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All Our Old Heroes are Dead: The Nostalgia of Chivalry and the Myth of the 'Good War' in Game of Thrones

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All Our Old Heroes are Dead:
The Nostalgia of Chivalry and the Myth of the "Good War" in *Game of Thrones*

George R.R. Martin's medievalist fantasy series exhibits a tension between the nostalgic desire to return to the good old days of the past and the unavoidable realism of the present. This conflict is most often explored through characters and their perspective on knights and soldiers, war and combat. Wrapped up within this spectrum of the longed-for return and the feared-for future are sociological considerations such as the construction of masculinity, femininity, class, and, of course, power. This paper will explore that tension and its relationship to medievalism and chivalry in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and his *Tales of Dunk and Egg* prequels. It will also examine the ways the characters and their attitudes toward war and warfare create a textual discourse in which the very notion of the Nostalgic Good War and the Modern Unworthy War are debated, tested, and ultimately, judged.

It's no secret that when the first book of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series opens the audience stumbles into an almost quintessential fantasy setting. And even though this idealism of the text is undermined from the start—in the prologue with the frightening army of the Others, the beheading of a deserter from The Wall, and the discovery of the direwolf corpse and her pups that symbolize the Stark family's fast-approaching fates—there is still a sense that the world of Westeros and Martin's text are a complete self-contained narrative. The wars of the past are over, and while rebellions pop up here and there throughout the reign of Robert Baratheon, a modicum of peace and stability has settled over the land. Life in Westeros seems to be pretty good. And yet, despite the long summer, the decade and a half without major conflict, and the years of growth and prosperity, from the very first chapters there is a sense of looking back, of nostalgic longing for what the usurper king calls the "good years" (*GoT*). This nostalgic longing is prevalent throughout the text; in fact, it is the very bedrock upon which Martin's work rests.

The idea of an eternally glorified past and a continually declining present is a common feature in both medieval fiction and fantasy medievalism. As Narelle Campbell writes in her 2013 PhD thesis *Now and Then: Traces of the Present in Medievalist Fantasy Fiction*, "the medievalism at the core of fantasy demonstrates an attachment, not necessarily to an historical past, but to idealized or pre-modern places and times" (Campbell 10). In fact, she continues, "genre fantasy does not claim to be an historically accurate representation of times past" but "openly flaunts that it is imaginary, not realist" (Campbell 62). In essence, fantasy medievalism as genre fiction destabilizes the very idea of historical continuity or historical narrative; really, challenging the idea of history as anything other than a purposeful construction and therefore subject to the same need for critical analysis and breaking down as other created narrative structures. As such, works of fantasy medievalism often participate in the sphere of post-modernism, pulling apart received knowledge at the seams and peering inside, expanding the unexplored avenues in the official record. No one reads *A Song of Ice and Fire* and assumes that it's a faithful representation of a historical period, for all that George R.R. Martin continues to attest to the influence of The Wars of the Roses on his work.

But the text continues to resonate with its audience as "medieval," as evoking the feel of the Middle Ages throughout, and has inspired countless articles, webpages, and critical works focused on identifying historical analogues and archetypes to the characters and scenes in the text. "That's part of what makes *Game of Thrones* so successful," writes David Perry for *Vice*, "the peoples, places, and even plot lines feel at once familiar and new." (Perry, "The Telescoped Histories and Myths of 'Game of Thrones'"). Martin creates a feeling of familiarity, with no one complete historical or geographical referent but touchstones from a variety of eras and cultures, the strongest of which, of course, is the European (and specifically English) Middle Ages. This medievalism, in cooperation with the Martin's postmodernist approach, contributes to the creation of a liminal space that allows the free exploration of both the past and the present without the attendant value-based concerns of either era.

That his audience reads the events of the present into the text of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the HBO series is not a surprise.[1] The rhetoric of "Game of Thrones" pops up in many headlines and discussions of international politics, as an encoded phrase that references complex political dynamics.[2] The series "may be rollicking fantasy," writes Jedidiah Purdy for *The Daily Beast* in 2014, "but beneath its bloody surface it is also about our dysfunctional political system. Westeros and Capitol Hill may seem far apart, but the two worlds share dark echoes and philosophical parallels" (Purdy). And just last year, in an address before the US Congress, Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, referenced the series to talk about ISIS and Iran (Campbell, "Benjamin Netanyahu"). But Martin has made a point of insisting that his series is not an allegory for the present, saying in an interview with Adam Pasick for *Vulture* that "other people have made the argument […] that [the series] might have resonances with our current misadventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. I'm aware of the parallels, but I'm not trying to slap a coat of paint on the Iraq War and call it fantasy" (Pasick).

A Song of Ice and Fire, then, offers its audience the opportunity for reflection on the present through the past—an opportunity not necessarily intended by the author, perhaps, but irrefutable in the face of the numerous postings on personal websites, social media, and places like Reddit where fans eagerly discuss the connections between the wars in Westeros and Essos with those in Iraq and Afghanistan. That it is possible, that readers continue to see links, is the important element, not whether Martin intended such associations directly. This is the value of *A Song of Ice and Fire*'s medievalized and nostalgic quality, that it allows the reader to draw connections and critically examine the issues at the forefront of their own experience.

Nostalgia has, historically, gotten a bad rap. It has a long and complicated history: it's been interpreted as a sign of weakness; a medical diagnosis for soldiers suffering from mental and emotional trauma as a result of their combat experiences; an anti-progressive inability to let go of the past and embrace the present; and more. In its most simple and denotative meaning, *nostalgia* is a desire or longing for familiar surroundings (*OED*). But it's much more complex than that simple description would suggest. Svetlana Boym, perhaps one of the better-known voices in the study of nostalgia defines it as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship" (Boym xiii). The nostalgia of medievalism is the desire to return to a past that we imagine must be simpler, if only because our own lives are so complex. But it erases the reality that, in its own time, any era is full of its own dangerous complexities, and even more concerning, nostalgia presented without critique erases any and all experiences but for the sanitized "majority," the one most useful to us. Not the most real, not the most representative, but the one that most conforms to our preconceived expectations—conceived within our own prejudices and present experiences—not to mention our motives. It creates the past in order to explain the present, divesting us of any responsibility to acknowledge our part in constructing the world of today.

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[1] Martin has even been asked if his texts are a commentary on global warming. See http://nerdalicious.com.au/books/george-r-r-martin-on-the-end-of-thrones/.

[2] This rhetoric is used frequently by the Right in particular. See "What Game of Thrones Can Teach Us About the War on Terror" by James Delingpole for Breitbart (http://www.breitbart.com/london/2014/06/17/what-game-of-thrones-can-teach-us-about-the-war-on-terror/), Patrick Buchanan's essay for RealClearPolitics (http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/07/21/a_mideast_game_of_thrones_127465.html), and Ralph Peters on Bill O'Reilly's Fox News show, *The O'Reilly Factor* (http://insider.foxnews.com/2014/03/17/ralph-peters-%E2%80%9Cputin-playing-%E2%80%98game-thrones%E2%80%99-we%E2%80%99re-playing-%E2%80%98downton-abbey%E2%80%99%E2%80%9D).

But what is it about the European Middle Ages in particular? What are we so nostalgic for that we continually recreate it in our own image? One of the most steadfast symbols of the medieval period that gets recycled over and over again is that of the knight in armor. A man always ready for battle—sword and shield in hand—and accompanied by his steed. A symbol of power and force, but one tempered by a code of behavior that was supposed to be understood and shared by others of the same status—the chivalric code. The various versions of this code describe a way of life that values faith, charity, and justice. Martin's works contain multiple examples as well, including the knighting of Ser Duncan the Tall in *The Hedge Knight*, where he was "charged to be a good knight and true, to obey the seven gods, defend the weak and innocent, serve [his] lord faithfully, and defend the realm with all [his] might" (Martin, *The Hedge Knight*).[3] Most notably, though, is the code of the oath taken by the Night's Watch which emphasizes that swearers "shall wear no crowns and win no glory [...] shall live and die at [their] post" and "pledge [their] life and honor" to their order (*GoT*).

Above all, these formulas value honor--a troublesome concept--as well as the protection of those weaker than ones' self and demands each individual treat each challenger fairly. For the most part, on paper, it sounds like an ideal system. This is the system of chivalry and knighthood that a young and innocent, "sweet-smelling Sansa, who loved silks, songs […] and tall gallant knights with handsome faces" believes in so whole-heartedly (*SoS*). But her faith in the ideal of chivalry blinds her to the maneuvering and scheming by those in power, who use her to further their own agenda, even to the point of pitting her against her father in his trial for treason. As the events in Westeros and the text progress, we are witness to the continual undermining of Sansa's belief in the ideal, virtuous, and honorable knight. The reality of her experiences—the cruelties she is subjected to—reveal the rust beneath the polished gleam of the heroic knight. We too, through the rose-colored telescope of hindsight and a couple of hundred years, know that taking an oath of chivalry did not make angels out of ordinary men. Nor does it now.

But our nostalgic yearning for the past, for the Middle Ages, is based in ideals, not reality. Tison Pugh points out in his book *Queer Chivalry* that the idea of a chivalric code is in many ways (and perhaps all ways) a myth; a foundational story created by later generations in order to further social ideals of behavior, in the same way as the story of George Washington and his cherry tree. Not true, but performed as truth in order to inculcate certain social structures of ideal citizenship. And participating the entire time in a project that deliberately erases experiences and testimonies that do not conform to the imagined ideal. For the Victorians and their Edwardian successors, nostalgic medievalism was employed for a variety of purposes—nationalism and colonialism, religion, social structures, etc. But, notably, it was also representative of a moment of transition for the concept of masculinity in England and the United States, one brought about by major social and institutional changes to agriculture, industry, and even the gender spheres. A moment marked by both the socialization of young children through morality literature disguised as chivalric adventure tales, as well as the evolution of the chivalric knight into the Victorian gentleman, just as focused on individual honor as in the Middle Ages, only ever more aware of the need to uphold and protect group and national honor as well.[4]

Medieval chivalric imagery and values have been coopted in service of this very same vision in the 20th and 21st centuries. Of course, there's Allen J. Frantzen's challenge to the popular narrative that

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[3] Later in the text, Ser Duncan knights someone himself: "In the name of the Father I charge you to be just. […] In the name of the Mother I charge you to defend the young and innocent. […] In the name of the Maiden I charge you to protect all women" (Martin, *The Hedge Knight* 98).

[4] "It can consequently be argued that, in the nineteenth century, the idea of the gentleman was developed into an 'invented tradition': based on the mediaeval cult of the knight, it was adapted and modified to fit contemporary needs." See Berberich, Christine. *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-century Literature: Englishness and Nostalgia*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007. Print.

"Chivalry was born in the court of King Arthur and laid to rest in the trenches of WWI" (Frantzen 1). While Frantzen focuses on a connection between spiritual and military masculinity in terms of chivalric idealism, including the image of both knight and soldier performing self-sacrifice in the same model as Christ, he succeeds in demonstrating that WWI did not snuff out chivalry so much as it further entrenched it within military masculinities and military culture.

Chivalry persists within the military for a multitude of reasons, first and foremost because it emphasizes a citizen's duty to protect the honor of the state, to respond to threats that challenge the honor and safety of the nation and its people. But it also offers those who join the Armed Forces the image of themselves as the latest in a long line of noble warriors. Leo Braudy, in *From Chivalry to Terrorism*, suggests that the nostalgic "image of the shining chivalric knight helps foster the vague impression that somehow past wars were more honorable and perhaps more humane than the grand slaughters of the twentieth century" (Braudy, "Chivalry in Theory and Practice"). Certainly bloodshed and casualties on the battlefield were high during the Middle Ages as well, but modern warfare—especially in the early years of the 20th century—has brought with it battlefield casualties on a massive scale with advances to long-range and large-caliber artillery. Death in war during the Middle Ages was every bit as violent and senseless as it is now, it was just different.

"The chivalrous ideal of medieval warfare never occurred in fact," Andrew Fiala insists in his book *The Just War Myth* (Fiala 40). But perhaps the idea that it did persists for two reasons: that a) everyone wants to believe that when war occurs it is in service of some good and b) the concept of a just war is still entirely beholden to medieval religion and the idea that a war consecrated by God and fought by believers was the acceptable exception to the first of the Commandments—*thou shalt not kill* (Fiala 9). The creation of military confraternities reflects this belief, groups like the Knights Templar or Knights of Malta were supposed to be divine warriors in service of the highest authority. At the very least, the nostalgia that surrounds chivalry is influenced by the understanding that chivalry was supposed to signal an ideal concerned with noble causes, fairness, and justice. The myth is a welcome relief to the wars of today, which seem to exist outside of justice, with no rulebook, and for which there is a large divide between those declaring wars and those fighting them.

Martin's discourse of chivalry explodes out of its idealized origins from the very start with Tyrion Lannister's interrogation of Jon Snow's desire to join the Night's Watch, which borders on outright mocking. "The Night's Watch is a noble calling," Jon tells the dwarf in *A Game of Thrones*, but Tyrion disagrees. "The Night's Watch is a midden heap for all the misfits of the realm," he points out, "sullen peasants, debtors, poachers, rapers, thieves, and bastards like you all wind up on the Wall" (*GoT*). What originated as a prestigious knightly order—dedicated to protecting the realm from incursion by the Wildlings and the other dangers that exist beyond the Wall—has fallen into ill-repute, its ranks filled by those whom society has cast off. Young men enter its service in order to escape poverty, or as punishment for their crimes, an alternative to dismemberment or even death, as in the aborted attempt of Eddard Stark to "take the black" at his trial for treason. It turns out that Jon Snow is just as enamored with the nostalgic ideal of chivalry as Sansa is.

Among the many consequences of nostalgic chivalry, as it exists both within society and within the texts of Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, is the distinction between the "Good" war of the past and the "Unworthy" or "Bad" war of the present. This dichotomy exists in the very familiar example of how WWII and Vietnam are represented with our society, not only in media but also in the way we talk about them every day. "In the popular imagination," writes David Morris, author of *The Evil Hours*, WWII is "still somehow remembered as 'The Good War'" (Morris 132). The consequences of that war, in popular representation, are unimportant. What matters here is that the war—one that took millions of lives and forever altered global politics and the human experience—is *perceived* as good, *represented* as a war worth fighting. In contrast, Vietnam is held up as almost the exact opposite. A war not fought for the protection of a higher human ideal or one with a clear exit plan but seemingly entirely political, and with

no end in sight. It doesn't help the public perception of the Vietnam War that even though perhaps we did not lose what journalist Paul Harvey called a "crooked, corrupt, rotten and […] devastatingly debilitating blunder" of a war, we most assuredly did not win it either (Harvey). Martin himself speaks to this in an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos when he explains how he was approved for conscientious objector status during the Vietnam War. "The big question they would always ask you," he tells the interviewer, "was 'Would you have fought in WWII against the Nazis?' Yes, I would have fought in WWII against the Nazis […] but the Vietcong were not the Nazis and I didn't think America had any business in Vietnam" ("George R.R. Martin on Vietnam and the Realities of War").

This structure of good and bad wars persists through the recent contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many consider the war in Afghanistan to be "just" but the war in Iraq, perpetrated on a campaign of misinformation and opaque motivations, to be "unjust" or even illegal. And it is also present throughout *A Song of Ice and Fire*, where the events of the current conflict in Westeros are often compared to the wars of the past—Robert's Rebellion or the Targaryen's historic conquest of Westeros and unification of its disparate kingdoms which takes place almost 300 years before *A Game of Thrones* opens, to name just two.

The former, the rebellion that dethroned the Targaryen dynasty, sent the last living heirs off to live in secret and exile, and established the Baratheon reign, is frequently alluded to as a war based in a just and worthy cause. A good war. It focused on two specific motives: the first is the supposed abduction and rape of Robert Baratheon's betrothed by the crown prince, Rhaegar Targaryen. In truth, the war Robert waged in response was as much about recovering his lost love as it restoring his wounded honor. But for all the questionable motivation of the first, the second motive is the basis for reading "Robert's Rebellion" as falling into the pattern of Good War vs Bad War. King Aerys, the "Mad King," was a paranoid and insane ruler who murdered and tortured his advisors and his enemies in equal measure, and it was he who burned Ned Stark's father alive in a farcical performance of trial by combat. Aerys was even willing to burn down his entire castle, his entire city and all within it, in order to prevent the rebellion from winning, and was only thwarted by Jaime Lannister, who killed him in the throne room despite his duty to protect the King with his life as a member of the Kingsguard (*SoS*).

In contrast, the wars that take place in the books—the War of the Five Kings, as it is known—are the epitome of an unjust, unworthy war. One incited by a deliberate mistruth, and one that perpetuates injustice—that Joffrey Baratheon is the rightful heir to the throne. Of course, the categories of just and unjust can depend upon which uniform a combatant is wearing, and from the perspective of Stannis and Robb, and to a lesser bit, even Renley, their cause is just. But in the case of this conflict, unlike the representation of the previous war within the text, or even the real-world example of WWII as detailed above, there is no global issue of human rights at stake, no retaliation for a large-scale act of treachery, no threat to the social fabric of the realm or its people. The War of the Five Kings boils down to a quibble, a political issue, that spirals out of control and envelopes every level of society, that enlists every citizen of the realm into service of one or another party. A disagreement over the rightful heir to the throne erupts and thousands of citizens die on the battlefields. And, further, it cannot be historicized by a nostalgic view of the past, as the Rebellion is now. This war, unlike the one Robert Baratheon remembers as the "good days" is all too present and all too real within the text.

Perhaps the finest critique of nostalgia, chivalry, and war comes from Jaime Lannister, the "Kingslayer" himself. "I earned my knighthood," he tells Brienne of Tarth, who accuses him of scorning and soiling its gifts in *A Storm of Swords*, "I won a tourney melee at thirteen […] At fifteen, I rode with Ser Arthur Dayne against the Kingswood Brotherhood, and he knighted me on the battlefield. It was the white cloak that soiled me, not the other way around" (*SoS*). Like the Night's Watch, like all ideals exposed to the tiresome grind of reality, the Whitecloaks, the Kingsguard, began as a noble order dedicated to protecting the life of the king. But it, too, seems to have declined into an order more influenced by politics and status than justice or the chivalric ideal of loyalty and duty to one's lord and

king. Nowhere is this more apparent than his study of the White Book, the chronicle of the Kingsguard in which every knight to serve is recorded along with his notable deeds. Jaime compares his own record to those of the brothers who had come before him, finding his and the ones of his generation lacking in comparison. "The world was simpler in those days […] and men as well as swords were made of finer steel," he thinks to himself in *A Storm of Swords* (*SoS*). "Cocksure arrogance and empty chivalry" had been enough to sustain Jaime in his duties as a young and inexperienced knight, but as an old one, as someone who's lived through wars and battles, rebellions and betrayals, he is well aware of the cost that chivalry exacts. Nightmares that haunt his sleep, memories of impossible choices between what is right and what duty demands, the sacrifice of body and soul and even love.

Martin's use of fantasy to explore real and historical concepts such as war, masculinity, and even history itself demonstrate his understanding of these things as conceptual constructions, under constant revision as the present remakes the past in the image of the desired future. The return to the past is never about *recovering* something lost but about justifying the *creation* of something in the future, identifying or even inserting evidence into the historiographic narrative to be used as the foundation, the building blocks, of an idealized hope that we can be better than the present. "War is a force that gives us meaning," Chris Hedges declares boldly in his book of the same title, and argues that societies enact narratives of war in order to foster not only individual meaning, but national purpose (Hedges). But that meaning is always simultaneously bound to the past and projected into the future, never accessible in the present. Before becoming involved in WWII, for example, the citizens of the United States debated whether or not it was in the country's best interests to get involved in a pan-European conflict that didn't directly affect them yet, long before tales of the German Concentration camps were revealed. But in the stories we tell about the war, the United States jumped in to protect the world from an unimaginable evil, we were always going to be involved in the fight for justice—we assign meaning to it in retrospect, and this meaning influences our future. Nostalgia isn't about the past, it's about the future, and the nostalgia in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* is not about the Middle Ages and knights and chivalry—it's about us, it's about who we envision ourselves to be and what ideals we imagine measuring our future selves against.

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