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George R.R. Martin and the Myths of History: Postmodernism and Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire

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What, exactly, does the medievalism in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series do? Certainly it's not intended to be an accurate representation of the Middle Ages, actual or romantic. As Umberto Eco, Heather Arden, and other scholars of medievalism have long suggested, a return to the medieval is an attempt to process the concerns that trouble our collective cultural identity, concerns which cannot be fully explored in the framework of our contemporary experiences. With this in mind, I argue that the combination of Martin's postmodern interpretations of history with his medievalism functions to enact a liminal space wherein it is possible to explore the unexamined constructions of knowledge which threaten our ability to understand the world we live in.

The English translation of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* was published in 1994, just two years before the first book in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (AGOT) hit the shelves. The timing is coincidental, of course, but the coincidence does offer some insight into the cultural psyche of the early 1990s in the United States. It may even offer some insight into the as-yet unexamined framework of Martin's text as well. Many have acknowledged that the series has a very postmodern character about it. As Caleb Masters notes, writing under the pseudonym "bigcalkenobi" on his website *Masters Film Review*, the book and the television series are postmodern both in their content and their style. The content of the series, he writes, "presents a postmodern take on high fantasy by removing definitive evil," and the style of the narrative rhetoric—in particular the multiple point-of-view characters and the short chapters that quickly switch from one line of plot to another—serves as its "own form of postmodernism as it seems to undermine the belief in one grand truth in the world of Westeros."

As Lyotard defined it, postmodernism consisted of an "incredulity toward metanarratives," the totalizing narratives that legitimate the human experience (xxiv). As a critical process with strong ties to deconstruction, it delights in a paradigm of disunity, disruption, and discontinuity. Postmodernism, then, calls into question the reliability not just what is known, but what can be known, and demands that all claims of knowing be acknowledged as constructions of a larger narrative. One very important type of metanarrative is genre; genre is really a way of knowing or reading a text, bound by expectations that are mutually agreed upon by both the creators within the particular genre, and the audience that consumes it. The success of a genre narrative is based on the degree to which the generic or narratological expectations of the audience or reader are fulfilled. Indeed, the "genre of a narrative shape[s] understandings" in the way that it orders interpretations.

One of the significant features of Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, I believe, is the way in which he disrupts the typical features of the genres of his texts, whether they are categorized as historical fiction, fantasy fiction, or a medievalized version of either. He deliberately subverts historical narrative, claiming that though "historical fiction is wonderful to read […] the only problem I have with [it] is that I know too much history. So I always know what's going to happen. So you're reading a novel about the War of the Roses and no matter how good or bad it is, you know who is going to win." (Richards) The conclusion of the series is known to Martin alone, and any attempts to predict who seizes power in the end—much less which characters will still be alive—is futile. The first lesson Martin's ASOIAF audience learns is that anything can happen to anyone at

any time. Chekhov's famous gun metaphor has no significance here; there may be a loaded gun in the first act, but it's just as likely that your favorite character will be killed by a sword in the second as the gun in the third. Martin saturates his text with all sorts of red herrings, using typical generic signposts to draw his audience in and "help form reader expectations," but then, at the last second, reverses them and changes the direction of the narrative entirely. Basically, Martin zigs when the audience's prior reading experiences have conditioned them to expect a zag. "With this sort of thing," he says, "you can take people by surprise. It reads like historical fiction, it feels like historical fiction but you don't know how it's going to come out." (Richards)

The most obvious example of this genre-based bait and switch comes in the first book of the series, *A Game of Thrones*. This text introduces the reader to some of the most important families in Westeros, focusing closely on the Starks and their patriarch Eddard (or Ned). This early spotlight on the Stark family is so intense that 26 of the 72 chapters feature the points-of-view of Eddard and his wife, Catelyn. In fact, the only non-Stark characters with point-of-view chapters in AGOT are Daenerys Targaryen (10 chapters) and Tyrion Lannister (9). Compared to the diversity in point-of-view characters throughout the rest of the books, the dominance of the Stark family in this first text proves to be a red herring for the reader. In fact, it often leads to a "make it or break it" point for readers not yet completely sold on the series. Sharing his grievances of the television series, Peter Henne writes, "If we don't like it, then we must not be getting it." But it's not that the readers and viewers aren't getting it, it's that Martin has played a shell game with them, asking them to follow his character and then revealing that there's nothing under their chosen shell. Martin gives his audience a character so perfectly crafted in the style of Joseph Campbell's "mythic protagonist […] the one who leaves home, sacrifices himself for the good of his people, and is reborn to live happily ever after," and then suddenly, without warning, removes him from the narrative. The sudden reversal leaves them lost; in a genre built by audience expectations, suddenly the reader doesn't know what to expect anymore.

The first text, *A Game of Thrones*, follows Eddard Stark's journey from his role as Lord of the North in Winterfell, the Stark family's ancestral fortress, to the royal seat at King's Landing where he will become the "Hand of the King," the most powerful advisory position in the kingdom. This, of course, makes his public execution three-fourths of the way through the text quite a shock to the reader, for whom the killing-off of main characters has heretofore been taboo. "For once," writes Ned Vizzini, "the hero actually bit it—after showing that he was a brave and principled family man against a backdrop of schemers" no less. Even worse is the manner in which he dies. Promised his life by the Crown in exchange for his promise to "take the black and live out the rest of [his] days on the Wall" as a member of the Night's Watch, Eddard publicly claims that he has betrayed the realm and rescinds his accusation that the boy-king Joffrey is not the trueborn heir of Robert Baratheon (635). His testimony is, of course, false. After all, Eddard Stark is a monomythic hero in the classic Campbellian style: noble, loyal, honest, and willing, as Eddard is here, to sacrifice his own name and self for the greater good. In *A Game of Thrones*, Eddard sacrifices his individual honor in order to help quell threat of rebellion against the crown and all-out war. But, at the whims of an immature ruler, Eddard's life-sentence of service on the Wall is turned into a death sentence, and he is beheaded in the public square (727).

The great and terrible irony, of course, is what the audience already knows, that Eddard's accusation *is* true, that Joffrey *is not* the trueborn heir of the late King, and that he has not

committed any treason at all. Television critic Scott Meslow, writing of the scene's portrayal in the television series, remarks that "Ned's death is horrific in its indignity. He's dragged in front of a jeering crowd, where he confesses to a crime he didn't commit, and praises the rightness of the false king Joffrey." It's "nightmarish," Meslow continues, "there's no justice to be found in Ned's actual death—only cruelty and petty vengeance." Not at all an end fit for the high fantasy hero that is Eddard Stark, the Lord of Winterfell. This circumvention of expectation became all the more powerful in HBO's marketing strategy during the lead-up to the first season of *Game of Thrones* when the network made "Sean Bean's doomed Eddard Stark the literal poster boy for the first season," [**Fig. 1**] proving "an effective set-up to jolt those experiencing Westeros for the first time through the show." (Lowder) Of course, the truth is there all along—each poster is accompanied by an ominous tagline "You win or you die." But, only those familiar with the book series would have realized what twist was being given away. Time and time again, Martin has set-up his audience, and demonstrated to them that no one is safe from harm in "the game of thrones," not even the hero. If there is a moral to Martin's story, perhaps it's the idea that there is no one hero that will save the world for us, that there is no clear-cut good and evil, no tidy happily ever afters. Martin's multi-protagonist, multi-arc story asks us to realize that there is no master narrative, not even in fiction. In fact, Martin seems to suggest, there never was.

In fact, the medievalism of the text acts as a kind of simulacrum. "The simulacrum," opens Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, "is never what hides the truth - *,* it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true." Baudrillard's precession of the simulacra mirrors the concept of medievalism as it has developed from the waning of the Middle Ages until the present. From the first representations of the medieval period, which marked "the reflection of a profound reality," to the slow divergence between representation and reality, the concept of a medieval subject has been so abstracted as to preclude any representation of reality at all. Now, in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the representations of the Middle Ages have reached the final stage in Baudrillard's process, in which the representation becomes "its own pure simulacrum." This is the stage of the hyperreal, wherein the myth of the Middle Ages has become so pervasive within our cultural memory that we can no longer tell the difference between post-medieval romanticizations of the medieval period and the historical reality. The classic example of the concept in Baudrillardian postmodernism is the Disneyland theme park in California, which he likens to a simulacrum of the modern United States. "Everywhere in Disneyland," Baudrillard writes, is "the objective profile of America [...] All its values are exalted by the miniature and the comic strip. Embalmed and pacified." Disneyland acts as an "'ideological' blanket" that conceals the fact that it is actually a representation of the country which pretends to be imaginary in order to conceal the truth that it is real; it is "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real" when, in fact, the "real" world is actually the imaginary one.

Martin's own explanation about his use of the Middle Ages, and the ways his representation diverges from classic medievalized fantasy works, is strongly reminiscent of Baudrillard's explanation of the simulacra. In 2011 interview, John Hodgman quotes Martin as saying:

> I sort of had a problem with a lot of the fantasy I was reading, because it seemed to me that the middle ages or some version of the quasi middle ages was the preferred setting of a vast majority of the fantasy novels that I was reading by Tolkien

> imitators and other fantasists, yet they were getting it all wrong. It was a sort of Disneyland middle ages, where they had castles and princesses and all that.

Martin's medievalism isn't intended to be a representation of a real Middle Ages, or even a "quasi middle ages." Instead, it is that "ideological blanket" which conceals the fact that Martin's universe is only pretending to be imaginary. In actuality, Martin's work acts as a realistic representation of the contemporary world that has taken on the artifice of the Middle Ages; underneath the illusion, the differences between Martin's world and the contemporary world are negligible. Westeros and the world of the contemporary West are two sides of the same coin.

The point behind this disguising of identity is that the process enacts a metaphysical distance between identity and representation where it becomes possible to imagine alternative identities and histories. It's like attending a masquerade ball and creating a new identity for yourself to match your new outer appearance, an identity that is not but could have been. Baudrillard writes that "history [is] our lost referential, […] our myth," perhaps even "the last great myth," and I think Martin's text acknowledges, at least in terms of narrative, that the idea of history has already been a great myth for quite some time. But Martin, instead of participating in the great myth of history, uses his series to advocate for realism:

> I think if you're going to write about that period then you should reflect honestly what it's about, and capture both sides of that. The, you know, whatever emotional stirring we feel when we see the banner proudly flying in the wind and we hear the bugles' charge, and the drums are beating and the armies surge forward. But also the aftermath (Martin).

He doesn't endorse realism out of the desire to make representations of the Middle Ages more accurate for the sake of history, but to remind us that our representations of the medieval have always been about the contemporary first and the medieval second, fully cognizant of the hazardous consequences of building identities, national or individual around the myth of history.

In his famous essay "The Return of the Middle Ages," Umberto Eco attempts to understand the reasons why contemporary Western culture continually reinvents the Middle Ages for itself. "The Middle Ages," Eco concludes, "are the root of all our contemporary 'hot' problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origins" (Eco, 65). In other words, the "medieval world model" can have "a direct explanatory power for us because a good part of our reality is historically grounded in it" (Pietropaolo, 131). What Eco describes here is an act of abreaction: we conceptualize a link between the medieval and the modern and acknowledge that though they are related facets of the same historical trajectory, there is an essential difference between them, a gap between what it is to be medieval and what it is to be modern. The practice of medievalism is our attempt to fill the space between, to explain how our culture got from point A (the Middle Ages) to point B (modernity). We cannot know the Middle Ages impartially because we are always abstracting it at a distance. This is a consequence of the Western tradition that persists in representing the Middle Ages as a historical mirror upon which the drama of the contemporary may play out in fancy dress and with no consequences. When we

attempt to represent the Middle Ages, all we can produce are the myths of medievalism, as Martin points out above.

Martin's work reminds us that our representations of the medieval have always been about the contemporary first and the medieval second, and warns us of the consequences of building identities, national or individual around the myths of history. He disrupts the process of history, creating a world that is both static (consider the role of seasons in the text) and self-repeating historical cycle (there is a sense throughout the books that the conflict being fought now is really just a reenactment of the dynastic wars that were fought a generation before). And he collapses the distance between reality and fiction by transplanting an interpretation of historical events—the Wars of the Roses—into this world of fantasy. This world of fantasy which, as many have noted, seems to geographically and conceptually reproduce our own. Naming the two large land masses Westeros and Essos isn't exactly subtle, after all. All this cooperates to create a sense that the story and characters of *A Song of Ice and Fire* are both half-foreign and half-familiar, that the world of the text operates as a metaphorical version of our own historical reality. Underneath the artifice of medievalism, then, the differences between Martin's world and the contemporary world are negligible. The medievalized Westeros and the world of the contemporary West are really just two sides of the same coin, and the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* can be utilized as a free space in which to explore a host of issues that concern modern culture.

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