A Note on Terminology

As it has become customary within colloquial parlance to refer to the common world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the book series created by George R. R. Martin, and *Game of Thrones*, the HBO television series adapted from the books, by the name of the television show, for sake of ease and consistency I will continue that tradition. However, a distinction must be drawn between the name of the television show and that of the first book in the series, *A Game of Thrones*. The title of the first book in the series utilizes a clear indefinite article at its beginning, and it is with this article that I will make a distinction between the two. All other titles and terminology should be self-evident.

Introduction

When considering the genre of fantasy, it is easy to dismiss it as niche or isolated. To be sure, magic and monsters seem about as far removed from the general human experience as one can get. Moreover, fantasy, as other genres, is not immune to truly terrible offerings, which present as all the more outrageous given the seemingly alien worlds within the fantasy genre. However, fantasy, like its settings and characters, may be more than it appears on the surface. As a genre, fantasy is relatively new to the literary corpus and continues to develop and expand over time, often drawing from reality for

inspiration. Historical cultures are excellent models for those who work in the fantasy genre to draw upon as they present a relatable connection to a generalized human past, through an alternate yet familiar portrait of humanity. At its core, fantasy explores themes and ideas immediately relevant to the human experience, but free from the bias of convention or oversaturation. As such, the fantasy genre acts as a mirror, to reflect social commentary through the lens of familiar or relatable human history and culture.

One of the most successful examples of fantasy works in recent years is George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series, and extending the popularity of Martin's epic saga is HBO's hit television series, *Game of Thrones*. To say that the cultural influence of both series is far-reaching would be an understatement. The show continues to gain both viewership and critical acclaim with every season, and the book series has expanded beyond its original design to include novellas such as *The Tales of Dunk & Egg*, graphic novels, board games, and companion publications such as *The World of Ice & Fire*. These various adaptations, as well as their respective sales, prove not only the series' popularity, but also its relevance to current culture. It would thus stand to reason that the inspiration behind Martin and HBO's work would also prove to be not only popular, but relevant as well.

It is most often cited that Martin took inspiration for *A Song of Ice and Fire* from the period in English history known of the War of the Roses.[1] However, the series is full of many other examples of historical and cultural similarities to other times and places in European history. Two periods that contribute such similarities are Greco-Roman Antiquity and the Norse Middle Ages. Both have rich histories and literary traditions to draw upon as

[1] Carolyne Larrington, *Winter is Coming* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), 2.

inspiration for *Game of Thrones*. Literary sources often provide the clearest picture of the lives and values of the people living around the time of their composition, and as such make the best investigative tool for comparison to the works of Martin and HBO. Thus the bulk of my examination will come from the literature of the Greco-Roman and Norse traditions, but not to the exclusion of all else. For the sake of simplicity and the size of this paper, I have chosen a small handful of relevant examples from these two periods, and the cultures therein, to illustrate my points. Martin himself has stated previously his appreciation and fondness for historical fiction, but also acknowledges the limitations of the genre.[2] Therefore the comparisons of this paper are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Martin has also claimed inspiration from other authors, particularly early fantasy author J. R. R. Tolkien.[3] Tolkien himself drew heavy inspiration for his pioneering work from the Old Norse and Old English literature of which he was a scholar.[4] It is precisely this legacy of inspiration that underscores fantasy as a genre, and positions it within a greater literary tradition that spans and intersects other cultures and periods of human history.

Point of View and Literary Transmission

One key notion to keep in mind when considering the influence of Classical and Norse sources on the *Game of Thrones* corpus is that of point of view. As with other forms

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[2] Mikal Gilmore, "George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview," Rolling Stone, April 23, 2014, accessed August 25, 2017, http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-20140423.

[3] Wayne MacLaurin, "A Conversation With George R.R. Martin," SF Site, 2001, accessed August 25, 2017, https://www.sfsite.com/01a/gm95.htm.

[4] Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 154.

of literary technique, point of view plays an important role in understanding the broader context of a work, and it is paramount to consider the motivation of the narrator alongside the content of the narrative. Within the world created by George R. R. Martin, and adapted by David Benioff and Dan Weiss, the narrative is presented from the perspective of individual characters within the larger story.

Martin's choice to present the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* to readers through the experiences of individual characters is not thoughtless. The scope of the world that he has created is so vast and complex that it could not possibly be experienced, considered, and imparted by any one human person. In this way, Martin enshrines his narrative within the human experience, allowing for easier and more direct commentary on the experience of humanity itself. He states that "[h]aving multiple viewpoints is crucial" to the structure of his narrative because "real human beings" undergo "processes of self-justification" to rationalize their actions, and goes on to state this as a process that repeats "throughout history."[5] By proffering the events and mythology of his world through its people, Martin compartmentalizes them, creating easily consumable parts of a much larger whole, which allows for the narrative to be absorbed by its human audience.

However, the individual points of view of all the characters in Martin's world also present the narrative as disjointed and fragmentary, a reality that is mirrored in the war-torn world of Westeros, and indeed the preservation and transmission of historical sources. The split structure of Martin's narrative mimics that of the human experience, which is bound by the limits of its own comprehension. Martin often quotes as his "guiding

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[5] LOCUS Online, "George R.R. Martin: The Gray Lords," November 2005, accessed August 27, 2017, http://www.locusmag.com/2005/Issues/11Martin.html.

principle" the words of William Faulkner, who said that only "the human heart in conflict with itself" is "worth writing about."[6] These conflicts are clear within the points of view of each character, and it is important to consider them, along with Martin's motivations, when engaging with his narrative.

Ancient and Norse sources were less interested in presenting human experiences to audiences, preferring stories of the gods, but the need for audiences to relate to narrative content was also necessary. However, as the consumers of these sources were obviously members of their respective societies, point of view and an author's motivations can provide valuable insight into each respective culture. As with the work of Martin, it is through this lens that we must consider the sources of Greco-Roman Antiquity and the Norse world.

One obvious problem with trying to quantify the Greco-Roman literary corpus is that of longevity. Though Latin was slow to establish its place as the language of academia, it did eventually rise to its position, through its use in the Roman Empire and later the Catholic church, to become the *lingua franca* of the literary community.[7] For the sake of having a useful definition, I will make use of the one established by Ayelet Haimson Lushkov in her work on the influence on *Game of Thrones* of the classical period, which she roughly defines as "the world of the ancient Mediterranean" from approximately 800 BC

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[6] Rachael Brown, "George R.R. Martin on Sex, Fantasy, and 'A Dance With Dragons'," The Atlantic, July 11, 2011, accessed August 25, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/07/george-rr-martin-on-sex-fantasy-and-a-dance-with-dragons/241738/.

[7] Brian W. Breed, "Latin Literature, Beginnings of," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2010), http://www.oxfordreference.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780195170726.001.0001/acref-9780195170726-e-686

until AD 400.[8] Greek and Roman authors in this period often wrote of events that at earliest had occurred hundred of years before their time, if indeed they happened at all, and would adapt the mythological tales known to their audiences for their own purposes, to be either preformed or read.

Norse literary sources recorded during the Viking Age are, by and large, nonexistent. That is to say that the process of writing in a Latin-based script only came to Scandinavia with the advent of Christianity, and thus almost exclusively began in or around the late tenth century.[9] Previously, Nordic narrative culture was transmitted orally from generation to generation.[10] Sources, if written at all, were carved into materials such as stone or wood in runic script, which was not conducive for the recording of lengthy or detailed accounts, and was further complicated due to the impermanence of wood.[11] Written sources by native Scandinavians only began to flourish around the eleventh century, but were not prevalent until around the thirteen century, almost 400 years after the Viking Age had concluded.[12] As such, the narrative culture extant for the study of Viking Age society is almost exclusively presented through a Christian lens, a culture that began and developed thousands of kilometres away in continental Europe and initially viewed Viking Age Scandinavians as divine retribution for their mortally sinful ways.[13]

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[8] Ayelet Haimson Lushkov, *You Win or You Die* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2017), xi.

[9] John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7-10.

[10] Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, *The Vikings and Their Age*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 105.

[11] Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 10-11.

[12] Somerville and McDonald, *Vikings*, 86.

[13] O'Donoghue, *Literature*, 3.

Therefore, when considering Old Norse sources, it is paramount to consider how and why and by whom they were transmitted. The same holds true for Greco-Roman sources, as well as those of Martin and HBO. It is precisely within these often hidden motivations that we can find the conflict of the human heart.

At the onset of the television show's seventh season, three out of five of the show's core cast claim various sections of the same land as its ruler. All believe themselves to be the rightful monarch and put forth a narrative to support their claim. Cersei Lannister claims power as the sole remaining member from the ruling family, claiming to be the protector against a foreign invasion by Daenerys Targaryen and her eastern armies. Daenerys claims her power as the last known heir of the previous Targaryen dynasty, asserting rule over Westeros as her birthright. Finally, Jon Snow considers himself the rightfully elected King in the North, invested with power by the northerners and chosen as the defender of their interests from the southern monarchs that seek to control the vast North. All three present their narratives in the way that best suits their needs and all three vehemently believe they are right. The multilayered intricacy of the *Game of Thrones* narrative is precisely what draws in its audience. It challenges the preconceived notions of what a story is, and asks its audience to consider not just their own perspectives, but those to the story's characters as well. In this way Martin and HBO play with the idea of the unreliable narrator, by making each narrator reliable to only themselves, mimicking human experience and adding to the realism of the story.

The Wall

One important Roman inspiration for the *Game of Thrones* world is not literary in origin, but is of such importance to the series that it would be negligent not to explore. George R. R. Martin has stated very clearly that the inspiration for the 700-foot high wall of ice in his series comes from Hadrian's Wall in the north of England.[14] Martin goes on to say that as "fantasy is the stuff of bright colours and being larger than real life," his "Wall is bigger and considerably longer and more magical," and moreover "what lies beyond it has to be more than just Scots."[15]

Construction of Hadrian's Wall seems to have begun in AD 122, which corresponds with a journey the Emperor, for whom the Wall is named, took to the Roman province of *Britannia*.[16] Hadrian understood that Roman expansion "could not continue indefinitely" and sought to "stabilize" Roman frontiers.[17] Hadrian's Wall delineated the northernmost boundary of the Roman Empire until in AD 142 it was for a time replaced by the Antonine Wall, before once again being established as a primary demarcation line through Roman military occupation around AD 163.[18] However, the design and ultimate purpose of the wall remains a topic of academic speculation.

A common misconception about Hadrian's Wall was that it was a purely defensive fortification to stop any and all movement from crossing into and out of the Roman

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[14] MacLaurin, "A Conversation,".
[15] MacLaurin, "A Conversation,".
[16] David J. Breeze, *Roman Frontiers In Britain* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2007), 37.
[17] Guy de la Bédoyère, *Hadrian's Wall: History & Guide* (Stroud: Tempus, 1998), 12.
[18] De la Bédoyère, *Hadrian's Wall*, 27-8.

province of Britannia. However, the multiple gateways along its length, for one, contest such a limited definition. While the true purpose of Hadrian's Wall remains shrouded in mystery, it is precisely within its design that scholars can glean clues as to its true function. In his work *Hadrian's Wall: History & Guide*, Guy de la Bédoyère states that Hadrian's Wall "had no one purpose," and proposes several functions for the wall that, among other things, served to provide a sense of security to the south, to provide a sense of the might of Rome to the north, and was a "practical project" for the Roman Army.[19] De la Bédoyère, however, also suggests what the wall was not: an outright obstruction. Oddly enough, almost no ancient sources exist to comment on the construction or function of the wall, except for the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, written "perhaps 250 years" after the wall's conception.[20] Though the historical authenticity of this work is assuredly problematic, it presents the following on the subject of Hadrian's Wall, which gives the only literary clue we have to the original function of Hadrian's Wall: "*murumque per octoginta milia passuum primus duxit, qui barbaros Romanosque divideret*," [and as the first, he built a wall eighty miles long, which divided the barbarians and the Romans.].[21] The statement, however, can be interpreted in a number of ways, and does not take into account the ways in which the wall's function changed over time. To this day, archaeologists have yet "no consensus" on the wall's original function or what it accomplished.[22]

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[19] De la Bédoyère, *Hadrian's Wall*, 25.

[20] David J. Breeze, *Hadrian's Wall: A History of Archaeological Thought* (Kendal: Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, 2014), 11.

[21] David Magie, Ainsworth O'Brien-Moore, and Susan Helen Ballou, eds. "De Vita Hadriani," in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (London: William Heinemann, 1921), 11.2.

[22] Rob Collins and Matthew Symonds, "Challenging Preconceptions about Hadrian's Wall," in *Breaking Down Boundaries: Hadrian's Wall In the 21st Century* (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2013), 11.

Speculation on the function of the wall aside, the most easily defensible of de la Bédoyère's assertions is that of what Hadrian's Wall did not function as, chiefly an "absolute barrier."[23] It would simply be in fundamental opposition to the function of Roman structures and the operation of its army. Scholarship has "widely recognised" Roman constructions as placing little value on defense.[24] This would be in line with the operation of the Roman military force, which was "offensive" in nature and preferred to "operate in the field" where their tactics would have the greatest effect.[25] Furthermore, manning the wall was a significant undertaking, not least of all due to the number of structures along the wall that required manning. The density of soldiers along Hadrian's Wall was simply "too thinly spread" to defend against a concentrated attack.[26]

Perhaps the sheer number of bodies needed to man Hadrian's Wall gave Martin his inspiration for the state of the Night's Watch, the guardians of the 700-foot counterpart in *Game of Thrones*, who beginning in the first novel and continuing throughout the series are presented as crucially lacking the numbers to garrison more than just three of the nineteen fortresses along the Wall's length.

The Wall, like its real-world counterpart is covered in some mystery. Though the story of its creation is commonly known in Westeros, the details presented are somewhat puzzling. In the companion book to the series, *The World of Ice & Fire*, Martin et al. state

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[23] De la Bédoyère, *Hadrian's Wall*, 25.

[24] Richard Geoffrey Hartis, "Beyond Functionalism: A Quantitative Survey and Semiotic Reading of Hadrian's Wall" (PhD diss., Durham University, 2010), 66.

[25] Breeze, *Frontiers*, 42.

[26] Hartis, "Beyond Functionalism," 67.

that the Wall's purpose is "to defend the realms of men."[27] This statement, like the previous one on Hadrian's Wall can be interpreted in a number of ways. However, it is the building of the Wall that is of interest. Martin et al. go on to discuss the Wall's construction as having been achieved through cutting the ice from "nearby lakes" into "huge blocks" that were then used to build the Wall.[28] However, with a wall that is 700-feet high and wide enough for a "dozen armored knights to ride abreast," and stretches along the width of the continent, the explanation for the amount of ice, as well as the time, needed for the Wall's construction seems insufficient.[29] True that the Wall is established as magical, but Martin makes note to say that legends are of "dubious value."[30] Is this perhaps an oversight on the part of Martin's abilities in engineering and construction? Or is there perhaps some more information to come? After all, the Romans had a difficult enough time constructing their wall, and they had the might of the Roman army to help them.

Though the Roman army manned Hadrian's Wall, it is the Night Watch that man Martin's Wall. Unlike the Roman army however, the Night's Watch is undisciplined, though not for lack of trying. The prospect of living the rest of one's days at the frozen edge of the world is a difficult one to market to potential newcomers. However, the Wall establishes a noteworthy dichotomy of human interest: that of the Night's Watch and the Free Folk separated by a barrier that is semi-transparent. The symbolism seems quite clear, and Martin is known for the obscured obvious. Though the two groups begin in opposition to

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[27] George R. R. Martin, Elio García Jr., and Linda Antonsson, *The World of Ice & Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and The Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Books, 2014), 12.
[28] Martin, García Jr., and Antonsson, *World*, 145.
[29] George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 184.
[30] Martin, García Jr., and Antonsson, *World*, 145.

each other, as the narrative progresses, the lines become more blurred.[31] It should now come as no surprise that the Wall is not made of an opaque material, as it now harkens to the many walls in the real world, both physical and imagined, that humanity builds for itself to maintain division.[32] Perhaps the best summary for the Wall comes from Ygritte: "You know nothing, Jon Snow. This wall is made o' blood."[33]

Guest Right, Xenia

Hospitality, Carolyne Larrington states, is "a central obligation of human interaction," and argues that the Latin words *hospes* [host, guest] and *hostis* [enemy] are related.[34] Indeed, both words seem to have a common Proto-Italic root.[35] [36] The dichotomy of guest/host relations is established quite early on in *Game of Thrones* (within the first eight chapters of the book series and by the end of the first episode of the television show). Brandon "Bran" Stark, a point of view character in the novels and main cast member on the show, is climbing the Broken Tower of Winterfell, his home, when he stumbles upon the incestuous secret of Queen Cersei Lannister and her brother Jaime Lannister, who are guests of his father, and by extension him.[37] Bran would have been better off not knowing,

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[31] Larrington, *Winter*, 76.

[32] Larrington, *Winter*, 75.

[33] George R. R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 411.

[34] Larrington, *Winter*, 34.

[35] "Hospes," Etymological Dictionary of Latin, first published online October 2010, accessed August 28, 2017, http://dictionaries.brillonline.com/search#dictionary=latin&id=la0772.

[36] "Hostis," Etymological Dictionary of Latin, first published online October 2010, accessed August 28, 2017, http://dictionaries.brillonline.com/search#dictionary=latin&id=la0773. First published online: October 2010.

[37] Martin, *Thrones*, 84-5.

and all parties would have been safer. But it is Bran's comfort and familiarity with his own home that puts him in danger, and ultimately leads to Jaime's most famous words and the consequences thereafter.[38] Martin perfectly foreshadows the events and themes that are yet to come, to greater degree, in the rest of his work: that norms and customs are often transgressed by human desire and ambition.

As in Westeros, so too do the laws of hospitality apply to the Greco-Roman world and are known by the word *xenia*. Ayelet Haimson Lushkov argues that hidden natures often "shine through" at feasts, and a "staple of ancient myth" was to have hosts use feasts as a testing ground to reveal hidden truths, particularly if their guest was in fact a god.[39] However, Lushkov continues by pointing out the breach of *xenia* in doing so, not simply because of the violation of the guest's right to security, but also because the test was often extreme in nature, involving "something taboo, like the serving of human flesh," to gauge the guest's presumed immortality.[40]

One of the best examples of Roman literature to feature the transgression of *xenia* involving the use of human flesh is Seneca's *Thyestes*. The *Thyestes* centres on the cursed House of Pelops, so-cursed because its founding member, Tantalus, who is also a son of Zeus, attempts to feed his son to the god.[41] Although Pelops' attempt ultimately fails, the violation of *xenia*, as well as the laws of nature (through cannibalism), was considered "so abhorrent" that the family was cursed to carry the burden of his crime until it eventually

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[38] Martin, *Thrones*, 85.
[39] Lushkov, *You Win*, 45.
[40] Lushkov, *You Win*, 45.
[41] Lushkov, *You Win*, 46.

destroys itself.[42] The curse thus carries on to successive generations, manifesting in the feud between brothers Atreus and Thyestes, grandchildren of Tantalus. In the play Atreus concocts a scheme whereby he is able to slaughter Thyestes' two sons and feed them to their unsuspecting father. Thyestes gorges himself unwillingly on his family members, which he had previously done willingly when he slept with Atreus' wife and began the conflict between the two brothers, as the audience grows more and more horrified, keenly aware of the atrocities being committed by multiple characters.

Seneca's narrative of dynastic consumption draws obvious and striking parallels to the most infamous scene of guest right violation in *Game of Thrones*, the Red Wedding, a bloody revenge feast plotted by Walder Frey, Tywin Lannister, and Roose Bolton against House Stark. The Lannisters have been established as Stark foes since the beginning of the series; their nominal opposition being preserved from the inspiration of the War of the Roses, in which the two royal houses Lancaster and York fought for the English throne. However the Freys and the Boltons, though untrustworthy, had not been outright enemies of the Starks before this point, at least not to the contemporary generation represented in the narrative. Martin hints that something is amiss through Catelyn Stark when she thought, "Now we should be safe."[43] Such statements are usually promises from Martin that his character is unaware and the audience should pay attention. True to form Martin, and later Benioff and Weiss, deliver a savage blow to the Starks, their bannermen, and the fans of the series. The horror of the Red Wedding aside, it is the repercussions of the same wedding that are of particular note.

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[42] Lushkov, *You Win*, 47.

[43] Martin, *Swords*, 679.

The final scene of the sixth season of *Game of Thrones* brings its audience back to The Twins, where the Freys are apparently still celebrating their victory over the Starks, an event that occurred almost a full three seasons previous, which demonstrates in just how high regard the Freys consider their actions against the Starks. Lord Walder Frey is shown to be presiding over the event and enjoying a piece of a savoury pie, as an unknown serving woman, who is later revealed to be Arya Stark in disguise, attends him.[44] Attention is slowly drawn to the pie as the horror builds in both Lord Frey and the audience, much as it had in the *Thyestes* before it. The cannibalism is of course horrific in and of itself, but it is the consumption of one's own family that makes the act that much worse, and recalls another tale of cannibalism in the world of *Game of Thrones*, that of the Rat Cook, who served a king a pie made of his own son as an act of vengeance.[45] The story of the Rat Cook makes clear the Westerosi view on the subject in that the cannibalism is not presented a religious sin, but it is the violation of guest right "that the gods cannot forgive."[46] Within the world of the book series, it is Lord Wyman Manderly who is hinted as the orchestrator of the Frey pies, and he bakes three of them from three different Freys.[47] Of course Lord Manderly also takes part in the eating, which adds a new and different dimension of unease for the audience.

Lest the Old Norse tradition be absent from a discussion on cannibalism in literature, the motif of familial consumption is present in the Icelandic legendary saga

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[44] David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, "The Winds of Winter," *Game of Thrones*, season 6, episode 10, directed by Miguel Sapochnik, aired June 26, 2016 (New York: Home Box Office, 2016).
[45] Larrington, *Winter*, 168.
[46] Martin, *Swords*, 764.
[47] George R. R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* (New York: Bantam Books, 2013), 542-4.

known as *Völsunga saga*. Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, a principal character within the saga, is forced to marry for a third time in the final act of the narrative, to none other than King Atli (Attila the Hun). As revenge for killing her brothers, Guðrún kills her children with Atli and serves their blood "mixed with wine" in cups made of their skulls, and roasts their hearts on a spit for him to eat.[48] It is important to note that Guðrún's brothers are considered closer kin than her children with Atli, as children of a marriage union were seen as belonging to their father's family. This "general privileging of patriliny over matriliny" resounds structurally within Old Norse myth, and was a foundation on which kinship was established.[49] A similar motif of killing one's children is found in Euripedes' story of Medea.[50]

The Red Wedding is as significant a violation of guest right as is possible. But its justifications are morally grey, as they had been in the *Thyestes*. The Starks had after all broken their promise made to the Freys. But does that justify the actions of the Freys against them? Is Atreus justified in his actions against Thyestes? These questions speak to the root of the eye for an eye mentality of vengeance that is a common trope of both Greco-Roman and Norse literature. Martin has stated in the past that the Red Wedding "was the

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[48] Jesse L. Byock, trans., *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 104.

[49] Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 57.

[50] Sarah Hitch, "Medea," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). http://www.oxfordreference.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780195170726.001.0001/acref-9780195170726-e-780.

hardest thing [he] ever wrote," going so far as to write the entirety of *A Storm of Swords* before attempting it.[51] Perhaps that leaves hope for the end of the series after all.

[51] Amy Gentry, "LoneStarCon 3: The George R. R. Martin Interview," The Austin Chronicle, August 29, 2013, accessed August 28, 2017, https://www.austinchronicle.com/daily/books/2013-08-29/lonestarcon-3-the-george-r-r-martin-interview/.

Widowhood

Recently much scholarship has been done on the role of women in Old Norse literature. A cursory glance could present a misleading and one-dimensional view of female agency. However, contemporary scholarship provides a more nuanced view, one where women resourcefully navigate a male-dominated world to gain advantages and power.

One role in which women in Old Norse society had great agency was that of widowhood. Widows (and divorced women) were able to manage their family's affairs, arrange marriages, run businesses, and take on other roles that were traditionally seen as masculine. Carol Clover writes that women, particularly widowed or divorced, who were "sufficiently ambitious and sufficiently endowed with money and power" were not "especially hindered by notions of male and female nature."[52] Widowhood, more than anything else, seems to have afforded women freedom from the confines of traditional gendered roles.

The best example of the agency afforded to widows in the Old Norse world can be found in Auðr djúpúðga Ketilsdóttir, a ninth century Icelandic settler of Norwegian origin, known better to English-speaking audiences as Unn the Deep-Minded. Auðr was a daughter of Ketill Flatnose, a respected chieftain and Viking military commander who left Norway for Scotland when his interests clashed with those of the Norwegian king Harold Fairhair.[53] Auðr followed her father to Scotland, where the family settled for some time. There, she would marry Óleifur the White, ruler of Viking Dublin, and the two had a son named

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[52] Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Representations*, no. 44 (Autumn 1993): 5, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928638.
[53] Somerville and McDonald, *Vikings*, 80.

Þorsteinn the Red. Óleifur would later be killed by "the descendants of Earl Sverting," while Þorsteinn would go on to be acknowledged as ruler of half of Scotland, before being killed by the Scots.[54] It is here that a clear parallel can be seen between Auðr and Catelyn Stark.

Auðr, as a widow, then became the head of her family. She had a ship built in secret and left Scotland with all of her kinsfolk and wealth.[55] Describing what an "exceptional woman" Auðr was, the saga states, "it is hard to find another example of a woman managing to escape from such a hostile situation with as much wealth and so many followers."[56] While Catelyn Stark was not quite so lucky as Auðr, she too became the head of her family in a way after the Boltons brutally and fatally betrayed her son. Though Catelyn was slain at the Red Wedding, along with her son Robb and most of the loyal Stark bannermen, at least in the book series she is resurrected as Lady Stoneheart, leading the Brotherhood Without Banners in seeking vengeance on those who have wronged her and her family, chiefly the Freys. Catelyn had previously always taken on an advisory role, both to her husband and later her son, and her council was accepted and appreciated by the men around her. However, it is within the Lady Stoneheart aspect of her character that we see Catelyn with her greatest agency yet, commanding a force of soldiers to do her bidding. It is also interesting that as a corpse, Lady Stoneheart challenges that notion of what is considered female, at least within the world of Westeros. Her undead nature seems to be in opposition to her previous role of mother and life-giver to the Stark children, most of whom she believes to be dead, and she likely can no longer bear children, something that

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[54] Keneva Kunz, trans., "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 276-8.

[55] Kunz, "Laxardal," 278.

[56] Kunz, "Laxardal," 278.

her character had been preoccupied with in earlier novels. It would seem that Catelyn Stark, shed of her previously stark femininity as Lady Stoneheart, takes on the more aggressive qualities usually associated with masculinity. For her part, Auðr also negotiates her position regardless of her biological sex, and free from the expectations previously placed on her to marry and produce children, takes charge of her family and situation in a way atypical of female characters in Norse literature.

Auðr goes on to settle her family in Iceland, but not before making a slow procession through the Orkney and the Faroe Islands, marrying off the daughters of her son to high-status families in both regions.[57] Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald compare her voyage to Iceland to that of a "royal progress," which demonstrates her newly acquired high status in her own right.[58] It is in this new status that another comparison can be drawn, this time to Lady Olenna Tyrell. Lady Olenna, aptly nicknamed the Queen of Thorns for her sharp wit, acts as the de facto leader of House Tyrell, despite the de jure head of the household being her son Mace Tyrell. Though born into House Redwyne, bannermen to House Tyrell, Lady Olenna's fierce loyalty to House Tyrell can be seen as her achievement of a greater status than the one she was born into, similarly to Auðr.

It would seem then that in Westeros, as in the Norse world, being female does not preclude one from acquiring power, but does make it more difficult. Conversely, being male does not confer authority outright. Clover states that the "machismo of Norse males, at least as they are portrayed in the literature," seems to suggest that being born male "did not confer automatic superiority," as "distinction had to be acquired, and constantly

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[57] Kunz, "Laxardal," 278-9.

[58] Somerville and McDonald, *Vikings*, 81.

reacquired, by wresting it away from others."[59] Clover goes on to establish that the binary of status in Old Norse literature is not necessarily drawn between men and women, but between strong and weak, which itself is a common theme of *Game of Thrones*. Lady Olenna is a perfect example of this, as she often supersedes her son in authority, particularly in matters concerning House Tyrell, routinely calling him an "oaf" along with her late husband.[60] [61] However, as is evidenced by other marriages, if her husband had been alive, doubtless she would not have the same level of authority. Still, Lady Olenna is a fascinating case study on widowhood in the world of Westeros, and her words should be heeded: "All these kings would do a deal better if they put down their swords and listened to their mothers."[62]

Incest

As in our world, so too is the subject of and engagement in incest taboo in *Game of Thrones*. Despite this, the practice is surprisingly common and multiple characters within the series engage in some form of incest. Incestuous relationships vary in degree of consanguinity and consent, from the daughter-wives of Craster, to the cousin marriages of the noble houses, close-kin relationships take multiple forms and have varying levels of acceptance. The most common and notable incestuous relationships, however, are found in

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[59] Clover, "Regardless," 13.
[60] Martin, *Swords*, 81.
[61] David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, "Dark Wing, Dark Words," *Game of Thrones*, season 3, episode 2, directed by Daniel Minahan, aired April 7, 2013 (New York: Home Box Office, 2013).
[62] Martin, *Swords*, 84.

House Targaryen, who regularly and historically engage in culturally accepted and prevalent forms of incest. On the topic of incest, Catelyn Stark echoes the religious sentiments of Westeros in thinking that incest is "a monstrous sin" and that those children born of such a union "were named abominations" by religious authority, clearly overlooking some of the marriages of the nobility.[63] She continues, however, by establishing the Targaryen exception, that due to their descent from the Valyrian culture, both the Targaryens and their dragons "answered to neither gods nor men."[64] Her statements immediately establish the Targaryen dynasty in a separate social class than other families, and its members as mythical and above the religious authority governing the lives and relationships of the rest of the realm.

A clear parallel within the classical world to the Targaryen practice of incestuous marriage is that of Ancient Egypt, where the Ptolemaic dynasty in particular continued the previous Egyptian tradition of incest, and married and reproduced within its own ranks.[65] However, the practice was not viewed in the same way in the Greco-Roman tradition. Culturally, and later legally, the practice of close-kin relationships was considered *nefas* [religiously immoral] and forbidden to Roman citizens, though it would seem that the guiding principles and laws were different for emperors and non-citizens.[66] Despite this, incest played a prominent role within the religious tradition of Greece and Rome. Instances of incest within the Greco-Roman religious tradition are well attested, and mostly

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[63] George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 497-8.

[64] Martin, *Clash*, 497-8.

[65] Elaine Fantham, "Incest" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. http://www.oxfordreference.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780195170726.001.0001/acref-9780195170726-e-621.

[66] Fantham, "Incest."

performed by the Greco-Roman gods. For example, Zeus/Jupiter, the head of the pantheon is wed to his sister, Hera/Juno, and the two make up the primary coupling within the pantheon. The union of the two is complex and nuanced, to be sure, with Zeus/Jupiter often engaging in extramarital affairs, much to the chagrin of his sister/wife.

The marriage between these two gods draws parallels to that of Aerys II Targaryen, better known as the Mad King, and his sister/wife Rhaella. Not originally intended for each other, their father, Jaehaerys II, compelled his two children to marry after a woods witch, who was the companion to Jenny of Oldstones, the wife of Jaehaerys II's older brother Duncan, prophesised that a child born of Aerys and Rhaella's line would be a mythical saviour known as The Prince That Was Promised.[67] Their union was not a happy one, but both felt duty-bound to maintain it, at least outwardly.[68] As Aerys grew older and sank deeper into madness, their marriage grew more and more strained, culminating in Aerys' multiple brutalities and rapes of Rhaella, the result of which is Daenerys' birth.[69] It is one of the many emotionally complex narratives that Martin spins, to have a beloved character's very existence rooted in violence and tragedy. Though Zeus/Jupiter may not have raped or brutalized his own sister/wife, he often humiliated her with his sexual appetite and constant seductions. As Zeus/Jupiter, so too did Aerys engage in extramarital affairs, though Rhaella, unlike her counterpart in Hera/Juno, seems to have been somewhat more inclined for Aerys' advances to be directed elsewhere.[70]

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[67] Martin, *Dragons*, 329.
[68] Martin, García Jr., and Antonsson, *World*, 115.
[69] George R. R. Martin, *A Feast for Crows* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 330-1.
[70] Martin, García Jr., and Antonsson, *World*, 115.

Moreover, the practice of incest is not limited to the Greco-Roman gods, but appears within the Norse tradition as well. The Norse pantheon is divided into two main groups, the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*. The *Vanir* are distinguished from the *Æsir* in that they historically practiced incest, though the practice was ended when the two groups of gods were incorporated as one, as the *Æsir* would not tolerate it.[71] The *Æsir* and the *Vanir* were incorporated with each other after a great war between the two that was eventually called to a truce with an exchange of hostages.[72] The *Vanir* seem to be gods of fertility and some scholars believe them to be the remnants of a previously sovereign group of gods superseded by the *Æsir*, gods of war and aggression, and take the war between the two as evidence.[73] It is here that we can see some parallel to *Game of Thrones*.

Robert's Rebellion too saw the deposition of the previously incestuous ruling class, which was replaced with a more war-like family: the Baratheons. Furthermore, Robert Baratheon's weapon of choice is the war-hammer, a weapon symbolizing brute force and destruction. Þórr, better known as Thor, was a member of the *Æsir* who also wielded a hammer, and his greatest foe was Jörmungandr, also known as the Midgard Serpent.[74] In the series, Robert Baratheon's greatest foe is presented as Rhaegar Targaryen, whose house sigil is the three-headed dragon, a reptillian creature similar to a snake. Þórr is equated in the Greco-Roman tradition with Heracles, who also fought a large creature with multiple head, the Hydra. The similarities between Þórr and Heracles are numerous, but the best comparison comes in their shared function: protector of mankind and slayer of

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[71] Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 311-2.

[72] Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 45.

[73] Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 53.

[74] Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 287.

monsters.[75] [76] Robert too can be seen as the protector of mankind, at least in the commonly held view of his military victory over the Targaryen dynasty. Interestingly, however, the image of Robert Baratheon portrayed in *Game of Thrones* is one more associated with fertility than war.

Another example of incest within the Old Norse tradition can be found in *Völsunga saga*. Early on the story introduces its audience to two twins of the Völsung line: Sigmund and Signy, the only twins in a long line of sons.[77] After a betrayal that left King Völsung dead and his sons imprisoned, King Siggeir, who orchestrated the plot and was married to Signy against her wishes, arranges that the sons of Völsung would be killed off one by one until only one remained: Sigmund.[78] Signy ensures that Sigmund survives, and as a means of avenging their family, arranges to trick her brother into getting her pregnant.[79]

Procreation between twins also occurs in *Game of Thrones* in the characters of Cersei and Jaime Lannister. The intrigue throughout the first book and season of *Game of Thrones* surrounds the parentage of Queen Cersei's children, and that they are not the children of King Robert. In fact, the succession of the throne hinges on this fact and ultimately leads to the death of Eddard Stark. The parallels between the two sets of incestuous twins seem obvious, and both the revenge of Signy and that of Cersei can be rooted to the marriages forced upon them by their families.

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[75] Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 287-91.

[76] Albert Schachter, "Heracles," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), http://www.oxfordreference.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199545568.001.0001/acref-9780199545568-e-3016

[77] Byock, *Volsungs*, 37.

[78] Byock, *Volsungs*, 40-1.

[79] Byock, *Volsungs*, 41-3.

However, incestuous narratives have another presentation in the Greco-Roman tradition as well. In the Greek story of Oedipus, for example, its titular character engages in accidental incest with his mother. At the onset of the story, Oedipus is the king of Thebes, having married his mother unknowingly. Thebes is besieged by a plague, brought on by the social pollution of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta's hidden incest.[80] As the cause of the plague becomes clear, the characters of the story react in horror and disgust. Depending on the source of the tale, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself with a brooch from her gown.[81] The story demonstrates a clear moral message that incest leads to religious pollution, death, and inter-generational tragedy.

Even with the acceptance for certain incestuous relations, and besides the practices of Ancient Egypt (which are outside of the scope of this paper), incest was not a practice of the common people, neither in antiquity nor the Viking Age, which would seem to suggest that, within both the Classical and Norse worlds, as well as that of *Game of Thrones*, the varying acceptance for incestuous behaviours is rooted in social class. The closest forms of incest are acceptable for gods or god-like rulers, with decreasing levels of acceptable consanguinity for decreasing levels of power and influence.

Conclusion

The ramifications and costs of war are among some of major themes of *Game of Thrones*. While a significant part of many of the world's cultures, war plays an especially

[80] Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. Stephen Berg and Diskin Clay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 24.
[81] Sophocles, *Oedipus*, 80-2.

important role in both Roman and Norse cultures. Roman military might is considered one of the most effective and highly organized in human history, while the Viking raids in Europe during the medieval period continue to be a source of fascination and scholarship, as they mark a significant cultural and political change for the region.

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