something in Bronn's ear before the guardsmen led him away. The sellsword rose laughing" (*Game* 438).

Framed by these two appeals to the gods – the first impotent in its wordlessness, the second – bitter in its sarcasm – the trial is equal parts folly and brutality. Rightly, Catelyn calls the trial a “mummer’s farce” (432), but it is a deadly farce, and with the life of Tyrion Lannister on the line, the casual, violent injustice of the child-lord and his mother is all the more horrifying for being a little humorous:

‘The bad little man,’ Lord Robert said, giggling. ‘Mother, can I make him fly? I want to see him fly.’

‘Later, my sweet baby,’ Lysa promised him.

‘Trial first,’ drawled Ser Lyn Corbray, ‘*then* execution.’ (437)

The very deadly business of the trial – and the very somber business of supposedly divine justice – become a child’s game:

‘They await your command,’ Lady Lysa said to her son.

‘*Fight!*’ the boy screamed, his arms trembling as they clutched at his chair. (439)

The monstrous bloodlust of Robert Arryn will be writ larger later in King Joffrey, who also displays a “fondness for making men fight to the death” (*Clash* 31; 228).

Bronn defeats Egen by outmanoeuvring him, using the weight of the knight’s shield and armour, and the limited vision provided by his helm, to his own advantage, and to the dissatisfaction of the little lord: “They’re not fighting good, Mother ... I want them to *fight*.” (*Game* 441) There is a satisfying touch of David and Goliath in his victory: the man of common birth, lightly armoured, wielding an ugly, cheap sword, defeating the heavily armoured knight, in the presence of the arrogant lords who have mocked his chances. We root for the underdog here, not least because he fights for the cause we support – for the freedom and name of Tyrion Lannister. Even so, there is a tragic sympathy for Egen as he is defeated:

Blind with arrogance as they were, even the knights and lords of the Vale could see what was happening below them, yet her sister [Lysa] could not. ‘Enough, Ser Vardis!’ Lady Lysa called down. ‘Finish him now, my baby is growing tired.’

And it must be said of Ser Vardis Egen that he was true to his lady’s command, even to the last. (442)

This marks a curious aberration of style for Martin. “And it must be said of Ser Vardis Egen” – this strange concession – is narratively distinct: the thought is not Catelyn’s, but that of the otherwise unimposing narrator, suggesting a curious temporal shift. This distinction from the

limited past-tense narration, which is so focused on the opinions of its focalizers, leaves the reader little choice but to acknowledge Egen's loyalty to Lysa, to admire him in the end.

The admiration gives way to brutality as Ser Vardis is killed:

Bronn was on him in a heartbeat, kicking what was left of his shattered rondel aside to expose the weak spot between arm and breastplate. Ser Vardis was lying on his side, pinned beneath the broken torso of the [statue of the] weeping woman. Catelyn heard the knight groan as the sellsword lifted his blade with both hands and drove it down and in with all his weight behind it, under the arm and through the ribs. Ser Vardis Egen shuddered and lay still. (ibid.)

This butchery is anything but divine, and it seems very unlike justice. We know that Tyrion is innocent, and his champion is victorious, but we do not see innocence as the cause of the victory: it is only a sellsword's skill at killing, for which we will be grateful, but not without sensing that great absence of justice from these proceedings, and the tragedy of violence that ends the life of the noble Vardis Egen.

Tyrion faces a more protracted, and far less comical, miscarriage of justice at the end of *A Storm of Swords*, when he is falsely accused of the murder of King Joffrey. At the start of this third novel, Tyrion is summarily cast from power after his virtually unacknowledged heroism during the Battle of the Blackwater – a battle in which the Lannisters are victorious almost entirely due to his efforts. Over the course of his trial, Tyrion is finally abandoned by every ally he has,⁸⁸ including Shae, his lover, who humiliates him with her testimony.⁸⁹ The trial, which proceeds over the course of two of Tyrion's chapters, is a terrible affair, and in the end, Tyrion offers a confession which expresses a great deal of his torment:

'Of Joffrey's death, I am innocent. I am guilty of a more monstrous crime.' He took a step toward his father. 'I was born. I lived. I am guilty of being a dwarf, I confess it. And no matter how many times my good father forgave me, I have persisted in my infamy.'

'This is folly, Tyrion,' declared Lord Tywin. 'Speak to the matter at hand. You are not on trial for being a dwarf.'

'That is where you err, my lord. I have been on trial for being a dwarf my entire life.' (*Storm 2*: 407)

⁸⁸ Every ally, that is, except for Podrick Payne, whose steadfast loyalty to Tyrion in this case is a large part of why the reader will admire him, and his brother Jaime, whose assistance comes too late, and ends in conflict between them.

⁸⁹ This is an oversimplification of Shae's betrayal. We only see Shae through Tyrion's eyes (and briefly through Sansa's), and never receive much certainty about her motives. We have seen women in similar positions however, and Martin has made it clear how vulnerable prostitutes are when embroiled in the politics of the realm. It seems only fair, then, to see Shae's actions as defensive, rather than self-serving.

Tyrion gives up all hope of a fair trial, and instead demands trial by combat: “I am innocent, but I will get no justice here. You leave me no choice but to appeal to the gods.” (ibid.)

This second trial by combat, however, is, symbolically, two trials in one, because while the Crown – that is to say Cersei – selects the indomitable Gregor Clegane as its champion, Oberyn Martell, the Red Viper of Dorne, stands as Tyrion’s champion. Oberyn himself suggests the trial, not to defend Tyrion, but for the chance to win justice for a different crime:

‘Justice is in short supply this side of the mountains. There has been none for Elia, Aegon, or Rhaenys. Why should there be any for you? Perhaps Joffrey’s real killer was eaten by a bear. That seems to happen quite often in King’s Landing...’

‘Is that the game we are playing? There was a bear at Harrenhal, and it did kill Ser Amory Lorch.’

‘How sad for him... And for you. Do all noseless men lie so badly, I wonder?’

‘I am not lying. Ser Amory dragged Princess Rhaenys out from under her father’s bed and stabbed her to death. He had some men-at-arms with him, but I do not know their names. ... It was Ser Gregor Clegane who smashed Prince Aegon’s head against a wall and raped your sister Elia with his blood and brains still on his hands.’...

‘Your father gave the commands, yes?’

‘No.’ ...

‘Such a dutiful son. And such a very feeble lie. It was Lord Tywin who presented my sister’s children to King Robert all wrapped up in Lannister cloaks.’

‘Perhaps you ought to have this discussion with my father. He was there. I was at the Rock, and still so young that I thought the thing between my legs was only good for pissing.’

‘Yes, but you are here now, and in some difficulty, I would say. Your innocence may be as plain as the scar on your face, but it will not save you. No more than your father will... But I might... Not as your judge. As your champion.’ (353-354)

Tyrion feels himself on trial for being a dwarf, but for Oberyn this becomes the trial of Gregor Clegane, and by extension, the trial of Tywin Lannister, who has never condemned Clegane, nor publicly taken responsibility for the order. It is almost a redemption of justice: an attempt to give Tyrion justice by enacting justice for Elia of Dorne. The result is a travesty, not because of this usurpation of the law, but because the trial by combat is ultimately an act of violence, not justice.

It is worth considering the structure of the chapter in which this trial occurs. After Tyrion's accusatory confession, but before the trial by combat, the tension suddenly ebbs. As Oberyn prepares for battle, he tells Tyrion of how the death of Joanna Lannister thwarted the intended marriage pact between the houses Martell and Lannister. This is a strange digression: through Oberyn, Martin interrupts this climactic chapter to reveal what seems (by comparison) a trivial piece of history. Oberyn implies by his tale that Elia's death was an act of vengeance by Tywin for her marriage to Rhaegar, whom he had intended to wed Cersei. This is possible, but seems unlikely given Tywin's own (probably true) account of Elia's death.⁹⁰ Martin's own purpose in including this interlude seems not to slander Tywin, but rather to place an emphasis, before this important trial, on the vulnerability of individuals to the vicissitudes of history. Oberyn begins his tale with an account of Elia's various suitors, and how he mocked them, and in particular how that mockery sabotaged a likely match:

'The only one who was even halfway presentable was young Baelor Hightower. A pretty lad, and my sister was half in love with him until he had the misfortune to fart once in our presence. I promptly named him Baelor Breakwind, and after that Elia couldn't look at him without laughing. I was a monstrous young fellow, someone should have sliced out my vile tongue.'

Yes, Tyrion agreed silently. Baelor Hightower was no longer young, but he remained Lord Leyton's heir; wealthy, handsome, and a knight of splendid repute. *Baelor Brightsmile*, they called him now. Had Elia wed him in place of Rhaegar Targaryen, she might be in Oldtown with her children growing tall around her. He wondered how many lives had been snuffed out by that fart. (412)

This tragicomic tale points to the powerlessness of individuals before even the most arbitrary forces of history. Tyrion's conclusion to the failed proposal suggests something antithetical:

It all goes back and back, Tyrion thought, to our mothers and our fathers and theirs before them. We are puppets dancing on the strings of those who came before us, and one day our own children will take up our strings and dance on in our steads. (413)

This is a bleak paradox: history is by turns the inevitable result of the past, and the catastrophic result of the smallest accidents. Either way, this story places the future out of the control of those trying to shape it, which ought to be a warning to the reader of forthcoming events, but it will likely go unheeded. When Oberyn tells us, "Elia and her children have waited long for justice ... But this day they shall have it" (ibid.), we are likely to believe him.

⁹⁰ "Elia need not have been harmed at all ... I doubt I mentioned her at all." (*Storm* 2: 156-157)

The fight is an appealing one. Oberyne is a particularly likeable character: against the false piety, hypocrisy and treachery of the King's Landing court, he is sexually liberated, honest, charming, funny, and despite his reputation as a treacherous poisoner, is presented to us as an honourable man. Much like Tyrion, he is something of a picaro, and certainly an underdog, particularly in this fight. Much is made of the contrast between the two men, and their armour:

In his armor, the Mountain looked bigger than a man had any right to be. Beneath a long yellow surcoat bearing the three black dogs of Clegane, he wore heavy plate over chainmail, dull grey steel dented and scarred in battle. Beneath would be boiled leather and a layer of quilting. A flat-topped greathelm was bolted to his gorget, with breathers around the mouth and nose and a narrow slit for vision. The crest atop it was a stone fist. ...

He looks as though he was chiseled out of rock, standing there. His greatsword was planted in the ground before him, six feet of scarred metal. Ser Gregor's huge hands, clad in gauntlets of lobstered steel, clasped the crosshilt to either side of the grip...

The Red Viper was lightly armoured; greaves, vambraces, gorget, spaulder, steel codpiece. Elsewhere Oberyne was clad in supple leather and flowing silks. Over his byrnie he wore his scales of gleaming copper, but mail and scale together would not give him a quarter the protection of Gregor's heavy plate. With its visor removed, the prince's helm was effectively no better than a half-helm, lacking even a nasal. (414-415)

The contrast between the two men is similar to that between Ser Vardis Egen and Bronn, but here it is exaggerated. Oberyne's status as the underdog, then, gives us a near certainty that he will succeed: we are presented again with David and Goliath, and we will be almost certain that our David will win.

Oberyne circles the Mountain, darting in and out, quickly and cleverly using the Mountain's armour and helmet against him, interspersing his attacks with accusations: "Elia Martell, Princess of Dorne ... You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her children." (416) He tries desperately to force Gregor to a confession, using this trial to bring judgment upon Clegane. At the same time, the tension of the battle rises and falls, Oberyne and Clegane fight for advantage over each other in a battle which is alternately exciting and frightening, until at last, victory is in sight: indeed, *eucatastrophe* is in sight. The small, quick, charming, funny, clever, picaresque underdog is set to triumph over the monstrous Clegane, and the

ruthless Tywin Lannister, and the corrupt crown; Goliath is set to fall before this David. Martin offers us the hope of a truly beautiful victory, and a triumph of justice:

The Dornishman flung away his ruined shield, grasped the spear in both hands, and sauntered away. Behind him the Mountain let out a groan, and pushed himself onto an elbow. Oberynd whirled cat-quick and *ran* at his fallen foe. ‘EEEEELLLLLLLLLIIIIIAAAAA!’ he screamed, as he drove the spear down with the whole weight of his body behind it. The *crack* of the ashwood shaft snapping was almost as sweet a sound as Cersei’s wail of fury, and for an instant Prince Oberynd had wings. *The snake has vaulted over the Mountain.* Four feet of broken spear jutted from Clegane’s belly as Prince Oberynd rolled, rose, and dusted himself off. He tossed aside the splintered spear and claimed his foe’s greatsword. ‘If you die before you say her name, ser, I will hunt you through all seven hells.’

Ser Gregor tried to rise. The broken spear had gone through him, and was pinning him to the ground. He wrapped both hands about the shaft, grunting, but could not pull it out. Beneath him was a spreading pool of blood. ‘I feel more innocent by the instant,’ Tyrion told Ellaria Sand beside him. (419-420)

But Martin, of course, steals this victory from us:

Clegane’s hand shot up and grabbed the Dornishman behind the knee. The Red Viper brought down the greatsword in a wild slash, but he was off-balance, and the edge did no more than put another dent in the Mountain’s vambrace. Then the sword was forgotten as Gregor’s hand tightened and twisted, yanking the Dornishman down on top of him. They wrestled in the dust and blood, the broken spear wobbling back and forth. Tyrion saw with horror that the Mountain had wrapped one huge arm around the prince, drawing him tight against his chest, like a lover.

‘Elia of Dorne,’ they all heard Ser Gregor say, when they were close enough to kiss. His deep voice boomed within the helm. ‘I killed her screaming whelp.’ He thrust his free hand into Oberynd’s unprotected face, pushing steel fingers into his eyes. ‘*Then* I raped her. Clegane slammed his fist into the Dornishman’s mouth, making splinters of his teeth. ‘Then I smashed her fucking head in. Like this.’ As he drew back his huge fist, the blood on his gauntlet seemed to smoke in the cold dawn air. There was a sickening *crunch*. (420-421)

In an instant, the levity of Oberynd soaring is pulled down to this struggle in the dust and blood, and to this horrifying death: to the penetration of eye sockets, the smashing of teeth, the crushing of Oberynd’s skull.

So, Tyrion – whom we know to be innocent – is proven guilty by the death – the truly horrific death – of an honourable man at the hands of a truly monstrous one, in the very

moment that he confesses to a most heinous crime, for which he has gone unpunished. Our hope for poetic justice is dashed by this poetic injustice. The confession is corrupted into threatening bloodlust and pride; the agent of justice is reduced to the mere body, and broken; and the innocent Tyrion Lannister – the man who saved the city – is led down into the black cells: the lightless subterranean prison cells where the worst criminals are kept. Over the course of a single chapter, we see the whole of this obscene perversion of the law: the cruelty of Shae’s false testimony, the brutal contest of the trial, and yet another innocent man condemned to the black cells. It is injustice *ad nauseum*, and so biting an indictment of the trial by combat that it seems bizarre that Martin should ever have given us a trial by combat which seems just, even holy.

The audience of Tyrion’s first trial by combat is arrogantly and pompously cynical, a “fool’s festival” (*Game* 433), while the audience to his second seem grossly eager both for the battle, and for Tyrion’s condemnation: neither audience seems remotely interested in the matter of justice. By contrast, the Brotherhood without Banners, who witness and facilitate the Hound’s trial by combat, are remarkably sombre at the trial’s opening. Where the septons’ words at Tyrion’s trials are never reported to us, the benedictory and supplicatory prayer by Thoros of Myr is not merely presented for us, but is in a sense, doubled, because unlike the audiences of the other trials, the Brotherhood *participate* in a kind of call-and-response, seemingly quite earnestly:

‘First we pray.’ He turned toward the fire and lifted his arms. ‘Lord of Light, look down upon us.’

All around the cave, the brotherhood without banners lifted their own voices in response. ‘Lord of Light, defend us.’

‘Lord of Light, protect us in the darkness.’

‘*Lord of Light, shine your face upon us.*’

‘Light your flame among us, R’hllor,’ said the red priest. ‘Show us the truth or falseness of this man. Strike him down if he is guilty, and give strength to his sword if he is true. Lord of Light give us wisdom.’

‘*For the night is dark,*’ the others chanted, Harwin and Anguy loud as all the rest, ‘*and full of terrors.*’ (*Storm* 1: 497)

This reverence echoes through the battle, and even once the audience turns to cheering, their focus is on the combat as trial, crying “*Guilty, guilty, kill him, guilty!*” (499): they are bloodthirsty, certainly, and shockingly so, but do not stray from the purpose of this bloodshed. It is tempting to believe, with them, in the rightness of this process.

Interspersing all the reverence before the trial, however, is the irreverence of Sandor Clegane. Clegane is a ‘broken man’, certainly, and the source of his brokenness has been plain for a long time: he exhibits a constant vocal loathing for, and silent longing to live up to, the chivalric vision of the “true knight”. The loathing is plain, expressed primarily in conversations with Sansa, whose belief in the true knight he mocks frequently. His hatred of knights and knighthood is an important part of how we perceive the King’s Landing court and Sansa’s place in it, though at its heart, it is driven by his response to the hypocrisy surrounding his brother’s knighthood.

The Hound is among *Song*’s many maimed characters – characters who have been shaped, body and soul, by violence. In his case, the injury came at the hands of his monstrous brother, Gregor, who, as a boy, caught Sandor playing with one of his toys, and retaliated by thrusting his brother’s face into a brazier, leaving him disfigured, and forever terrified of fire. Afterward,

‘My father told everyone my bedding had caught fire, and our maester gave me ointments. *Ointments!* Gregor got his ointments too. Four years later, they anointed him with the seven oils and he recited his knightly vows and Rhaegar Targaryen tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Arise, Ser Gregor”.’ (*Game* 303)

The chivalric system of Westeros makes Ser Gregor – rapist, murderer, maimer – a knight, and it is this that lies at the heart of Sandor’s hatred for that system. “What do you think a knight is *for*, girl?” He asks Sansa, “You think it’s all taking favors from ladies and looking fine in gold plate? Knights are for *killing*.” (*Clash* 552) The Hound is a killer, but he refuses to be a knight.⁹¹

The Hound is cruel, violent and nihilistic, incapable of acknowledging the value of the chivalry he denigrates, but there is wisdom to his view of the King’s Landing court, and perhaps there is wisdom also to his view of the Brotherhood, even if he is blind to what is good in them. The Brotherhood are knights – knighted by Dondarrion – and for all that they are radically different to the glorified, but usually corrupt, knights of the Seven Kingdoms, Clegane tars them with the same brush:

⁹¹ In a way, the Hound seems to long to be a knight: his desire to be a hero, to be loved, to be redeemed is never stated, but is clear from his relationship with Sansa. He at turns protects and terrorizes her, alternating between emulating the rescuer-knight she seeks and the monster-knight he believes is inevitable. The intricacies of this relationship, and the parallel relationship between Arya and the Hound, are well beyond the scope of the present discussion, but it is worth bearing in mind that the Hound’s cynicism surrounding the realities of chivalry is coupled with a profound longing for the ideals of chivalry.

Might be you *are* knights after all. You lie like knights, maybe you murder like knights ... A knight's a sword with a horse. The rest, the vows and the sacred oils and the lady's favors, they're silk ribbons tied round the sword. Maybe the sword's prettier with ribbons hanging off it, but it will kill you just as dead. (*Storm* 1: 494)

And when Beric Dondarrion takes up his own sword in the trial by combat, and the magic of his blood – which may or may not be granted by R'hllor⁹² – lights his sword ablaze, Martin allows the Hound's words to give us some small doubt: “The flaming sword leapt up to meet the cold one, long streamers of fire trailing in its wake like the ribbons the Hound had spoken of.” (497-498)

The image is innocuous enough, and far from a narratorial indictment of the Brotherhood, but it serves to remind us that even this magic – this presumed intervention from a god – may not have much substance. And if that is the case, all we are left with is the battle, and the disconcerting idea that the ability to wield a sword determines justice, or to put it in the most banal fashion, that ‘might makes right’. This is what we are left with once the messianic presence of Beric Dondarrion is lost: the rope is right enough.

⁹² Over the course of the novels we see a great deal of magic, some of it arising, supposedly, from R'hllor. With so much trickery, and so many contradictory interpretations of the faith, we are left with room for a great deal of doubt whenever the god is given as the cause of any event.

Chapter Three

“How they loved to promise heads”: Maimed Bodies Displayed

Shortly after the execution of Eddard Stark, Joffrey I Baratheon takes the captive Sansa out onto the battlements and forces her to look at her father’s tarred head:

The heads were mounted between the crenels, along the top of the wall, impaled on iron spikes so they faced out over the city. Sansa had noted them the moment she’d stepped out onto the wallwalk, but the river and the bustling streets and the setting sun were ever so much prettier. *He can make me look at the heads; she told herself, but he can’t make me see them.*

‘This one is your father,’ he said. ‘This one here. Dog, turn it around so she can see him.’

Sandor took the head by the hair and turned it. The severed head had been dipped in tar to preserve it. Sansa looked at it calmly, not seeing it at all. It did not really look like Lord Eddard, she thought, it did not even look *real*. ‘How long do I have to look?’

Joffrey seemed disappointed. (*Game* 748-749)

This chapter – the last ‘Sansa’ chapter of the first book – is full of abuse: Sansa, now a ward of the crown, is haunted by nightmares of her father’s executioner (742), molested by Maester Pycelle (*ibid.*), beaten by the knights of the Kingsguard (744; 750), and tormented by Joffrey. Her plight deliberately reflects that of the archetypical captured princess – we are even told that she has been confined to “the top of the highest tower of Maegor’s Holdfast” (543) – but her treatment is brutal beyond the norms of a fairy-tale.⁹³

Sansa’s torment is the focus of these events, but also apparent here is Joffrey’s contemptible desperation to be feared. He displays such behaviour again and again throughout the novels, his aggression frequently serving as a means of reestablishing power where he perceives it as threatened. When the butcher’s boy, Mycah, plays with a stick as though it were a sword, Joffrey responds to the offense – that a commoner “wants to be a knight”, and

⁹³ Sansa’s role as damsel in distress, introduced here, is foregrounded and interrogated in *A Clash of Kings*, in which the impossibility of a fairy-tale rescuer (her “true knight”), as well as the complexities of the would-be rescuer, Sandor Clegane, are focused upon, and *A Storm of Swords*, in which Ser Dontos Hollard plays the part of the fairy-tale rescuer, Florian, but never well, and only for his own benefit, and as part of Littlefinger’s political scheme.

so encroaches on the preserves of the nobility⁹⁴ – by hurting and humiliating him. (150-151) When starvation threatens King’s Landing, Joffrey meets protest with violence, first shooting protesters at the Red Keep’s gates (*Clash* 356), and later sending the Hound to cut his way through the crowd, provoking a terrible riot (434-435). Though Joffrey is never a focalizer, we can clearly see the ways in which his sadism is informed by insecurity about the threats to his own power, how he acts violently towards those who cannot harm him:

‘Fear is better than love, mother says.’⁹⁵ Joffrey pointed at Sansa. ‘*She* fears me.’

The Imp sighed. ‘Yes, I see. A pity Stannis and Renly aren’t twelve-year-old girls as well.’ (358)

Sansa, cut off from her family and their allies, caught in King’s Landing, makes for an easy target – Joffrey only ever attacks easy targets – for his rage against her brother, Robb, who poses a real threat to his person.

Having been unable to cow Sansa with the sight of her father’s head, Joffrey threatens to present her with that of her brother, Robb, to which Sansa responds, “Maybe my brother will give me *your* head” (*Game* 749). It is an act of defiance for which she is cruelly punished, but the interchange of threats of decapitation is interesting, especially since promises of heads are made with great frequency in *Song*, both threateningly, and, oddly, kindly. Arya, nine-years-old at the time, threatens the guards at the Red Keep that her father “will have both your heads on spikes” (346), Sansa, at eleven, asks casually whether “Lord Beric [will] spike Ser Gregor’s head on his own gate or bring it back here for the king” (475-476), and Tyrion at one point threatens to mount the head of the Lannister Captain of the Guard on the walls of the Red Keep, if he does not remove the heads already there (*Clash* 46). The threat is so

⁹⁴ This fear is Joffrey’s, and clearly absurd in this context, but it is not foreign to the nobility at large. The term “upjumped”, nearly ubiquitous in its use to describe Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, Lord Janos Slynt, and Ser (later Lord) Davos Seaworth, and other commoners who are raised above their birth, is illustrative of the way in which the nobility of the Seven Kingdoms police class borders. The sense that a House has been upjumped seems to linger a long time: the former merchant House Spicer, the former steward House Tyrell, and even the six-hundred year-old House Frey are all treated as lesser by houses with (supposedly) nobler lineages.

⁹⁵ This is dangerous advice to give Joffrey, but it is worth recalling that such advice is not exactly out of the ordinary. Catelyn’s advice to Robb, already referred to, is far more measured, but similar: “The day will come when you need them to respect you, even fear you a little.” (*Game* 600)

common as to become almost banal, as it does at one point in conversation between Tyrion and Tywin, when the former reduces it, as if bored by it, to single words: “‘Spikes,’ he sighed. ‘Heads. Walls.’” (*Game* 770). Decapitation followed by display is an act of retribution so normalized for the noble protagonists of *Song* that it can become literal child’s play: when Robert Arryn uses his doll to destroy Sansa’s snow replica of Winterfell, and the doll is ripped apart in their ensuing struggle, in a “mad rage”, Sansa mounts the doll’s head above the gatehouse of the snow castle (*Storm* 2: 556). The mockery is particularly bitter, given Sansa’s experience with severed heads.

On the other hand, the head, symbolic of justice, and vengeance, is sometimes not a threat, but an offering. Catelyn receives promises of such from both Renly and Stannis:

‘When I take King’s Landing, I’ll send you Cersei’s head.’
And will that bring my Ned back to me? she thought. (*Clash* 253)

Her reflection is true to her character, displaying her usual scepticism of vengeance. She feels similarly when Stannis makes the same promise:

‘I give you my word, you shall have justice for his murder.’
How they loved to promise heads, these men who would be king.
(346)

The reflection is an apt one, especially when taken more generally than intended: the men (and the woman, for we can count Cersei among them) who would be king love to promise heads, and both the threat and the act of decapitation are nearly vital to their rule.

It is not enough that the head be taken, the head must be looked at, and it must be seen. Joffrey’s disappointment at Sansa’s response to Eddard’s head – which turns quickly to anger, and an escalation of his violent posturing of power – is in that “*He can make [her] look at the heads ... but he can’t make [her] see them*” (*Game* 748). The positioning of the heads of criminals above castle walls serves to have them seen, always, by the subjects who live beneath them:

Arya had been staying as far from the castle as she could get, yet even from a distance she could see the heads rotting atop the high red walls. Flocks of crows squabbled noisily over each head, thick as flies. (717)

The heads serve as a deterrent, and an important one. Cersei, in one of her twisted lessons to Sansa,⁹⁶ after three servants attempt to flee the besieged King's Landing on stolen horses, expounds the importance of such symbols:

Have Ser Ilyn see to them, and put their heads on pikes outside the stables as a warning. ... Another lesson you should learn, if you hope to sit beside my son. Be gentle on a night like this and you'll have treasons popping up all about you like mushrooms after a hard rain. The only way to keep your people loyal is to make certain they fear you more than they do the enemy. (*Clash* 619-620)

These heads, gory results of the power of rulers over the bodies of their subjects, serve to enforce that very power by making it visible to those subjects.

Cersei takes her cue from her father, though she is inept as a ruler, and often fails to learn from him:

His sister liked to think of herself as Lord Tywin with teats, but she was wrong. Their father had been as relentless and implacable as a glacier, where Cersei was all wildfire, especially when thwarted. ... *She does not lack for wits, but she has no judgment, and no patience.* (*Feast* 291)

Illustrative of this, though far from exhaustive, is Cersei's belief regarding her father's attitude to surrender. Faced with a second Greyjoy rebellion, she thinks,

Robert should have scoured the isles after Balon Greyjoy rose against him ... when he had them on their knees he let them up again. He should have made another island of their skulls. That was what her father would have done (588)

Whatever her father would have done in the specific case of Balon's rebellion is unknowable, but he has, in fact, advised precisely the opposite, in Cersei's presence:

when your enemies defy you, you must serve them steel and fire.
When they go to their knees, however, you must help them back to

⁹⁶ Over the course of *A Clash of Kings*, but particularly during the chapters set during the Battle of the Blackwater, Cersei engages in numerous conversations with Sansa, which are intended to educate her in some of the more unsavoury aspects of nobility and womanhood, from the nature of war, to sexual manipulation. These lessons are horrifying glimpses into the society that has shaped Cersei, into her own jadedness, and indeed trauma, and her treatment of Sansa is more abusive than pedagogical, intended to shock and frighten, rather than empower her.

their feet. Elsewise no man will ever bend the knee to you. (*Storm 2*: 152)

The advice, given to Joffrey, and in conflict with that given by Cersei, is duly warranted, given that neither Cersei nor Joffrey are ever inclined to reconcile with their enemies – to their own detriment – but Cersei’s misapprehension of her father is understandable. Tywin may forge alliances with former enemies in order to maintain power,⁹⁷ but he is far more noted for the acts of brutality with which he maintains power, and one act of brutality in particular.

Tywin is a formidable general in *Song*, emerging victorious at the end of the War of the Five Kings, defeating Stannis on the field and Robb through the cunning orchestration of the Red Wedding. But Tywin’s legend is more brutal still. The song, “The Rains of Castamere”, which plays such a poignant role in *A Storm of Swords*, when its performance signals the oncoming horrors of the Red Wedding, commemorates Tywin’s most famous victory: that over the Reynes and the Tarbecks, which is described most fully in *A World of Ice and Fire*. As is discussed above,⁹⁸ Tywin’s hatred of mockery is due to that faced by his father, Tytos. When Tywin takes command of the house, he demands repayment of Tytos’s loans, and when the Reynes and Tarbecks defy him, Tywin responds with such brutality as to eradicate both lines utterly, culminating in the destruction of the Reynes’s seat at Castamere:

nine-tenths of the castle was beneath the ground.... It was to those tunnels that the Reynes retreated now... Once all his folk were safe inside the tunnels, Ser Reynard sent word to Ser Tywin above, offering terms. But Tywin Lannister did not honor Ser Reynard’s offer with a reply. Instead he commanded that the mines be sealed... Once that was done, he turned his attention to the small swift stream that fed the crystalline blue pool beside the castle from which Castamere took its name. It took less than a day to dam the stream and only two to divert it to the nearest mine entrance.

Ser Reynard had taken more than three hundred men, women, and children into the mines, it is said. Not a one emerged....

⁹⁷ Tywin forges alliances with Walder Frey and Roose Bolton, even after they have spent a considerable time as part of Robb’s revolt. He also maintains his alliance with the Westerlings even after Robb’s marriage to Jeyne Westerling, although he may have had a part in encouraging that marriage in conspiracy with Sybell Spicer, with whom he certainly conspires after the marriage. These three allies, and others, are what allows him to arrange the Red Wedding – an atrocity, certainly, but one which allows him to end the War of Five Kings at a stroke. This shows a deftness which his daughter never displays.

⁹⁸ See pp. 13-14.

No one has ever reopened the mines of Castamere. The halls and keeps above them, put to the torch by Tywin Lannister, stand empty to this day, a mute testament to the fate that awaits those foolish enough to take up arms against the lions of the Rock. (*World* 203)⁹⁹

The ruins of Castamere are mentioned only in passing in *Song*, but “The Rains of Castamere” appears frequently, a testament to Lannister power, and a ready threat to Lannister enemies:

when Lord Farman of Faircastle grew truculent, Lord Tywin sent an envoy bearing a lute instead of a letter. But once he’d heard ‘The Rains of Castamere’ echoing through his hall, Lord Farman gave no further trouble. (*Storm* 1: 288)

This reaches absurd heights during Joffrey’s wedding, when the song is repeated numerous times: as much a display of power as the seven singers, and the seventy-seven courses intended to be served.¹⁰⁰

Tywin Lannister despises mockery and laughter, and for good reason: as was discussed above, laughter is a very real threat to power,¹⁰¹ and power is profoundly important to Tywin, as it is to many of the novels’ characters. In fact, if there is a central concern in *Song*, power is it. Power is at the heart of nearly every narrative in the text: Daenerys, Theon, Cersei, Victarion, Jon Connington, and Quentyn seek to win political power, and must deal with the problems of both failing and succeeding in that endeavour;¹⁰² Eddard, Jon, Robb,¹⁰³ and Tyrion have political power thrust upon them, and must deal with the consequences; Davos, Catelyn, Brienne, Areo, and Ser Barristan are all heavily defined by their close

⁹⁹ This full description appears only in the supplementary text, and not in the primary narrative of *Song*, where all we are given is, “He [Tywin] had extinguished the proud Reynes of Castamere and the ancient Tarbecks of Tarbeck Hall root and branch when he was still half a boy.” (*Storm* 1: 289)

¹⁰⁰ As observed by Duncan Hubber, food is an immensely important aspect of the novels, and the wedding feast, “perhaps the most shameless display of excess in the series” is orchestrated despite its ruinous expense, because “it demonstrates the wealth and power of the Lannister royal family, and asserts a return to stability and prosperity for the Seven Kingdoms”. The repetition of “Rains of Castamere” is not orchestrated – it results from the pandering of the singers – but it has a similar effect.

¹⁰¹ See p. 13.

¹⁰² On the surface, Connington seeks power for Young Gryff, supposedly the true heir to the Iron Throne, and some kind of absolution for his failure during Robert’s Rebellion, and in particular at the Battle of the Bells. Still, what he seeks is a homecoming, and given his birth, this means coming home to his position as Lord of Griffin’s Roost, which is a coming home to power.

¹⁰³ Unlike the other characters mentioned here, Robb is never a focal character, but because Catelyn, one of the primary focal characters, is so particularly invested in his cause, it remains a central concern in the narrative.

relationships to people in power. There are two driving plots in *Song*, and the one which has, so far, been given more attention by the novels is the struggle for power over the Seven Kingdoms.¹⁰⁴

Martin's interest in the nature of power comes to the fore particularly in the riddle that Lord Varys presents to Tyrion Lannister:

In a room sit three great men, a king, a priest, and a rich man with his gold. Between them stands a sellsword, a little man of common birth and no great mind. Each of the great ones bid him slay the other two. 'Do it,' says the king, 'for I am your lawful ruler.' 'Do it,' says the priest, 'for I command you in the names of the gods.' 'Do it,' says the rich man, 'and all this gold shall be yours.' So tell me – who lives and who dies? (*Clash* 49-50)

Martin has called this "One of the central questions in the book" ("George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview"), and the riddle's relevance to *Song*'s plot is apparent: these novels contain many swordsmen with many conflicting allegiances, and the fates of everyone we meet depend on whose orders they follow. Of interest to us, then, is Varys's answer, as related in conversation with Tyrion:

'... It's a riddle without an answer, or rather, too many answers. All depends on the man with the sword.'

'And yet he is no one,' Varys said. 'He has neither crown nor gold nor favor of the gods, only a piece of pointed steel.'

'That piece of steel is the power of life and death.'

'Just so... yet if it is the swordsmen who rule us in truth, why do we pretend our kings hold the power? Why should a strong man with a sword *ever* obey a child king like Joffrey, or a wine-sodden oaf like his father?'

'Because these child kings and drunken oafs can call other strong men, with other swords.'

'Then these other swordsmen have the true power. Or do they? Whence came their swords? Why do *they* obey?' Varys smiled. 'Some say knowledge is power. Some tell us that all power comes from the gods. Others say it derives from law. Yet that day on the

¹⁰⁴ The other overarching plot – the struggle against the environment, and the supernatural force of the White Walkers – is, in its own way, a struggle for the Seven Kingdoms, and a far more serious one, being existential rather than political. The fact that this more urgent struggle is narratively eclipsed by the political one is deliberate: we are distracted from the real threat, even as Martin's characters are.

There is, of course, a great deal in *Song* which has very little to do with either of these conflicts – such as the conflicts in Essos which are only tangentially related – but every focalizer in these novels has a stake in the present wars of Westeros, and it is clear that the driving force of the story is toward settling the rulership – and protector – of the Seven Kingdoms.

steps of Baelor's Sept, our godly High Septon and the lawful Queen Regent and your ever-so-knowledgeable servant were as powerless as any cobbler or cooper in the crowd. Who truly killed Eddard Stark, do you think? Joffrey, who gave the command? Ser Ilyn Payne, who swung the sword? Or... another?'

Tyrion cocked his head sideways. 'Did you mean to answer your damned riddle, or only to make my head ache worse?'

Varys smiled. 'Here, then. Power resides where men *believe* it resides. No more and no less.'

'So power is a mummer's trick?'

'A shadow on the wall,' Varys murmured, 'yet shadows can kill.' (*Clash* 97)

These final lines will prove to be strangely (and unintentionally on Varys's part) literal when, later in the same novel, a shadow, born of the magic of Melisandre, murders Renly Baratheon, but the metaphorical meaning is felt throughout *Song*.

Martin's interest in this illusory nature of power is informed by his experience of real-world politics:

This is the fundamental mystery of power and leadership and war through all history. ... Do you remember the poster during [the Vietnam War]? WHAT IF THEY GAVE A WAR AND NOBODY CAME? That's one of the fundamental questions here. Why did anybody go to Vietnam? Were the people who went more patriotic? Were they braver? Were they stupider? Why does anybody go? What's all this based on? It's all based on an illusion: You go because you're afraid of what will happen if you don't go, even if you don't believe in it. But where do these systems of obedience come from? Why do we recognize power instead of individual autonomy? These questions are fascinating to me. It's all a strange illusion, isn't it? ("George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview")

Power is a "strange illusion", and a "mummer's trick", something almost ethereal, but it is also the driving narrative force of this world. The titular 'game of thrones', so frequently mentioned by so many disparate characters,¹⁰⁵ positions power at the heart of the text: the game is, after all, one in which power is both the prize and the contest.

¹⁰⁵ The phrase is used by Jorah Mormont, Tyrion Lannister, Cersei Lannister, Varys, Septon Meribald, Barristan Selmy, and Doran Martell, suggesting that the phrase is used widely, certainly by the literate nobility, and possibly by the smallfolk.

The prize is notably transient. Power is particularly fragile in this world – far more obviously than in the primary world: we see it gained and lost repeatedly, with disastrous consequences. The fall of the Targaryen and the rise of the Baratheon dynasties sets the ground for these novels, and the change to the political landscape of Westeros is frequently alluded to. More immediate is the current war, in which the rises and falls are countless: the near-eradication of the Stark line, the rise of the Boltons, the veritable musical chairs of the Lordship of Harrenhal. “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die”, Cersei Lannister tells Eddard Stark (*Game* 488), but this seems only a part of the truth. “When you play the game of thrones,” we might say, “you *keep* winning or you die.”

To draw again on Foucault, the observation that “power is exercised rather than possessed” (26) seems appropriate. In fact, power is *performed*, in both the sense of action and the sense of acting: it is a “mummer’s trick”, as Tyrion calls it, and an act of theatre. Melisandre is such a ‘mummer’, wielding both political and magical power, and making use of illusion in both cases. While she is undeniably capable of casting spells, a great deal of her magic, we learn in *A Dance with Dragons*, is deception: she uses chemical powders to alter the properties of fires, concealing this with sleight of hand (411). Even when discussing her real magic, she conceals its nature:

She made it sound a simple thing, and easy. They need never know how difficult it had been, or how much it had cost her. That was a lesson Melisandre had learned long before Asshai; the more effortless the sorcery appears, the more men fear the sorcerer. (419)

Melisandre is clearly skilled at this: from surviving the Strangler, to the terrible shadow which murders Renly Baratheon, she has seemed terrifyingly powerful to the reader.

Melisandre is the focalizer of only a single chapter in *A Dance with Dragons*. Until this time, she has been shown to us through characters who, one way or another, are in awe of her power: Maester Cressen, Davos, Jon, and Sam. This solitary glimpse into her character shows her as startlingly vulnerable. While she relentlessly assures herself that R’hllor will protect

her, her fears and doubts come to the fore, and in particular, the echoes of a past in which she was powerless: “Melony” and “Lot Seven” (*Dance* 408, 410), she recalls, almost certainly indicating her time as a slave.¹⁰⁶ This vulnerability is very different from the Melisandre we were first introduced to in *A Clash of Kings*, who is almost inhuman in description: “She was red, and terrible and red.” (17)

Her terrible appearance of power is not entirely the result of magic. She seems unassailable because she takes deliberate steps to appear so, such as travelling under guard, even though she does not need protecting, because “It sent a certain message” (*Dance* 415). These are the “*trappings of power*” (*ibid.*), and she considers the importance of such trappings, which Jon eschews:

That was his mistake, the false humility of youth that is itself a sort of pride. It was never wise for a ruler to eschew the trappings of power, for power itself flows in no small measure from such trappings. (411)

Cersei makes a similar observation when the High Sparrow¹⁰⁷ refuses to bless King Tommen: “The blessing was an empty ritual, she knew, but rituals and ceremonies had power in the eyes of the ignorant.” (*Feast* 512) These rituals and ceremonies, these “trappings of power”, are multiple, but one in particular has already been focused on: the public execution, in which the power of the nobility over their vassals is exercised in the right to end life. Foucault is illuminating:

The public execution ... is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular. The public execution, however hasty and everyday, belongs to a whole series of great rituals in which power is eclipsed and restored... Its aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, at its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength. ... in this liturgy of punishment, there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority. And this superiority is not simply that of right, but

¹⁰⁶ It is possible that the name “Melony” is not Melisandre’s own, although that is the most obvious interpretation of her recollection.

¹⁰⁷ “High Sparrow” is a somewhat derogatory name for the High Septon who is raised to the office by the ‘sparrows’, the poorest priests of the Faith. Since the High Septon abandons his name upon taking office, this name will be used here to distinguish him from his predecessors.

that of the physical strength of the sovereign beating down upon the body of his adversary and mastering it: by breaking the law, the offender has touched the very person of the prince; and it is the prince – or at least those to whom he has delegated his force – who seizes upon the body of the condemned man and displays it marked, beaten, broken. (48-49)

The executions in *Song* are a great deal less horrifying than the historical executions which Foucault addresses in *Discipline and Punish*: the spectacle of drawing and quartering, for instance, is absent from the novels, despite its close association with the medieval period that *Song* emulates. Justice is, nevertheless, a very public, and often gruesome display.

Public execution in the Seven Kingdoms primarily takes the form of beheading or hanging: the first kills in a single blow, except in the case of error, the second kills sometimes in an instant, and always within a few minutes.¹⁰⁸ The display of the dead may be extended – heads may gaze down from castle walls, bodies may hang from trees – but the display of the dying, however public, and however important, is brief – quite unlike the gruesome and protracted death of Robert-François Damiens which opens Foucault's discussion of the spectacle of execution (3-6). Death by torture is common enough, but it is almost always concealed: relegated to the hidden, subterranean dungeons of castles. We glimpse such a hidden space when Tyrion travels beneath the black cells of the Red Keep, into a level of the dungeons that remains largely a secret:

Once a man is taken down to the fourth level, he never sees the sun again, nor hears a human voice, nor breathes a breath free of agonizing pain. Maegor had the cells on the fourth level built for torment. (*Storm* 2: 516-517)

Several of the executions ordered by Aerys II appear to be exceptions to this. The deaths of Rickard and Brandon Stark is notable both for its unusual cruelty, and for its warping of conventional systems of justice:

Lord Rickard demanded trial by combat, and the king granted the request. Stark armored himself for battle, thinking to duel one of the Kingsguard. ... Instead they took him to the throne room and

¹⁰⁸ As in real-world history, the method of execution is dependent on class as well as crime: commoners are usually hanged, nobility usually beheaded.

suspended him from the rafters while two of Aerys's pyromancers kindled a blaze beneath him. The king told him that *fire* was the champion of House Targaryen. So all Lord Rickard needed to do to prove himself innocent of treason was ... well, not burn.

When the fire was blazing, Brandon was brought in. His hands were chained behind his back, and around his neck was a wet leathern cord attached to a device ... His legs were left free, though, and his longsword was set down just beyond his reach...

[Rickard] would start to cook, Aerys promised, unless his son could free him. Brandon tried, but the more he struggled, the tighter the cord constricted around his throat. In the end he strangled himself. (*Clash* 582-583)

This twisted trial by combat, since it takes place in the throne room, is presumably a public execution. Aerys's most horrifying public retribution, however, comes after the Defiance of Duskendale: a half-year long rebellion in which the king is held prisoner by Lord Denys Darklyn, and which accelerates Aerys's descent into madness (*World* 117-119). The king's response is to execute the entirety of the Darklyn, and the related Hollard families – save the young squire, Dontos Hollard – almost certainly publicly. The most horrific death, however, is that of Lady Serala, the Lace Serpent, who supposedly incited her husband to rebellion. This execution verges on the nightmarish spectacles of history, and since it appears to be common knowledge, was presumably public:

The Lace Serpent was burned alive, poor woman, though her tongue was torn out first, and her female parts, with which it was said that she had enslaved her lord. (*Feast* 166)

These excesses of public violence (if, indeed, they were public) are, however, framed as the result of Aerys's madness, rather than as ordinary processes of justice.

The only method of execution by torture which appears to be conventional in the Seven Kingdoms is the use of crow-cages. With this practice, criminals are gibbeted in public spaces, to die of thirst or starvation, being eaten alive by the carrion crows that give the cage its name. This is the death that Catelyn Stark urges Robb to give Theon (*Storm* 1: 213), it is the tool of interrogation used by Jon Connington at Stoney Sept during Robert's Rebellion (*Dance* 805),

and it is the death given to Lord Lothar Bracken some time before Aegon's Conquest (*World* 154), but in the primary narrative of *Song*, we see it only in one scene:

In the market square at the town's heart stood a fountain in the shape of a leaping trout, spouting water into a shallow pool. Women were filling pails and flagons there. A few feet away, a dozen iron cages hung from creaking wooden posts. *Crow cages*, Arya knew. The crows were mostly outside the cages, splashing in the water or perched atop the bars; inside were men. Lem reined up scowling. 'What's this, now?'

'Justice,' answered a woman at the fountain.

...The bars allowed so little room that the prisoners could neither sit nor turn; they stood naked, exposed to sun and wind and rain. The first three cages held dead men. Carrion crows had eaten out their eyes, yet the empty sockets seemed to follow her. The fourth man in the row stirred as she passed. Around his mouth his ragged beard was thick with blood and flies. They exploded when he spoke, buzzing around his head. '*Water.*' The word was a croak. 'Please ... water ...' (*Storm* 1: 420)

These men, we learn, raped and murdered villagers at Tumbler's Falls, and so, when they are captured by the Mad Huntsman near Stoney Sept, this is their fate.¹⁰⁹ This is not justice performed by any liege: Ser Wilbert, presumably the owner of these lands, is dead, and his heirs are absent, and so the Huntsman takes de facto power.¹¹⁰ Yet, even if we never see the crow cages anywhere else in the novels, the fact that Arya recognizes them suggests that she has seen them elsewhere.

Arya is horrified to learn that the men are "Wolves": her brother's men. This makes this a moment of painful revelation for the girl, undermining a sense of righteousness in two ways: firstly, she is confronted very viscerally with the fact that atrocities are committed on *both* sides, that her brother is not uncomplicatedly in the right; secondly, she is faced with the horror of this righteous retribution, and participates in an act of mercy, giving the men water before Anguy kills them (421-422). It is a similar revelation to that experienced by Brienne

¹⁰⁹ Stoney Sept, like Oldstones gathers associations. It is here that Jon Connington failed to find Robert Baratheon before Tully and Stark forces arrived and defeated him (*Storm* 1: 418). It is for his failure here that he has been exiled, and the bells of Stoney Sept haunt his focal chapters. The crow cages in which he held villagers may well be the same cages in which these northmen are now held.

¹¹⁰ An important part of what makes the villagers accept the Huntsman's leadership appears to be his ability to provide for them: in a time of famine, he brings a flock of sheep (*Storm* 1: 419).

when faced with the bodies of the raiders of Saltpans. This grotesque display of suffering is appalling to the reader, and to the focalizer. The display is integral to this death, however, and the presence of these bodies *here*, at the well, in the heart of the village, clearly indicates that it is meant to be *seen*.

Such a display, and a particularly spectacular one at that, is the Plaza of Punishment in Astapor. So far, this discussion has been largely confined to events in Westeros, but here we turn to a very different culture, and it is worth dwelling on that culture. Our first impression of the city is not the Plaza of Punishment, but rather the mirroring Plaza of Pride, the curiously named slave market, and it certainly gives a prideful impression:

In the center of the Plaza of Pride stood a red brick fountain whose waters smelled of brimstone, and in the center of the fountain a monstrous harpy made of hammered bronze. Twenty feet tall she reared. She had a woman's face, with gilded hair, ivory eyes, and pointed ivory teeth. Water gushed yellow from her heavy breasts. But in place of arms she had the wings of a bat or a dragon, her legs were the legs of an eagle, and behind she wore a scorpion's curled and venomous tail. (*Storm* 1: 330)

The harpy, the symbol of old Ghis that has been reshaped into the symbol of Astapor, bearing chained manacles as a symbol of the slave trade which defines the city, is a terrible icon. Her sulphurous lactation introduces to us the monstrous motherhood of the harpy, which is a strong part of Ghiscari identity, and indeed pride: faced with Daenerys's claim to be of the blood of old Valyria, Kraznys mo Nakloz boasts, "Old Ghis ruled an empire when the Valyrians were still fucking sheep ... and we are the sons of the harpy" (340).

Astapor, as well as the other Ghiscari slave cities, Yunkai and Meereen, declare their power structures with their very architecture,¹¹¹ far beyond simply the domineering presence

¹¹¹ The architecture in the Seven Kingdoms also declares its power structures, from the stupendous size of Harrenhal, to the struggle between church and state embodied in the opposition of Baelor's Sept and the Red Keep on the King's Landing skyline. This architecture is almost always predictably West-European, however, or at least in keeping with the medievalist expectations of the Fantasy genre. The Slave Cities, however, are not as simply analogous to any time or place, and so Martin's choice of architecture feels more deliberate.

of the Harpy. Above the city, the stepped pyramids that are the residence of the masters of the city (the ironically named, “Good Masters”), are a towering presence, lit up with lanterns so that they glow in the evenings: they are a beautiful presence, the “fairer face” (345) of the city, but, from the Plaza of Pride, distant, and almost illusory, shimmering in the heat, so that they “seem half a dream” (332). Contrasted with the bronze harpy and the illuminated pyramids is the dusty, crumbling red brickwork of the city, which is united with the body of its slaves: “Bricks and blood built Astapor ... and bricks and blood her people”, the rhyme goes, and Arstan Whitebeard claims that, “The bricks of Astapor are red with the blood of the slaves who make them” (343). Even the Unsullied, the spectacle that Dany is intended to view here in the Plaza of Pride, “*could be made of brick themselves, the way they stand there*” (332). There is an architectural opposition, then, between the elevated and illuminated world of the masters, and the brick and blood world of the slaves.

By focusing on this simple opposition, one runs the risk of losing sight of the most striking aspect of Astapori culture (apart from the obvious cruelty of the slave trade), which is the evidence of its collapse into decadence. The Slave Cities are the very flotsam of Old Ghis, rotting on the shores of Slaver’s Bay after the wave of the Ghiscari Empire has receded, and the attempts by the Astapori to imitate the glories of the old empire are a subject of much mockery: the warriors of Ghis, Jorah tells us, are

Old names and fat purses who dress up as Ghiscari scourges to pretend they still rule a vast empire. Every one is a high officer. On feastdays they fight mock wars in the pits to demonstrate what brilliant commanders they are, but it’s the eunuchs who do the dying. (349)

There is much here, also, that hints at Rome, and its own fall: from the *tokar*, which closely resembles a toga, to nostalgic recollections of the “lockstep legions of Old Ghis” (334). There is also a sense, even before Daenerys begins her destruction of the slave cities, that the collapse of this neo-Empire is imminent: the very brickwork is disintegrating – the stinging brickdust pervades the city.

Yet the world of the Good Masters is one of grotesque excess, evidenced first in the body of the slaver, Kraznys mo Nakloz: corpulent, perspiring, and perfumed.¹¹² Astapori society reflects him in its grotesquery, as Kraznys relates it to Daenerys (and the reader), sometimes unwittingly, since he believes he cannot be understood. The “folly” in Douquor’s Pit combines food and decay with obscene violence in a spectacle of amusement:

A bear and three small boys. One boy will be rolled in honey, one in blood, and one in rotting fish, and she may wager on which the bear will eat first. (341)

The cuisine in Astapor is itself characterized by nauseating excess: the introduction of foodstuffs such as “jellied dog brains” and “red octopus” already positions this culture as disconcertingly alien to its presumed Western audience,¹¹³ but the inclusion of “unborn puppy” in the (literal) stew (340) makes the menu a monstrosity, touching on life violently aborted for the sake of the Masters. Astapori decadence takes this same form again and again: the young are killed, for the pleasure of those that own them. The three boys, we can assume, die in one fighting pit, a nine year old girl risks her life against a bull in another (334), and the Unsullied are castrated, and forced to kill young things, as well.

Beneath the stars, and above the lanterned terraces,

The brick pyramids were all glimmery with light. *But it is dark below, in the streets and plazas and fighting pits. And it is darkest of all in the*

¹¹² Perfume in *Song* is almost always a signal of excess or corruption, and is *always* such a sign when it is worn by men: something which indicates a certain degree of conservatism around gender presentation in the novels. Daenerys may have numerous positive associations with “the perfumes of her childhood” (*Game* 588), but she is almost ritually perfumed before meeting Khal Drogo, including a dab on her vulva, while Sansa calls for perfume in the same breath that she calls for powder to hide her bruises from Joffrey – who called for them to be inflicted, but expects her to be beautiful for him (*Game* 744). In both cases perfume becomes connected with the sexual objectification (and commodification) of these young women.

More often, however, perfume is the substance which signals excess or fails to hide something rotten: Illyrio’s stench is detectable beneath his perfumes (34); we are told that Robert wears perfume in the same line that we learn he has grown fat (40); perfume signals dangerous obsequiousness in Varys (173) and the wineseller-assassin (589); the heavy perfume worn by Yezzan zo Qaggaz cannot conceal the stench of his sickness (*Dance* 323); and Quaithe warns Daenerys, “Beware the perfumed seneschal” (153) At times, perfume simply *is* the rot: the smell of corruption clings to the direwolf corpse “like a woman’s perfume” (*Game* 17), sour wine “perfumed” Yoren’s breath (727), the smell of “rich rotting earth” is a perfume (*Clash* 59).

When we learn that Kraznys “smelled as if he’d bathed in raspberries” (*Storm* 1: 331), then, this compounds our perception of him as corrupt.

¹¹³ The spectre of Orientalism hovers close at hand in the culture of Astapor and the slave cities, as it often does in Martin’s portrayal of Essos in general, and this is evident in these foods. Mat Hardy has discussed this in his “Game of Tropes”.

barracks, where some little boy is feeding scraps to the puppy they gave him when they took away his manhood. (Storm 1: 348)

The Unsullied – or, here, the boys who will one day be Unsullied – come to be the epitome of the possessed slave bodies of Astapor. Renowned as among the most skilled and obedient soldiers in the known world, the Unsullied are not so much trained as forged, and their forging is achieved through sickening violence. Where Daenerys perceives them as made of brick, Kraznys makes a different comparison:

Tell her they are like Valyrian steel, folded over and over and hammered for years on end, until they are stronger and more resilient than any metal on earth. (338)

The Unsullied are defined by their reshaping, and by removal: primarily, by the castration for which they are named¹¹⁴ and famed. The reader will hear echoes in this of the cutting of Lord Varys, which was so frighteningly rendered in *A Clash of Kings* (473) – a tale of how the body of one is transformed into power for another in a magical sense.¹¹⁵ In the Unsullied, the castration is still an act to gain power, but in a different way.

The Unsullied are castrated, but they are also numbed, and unnamed, all of which aims to make tools of them, to remove their humanity. By castrating the Unsullied, the Masters seek to remove desire, temptation, and love; by feeding them the wine of courage, they seek to remove pain, and thus self-preservation; by removing their names, they seek to remove their identities. The transformation enacted by these excisions is not magical, nor is it permanent beyond the physical – we will see the Unsullied behave under Daenerys in ways which radically subvert this training: in Meereen, some Unsullied, including Stalwart Shield, visit brothels in search of the physical intimacy which the Masters sought to deny them (*Dance* 32), and Dany's Unsullied not only take names, but take pride in them (*Storm 2: 3*). Dany's

¹¹⁴ This is not explicit in the novels, but the association between their total castration and their supposed purity (“We remove the penis as well, leaving nothing. The Unsullied are the purest creatures on earth” (*Storm 1: 336*)) strongly implies that the name “Unsullied” is drawn from this. The name is, then, profoundly ironic, given that an act of mutilation earns them a name implying that they are untouched.

¹¹⁵ Varys tells Tyrion of his cutting: that he was sold to a sorcerer who used his genitalia in a ritual to converse with a mysterious voice.

Unsullied are individuated and characterful – a far cry from the faceless mass of “eight thousand brick eunuchs” (*Storm* 1: 346, indistinguishable, except racially).

For now, in the Plaza of Pride, the Unsullied are sold as an army: as a uniform mass of bodies intended to be used to make war, to kill and to die – Elaine Scarry would say, “‘to hurt’ (to hurt within one’s own body; to hurt an opponent’s body) or ‘to alter body tissue’” (123). Killing is an important part of their training, and moral reservation is just another part of them that is excised. As part of their training, Kraznys explains, they must raise and then strangle a puppy, and later, they must buy an infant slave, and kill it in front of its mother. Kraznys also makes a spectacle of the Unsullied’s ability to withstand hurt without being weakened through pain: he whips a Lhazareen and makes a show of his willingness to be whipped again (*Storm* 1: 334), then mutilates a Lyseni in a grim display:

The eunuch knelt, unsheathed the blade, and offered it up hilt first. ...
‘Stand,’ Kraznys commanded.

‘Your worship.’ The eunuch stood, and Kraznys mo Nakloz slid the sword slowly up his torso, leaving a thin red line across his belly and between his ribs. Then he jabbed the swordpoint in beneath a wide pink nipple and began to work it back and forth.

... ‘This will do him no great harm. Men have no need of nipples, eunuchs even less so.’ The nipple hung by a thread of skin. He slashed, and sent it tumbling to the bricks. The eunuch did not move, until Kraznys offered him back his sword, hilt first. ‘Here, I’m done with you.’

‘This one¹¹⁶ is pleased to have served you.’

Kraznys turned back to Dany. ‘They feel no pain, you see.’ (335)

The wounding is in part brute sadism – Kraznys is vile in speech and manner, and the reader will be prepared to believe the worst of him – but it is also a necessary display of power.

The power displayed in this act is twofold, taking the form of both *force* and *license*. The willingness of the Unsullied to kill or be killed, to maim or be maimed, is a power of their own, but it is translated here into the power of the master – a military force which is conferred upon their owners. But also on display is the *license* of the master to use the bodies of the

¹¹⁶ The Unsullied appear never to use first person pronouns, objectifying themselves constantly through their own speech. This is presumably a part of their training.

Unsullied without restriction. The power may exist within the bodies of the Unsullied, but it is framed as the possession and the “pride” (as the setting suggests) of the Good Masters. This power is also framed as a product for Daenerys to buy. When Daenerys buys the Unsullied, the transaction is sealed with the gift of a whip:

The handle was black dragonbone, elaborately carved and inlaid with gold. Nine long thin leather lashes trailed from it, each one tipped by a gilded claw. The gold pommel was a woman’s head, with pointed ivory teeth. ‘The harpy’s fingers,’ Kraznys named the scourge.

Dany turned the whip in her hand. *Such a light thing, to bear such weight.*¹¹⁷ (401)

The sign of ownership is a *weapon*, and a weapon of punishment. It is beautiful, proclaiming wealth and power in the materials used to craft it, but it is impossible to deny what the power proclaimed by the object is: it is the power to use the bodies of slaves, and the power to maim those bodies.

We may be introduced to this power with Kraznys in the Plaza of Pride, but we see it most clearly in the Plaza of Punishment, where the eight-thousand six hundred Unsullied that Daenerys buys are presented to her. Here, the display of power is very different from the statuary of the Plaza of Pride:

There were no bronze statues here; only a wooden platform where rebellious slaves were racked, and flayed, and hanged. ‘*The Good Masters place them so they will be the first thing a new slave sees upon entering the city [emphasis added],*’ Missandei told her as they came to the plaza.

At first glimpse, Dany thought their skin was striped like the zorses of the Jogos Nhai. Then she rode her silver nearer and saw the raw red flesh beneath the crawling black stripes. *Flies. Flies and maggots.*¹¹⁸ The rebellious slaves had been peeled like a man might peel an apple, in a long curling strip. One man had an arm black with flies from fingers to elbow, and red and white beneath. Dany reined in beneath him. ‘What did this one do?’

‘He raised a hand against his owner.’ (399-400)

¹¹⁷ Dany has already realized the horror of the whip, as we sense when she orders Jhogo, who often uses the sound of a whipcrack to clear a path, not to do so in Astapor: “These bricks have heard too much of the sound of whips.” (*Storm* 1: 342)

¹¹⁸ Martin frequently uses flies to invoke horror in the reader: they are always present around the bodies of the condemned, and almost entirely absent elsewhere.

This platform, like the gibbets, crow cages, and spikes we see in Westeros, displays these broken, punished bodies to those who are to be subject to the same control: to the slaves who must be reminded of the masters' power. We see, as Dany does, and as the new slaves do, the slave punished in a manner reflective of his offense: it is the offending hand which has been flayed, and Missandei, a slave well-acquainted with Astapor, can read the crime simply by seeing the punishment. This is what is intended: it is vital to the Good Masters that their power be visible, and, in the curious language of the body, legible.

We see echoes of this language in the laws of Westeros. Rapers in the Seven Kingdoms are castrated¹¹⁹ and thieves lose a finger – or in one case, seven, because “a man who steals from a sept is stealing from the [seven] gods” (*Feast* 257). The amputation of a hand, we learn, is the “old penalty for striking one of the blood royal” (570). Charles Lambert's work on disability in *Song* focuses closely on this symbolic quality of the body:

The novels are strewn with body parts: hands, tongues, penises, removed from their owners as punishment or payback, or for the sheer hell of it, as though the person were an assembly of detachable elements, each with its own magical valency. The body has and is a series of correspondences (22)

This becomes deeply important in the case of characters like Davos Seaworth, for whom the loss of his fingertips – an act of punishment for smuggling exacted by Stannis Baratheon – represents the excision of his former life, and for Jaime Lannister, who, in losing his sword-hand, loses “[t]he hand that made [him] Kingslayer ... his glory and his shame, both at once” (*Storm* 1: 537) – allowing him a chance at renewal and redemption.

In both cases (and in the case of the rebellious slave), the hands are the target of maiming, and this is significant: Beth Kozinsky observes how, in a manner drawn from medieval formulations of the body, in *Song*, “the hand on some level becomes the seat of self” (172). The hand connects the interior will to the world,¹²⁰ and so to maim the hands of a slave

¹¹⁹ Literally, or, if they choose to take the black, symbolically, since the Night's Watch take vows of celibacy.

¹²⁰ This is the symbolism at work in the title, “Hand of the King”, who acts upon the will of the ruler.

is to deny their power to *act*, to reject their agency, and symbolically destroy their *self*. Contra Kozinsky, Lambert situates the self in Martin's text not in the hands, but in the *skin*: "Our skin is what we are; without it, as the Boltons know, we're nothing." (22) The claim is a hyperbolic affectation, but it points to the particular importance of *flaying* in Martin's text. Of all the tortures in this text, flaying is positioned as the worst:

Reek had been whipped and racked and cut, but there was no pain half so excruciating as the pain that followed flaying. (*Dance* 167)

Lambert's discussion of flaying focuses on skin as the part of the self which is *visible*, but it should also be read as the boundary between flesh and air, between self and world. "[A] naked man has few secrets, but a flayed man's got none", Ramsay Bolton tells Theon (*Clash* 530), aligning the use of flaying in interrogation with the exposure of nakedness, as though the man's secrets were kept hidden beneath his skin, and, symbolically speaking, they are. By flaying the hands of the rebellious slave, then, the Masters target the self in two ways: the self-beneath-the-skin is exposed, the self-as-hands destroyed. The maimed body of the slave is then placed on display – a spectacular symbol of the Masters' power.

This kind of spectacular display is divorced even from a dynamic of retributive punishment by the Great Masters of Meereen, in a taunting sign to the advancing Daenerys, who, as Breaker of Chains, so threatens the ordinary power relations of Slaver's Bay:

Worst of all, they had nailed a slave child up on every milepost along the coast road from Yunkai, nailed them up still living with their entrails hanging out and one arm always outstretched to point the way to Meereen. ... By the time they came to Meereen sitting on the salt coast beside her river, the count stood at one hundred and sixty-three. (*Storm* 2: 215-216)

The slave children themselves are not the target of the violence done upon their own bodies – Daenerys, and her army are. It is an appalling display, and one that Dany repays in kind, making a similar display of the Masters:

‘I want your leaders,’ Dany told them. ‘Give them up, and the rest of you shall be spared.’

‘How many?’ one old woman had asked, sobbing. ‘how many must you have to spare us?’

‘One hundred and sixty-three,’ she answered.

She had them nailed to wooden posts around the plaza, each man pointing at the next. The anger was fierce and hot inside her when she gave the command; it made her feel like an avenging dragon. But later, when she passed the men dying on the posts, when she heard their moans and smelled their bowels and blood ...

It was just. It was. I did it for the children. (425)

Then, faced with the disintegration of these corpses, and the plague of flies that it brings, she desperately tries to distance herself from the spectacles she knows she is mirroring:

Dany remembered the horror she had felt when she had seen the Plaza of Punishment in Astapor. *I made a horror just as great, but surely they deserved it. Harsh justice. (426)*

The reader will not believe it, and it is clear that neither does Daenerys – her regret is palpable. She knows what she has created here – not justice, but vengeance, and the “confused horror” of “punishment-as-spectacle” (Foucault 9), which aims at power.

A different kind of spectacle, allegedly aiming at a different kind of power, is at play in the burnings performed by Melisandre and her Queen’s Men. They burn, first, in effigy, the seven gods of the Faith, as part of a ceremony which is both (supposedly) a sacrifice to R’hllor, and the introduction of Stannis as Azor Ahai (*Clash* 108-111).¹²¹ The burning itself is violent only symbolically: there are men who die defending the sept, and others who are imprisoned afterward, but it is simply wooden statuary that burns, and it is a “burned sword”, not the burning sword Lightbringer, that is pulled from the flames, as Salladhor Saan assures Davos, and the reader. We are told, as Davos is told, to be glad of this, because the power of the mythical Lightbringer is derived from its terrible tempering:

[Azor Ahai] summoned his wife. ‘*Nissa Nissa,*’ he said to her, for that was her name, ‘*bare your breast, and know that I love you best of all that is in this world.*’ She did this thing, why I cannot say, and Azor Ahai thrust the smoking sword through her living heart. It is said that her cry of anguish and ecstasy left a crack across the face of the moon,

¹²¹ Azor Ahai is a messianic figure, prophesied to return, in the faith of the Red God.

but her blood and her soul and her strength and her courage all went
into the steel. (115)

In this faith, power is won through terrible sacrifice, but the sacrifices offered by his followers in Stannis's service will almost all be those of their enemies, rather than those they love.¹²²

The first taken by Melisandre's flames are Guncer Sunglass and the surviving sons of Hubard Rambton: "*Servants of the dark*, she named them, poor men, and the red woman sang as the fires were lit." (*Storm 1*: 150) The burning is framed as punishment for their treachery (their defiance against the burning of the Seven), but the fact that it occurs such a long time after this defiance,¹²³ and in the king's absence, suggests that this is not the entire motivation. These burnings occur while Stannis makes his attempt to take King's Landing – it is suggested during the battle itself (*ibid.*). Given Melisandre's misgivings about the battle,¹²⁴ it is clear that these traitors are burned, not simply as punishment, but also as a sacrifice to ensure success. This is certainly the fate of Alester Florent, who is held in Davos's cell for treason (372):

Melisandre had given Alester Florent to her god on Dragonstone, to conjure up the wind that bore them north. Lord Florent had been strong and silent as the queen's men bound him to the post, dignified as any half-naked man could hope to be, but as the flames licked up his legs he had begun to scream, and his screams had blown them all the way to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, if the red woman could be believed. (*Dance 129*)

Whether or not these men were intended to be executed as traitors, their deaths are delayed until they can be used. Davos fears this when he is held prisoner:

¹²² Davos believes that Melisandre made a sacrifice of those lost to the Wildfire at the Battle of the Blackwater, but this seems doubtful. She certainly wishes to sacrifice Edric Storm, but is denied by Stannis. The only sacrifice which resembles that of Nissa Nissa occurs only in the HBO adaptation, where Shireen Baratheon, Stannis's only daughter, is given to the flames to lift the blizzard which surrounds his forces ("The Dance of Dragons"). While this would not be out of character, this is unlikely to be reproduced in forthcoming novels, given the distances separating Stannis, Melisandre, and Shireen, as well as the possibility that Stannis is dead (*Dance 907*).

¹²³ The passage of time is unclear in these novels, and so it is impossible to tell how much time passes between the burning of the gods on Dragonstone and the Battle of the Blackwater. Given that Stannis marches on Renly's camp, then on Storm's End, before making for King's Landing, we can assume that many weeks pass. If execution was the punishment intended for these men, it is nearly inconceivable that Stannis – who is usually decisive in his dispensation of the law – would wait such a long time to perform that execution.

¹²⁴ Before Renly's death, Melisandre has a vision of Stannis defeated at King's Landing by Renly in his green armour – a vision which proves true, though misread, when Ser Garlan Tyrell leads the vanguard of Tywin Lannister's host, dressed in Renly's armour to masquerade as his shade (*Storm 2*: 366-367).

They are keeping me alive, for some purpose of their own. He did not like to think what that might be. Lord Sunnlass had been confined in the cells beneath Dragonstone for a time, as had Ser Hubard Rambton's sons; all of them had ended on the pyre. (*Storm 1: 367*)

This kind of sacrifice is familiar: "Only death may pay for life" (*Game 710*), the maegi Mirri Maz Duur tells Dany – words which Queen Selyse echoes later, apparently as one of Melisandre's teachings (*Storm 2: 161*), and Mirri herself is burned alive in the haphazard ritual that – the reader may suppose – brings the three dragons to life (*Game 803-807*). The similarity of Melisandre's magic to that of the Great Shepherd-worshipping maegi no doubt comes from their respective training in Asshai (*Game 672; Clash 15*). Melisandre is also named a "shadowbinder" (*Game 768, Clash 15*) – a form of sorcery for which Asshai is famed (*World 308-309*), but which seems to carry no religious connotations. This suggests that Melisandre's magic – we might call it bloodmagic, as Mirri does – is not quite so entangled with the faith of R'hllor as Melisandre implies.

Bloodmagic or religious sacrifice cannot be all that is occurring in these burnings, however. The execution of Mance Rayder, for instance, is something different. It initially seems to be bloodmagic: Melisandre makes much of the power of "king's blood" (*Storm 1: 531; Storm 2: 162*), and it is implied that Mance is killed for this power, despite the absence of true royalty from his line (*Feast 97*).¹²⁵ Later it becomes clear that this is not Melisandre's intention, because Mance Rayder is not the man burned. Through "glamor", Mance is made to look like Rattleshirt, and Rattleshirt like Mance, so that the King-Beyond-the-Wall is *seen* burned, but is never burned in fact.

While there are rumours, neither Stannis nor Melisandre actually state in the text that Mance is executed for bloodmagic. Melisandre frames the decision in terms of Stannis's adherence to the law: "Only his life's blood could pay for his crimes, your laws said, and Stannis Baratheon is not a man to go against the law" (*Dance 419*). Stannis discusses it

¹²⁵ Martin gives us reason to doubt that there *is* such a thing as true royalty: it is success in war, rather than god-given right or inherent kingliness that has made all the kings in this text. There is nothing more magical about kings than men, and it seems unlikely that there is anything especially magical about king's blood.

particularly as adherence to the law, not only for its own sake, but as a deterrent: “Suffer one deserter to live, and you encourage others to desert”, he claims, and with comical obduracy, “Laws should be made of iron, not of pudding.” Display goes to the heart of this, however. Stannis intends this execution as a way to “make good use of him”: “I’ll *burn* him, and the north will see how I deal with turncloaks and traitors” (54).

This display is not *only* one of punishment, however: it has far more in common with the burning of the statues of the Seven on Dragonstone than the beheading of the turncloak Gared, or the crow cages in Stoney Sept, or the Plaza of Punishment. This is a display of the power of a god, rather than the power of a king, meant to compel not simply political loyalty, but religious conversion. The false Mance Rayder is presented not as oathbreaker, nor as an enemy leader, but as a heretic, and a servant of the Great Other: “Here stands your king of lies”, Melisandre tells the free folk as he is brought to the scaffold that has been erected in view of the wildlings (135). Before she ignites the Horn of Joramun¹²⁶ which lies on Mance’s pyre, she declares: “Behold the fate of those who choose the darkness” (136).

The fire is positioned not as the weapon of earthly justice, but of divine retribution and power. After Mance is killed,¹²⁷ Melisandre connects the intended weapon of the execution with benevolent godly gifts:

The Lord of Light made the sun and moon and stars to light our way,
and gave us fire to keep the night at bay ... None can withstand his
flames. (137)

¹²⁶ Like the executed Mance Rayder, the Horn of Joramun is itself false, and like the execution, intended as a show of power, though having none of its own. We learn this only later, from Tormund Giantsbane:

She burned that big fine horn, aye. A bloody sin, I call it. A thousand years old, that was. We found it in a giant’s grave, and no man o’ us had ever seen a horn so big. That must have been why Mance got the notion to tell you it were Joramun’s. He wanted you crows to think he had it in his power to blow your bloody Wall down about your knees. (*Dance* 777-778)

¹²⁷ Jon gives Mance mercy: on his orders, four men shoot Mance with arrows. Stannis is displeased, perhaps because the act denies Mance the suffering intended for him, but more likely because the imposition of unsanctioned – and very mortal – weapons into this religious performance is an affront to his power. (*Dance* 137)

She describes the burning of Lord Sunnlass in similar terms, somewhat absurdly lambasting the failure of the Seven to protect him from the pyre:

They did not protect Guncer Sunnlass. He prayed thrice each day, and bore seven seven-pointed stars upon his shield, but when R'hllor reached out his hand his prayers turned to screams, and he burned. Why cling to these false gods? (*Storm* 1: 368)

The power of the god R'hllor is extended symbolically, and magically, to Stannis, who is presented as his champion, bearing, as always, the flaming sword Lightbringer. It is a familiar performance, Jon knows, but it is a glorious one, and even he is awed by the spectacle:

‘...here stands the true king. *BEHOLD HIS GLORY!*’

Stannis Baratheon drew Lightbringer.

The sword glowed red and yellow and orange, alive with light. Jon had seen this show before ... but not like *this*, never before like this. Lightbringer was the sun made steel. When Stannis raised the blade above his head, men had to turn their heads or cover their eyes. Horses shied, and one threw his rider. The blaze in the fire pit seemed to shrink before this storm of light, like a small dog cowering before a larger one. The Wall itself turned red and pink and orange, as waves of color danced across the ice. *Is this the power of king's blood?* (*Dance* 137-138)

The power is *not* that of king's blood, but a glamor of Melisandre's making, taken to be something else. This is the power to be gained by the spectacle of burning Mance, and connecting it with the magic of Lightbringer: not of king's blood itself, but of *belief* in king's blood, and the inexorability of fire, and the king, Stannis, and his priest, Melisandre, and their god R'hllor.

At the conclusion of Mance's execution is a demand to relinquish – indeed, destroy – another set of false gods: the gates of the wildling stockade are opened, and the free folk are brought forward, and given pieces of weirwood – the trees sacred to worshipers of the old gods – to feed to the same fire which lately burned their king: “*A piece of the old gods to feed the new.*” (138) Like the Seven on Dragonstone, the old gods, too, are symbolically destroyed along with the old king. The necessity of such gestures to the faith of R'hllor in Westeros is interesting. Until the events of *Song*, the faiths of the old gods and the Seven have existed

relatively harmoniously on the Westerosi mainland, and the faith of the Drowned God has no overt conflict with either.¹²⁸ Sasse and Collins have discussed this harmony, and the ways in which the rise of radical leaders like the High Sparrow, and Aeron Damphair foment religious conflict in a society already radicalized by war (“My Sweet R’hllor”). Religious rhetoric thus becomes an important feature of the war in *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*. Unlike the faith of the Drowned God and the faith of the Seven, however, the faith of the Red God is *new* to Westeros,¹²⁹ and thus shows of strength are necessary to its survival. There is a religious reinforcement occurring in these rituals of fire, evident in the fervent call-and-response between Melisandre and her faithful Queen’s Men.

Despite Jon’s awe, the conversion here is not particularly successful. Most of the free folk *do* participate in the burning of the weirwoods, but it is evidently for the very earthly reason that it is the only way that they will be allowed shelter and food:

‘Come,’ urged Melisandre. ‘Come to the light ... or run back to the darkness.’ In the pit below her, the fire was crackling. ‘If you choose life, come to me.’

And they came. ... *If you would eat, come to me*, Jon thought. *If you would not freeze or starve, submit.* (*Dance* 138)

Dolorous Edd – whose dry humour is often the voice of reason in the midst of madness – puts it plainly: “What’s a god compared to a nice bowl of onion soup?”¹³⁰ (143) As soon as the Wildlings are settled in Mole’s Town, they begin carving faces in the trees surrounding it, transforming them into the heart trees of the old faith:

The Wildlings brought their gods with them after all. Jon was not surprised. Men do not give up their gods so easily. The whole pageant that Lady Melisandre had orchestrated beyond the Wall suddenly seemed as empty as a mummer’s farce. (269)

¹²⁸ This harmony has not always existed in Westeros, but was built as a part of the end of the political conflict between the invading Andals, who worshipped the Seven, and the First Men, who worshipped the Old Gods (*World* 20).

¹²⁹ The faith is new, that is, excepting the missionary presence of Thoros of Myr in King’s Landing, who until recently had little interest in religious conversion.

¹³⁰ There is a double meaning in Edd’s words here, as he is expressing both the motivation at the heart of the wildlings’ participation, but also, sarcastically, fear of reprisal from the Wildlings: “Aye, we hacked their gods apart and made them burn the pieces, but we gave them onion soup.” (*Dance* 143)

Like so many of Stannis's performances, this farce aims at power, but fails to achieve it. It is almost entirely pretence: the horn is false, Mance is false, Lightbringer is false,¹³¹ and given the revelation of Melisandre's powders (411), even the magic may partly be false. Jon may briefly be awed, but he is unconvinced; the wildlings only feign conversion. Only Stannis and the Queen's Men take it seriously, and there is something a little contemptible in that.

Stannis's wilful ignorance of the Wildlings goes to the heart of the failure of this ceremony: the chapters leading up to it are full of conversations in which Jon tries with great patience to explain why it will not work, and Stannis's stubborn stupidity is noxious: whenever his beliefs are contradicted, he blusters on righteously, never altering course. When Jon tries to convince him that Mance is more useful as a captive than a corpse, he disagrees:

‘...I have other men to lead the wildlings. And I have Rayder's son, do not forget. Once the father dies, his whelp will be King-Beyond-the-Wall.’

‘Your Grace is mistaken. ... The babe is no more a prince than Val is a princess. You do not become King-Beyond-the-Wall because your father was.’

‘Good,’ said Stannis, ‘for I will suffer no other kings in Westeros...’ (54)

Jon also tried to caution him against forcing the submitting wildlings to kneel – a gesture of fealty and homage to people of the Seven Kingdoms, but a symbol of weakness and servitude to the free folk:

‘The free folk despise kneelers,’ he had warned Stannis. ‘Let them keep their pride, and they will love you better.’ His Grace would not listen. He said, ‘It is swords I need from them, not kisses.’ (139)

¹³¹ There is strong evidence that Stannis's sword is *not* Lightbringer, most particularly that given by Maester Aemon, whose wisdom the reader has come to trust. When the sword is described to him, he claims that it must be “lovely to behold”, but remarks to Sam, with great scepticism, that it gives no heat (*Storm 2*: 530-531). Before departing the Wall, he instructs Jon to read a particular passage of *The Jade Compendium* (*Feast 105*), which describes Lightbringer's heat, leaving Jon convinced that Stannis's sword is not truly Lightbringer (*Dance 146*). This deception even has a place in Aemon's dying thoughts:

we all deceive ourselves, when we want to believe. Melisandre most of all, I think.
The sword is wrong, she has to know that ... light without heat ... an empty glamor
... the sword is wrong, and the false light can only lead us deeper into the darkness.
(*Feast 648*)

‘Empty glamors’ make frequent appearance in *Song*, and they frequently surround Melisandre and Stannis – shows of power, with very little substance.

Neither the kneeling nor the burning win Stannis either swords or kisses. The whole farcical business would be funny, were it not for the sorrow at the heart of it.

Characters in this text grab at power using a multitude of tools: they use armies, certainly, and magic, too, but also letters, feasts, weddings, and gods. And they use bodies. The feudalism in the Seven Kingdoms and the slavery in Slaver's Bay are reinforced by the assertion by rulers of their sovereignty over the bodies of others. By making a spectacle of their power over those bodies, by presenting those bodies maimed, they assert their right and ability to rend flesh. Martin plays with his reader's response to this, at times giving us the satisfaction of righteous retribution, but more often horrifying us, giving us terror or tragedy. He continually asserts what these performances are intended to be: attempts, successful or otherwise, at gaining or maintaining power.

Chapter Four

“it rhymes with weak”: The Violent Performance of Ramsay and Reek

Violence, I have claimed, is often a show of power, but, paradoxically, it is often a signal to the reader of weakness. Tywin Lannister warns Joffrey that “any man who must say ‘I am the king’ is no true king at all” (*Storm 2*: 152), and the warning seems as true of displays of power as it is of claims of power.¹³² This is true of Stannis, whose displays of religious power fail to win him recognition as king: “Stannis might be the King of Westeros in name, but in truth he was the King of the Painted Table” (174) – that is, the table in Dragonstone that is painted as a map of Westeros. It is also certainly true of Joffrey, whose peevish insistence on his royalty and the violence that accompanies it inspire Tywin’s advice. His abuse of Sansa, of Tyrion, of the smallfolk, even of animals, all make him monstrous, but also pitiful, because in these acts of force, his weakness is made clear: for all his bravado, he is unable to defend his own kingdom from threats within or without. Similarly, Viserys, the beggar king, exiled from his kingdom, whose right to rule is never recognized, constantly threatens (and occasionally, when he is able, enacts) violence against Daenerys, as well as other subservient women (such as her handmaids) around him, for perceived slights, but cannot shake his identity as ‘the beggar king’. Victarion Greyjoy turns seething envy of his brother’s success against the most vulnerable in his care, justifying it with religious fervour: he beats his wife to death, allows Maester Kerwin to be raped and brutalized, and throws the male sex-slaves on a captured ship into the sea as “unnatural” (*Dance* 832). He “feels aggrieved”, Martin claims (“George R.R. Martin: The Complete Interview”), and his violence flows from this.

Of these characters, only Victarion is a focalizer, and then only in two chapters each in *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*. He is far from a major character. But where

¹³² Tywin’s reprimand is spoken with this in mind – his warning is precisely against Joffrey’s penchant for threatening violence to reassert his rule:

‘I could have your tongue out for saying that ... I’m the king.’

‘Aerys also felt the need to remind men that he was king. And he was passing fond of of ripping out tongues as well.’ (*Storm 2*: 152)

Martin examines particularly how vulnerability leads to violence in the character of Theon Greyjoy, whose chapters in *A Clash of Kings* show him as the *perpetrator* of such violence, and whose chapters in *A Dance with Dragons* show him as the *victim* of such violence, at the hands of Ramsay Bolton, who is also defined by his vulnerability as much as his sadism.

All of Martin's characters are heavily influenced by the power structures of their world, and by their proximity to, or distance from, that power: Cersei's threatened queenly ambitions, Eddard's unexpected ascension to the Lordship of Winterfell in his brother's place, and Jon's liminal position as the acknowledged bastard of a high lord, serve as simple examples of how the psyches of Martin's characters are shaped by power relations. Theon is no exception: in fact, he epitomizes this trend, since what is foregrounded in his character is the way in which he has been shaped by the restructuring of power brought on by war.

Born the youngest child to the brutal lord of brutal people, Theon's childhood on Pyke can only really be guessed at. We are given no more than allusions to "Rodrik's drunken cuffs and Maron's cruel japes" (*Clash* 136), and hints also that Theon tormented Asha, who, while older, is female, and so subordinate in the usual structures of Westerosi society. One senses in this the start of the gendered power dynamic that will be visible in Theon later: victimized (at least in his own warped view of things), Theon turns the resulting aggression downward. At the age of ten, however, Theon is given as a hostage to Eddard Stark after his father, Balon Greyjoy, has failed in his rebellion against the Iron Throne: a brief war in which Theon's elder brothers were both slain, and House Greyjoy's hope for independence from Winterfell crushed (at least temporarily).

At Winterfell, Theon is, conflictively, both foster-child and prisoner. The trauma of this is a little too easy to dismiss: the Starks and their servants at Winterfell, who are far more reliable (and likeable) than Theon, make light of the threat to Theon's person, and so it is easy for the reader to make light of it in turn. Theon sees himself as an outcast, raised with

Eddard's sons, but never one of them, "[a] ward in name, a hostage in truth" (123) always aware of the purpose of his presence at Winterfell: to be executed should his father rebel again. This vulnerability and trauma is easy to ignore in *Clash*, partly because Theon is in various ways very powerful – being the eldest of the Winterfell children (spoken of and thought of by the younger siblings in almost threatening terms), and more importantly, highborn – but primarily because of the way Theon comes across in his own chapters in *A Clash of Kings*.

Charles Lambert describes him as “the nearest thing the cycle offers to an uncomplicated alpha male, the kind of man who wears a T-Shirt with the words Eat Drink Fuck on the chest” (23-24).¹³³ He is obsessed with the (usually false) perception that he has been cast from power. His attempts to regain that lost power almost always centre on acts of inept (but very real) violence. He is, at the time of his first appearance, a uniquely deplorable focalizer, and his sudden appearance in the company of spunky Arya, compassionate Catelyn, witty Tyrion, and the foolish but innocent Sansa, is something of a shock. Until the radical narrative shift that occurs with the start of *A Feast for Crows*,¹³⁴ Theon will stand as the most villainous of Martin's focalizers.

Theon's complaints of his ill-treatment by the Starks often feel put on, or at least dulled by his conflicting emotions. He initially expresses familial bonds, claiming (perhaps deceitfully, but there is nothing to indicate it) that “Lord Eddard is a second father to me,” (*Game* 136) and we are told later that, “For Robb himself, Theon did have a certain affection, as for a younger brother” (*Clash* 131). Before Theon's father compels him to turn against the

¹³³ Following him, I would add that Theon displays the sexual politics of a PUA devotee, the victim mentality of a Men's Rights Activist, and the empathetic imagination of Jason Compson.

¹³⁴ With a few exceptions, the narrative structure of the first three books in the series is relatively regular: Martin gives us a small number of focal characters, all of whom have multiple chapters, spread out fairly evenly. In *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*, however, Martin introduces numerous characters who appear for only one or two chapters, allowing him to spread a single storyline across multiple perspectives, with only a few characters appearing regularly.

Stefan Sasse has gone so far as to argue that this “*Feastdance*” – the fan title which pays homage to the fact that these books were intended to be a single book, and in Sasse's view should be read as such – constitutes “Act II” of the series, marking a deliberate, thematic and structural departure from “Act I” (the first three novels). (“A reader's guide”)

Starks, there is a vague indication of the fear he felt as a child: “As a boy, he had lived in fear of Stark’s stern face and great dark sword.” (ibid.)

There is a clearer indication that Theon felt himself to be an outsider, and subordinate:

Eddard had raised him among his own children, but Theon has never been one of them. The whole castle, from Lady Stark to the lowliest kitchen scullion, knew he was a hostage to his father’s good behavior, and treated him accordingly. Even the bastard Jon Snow had been accorded more honor than he had. (130)

The reader may well be inclined to doubt this – particularly concerning his comparison of himself to Jon. During the brief time we see Jon and Theon at Winterfell, it seems clear that Theon’s position is higher: Theon participates in the execution of Gared, where Jon only watches (*Game* 14); Theon is made a part of the royal procession, and seated at the high table during the feast for the King, where Jon is seated on the bench (51) – a dishonour which makes an impression on Jon (*Storm* 1: 111); and Lady Stark herself treats Jon with open loathing (*Game* 95), yet trusts Theon with a dangerous secret (136). Theon believes himself mistreated, but seems to have no real grounds for that feeling.

Theon’s most vehement expression of the trauma of his childhood comes as a revelation:

‘I was ten when I was taken from my father’s house, to make certain he would raise no more rebellions. ... The noose I wore was not made of hempen rope, that’s true enough, but I felt it all the same. And it chafed, Ser Rodrik. It chafed me raw.’ He had never quite realized that until now, but as the words came spilling out he saw the truth of them. (*Clash* 674)

It is possible for the reader to disbelieve him here. Theon is not particularly self-aware, deceiving himself and misinterpreting others with frequency – as his perception of Jon’s treatment shows. But Theon has certainly experienced a bewildering contradiction in power relations: he is simultaneously the valued heir (at least, so he anticipates) and the rejected child, who was sent away, at once valuable and worthless to his true father, simultaneously cared for and threatened by his foster father.

Our introduction to Theon as a focalizer is in his return – a return that Theon tries to make conform to a dramatic impression:

There was no safe anchorage at Pyke, but Theon Greyjoy wished to look on his father's castle from the sea, to see it as he had seen it last, ten years before, when Robert Baratheon's war galley had borne him away to be a ward of Eddard Stark. On that day he had stood beside the rail, listening to the stroke of the oars and the pounding of the master's drum while he watched Pyke dwindle in the distance. Now he wanted to see it grow larger, to rise from the sea before him.

Obedient to his wishes, the *Myraham* beat her way past the point with her sails snapping and her captain cursing the wind and his crew and the follies of highborn lordlings. (120)

Theon romanticizes his return, and also the people and place he is returning to: while he describes Pyke and the islands in bleak terms (“Drear, dark, forbidding” (ibid.)), there is, evident in all these descriptions, a strength associated with this: “A miserable hard place, in truth ... but my lord father once told me that hard places breed hard men, and hard men rule the world.” (122) There is a nostalgia in him for the Old Way – for the violent past of the Iron Islanders – which speaks to a romanticization of violence:

*Once I would have kept her as a salt wife in truth*¹³⁵ ... *Once. When we still kept the Old Way, lived by the axe instead of the pick, taking what we would, be it wealth, women, or glory. ... War was an ironman's proper trade. The Drowned God had made them to reave and rape, to carve out kingdoms and write their names in fire and blood and song.* (125)

Theon is not alone in this nostalgia. *The World of Ice and Fire*, one of the more objective sources of information about Martin's world, makes much of the legends of reavers, and their importance to the Ironborn, claiming that “many ironborn still yearn to return to what they call the Old Way” (178). It is this ambition that motivates Balon's two rebellions, and after his death Balon's brothers take up that ambition. The brutish and stupid Victarion foresees his own greatness in this restoration:

¹³⁵ As described in *The World of Ice and Fire*, “On the Iron Islands ... a man may have only one ‘rock wife’ ... but any number of ‘salt wives’ ... Salt wives are almost always women and girls captured during raids.” (178)

‘My brother Balon was a great man,’ he said, ‘but I shall do what he could not. The Iron Islands shall be free again, and the Old Way will return. Even Dagon could not do that.’ Almost a hundred years had passed since Dagon Greyjoy sat the Seastone Chair, but the ironborn still told tales of his raids and battles. In Dagon’s day a weak king sat the Iron Throne, his rheumy eyes fixed across the narrow sea where bastards and exiles plotted rebellion. So forth from Pyke Lord Dagon sailed, to make the Sunset sea his own. (*Dance* 832)

The nostalgia is rich in these reminiscences, and one can almost hear the song in Victarion’s recollection:

Sö förth | fröm Pýke | Lörd Dá | gön sáiled,
tö máke | the Sún | sēt séa | hīs ówn.

As they often are, songs are at the heart of a romanticization about which Martin wishes us to be sceptical. We see the love of reaving songs espoused by several of the ironborn, and the presence of such songs, and a certain proclivity for relishing violence in their culture, is evident, for example, during the feast before the Kingsmoot, at which the ironborn captains gather:

Two of Gorold Goodbrother’s sons knocked a table over fighting; Will Humble lost a wager and had to eat his boot; Little Lenwood Tawney fiddled whilst Romny Weaver sang ‘The Bloody Cup’ and ‘Steel Rain’ and other old reaving songs. Qarl the Maid and Eldred Codd danced the finger dance. A roar of laughter went up when one of Eldred’s fingers landed in Ralf the Limper’s wine cup.¹³⁶ (*Feast* 322)

¹³⁶ *The World of Ice and Fire* describes the finger dance as “a game popular amongst the ironborn wherein players spin a throwing axe at one another and attempt to snatch it from the air” (*World* 183), and presents an interesting tale regarding the finger dance: during the upheaval caused by the invasion of the Andals at some undetermined point in Westerosi history, Rognar II, High King of the Iron Islands, was overthrown, and

Afterward the victors could not agree on who should succeed Rognar as king, so it was decided that they would settle the matter by dancing the finger dance... Harras Hoare emerged as victor, at the cost of two fingers. As Harras stump-hand, he ruled the Iron Islands for thirty years. ... Many believe the tale of Harras’s winning his crown by catching an axe to be no more than a singer’s fancy. In truth, Archmaester Haereg suggests that Harras was chosen because he had taken an Andal maiden for his wife, thereby winning the support of her father and many other powerful Andal lords. (*ibid.*)

True or false, the tale of Harras’s finger dance is an interesting example of how the ironborn perceive their own history: rife with individual men whose individual acts of courage and skill with arms shaped the Iron Islands. That Martin offers an almost deflating alternative in the form of a political marriage is just another in a long line of instances that undercut the more glorious tale.

A certain romanticization of the martial is evident throughout the Seven Kingdoms, but there is certainly a nearly unexamined respect for violence that is particular to the Iron Islanders. Maester Yandel notes of Dalton Greyjoy, known as the Red Kraken, whose success in war and unwillingness to make peace ultimately brought a slaughter down upon the Islands:

In other lands, a lord who brought such a fate upon his house and people would be justly reviled, but such is the nature of the ironborn of the isles that the Red Kraken is revered amongst them to this day and counted as one of their great heroes.
(*World* 190)

While we see nothing of Theon's own life on Pyke before his time as a ward, he is evidently influenced by this reverence for brutality. The first time that he is mentioned in the novels, he is handing Eddard Stark his sword, and in the second, making a joke of the execution, and the body of the condemned man:

The head bounced off a thick root and rolled. It came up near Greyjoy's feet. Theon was a lean, dark youth of nineteen who found everything amusing. He laughed, put his boot on the head, and kicked it away. (*Game* 15)

He is quick to move to kill the direwolf pups, and eager for war. He is noted frequently as smiling often ("He smiled a lot, as if the world were a secret joke that only he was clever enough to understand" (298)), often in spite of, or even in light of, violence:

The guardsmen had a strange, pale look to their faces as they took in the scene of slaughter. They eyed the wolves uncertainly, and when Summer returned to Hali's corpse to feed, Joseth dropped his knife and scrambled for the bush, heaving. Even Maester Luwin seemed shocked as he stepped from behind a tree ... Theon Greyjoy stood beside a sentinel tree, his bow in hand. He was smiling. Ever smiling. 'A dead enemy is a thing of beauty,' he announced. (407)

Callous, arrogant, and above all, possessed of a deep sense of entitlement, Theon greets the coming war as an opportunity to rise to the power that he feels he is destined for. It is for this that he returns: Robb sends him to treat with his father, Balon, to offer him a crown in exchange for his allegiance, something which Theon sees as his own victory, and a promise

of his own future rule. Sailing toward Pyke, he looks upon the comet which so many other characters have seen as portents of their own destiny, thinking, “*It is my comet*” (*Clash* 122):

This is the season ... the season, the year, the day, and I am the man. He smiled crookedly, wondering what his father would say when Theon told him that he, the last-born, babe and hostage, *he* had succeeded where Lord Balon himself had failed. (125)

Theon’s greeting on Pyke is a shock to him: he is unknown, and uncelebrated. He is humiliated by his uncle, learns that he may be disinherited of Pyke in favour of his sister, and is emasculated and rejected by his father:

‘Did Ned Stark dress you like that? ... Was it his pleasure to garb you in velvets and silks and make you his own sweet daughter? ... That bauble around your neck – was it bought with gold or iron?’

Theon touched the gold chain. He had forgotten. *It has been so long ...* In the Old Way, women might decorate themselves with ornaments bought with coin, but a warrior wore only the jewelry he took off the corpses of enemies slain by his own hand. *Paying the iron price*, it was called. ...

‘The gold,’ Theon admitted.

His father slid his fingers under the necklace and gave it a yank so hard it was like to take Theon’s head off, had the chain not snapped first. ... ‘I will not have my son bedeck himself like a whore.’ (135)

This gendered humiliation by his father and his later sexual humiliation by his sister are clearly immensely painful, particularly because of Theon’s own hatred of women. True to the historical period the series emulates, misogyny is rife in *Song*. Theon is not particularly outstanding in his possessive and contemptuous views and treatment of women, but he is one of the few focal characters in whom this trait is foregrounded extensively. We have already heard his vulgar remarks about Kyra and Bessa of the Smoking Log, and witnessed his treatment of the daughter of the captain of the *Myraham* (her name is never important enough to Theon to appear in the text), and we will soon have cause to examine how his views and treatment of women are all the more scornful as he feels weakened.

Balon is offended by Robb's offer of an allegiance, and reveals his own intentions: to attack the North. Theon, already an outcast at his own homecoming, is given only a small command, to accomplish a task he finds shameful: harrying the Stoney Shore. We are offered here a brief glimpse at the reaving of the Iron Islanders, who have ravaged a fishing village:

The men had been put to the sword, all but a handful that Theon had allowed to flee to bring the word to Torrhen's Square. Their wives and daughters had been claimed for salt wives, those who were young and fair. The crones and the ugly ones had simply been raped and killed, or taken for thralls if they had useful skills and did not seem like to cause trouble. (395)

The description is almost matter-of-fact, and very different from the scenes of destruction and slaughter witnessed by, for example, Arya, which form the backdrop to much of *A Clash of Kings*. In fact, the use of the passive voice, which defines this description, is a fascinating strategy. The absence of any named killers, abductors, and rapists, leaves the reader without any clear target for outrage, beyond the massed and indistinct body of ironborn reavers. It is, furthermore, unclear whether Theon himself engages in rape. His distance from the rest of his men's actions, and his apparent distaste for the whole business – not to mention his later, punitive response to Palla's rape by his men – leaves it entirely believable that he did not, but his level of complicity is elided by the absence of any perpetrators from this description. Theon acknowledges only two actions in the active voice: he allowed a handful of men to flee, and he “had planned that attack” (ibid.).

The passive voice divorces these atrocities from the men committing them: their violence is removed from them and takes on a life of its own, proceeding from the battlefield, not the combatants. The effect is striking, and not limited to this incident. Jaime considers the character of the Bolton captain Steelshanks Walton, and what is striking is not his monstrosity, but its ordinariness:

Jaime had served with his sort all his life. Men like Walton would kill at their lord's command, rape when their blood was up after battle, and plunder whenever they could, but once the war was done they would go back to their homes, trade their

spears for hoes, wed their neighbours' daughters, and raise a pack of squalling children (*Storm 2: 35*)

This is a phenomenon that will become uncomfortably prevalent in *Song*, with the most horrific actions of men in war often being described as inevitable, and ordinary: they rape when their blood is up, as though sexual violence is a biological fact. During the Battle of the Blackwater, Cersei warns Sansa of what will occur if the city is sacked, in shockingly cold terms, describing atrocities of war as banal:

most of my guests are in for a bit of rape, I'd say. And you should never rule out mutilation, torture, and murder at times like these (*Clash 618*)

We are intended to be horrified in both cases: to be appalled by the dispassionate tones in which horrific violence is discussed by characters for whom it is normalized. There is a similar dynamic occurring in the descriptions of the attacks on the Stoney Shore.

Relayed in the same chapter is the Ironborn's victory over, and massacre of, a company of soldiers led – to Theon's surprise – by a man he knows: Benfred Tallhart. This company, known as the Wild Hares, enjoy an extremely brief, but significant existence in the novels. They are first brought to our attention by Leobald Tallhart, Benfred's uncle, when the Stark bannermen gather at Winterfell for the harvest feast:

Benfred has raised his own company of lances. Boys, none older than nineteen years, but every one thinks he's another young wolf.¹³⁷ When I told them they were only young rabbits, they laughed at me. Now they call themselves the Wild Hares and gallop about the country with rabbitskins tied to the end of their lances, singing songs of chivalry. (189)

The Wild Hares are later sent by Leobald Tallhart to deal with what they believe to be a small group of reavers on the Stony Shore. In their naive confidence and hunger for glory, the Wild Hares fail to send out scouts, and “joking and even *singing* as they'd come on”, are easily cut down by Theon's men.

¹³⁷ The “young wolf” is a common nickname for Robb Stark, usually a term of admiration, in light of his reputation as a brave warrior and successful commander.

As foolish as the Wild Hares seem, there is a sadness to this end, much like the sadness which surrounds the Brotherhood without Banners. We are likely to feel a sense of sorrow at this death of chivalry. The song they sang, whichever it was, lingers a little longer over the scene, and Dagmar Cleftjaw's claim that "It was a good song, and they sang it bravely" seems more reverent than perhaps he intends (396). The romance of these warriors, however foolish and doomed, is something we are likely to mourn. And we may mourn, too, the fact that Theon fails to see it:

He kicked at Benfred's fallen banner, clutched in the dead hand of the squire who'd borne it. A rabbitskin had been tied below the flag. *Why rabbitskins?* he had meant to ask, but being spat on had made him forget his questions. (395)

Theon has slipped far from the sense of chivalry that defines the Wild Hares, and this forgetting – caused by his all-too-frequent reactive outrage – seems emblematic of that fall.

We begin to see in Theon a simultaneous pride and shame in his own role in this war on the North: he takes credit for the planning of the attack, but nevertheless begins to shrug off the blame for it. He avoids taking part in Benfred's execution: when the priest, Aeron Damphair, demands that he be given to the Drowned God – that is to say, that he be drowned in sea water – he tells Theon, "You command here. The offering should come from you." Theon dismisses this, and "stalk[s] off in the other direction" (394), an act of cowardice, rather than rebellion. Of the attack on the fishing village, we are told "He did not like the taste of any of this, but what choice did he have?" (395) This will become an important refrain: his insistence (to himself) that he has no choice but to act as he does, that he is not to blame for his violent actions against others. Theon is incapable, even, of acknowledging his shame; of realizing that the absence of chivalry from this battle affects him, "remembering how elated he'd felt after the Whispering Wood, and wondering why this did not taste as sweet." (ibid.) The same shame, and inability to acknowledge it, will continue even later, when, saved from the noose

by the death of Ser Rodrik, his former master at arms, he cannot recognize his own grief and guilt: “*I am saved*, Theon thought. So why did he feel so empty? This was victory, sweet victory, the deliverance he had prayed for.” (678)

Feeling this absence, despite Dagmer Cleftjaw’s insistence that the victory should please him, Theon’s response is to further escalate his assault against the Starks, planning to capture Winterfell. Unsurprisingly, his attempt to win over the Cleftjaw, a reaver great in legend, draws on the reaving songs which form such an important part of his nostalgia, and that of the Ironborn:

‘...I mean to do a deed that the harpers will sing of for a thousand years.’

He knew that would give Dagmer pause. A singer had made a song about the axe that cracked his jaw in half, and the old man loved to hear it. Whenever he was in his cups he would call for a reaving song, something loud and stormy that told of dead heroes and deeds of wild valor. *His hair is white and his teeth are rotten, but he still has a taste for glory.* (398)

With a series of tricks that are nothing if not clever, Theon captures Winterfell with thirty men, and names himself Prince of Winterfell, but with so few men, his position rapidly deteriorates: his victory – told not from Theon’s perspective, but from that of the conquered Bran – is followed by a series of chapters in which Theon steadily loses control, and turns to more and more violent means of regaining it.

Theon’s complete dearth of empathy for the victims of his actions, and his failure to acknowledge his own part in their suffering, escalates further at Winterfell:

Outside, he heard sobbing as the castle folk were pulled from their beds and driven into the yard. *I’ll give them reason to sob. I’ve used them gently, and this is how they repay me.* He’d even had two of his own men whipped bloody for raping that kennel girl, to show them he meant to be just. *They still blame me for the rape, though. And the rest.* He deemed that unfair. Mikken had killed himself with his mouth¹³⁸, just as Benfred had. As for Chayle, he had to give *someone* to the Drowned God, his men expected it. ‘I bear you no ill will,’ he’d told the septon before they threw him down the well, ‘but you and your

¹³⁸ Mikken, the blacksmith at Winterfell, is killed by Stygg for refusing to yield, and insulting the Ironborn host. (*Clash* 491)

gods have no place here now.’ You’d think the others might be grateful he hadn’t chosen one of them, but no. (491)

This absurd failure to take responsibility becomes nearly constant as Theon loses grip on the castle, and Theon’s tenuous control over his own actions degrades rapidly. When Bran and Rickon escape, Reek, a former prisoner of Winterfell, who has come to serve Theon, suggests that he flay the castle folk to learn their location, and Theon is initially outraged:

‘There will be no flaying in the north so long as I rule in Winterfell,’
Theon said loudly. *I am your only protection against the likes of him,*
he wanted to scream. (530)

Yet by the end of the chapter, Theon will allow Reek to flay the corpses of the miller’s sons, so that he can seem to have recaptured the Stark boys.¹³⁹ It is an act of desperation; a feigned act of retribution to hold out against the defiance of Winterfell. On the one hand, it is an act driven by anger – another compulsive reaction to a slight – but on the other hand, it is an attempt to hold onto power by avoiding being seen as powerless: “*It is better to be seen as cruel than foolish*” (531), he thinks, and “*It is better to be feared than laughed at*” (536). In this display of bodies the use of spectacular violence as a means to maintain power is clear.

Despite his consideration of the relationship between cruelty, fear, and power, Theon’s thoughts are frequently erratic, perhaps because his education by the Starks has left him with a conflicting view of the purpose of mercy: when Maester Luwin counsels him to be merciful when he finds Bran and Rickon, he thinks,

Mercy... There’s a bloody trap. Too much and they call you weak, too little and you’re monstrous. Yet the maester had given him good counsel, he knew. His father thought only in terms of conquest, but what good was it to take a kingdom if you could not hold it? (532)

Of course, Theon cannot hold the castle, and within a few hours of promising mercy, he dismisses it, something which will seem almost ironic later in the novel, when, plagued by

¹³⁹ The reader is initially given to believe that Bran and Rickon have, in fact, been recaptured, killed, and flayed, and it will be several chapters before we are made aware of Theon’s deception, and before Bran, one of the novels’ principle focalizers, returns to the text.

nightmares, he thinks, so frequently, begging the shades of those he has murdered, “*Mercy... Mercy, mercy ... Oh, mercy, mercy.*” (585)

Among the nightmares that plague Theon during his time at Winterfell is a particularly symbolically charged dream about the miller’s wife, who is killed along with the miller’s sons:

Theon had forgotten her name, but he remembered her body, soft pillowy breasts and stretch marks on her belly, the way she clawed his back when he fucked her. Last night in his dream he had been in bed with her once again, but this time she had teeth above *and* below, and she tore out his throat even as she was gnawing off his manhood. (586)

This fear of emasculation by a woman is a powerful display of his fear of weakness and failure. Power, especially sexual power, over the women around him – particularly the smallfolk, who are so powerless within the feudal system of the Seven Kingdoms – is the easiest confirmation of his position that Theon can achieve, and as he feels his position slipping at Winterfell, he responds by abusing Kyra, whom he brings into the castle as a ‘bedwarmer’.

Theon himself claims that Kyra came to him “wet and eager”, and describes her coital “gasps and giggles”, but given Theon’s unreliability as a narrator, especially regarding others’ perceptions of him, the reader is undoubtedly intended to be sceptical about any supposed consent by Kyra. Our familiarity with the situation of women across Westeros during this war, furthermore, leaves no room for belief that Kyra has any choice but to submit to Theon. We must dismiss any idea that consent takes place here.¹⁴⁰ It is, in fact, quite obviously irrelevant to Theon. Her only reported words to Theon in *A Clash of Kings* are “M’lord?” (526) and

¹⁴⁰ Kyra’s rape is never named as such in the text, nor is that of Cersei or Daenerys. This is not Martin’s own failure, but the failure of the world that he is creating, and a failure that he is constantly engaging with throughout the text. There is perhaps no better indication of this than in those rare moments of wholehearted and active consent by female characters. These are among the happiest sections of the text: Daenerys’s sexual relationship with Daario Naharis; Ygritte’s seduction of Jon Snow; the playful flirtation between Sigorn and Alys. The presence of these women who take control of their own bodies and desires is not anomalous: these empowered women are in conversation with Martin’s disempowered women, and their consent reveals the rape that is so frequent elsewhere in the text.

descriptions of her actions, let alone any indication of an internal life, are almost completely absent: she is objectified totally by Theon's perspective.

Theon turns to her as a sex object partly as a means of relief from his feelings of guilt and fear ("He'd roll Kyra on her back and fuck her again, that ought to banish these phantoms." (ibid.)), but his treatment and perception of her reflects not only a desire for sexual gratification, but a desire for a feeling of power. That power manifests itself, unsurprisingly, in sexual violence. After one particularly vivid, and possibly prescient¹⁴¹ nightmare, Theon is "ashamed of his panic", and his response is to rape Kyra:

He sent for Kyra, kicked shut the door, climbed on top of her, and fucked the wench with a fury he'd never known was in him. By the time he finished, she was sobbing, her neck and breasts covered with bruises and bite marks. Theon shoved her from the bed and threw her a blanket. 'Get out.' (592)

Kyra becomes a mere vessel for his desire and rage, her sole action here ("she was sobbing") registered as a reflection of his anger; it is relevant to Theon only in that it reveals his fury to him. She is presented as devoid of agency; she is an object, in the profoundest sense, upon which Theon performs power.

This absence of agency places Kyra in direct opposition to Theon's sister Asha. As a woman of almost unprecedentedly independent will, Asha represents a particular threat to Theon, in a manner which directly reflects Asha's threat to the patriarchal status quo of Westeros, and the Iron Islands in particular. The possibility that Asha might inherit her father's rule – though this will prove false¹⁴² – is a radical one: an affront to the right of male primogeniture which is the basis of Theon's power, and of the political system that holds in most of Westeros. Her initial deception of Theon, when she pretends to be Esgrid and flirts

¹⁴¹ This nightmare, in which Theon finds himself at a feast with dead men, contains imagery, such as the vision of Lyanna Stark wearing "a crown of pale blue roses" (*Clash* 591), which intersects with our previous glimpses (through Eddard), at the secret surrounding Lyanna's death. Additionally, Robb's appearance, with Grey Wind, seems to presage his death at the Red Wedding. There is a hint, then, of something supernatural at play in this nightmare.

¹⁴² Asha is rejected at the Kingsmoot – the traditional election of the new king which is revived after Balon's death – largely because of her sex.

with him, manipulates Theon's sexual desire – an aspect of him which has hitherto reflected only his power over women – rendering it perverse, symbolically corrupting his masculinity. Her constant assertion that she is wedded to her axe, and that her dagger is her “suckling babe” (288) undermines the traditional gender roles by which Theon intends to hold power over her. Asha is a constant radical presence, an offense to the whole patriarchal system that Theon depends upon: she performs traditionally male activities, she is open about her own sexual desire, making her own sexual advances, and refusing (violently if need be) the advances of men around her. She is, to Theon, “unnatural” (529), and a threat.

Theon's problem is not, of course, Asha, but rather his own ambition, which is thwarted by political circumstances, and his inability to win power by any means other than violence and sex. He fails to win the respect that he believes he has earned – and believes for good reason, since he acts in ways which afford others respect, in all the ways which afford men respect in this world:

He'd led men in war, hunted with a king, won honor in tourney
melees, ridden with Brynden Blackfish and Greatjon Umber, fought in
the Whispering Wood, bedded more girls than he could name, and yet
his uncle was treating him as though he were still a child of ten. (130)

He sees himself as being owed power, and then denied it – a belief which is repulsive, but understandable.

Theon's betrayal of the Starks leads him into a trap: to hold Winterfell, he must hold the Stark boys. When the Stark boys disappear, he must *seem* to have caught them, and so, with the help of Reek, he kills the Miller's children, and passes them off as Bran and Rickon. Then, to hide that, he has Reek murder the men who helped them. Then, so that he can be seen to have control over the castle, he must have justice for these murders, and so he executes Farlen, as has been discussed.¹⁴³ Every action is motivated by the need to keep control, and marked by a lack of control: in his dreams, he tells the corpses of the boys, “This

¹⁴³ See p. 38

was never what I wanted ... They gave me no choice” (*Clash* 586); he wants to scream at Farlen, “*I had no choice*” (587); he asks Maester Luwin, “What choice have they left me?” (671). Steadily, and unintentionally, he gives control to Reek, finally giving his life into the man’s hands when he sends him to find men to fight for him.

When at last he is inevitably surrounded by Ser Rodrik Cassel’s forces, Theon’s final, desperate (and futile) attempt to keep control is a poetic one: having been a hostage, he takes a hostage himself, threatening to hang Beth Cassel if Rodrik does not disperse. It is here that Theon’s revelation – that his own symbolic noose had chafed him raw¹⁴⁴ – occurs, and it is coupled with the knowledge of his father’s disregard for him: “Had it been Theon with a noose around his neck and Lord Balon commanding the army without, the warhorns would already have sounded the attack, he had no doubt.” (675-676) Theon realizes also that Ser Rodrik will attack, regardless, and that the gesture is ultimately futile: “*If I hang the girl, the northmen will attack at once ... If I do not hang her, they will know my threats are empty ... There is no way out, none.*” (676)

Maester Luwin offers him a way out – taking the black, which offers him a clean slate, and an end to his spiral of betrayals: “*A black cloak can’t be turned. I’d be as good as any man...*” (677) This is hope of a kind of moral renewal: the Night’s Watch, who are fighting to protect the realm, rather than fighting for power, stands at least in principle, outside of the kinds of power structures which have resulted in Theon’s toxic way of being. The order is uniquely righteous, at least in its enterprise, if not its membership. Theon’s hopes for the Night’s Watch are base – hopes of rising high, of commanding a ship, of hunting, and of wildling women (*ibid.*) – but the reader will see other possibilities. For all the criminals in the Night’s Watch, many of the men whom we have seen in positions of power – Jeor Mormont, Maester Aemon, Qhorin Halfhand, Donal Noye – are exemplary leaders, who command well, and serve the good of the realm. At the time of Theon’s fall, the reader’s previous encounter

¹⁴⁴ See p. 101.

with the Night's Watch saw Squire Dalbridge giving his life to give Qhorin's men time to escape and bring warning to the Wall (563) – an act of courage which will shortly be echoed in the actions of Ebben, Stonesnake, and Qhorin himself, who all die courageously in the flight through the Skirling Pass (690-691; 697). Theon sees in the Night's Watch the chance to win power, but the reader will see his chance of redemption.

Both hopes are dashed with the reappearance of Reek and a host of Dreadfort men, and yet more poetically violent betrayal. Ser Rodrik, the stalwart castellan of Winterfell, as Reek tells Theon, “thought us friends. A common mistake. When the old fool gave me his hand, I took half his arm instead.” (*Clash* 679) As has already been discussed, the hands are frequently made symbolically identical with the self,¹⁴⁵ and in the case of Ser Rodrik, the amputation of an arm is made identical with his death – we are given no other cause. It is the very act of betrayal – this vile and violent refusal of the hand of friendship – that kills him. Reek reveals himself to be Ramsay Bolton, and his men turn on Theon, razing Winterfell.

Over the course of *A Clash of Kings*, Theon is monstrous, and his claim that he has no choice is obviously an absurd act of self-deception. But his actions correspond to the pattern that we have seen in the rest of this world, and so they are at least somewhat understandable. Violence is a means to power, and so, as he loses control, Theon escalates violence, mimicking the displays that the world has accustomed him to. He fails, his actions placing him instead in Ramsay's power. He reappears in *A Dance with Dragons*, a broken, maimed man, under the inherited name – taken up even as chapter titles – “Reek”.

Ramsay Bolton is a bogeyman – or, in the style of Martin's characters, we might call him a ‘snark’.¹⁴⁶ He is a monster almost too horrifying to believe in, in a way that almost no other character in *Song* is. Beyond understanding and beyond redemption, he stands out in a series

¹⁴⁵ See pp. 88-89.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Snarks’ are never described in the text, but are clearly (fictional) monsters from children's stories in the Seven Kingdoms. The name is presumably a reference to the Carrollian monster.

which draws the reader to sympathize with the likes of Theon, Jaime, Cersei, and Victarion. Amidst murderers, torturers, cannibals and rapists, Ramsay is the worst of the lot: sadistic and psychopathic. With the exception, perhaps, of Gregor Clegane or Joffrey Baratheon, he is the most heartily loathed of all Martin's characters. Even before direct accounts of his atrocities appear in *Song*, rumours of his monstrosity abound, and he is almost universally mistrusted. As his nature reveals itself over the course of the novels, he remains beyond the King's Justice only because of the extraordinary circumstances of the war, and his father's need for an heir.

That Ramsay is an exceptional case makes him an important point of study: while most other characters are presented as having some understandable – or at least, interpretable – motivation, Ramsay appears in every way an aberration. His actions are never conducted in service of a liege, nor do they appear to serve any simple ambition. He may act in the name of one king or another, or under the instruction of his father, but none of his actions seems to correspond to any direct motive. On the surface, he appears simply a Martinian twist: a case of what largely appears to be a gritty, realist fantasy slipping closer to the horror genre that Martin loves – as the text frequently does. Yet I would argue that there is a deeper significance to Ramsay's actions than merely psychopathy: like Theon's, his actions reflect – although they never actually serve – Ramsay's need to legitimize himself in the face of Westerosi power structures, and in presenting us with his madness, Martin shows us, as if in a carnival mirror, the violence and excess of those power structures.

Ramsay first appears in *A Clash of Kings* as an ambiguous threat to the lands of Lady Donella Hornwood, the widow of a Stark bannerman killed at the Battle of the Greenfork. With Lord Hornwood's death, and the departure of the Hornwood men to fight in the war, Hornwood itself is left vulnerable, and Lady Hornwood fears that "Bolton's bastard" may intend to take her lands. Lady Hornwood speaks of "tales, things I can scarcely believe", that Ramsay and his servant Reek hunt "not for deer" (185) – a reference which Bran, our focalizer for this chapter, does not seem to understand, which makes Ramsay seem all the

more snarkish. Yet the most pressing threat to her person in this chapter is not Ramsay himself, but the host of bannermen come to Winterfell.

The scene is a deeply discomfiting one, both for the reader, and for Bran, the naive and distracted focaliser of the chapter. While the chief purpose of the meeting at Winterfell is to discuss the preparations for Winter, each of the Lords who appear vies for Lady Hornwood's land, less ominously than Ramsay, perhaps, but no less greedily. As much as they profess concern for Lady Hornwood's safety, it is nevertheless her land and her body which provide the objects of their desire: Lord Wyman Manderly presses his case on the grounds that it is "[p]ast time [he] took another wife" (183), while Mors Umber lewdly speaks of "a cure for grief under [his] furs" (188). Even Leobald Tallheart, who makes no attempt to marry Lady Hornwood, seeks to send his son to become heir to the Hornwood lands (190). This is a galling reminder of the position of women as commodity in Westeros. Lady Hornwood, childless and widowed (in other words, without a male relative to control her), becomes the property of her feudal lord. Her position is profoundly powerless: she expresses distaste at the prospect of becoming the sexual property of any of these men, but ultimately "shall wed again, if His Grace commands it" (185).¹⁴⁷

His Grace never does command it: Ramsay seizes Lady Hornwood on her return from the feast, and forces her into marriage, whereupon Lord Manderly seizes her castle, supposedly to protect her lands from the Boltons (319). Ramsay's actions are fantastically evil, a combination of gothic and Grimm:

After their wedding, the Bastard had locked her in a tower and neglected to feed her. Bran had heard men saying that when Ser

¹⁴⁷ The interaction is simultaneously grotesque and humorous: the abuses of marriage, and of sexual relations in marriage, to which she must consent (and which Martin examines with a more serious eye in the marriage of Cersei and Robert), are rendered strange in the eyes of the eight-year old focalizer, who is steadily being initiated into lordship through these meetings:

'...Mors Crowfood is a drunken brute, and older than my father. As for my noble cousin of Manderly, my lord's bed is not large enough to hold one of his majesty, and I am surely too small and frail to lie beneath him.'

Bran knew that men slept on top of women when they shared a bed. Sleeping under Lord Manderly would be like sleeping under a fallen horse, he imagined. (*Clash* 185)

Rodrik had smashed down the door he found her dead with her mouth all bloody and her fingers chewed off. (384)

Ramsay seems more fairytale villain than the kind of realistic characters that Martin has hitherto written, but Martin's choice to couple the Bastard's actions with the grasping of other lords, and in particular Wyman Manderly, who takes Lady Hornwood's castle in the aftermath, places this extraordinary monster within the context of very ordinary monstrosity. His treatment of Lady Hornwood may be a gross breach of Westerosi law, but it reflects the accepted actions of Robb's bannermen.

A great deal of Ramsay's actions reflect ordinary practice for the nobility of the Seven Kingdoms. Infamously (as implied by Lady Hornwood), he hunts women, whom he flays, rapes, and kills (in variable order), and this seems a warped reflection of the ordinary hunt as enjoyed by others – memorably King Robert. At one point, reflecting on this, Theon thinks, “Lord Ramsay loved the chase and preferred to hunt two-legged prey” (*Dance* 163), framing his perversion – rhetorically – as simply a *preference* within the scope of ordinary noble behaviour. This is certainly not how anyone views his behaviour, but the implied reflection is still present.

The parallels to ordinary nobility are more extensive in the relationship between Ramsay and “Reek”. This relationship is one that is *performed*, the players hardly mattering and often changing. The first Reek – the man who Ramsay once claims was born Heke (*Clash* 490) – was a servant at the Dreadfort who suffered from some sickness which caused him to stink, no matter how often he bathed (*Dance* 428), an affliction which gives him his name.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Roose Bolton describes the malady's origins in interesting terms:

A curse, the smallfolk said. The gods had made him stink so that men would know his soul was rotting. My old maester insisted it was a sign of sickness, yet the boy was otherwise as strong as a young bull. (*Dance* 428)

The tension between the smallfolk's belief in magic and the maesters' science, is particularly well illustrated in this description. There *is* magic in Martin's world, but the world has been written in such a way that the reader is always sceptical of magical explanations when there are mundane explanations available. Roose implies (with his condescending tone) that he doubts the smallfolk's explanation, but he also gives us reason to doubt the maester's explanation. Still, the reader will believe the odour to be mundane in origin.

Beth Kozinsky notes that Martin critiques

When Ramsay's mother demanded a servant for her son, Roose tells Theon, he sent Reek as a joke, but "he and Ramsay became inseparable. I do wonder, though ... was it Ramsay who corrupted Reek or Reek Ramsay?" (ibid.) The word 'inseparable' is suggestive here. Their relationship is one of servitude and mastery, one which by nature requires both: without a Reek in service, Ramsay is no master – his power relies on dominion over the servant. After 'Heke' dies, Ramsay's actions serve to ensure the continuation of that same relationship. When Ser Rodrik, coming to Lady Hornwood's aid, catches Ramsay and Reek (in the midst of one of their hunts), Ramsay escapes death by taking up Reek's identity – specifically, by taking up the stench: he tricks Reek into wearing his clothes, and smears himself with the excrement of their victim, so that Reek is killed as Ramsay, and Ramsay imprisoned as Reek (*Clash* 679). Ramsay-as-Reek then performs the role of servant to Theon, drawing him into a relationship that resembles his own relationship with the original Reek. Ramsay-as-Reek corrupts Theon-as-Master (not that Theon is not perfectly capable of corrupting himself) – a fall which is signified in a hunt for two-legged prey (for Bran and Rickon, ending in the murder of the miller's sons) which is not, like Ramsay's other hunts, an act of sexual sadism, but nevertheless ends with the flaying of which Ramsay and Reek are so particularly fond.¹⁴⁹ It is as though Ramsay draws Theon into their relationship by making a Ramsay out of Theon.

the medieval notion that 'the body somehow reflects the status of the soul'. For a medieval reader, a misshapen exterior reveals the corruption of the interior, and Martin certainly seems to play upon such expectations with characters like the dwarf, Tyrion. (170)

Kozinsky is speaking here quite particularly of disability, disfigurement, amputation, and injury; not of illness. She is careful to distinguish between maimed bodies and corrupt bodies: "a distinction needs to be made between disfigurement and disease for Martin" (177), she claims. She points to the decomposition of Tywin Lannister's corpse, and the festering of Victarion's wounded hand, which is nursed along with his fratricidal urges, suggesting that while disabled bodies are not moralized, corrupt bodies are. There is something similar occurring in the disease of Yezzan zo Qaggaz, who is "rotting from the inside out" (*Dance* 628) – though this description is an exaggeration, the affliction is closely associated with his sexual perversion.

In short, this conflicting diagnosis of Reek's condition is a part of a complex discussion of bodily and moral corruption throughout the text.

¹⁴⁹ Sexual violence *is* embroiled in the murder of the miller's boys, though only in Theon's mind. As discussed earlier, Theon is haunted after the murder by nightmares, including that of being castrated by the vagina dentata of the miller's wife – a result of the confusion between the violence of the murder and his former sexual relations with her (which were probably consensual – insofar as any relationship across such a divide of power can be consensual).

When, after Theon finally loses all hope of holding Winterfell, Ramsay-as-Reek returns to ‘rescue’ Theon, he reveals himself, and destroys the castle. Theon disappears from the text for an extended time: we hear in *A Storm of Swords* that Theon is prisoner at the Dreadfort, being flayed alive by Ramsay, and in *A Feast for Crows* he is widely presumed dead.¹⁵⁰ After over two thousand pages of the tale, a character named Reek appears: a tortured man, and degraded, locked in a cell, starved, eating rats, and terrified of Lord Ramsay. Some of his memories hint at his identity, but it is Arnolf Karstark who identifies him to the reader:

‘Him? Can it be? Stark’s ward. Smiling, always smiling.’
‘He smiles less often now,’ Lord Ramsay confessed. ‘I may have broken some of his pretty white teeth.’ (*Dance* 167)

Ramsay has attempted to strip Theon of that identity, forcing him into the performance of Reek.

It is a performance which Theon partly internalizes. When he negotiates with the ironborn at Moat Cailin we are told, “‘I am ironborn,’ Reek answered, lying” (256) – his

¹⁵⁰ We learn that Theon is imprisoned when Roose Bolton offers a piece of his skin to Catelyn as a token of revenge, which recalls the earlier point of offered heads:

‘The skin from the little finger of Theon Greyjoy’s left hand. My son is cruel, I confess it. And yet ... what is a little skin, against the lives of two young princes? You were their mother, my lady. May I offer you this ... small token of revenge?’

Part of Catelyn wanted to clutch the grisly trophy to her heart, but she made herself resist. ‘Put it away. Please.’

‘Flaying Theon will not bring my brothers back,’ Robb said. ‘I want his head, not his skin.’ (*Storm 2*: 120)

The distinction being made here is not between one body part and the other, but between appropriate justice and inappropriate justice (torture). The appropriate fate of Theon is discussed by Robb and his bannermen (most vocally Roose), and the conversation serves as an interesting parallel to the discussion (examined on p. 35) of the fate of Rickard Karstark:

‘He is Balon Greyjoy’s only living son ... and now rightful King of the Iron Islands. A captive king has great value as a hostage.’

‘Hostage?’ The word raised Catelyn’s heckles. Hostages were oft exchanged. ‘Lord Bolton, I hope you are not suggesting that we *free* the man who killed my sons.’

‘Whoever wins the Seastone Chair will want Theon Greyjoy dead,’ Bolton pointed out. ‘Even in chains, he has a better claim than any of his uncles. Hold him, I say, and demand concessions from the ironborn as the price of his execution.’

Rob considered that reluctantly, but in the end he nodded. ‘Yes. Very well. Keep him alive, then. For the present.’ (*Storm 2*: 120-121)

While Robb refuses to keep Rickard Karstark (who murdered two boy hostages) in order to *threaten* his heir with his death, he is persuaded to keep Theon Greyjoy (who also murdered two boy hostages) in order to *offer* his death.

identity as Theon is now so distant from him that he regards it as a falsehood. This thought is reflected in the threatening words of Ramsay:

Ramsay Bolton turned his smile on Reek. He clasped him by the back of the head, pulled his face close, kissed him on the cheek and whispered, ‘My old friend Reek. Did they really take you for their prince? What bloody fools, these ironmen. The gods are laughing.’¹⁵¹
(263)

It is a threat – a repetition of a threat that Theon has clearly heard before: Ramsay polices his identity, constantly reinforcing the idea that he is *Reek* and *not* Theon. When Big and Little Walder are sent by Ramsay to fetch him, the first question he is asked is, “Do you remember who you are?” (162), a question to which the answer is Reek, not Theon.¹⁵² The reader realizes that the failure to remember who he is – which is in fact the failure to *forget* who he is and the failure to let his relationship with Ramsay define him – has previously resulted in punishment: “*remember who you are, and no more harm will come to you*”, he remembers Ramsay telling him (164). When he is treated as Theon, his fear is palpable: “Please, m’lord, m’lady, there’s been some mistake. ... I’m not him, I’m not the turncloak, he died at Winterfell.” (433) When Theon’s memories resurface, he tries to bury them, denying his

¹⁵¹ The phrase “turned his smile on Reek” suggests a weapon, and this is deliberate: Ramsay’s smiles are usually precursors to violence, and the show of physical affection that proceeds from this smile is one that serves as warning to the reader, as it does to Theon. It is interesting that Ramsay and Theon both smile frequently, and not kindly.

¹⁵² Big and Little Walder, who present this question, were formerly fostered by the Starks, come to serve the Boltons, but Big Walder becomes far less monstrous than his cousin:

Little Walder had become Lord Ramsay’s best boy and grew more like him every day, but the smaller Frey was made of different stuff and seldom took part in his cousin’s games and cruelties. (*Dance* 421)

There is a tentative kindness present in the way Big Walder treats others, most particularly Theon-as-Reek, who is unafraid to initiate conversation with him, when he is afraid of all others (422). He is not particularly heroic, nor particularly moral; he never objects to the cruelty of his cousin, but the contrast between the two is significant.

Big and Little Walder are distinguished in terms of size, but it is an old joke: while Little Walder is younger, he is bigger than Big Walder. When discussing Big Walder’s bullying of Hodor, Osha tells Bran, “The big one they call little, it comes to me he’s well named. Big outside, little inside, and mean down to the bones.” (*Clash* 187) His cruelty is attributed to a smallness of heart and mind – in any case, to weakness. There is nothing radical in this, but because we see him under the care of the Boltons, as squire (and thus a future knight), and not simply as a child, we sense the possibility of the man in him – a man not unlike Ramsay. His littleness thus speaks to a littleness in Ramsay, and all the others like him.

identity “*No, no. Not mine, he was not mine, Reek never had a horse*” (258) He is unable to do so, and this causes him distress:

We are ironborn, he thought, with a sudden flash of pride, and for half a heartbeat he was a prince again, Lord Balon’s son, the blood of Pyke. Even thinking was dangerous, though. He had to remember his name. *Reek, my name is Reek, it rhymes with weak.* (262)

Throughout his chapters, Theon-as-Reek repeats that sentence, with varying rhymes, often suggestive: “it rhymes with bleak” (164), “meek” (167), “squeak” (257), “freak” (263), “wreak” (428), “shriek” (489).

These words – whether thought or spoken – are clearly not his own: the playful phrasing is evidently Ramsay’s. One is reminded of Elaine Scarry’s description of the voice of the tortured prisoner: “even this voice, the sounds I am making, no longer form my words but the words of another” (35). In fact, even though the torture of Theon, which forces him into this half-believed performance of Reek, occurs ‘off-screen’, as it were, the reader still observes in it precisely the dynamic between torturer and prisoner that Scarry observes. In torture, she claims, “one person’s body [is] translated into another person’s voice ... real human pain ... into a regime’s fiction of power” (18) – in this case, the fiction of a feudal relationship between lord and his servant, advisor, confidante.

We see such relationships frequently: in Jon as Jeor Mormont’s steward, in Eddard as Robert’s hand, in Jorah Mormont and then Barristan Selmy as Daenerys’s Queensguard, in Brienne as Catelyn’s guard. In all these others, there is genuine affection and loyalty, but each is a relationship in which there is a power imbalance, and a relationship only made possible because the lord is already in an elevated position. Ramsay, in parallel, uses Theon’s forced subservience to elevate himself. Kozinsky observes just how high this elevation can go:

When asked why he’s still alive, [Theon-as-]Reek answers, ‘The gods are not done with me ... Lord Ramsay is not done with me’. The parallel structures of this statement suggest that on some level they are the same (182)

The power dynamic is exaggerated in this particular thought, but it is always absurd. Ramsay's monstrosity is reframed in Theon's mind as lordly benefaction, the torture he inflicts reframed as ordinary punishment:

He does not want to hurt me, he told me so, he only does it when I give him cause. His lord was merciful and kind. He might have flayed his face off for some of the things Reek had said, before he'd learned his true name and proper place. (Dance 167-168)

So, Theon, traumatized, performs the identity of Reek, almost believing it, repeating Ramsay's own words back to him. Ramsay transforms him into the servant, which reinforces his own role as master. "Reek has been with me since I was a boy", he tells Arnolf Karstark and Hother Umer, indicating Theon (166). The purpose is not deception: Theon is soon recognized, as he is intended to be. It is a performance with a different purpose altogether: Ramsay presents his own power over Theon's body, and Theon's soul. Lambert claims that, "Who Reek really is, finally, depends on the whim of the flayer" (22), and although this does not seem likely to turn out true in the end – Martin seems to be telling a tale of Theon crawling back to himself, with Theon's chapter titles changing from "Reek" back to "Theon" over the trajectory of *Dance* – Ramsay acts as though he had such power, and seems to be showing it off to his father's bannermen.

Ramsay *needs* to show off. Politically, Ramsay is a profoundly precarious position, and vulnerable to harm. This is easy to ignore – simply because Ramsay is so particularly difficult to empathize with. He is a *bastard* – a position of liminality to which Jon Snow's focalization should render the reader sympathetic: on the edge of power, by virtue of his proximity to nobility, but vulnerable to being cast out from it. Even once he is legitimized (becoming Bolton, rather than Snow), he is merely tolerated by his father – a man far more dangerous than he is, who "had more cruelty in his pinky toe than all the Freys combined" (265), a man who

does not love ... does not hate ... does not grieve. This is a game, mildly diverting. Some men hunt, some men hawk, some tumble dice. Roose plays with men. You and me, these Freys, Lord Manderly, his

plump new wife, even his bastard, we are but his playthings. (495)

Roose is driven by ambition, and Ramsay is clearly disposable to him. Ramsay remains the heir only for convenience – Roose simply *allows* him to dispose of other potential heirs

Ramsay will kill them all, of course. That's for the best. I will not live long enough to see new sons to manhood, and boy lords are the bane of any house. (431)

Ramsay is absurdly cruel: he rapes, flays, tortures; he subjects Theon to terrible degradation. Yet it all seems oddly desperate when the reader is faced with his father, whose performances of power are all the more skillful (and successful), and on whose tolerance Ramsay's power depends. It is little wonder he acts the way he does: just as Theon did in *Clash of Kings*, feeling the precariousness of his position, Ramsay turns his violence toward the powerless.

Conclusion

Nearly all of Martin's human villains are driven by the same weakness: in this world, where justice consists of *maiming* in the name of (and sometimes by the hand of) those in power, they respond to their own vulnerability with excessive and spectacular acts of violence. Monstrous and frightening as they may be, there is something pathetic about all of them, and nothing all that unique about any of them. They merely reflect the violence that is already perfectly ordinary in the world: the execution, the trial by combat, punitive torture. Even Ramsay, monster of monsters, merely reflects (in excess) the violence of the nobility he seeks to be a part of: the hunt, the objectification of women, the feudal right of nobles to rend the flesh of those they rule.

This is a world of corporal and capital punishment, where ruling entails (to a greater or lesser extent) control over the bodies of others, and requires that this control be reinforced with violence upon the body. Martin does not advocate such violence – *Song* is full of open horror for it – but his characters are unlikely to escape the need for it. Eddard *must* execute Gared, Robb *must* execute Karstark; Jon *must* execute Slynt. Whoever takes the Iron Throne in the end – if anyone does – will sit at the head of it all: bodies will be maimed in their name. This is not comforting: we have seen how badly it can go. We see moments when justice is performed *well*, but they are rare, and Martin leaves us with doubts: justice here has a tendency to go awry.

But justice is at the heart of rulership for Martin. Shortly before she begins her war against slavery in Slaver's Bay, a war which becomes marred by violence yet is noble at its heart, Daenerys speaks, perceptively, of the failure of two kings of the Seven Kingdoms:

‘Viserys should have protected me, but instead he hurt me and scared me worse. He shouldn't have done that. He wasn't just my brother, he was my *king*. Why do gods make kings and queens, if not to protect the ones who can't protect themselves?’

‘Some kings make themselves. Robert did.’

‘He was no true king... He did no justice. Justice ... that's what kings are *for*.’ (*Storm 2*: 396)

We have seen many would-be rulers who don't do justice: Aerys makes a mockery of the law in his mad acts of retribution; Stannis's adhesion to the law turns to a spectacle of power; Theon commits a series of injustices in his occupation of Winterfell, yet convinces himself that he is not to blame. We have seen the ways in which would-be rulers *try* to do justice and fail: Eddard executes a deserter for good reasons, but to the detriment of the kingdom; Jon executes a mutineer with consideration and care, but fails in the end to put down the mutiny; Daenerys seeks justice for the slaves of Meereen, but becomes caught up in terrible vengeance against their masters.

Whoever rules in the end, the reader will want them to do justice: Martin has made sure of that. We see it all go horribly wrong, but in each case, there is there is a sense of something better that *might* have been. Perhaps there is the *possibility*, rarely achieved, of justice. Martin seems to point down some right path for those in power (or, at least, he points to the hazards on that road). Whether one of his would-be rulers will walk it remains to be seen. He seems to want it, and his readers should, too.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

- Martin, George R.R. *A Clash of Kings*. Harper Voyager, London, 2003.
- . *A Feast for Crows*. Harper Voyager, London, 2006.
- . *A Game of Thrones*. Harper Voyager, London, 2003.
- . *A Storm of Swords 1: Steel and Snow*. Voyager, London, 2003.
- . *A Storm of Swords 2: Blood and Gold*. Voyager, London, 2003.
- Martin, George R.R., Elio M. García, Jr. and Linda Antonsson. *The World of Ice and Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and The Game of Thrones*. Harper Voyager, London, 2014.

Secondary Sources

- Adair, Jamie, editor. *History Behind Game of Thrones*, history-behind-game-of-thrones.com/. Accessed 15 Nov. 2016.
- Ahmed, Saladin. "Is 'Game of Thrones' Too White?" *Salon*, 1 Apr. 2012, www.salon.com/2012/04/01/is_game_of_thrones_too_white/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2016.
- Antonsson, Linda & Elio M. García. "The Palace of Love, the Palace of Sorrow: Romanticism in A Song of Ice and Fire." *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by James Lowder, Benbella, Dallas, 2012. Kindle Edition.
- Attewell, Steven. *Hands, Kings & City-States: Analyzing a World of Ice and Fire*, Blue Buddha Press, 2015. Kindle Edition.
- . *Race for the Iron Throne: Political and Historical Analysis of A Game of Thrones*, Blue Buddha Press, 2014. Kindle Edition.
- The Big Honkin'. "Celebrity Story Time: Game of Thrones Author George R. R. Martin Reads Children's Stories." *YouTube*, 9 Feb. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLMydhMqWDQ. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.
- Breen, Benjamin. "Why 'Game of Thrones' Isn't Medieval – and Why That Matters". *Pacific Standard*, 12 Jun. 2014, psmag.com/why-game-of-thrones-isn-t-medieval-and-why-that-matters-64ac36616d27. Accessed 6 Nov. 2016.
- "The Citadel: So Spake Martin - January 2006." *Westeros.org*, www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Month/2006/01. Accessed 12 Nov. 2016.
- "The Climb." *Game of Thrones*, written by David Benioff & D.B. Weiss, directed by Alik Sakharov, Home Box Office, 2013.

- Collins, Sean T. and Stefan Sasse. "My Sweet R'hllor: The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism in Westeros." *The Boiled Leather Audio Hour*, 9 Jan. 2012, boiledleather.com/post/15182035873/the-boiled-leather-audio-hour-episode-three. Accessed 28 Nov. 2016.
- . "The Quality of Mercy: GeorgeRRMartin.com's new 'The Winds of Winter' Sample Chapter." *The Boiled Leather Audio Hour*, 31 Mar. 2014, boiledleather.com/post/81289104110/the-boiled-leather-audio-hour-episode-28. Accessed 10 Nov. 2016.
- Cowlshaw, Brian. "What Maesters Knew: Narrating Knowing." *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by Jes Battis & Susan Johnston, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2015, pp. 57-69.
- "The Dance of Dragons." *Game of Thrones*, written by David Benioff & D.B. Weiss, directed by David Nutter, Home Box Office, 2015.
- Doyle, Sady. "Enter Ye Myne Mystic World of Gayng-Raype: What the 'R' Stands for in 'George R.R. Martin'." *Tiger Beatdown*, 26 Aug. 2011, tigerbeatdown.com/2011/08/26/enter-ye-myne-mystic-world-of-gayng-raype-what-the-r-stands-for-in-george-r-r-martin/. Accessed 3 Dec. 2016.
- Fathallah, Judith. "Statements and silence: fanfic paratexts for ASOIAF/Game of Thrones." *Continuum*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 75-88.
- Flood, Alison. "'George RR Martin revolutionised how people think about fantasy'." *The Guardian*, 10 Apr. 2015, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/apr/10/george-rr-martin-revolutionised-how-people-think-about-fantasy. Accessed 4 Nov. 2016.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, New York, 1995.
- Frankel, Valerie Estelle. *How Game of Thrones Will End: The History, Politics, and Pop Culture Driving the Show to its Finish*, Thought Catalogue, Williamsburg, 2014. Kindle Edition.
- . *Symbols in Game of Thrones: The Deeper Meanings of Animals, Colors, Seasons, Food, & Much More*, 2014. Kindle Edition.
- . *Winning the Game of Thrones: The Host of Characters and their Agendas*, 2013. Kindle Edition.
- . *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2013. Kindle Edition.
- "Game of Thrones." *Know Your Meme*, knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/game-of-thrones/. Accessed 4 Nov. 2016.
- Game of Thrones Research Project*. www.questeros.org/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2016.

- Gjelsvik, Anne and Rikke Schubart, editors. *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements*. Bloomsbury, New York, 2016.
- “A Golden Crown.” *Game of Thrones*, written by Jane Espenson, David Benioff & D.B. Weiss, directed by Daniel Minahan, Home Box Office, 2011.
- Grossman, Lev. “The American Tolkien”, *Time*, vol. 166, no. 21, 21 Nov. 2005, p. 139.
- . “How Magic Conquered Pop Culture.” *Time*, 19 Aug. 2014, time.com/lev-grossman-magicians-land-magic-pop-culture/. Accessed 4 Nov. 2016.
- Hackney, Charles H. “‘Silk ribbons tied around a sword’: Knighthood and the Chivalric Virtues in Westeros.” *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by Jes Battis & Susan Johnston, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2015, pp. 132-149.
- Hardy, Mat. “Game of Tropes: The Orientalist tradition in the works of G.R.R. Martin.” *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 409-420.
- Hemsath, Dan. “Cold Open: Thoughts on AGOT’s Prologue.” *Tower of the Hand*, 9 Jun. 2014, towerofthehand.com/blog/2014/06/09-cold-open-thoughts-prologue/. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.
- Hovey, Jaime. “Tyrion’s gallantry.” *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 86-98.
- Hubber, Duncan. “A Shadow on the Plate: The Meaning of Mealtime in ASOIAF.” *Tower of the Hand*, 22 Jun. 2015, towerofthehand.com/blog/2015/06/22-shadow-on-plate/index.html. Accessed 8 Nov. 2016.
- Johnston, Susan. “Grief poignant as joy: Dyscatastrophe and eucatastrophe in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.” *Mythlore*, vol. 31, no. 1, Fall/Winter 2012, pp. 133-154.
- Joshi, S.T. *Encyclopedia of the Vampire*. Greenwood, Santa Barbara, 2011.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971.
- “The Kingsroad.” *Game of Thrones*, written by David Benioff & D.B. Weiss, directed by Tim Van Patten, Home Box Office, 2011.
- Kleinhenz, Marc N., editor. *Tower of the Hand: A Flight of Sorrows*, Blue Buddha Press, 2013. Kindle Edition.
- . *Tower of the Hand: A Hymn for Spring*, Blue Buddha Press, 2015. Kindle Edition.
- Kleinhenz, Marc N. *It Is Known: An Analysis of Thrones, Vol. I*, Blue Buddha Press, 2012. Kindle Edition.
- . *It Is Known: An Analysis of Thrones, Vol. II*, Blue Buddha Press, 2013. Kindle Edition.
- Kozinsky, Beth. “‘A thousand bloodstained hands’: The Malleability of Flesh and Identity.” *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and*

Fire, edited by Jes Batts & Susan Johnston, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2015, pp. 170-188.

Lambert, Charles. "A tender spot in my heart: disability in *A Song of Ice and Fire*." *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 20-33.

Larrington, Carolyne. *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2016. Kindle Edition.

Lowder, James, editor. *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, Benbella, Dallas, 2012. Kindle Edition.

Martin, George R.R.. "Episode 1: The Birth of A Song of Ice and Fire." *The George R. R. Martin Podcast*, 2 Oct. 2006.

---. "George R.R. Martin: The Complete Unedited Interview." By Charlie Jane Anders, *Observation Deck*, 23 Jul. 2013, observationdeck.kinja.com/george-r-r-martin-the-complete-unedited-interview-886117845. Accessed 28 Nov. 2016.

---. "George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview." By Mikal Gilmore, *Rolling Stone*, 23 Apr. 2014, www.rollingstone.com/tv/news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-20140423. Accessed 4 Nov. 2016.

---. "George R.R. Martin, Author of 'A Song of Ice and Fire' Series: Interview on The Sound of Young America." By John Hodgman, *The Sound of Young America*. Maximum Fun, 19 Sept. 2011, www.maximumfun.org/sound-young-america/george-r-r-martin-author-song-ice-and-fire-series-interview-sound-young-america#audio. Accessed 10 Nov. 2016.

---. "George R.R. Martin on Sex, Fantasy, and 'A Dance With Dragons'." By Rachel Brown, *The Atlantic*, 11 Jul. 2011, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/07/george-rr-martin-on-sex-fantasy-and-a-dance-with-dragons/241738/. Accessed 8 Nov. 2016.

---. "GRRM Interview Part 2: Fantasy and History." By James Poniewozik, *Time*, 18 Apr. 2011, entertainment.time.com/2011/04/18/grrm-interview-part-2-fantasy-and-history/. Accessed 10 Nov. 2016.

---. "The Man Whose Darkest Secret Is That He Kind of Likes the Wallflowers." *Conan*, season 3, episode 95, Conaco.

---. "Merchandise." *George R.R. Martin*, www.georgerrmartin.com/merchandise/. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

---. "Transcript of Chat with George R. R. Martin on March 18, 1999." *Flashpoint Weekly Chats*, Event Horizon Web Productions Inc, 1999, www.astralgia.com/sfzine/chats/transcripts/031899.html. Accessed 4 Dec. 2016.

McIllwain, Josh. "D&D Player's Handbook reaches #1 on Amazon's book charts." *Mighty Meep!*, 21 Aug. 2014,

mightymeep.com/news/dd-players-handbook-reaches-1-amazons-book-charts/3523.
Accessed 4 Nov. 2016.

O'Leary, Peter. "Sacred fantasy in *Game of Thrones*." *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 7-19.

Rastogi, Nina. "Is 'Game of Thrones' Racist?" *Slate*, 20 Apr. 2011,
www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2011/04/20/is_game_of_thrones_racist.html. Accessed 24 Nov. 2016.

Rosenberg, Alyssa. "Feminist Media Criticism, George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, And That Sady Doyle Piece." *ThinkProgress*, 29 Aug. 2011,
thinkprogress.org/feminist-media-criticism-george-r-r-martins-a-song-of-ice-and-fire-and-that-sady-doyle-piece-7bca965f07a4. Accessed 3 Dec. 2016.

---. "Men and Monsters: Rape, Myth-Making, and the Rise and Fall of Nations in *A Song of Ice and Fire*." *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by James Lowder, Benbella, Dallas, 2012. Kindle Edition.

Rothman, Lily. "Why TIME Declared George R.R. Martin 'An American Tolkien'." *Time*, 12 Apr. 2015, time.com/3774280/george-r-r-martin-tolkien/. Accessed 4 Nov. 2016.

Sasse, Stefan. "The concept of honor in Westeros." *Tower of the Hand*, 16 Dec. 2012,
towerofthehand.com/blog/2012/07/16-concept-of-honor-in-westeros/index.html.
Accessed 15 Nov. 2016.

---. "A reader's guide to the Feastdance." *Tower of the Hand*, 1 Jul. 2015,
towerofthehand.com/blog/2015/07/01-readers-guide-to-feastdance/index.html. Accessed 28 Nov. 2016.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987.

Schröter, Felix. "The Game of *Game of Thrones*. George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Its Video Game Adaptations." *IMAGE*, issue 22, pp. 65-82.

Schubart, Rikke and Anne Gjelsvik. "Introduction." *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements*, edited by Anne Gjelsvik & Rikke Chubart, Bloomsbury, New York, 2016, pp. 1-16.

Serwer, Adam. "'Game of Thrones': When Fantasy Looks Like Reality." *The Atlantic*, 12 Apr. 2011,
www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/04/game-of-thrones-when-fantasy-looks-like-reality/237196/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2016.

Shacklock, Zoë. "'A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies': Transmedia Textuality and the Flows of Adaptation." *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by Jes Battis & Susan Johnston, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2015, pp. 262-279.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, edited by G. R. Hibbard, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.

- . *King Richard II*, edited by Charles R. Forker, The Arden Shakespeare, London, 2002.
- St. Denis, Patrick. "Win an autographed copy of George R.R. Martin's A DANCE WITH DRAGONS." *Pat's Fantasy Hotlist*, 2 Jun. 2011, fantasyhotlist.blogspot.co.za/2011/06/win-autographed-copy-of-george-r-r.html. Accessed 13 Nov. 2016.
- Stanton, Rob. "Excessive and appropriate gifts: hospitality and violence in *A Song of Ice and Fire*." *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 20-33.
- Švelch, Jaroslav. "The delicate art of criticizing a savior: 'Silent gratitude' and the limits of participation in the evaluation of fan translation." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 19, no. 3, Aug 2013, pp. 303-310.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories." *Tree and Leaf*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1964, pp. 11-70.
- Van der Sar, Ernesto. "'Game of Thrones' Most Pirated TV-Show of 2016." *TorrentFreak*, 27 Dec. 2016, torrentfreak.com/game-of-thrones-most-pirated-tv-show-of-2015/. Accessed 4 Nov. 2016.
- Vassals of Kingsgrave*. vokpodcast.wordpress.com/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2016.
- Verma, Neil. "Wall of sound: listening to *Game of Thrones*." *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 71-85.
- Walker, Jessica. "'Just songs in the end': Historical Discourses in Shakespeare and Martin." *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by Jes Battis & Susan Johnston, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2015, pp. 71-91.
- West, Ed. *The Realm: The True History Behind Game of Thrones*, 2014. Kindle Edition.
- Whitehead, Adam. "An Unreliable World: History and Timekeeping in Westeros." *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by James Lowder, Benbella, Dallas, 2012. Kindle Edition.
- Wittingslow, Ryan Mitchell. "'All men must serve': Religion and Free Will from the Seven to the Faceless Men." *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by Jes Battis & Susan Johnston, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2015, pp. 113-131.
- Young, Helen. "Race in online fantasy fandom: whiteness on *Westeros.org*." *Continuum*, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 737-747.
- Zontos, Michail. "Dividing Lines: Frederick Jackson Turner's Western Frontier and George R.R. Martin's Northern Wall." *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by Jes Battis & Susan Johnston, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2015, pp. 92-111.