ENCHANTING THE PAST:
NEOMEDIEVALISMS IN FANTASY LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century people are fascinated with the Middle Ages for a variety of reasons and purposes, whether for a sense of nostalgia, a yearning for a simpler time, or the justification and foundation of contemporary politics and traditions. This fascination is perhaps most clear and evident in fantasy literature, which has a marked tendency to borrow heavily from the Middle Ages for settings, characters, themes, motifs, symbols, and ideas. Since the Victorian medievalist revival driven in part by authors such as William Morris and Lord Dunsany, medievalism in fantasy literature became commonplace and expected by the readership, especially after J.R.R. Tolkien's contributions to the genre.

This dissertation examines contemporary fantasy authors' use of medieval themes, tropes, and material to construct their worlds and characters. Focusing primarily on late fantasy novels, I examine the authors' visions and interpretations of the Middle Ages. Each author's view of and approach to the Middle Ages provides insight into recent views of the medieval period as well as contemporary ideas projected onto the Middle Ages in order to explore political, social, and psychological phenomena in a space removed from the present. Through the lenses of various literary theories, including feminism, queer theory, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and postcolonialism, I examine the works of George R.R. Martin, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Tamora Pierce in order to illustrate specific examples of neomedievalism and the intersection of contemporary and medieval ideas and traditions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: NEGOTIATING HISTORY……. 1

"I Thought We Were an Autonomous Collective": Defining Medievalism and Neomedievalism……... 2

"Welcome to the Castle Anthrax": Neomedievalism in Fantasy…… 12

CHAPTER TWO: RELIVING HISTORY: GEORGE R.R. MARTIN'S QUEST FOR REALISM…….. 23

"Life is Not a Song": The Princess Deconstructed……. 30

"So Many Vows": The Fallen Knight……. 40

CHAPTER THREE: SUBVERTING HISTORY: FEMINISM AND QUEERNESS IN THE MIDDLE AGES…… 57

"You Think She'd Be Over This Warrior Thing by Now": Female Knights in High Fantasy……... 59

"Without Surprise or Shame": Queer Encounters and Characters in Neomedieval Fantasy…….. 71

CHAPTER FOUR: REDEEMING HISTORY: RECOVERING MARGINALIZED VOICES THROUGH FANTASY…….. 93

"Our Name Means Those Who Sing the Song of Earth": Pre-Christian People and Ecology……. 94

"The Eagle has Flown and will Never Return": Difficulties with Postcolonialism…….. 109

CHAPTER FIVE: EMBRACING THE PRESENT: THE IMPACT AND EFFECTS OF FANTASTIC NEOMEDIEVALISM…….. 136

WORKS CITED……. 145

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Negotiating History

"On second thought, let's not go to Camelot. 'Tis a silly place."

--King Arthur, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975)

Comedy troupe Monty Python's film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* takes on the Matter of Britain with a gleeful disregard for legendary or historical accuracy, mixing genres and time periods into a slurry that mocks Arthurian literature of both English and French origins, historians, and popular beliefs about the Middle Ages. While it would be easy to dismiss the entire film as an anachronistic mess, one must also consider that Terry Jones, one of the members of Monty Python and co-writer of the film, is an Oxford-trained historian, with several published studies on medieval history and literature as well as documentaries on historical topics such as the Crusades, the Roman Empire, and the lives of medieval people. So what is a viewer to make of the rampant anachronism in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*? The various inaccuracies in portraying the Middle Ages in general and Arthuriana in particular are clearly not accidental, but purposefully crafted for comedic effect by a writer who is aware of not only the medieval literature on which the film is based, but contemporary reactions to and beliefs about it.

Frequently, however, the Middle Ages are utilized in popular culture to make statements about the medieval and the modern in a more serious fashion, by authors whose credentials are not as readily available as Jones's. If such an author includes a fact, assumption, or portrayal of the Middle Ages which could be seen as "wrong," how is a reader to approach the text? And who decides which facts, assumptions, or portrayals of a historical period long past, which encompasses 1000 years and from

which relatively little extant material remains, are "wrong"? Likewise, which inaccuracies are acceptable and which make the work impossible to take seriously as an attempt at historicity? These are some of the questions that scholars have begun to explore through medievalism studies.

This study will examine several twentieth- and twenty-first-century fantasy texts in order to analyze their use of the Middle Ages and how the various medievalisms reflect contemporary attitudes and beliefs about the Middle Ages as well as present-day society. To this end, various critical approaches—specifically feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism, and ecofeminism—will be utilized as lenses through which to view the authors' approaches to the Middle Ages and the reflection of the present in the neomedieval. The works chosen for this study—George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, and Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness*, *The Immortals*, and *Protector of the Small*—are works which have been mostly overlooked by the academy, yet represent approaches to the medieval which will allow for in-depth study of different types of medievalism. These analyses will show that fantasy literature's medievalism is not necessarily sloppy or error-laden, but rather provides a mirror for contemporary society's anxieties, beliefs, desires, and values.

"I Thought We Were an Autonomous Collective": Defining Medievalism and Neomedievalism

Contemporary popular culture is enamored of the Middle Ages, with medieval or pseudo-medieval settings appearing in works of historical fiction, fantasy, and even science fiction texts. A comprehensive list of such works would easily cover several

hundred pages and include everything from retellings of *Beowulf*, various approaches to Arthurian tales, and high medieval fantasy, to time-travel stories and space opera. Although material portraying the Middle Ages is wildly popular, describing what exactly the Middle Ages were and how they affect contemporary society remains difficult for historians, literary critics, and laypeople alike. In order to explore the various interpretations of the Middle Ages, rather than the historical Middle Ages and its extant texts, historians and critics have had to develop a discipline specifically to study the interpretations without reducing those studies to questions of accuracy, anachronism, and error in those interpretations; this field has become known as "medievalism."

According to Clare Simmons, the term "medievalism" was first coined by John Ruskin in 1853 to refer to the Victorian interest in and enthusiasm for the medieval (1). Later in the nineteenth century, however, Leopold von Ranke introduced "scientific history," which involved careful examinations of available texts to find out what "really" happened and began a new surge in the "scholarly quest for authenticity" (Simmons 9-10). From this surge came a separation between Medieval Studies and medievalism, which Simmons defines thus:

> *Medieval Studies*: Professional; within the academy, research-based; objective; committed to discovering the authentic past.
>
> *Medievalism*: Amateur; outside the academy; based on cultural preconceptions; subjective; shaped by the individual's needs and desires. (12)

Although studies of medievalism are relatively new, medievalism itself began, as Simmons says, as early as the fifteenth century, when scholars began studying the Anglo-

Saxons and Arthurian legends (2). Much of modern medievalism is derived from Victorian medievalism, which was born as a reaction to the changes in society brought about by the Industrial Revolution. According to Charles Dellheim:

> The medieval search for usable symbols was part of a larger quest for cultural orientation. In the Middle Ages Victorians found markers that helped them orient themselves in an open-ended, unprecedented world: first by providing maps of continuity and change; second, by placing the "unfamiliar something" of modernity against familiar medieval myths and symbols. (53)

By recasting and interpreting the Middle Ages, writers and philosophers from the Elizabethan era to the Victorian era debated issues such as social and political change, the changes in working conditions brought on by the Industrial Revolution, and the Protestant Reformation. According to Dwight Culler, the Victorians had "a partly historical, partly mythical vision of the Middle Ages as a society whose indwelling religious faith had manifested itself in a social order, a hierarchy in which every individual had a place, bound together by a system of mutual responsibilities" (154). Similarly, Jennifer Palmgren and Loretta M. Holloway claim that the medieval was so popular in Victorian popular culture that their perception of the Middle Ages became more important than the historic Middle Ages; many received their impressions of the Middle Ages from popular culture (such as Sir Walter Scott's novels) rather than from historical texts (1). Alice Chandler refers to this vision as "a dream of order," which she explains by saying that "[t]he Middle Ages became a metaphor both for a specific social order and, somewhat more vaguely, for a metaphysically harmonious world view" (1).

Medievalism was not exclusively a political and social tool, however; many Victorian artists, especially the Pre-Raphaelites, approached medievalism from an aesthetic standpoint, though their underlying purpose, to critique or celebrate Victorian culture through comparison to the Middle Ages, was the same. Helene Roberts claims that Tennyson projected his contemporary concerns about society and the royal family onto the Arthurian court (32), while Alicia Faxton examines the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's tendency to model itself on Arthur's Round Table (55).[1] Despite Ruskin's early introduction of the term, medievalism is a relatively new field of study, its definition still in flux and under debate. The Victorians, for the most part, did not examine their own medievalism, and thus the serious study of medievalism was delayed until the 1970s, when Umberto Eco and Leslie J. Workman began their examinations of the field.

The foundational description of the field comes from Eco's 1973 essay "Dreaming the Middle Ages," in which he claims that "we are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination" (63). He then closely examines the idea of medievalism, claiming the need to define "which" Middle Ages is meant when the Middle Ages are discussed. He defines ten "little Middle Ages," or subdivisions of medievalism, each of which is used for a different purpose and with a different mindset. Of the ten, three are most relevant to the study of fantastic medievalism: pretext, in which "the Middle Ages are taken as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters," as opposed to historical fiction, which is written to "gain a better understanding not only of that period, but [. . .] our present time, seen as the end result of those remote historical events" (68); the

Barbaric Age, in which the Middle Ages and its people are simplified to barbarism and ignorance, which Eco describes as "a shaggy medievalism, and the shaggier its heroes, the more profoundly ideological its superficial naïveté" (69); and romanticism, populated with knights, castles, and ghosts (69). Eco's essay strongly influenced the academic discussion and definition of medievalism, with many later scholars expanding on or disputing his assertions.

In America, Workman spearheaded the campaign for serious, academic study in medievalism, which he insisted should be taken as seriously as Medieval Studies. Kathleen Verduin has documented Workman's campaign in her essay "The Founding and the Founder," within which she asserts that the field of medievalism began in the 1970s. Recognizing the difference between medieval studies and "the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages," Workman labored to establish medievalism as its own field, an interdisciplinary one which would examine the various ways in which the Middle Ages are reinvented, reinterpreted, and otherwise used for political, social, architectural, literary, and economic purposes (Workman "Preface," 1; Verduin 7). Since then, the exploration of interpretations and uses of the Middle Ages have become more frequent as scholars attempt to define what medievalism is and what it means to individual texts, attitudes, critics, and approaches. Medievalism has proven to be a "slippery" topic to define, as Gwendolyn Morgan puts it; each critic who takes on a medievalist text or idea must provide a definition of medievalism that matches his or her purpose in examining the text (55). Thus, definitions are varied and contested, though they tend to have specific ideas in common. As Verdiun's article explains, Workman struggled to keep the borders of the new field clearly defined as other scholars misused his terminology;

Workman wrote periodic rebuttals to critics who framed medievalism in a way with which he disagreed. In *Speaking of the Middle Ages* (1986), Paul Zumthor used the term *medievisme*, which Sarah White translated from the French as "medievalism." Workman blamed this translation for much of the confusion surrounding "medievalism," claiming that "*medievisme*" has more in common with medieval studies than medievalism ("Review" 162). In 1997, Workman took to task R. Howard Bloch and Stephen J. Nichols, editors of *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, for their misuse of the term, claiming that they used it interchangeably with "medieval studies" and failed to mention the burgeoning field of medievalism that Workman had developed and defined ("Review" 161). "One thing must be made absolutely clear at once," he argued, "the English term medievalism does not and never has referred to medieval studies" (161). Some critics worked to define medievalism, frequently in works on the Victorian era and their fascination with the Middle Ages; Simmons's aforementioned examination, for example, as well as Alice Chandler's *A Dream of Order* (1970), and Liana De Girolami Cheney's *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts* (1992).

In 1990, Workman's journal *Studies in Medievalism* released two volumes dedicated to defining medievalism, which have helped to solidify the definition. Each author featured in the collection provides a broad definition, then further examines the definition and its contexts. For example, Tom Shippey examines dictionary definitions, which he then elides into "[a]ny post-medieval attempt to re-imagine the Middle Ages, or some aspect of the Middle Ages, for the modern world, in any of many different media; especially in academic usage, the study of the development and significance of such attempts" (45). In this same volume, Elizabeth Emery defines medievalism as "an active

and evolving process of engagement of things medieval" (77). Morgan claims that, despite the many ways in which medievalism is defined and used, it is ultimately "the reliance on the medieval past to lend authority to contemporary thought" (55). M.J. Toswell claims that medievalism is "both a scholarly field of study and a nostalgic impulse to rework or recreate or gesture towards the Middle Ages, sometimes in a careful and precise way but mostly making use of some standard images and motifs that evoke the medieval" ("Tropes" 69). Generally, the critics agree that medievalism involves material from the Middle Ages interpreted, reframed, and presented in such a way as to comment on the contemporary social, political, religious, and other considerations of the artist, philosopher, or critic in question. The authors in these volumes frequently follow Eco's lead in pluralizing "medievalisms"; as Eco argues, medievalism is so pervasive that in order to study it, one must define which Middle Ages one is discussing (72). Shippey argues that medievalism needs to be pluralized because the available definitions, including his own, are so comprehensive that they lack specificity and clarity (45). Shippey defines several types of medievalism, dividing the field into literary, linguistic, ceremonial, musical, popular, iconic, and touristic medievalisms (46-50). Emery sees three types, which group Shippey's into categories: serious or scholarly medievalism, which encompasses the ways in which specialists study the period; dogmatic medievalism, which includes the ways in which religious, political, or nationalist groups use the Middle Ages for their own ends; and creative medievalism, which describes the ways in which cultural productions such as film, art, literature, and games represent and are inspired by the Middle Ages (82-3). The most recent study in medievalism, Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl's *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, follows the

lead of these essays, defining medievalism as "the art, literature, scholarship, avocational pastimes, and sundry forms of entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter or inspiration, and in doing so, explicitly or implicitly, by comparison or by contrast, comment on the artist's contemporary sociocultural milieu" (1). They also break down the field in order to examine several specific uses of medievalism in literature, culture, film, and politics.

More recently, some contemporary scholars have begun to distinguish "traditional" medievalism from what they identify as "neomedievalism"; this term is still the topic of some debate over its definition, nature, and even usefulness. Emery claims that "[t]he term 'neomedievalism' is, in fact, redundant with regard to Workman's sense of medievalism, which posits medievalism as a constant evolution of the process of imagining the Middle Ages" (84). Other critics at least partly disagree, arguing for the necessity of the term even as they work to decide what the term means and where it fits in the overall scheme of medievalism. Carol Robinson and Pamela Clements argue that the term is necessary because "while *medievalism* may have been originally coined in the early nineteenth century and later picked up by Workman and others in the late twentieth century to depict a phenomenon that is both about the medieval and yet post-medieval, the phenomenon itself has both evolved (carefully used) and de-evolved (carelessly abused) over the years" (57). They argue that neomedievalism is a postmodern version of medievalism, the product of purposeful inaccuracies that reimagine the Middle Ages by commenting on medievalist views of the Middle Ages rather than attempting to recreate the Middle Ages. However, they claim, "the lack of concern for historical accuracy [. . .] is not the same as that held in more traditional fantasy works: the

difference is a degree of self-awareness and self-reflexivity. Nor is it the same as what we conceive to be medievalism" (62). Unlike many examples of medievalism, neomedievalism is aware of its own separation from the Middle Ages and "intentionally and playfully" uses that separation (63). Robinson and Clements conclude that "[n]eomedievalism allows us to have it both ways: to appreciate simultaneously the modernity of the Middle Ages and its very difference from the world we readers or viewers inhabit" (69).

Though Robinson and Clements argue for neomedievalism as an idea separate from medievalism, it can be more accurately described as a different type of medievalism, another of the pluralized medievalisms discussed above. Cory Lowell Grewell claims that "neomedievalism is a form of medievalism that is intrinsically influenced by postmodern ideology, [. . .] is integrally linked to late twentieth and twenty-first-century advances in technology, and [. . .] is distinguished from previous forms of medievalism by its multiculturalism, its lack of concern for history, and its habit of imagining the medieval through the lens of previous medievalisms" (40). Grewell also claims that separating neomedievalism from the field of medievalism creates a danger of neomedievalism being too closely linked with popular culture rather than serious academic study. This particular reason for linking medievalism and neomedievalism is spurious, especially as popular culture studies become more accepted within the academy. Rather, neomedievalism should be part of medievalism studies rather than entirely relegated to the realm of popular culture because its origins are in medievalism. Studying medievalism is necessary for understanding neomedievalism, though studying popular culture can also be helpful. Amy Kaufman has also argued for neomedievalism

as a subset of medievalism, claiming that neomedievalism is medievalism at yet another remove from the Middle Ages, an idea of the Middle Ages gathered by contact with a "medievalist intermediary"; Kaufman argues that "[n]eomedievalism is thus not a dream of the Middle Ages, but a dream of someone else's medievalism. It is medievalism doubled up on itself" ("Medievalism Unmoored" 4). Kaufman argues that "[n]eomedievalism is one way of doing medievalism, one that requires certain philosophical and technological shifts in order to exist at all. Yet while medievalism can exist perfectly independently at any point in time, neomedievalism, despite its seeming ahistoricity, is historically contingent upon both medievalism itself and the postmodern condition" ("Medieval Unmoored" 2). Toswell argues similarly, drawing on Jean Baudrillard's ideas of the simulacrum of mass media culture to differentiate between medievalism and neomedievalism. She claims that medievalism depends on existing texts, whereas neomedievalism is a simulacrum, "a copy of a copy of a nonexistent original" ("Simulacrum" 45). She agrees with Robinson and Clements in that neomedievalism is purposeful, used to subvert or complicate the medieval trappings it employs, using contemporary concerns to "play with the notion of the medieval" (45).[2] Neomedievalism, then, can be seen as a second stage of medievalism, wherein the separation of medievalism from the Middle Ages, primarily through introducing contemporary concerns, is taken a step further, and its portrayal of the Middle Ages is based on a medievalist view rather than a historical one.

The difficulty with neomedievalism is determining whether or not any "inaccuracies" in a work are due to the author's fundamental misunderstanding of the

Middle Ages or, rather, a neomedieval, postmodern approach to the Middle Ages. Pugh and Weisl, again echoing Kaufman, claim that:

> It nonetheless seems difficult to determine in many instances whether one is dealing with a dream of the Middle Ages or of someone else's dream of medievalism doubled upon itself, for many medieval tropes are themselves fantasies of the period: are not courtly love and chivalry both realities of the Middle Ages [. . .] as much as they are dreams of what medieval people believed their world should be? What emerges is a recognition that reimaginings of the Middle Ages are essentially fantasies built upon fantasies, for many medievalisms draw more firmly from medieval ideas about fictionality than they do from medieval history. (3)

Thus, determining whether a text should be classified neomedieval or merely mistaken medievalism can be difficult and cannot always be predicated on the author's stated knowledge and intentions. Despite the fact that contemporary authors are accessible and may be quite vocal about their views of their own work, a critic must also be aware that an author's culture and socialization will influence his or her writing. Thus, an author's own words cannot be the final arbiter of whether to classify a work as neomedieval, but must be taken into account alongside close reading of the text.

"Welcome to the Castle Anthrax": Neomedievalism in Fantasy

Neomedievalism is especially useful in analyzing fantasy literature, as it provides a method for explaining fantasy's frequent ahistoricism without dismissing the entire genre as error-laden and lazy. In many cases, fantasy literature can be considered

neomedieval due to an author's tendencies to base their pseudo-medieval settings on Tolkien's Middle-earth (despite Middle-earth technically being ancient rather than medieval) and other such medievalist fantasy precedents. Fantasy's link with the medieval has been recognizable and ubiquitous since the beginning of the genre as it is currently understood. The connection is primarily due to fantasy's descent from medieval romance and heroic epics, which early fantasists such as William Morris and Lord Dunsany used to inspire their work. Diana Waggoner credits Morris with beginning the medievalist fantasy trend through his use of Icelandic sagas and tendency to set his fantasies in the "Dark Ages" or high Middle Ages, using "the image of [the Middle Ages] that the Romantics had established in the public imagination, the mythology of chivalry" (37). Raymond H. Thompson has catalogued the many similarities between heroic fantasy and medieval romance, particularly in their treatment of morality, heroic virtues, and setting (212-223).[3]

The conversation about medievalism in fantasy began practically as soon as the fantastic returned to literature after the rise of realism. Joseph Addison claims that fantasy is inherently medieval due to its subject matter, arguing that "Learning and Philosophy" drove away the superstition of the Middle Ages, when people believed in "Witchcraft, Prodigies, Charms and Enchantments" as well as faeries and ghosts as a matter of course (572). He claims that "The Ancients have not much of this Poetry among them, for, indeed, the whole substance of it owes its Original to the Darkness and Superstition of later Ages, when pious Frauds were made use of to amuse Mankind, and frighten them into a Sense of their Duty" (572).[4] To Addison, fantasy and its link to the presumed "superstitions" of the Middle Ages is a step backward and a fault in fantastic

writing. His attitude is emblematic of his society's views of both the Middle Ages and non-realistic literature; as Stephen Prickett points out, the scholars and critics of the eighteenth century rejected the fantastic in all its forms, even as authors began courting the fantastic once again (6). Later, as the Gothic becomes popular in literature, Anna Laetitia Barbauld claims that rooting fantasy in the medieval and ancient mythology is natural: "The old Gothic romance and the Eastern tale, with their genii, giants, enchantments, and transformations, however a refined critic may censure them as absurd and extravagant, will ever retain a most powerful influence on the mind, and interest the reader independently of all peculiarity of taste" (122). As the Gothic era gives way to the Victorian, Sir Walter Scott also champions the use of medieval material in fantasy, though he argues for a simplified version rather than strict historicism, claiming that some history can be confusing for a lay reader and suggesting that "the author confine his historical materials to such as are either generally understood as soon as mentioned, or at least can be explained with brief trouble in such a degree as to make the reader comprehend the story" (72). To Scott, entertaining the reader is more important than striving for historical accuracy, especially where such accuracy might interfere with the story or the reader's comprehension of and interest in the story.

Few contemporary critics would agree with Scott, however; some attempt at historical accuracy is expected in contemporary fiction, even from fantasy writers. Eco presents an early argument on misuse of the medieval, arguing that "[o]ur return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to real roots, we are looking for 'reliable Middle Ages,' not for romance and fantasy, though frequently this wish is misunderstood and, moved by a vague impulse, we indulge in a sort of

escapism á lá Tolkien" (65). Fantasy, he argues, presents a skewed view of the "real" Middle Ages rather than "responsible philological examination" (63). Waggoner claims that ahistoric medievalism is "[t]he hallmark of heroic fantasy, and of adventure fantasy, thanks to Morris" (37). She goes on to claim that neomedieval fantasy writers' use of the medieval tends to be lazy: "Few writers bother to develop such a background beyond a few scattered references to castles, knights, feudal dues, and courtly behavior, which, by calling up all the well-known images of medieval life current in popular culture, are supposed to serve as Secondary Worlds" (37). Rebecca Barnhouse has argued that writers of young adult fiction in particular have a duty to historical accuracy so that they do not give children or teenagers a skewed or "wrong" idea of the Middle Ages. She claims that "[m]any writers use their material responsibly, accurately portraying the medieval period. Others, however, allow their own moral sense to take precedence over historical accuracy. In so doing, they often perpetuate anachronistic fallacies, allowing modern attitudes about such topics as literacy and tolerance for diversity to pervade their presentation of the Middle Ages" (ix). This attitude and argument is scarcely new; critics have argued about adult writers' duty to educate children while entertaining them for several hundred years, often focusing on fantasy as the worst offender of non-educational material. Prickett quotes Sarah Trimmer of the SPCK Tract Committee as referring to fairy tales as "romantic nonsense" and worrying that they would confuse children (qtd. in Prickett 7-8). An anonymous review of *Tales for Children* by Mrs. Marshall published in 1831 declared that "[t]he days of Jack the Giant Killer, Little Red Riding Hood, and such trashy productions, are gone by, and the infant mind is now nourished by more able and efficient food" (136). Despite the belief that fantasy and fairy tales were juvenile and

only good for the simple minds of children, fantasy is at the same time considered too dangerous for children.

Even scholars of medievalism and neomedievalism separate fantasy neomedievalism from other examples of neomedievalism; Robinson and Clements claim that the neomedievalism they discuss "is not the same as that held in more traditional fantasy works: the difference is a degree of self-awareness and self-reflexivity" (62). This statement creates a division between "smart" neomedievalism and "traditional fantasy" neomedievalism, with an implied value judgment placing the "smart" neomedievalism above "traditional fantasy" neomedievalism. For example, they contrast *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which contains purposeful and playful anachronism, with the 1953 film *Knights of the Round Table*, which contains inaccuracies that "are the result of carelessness" rather than an attempt to "consciously impose contemporary ideology and comprehension" (62). In this way, the tendency to privilege forms of medievalism that can be considered more academically serious over those considered "popular"—which is frequently dismissed by the academy—continues, though the line between "academic" and "popular" has shifted. Yet this tendency still seems predicated on assumptions about the knowledge and intentions of the writer, director, or showrunner; in this case, these assumptions are used to demarcate the difference between "real" neomedievalism, which requires purposeful inaccuracies, and other texts, which are merely the result of sloppiness or ignorance.

While the general study of medievalism has, for the most part, moved away from questions of accuracy and toward questions of politics, sociology, and culture when it comes to uses of the Middle Ages, the study of fantasy medievalism has not yet reached

this point. Perhaps it is because fantasy is more closely related to neomedievalism, which is still relatively new and fighting the same academic battles that medievalism fought ten years ago, or because popular opinion tends to judge "genre" fiction such as fantasy and romance by its weakest examples, then treat the genre as a monolithic collective of "fluff" or "trash," with a few quality exceptions such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Wizard of Earthsea*.[5] Only in the last few years have discussions of fantasy's medievalism followed the general trend of the study of medievalism, acknowledging that "authenticity" is not the point or purpose of fantasy, and that judging a work of fantasy on its historical accuracy is fallacious. William Hodapp argues that the study of popular culture medievalism tends to focus on accuracy because it is conducted by medievalists, trained scholars "equipped with knowledge of old languages, interested in early poetics, and skilled in a range of not-so-every-day disciplines like paleography, codicology, and iconography" (68). However, he continues, studying "errors" in the text fails to read the text as a novel, film, or piece of art, as well as raising the question of what the "real" Middle Ages looks like (68-9).

Yet in order for the field of fantasy medievalism to be taken seriously, it seems critics must acknowledge the weaknesses in the fantasy genre before arguing for the strength and worth of other works. Robinson and Clemens' above comment fits into this acknowledgement; they claim that neomedievalism is not lazy medievalism, as can be found in "more traditional fantasy works," but they go on to claim that "[i]t is assumed that the reader, viewer, or player knows that the 'medieval' world of the work is a construct, and a not necessarily accurate construct at that. There is no attempt at verisimilitude" (63). Likewise, Michael Drout argues that, while strict historical

accuracy is not necessary in a fantasy work, writers who more closely mirror their medieval precedents and antecedents are likely to be more successful: "The use of transformations of medieval materials (at all) may explain the difference in aesthetic and critical success between the texts mentioned above (Tolkien, Cooper, Le Guin, Holdstock, White, Stewart), and equally popular but less-respected fantasy literature such as that by Terry Brooks or Stephen R. Donaldson"; the weaker writers' "lack of direct engagement with medieval sources" makes them less aesthetically pleasing and generally successful (15-16). Thus, fantasy's tendency to rely on a simulacrum of the medieval for its setting has its pitfalls; however imaginative the work, public expectation is that the writer makes some attempt to mirror the historical Middle Ages, and the more accurate that mirror, the higher the quality of the work. The irony that historical realism is expected of an imaginative work, the plot of which relies on such elements as goblins, orcs, dragons, or giants, is rarely addressed. Perhaps it is a side effect of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to as a "willing suspension of disbelief," which requires "a human interest and a semblance of truth"; in order to believe the fantastic elements, the reader requires elements that seem real (191).

Since medievalism and fantasy are both capable of revealing the concerns, fears, and desires of a society, besides driving beliefs about the past and its influence on the present, a detailed examination of contemporary (neo)medievalist fantasy is not only warranted, but necessary, and this study seeks to fill a gap in today's scholarship on fantasy literature and its various medievalisms. Critical studies of fantasy tend to be large genre-studies that approach the field through the dominant critical theory of the time (such as Tzvetan Todorov's [1975] *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a*

Literary Genre or Rosemary Jackson's [1983] *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*), studies of the history of the genre and criticism of it (Brian Attebury's [1992] *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, Richard Mathews's [1997] *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*), or fantasy authors' defenses of their choice of genre (Ursula K. Le Guin's [1989] *The Language of the Night*). Examinations of the medieval in specific fantasy texts tend to be article-length rather than book-length, and even book-length studies tend to focus on a single work or group of works by a single, relatively canonical, author, usually Tolkien, Lewis, Le Guin, or more recently, J.K. Rowling.

Thus, this study examines non-canonical works that have been largely overlooked by the academy. Through these works, this study will examine the approaches to feminism, homosexuality, ecology, imperialism, and historicism and how these approaches reflect the authors's beliefs about the Middle Ages, contemporary society, and a reader's expectations of a (neo)medievalist fantasy work. A study of this type may provide the necessary foundation for further serious, unapologetic exploration of the many and varied medievalisms in fantasy literature.

The next chapter will examine Martin's claims that *A Song of Ice and Fire* represents a more accurate and realistic Middle Ages than other heroic fantasy. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* has grown in popularity in the last few years, primarily due to the HBO series based on the novels, but the first novel, *A Game of Thrones*, is currently seventeen years old. Very little scholarship focusing on these novels exists, though scholarly interest in them is rising. Part of Martin's appeal is his juxtaposition of his fantasy world against the stereotypical "Disney" Middle Ages in a neomedievalism that attempts to assert its own authority through claims to historical accuracy and realism,

apparently in contrast to other works of neomedieval fantasy. Chapter three examines authors who use a neomedieval landscape to subvert gender roles and sexuality, including Martin, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Tamora Pierce. The fourth chapter explores the postcolonial in Martin and Bradley and the ways in which both authors attempt, but ultimately fail, to reclaim the lost voices of British history. Finally, the conclusion will explore the effects of fantasy neomedievalism on the reader and suggest ways of approaching the genre in the academy.

Although Monty Python's Camelot is a "silly place," it is also, as Arthur's trusty servant Patsy points out, "only a model." Medievalism may be only a model of the medieval, crafted to look like the Middle Ages but much smaller than the reality, yet it bears examination. Models are representations, providing the artist's-eye-view of the subject, emphasizing what the artist finds important while glossing over what he or she does not. The chosen emphasis or de-emphasis reveals much about the artist's beliefs, mindset, culture, desires, and fears. Fantastic (neo)medievalism's model of the Middle Ages is a smaller representation of a period of human history onto which people have projected their hopes, desires, and fears. This projection allows themselves and others to examine, experience, and judge those hopes, desires, and fears from a safer distance. Due to fantasy's close relationship to medievalism and neomedievalism, examining its approaches to and portrayals of the Middle Ages serves to illuminate contemporary attitudes and ideologies as they are projected onto the past.

Notes

[1] Antony Harrison uses Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* as the primary example of this projection. In his dedication to Prince Albert, Tennyson compared him to one of Arthur's knights, describing him as embodying all the virtues of Camelot, virtues which he assumes are "natural, inevitable, unquestionable, and absolute" (20). He goes on to point out that Tennyson's version of the Pentecost Oath calls for complete obedience to the king "as if he were / Their conscience"; Christian imperialism; truthfulness; chastity; and the virtues of courtly love, giving historical weight to ideologies already present and embraced by the middle- and upper-class Victorians—"In short, Tennyson adopts medievalist discourse in the service of Tory social, political, and religious values" (21-2).

[2] Echoing and expanding on Kaufman's claim that "[n]eomedievalism finds a way of clinging to the past by rejecting the 'history,' the alterity, the time and space that separated it from its desired object and bringing it into the present" (3), Toswell claims that this search for a lost history "might explain the massive thirst for the Middle Ages that inheres in the modern day, perhaps a thirst for roots and origins, perhaps simply a thirst for simplicity and a clear sense of the order of things, perhaps a search for myth and apocalyptic explanation, perhaps a more complex engagement with the concepts of tradition and modernity [. . .] as competing impulses in the postmodern world" ("Simulacrum" 54).

[3] In regards to setting, Thompson points out that setting fantasy works in the medieval period is actually contrary to the tendencies of medieval romance, which "integrate[d] the past into its own culture" even when the story was set in the past (216).

[4] According to Donald F. Bond, Addison's use of "amuse" follows a common 18th-century usage meaning "beguile, delude, or cheat," not "entertain," as contemporary readers might see it (571 n. 3).

[5] "Literary" fiction does not tend to suffer this issue. Perhaps this is because "literary" fiction, as a genre, is a collection of works which do not easily fit into a pre-defined genre such as fantasy, romance, mystery, Western, etc. Thus, it is more difficult to judge a non-genre genre as a whole, as the works within it have far less in common than the works within a defined genre. Or perhaps it is because once a work is judged "literary," it is a priori considered "art."

CHAPTER II

Reliving History: George R.R. Martin's Quest for Realism

"When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die."

--Cersei, *A Game of Thrones*

When Eddard Stark discovers that Cersei Lannister, the Queen of Westeros, has borne her brother, Jaime, three sons and her husband, Robert, none, he offers her a chance to leave the country before he informs Robert of her treason. Cersei has no intention of abandoning the power she has accumulated and tells Eddard that he made a mistake by not taking the throne himself, uttering the now-iconic line: "When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die" (*Game of Thrones* 488). This line encapsulates the cutthroat politics evident throughout the series and has been adopted as the tagline for the HBO series based on Martin's novels. The line also captures Martin's ideas about the Middle Ages as they "really" were—violent, brutal, and cutthroat—an insistence on realism that is, in fact, an example of neomedievalism.

Fantasy is often accused of being "escapist," providing a preferable world in which readers can immerse themselves in order to avoid the realities of life. In 1995, P.J. Webster published an article titled "Tolkien and Escapist Fantasy Literature" that attempted to differentiate between "creative" fantasy and "escapist" or "derivative" fantasy in order to draw a clear distinction between "good" and "bad" fantasy literature. Mirroring Renaissance attitudes about the dangers of escapism and fantasy's contributions to imagination, Webster argues that "intrinsically all escapism is detrimental because by its very nature it seeks to avoid reality, it is determined to distract the mind from the reality of life" (12). Although Martin's work predates Webster's

article, perhaps the attitude toward "escapist" fantasy that Webster articulates is part of what inspired Martin to begin writing *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The series spans five books, nearly six thousand pages, and an HBO series, all in a style of neomedievalism that is often described by critics and reviewers as "gritty realism." "Gritty" is used so frequently to describe Martin's work that cataloguing the critics, bloggers, and reviewers who use the term is an impossible task. As an example, however, Rachael Brown of *The Atlantic* says that *A Dance with Dragons*, the fifth book of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, contains all the characteristics of Martin's previous work that fans have grown to love: "rich world building, narrative twists and turns, and gritty depictions of the human struggle for power" (n.p.). Martin himself has said that part of his goal was to "write 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" (Hodgeman, n.p.).

While "gritty" is seldom defined or explored by those who use the term, it can be read as a euphemism for "dark, violent, and realistic." In an interview with John Hodgeman, Martin claims that realism is a major goal for *A Song of Ice and Fire*, saying that he:

> [. . .] 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 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. The 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.

"Wrong" is a problematic term to use for neomedieval fantasy, since authenticity is a dubious endeavor, partly because of narrative necessity but also because of the layers of interpretation between the contemporary writer and the medieval past. Rolling back these layers to undo the profound impact the Romantics and Victorians, among others, have had on the cultural zeitgeist regarding the Middle Ages is nearly impossible; thus, a blanket declaration that a particular text or group of texts is "wrong" about the historical reality of the Middle Ages is troubling and potentially elitist. According to Veronica Ortenberg:

> Accuracy cannot exist even when most of the factual information is as appropriate as it is possible to make it. This is because generally the writers' perception of the period is overruled, indeed has to be left out, in order to make the book palatable and interesting to readers. It almost inevitably means projecting twentieth-century attitudes and moral issues onto medieval characters. (192)

Interestingly, Martin's insistence on a "realistic" medieval setting creates its own kind of neomedievalism among the fans of the books and show. Helen Young has studied the fan culture for several years, primarily by reading the *Westeros.org* forums and the discussions of books and TV series in that venue, and has presented her findings in several conference talks and an article in *Year's Work in Medievalism*. Young differentiates between "fans" and casual readers by describing a fan as someone who has

an affective relationship with the text or franchise, who emotionally connects to the story. Young argues that a cognitive dissonance exists in fans; they understand that the world Martin has created is fictional, and yet it is important to them that the world is "authentic," or just like the "real" Middle Ages. She claims that "there is a very strong desire amongst fantasy fans [. . .] for imagined worlds to reflect historical realities of the Middle Ages," adding that "[t]he point that a fantasy world is, by definition, not historically accurate, however, does not derail the demand for historical authenticity" ("'It's the Middle Ages, Yo!'" 6). Frequently, fans will answer questions about or challenges to the text—most usually regarding the amount of violence or treatment of women—by claiming that the text is "realistic." However, Young points out, nobody offers factual evidence for their "truth claims," either with examples from medieval history or texts or even clarification of what specific time period or country they mean when they say "the Middle Ages." Rather, they make declarative statements about the Middle Ages and let these statements stand as evidence in and of themselves ("Authenticity"; " 'It's the Middle Ages, Yo!'" 6-7).

Young believes that what these fans really want is a sense of verisimilitude, a "feeling" of authenticity but not necessarily true realism. After all, these fans do not seem to understand that the Middle Ages were not a cohesive monolith of culture, laws, traditions, customs, and religious beliefs. They do not back up their "truth claims" because they are not historians; rather, they have combined Martin's "grittiness" with preconceived ideas about the Middle Ages that they have gleaned from other neomedieval material. Martin's world "feels" more real to them than the "Disneyfied" Middle Ages Martin himself has dismissed, and thus Martin's work must be based on the

Middle Ages as they "really" were ("Authenticity"). To the fans, an authentic representation of the Middle Ages is of paramount importance, but "authenticity" depends on the individual's preconceived beliefs ("'It's the Middle Ages, Yo!'" 7). This mindset creates a feedback loop in which Martin's text is realistic because it mirrors the Middle Ages because Martin wrote the Middle Ages that way in the text. Thus, Martin becomes the conduit through which fans understand the Middle Ages, much as Tolkien has been since *The Lord of the Rings*.

One could argue that Martin does not help the perception of Westeros as the "authentic" Middle Ages as he frequently complains about the romantic fantasy Middle Ages found in so much literature. He claims the "real" Middle Ages as the basis of his own work: "The impetus here is to keep the story more realistic," he says of the religious timbre of Westeros, "If you go back to my model of the actual Middle Ages, religion was enormously important" ("Religions of Westeros"). Likewise, he has used the "real" medieval to justify his treatment of the children in the series; in an interview with Christina Radish he claims, "If you read about the real Middle Ages, as I do all the time, it was a brutal time for everybody—for men, women and children. Children weren't sentimentalized, the way they are today." Medieval and ancient precedents are also used as justification for Targaryen and Lannister incest, arranged marriages for girls as young as thirteen, and the overall violence in the series (Itzkoff; Poniewozik).

Despite his frequent allusions to historical inspiration and the "real" Middle Ages as influences on his work, however, Martin also admits that it is not possible, or even his goal, to represent the Middle Ages exactly as they were, either in a broad or a specific sense. In an interview with Wayne MacLaurin, he acknowledges that the "medieval

mindset" was different than the contemporary—so different that "I can't say I've done a complete medieval mindset. I haven't. In fact, I think if I had, it would be too alien. But I've tried to convey some of it." In a more specific sense, he claims the Wars of the Roses as one of his inspirations, but denies any allegorical flavor to his treatment of it:

> [T]here's really no one-for-one character-for-character correspondence. I like to use history to flavor my fantasy, to add texture and verisimilitude, but simply rewriting history with the names changed has no appeal for me. I prefer to reimagine it all, and take it in new and unexpected directions. ("More Wars of the Roses").

Thus, it appears Martin understands the difficulty of portraying the "real" Middle Ages in fiction, though he works toward as authentic a feel as he can while still making his work readable for contemporary audiences, but the fans seem to have more difficulty separating the two.[1]

By referring to the fantasy he dislikes for its lack of authenticity as "Disneyland," Martin implies that neomedievalism is for children, and that his own works, with their attempts at realism, are adult. Martin tells George Stroumboulopoulos that Tolkien's imitators created clichéd characters and plots "that have ultimately harmed the genre and made people think that it's for children or particularly slow adults." This claim is, of course, dubious at best and elitist at worst; echoing Webster's attempt to separate "escapist" fantasy from "creative" fantasy, Martin defines his work as superior to lesser neomedieval fantasy (despite obvious neomedievalisms in his own work). At the same time, he fetishizes his own version of fantastic realism, which requires contrast with the "Disney," neomedieval Middle Ages. Martin fetishizes realism in a general sense, not

just in his insistence that his Middle Ages are real. In an interview with Michael Levy, Martin claims "Someone who loves books too much, or lives too much in the world of imagination, is going to have this faint sense of disappointment about what life actually brings them" (71).

The divide Martin draws between "fairy-tale" neomedievalism and his own "gritty" fantasy provides a lens with which to examine many of the themes and characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Martin is aware that many of his readers come to his work from the fantasy novels of Tolkien imitators with their "Ren Faire Middle Ages," and sets up situations and characters to show his audience that his novels will not follow the tropes and structure of the fantasies to which he believes his readers may be accustomed. Indeed, Martin must set up and acknowledge the neomedievalism he sees as childish in his own work in order to tear it down. Martin's disdain for the "Disney" Middle Ages comes through in *A Song of Ice and Fire* as he rejects several tropes of the medieval, medievalist, and neomedieval, most specifically the idea of the "princess" and "knight." These two idealistic archetypes are introduced, torn down, and rebuilt as Martin sees fit in the characters of Sansa Stark and Jaime Lannister; both begin with a belief in glory and honor, both lose faith in their beliefs, and both find less romantic, more realistic ways of living in the dark world Martin has created. While Martin's desire to move past the Romantic archetypes of neomedieval fantasy can be understood, his insistence that his portrayal of the Middle Ages conforms to an objective historical reality rather than representing another neomedieval interpretation can be problematic. Not only does this insistence indicate that an objective historical reality exists, but also that his narrative choices and character arcs are based not on his own viewpoint and understanding of

history or humanity, but on an external, inevitable truth that validates his treatment of women, people of color, and those with non-normative sexualities, which will be discussed later in this study.

"Life is Not a Song": The Princess Deconstructed

Nearly all of Martin's heroic figures go through a redemption arc in which they begin privileged in some way, gain power or prestige, lose all that power or prestige and their privilege, then begin fighting their way back to power having learned something and become better people. Only the character arcs of children and villains do not follow this pattern. Both Jaime and Sansa, Martin's archetypal knight and princess, begin with idealized views of nobility and knighthood, fed by songs and tales of grand adventures and high chivalry.

Sansa's mother, Catelyn, says that even as a toddler, Sansa "loved nothing so well as tales of knightly valor" (*Clash of Kings* 785). Sansa expects her own life and the world of Westeros also to conform to these standards. Through Sansa's fascination with songs and tales, Martin sets up the neomedieval Middle Ages, laying the foundation for his later destruction of Sansa's beliefs. Early on, Martin contrasts Sansa with her sister Arya, who does not care to be a lady, to highlight Sansa's insistence on proper behavior. As they travel to King's Landing from Winterfell, Arya finds adventure everywhere; she searches a ford for the rubies King Robert struck from Prince Rhaegar's armor, learns about the flora and fauna of the Westerosi midlands from a butcher's son, and explores every ruin they pass (*Game of Thrones* 141-2). Sansa, on the other hand, finds the countryside disgusting; where Arya sees adventure, Sansa sees "a horrid black bog," full

of "quicksands waiting to suck you down, and snakes watching from the trees, and lizard-lions floating half-submerged in the water, like black logs with eyes and teeth" (*Game of Thrones*141). These early scenes not only characterize Sansa and Arya, but also set Martin's world apart from nature as it is shown in Disney's animated fairy tales or other idealized neomedieval fantasies. Nature in Westeros is more often brutal and harsh than welcoming; nature itself is an obstacle his characters face in many of their endeavors.

Sansa refuses to interact with anyone below her station, whereas Arya makes friends with "squires and grooms and serving-girls, old men and naked children, rough-spoken freeriders of uncertain birth" (*Game of Thrones* 142). Sansa believes that Arya's presence ruins everything because of her refusal to conform; after one of their frequent fights, Sansa says, "She tries to spoil *everything*, Father, she can't stand for anything to be beautiful or nice or splendid" (*Game of Thrones* 477). Thus, Sansa is set up as a hyper-feminine princess figure, highly sentimental and a believer in an idealized world, in contrast to her more masculine sister.

Beautiful, nice, and splendid are Sansa's benchmarks for goodness and nobility. She initially thinks of Prince Joffrey as "everything she ever dreamt her prince should be, tall and handsome and strong, with hair like gold" (*Game of Thrones* 140). Joffrey is not the only person she believes good and heroic due to beauty; when she meets Ser Loras Tyrell, called the Knight of Flowers for his house sigil (a rose) and his tendency to distribute roses to the young ladies, she is struck dumb at his beauty and gallantry (*Game of Thrones* 297). Thus, when Eddard finds it necessary to send someone to kill Ser Gregor Clegane for his crimes, Sansa is shocked that he does not choose Loras: "When the Knight of Flowers had spoken up, she'd been sure she was about to see one of Old

Nan's stories come to life. Ser Gregor was the monster and Ser Loras the true hero who would slay him. He even *looked* a true hero, so slim and beautiful, with golden roses around his slender waist and his rich brown hair tumbling down into his eyes" (*Game of Thrones* 472-3). Thus, Martin sets up the traditional idea of outer beauty reflecting inner goodness, as well as the idea of noble birth bestowing both beauty and character, in order to destroy both of these ideas later.

Martin foreshadows Sansa's fate early in her story, providing hints to Joffrey's nature that Sansa ignores or simply naively misses. For example, when Sansa is startled and frightened by the sight of Ser Ilyn Payne, the king's tongueless headsman, Cersei prompts Joffrey to "go to her" before he arrives to gallantly protect and comfort her; when Sansa and Joffrey come upon Sansa's sister Arya and her friend the butcher's boy practicing swordplay, he threatens the boy with his real sword, then attacks Arya when she steps in to protect him; and after Arya's pet direwolf, Nymeria, bites Joffrey's arm to protect Arya, Cersei claims that "Joffrey told us what happened. [. . .] You and the butcher boy beat him with clubs while you set your wolf on him" (*Game of Thrones* 145, 150-1, 155). Yet Sansa continues to believe that Joffrey is admirable, going so far as to dismiss his actions based primarily on his beauty—"She could not hate Joffrey tonight. He was too beautiful to hate"—and her conscious decision to blame other people—"it had not been Joffrey's doing, not truly. The queen had done it; she was the one to hate, her and Arya. Nothing bad would have happened except for Arya" (*Game of Thrones* 298). Likewise, because Sansa believes that beauty necessarily means nobility and prowess, she fails to realize that Loras is not the model of chivalry she believes he is. Rather, he employs underhanded means to win a tourney, riding a mare in heat because

his opponent always rides a stallion (*Game of Thrones* 316). Yet Sansa's beliefs as well as her inexperience prevent her from seeing the unchivalrous behavior of both Joffrey and Loras; her early characterization is young, naïve, stubborn, and entirely certain of the inherent goodness of knights and nobles. Sansa is not the only character to believe in the inherent nobility of knights or that beauty equals nobility; Bran Stark insists on believing knighthood to be the highest ideal to which one can aspire, though his teacher, Maester Luwin, attempts to explain that knights are only warriors who have gone through a special ceremony: "A man's worth is not marked by a *ser* before his name" (*Game* 570). Yet Bran's belief is allowed to continue throughout the narrative rather than interfering with his duties or survival, as Sansa's belief is not.

Early in Sansa's maturing process, Petyr Baelish, the kingdom's treasurer, tells her "life is not a song, sweetling. You may learn that one day to your sorrow" (*Game of Thrones* 473). Sansa does learn it; her life at court after King Robert's death descends into the worst possible environment for a teenage girl, most of it at Joffrey's hands. Martin holds nothing back in showing the reader that Joffrey is not the noble prince Sansa believed him to be, or even just the spoiled brat he appeared to be in the first half of *A Game of Thrones*. Rather, Joffrey—and his entire retinue—is cruel and abusive, subjecting Sansa to constant physical and emotional violence. When Sansa finally has the courage to tell someone about her experiences, she says, "Joffrey is a monster. He lied about the butcher's boy and made Father kill my wolf. When I displease him, he has the Kingsguard beat me. He's evil and cruel, my lady, it's so. And the queen as well" (*Storm of Swords* 87). She gradually abandons her ideas about the inherent goodness of knights, though Martin demonstrates the difficulty of giving up one's worldview through

Sansa's initial responses to knights acting un-knightly. Sandor Clegane tells her about his brother's cruelty, and Sansa responds, "he was no true knight" (*Game of Thrones* 303). Rather than immediately reject her beliefs about knighthood's inherent chivalry, Sansa sets the single—so far as she knows—example of unchivalrous behavior outside the code of knighthood.

However, Gregor is not the last knight she declares "no true knight"; nearly every member of the Kingsguard, the group of knights Sansa has the most interaction with, is at best indifferent and at worst outright brutal. Martin writes his knights at such an extreme opposite of the knights of chivalric romance that it is almost its own trope; nearly every knight in *A Song of Ice and Fire* abuses his power to one extent or another, with only a few, like Jaime, striving to behave better and acting as contrasts to the other bullies in armor. Besides Gregor, who is the epitome of bad knights in the kingdom, the Kingsguard represents the worst of the bullies, and Joffrey uses them accordingly. When, after Eddard's execution, Sansa tells him she hates him, Joffrey says, "My mother tells me that it isn't fitting that a king should strike his wife," and has Ser Meryn hit her instead, which he does without hesitation or protest (*Game of Thrones* 743-4). Thus Martin places Sansa into an emotionally and physically abusive environment in which all of her preconceived notions about the goodness of knights and nobles are systematically stripped away.

Instead of being rescued by the knights of her dreams, Sansa instead finds herself protected by "monsters." Tyrion Lannister, a dwarf frequently referred to as "the Imp" and nearly universally reviled, is one of the few who stands up for Sansa; when he comes upon one of Joffrey's punishment sessions, which involves the Kingsguard beating Sansa

with mailed fists and the flats of their swords, then stripping her nearly naked, he demands to know "what sort of knight beats helpless maids?" (*Clash of Kings* 488). Afterward, Sansa realizes that the only people who defend her are not knights: "Only Ser Dontos had tried to help, and he was no longer a knight, no more than the Imp was, nor the Hound . . . the Hound hated knights . . . *I hate them too,* Sansa thought. *They are no true knights, not one of them*" (*Clash of Kings* 490). Though Sansa still believes in the ideal image of a true knight, she recognizes that the ideals of the songs and stories are unrealistic. "There are no heroes," she thinks, "In life, the monsters win" (*Game of Thrones* 746). Soon she comes to think of her former romantic notions as "childish," especially when chivalric trappings are not accompanied by good intentions; when Joffrey prepares to ride into battle, he has her kiss his sword (which he has named Hearteater), and Sansa thinks that "He never sounded more like a stupid little boy" (*Clash of Kings* 812). Thus, Sansa projects her understanding that believing in chivalric virtues was childish onto Joffrey, despite the fact that Joffrey clearly does not believe in them himself. That Martin pairs "stupid" with "little boy" again emphasizes his assertion that Victorian medievalist virtues such as chivalry are naïve and for children, whereas his own portrayal of the Middle Ages is the sort that adults would understand.

At this point in Sansa's character development, it would be easy to assume that Martin is punishing Sansa for conforming to feminine gender norms, as opposed to Arya, who is self-sufficient and learns to fight with a sword. However, this is only the first stage of Martin's development of Sansa's character. Sansa's journey shows Martin's disdain for the idealism of his construction of the neomedieval Middle Ages, but through Sansa he also portrays a more grown-up, realistic version that allows for people to strive

to be honorable, decent, and kind. Life may not be a song, but that does not mean that the behavior of the knights is acceptable. Sansa's next stage of development, which involves strict governance of her own words and behavior, is portrayed as a smarter, more politically savvy approach that nonetheless allows Sansa to hold on to some of her idealism. Though Sansa is not strong in a traditional masculine sense, her strength comes from her ability to read people, remember details about their lives, and say exactly what they need or want to hear. At first, she is merely trying to survive, following Sandor's advice:

> "Save yourself some pain, girl, and give him what he wants."
>
> "What . . . what does he want? Please, tell me."
>
> "He wants you to smile and smell sweet and be his lady love," the Hound rasped. "He wants to hear you recite all your pretty little words the way the septa taught you. He wants you to love him . . . and fear him." (*Game of Thrones* 744)

However, Sansa is willing to risk her own safety to protect others; when Joffrey threatens to drown Dontos in a wine cask, she speaks for him, claiming "it would be ill luck, your Grace . . . to kill a man on your name day. [. . .] Drown him or have his head off only . . . kill him on the morrow, if you like, only . . . not today, not on your name day" (*Clash of Kings* 46). When Joffrey agrees to have Dontos killed the next day, Sansa convinces him that Dontos would make a better fool than a knight, and that "he doesn't deserve the mercy of a quick death" (*Clash of Kings* 46). Saving his life earns Sansa Dontos' devotion, and he steps forward to try to protect her the next time Joffrey has her

beaten, smacking her with his "club," a melon on a stick (*Clash of Kings* 487). He is also instrumental in helping her escape from the castle after Joffrey's death.

Sansa also takes on the role of queen during the Battle of the Blackwater, during which King's Landing is under siege. Cersei demonstrates poor leadership and morale-boosting skills; she drinks continuously, orders the execution of two servants who try to escape, and tells Sansa that "[t]he only way to keep your people loyal is to make certain they fear you more than the enemy" (*Clash of Kings* 848). Sansa disagrees, thinking that "*If I am ever a queen, I'll make them love me*" (*Clash of Kings* 848). Later, she has a chance to show her ability to win the ladies of the court; Cersei quits the holdfast, sending the ladies into a near-panic, but Sansa calms them:

> "Don't be afraid," she told them loudly. "The queen has raised the drawbridge. This is the safest place in the city. There's thick walls, the moat, the spikes. . . ." [. . .] Sansa raised her hands for quiet. "Joffrey's come back to the castle. He's not hurt. They're still fighting, that's all I know, they're fighting bravely. The queen will be back soon." The last was a lie, but she had to soothe them. She noticed the fools standing under the galley. "Moon Boy, make us laugh." (*Clash of Kings* 863)

Unlike Cersei, who showed little concern for the well being of her ladies, instead telling Sansa that if Stannis' forces break into the city, "then 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," Sansa steps forward as a leader, working to live up to her own ideals of what a queen should be (*Clash of Kings* 846).

Part of the realism of Martin's world is found in the political maneuverings of the various players of the "game of thrones," and Sansa's ability to negotiate the politics of court is an essential part of her growth from a naïve preteen to an adult in charge of her own survival. She frames the politics in light of chivalric romance, claiming that "a lady's armor is courtesy" (*Clash of Kings* 50). This statement, which she repeats several times, either out loud or to herself, carries two possible meanings: Sansa uses courtesy to protect herself from Joffrey's violence, surrounding herself with carefully chosen words to deflect his anger and save herself and others from his impulsive violent acts. At the same time, armor is a knightly accoutrement, and in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the design of armor is important and reveals much about a character. Thus, Sansa is still thinking in terms of knighthood and chivalry, placing herself in the role of warrior by wearing a form of armor, albeit a political armor made of words. Since no real knights will protect Sansa, she takes on the role of her own protector. Her burgeoning political savvy does not go unnoticed; during Joffrey's wedding feast, Tyrion considers Sansa's abilities:

> *She is good at this*, he thought, as he watched her tell Lord Gyles that his cough was sounding better, compliment Elinor Tyrell on her gown, and question Jalabhar Xho about wedding customs in the Summer Isles. His cousin Ser Lancel had been brought down by Ser Kevan, the first time he'd left his sickbed since the battle. *He looks ghastly*. Lancel's hair had turned white and brittle, and he was thin as a stick. Without his father beside him holding him up, he would surely have collapsed. Yet when Sansa praised his valor and said how good it was to see him getting strong again, both Lancel and Ser Kevan beamed. *She would have made Joffrey*

> *a good queen and a better wife if he'd had the sense to love her*. (*Storm of Swords* 816)

Like every other stage of Sansa's development, leaving court represents another step away from her previous idealistic outlook and desire to be a princess and later queen. This time, however, Sansa not only loses her place at court, but her very identity; in order to hide her, Petyr claims she is his bastard daughter, renames her Alayne, and has her dye her hair brown (*Storm of Swords* 932-3). Petyr becomes a father figure to Sansa, though she does not fully trust him; he asks whether she can "be [his] daughter in [her] heart," and says that "with my wits and Cat's beauty, the world will be yours, sweetling" (*Feast for Crows* 224). Sansa's insistence on calling Petyr "father" and acting as the dutiful daughter can be seen as another way of protecting herself; Petyr has been shown to have an unhealthy fascination with the women of the Tully family, whom he continuously tries to seduce. Sansa knows that the Eyrie and Petyr's guardianship are another prison, but she recognizes the advantages of Petyr over King's Landing. After the aforementioned discussion, during which Sansa fully accepts her new role, claiming that "I am Alayne, Father. Who else would I be?", Martin ceases to refer to her in text as Sansa, instead calling her Alayne and even titling her chapters "Alayne" rather than "Sansa." Sansa's unmaking is complete, and Alayne's training in "the game of thrones" is underway.

Sansa's final appearance to date, in *A Feast for Crows*, reveals Petyr's plan to marry her to the heir of the Vale of Arryn and reveal her true identity, when she will "come out with [her] long auburn hair, clad in a maiden's cloak of white and grey with a direwolf emblazoned on the back," thus returning her to her place as Lady Sansa, heir to Winterfell and Lady of the Eyrie (*Feast for Crows* 896). In a way, Petyr plays on

Sansa's remaining idealism, which is focused on her own duties and behavior as a noble. Although Sansa has lost her belief in the inherent goodness of the world, she still believes that she can use courtly behavior to live up to her own ideals.

"So Many Vows": The Fallen Knight

Like the noblemen Sansa admires, Jaime Lannister is beautiful to look at, but that beauty is at odds with his reputation. He is introduced as "Kingslayer," a tall, golden-haired man who looks every inch the knight. Jon Snow thinks that "*this is what a king should look like*," but Robb tells Bran that Jaime "killed the old mad king and shouldn't count [as a knight] anymore" (*Game of Thrones* 51, 77). Eddard warns Robert that Jaime cannot be trusted because "[h]e swore an vow to protect his king's life with his own. Then he opened that king's throat with a sword" (*Game of Thrones* 115). Though Eddard agrees that Mad King Aerys needed killing, the fact that Jaime broke his oaths and killed Aerys makes him inherently untrustworthy. Nearly every other character who interacts with Jaime thinks much the same; the instances of people telling Jaime his honor is worth nothing because he is an oath-breaker are too numerous to list here. As Sansa is set up as a naïve young girl, Jaime is set up as a monster, an oath-breaker, and a child-killer.

Like Sansa, Jaime grows up on tales of chivalric heroes; he was raised in Westeros' Golden Age, which was populated by legendary figures who resemble the Victorian reimaginings of King Arthur and Robin Hood. His hero, Ser Arthur Dayne, for instance, was respected by everyone who knew him, even those who fought against him; Eddard tells his son Bran that "[t]he finest knight I ever saw was Ser Arthur Dayne, who fought with a blade called Dawn, forged from the heart of a fallen star. They called him

the Sword of the Morning, and he would have killed me but for Howland Reed" (*Clash of Kings* 332). Eddard remembers Dawn as "pale as milkglass, alive with light" (*Game of Thrones* 425). Jaime describes Dayne's prowess more bluntly, telling Ser Loras that Dayne "could have slain all five of you with his left hand while he was taking a piss with the right" (*Storm of Swords* 923). Dayne was such a model of chivalry that, during his fight with the Smiling Knight, he allowed his opponent to change swords when the Smiling Knight's was notched past usability (*Storm of Swords* 916).

Dayne is clearly meant to be an analogue of King Arthur, a model of honor and chivalry whose title—the Sword of the Morning—is passed through the sword Dawn. Dawn itself is similar to Excalibur; Malory describes Excalibur as "so breyght in his enemyes eyen that it gaf light lyke thirty torchys," while in the Middle English Prose *Merlin* it is described as "so cler and bright shynynge as thei semed that it be helden that it glistred as it hadde be the brightnesse of xx tapres brennynge" (Malory 14; Wheatley 118). Dayne, like Arthur, dies during a violent revolution, at the hands of a close friend rather than a son, though the details of his death are unclear (*Game of Thrones* 425). However, Martin presents the ideal Arthur as found in Victorian texts rather than the flawed Arthur of the medieval romances, echoing Pre-Raphaelite tendencies to see Arthur and his court as "a model of chivalry, courage, loyalty, and mutual support" (Faxton 55). Despite Dayne's celebrated courage and nobility, he is a member of Mad King Aerys' Kingsguard, and he remains loyal to Aerys until his death, yet he remains a role model and larger-than-life memory for both Jaime and Eddard.

Contrarily, the Smiling Knight and his comrades of the Kingswood Brotherhood, who resemble Robin Hood and his band, are initially presented as dangerous yet happy-

go-lucky, but Martin implies that this is not the whole story. Led by Simon Toyne, the Brotherhood terrorized nobles from the Kingswood, prompting King Aerys to send Dayne to destroy them. While little is specifically revealed about the Brotherhood in the novels, what information is available creates clear parallels with the Victorian portrayal of Robin Hood; the Victorian-era tales of Robin Hood, such as Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883), are an example of the sort of idealized neomedievalism Martin claims to combat. This portrayal is at odds with the early ballads about Robin Hood, who, according to Stephen Knight, "robs the rich to give to himself and his friends, not to be generally charitable to the poor" (2). The Brotherhood operated out of the Kingswood, much as Robin Hood's men operated out of Sherwood Forest. Like Robin Hood's merry men, the Brotherhood was an ensemble of colorfully-named men and women: Wenda the White Fawn, Oswyn Longneck, Big Belly Ben, Fletcher Dick, and the Smiling Knight (*Storm of Swords* 446). Since their defeat, the Brotherhood inspired several ballads and silly songs, at least one of which praises them:

> The brothers of the Kingswood
>
> They were an outlaw band.
>
> The forest was their castle,
>
> But they roamed across the land.
>
> No man's gold was safe from them,
>
> Nor any maiden's hand.
>
> Oh, the brothers of the Kingswood,
>
> That fearsome outlaw band. (*Storm of Swords* 232)

One of the remaining outlaws, currently serving as a member of the Night's Watch, tells stories about his time in the Brotherhood, "when he rode with Simon Toyne and Big Belly Ben and helped Wenda the White Fawn burn her mark in the buttocks of her highborn captives" (*Dance with Dragons* 714-15). Finally, the Brotherhood earned the loyalty of the smallfolk of the Kingswood; in order to find them, Dayne had to win it back:

> He paid the smallfolk for the food we ate, brought their grievances to King Aerys, expanded the grazing lands around their villages, even won them the right to fell a certain number of trees each year and take a few of the king's deer during the autumn. The forest folk had looked to Toyne to defend them, but Ser Arthur did more for them than the Brotherhood could ever hope to do, and won them to our side. (*Feast for Crows* 646)

However, Martin again undercuts the simplicity of the Robin Hood tales in his depiction of the Brotherhood; the only member described at any length is the Smiling Knight, who Jaime recalls as "a madman, cruelty and chivalry all jumbled up together" (*Storm of Swords* 916). Far from the more simple grey morality of the later tales of Robin Hood, who stole from the rich in order to feed the poor, Martin depicts the Kingswood Brotherhood as a scourge that needed to be removed.

To further make this point, Martin has Jaime compare a current band of outlaws, the remains of the Brotherhood Without Banners, a group of knights and soldiers originally sent out to punish Ser Gregor Clegane for his atrocities against the smallfolk but who then turned outlaw when they failed, to the Kingswood Brotherhood. Lady Amerei mentions that bandits killed her father, Merrett Frey, who was a squire with

Jaime when they hunted the Kingswood Brotherhood. Merrett did not make a good showing: "Frey's chief contributions to the fight had consisted of contracting the pox from a camp follower and getting himself captured by the White Fawn. The outlaw queen burned her sigil into his arse before ransoming him back to Sumner Crakehall" (*Feast for Crows* 642). When Amerei mentions talk of a "woman, cloaked and hooded" in the Brotherhood Without Banners, Jaime immediately thinks of the White Fawn, but Amerei corrects him: "The White Fawn was young and fair, they say. This hooded woman is neither" (*Feast for Crows* 644). Though Jaime sees a potential parallel between the two groups, the Brotherhood without Banners is immediately set up as a more brutal contrast through the differences in the major female players. Like the Kingswood Brotherhood, the new band has gained the loyalty of the smallfolk, who refuse to give their lords any information about the bandits' whereabouts (*Feast for Crows* 645).

The Brotherhood Without Banners seeks revenge for the slaughter of Starks and Stark bannermen at the Red Wedding in *A Storm of Swords*, but seek that revenge indiscriminately. Among their victims are Petyr "Pimple" Frey, who was blackout drunk at the Wedding, and Merrett, whose role during the Wedding was to keep the biggest Stark warrior too drunk to fight (*Storm of Swords* 1121). Lady Stoneheart is Catelyn Stark, resurrected after the events of the Red Wedding, and death has so warped her sense of friend and foe that she orders Brienne of Tarth, who swore loyalty to Catelyn and has been working to reunite the remains of the family, killed due to her perceived treason for assisting Jaime, along with her companions for being Lannisters or Lannister bannermen (*Feast for Crows* 912-13). Brienne is spared hanging only because she shouts an as-yet

unrevealed word (*Feast for Crows* 916). Unlike the Kingswood Brotherhood, who harassed and ransomed nobles, presumably to pass the money on to the smallfolk, the Brotherhood Without Banners is dangerous and terrifying.

While Martin argues against the Victorian version of Robin Hood, refusing to portray his medieval people as innocent and childlike, he instead relies on a medievalism that resembles what Eco referred to as "the Barbaric Age," describing it as "Dark par excellence," in which "one is asked to celebrate, on this earth of virile, brute force, the glories of a new Aryanism" (69). Thus, "Barbaric Age" medievalism celebrates masculinity expressed through violence, especially that of the peoples often referred to as barbarians, such as the Norse. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, knights and other hypermasculine characters gain power through violence, while feminine characters such as Sansa or the eunuch Varys use more subtle, political methods. Martin may see this tendency to privilege violence over reason as realistic, but it falls into a traditional medievalism that echoes the Renaissance idea of the Middle Ages as a time of "barbarism, ignorance, and superstition that allegedly constituted a persistent decline between the twin peaks of classical Rome and the Italian Renaissance" (Cantor 28). The brutality of Martin's world becomes especially apparent in Sansa and Jaime's downward trajectories, during which Martin demonstrates to the characters and the audience his belief that the Middle Ages in particular was a time of rampant cruelty and violence rather than the Victorian ideal of chivalry and order.

Jaime has lost faith in chivalry and nobility, driven to cynicism by the necessity of killing King Aerys and the resulting mistrust by the people around him. When Catelyn

demands to know how he can consider himself a knight when he has "forsaken every vow [he] ever swore," Jaime's reply demonstrates the inherent difficulties of chivalry:

> So many vows . . . they make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Obey the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. But obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. Respect the gods. Obey the laws. It's all too much. No matter what you do, you're forsaking one vow or the other. (*Clash of Kings* 796)

Jaime does not explain to Catelyn how these vows came into conflict, but he does tell Brienne later. Aerys planned to burn King's Landing to the ground with all its people inside: "*The traitors want a city,* I heard him tell Rossart, *but I'll give them naught but ashes. Let Robert be king over charred bones and cooked meat*" (*Storm of Swords* 507). He ordered Jaime to kill his father, Tywin, to prove he was not a traitor. In order to save the smallfolk of King's Landing and Tywin, Jaime killed the pyromancer Rossart and then Aerys (*Storm of Swords* 507). Even before Jaime's many vows come into conflict with each other during the sack of King's Landing, he struggles with Aerys' violent tendencies. Aerys routinely raped and abused his wife, particularly after burning a man alive, and her maids said she "looked as if some beast had savaged her, clawing at her thighs and chewing on her breasts" (*Feast for Crows* 331). When Jaime protests this treatment, pointing out to a fellow member of the Kingsguard that "[w]e are sworn to protect her as well," the other knight replies, "[w]e are [. . .] but not from him" (*Feast for Crows* 331). Jaime was also present for Aerys' execution of Brandon and Rickard Stark, Eddard's father and older brother, during which Rickard was cooked in his own armor and Brandon bound so that he strangled himself trying save Rickard (*Clash of*

Kings 797-8). Jaime tells Catelyn that during the execution he "stood at the foot of the Iron Throne in my white armor and white cloak, filling my head with thoughts of Cersei" (*Clash of Kings* 798). Like Sansa, Jaime found a survival mechanism for dealing with the horrors he was not allowed to fight; he dissociated, distancing himself mentally from whatever was happening, which he calls "go[ing] away inside" (*Storm of Swords* 417; *Feast for Crows* 181). That dissociation is Jaime's only option demonstrates the clash of Martin's "High Middle Ages" fantasy with his privileged "Barbaric Age" fantasy; Jaime's early life with Dayne is emblematic of a High Middle Ages chivalric romance, but his training and belief in chivalry cannot compete with the brutality of the Barbaric Age.

As a catalyst for his redemption arc, Martin has Jaime lose a hand (a common trope in heroic fantasy), which causes him to question his identity: "*They took my sword hand. Was that all I was, a sword hand?*" (*Clash of Kings* 415). Because of his prowess with a sword, which Martin established was built from his association with and teaching at the hands of Dayne, as well as his social standing, Jaime had believed himself invincible. This belief shows in his refusal to take anything seriously, including his own incarceration and the horrors of the war-torn countryside; encountering a pool famous in song, now filled with corpses, Jaime begins singing that song—"*Six maids there were in a spring-fed pool*" (*Clash of Kings* 285). He even finds the thought of keeping a promise to Catelyn funny: "Jaime had decided that he *would* return Sansa, and the younger girl as well if she could be found. It was not like to win him back his lost honor, but the notion of keeping faith when they all expected betrayal amused him more than he could say" (287). His flippant attitude continues through his recapture by the Brave Companions

(called the Bloody Mummers behind their backs), a mercenary group under the command of Roose Bolton, one of the more brutal lords of the land. Jaime underestimates their leader's brutality and does not believe he will be harmed until he is:

> *They mean to scare me.* The fool hopped on Jaime's back, giggling, as the Dothraki swaggered toward him. *The goat wants me to piss my breeches and beg his mercy, but he'll never have that pleasure.* He was a Lannister of Casterly Rock, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, no sellsword would make him scream.
>
> Sunlight ran silver along the edge of the *arakh* as it came shivering down, almost too fast to see. And Jaime screamed. (*Clash of Kings* 297)

His time with the Companions is the low point of Jaime's redemption arc; as they take him back to Bolton, they tie his severed hand around his neck, give him horse urine to drink, tie him to Brienne on the saddle and mock both of them, and make Brienne clean him up when he vomits (*Clash of Kings* 413-14). Finally he gives up and resigns himself to death, and only Brienne calling him "craven" convinces him to live (*Clash of Kings* 415). Yet despite his own pain and despair, he offers Brienne some advice about her impending rape: "let them have the meat, and you go far away. It will be over quicker, and they'll get less pleasure from it. [. . .] Think of Renly, if you loved him. Think of Tarth, mountains and seas, pools, waterfalls, whatever you have on your Sapphire Isle" (*Clash of Kings* 417). He believes he is offering sound advice, since "going away inside" was his coping mechanism for Aerys' cruelty. Thus, Martin seems to imply that those raised on idealistic tales and "escapist" fiction may lack the mental fortitude to face reality, especially when that reality is excessively brutal.

In order to emphasize the "reality" of his "Barbaric Age" Middle Ages, Martin must create character arcs in which his characters adapt to the world he has created; yet for the sake of audience engagement, he cannot allow them to conform to the brutality of the world. For Jaime, this means letting go of the nostalgia of his memories of the "Golden Age," and he questions his own memory of those great knights he served with or fought: "*The world was simpler in those days*, Jaime thought, *and men as well as swords were made of finer steel*. Or was it only that he had been fifteen?" (*Storm of Swords* 916). From the perspective of an adult who has suffered, broken oaths, and otherwise grown past the starry-eyed view of knighthood, the heroism and chivalry of the Golden Age knights seems naïve and idealistic, which is what Martin believes. Because his heroes are in question, Jaime also questions himself, wondering, "*And me, that boy that I was . . . when did he die, I wonder? When I donned the white cloak? When I opened Aerys' throat?* That boy had wanted to be Ser Arthur Dayne, but someplace along the way he had become the Smiling Knight instead" (*Storm of Swords* 916). Just as Sansa based her worldview on tales of romance and chivalry, so Jaime based his identity as a knight on a Golden Age ideal that he now realizes never truly existed. Thus, Martin seems to claim that even if the grand tales took place within living memory, that memory may be skewed by romantic ideology or youth. However, he does not seem to recognize that his own portrayal of the Middle Ages as brutal is a different type of medievalist interpretation.

Like Sansa, Jaime rebuilds himself with a reduced idealism about the world, but greater belief in his own strength of character. Brienne's stubborn courage serves an example to Jaime as he begins working his way back to health and usefulness. He begins

by finding new role models, primarily the lesser-known knights of the Kingsguard; he tells Loras that "[a] lot of brave men have worn the white cloak. Most have been forgotten" (*Feast for Crows* 337). Loras replies that "[t]he heroes will always be remembered. The best," and Jaime says, "The best and the worst. [. . .] And a few who were a bit of both" (*Feast for Crows* 337). Having already lost his chance to be one of the best, Jaime works to keep himself from being counted among the worst. Having promised Catelyn Stark that he will return Sansa and Arya to Winterfell, he sends Brienne out to try to find both girls, giving her a Valeryian steel sword he has named Oathkeeper to help with her quest. Fittingly, Oathkeeper is made with steel reforged from Eddard Stark's greatsword, Ice; Jaime tells Brienne that "[y]ou'll be defending Ned Stark's daughter with Ned Stark's own steel" (*Storm of Swords* 1009). Besides returning Sansa and Arya to their home, Jaime also swore to Catelyn that he would never to take up arms against Stark or Tully, Catelyn's families. Thus, when he is sent out to set matters right in the kingdom, he breaks the sieges on Riverrun, the seat of House Tully, and Raventree Hall through diplomacy rather than force of arms. As he travels the kingdoms cleaning up the last of the mess from the civil war and removing bandits, he thinks, "It felt good. This was justice. *Make a habit of it, Lannister, and one day men might call you Goldenhand after all. Goldenhand the Just*" (*Feast for Crows* 571). Jaime also cuts off his relationship with Cersei, whom he discovers he no longer loves after his ordeal. When Cersei's many indiscretions are discovered and she is imprisoned in the Sept of Baelor, she sends to Jaime for help, but he burns her letter (*Feast for Crows* 958). Rather than protecting Cersei from her own mistakes, Jaime leaves her to suffer for them, thinking that "[e]ven if he had gone back, he could not hope to save her. She was guilty

of every treason laid against her, and he was short a sword hand" (*Dance with Dragons* 693). As Jaime has defined himself by his relationship with Cersei, both as twin and lover, for most of his life, his choice to end the sexual relationship and related dependency helps him to redefine himself as "a bit of both" rather than one of "the worst."

Although Sansa and Jaime are two of Martin's heroes and seem destined for influence and greatness when the series is finished, the author's fetishization of his version of reality means that he cannot allow them to retain their idealism as it relates to other people or the world in general. Likewise, his claim that *A Song of Ice and Fire* purposefully combats an "escapist" fantasy requires him to define the Victorian medievalist fantasy within the text so that he can demonstrate that Westeros is not a traditional Victorian fantasy. Thus, his purpose and beliefs lead to violent reeducation for his characters, demonstrating through their experiences that his version of the Middle Ages is by nature violent and oppressive. Yet neither Sansa nor Jaime entirely give up on their idealism, instead focusing inward and working to live up to their own moral standards. However, that Martin chooses to make his admirable characters members of the nobility, as nearly all of his protagonists are, may indicate how difficult it is to break away from certain traditional views; those who show heroic tendencies and internally-driven goodness have noble blood, or at least have been raised to nobility, which imbues them with a certain inherent worth. Through characters such as Cersei Lannister, Petyr Baelish, and Roose Bolton, Martin actively undermines the idea that nobility are inherently better than commoners. Yet his admirable characters, such as Sansa and

Jaime, are nearly invariably nobility; indeed, most of his point-of-view characters are noble, with the concerns and ideas of the common people filtered through the perspectives of these nobles.

In a way, Martin's work echoes the tendencies of medieval romance to focus exclusively on the nobility, who frequently behave badly and against the rules of chivalric behavior; in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, for example, the Pentecostal Oath is necessary because of the bad behavior of Arthur's knights.[2] Yet medieval romances no more reflected the reality of the Middle Ages than Victorian medievalism does; according to Roberta L. Krueger, "romances were a vehicle for the construction of a social code—chivalry—and a mode of sentimental refinement—which some have called 'courtly love'—by which noble audiences defined their social identities and justified their privileges, thus reinforcing gender and class distinctions" (5). Thus, parallels between Martin's work and the traditions of medieval romance do not support his insistence that his work is historically accurate.

If fantasy neomedievalism is an insulating layer between contemporary concerns and a contemporary audience, allowing for a safe distance from which these concerns can be examined, then Martin's insistence on realism is an attempt to close that distance. His disdain for the Victorian medievalism as expressed in other neomedieval fantasy texts indicates a disdain for escapism in general. However, his insistence that his version of the Middle Ages is the "right" one creates its own problems and neomedievalism. Since he claims that his Middle Ages are based on research and history, he indirectly argues that the "Barbaric Age" model of the Middle Ages is the correct one. In this way, he falls in line with a Rationalist view of the Middle Ages, in which, according to Kevin Morris,

"[m]edieval ignorance, barbarism and superstition became a byword, it being assumed that such qualities were the moral defects of a corrupt system" (71). Morris argues that this view of the Middle Ages has persisted, and that the Middle Ages continue to be seen as a time of "barbarism, delusion, profligacy, and oppression" (92). Thus, Martin's choices to dismiss "Disney" neomedievalism as childish, even feminine, and privilege a harsh "realism" in which women are brutalized, commoners are exploited, and power for its own sake is a reasonable goal, legitimize the Rationalist ideas about the Middle Ages. These ideas are encapsulated in his assertion that "you win or you die," and enforced in his characterization of Sansa and Jaime, both of whom must give up their "childish" ideas of nobility and goodness, at least as they apply to anyone besides themselves.

Like most examples of medievalism and neomedievalism, Martin's construction of Westeros reveals more about his beliefs about the Middle Ages and the human condition than it does about the Middle Ages, and it is a bleak and potentially depressing view. If Martin sees the tendencies of his characters to engage in wanton brutality for the sake of power as realistic portrayals of human beings, then his view of the world would seem to be similarly dark. On the *Game of Thrones* season one DVD special features, Martin says: "When I look around at the real world, it's a world full of greys. Even the greatest heroes have weaknesses, and even the blackest villains are capable of the greatest acts of compassion and humanity. People are complicated, and I want my characters to be complicated, too" ("From the Book to the Screen"). Martin casts this approach to his characters as another way of avoiding fantasy clichés, explaining to Dorman T. Schindler that "I wanted [. . .] to get away from the traditional good guys and bad guys clichés of so much of contemporary fantasy" (37). He further claims that:

> The struggle between good and evil is certainly a legitimate topic; but that struggle is not waged against dark lords with evil minions. It's waged against the individual human heart. All of us have good and evil in us; the question is, what choices will we make when we're confronted difficult and dangerous situations? That's the approach [to fantasy] that I wanted to take. (Schindler 37)

Yet his approach to writing characters such as Sansa and Jaime indicates that he sees belief in the ultimate goodness of a traditional fantasy world as not only naïve, but ultimately dangerous. He seems to believe that he is not doing his readers a favor by sugar-coating his own view of the "real world," as can be seen in his aforementioned claim that those who "love books too much, or live too much in the world of imagination, [are] going to have this faint sense of disappointment about what life actually brings them" (qtd. in Levy 71). Thus, far from the insulating layer that fantasy neomedievalism provides between contemporary concerns and the reader, Martin's work forces the reader to confront the darkness Martin sees in the world immediately rather than at a remove.

However, all of this may be Martin's way of rationalizing his choice to embrace the "shaggy" medievalism of what Umberto Eco identifies as the "Barbaric Age" Middle Ages, which is frequently used to argue for the evolutionary progress of humankind, with the medieval people less evolved, and thus less intelligent and civilized, than contemporary people (Eco 69). Julie Nelson Couch describes this tendency as "a scholarly conception of the past as the nation's childhood, an idea enabled by the logical extension of evolutionary thinking to history and also by the deep-seated feeling among learned me that the old tales were essentially children's stories" (129). The idea of

progressive history, that history is an inevitable march forward, always improving, as well as a romanticized view of the social good of the Roman Empire, has led to the idea of the Middle Ages as a time of retrogression, devoid of science and heavily superstitious. Nineteenth-century historian J.J. Jusserand, for example, claims that the Germanic tribes of fourth-century England "hated peace, despised arts, and had no literature but drinking and war-songs" (23). As society has come to define "civilized" as "peaceful," the idea that the Middle Ages, as a less civilized era than the present, was inherently violent, has become common in medievalist thought.

As has been demonstrated, Martin's work is colored by medievalist ideas, despite his insistence that it is based on historical precedent. His medievalist society conforms to the ideas about the Middle Ages put forth by the progressive history model, particularly in its excessive violence. As with his apparent belief that integrity and righteousness are the purview of the nobility, although not an inherent trait of the nobility, his tendency toward the "Barbaric Age" Middle Ages seems subconscious rather than purposeful. The popularity of *A Song of Ice and Fire* with readers and viewers alike indicates that his portrayal conforms to (or possibly shapes) his audience's beliefs about the Middle Ages, including the portrayals of societal and individual violence. While fans may debate whether the level of violence in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is necessary, that some readers defend Martin's portrayal as "realistic" illustrates how ingrained the popular zeitgeist the idea of the "Barbaric Age" is.

Note

[1] Part of the difficulty for fans may be that Martin has never written a lengthy treatise on his views of the Middle Ages, medievalism, neomedievalism, and his own work. Rather, as can be seen here, these views must be pieced together from various interviews in which Martin's replies are limited to the questions the interviewer asks. Thus, while in one interview Martin may discuss the Wars of the Roses, the Hundred Years War, and the Ptolemics of Egypt, his disclaimer that he can never recreate the Middle Ages—nor does he want to—occurs in an entirely different interview.

[2] Dorsey Armstrong's *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's* Morte d'Arthur (Florida UP, 2003) is an important source for analysis of Arthurian society and the Pentecostal Oath.

CHAPTER III

Subverting History: Feminism and Queerness in the Middle Ages

"She was twice the man of anyone in the village, and now she's twice the woman."

--Valerian's Father, *Dragonslayer* (1981)

The 1981 film *Dragonslayer* begins when Cassiodorus Rex, king of Urland, holds a lottery to choose virgin girls to feed to a dragon as tribute to stop it from ravaging the countryside. One local blacksmith disguises his daughter as a boy in order to protect her from the lottery. When her true gender is revealed, Valerian's father boasts that "she was twice the man of anyone in the village, and now she's twice the woman." While disguised as a man, Valerian apprentices as a blacksmith, leads an expedition to recruit a wizard to destroy the dragon, and stands up to the king's general. As a woman, she agrees to participate in the lottery, helps her father forge a weapon with which the sorcerer's apprentice, Galen, will fight the dragon, and accompanies Galen into the dragon's lair. In many ways, her father is right; while most of the men in the film are willing to go along with the status quo, even when that means feeding girls to the dragon, Valerian refuses to accept that surrender and pacification are the only options. When Galen decides to go back into the dragon's lair to resurrect his master, Ulrich, Valerian tries to stop him. However, by this time, Galen not only knows she is a woman, but has also had sex with her. He ignores her attempts to stop him from going back to the lair, then refuses to let her accompany him. "I'm not afraid!" she tells him. "After all, I was a man. Remember?" Interestingly, in the shooting script, she says "I've been a man longer than you have," speaking in the present tense despite her gender having been revealed (Barwood and Robbins). In order to convince Galen of her fitness to join him in his

quest, she must remind him that she has been convincingly disguised as a man, and that she has masculine qualities. Galen has ceased to see her as a strong companion and instead sees her as a woman; these two concepts are antithetical to him.

Dragonslayer's Galen is not a unique character in neomedieval fiction. Dismissing the strength of women, even if that strength manifests in a traditionally masculine way, simply makes Galen a product of his "time." In texts such as these, the medieval period, or at least the neomedieval impression of the medieval period, and its patriarchal traditions are used as a backdrop for authors to portray characters who pursue non-normative gender roles or differing sexualities. Neomedieval fantasy literature frequently features women such as Valerian who must hide their gender in order to protect themselves or affect societal change. In order to be respected in a neomedieval society, women frequently must take on male roles and even a male identity. Women are not the only disenfranchised parties in neomedieval fiction; as social mores have changed, queer characters have become more prevalent in fantasy, as well. However, in the name of "authenticity," certain social traditions, such as treating women as the property of their fathers or husbands, or rejecting queer sexualities, are common in neomedieval fantasy. Thus, feminism and queer concerns are contemporary issues that fantasy authors frequently project onto the Middle Ages, which are commonly seen as a time of hyper-patriarchal oppression and intolerance. The right of women to make their own choices and for anyone to engage in a non-normative sexual orientation are subversive ideas for the neomedieval idea of the Middle Ages, which allows fantasy writers to engage in discussions about feminism and tolerance at a remove from contemporary issues. This chapter will focus on three such authors who have been

particularly influential, although not equally successful: Tamora Pierce, George R.R. Martin, and Marion Zimmer Bradley.

In the 1980s, Tamora Pierce introduced a cross-dressing female knight who showed herself capable of operating in a traditionally male role, then explored the ramifications of Alanna's abilities and their impact on the court and realm. In a subsequent series, Pierce continued the tradition with Keladry, a girl who, because of Alanna's previous success, was allowed to train to be a knight without having to hide her gender. Likewise, George R.R. Martin includes several female warriors, though his most prominent is Brienne of Tarth, who acts as a knight despite her gender making her ineligible for the title. Although feminism has been present in fantasy fiction for several decades, queer concerns are less addressed, especially in a serious, non-exploitative way. Martin and Marion Zimmer Bradley both include queer characters and encounters, yet their approaches can be troubling, with a tendency to reject or hide male homosexuality while fetishizing or glorifying female homosexuality.

"You Think She'd Be Over This Warrior Thing by Now": Female Knights in High Fantasy

Warrior women have become commonplace in neomedieval fantasy literature, likely as a reaction against the traditional medievalist patriarchal power structure. Critics such as Marleen Barr and Brian Attebury have examined the ways in which medievalist "heroic" fantasy has moved away from a "blood and thunder," Conan-esque genre and toward a more "gender-fair," in the words of Linda Forrest, approach (47). Initially, Barr claims, female warriors followed the characterization conventions of men, but developed

beyond that until "female heroes are free to be women, not merely sword-swinging men with female bodies and female names. They are free to be both heroic and female" (85). However, problems with the portrayal of women, women's strength, and women's relationships with other women can still arise in medievalist fantasy. George R.R. Martin and Tamora Pierce approach the warrior woman trope in different ways, but both unwittingly fall prey to problematic elements while attempting to present strong, empowered women.

One difficulty for authors writing strong women is the possibility, even tendency, for these women to fall into the trope of the "exceptional woman." Exceptional women are isolated due to the liminal space they inhabit, not part of a community of women nor truly accepted into the company of men. Rosi Braidotti explains the exceptional woman as the result of a post-feminist ideology in which women are, like men, judged on the basis of their financial success alone and expected to attain said success through their own efforts. Thus, community is devalued and women are discouraged from helping each other, or womankind as a whole, succeed. Women who can be described as "exceptional" frequently divorce themselves from feminism and any community of women, which creates "a new sense of isolation among women and new forms of vulnerability" (Braidotti 45). Mary D. Sheriff provides a simpler definition, claiming that the term "refers to the woman who, owing to some particular circumstance [. . .], has been exempted from rules or laws [. . .] prescribing the behavior of the female sex" (2). Thus, their very existence is problematic, for as Sheriff explains, "aspiring to her position implies collusion with the general subjugation of women. Separation from other women is the price a woman pays for her exceptionalness, and she pays it doubly, since the

exceptional woman was easily construed as the unnatural or unruleable (unruly) woman by men and women alike" (2). If a female warrior in fantasy is the only one of her kind, she is likely an exceptional woman. Despite Barr's optimism about female warriors being as much woman as warrior, frequently the only acceptable role for a strong female character is a masculine one. In order to have power in medievalist fantasy, women must act as men and take on the roles of men. These roles are often that of warrior or knight, as seen with Alanna, Keladry, and Brienne, with a few other possibilities. Very few women in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are powerful without entering traditionally masculine roles; the women most often thought of as "strong" are characters such as Arya, Brienne, Cersei, and Daenerys. Arya and Brienne are warriors, while Cersei and Daenerys are rulers who struggle with politics. Only Sansa Stark, whom fans rarely think of as a strong character, works from femininity to build her strength and power, using courtesy and traditional chivalric expectations to cement alliances and keep herself whole in extremely trying circumstances. Thus, while female warriors in medievalist fantasy may be free to be women, they must still take on masculine roles in order to be considered as strong as the men; writers rarely create strength out of femininity.

Medievalist fantasy seems especially prone to the exceptional woman trope, primarily because of the patriarchal nature of a medieval society as well as a subtle assumption that men's activities were the only things worth writing or reading about. Few neomedieval fantasy novels, even about women, focus on the day-to-day feminine tasks of the Middle Ages, and when a passage is devoted to such tasks, the women frequently find them boring and even demeaning. Women who find satisfaction in tasks such as spinning or embroidery tend to be portrayed as empty-headed and shallow, as

seen in Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* or Arya Stark's opinion of Sansa and the other girls in *A Game of Thrones*.

Alanna is an exceptional woman; she enters an exclusively male world in order to become a knight at a time when such things are not permitted. At ten years old, she devises a plan to disguise herself as a boy and enter training as a page at the royal palace. Alanna is frustrated by the traditional role of noblewomen and the activities to which she is restricted as a young lady; "Why do you get to have all the fun?" she asks her twin brother, Thom. "I'll have to learn sewing and dancing. You'll study tilting, fencing—" (*Alanna* 2). Alanna's interests are traditionally masculine; she likes "falling down and whacking at things," as Thom puts it (2). Switching places with her brother allows both of them to follow their dreams: Alanna to be a knight and Thom to be a sorcerer instead of a knight (2). Once Alanna enters the city, the reader learns that female warriors do exist in Tortall, but they are the guardians of the temple of the Great Mother Goddess. At the sight of them, Alanna thinks that "Someday she would wear armor, too, but she wouldn't be confined to temple grounds!" (*Alanna* 19). Even a socially sanctioned way for Alanna to be a warrior and a woman is not acceptable to her; she wants the glory and freedom of being a full knight, which in Tortall is the province of men. By choosing to disguise herself as a boy and act as one, Alanna fits the first part of Sheriff's definition of an exceptional woman, exempting herself from the rules for women of the patriarchal society in which she lives.

In entering the palace as a page, she removes herself from the company of women entirely, as the pages, squires, teachers, and knights with whom she interacts are all male. Her first meaningful interaction with another woman occurs when her menses come on;

panicked because she does not understand what is happening to her, she seeks out George for help, and he takes her to his mother, Mistress Cooper (*Alanna* 132-5). During the first two books, Alanna believes "female" to be synonymous with "silly" and "weak," and constantly rejects the physical traits that make her female; when she realizes her breasts are growing, she declares that "[m]aybe I was born that way, but I don't have to put up with it!" (*Alanna* 106). Believing her natural bodily cycles will interfere with her goals, Alanna declares that she will stop her cycles with magic, to which Mistress Cooper replies, "Your place in life can always change, whether you have the Gift or not. But you cannot change what the gods have made you. The sooner you accept that, the happier you will be" (*Alanna* 137). This attitude also leads to her rejecting other women as silly and worthless, thus conforming to Sheriff's claim that the exceptional woman "collude[s] with the general subjugation of women" (2). Although isolating Alanna from other women is a method for Pierce to increase the challenges Alanna faces during her training, it also subverts Pierce's underlying message of feminine empowerment; the only way for Alanna to be empowered is to become a man and take on a masculine role, and she is the only woman in the first half of the series who is capable of doing so.

Finally, when Alanna's true identity is revealed, she is allowed to keep her status as knight and not punished for either lying to the king or for flouting tradition, again "exempt[ing] her from rules or laws [. . .] prescribing the behavior of the female sex" (Sheriff 2). Instead, her friends rally around her and defend her, and those who do not accept her status as a knight are the primary antagonists of the series, their intolerance a part of their overall evil. When the would-be usurper Duke Roger discovers Alanna's secret, he loses his carefully-built façade of calm and calls her a "demon" (*Hand* 205).

He attacks Alanna, and she is forced to kill him in self-defense. When Alanna briefly lives with a group of desert tribesmen called the Bazhir, their shaman, Akhnan Ibn Nazzir, also declares Alanna a demon. He is furious with the headman's decision to make Alanna a warrior of the tribe; the orphans who attach themselves to Alanna tell her that "Akhnan Ibn Nazzir says you're a demon[. . . .] He says you have destroyed the eternal Balance. He wants us all to kill you" (*Woman Who Rides Like a Man* 27). Nazzir accuses her of corrupting the headman, Halef Seif, and conspiring to steal the souls of the children (33). He hates and fears her so much that he attempts magic beyond his abilities to destroy her, risking the entire tribe in the process (49-50). Finally, he attacks her with a magic sword and his own magic power, fighting until he uses up his own life force and dies (65). When, in a fit of hubris, Thom resurrects Duke Roger, Roger's co-conspirators, Lady Delia and Princess Josiane, take an opportunity to imply that Alanna was only named King's Champion because she slept with Jonathan, who is now the king. Delia then drags Josianne away, claiming that she does not "waste time in conversations with sluts" (*Lioness Rampant* 250-1). Those who dislike or distrust Alanna do so primarily because of her refusal to conform to society's gender norms, expressing jealousy (Delia and Josiane), fear of change (Nazzir), or simply incoherent fury (Roger). Only King Roald and Queen Lianne seem ambivalent about Alanna's deception, but they are rarely seen in the books after Alanna is revealed. Thus, Pierce portrays those who cling to the patriarchal social order and refuse to accept a female warrior as inherently evil, creating a social binary in which the patriarchy is opposed to a newer order in which women may also have masculine power. Once again, however, there is no other option

for women to wield power but in a masculine way, and up to that point, only Alanna is allowed to wield that power.

In the latter half of the series, Pierce works Alanna back into the company of women, and Alanna becomes a champion for misfits like herself who do not fit into the prescribed gender roles of their societies. However, in many ways, though Alanna forms communities of women, these women are also exceptional. During her time with the Bazhir, she becomes the guardian of three orphans, two girls and a boy, and begins training them to become the tribe's shamans. She fights for their position in the tribe, using her own acceptance as a warrior to influence the other men to accept the girls' expertise and position (*Woman Who Rides Like a Man* 80-1). Kara and Koureem are allowed to become the tribe's shamans because there is no one else available to fill the role; their induction into the governance of the tribe does not open the way for other women to join them, and few appear to be interested in doing so. Later, Alanna makes friends with a group of refugees, two of whom are warrior women, Burri and Princess Thayet; Thayet is Alanna's first female friend, a woman who is her social equal rather than her teacher or student. Alanna recognizes Thayet's diplomatic abilities and immediately plans to introduce her to Jonathan as a prospective queen and consort (*Lioness Rampant* 74). In later books, Thayet founds the Queen's Riders, groups of skirmishers who scout for trouble and fight using unconventional means; women are as welcome in the Riders as men (*Wild Magic* 19). However, Buri and Thayet are also exceptional; they escaped from a sectarian civil war, and Thayet's beauty and position make it possible for Jonathan to marry her without political fuss. The other refugees with them are barely mentioned or described, and the main characters leave them at a convent

at the first opportunity (*Lioness Rampant* 96-7). Other than Kara and Koureem, who strive to continue to act as women despite holding a man's position and authority, Pierce ignores and even rejects the possibilities of women's power outside of masculine gender roles. Even Thayet, who becomes queen of Tortall, is a warrior and thus wields a traditionally male power rather than finding power in femininity.

To Pierce's credit, her next lady knight, Keladry, breaks the mold of exceptional woman, though she continues the trope of women wielding masculine power. This change may be due to Pierce's express intent to create a role model for unconventional girls:

> For years, I'd been watching the plight of tall broad girls who are not necessarily fat but they're big. People are always on them to lose weight, and the guys are looking at them and saying, "Well, she's a good bud, but she's a moose." I wanted a book for that kind of girl to show her, "Yes, you can be beautiful and strong." ("Girls Who Kick Butt" 7)[1]

While Alanna is conventionally pretty, though muscular for a woman, Keladry is frequently called names such as "Cow" and "Lump" (*First Test* 13, 36). At fourteen, Keladry is five feet, ten inches tall and as muscular as any man of her station (*Squire* 3). She enters service as a page partly because she dislikes the womanly arts and partly because she thinks she has no talent for them; "Kel had no interest whatever in the ladylike arts, and even less interest in the skills needed to attract a husband or manage a castle. Even if she did, who would have her? Once she'd overheard her sisters-in-law comment that no man would be interested in a girl who was built along the lines of a cow" (*First Test* 12). Likewise, Keladry makes several female friends in the palace,

keeping her from being cut off from meaningful contact with other women. Though Keladry is the first girl to enter training as a page since Alanna, there are many other women who fight in various capacities in the kingdom, including Queen Thayet. Thus, Keladry fails to meet the criteria for an exceptional woman: she is not isolated from other women; she is not exempted from the rules that govern other women, as those rules have been changed; and she acts on behalf of other women's right to choose their own path, not just her own.

One could argue that Pierce's choice to make Alanna a solitary woman warrior while creating a community for Keladry from the outset is a function of Pierce's chosen setting. The neomedieval Middle Ages of Tortall is a traditional feudalist, patriarchal setting in which noblewomen become ladies and make alliance marriages while noblemen become knights, lords, or wizards. Following the familiar tropes of neomedieval fantasy creates constraints for women and their choices within which Pierce had to work, at least initially. Thus, Alanna's exceptionalism may be read as necessary to change the setting and allow for Keladry and other women to follow her. Likewise, Keladry's openly female knighthood further changes the culture and creates more opportunity for other women to enter the traditionally male knighthood. Yet Keladry also helps to affirm other paths for women; though she teaches her maid some basic hand-to-hand combat so she can protect herself from predators, ultimately Lalasa finds happiness in becoming a tailor and owning her own shop. Thus, Pierce's narrative and neomedieval culture moves steadily away from a traditionalist setting, with her women drastically changing the culture not only for themselves, but for others.

The same cannot be said of Martin's primary female warrior character, Brienne of Tarth, whose role as an exceptional woman places her outside traditional gender roles but does not extend to anyone around her. Like Keladry, Brienne rejects womanly pastimes because she believes her physical appearance makes her unsuited to such activities: "She could not have said which she found most hurtful, the pretty girls with their waspish tongues and brittle laughter or the cold-eyed ladies who hid their disdain behind a mask of courtesy. And common women could be worse than either" (*Feast for Crows* 286). When men came to seek an alliance with her father through marriage and courted her, the keep's septa tells her not to listen to them. "They're only saying those things to win your father's favor," the septa told her. "You'll find the truth in your looking glass, not on the tongues of men" (*Feast for Crows* 403). Catelyn Stark provides the most thorough description of Brienne:

> Beauty, they called her . . . mocking. The hair beneath the visor was a squirrel's nest of dirty straw, and her face . . . Brienne's eyes were large and very blue, a young girl's eyes, trusting and guileless, but the rest . . . her features were broad and coarse, her teeth prominent and crooked, her mouth too wide, her lips so plump they seemed swollen. A thousand freckles sprinkled her cheeks and brow, and her nose had been broken more than once. (*Clash of Kings* 344)

Thus, Martin places Brienne outside the company of women, whom he portrays as elitist and superficial, with a tendency to judge other women by their looks alone; Brienne has no worth as a woman because she is not beautiful, and therefore neither decorative nor a sexual object. Other than passing encounters, Catelyn is the only woman with whom the

reader sees Brienne interact in any meaningful way, and Catelyn pities Brienne for her looks. Brienne meets the criteria for exceptional woman of having no community with other women, but Martin rarely creates communities of women at all. Nearly all of his women are profoundly isolated from others, Brienne especially so due to her violation of feminine gender roles.

Brienne is also never fully accepted into the ranks of the male soldiers or knights, who either mock her or chastise her for not knowing her place. When Brienne joins Renly's camp, most of the men mock her, but a few begin courting her; Brienne is "confused and vulnerable" by the attention, until Lord Randyll Tarly informs her that the men have a wager on which of them will claim her virginity (*Feast for Crows* 299-300). Tarly says that the men were likely on the brink of resorting to force and blames Brienne for their behavior. "Your being here encouraged them," he claims, "If a woman will behave like a camp follower, she cannot object to being treated like one" (*Feast for Crows* 301). Later, during her hunt for Sansa Stark, Tarly again urges her to return home and act like a lady, telling her "when you're raped don't look to me for justice. You will have earned it with your folly" (*Feast for Crows* 296). Although Brienne acts outside of the traditional medievalist gender roles prescribed by the patriarchal, feudalist society Martin has created, she is allowed to do so partly because she can defend herself and partly because, since the country is in the midst of a civil war, no one with the inclination to stop her has the time or manpower to follow through. Thus, she also meets the criteria for an exceptional woman in that she is exempt, however grudgingly, from the rules surrounding other women of her rank and position in Westeros. However, Martin indicates that her status as an exceptional woman makes her more vulnerable than other

noblewomen to sexual assault and rape; while many of his common women are subjected to sexual assault, few of the noblewomen face more than the threat of violence. Brienne's choice to take on masculine power and act as a knight exposes her to physical violence, just as Alanna and Keladry are so exposed, but unlike the men, Brienne is also subject to the threat of sexual violence because she is a woman acting outside of her gender role. Although none of the men who so threaten Brienne are meant to be admirable or even likeable, the frequency with which Brienne is faced with this threat implies that sort of treatment should be expected if a woman should fail to act feminine.

Martin and Pierce both work within and yet seek to move beyond the tropes set down by earlier feminist fantasy writers whose creations became a new stereotype—the lone heroine, physically strong yet unable to make friends or build a meaningful relationship—and succeed in some ways while failing in others. Alanna learns the value of female companionship, gets married, and has children, all while continuing to serve as Jonathan's Champion. Keladry finds a man who does not balk at her strength, and their relationship ends only because he must enter a marriage of state to provide for his lands (*Lady Knight* 50-1). Despite not being bestowed the rank of knight, Brienne swears fealty to Catelyn Stark, then embarks on a quest to find and protect Catelyn's daughters, complete with a special sword named Oathkeeper (*Clash of Kings* 562; *Storm of Swords* 1008-9). Yet Brienne is never allowed to be a sexual being, as she is too ugly and too wary of men to be desirable; Alanna and Keladry, the only two female knights of their time, rarely interact; and while Alanna is able to have both a family and a career, Keladry's duties prevent her from doing the same.

Neomedieval fantasy writers continue to struggle to balance contemporary expectations of women's rights and abilities with the perceived limitations on women during the Middle Ages. The traditionally understood social structure and religious law that color the medievalist view of the Middle Ages can inhibit the creation of progressive or transgressive female characters, or at least make justifying their existence difficult for the writer. However, women's rights and social status are not the only contemporary issue facing fantasy writers; issues of gender and sexuality are also a struggle to portray fairly.

"Without Surprise or Shame": Queer Encounters and Characters in Neomedieval Fantasy

Queer sexuality remains a difficult topic in fantasy literature, and despite their best efforts, authors such as Martin and Bradley may create problematic scenes, characters, or incidents involving same-sex preferences or contact. Attitudes toward and understanding of sexuality and gender classifications have changed since the Middle Ages, enough so that contemporary fantasy writers and queer theorists may find themselves in a quandary when deciding how to handle contemporary attitudes toward gendered dress and behavior as well as sexual orientations. Perhaps the clearest difference between Middle Ages and contemporary understanding of sexuality is in sexual identity; according to Allan Frantzen, "The early Middle Ages [. . .] lacked an identity that we might think of today as the 'sexual subject' whose sexual practices and preferences inform, if they do not actually determine, both self-awareness and public identity" (4). While same-sex sexual activity existed and is documented in court

proceedings and religious texts, sexual preference as identity did not yet seem to exist, or if it did, it was not labeled as such in extant documents. Nikki Sullivan claims that before 1800 A.D., any non-traditional sex—sex acts not meant for procreation—was classified as "sodomy" and "conceived of as a sin against nature" (4). Unlike contemporary thinking about sexuality, James Schultz says, medieval understanding of sexual boundaries was entirely tied up with gender roles and keeping those compartmentalized (18). Schultz argues that to use anachronistic terms such as "heterosexual" in regards to medieval texts can cause confusion between past and present, medieval ideas and contemporary ideas, universal truths and relative truths (28-9). Thus, any discussion of queerness in the Middle Ages and its accompanying texts is rendered even more difficult due to the necessity of avoiding anachronism and the resultant possibility of further "othering" the subject of study.

Surprisingly few examinations of sexuality in fantasy as a genre exist, though many critics have worked with individual fantasy texts and their approach to or treatment of sexuality. Of the few available, most agree that the nature of fantasy allows it to explore issues which people may find uncomfortable by approaching them obliquely, through the veil of a different world or species, rather than confronting them head-on. Donald Palumbo claims that death and sex are the two topics people typically find the most difficult, and fantasy can make them easier to handle by allowing readers to "exorcise fear of the unknown by revealing the unknown, if only to the subconscious, to be always a variant of the familiar while treating it—safely containing it—in familiar, known formats" (3). Eric Garbo and Lyn Paleo claim that the fantastic has always contained portrayals of same-sex relations; they trace the tendency from as far back as

Classical Greece, into the Gothic era, and up to the 1960s. Supernatural elements, such as vampires in the Gothic era, have helped authors to explore non-normative gender roles and sexual object choices in a nonthreatening manner (Garbo and Paleo vii-viii). Some critics who study young adult (YA) fantasy literature disagree; Anne Balay claims that "critics agree" that fantasy contains almost no sex, and "that's one of the reasons that quest romance and other forms of fantasy are considered appropriate for children, and, in circular fashion, it explains why adults who follow fantasy are dismissed as juvenile" (924). However, even when explicit portrayals of sexual activity may not appear on page, symbolic and allegorical sexual activity is abundant even in YA fantasy.

Where fantasy has traditionally been lacking is in female same-sex activity; Joanna Russ claims that "since women's services, economic, emotional, and sexual, must be secured for men [. . .] women's sexual self-assertion must go the way of women's economic and political self-assertion: Not to Be Used Except in Response to Male Needs" (xxiv). Frye's sociological findings match Russ' argument; she claims that:

> in almost all cultures for at least the last couple of thousand years, to the best of my knowledge, virtually every woman is strenuously required by tradition, law, more and taboo to be in some form of availability, servitude or marriage to a man or men in which she is unconditionally or almost unconditionally sexually accessible to that man or men and in the context of which she carries and bears his or their children. (129)

Thus, while fantasy may be progressive in its approach to sexuality, it still struggles, as societies have for thousands of years, with female sexuality, especially that which does not include or serve male sexuality. Balay offers one possible explanation for heroic

fantasy, speculating that female warriors are already outside gender norms with their hypermasculinity, so lesbianism may be edging too close to discomfort or stereotype for authors, publishers, or audiences (937).

When considering neomedieval fantasy texts, all of the above difficulties can present themselves, along with the necessity of considering the author's approach to queerness—whether actions or characters—social mores, character responses to queer behavior, and how each of these contributes to the author's reconstruction of a medieval setting. The authors themselves face issues with the differences in attitudes toward same-sex preferences from the Middle Ages, which they are ostensibly attempting to recreate in their fiction, and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in which views of queer behavior as "sinful" and people who engage in said behavior as "aberrations" or "abominations" are generally frowned upon. Martin and Bradley have differing approaches to the question of sexuality in a medieval setting, both attempting to balance their visions of the Middle Ages with contemporary expectations and attitudes, though neither is entirely unproblematic.

Both Martin and Bradley include both characters who have same-sex preferences and characters who have same-sex encounters without identifying as queer. Renly Baratheon, who puts himself forward as king after his brother Robert's death, has a relationship with Loras Tyrell, his wife's brother; he married Margaery Tyrell after his relationship with Loras began, however, and only to help solidify his position as king. The relationship is strongly implied rather than explicitly shown, and Renly's orientation is revealed only through very subtle clues, most of which must be read through Loras after Renly's death.[2] The subtle hints are too numerous to list here, but the least subtle by

far is Jaime Lannister threatening to take Loras' sword away "and shove it up some place even Renly never found" (*Storm of Swords* 848). While Renly and Loras are established as a queer couple, Bradley's Lancelet has no such foundation; all he can tell Morgaine is that he is attracted to Arthur, which may be the root of his attraction to Gwenhwyfar (Bradley 481-3).

Besides these characters, whose preferences, if not lifestyles, are queer, several other characters in both *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *The Mists of Avalon* have same-sex encounters which do not define them as queer. Daenerys' handmaiden, Irri, performs sexual acts on her as a service, though Daenerys tells her that she is no longer a slave and is not required to do such things (*Storm of Swords* 325). Cersei sexually assaults Lady Taena, trying to imitate all the men she has known so she can be a respected ruler (*Storm of Swords* 689, 693). During Morgaine's time in Faerie, Bradley implies that Morgaine has a sexual relationship with the queen of Faerie, much as she (more clearly) does with the Horned One (Bradley 409). Later, when Morgaine returns to Avalon after her failed attempt to overthrow Arthur with Accolon, Bradley again strongly suggests that Morgaine and Raven have a sexual encounter (Bradley 640). All of these women appear to prefer sex with men, but circumstances bring them into sexual contact with women for one reason or another, sometimes to serve the plot or character development, but sometimes as titillation for the male audience and male gaze.

Considering Bradley's strongly feminist pagan viewpoint in *The Mists of Avalon*, it is surprising how negative her portrayal of same-sex relations between men actually is. When Lancelet tells Morgaine about his feelings for Arthur, how they became clearer during the threesome between Arthur, Gwenhwyfar, and himself, Morgaine—who up

until this point has been utterly nonjudgmental about people's sexual choices—refuses to hear it. Lancelet is in desperate need of a friend and confidante; Gawaine strongly implies that Lancelet is lusting after Gareth, and the two men almost come to blows, saved only by Morgaine's jest that "And indeed, we hear of the Lord Jesus that he never married, and that even among his chosen twelve there was one who leaned on his bosom at supper" (Bradley 480). Afterward, Lancelet confides in Morgaine that he often deals with such veiled accusations, and thus he "flung [him]self into experiment with women, and woman [. . .] but there were few women who could rouse me even a little, till I saw—[Gwenhwyfar]" (Bradley 481). Yet as he continues, he admits that it is Arthur he cannot live without, claiming that "I know not but what I love her only because I come close, thus, to *him*" (Bradley 482). Morgaine, having been a willing confidante to this point, tries to stop him from continuing because "[t]here were things she could not bear to know" (Bradley 482). Lancelet tells her of the threesome he shared with Arthur and Gwenhwyfar at Beltane, during which he "touched Arthur," and Morgaine "stood utterly still, appalled beyond speech" (Bradley 482). All Morgaine can offer Lancelet is platitudes—"The Goddess knows what is in the hearts of men, Lancelet. She will comfort you" (Bradley 483). Lancelet knows that the Goddess would not accept him, that his preferences "spurn the Goddess," and likewise the Christian church will not forgive him (Bradley 483). Thus, rather than providing Lancelet with a friend or comfort, Bradley utterly rejects male same-sex relations, leaving Lancelet believing that "[t]here is no help anywhere, till I am slain in battle or ride forth from here to throw myself in the path of a dragon" (Bradley 483). Even the pagan religion that Morgaine practices cannot accept non-normative male sexual behavior; sex is primarily for the

purpose of procreation or for worshiping the Goddess, and both require a man and a woman. James Noble also argues that Bradley's treatment of Lancelet's sexuality is problematic:

> The concept of a gay Lancelot (Lancelet) is as daring as it is rich in potential, given that homosexuality is a form of sexual expression as alien and incomprehensible to patriarchy as female sexuality and as subject to cultural myths, stereotypes, and misapprehensions that have long needed to be explored and/or exploded. If such were Bradley's intentions in transforming the legendary lover of Gwenhwyfar into a closet homosexual, however, her efforts fall disappointingly short of the mark: indeed, in the final analysis, Bradley's representation of Lancelot's situation would seem to be a clear-cut case of patriarchal homophobia posing as sympathetic liberalism. (288)

Noble points out that Bradley's portrayal of Lancelet as a masculine warrior rather than a "limp-wristed" stereotype is a positive approach, but the concept of male queerness is otherwise treated in a typically patriarchal, homophobic manner (289). While the women of Avalon are allowed to step outside of the patriarchal demands on their sexuality and are empowered, even deified, for it, Lancelet can only suffer (Noble 292-3). Finally, the threat of same-sex relations is what drives Lancelet and Arthur apart; Gwenhwyfar accuses Arthur of inviting Lancelet into their bed, not to try to allow Gwenhwyfar to conceive, as he said, but because of a lust for Lancelet: "I saw it then, you touched him with more love than ever you have given the woman my father forced on you—when you led me into this sin, can you swear it was not your own sin, and all your fine talk no more

than a cover for the very sin that brough down fire from Heaven on the city of Sodom?" (Bradley 547). Arthur is enraged, so much so that he says, "Say that again, [. . .] and wife or no, love or no, I will kill you, my Gwenhwyfar!" (Bradley 547). Noble claims that this reaction is so "altogether typical of patriarchy's response to the threat of being branded a homosexual that Bradley probably intended it to constitute no more than a firm declaration of Arthur's heterosexuality" (293). Bradley's text is overtly homophobic, not just because of the culture of the early Christian church, but also because she does not allow for any positive view of same-sex preference in men.

However, strong evidence exists in the text for same-sex activity on Morgaine's part, and this activity is not as thoroughly rejected as Lancelet's. Rather, as Marilyn Farwell points out, Avalon provides a safe space for women, and lesbianism itself is the source of Avalon's freedom from Camelot (327-8). Morgaine experiences same-sex encounters with at least two women, one a handmaiden of the Faerie Queen, the other her fellow priestess Raven. Morgaine's visit to Faerie is the result of being unable to find her way to Avalon after running away from it; her fear of being unable to reach Avalon is a self-fulfilling one, and she finds herself in Faerie instead (Bradley 402-3). In Faerie, time has no meaning, and Morgaine is unable to keep track of how long she is there: "It was a starless night, and it troubled her that she could not see the moon, as she had not seen the sun by day. Had it been one day, or two, or three?" (Bradley 405). At this point, "she found the maiden [. . .] twining her arms round her neck and kissing her, and she returned those kisses without surprise or shame" (Bradley 405). However, this encounter is quickly followed by a description of Morgaine lying "in the lady's lap and suckl[ing] at her breast [. . .] like an infant," then a detailed description of her sexual encounter with

the Horned One (Bradley 405-6). Morgaine's interactions with the women of Faerie are thus subsumed to her interaction with the Horned One; while it is clear that Morgaine had sex with him, Bradley describes no more than kissing with the maiden and casts Morgaine's interaction with the Queen as maternal rather than sexual. Thus, Bradley hints at same-sex interaction within Faerie but quickly glosses it over and overshadows it with a heterosexual interaction.

Morgaine's second interaction occurs within Avalon, when Morgaine finally returns. This encounter is much more explicit than the encounters in Faerie, but still does not reach the level of detail found in Morgaine's sexual interactions with men. Rather, the sexual activity is implied rather than stated:

> Raven's fingers covered her lips, in the old gesture of silence; she came to Morgaine's side, bent over her and kissed her. Without a word, she threw off her long cloak and lay down at Morgaine's side, taking her in her arms. In the dimness Morgaine could see the rest of the scars, running up along the arm and across the heavy pale breast . . . neither of them spoke a word, then, nor in the time that followed. (Bradley 639)

Raven's welcome is a benediction, ritually blessing Morgaine and welcoming her back to Avalon. As Raven blesses Morgaine, she takes on the form of the Goddess, "a form edged in light, whom [Morgaine] had seen once, years before, at the time when she crossed the great silence" (Bradley 639). The encounter is ritualistic, involving not only sexual acts but the shedding and exchange of blood, and Morgaine taking up the accoutrements of priestesshood after having cast them aside years ago. After the ritual, however, "Raven drew her again into her arms," and Morgaine considers how different

this is than her encounters with men, thinking that "*never have I known what it was to be received simply in love*" (Bradley 640). Unlike Bradley's utter rejection of male queerness through Lancelet, the lesbianism in *The Mists of Avalon* is redemptive, healing, and holy, even as it is blurred and hidden.

Bradley's approach to same-sex love or sex in *The Mists of Avalon* is a strong contrast to most of the scholarly consensus about lesbianism in fantasy; unlike much fantasy in which Russ claims female sexuality is "Not to Be Used Except in Response to Male Needs," Bradley's focus is entirely on women (xxiv). Men are a secondary consideration in every aspect of *The Mists of Avalon*, and sex is not only for procreation but for expressing the roles of Mother Goddess and Horned One in order to worship them. Farwell argues that the lesbian encounters are part of Bradley's deprioritization of men and men's sexuality; "Instead of positioning female desire within the dualistic system which fosters our way of thinking, the lesbian scenes position desire outside that structure and therefore outside the controlling realm of male desire" (327). While Morgaine's same-sex encounters are strongly connected to motherhood and her relationship to the Goddess, Lancelet's cannot be anything but aberrant, since no man can express the Goddess, and sex between men "is to spurn the Goddess," as Lancelet says (Bradley 483). Thus, as Noble points out, Lancelet suffers for his sexuality instead of being fulfilled by it, as the women are, and Bradley actually does very little to challenge patriarchal and homophobic views/assumptions about homosexuality in her portrayal of Lancelet (292-3, 296). Lancelet knows that neither the Goddess nor the Christians will accept him, and prepares to be damned upon his death, whereas Morgaine's doubts about

the Goddess' acceptance of her have nothing to do with her sexual encounters with other women.

Martin's approach is quite different from Bradley's, but poses no fewer problems for a queer critic. While the narrative voice in *A Song of Ice and Fire* makes no judgments about characters' sexual choices, as Morgaine's does, the amount of time and detail spent on the various relationships is just as important. As mentioned, the one confirmed same-sex relationship in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, between Renly and Loras, is subtle, easy to miss, and never shown on-page. It is almost an open secret in the kingdom; many people are aware of it, but few ever speak of it, except in careful, veiled terms. While Stannis is eager to use Cersei's incestuous infidelity against Joffrey's claim to the throne, and to spread that accusation as far and wide as possible, he never uses Renly's relationship against him, and neither does anyone else. Yet whenever people do speak of the relationship, they often use language which denotes disgust or superiority, usually directed at Loras.

Regardless of how Westerosi society views same-sex relations, the trouble comes when one examines the different ways in which Martin handles the relationships on-page. While Renly and Loras are never seen together, every same-sex interaction between women is, usually in some detail. Daenerys and Cersei's same-sex interactions seem crafted primarily for a male audience, for the male gaze, and hearken back to the age of fantasy in which women were present only for the convenience and pleasure of the male characters and female sexuality was portrayed to titillate adolescent male readers.

Cersei's encounter with Lady Taena is violent and detailed; she has just returned from a council meeting, Taena is naked in her bed, and Cersei "wondered what it would

feel like to suckle on those breasts, to lay the Myrish woman on her back and push her legs apart and use her as a man would use her, the way Robert would use *her* when the drink was in him" (*Feast for Crows* 685). Cersei remembers enjoying sex with Robert only once, on their wedding night, when he called her "Lyanna," the name of his then-dead sweetheart (*Game of Thrones* 487). After that, she remembers every encounter as rape, with her "lying helpless underneath him as he took his pleasure, stinking of wine and grunting like a boar. [. . .] She was always sore afterward, her breasts painful from the mauling he would give them" (*Feast for Crows* 685). Robert always blamed alcohol, refusing to take responsibility for hurting her when she complained (*Feast for Crows* 686). Cersei takes on the role of Robert, drunk and lustful, and begins touching Taena, purposefully hurting her; when Taena complains, Cersei says "It's just the wine. [. . .] I am the queen. I mean to claim my rights" (*Feast for Crows* 692). The language used during the scene is coarse, Taena's body described in intimate detail, "her nipples two black diamonds, her sex slick and steamy," her vaginal area described as a "Myrish swamp" (*Feast for Crows* 692). Cersei brings Taena to orgasm with her hand, but "could not feel it, whatever Robert felt on the nights he took her. There was no pleasure in it, not for her" (*Feast for Crows* 692). Cersei even elides Robert's death-by-goring with this experience, "let[ting] herself imagine that her fingers were a bore's [*sic*] tusks, ripping the Myrish woman apart from groin to throat" (*Feast for Crows* 693). Cersei still feels no pleasure; she thinks that "[i]t had never been good with anyone but Jaime," her brother, with whom Cersei has had three children and frequent sexual intercourse (*Feast for Crows* 693). When Taena offers to reciprocate, Cersei rebuffs her advances and tries to go back to sleep, deciding that "all of this would be forgotten. It had never happened"

(*Feast for Crows* 693). To Cersei, sex is power, and her assault on Taena is an attempt to wield a man's power, but Martin's level of detail adds a disturbing layer of voyeurism. While Cersei frequently uses her sexuality as a weapon, this scene is the only one for which Martin provides so much detail; even an otherwise detailed scene in which Cersei and Jaime have sex in the Great Sept of Baelor does not match this one.[3]

Just as troubling and problematic is Daenerys' sexual interaction with her companion Irri. Irri is one of three slave girls presented to Daenerys at her wedding to Khal Drogo; Irri was bought specifically to teach Daenerys how to ride a horse (*Game of Thrones* 103). After Drogo's death, Daenerys is celibate for months as she leads her people through the Red Wastes, to Qarth, and then to Astapor. Her first sexual contact of any kind occurs when her sworn sword, Jorah, ambushes her while she is dressing: "he pulled her close and pressed his lips down on hers. He smelled of sweat and salt and leather, and the iron studs of his jerkin dug into her naked breasts as he crushed her hard against him" (*Storm of Swords* 120). Though she does not entirely dislike the kiss, she rebukes him for taking the liberty: "I . . . that was not fitting. I am your queen" (*Storm of Swords* 121). Later, she considers that "Jorah's kiss had woken something in her, something that had been sleeping since Khal Drogo died" (*Storm of Swords* 324). However, it is not Jorah she wants, and so she struggles with having no outlet for her feelings; "Sometimes she would close her eyes and dream of him, but it was never Jorah Mormont she dreamed of; her lover was always younger and more comely, though his face remained a shifting shadow" (*Storm of Swords* 324-5). One night Irri wakes to find Daenerys touching herself, and dutifully takes over:

> Wordless, the handmaid put a hand on her breast, then bent to take a nipple in her mouth. Her other hand drifted down across the soft curve of belly, through the mound of fine silvery-gold hair, and went to work between Dany's thighs. [. . .] Irri never said a thing, only curled back up and went to sleep the instant the thing was done. (*Storm of Swords* 325)

Later, Irri offers to "pleasure the *khaleesi*" because Daenerys is sad, but she says, "No. Irri, you do not need to do that. What happened that night, when you woke . . . you're no bed slave, I freed you, remember?" (*Storm of Swords* 328-9). Irri insists that as Daenerys' handmaid, "it is great honor to please my *khalessi*," but Daenerys sends her away (*Storm of Swords* 328). Yet Daenerys takes advantage of Irri's skills and willingness to serve when she has trouble sleeping at least two more times; the first time, she thinks that "it was Drogo she wanted, or perhaps Daario. Not Irri. The maid was sweet and skillful, but all her kisses tasted of duty," and the second, Daenerys takes Irri to bed "hoping her caresses might ease her way to rest, but after a short while she pushed the Dothraki girl away. Irri was sweet and soft and willing, but she was not Daario" (*Storm of Swords* 993; *Dance with Dragons* 340). Daenerys' sexual relations with Irri are troubling on a number of levels. First is her "reawakening," which brings with it the sense that despite all of her power and accomplishments, Daenerys is incomplete without a male companion. Likewise, that Jorah's kiss was unwelcome and yet reminded Daenerys of what she has been missing is problematic, edging into the realm of rape and rape apology. Both Daenerys and Cersei replace unavailable men with available women, but their partners, while ostensibly consenting, are in less-powerful positions and thus may have no choice but to consent, which places Daenerys and Cersei in the position of

rapist, as well. As with the violence and brutality described in chapter two, the portrayal of these relationships argues for a "Barbaric Age" medievalism while normalizing and even celebrating non-consensual sexual acts perpetrated on women.

Martin does consider himself a feminist and believes he treats women with respect: "To me being a feminist is about treating men and women the same[. . . .] I regard men and women as all human—yes there are differences, but many of those differences are created by the culture that we live in, whether it's the medieval culture of Westeros, or 21st century western culture" (qtd. in Salter). Yet his tendency to fetishize female sexuality while avoiding or ignoring male sexuality raises questions about how equally he treats women and men; while the circumstances in which he places his women can be attributed to his beliefs about the ways in which society treats men and women differently, his narrative choices cannot. The detail with which Martin describes same-sex encounters between women is mirrored in the way he describes women's bodies in heterosexual pairings. On his return to the Iron Islands, Theon Greyjoy takes the ship's captain's daughter as his lover, and Martin's description of her body is less than appealing: "The girl was a shade plump for his taste, and her skin was as splotchy as oatmeal, but her breasts filled his hands nicely" (*Clash of Kings* 167). Later, Theon tells the girl (who is never named) that her "lips were made for" fellatio, during which he thinks that "this way he did not have to listen to her mindless prattle" (*Clash of Kings* 169). While Theon is not an admirable character and his view of the captain's daughter seems intended to reinforce a less-than-favorable opinion of him, Martin's narrative choices dehumanize the girl as well, reducing her to a nameless plaything for Theon's pleasure.

Likewise, violence against women is described in detail; Sansa's time at court is a prominent example of this tendency. While Joffrey frequently orders the Kingsguard to hit her and these beatings often occur between chapters, the worst beating occurs on-page:

> "Leave her face," Joffrey commanded. "I like her pretty."
>
> Boros slammed a fist into Sansa's belly, driving the air out of her. When she doubled over, the knight grabbed his sword, and for one hideous instant she was certain he meant to open her throat. As he laid the flat of the blade across her thighs, she thought her legs might break from the force of the blow. Sansa screamed. Tears welled in her eyes. *It will be over soon*. She soon lost count of the blows.
>
> "Enough," she heard the Hound rasp.
>
> "No it isn't," the king replied. "Boros, make her naked."
>
> Boros shoved a meaty hand down the front of Sansa's bodice and gave a hard yank. The silk came tearing away, baring her to the waist. Sansa covered her breasts with her hands. She could hear sniggers, far off and cruel. "Beat her bloody," Joffrey said, "we'll see how her brother fancies—" (*Clash of Kings* 488)

Similarly, when the Sept decides to punish Cersei for her indiscretions by shaving her bare and making her walk naked across the length of the city from the Great Sept of Baelor to the Red Keep, the ordeal is described in excruciating detail, spanning twelve pages from the ritual shaving to Cersei's arrival at the Red Keep. In contrast, when Jaime's hand is cut off, the chapter ends as the *arakh* comes down, and his misery is

summarized, with several days covered in a few paragraphs. Between the fever from the infection and his habit of "going away inside," Jaime is not present for most of his pain, whereas Sansa is always aware of what is happening to her. While the worst example of torture in the novels is that of Theon at Ramsay Bolton's hands, during Ramsay flays Theon's extremities, cuts off fingers, knocks out teeth, withholds food for days at a time, and refuses to allow Theon to bathe, little of that treatment happens on-page; rather, Theon disappears for two books and is widely presumed dead (*Dance with Dragons* 182-3). Thus, violence against men is glossed over or hidden, while violence against women is exposed and detailed. Violence against women is often sexualized, as well, as with Cersei and Sansa both being stripped naked or nearly naked during the course of their humiliation; many other women in the novels are subjected to rape and other forms of gendered violence. While Martin may intend these incidents to serve as examples of the sort of violence he believes was perpetrated against women in his "Barbaric Age" Middle Ages, once again he hides similar violence against men and sexualizes the violence against women.

The same fetishization of female bodies and avoidance of male vulnerability is reflected in Martin's different treatment of same-sex relations: Martin shows female same-sex interaction on page, but not male same-sex interaction. Some allowance can be made for the fact that neither Renly nor Loras are ever point-of-view characters, while Daenerys and Cersei are, but that raises a question of why Martin chose not to cause any of his male POV characters to engage in same-sex interactions. One possibility is that when Martin began writing *A Song of Ice and Fire* in the 1990s, male same-sex activity in fantasy literature was still not accepted in the mainstream. This may explain why,

besides not making a queer character a POV character, Martin also does not have his characters openly discuss Renly and Loras' relationship. Another reason may be his attempts to portray a "real" Middle Ages, in which male same-sex activity existed, but is not openly discussed in many texts other than religious ones, in which these activities are condemned. These are likely the most generous explanations; a more cynical one is that Martin has internalized the patriarchal, homophobic mores of the society in which he grew up and lives, and despite his claim of being a feminist, he still struggles with objectifying women and female sexuality. In an interview, Abigail Pritchard asks Martin specifically about the issue of on-page sexuality, and his explanation is that he uses a "very tight third-person viewpoint" with "a handful of characters in a cast of hundreds." He claims that until a sexual encounter "happens to one of my characters on stage, to one of my viewpoint characters," these encounters will remain invisible and rumored only. His answer does not explain why he chose not to include queer point-of-view characters—or point-of-view characters who were queer—and thus does not provide a satisfactory explanation for this issue.

Neither Daenerys nor Cersei are lesbians, but engage in lesbian activity when no males are available, while men who do not have women available simply abstain. In her analysis of Poe's "Ligea," Valerie Rohy asks, "What is sex between women who don't really want each other? One answer: a straight fantasy" (75). Cersei does not really want Taena; she wants to experience the thrill she imagines Robert felt when he drunkenly raped her. Daenerys does not really want Irri; she wants Daario or Drogo, but both are out of reach. Thus, all of these interactions can be classified as "straight fantasy," put in

place for the male gaze rather than for any reason relating to character development or plot.

Although medieval history and literature contain their fair share of warrior women, such as Joan of Arc or Boudicca; cross-dressers of various genders and for various reasons, often in saints' lives and miracle tales; and people and characters of differing sexualities, as documented in Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey's *Hidden from History* (1989) or Frantzen's *Before the Closet* (1998), popular understanding of the Middle Ages is of a homogenous monolith of religiously dictated gender roles. In some ways, this view serves several cultural needs; for those who view non-normative sexualities or non-normative gender roles as a threat to the cultural order, a past in which these sexualities did not exist proves that such things are new and thus unnatural, thus allowing them to yearn nostalgically for a time, however imaginary, when social roles were simpler. For fantasy writers, this perception of the Middle Ages provides the rigid society against which characters like Alanna or Brienne can rebel, a society which Pierce refers to as "the default setting" ("Girls" 76). Rather than a time in which people "naturally" fell into gender and sexual binaries, these texts cast the Middle Ages as a time of repression, contrasting contemporary society with the Middle Ages in a call to move forward, away from a societal structure in which people are not free to express themselves or choose their own paths in life.

Yet the use of the medieval as an anti-feminist or anti-queer backdrop can result in the treatment of non-normative women or queer people becoming stagnant; as the culture in which fantasy writers place their rebellious characters does not change or move

forward, neither can their characters. The characters will always be fighting the same norms, the same expectations, and the same persecutions. Hence, the portrayals of Alanna and Brienne, despite the sixteen-year gap between their introductions, is not much different; despite the progress in contemporary society in its attitudes toward woman and sexuality, the neomedieval societies of fantasy do not make the same progress. The powerful, influential women of the Middle Ages, of which there are many, tend to be invisible to contemporary popular culture; only Joan of Arc, who fits the female warrior archetype, receives extensive attention in the media. Thus, the tropes of medievalist feminism or queerness will always decree that "strength" derives from masculinity; even when characters defy society's gender norms and disrupt stereotypes, they still must conform to masculine gender roles in order to be considered "strong." The mostly-unspoken prejudice against the feminine remains, and regardless of the identity of the sword-bearer, so does the ubiquity of the sword.

Notes

[1] Unfortunately for Pierce's intentions, Joyce Patti's cover art for the *Protector of the Small* series do not match Pierce's description of Keladry; where Keladry is described as being "built along the lines of a cow" (*First Test* 12), the book covers show her as sturdy yet slim, with a rounded, childlike face that could be described as "cute," even on the final book in which Keladry is a full-grown knight. Though Pierce intends to create a role model for nontraditional girls, the book covers do not immediately convey that intention to the reader.

[2] In sharp contrast to Martin's handling of Renly's sexuality in the novels, the HBO series is much more overt; Renly's proclivities are an open secret that his men laugh about around their cookfire, Margaery offers to have Loras get Renly started so that they can produce an heir, and Renly and Loras are shown pre- and post-coitus on screen. Perhaps the showrunners felt it necessary to be explicitly clear about Renly's sexuality where Martin is more coy, though perhaps the relationship is used, as so many sexual encounters are in HBO shows, as voyeuristic titillation.

[3] This is Cersei's only same-sex interaction over the course of the novels to date, but Cersei tends toward non-normative sexual object choices. Her most frequent partner is Jaime, but she also uses her sexuality as a tool and a weapon. When Ned Stark confronts her with his knowledge that her children are not Robert's but her brother's and threatens to have her charged with treason, she offers to have sex with him in exchange for his silence: "If friends can turn to enemies, enemies can become friends. Your wife is a thousand leagues away, and my brother has fled. Be kind to me, Ned. I swear to you,

you shall never regret it" (*Game* 487). She offers Sansa Stark some advice on being a woman, claiming that "[t]ears are not a woman's *only* weapon. You've got another one between your legs, and you'd best learn to use it. You'll find men use their swords freely enough. Both kinds of swords" (*Clash* 847). In order to reward her cousin Lancel for his service and keep him loyal to her, she takes him to her bed, as well (*Clash* 446). She also promises Osney Kettleblack, a knight of the Kingsguard, her body in exchange for his help in framing the new queen Margaery for treason; she has sex with him only because he refuses to lie to a priest about "fucking a queen" (*Feast* 837).

CHAPTER IV

Redeeming History: Recovering Marginalized Voices through Fantasy

"You and I are not the polite people who live in poems.
We are blessed and cursed by our times."
--Guinevere, *King Arthur* (2004)

The characters of Arthurian legend have been portrayed in various ways, depending upon the needs and politics of the writer, showrunner, or filmmaker. In Anton Fuqua's 2004 *King Arthur*, Guinevere is a blue-painted warrior woman, Arthur a half-Briton, half-Roman commander devoted to his men. The opening title card proclaims that "historians agree" about the historical truth of Arthur's existence, and that "archeological evidence sheds light on his true identity." The truth behind history and legend is a Holy Grail frequently sought by writers and historians, but frequently, the "truth" presented is yet another legend. One way in which writers reach for the lost history of legend is by attempting to give voice to the people of that time, especially the people who have been marginalized by history, essentially rolling back the colonialism that hid them from contemporary view. In Furqua's *King Arthur*, Guinevere is the voice of the colonized people, frequently speaking out about the desire for freedom and the Britons' rightful ownership of the land: "It is the natural state of any man to want to live free in their own country," she tells Arthur. In the adjusted history of Britain as portrayed in this *King Arthur*, Guinevere is the only voice of the Britons, caught between Rome and the Saxons, their land and way of life at risk.

Both George R.R. Martin and Marion Zimmer Bradley similarly attempt to restore the voice and history of marginalized people, examining the results of imperialism

and the ways in which a culture is affected even after the colonizer disappears or integrates the colonized culture. Martin's Westeros has a ten-thousand-year history with several waves of colonial influence, and his approach to the eastern cities of Slaver's Bay portrays imperialism in action. Bradley focuses on the aftereffects of the Roman occupation of Britain in *The Mists of Avalon*, though her main focus is the destruction of woman-friendly paganism and the ecosystem by patriarchal Christianity. Both the postcolonial and ecological approaches to the Middle Ages are ways of recovering the voices of those lost to history or silenced by it, whether colonized people, women, or nature itself. However, despite their attempts to recover the lost voices of the past or to examine the mechanisms by which these voices were lost, both Martin and Bradley fall prey to essentialism and problems with race and gender born from their contemporary socialization.

"Our Name Means Those Who Sing the Song of Earth": Pre-Christian People and Ecology

As high medievalist fantasy tends to focus on the British Isles or their fantastic equivalent, the voices authors attempt to recover are frequently those of the pre-Christian, pre-Roman pagan tribes that inhabited the region in early history. These people are often linked to nature and portrayed as more ecologically friendly than more modern peoples, especially imperialist cultures. This trend, like so many in medievalist fantasy, can be traced back to the Victorians and the Romantics; part of Victorian medievalism was an opposition to industrialism and a nostalgia for medieval industry, in which, as Alice Chandler puts it, "the common man had been materially better off in medieval times" (3).

Romantic and Victorian medievalism strongly influence fantasy medievalism, and thus, a nostalgia for a preindustrial society is evident in much medievalist and neomedieval fantasy. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, is frequently approached through an ecocritical lens, contrasting the industrialism of Isengard and Mordor with the naturalism of the Shire, Rivendell, Lothlorien, and Tom Bombadil's valley.[1] Even if an ecological message is not the main purpose of a text, the medieval setting of a novel can create an underlying conservationism due to the history of naturalism in fantasy literature.

Ecofeminism and its accompanying pagan beliefs are a central component of Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. Based heavily on Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, *The Mists of Avalon* subverts the traditional Arthurian romance, depicting Christianity as a patriarchy-driven religion that destroys the Earth-friendly pagan worship and subjugates women. Lisa Tuttle points out that Celtic fantasy is a frequent choice for women authors because of the woman-friendly goddess paganism believed to predate Christianity in Britain (394). Bradley's paganism is neopagan rather than historically pagan—Carrol Fry refers to it as "Neo Paganism as it is most frequently practiced today," pointing out that Bradley is a liberal Christian rather than a pagan herself—but as with most neomedievalism, historical authenticity is not necessarily a central concern (73, 76). Lee Ann Tobin claims that all feminist historical fantasy sees authenticity as a secondary consideration: "Their purpose is not to follow a tradition that has left women aside or objectified them, but to create a new tradition that provides role models for women now to admire and emulate" (148). Neomedieval approaches are inevitable in these narratives due to their very nature and purpose: to present an alternative reading of the dominant

historical narrative which foregrounds the contributions and concerns of women and non-Christians.

Bradley in particular combines her neomedievalism with ecocriticism and ecofeminism. Ecocritics examine the role of nature and its representation, including how that representation is different when written in different time periods and by different genders; Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Despite this definition, Douglas A. Vakoch points out that many ecocritics avoid defining their field, "seeing their field instead as a confluence of practices in which diversity of approach is a virtue" (2). Ecofeminism is much more activist, not only analyzing texts, but arguing for major reform in the way humans relate to nature. Vakoch says that their view is that "ecofeminism should not be confined to critique, but should instead identify and articulate liberatory ideals that can be actualized in the real world, in the process transforming everyday life" (3). Ecofeminism is closely related to paganism, and can be read as a tightly woven braid of feminism, conservationism, and goddess-paganism. The movement rejects the patriarchy, human plunder of nature, and Christianity, tending to tie these three together as tightly as its own triune concerns are linked.

Ecofeminists claim that men are inherently separated from the natural world because of a tendency to dominate rather than cooperate. Men are seen as inherently unable to create, only to destroy, which puts them at odds with nature rather than in tune with it. Mary Daly claims that men are incapable of true creation (only women can truly create something new), and cannot commune with nature because their focus is on domination, not cooperation (92-7, 130-1). Judith Plant links patriarchy with destruction

because "there is no respect for the 'other' in patriarchal society. The other, the object of patriarchal rationality, is considered only insofar as it can benefit the subject. So self-centered is this view that it is blind to the fact that its own life depends on the integrity and well-being of the whole" (2). Ynestra King says that Western civilization has set itself at odds with nature, which which "reinforces the subjugation of women" due to the patriarchy's belief that "women are closer to nature" ("Ecology" 19). Thus, ecofeminism argues for the centrality of the feminine as opposed to the patriarchal centrality of the masculine, while using a construction of nature to reinforce this feminine centrality. Unlike traditional fantasy spaces that elevate the masculine, ecofeminism strives to find power in the feminine, primarily by elevating and privileging the opposite of all things traditionally masculine.

In general, ecofeminists reject the masculine as well as the patriarchal, seeing them as inherently and inextricably linked. Susan Griffin argues that science has created a divide between humans and nature that creates an inability for humans to see the spiritual life of a forest or a mountain. This inability allows humans to destroy the forest or mountain in order to benefit themselves or society, but forget that nature is necessary to humans' continued survival (10-12). Ynestra King claims that women are more likely to be interested in ecology because the patriarchy considers them closer to nature ("Ecology" 18). Daly claims that plundering nature, biology, and other planets is the realm of the patriarchy, and women must fight to regain and restore Nature as she is meant to be (3). Daly believes that women's nature is inherently connected to nature, while men's nature is to destroy, regardless of their intentions (44-6). According to ecofeminist belief, patriarchy is hierarchical and imposes hierarchy on nature; King says

that humankind's belief in their own domination is false and self-aggrandizing, not natural ("Ecology" 19). Ecofeminism challenges social domination, and that challenge "extends beyond sex to social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, and class and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing" (King, "Ecology" 20). The idea that women are more "natural" or more "in tune" with the natural world is a central (and yet contentious) point of ecofeminism. By defending nature, one is also fighting the patriarchy, as the destruction of the natural world and the patriarchy are congruous. Stemming from men's separation from nature is their abuse of nature and, by extension, women. The patriarchy is set up to Other and repress anything outside of itself; King says that ecofeminism "sees patriarchy [. . .] preceding and laying down the foundation for other forms of oppression and exploitation; it sees men hating and fearing women (misogyny) and identifying us with nature; it sees men seeking to enlist both women and nature in the service of male projects designed to protect men from feared nature and mortality" (*What is Ecofeminism?* 2).

Ecofeminism's challenge to social domination also extends to religion; Christianity is frequently seen as destructive and domineering.[2] King claims that Christianity drove out paganism: "A dualistic Christianity had become ascendant with the earlier demise of old goddess religions, paganism, and animistic belief systems" (*What is Ecofeminism?* 28). Yet, as Carol P. Christ points out, religion helps to define a culture, and choosing to ignore the dominant (male-centered) religion leaves feminists without a spiritual touchstone (42-3). Hence, ecofeminists embrace a spirituality which hearkens back to a pre-Christian, nature- and goddess-centered religion, which, according to Christ, allows for "an affirmation of the female body and the life cycle expressed within

it" (48). The major values of ecofeminist spirituality are interconnectedness, the belief that everything has a life force, and the belief that everything has its own intrinsic value.[3]

Thus, some understanding of ecofeminism is necessary to fully unpack *The Mists of Avalon* and Bradley's narrative choices. Ecofeminism's tendency to link nature, women, and paganism is clear throughout the novel. Bradley's choice to rewrite Arthurian legend to foreground the women and explore the loss of magic, pagan religion, and women's power in Britain is a clearly political one; ultimately, she attempts to give voice to those she believes have been robbed of that voice through the Christianization of history. Morgaine voices this intention at the very beginning of the novel: "the tale should be told as it was before the priests of the White Christ came to cover it all with their saints and legends" (Bradley ix). Jan Shaw describes *The Mists of Avalon* as "a gendered struggle in which the Goddess religion is fighting for survival against the relentless march of a misogynist Christianity. The Goddess religion is a fantasy of feminine autonomy, and is aligned with mysticism and privileged knowledge" (467). Shaw goes on to say that *The Mists of Avalon* sets up a dichotomy with scientific history as Christian and male, and sociological personal truth as pagan and female (468). Tobin claims that Bradley feminizes the Arthurian tale through decentralization of Christianity, setting up paganism as the norm and Christianity as the Other in order to show how female-unfriendly Christianity is (148). Thus, an ecofeminist reading of *The Mists of Avalon* is not only possible, but clearly encoded within the text, being the driving theme of the novel. Each woman in the text provides a different view of Christianity's destruction of paganism and women, with Morgaine as the central character and commentator on Arthur's court.

The destruction of British paganism is a factor in the destruction or attempted destruction of nature, as well, mirroring the ecofeminist belief that Christianity's ideas of man's transcendence over nature leads to a fundamental lack of care for nature. Morgaine is aware of the lack of tolerance of the "Other" in Christian Britain, as she represents all three Othered parties: women, paganism, and nature, which is represented by Faerie. She recognizes the differences in philosophy between the Christians and the pagans and the roots of these differences:

> Even those who till the earth, when they are Christians, come to a way of life which is far from the Earth; they say that their God has given them dominion over all growing things and every beast in the field. Whereas we dwellers in hillside and swamp, forest and far field, we know that is not we who have the dominion over nature, but she who has dominion over us. (Bradley 398)

Bradley frequently states that the Goddess must be worshipped outdoors, for "[w]ho [. . .] could worship the Greater Gods behind the Gods in a temple built by human hands?" (Bradley 55). The Merlin states that "God, who is beyond all, cannot be worshipped in any dwelling made by human hands, but only under his own sky" (Bradley 263). Nature is sacred and frequently coded female; Viviene claims that Excalibur is holy because it "was not made from iron raped from the body of the earth, our mother; it is holy, forged of metal which fell from the heavens" (Bradley 205). The Queen of Faerie tells Morgaine that "[m]y kind know neither Gods nor Goddesses, but only the breast of our mother who is beneath our feet and above our heads, from whom we come and to whom we go when our time is ended" (Bradley 225). Paganism's rites are intended to ensure

the bounty of the earth, and Morgaine thinks that "it is a miracle the Lady does not blight the fields of grain, since she is angry at being denied her due" (Bradley 578). When the Christians appropriate the trappings of the fertility ritual in order to bless the fields, Morgaine thinks that "[t]hese priests hate fertility and life so much, it is a miracle their so-called blessing does not blast the fields sterile" (Bradley 583). In their attempts to rid the country of pagan worship, the Christians often destroy or attempt to destroy facets of nature: Taliesin attempts to convince Archbishop Patricius not to close the sacred well on Glastonbury, while Morgaine convinces Uriens not to cut down the sacred grove, demanding to know why "we [should] punish the harmless trees" for a human belief (Bradley 263, 657). Bradley sets up Christians, especially male Christians, as inherently antagonistic to nature, willing to destroy it to further their own ends, yet paying lip service to protecting it in order to keep the formerly pagan British happy. Bradley's Christians co-opt pagan ritual and corrupt it, using the similarities to convert the pagan British, which Morgaine sees as blasphemous and despicable.

Since *The Mists of Avalon* is focused primarily on women's power, even the ultimate loss of women's power and paganism comes at the hand of a woman; Gwenhwyfar represents the damage done to women by Christianity and a patriarchal social structure. Gwenhwyfar is strongly Christian and contributes to the Christianization of Arthur's court more than any priest; Ann Howey argues that Gwenhwyfar's Christianity is more extreme than almost anyone else's, and that the ways in which she believes Christianity limits her are mostly self-inflicted (39). This structure is established early in the narrative through Igraine's point of view: "[T]hese Romans counted their lineage through the male line, rather than sensibly through the mother; it

was silly, for how could any man ever know precisely who had fathered any woman's child? Of course, these Romans made a great matter of worrying over who lay with their women, and locked them up and spied on them" (Bradley 7). Igraine is grateful for Gorlois' "indulgence" in allowing her to nurse and raise Morgaine rather than allowing the girl to die in hopes that Igraine would be able to bear a son; she thinks that many men, "Christian or no, [. . .] would have demanded that a daughter not be reared, so that their wives might be free at once to give them a son" (8). Thus, Bradley establishes the plight of women in a Roman Christian society, valued only for their ability to bear sons for the men, their sexuality viewed with suspicion and carefully controlled, while eliding Christianity and the Romans so that Christian values are inherently foreign to Britain. Gwenhwyfar represents the extreme of this plight; she was raised in a convent, "where she had felt as snug as a mouse in her hole, and never, never having to go out of doors at all, except into the enclosed cloister garden" (Bradley 252). Her father, Leodegranz, brings her out of the convent in order to marry her to Arthur, but she suffers from agoraphobia and cannot be out in the open for too long without "gasping and breathing hard and feeling the numbness rising up from her belly into her throat, her sweating hands losing all feeling" (Bradley 252). However, she is not allowed to speak of her trouble without "her father shouting that he'd have none of that womanish nonsense in his house," so she does not even "whisper it aloud" (Bradley 252). Likewise, she has learned that Leodegranz is "displeased" if she "speaks out boldly," so she instead uses her "shyest little voice" to communicate with him and Lancelet (Bradley 254). Leodegranz calls her a "pretty little featherhead" and says she needs "a man to take care of you" (Bradley 256). Despite Gwenhwyfar thinking of herself as "a woman grown,"

she is still treated as a child and acts as a child because her upbringing and her father's treatment have left her with no knowledge of how to act otherwise (Bradley 252). And yet Gwenhwyfar cannot justify being angry at her father: "*But how*, she thought wildly, *can I complain of the best of fathers, who has only my own welfare at heart?*" (Bradley 256).

Tobin claims that Bradley uses Gwenhwyfar to show women's loss of power under Christianity and the psychological processes that women may have gone through in order to allow it to happen; according to Tobin, the internalization of the patriarchal ideologies of Christianity are what leads Gwenhwyfar to guilt, self-hatred, and the hatred of other women's freedom (150-3). Charlotte Spivak and Roberta Lynne Staples claim that Gwenhwyfar's crime against the court is not adultery, as it tends to be in so many Arthurian tales, but "devout and intolerant Christianity" (84). Gwenhwyfar has so internalized this "intolerant Christianity" that when she first meets Morgaine, she attempts to banish her by crossing herself: " 'No,' she said doubtfully, 'you cannot be a demoness, you do not vanish when I cross myself, as the sisters say any demon must do—but you are little and ugly like the fairy people'" (Bradley 158). She pushes Arthur to convert entirely to Christianity and fight the pagans rather than the Saxons, claiming that "[t]he true warfare for a Christian king is only against those who do not follow Christ" (Bradley 317). When the Saxons threaten to invade in force, she protests allowing the pagans to fight with Arthur's armies and argues that Arthur should march under a Cross banner rather than the Pendragon one: "This battle shall be the stand of civilized men, followers of Christ, descendents of Rome, against those who know not our God. The Old People are of the enemy, as much as the Saxons, and this will not be a

proper Christian land until all those folk are dead or fled into their hills, and their demon gods with them!" (Bradley 379). By the end of the novel, Gwenhwyfar and the priests have pushed Arthur into abandoning or appropriating all of the pagan rites, beliefs, and symbols, and ignoring Morgaine's protests. The final confrontation in this struggle comes when Arthur uses Excalibur as a cross to accept the fealty of the Saxons; Morgaine protests this usage as making "the sword of the Mysteries into the cross of death, the gallows for the dead" (Bradley 716). Gwenhwyfar dismisses Morgaine's protests both because "There *are* no other Gods" and because "A day will come when all false Gods shall vanish and all pagan symbols shall be put to the service of the one true God and his Christ" (Bradley 716). Gwenhwyfar's piety drives Morgaine into a fury, which in turn makes Arthur angry, and so he refuses to return Excalibur to Avalon, claiming that "[a] sword is his who uses it, and I have won the right to call it *mine* by driving forth all enemies from this land" (Bradley 718). Though Arthur is able to resist the influence of priests such as Patricius, he is ultimately unable to stand against Gwenhwyfar's constant insistence that he convert to Christianity and take the nation with him. In this way, Bradley empowers women even within the system that seeks to disempower them; Gwenhwyfar has more influence over Arthur than the priests. Unfortunately for the pagans, she also has more influence over him than Morgaine, and ultimately Gwenhwyfar's will dominates Arthur and by extension the country.

Gwenhwyfar's extreme piety seems to primarily stem from jealousy of the pagan women and their freedom, and her insistence on eliminating paganism is to curtail women's freedom, Morgaine's in particular. Gwenhwyfar shows a pathological fear of freedom, of which her agoraphobia is only one symptom. Arthur initially offers

Gwenhwyfar authority equal to his; he claims that "Lot has said that his wife rules as well as he, when he is absent in war or council. I am willing to do you such honor, lady, and let you rule at my side" (Bradley 273). Gwenhwyfar refuses, partly out of fear and partly out of disdain for Lot's people: "How could it be a woman's place to rule? What did she care what the wild barbarians, these northern Tribesmen, did, or their barbarian women?" (Bradley 273). When Morgaine asks if Gwenhwyfar learned to sing in the convent, she says "No, it is unseemly for a woman to raise her voice before the lord" and admits that she was once "beaten for touching a harp" (Bradley 288). Gwenhwyfar is deeply jealous of the possibility of Morgaine marrying Lancelet, protesting Arthur's proposition that Lancelet and Morgaine could provide an heir due to their blood ties to Arthur; she claims that Lancelet's claim is due to "pagan harlotries" because he was conceived during the Great Marriage and not in a Christian marriage (Bradley 317). Though her Christian morality prevents her from having sex with Lancelet herself, she "could not bear to think of Lancelet wedded to Morgaine," and blames Morgaine for these feelings: "Had there ever been so wicked a woman as [Morgaine] on the face of this wicked world?" (Bradley 364). Yet Gwenhwyfar is deeply frustrated that Morgaine will not submit to being married off; when Leodegranz suggests marrying her to Marcus of Cornwall, Gwenhwyfar thinks:

> Why should Morgaine please herself? No other woman was allowed to do her own will, even Igraine who was mother to the King had been married as her elders thought good. Arthur should exert his authority and get Morgaine properly married before she disgraced them all! Conveniently Gwenhwyfar stifled the memory that when Arthur had spoken of marrying

> Morgaine to his friend Lancelet, she had objected. *Ah, I was selfish . . . I cannot have him myself, and I grudge him a wife*. No, she told herself, she would be happy to see Lancelet married if the girl was suitable and virtuous! (Bradley 375)

Rather than fight for her own freedom to behave as Morgaine does, Gwenhwyfar fights to curtail Morgaine's freedom and cast Morgaine as an evil temptress. When Gwenhwyfar discovers that Morgaine is the mother of Arthur's bastard son Mordred, she calls her an "unchaste harlot" who "would practice her whore's arts on her own brother" (Bradley 550). Gwenhwyfar projects all of her self-loathing for being unable to bear a child onto Morgaine, driving Britain away from paganism because of her jealousy "devout and intolerant Christianity" (Spivak and Staples 84). Gwenhwyfar is the most influential voice in Arthur's inner councils, and it is her own internalization of Christianity's hatred and fear of women and their sexuality that ultimately leads to the loss of paganism in Britain.

Where Bradley's narrative describes the decline of paganism, George R.R. Martin's occurs thousands of years after the indigenous people and their religion have been all but destroyed. Although Martin's approach to a pseudo-Celtic people is much less religious in nature, as his entire mythos is less religious than much medievalist or neomedieval fantasy, he also links his pre-"modern" people with nature. Called the Children of the Forest, his analogue for the pagan Celts lived thousands of years before the events of the novels and are presumed extinct by most of the learned people in Westeros. However, recorded history in Westeros is muddled, and the Children predate the written word. Thus, Maester Luwin's accounts of the lives of the Children of the

Forest are questionable at best, especially his insistence that they no longer exist; Osha, a servant from north of the Wall, tells Bran that "North of the Wall [. . .] that's where the children went, and the giants, and the other old races," but Luwin tells her that "[i]t is unkind to repay [the Starks] for their kindness by filling the boys' heads with folly" (*Game of Thrones* 738). Belief in the Children's extinction allows Luwin to think of them in romantic, nostalgic terms, rather than as a living group who may prove inconvenient were they to reappear in the south. As Bran discovers, however, the Children are not quite extinct, and have indeed gathered north of the Wall. Through Bran's encounter with them, Martin allows them to speak for themselves, though his portrayal continues to be idealized, primarily through the connection of the Children to nature, which echoes the Romantic view of nature as primitive yet preferable to civilization and industrialization.

When Bran encounters the remnants of the Children, he learns that they are indeed not human, but an elfin race the size of ten-year-old humans. Leaf, the one with whom he interacts most frequently, has odd-colored skin, gold-and-green eyes with a vertically-slit pupil, and brown hair that is full of leaves and vines (*Dance with Dragons* 196). She tells Bran that "The First Men named us children. [. . .] The giants called us *woh dak nah gran*, the squirrel people, because we were small and quick and fond of trees, but we are no squirrels, no children. Our name in the True Tongue means *those who sing the song of earth*. Before your Old Tongue was ever spoken, we had sung our songs ten thousand years" (*Dance with Dragons* 196). Perhaps because of their bond with nature, they are pacifists, fighting only when they must; Bran considers their slow extinction, which Leaf refers to as "our long dwindling," and thinks that "Men would be

wroth. Men would hate and swear bloody vengeance. The singers sing sad songs, where men would fight and kill" (*Dance with Dragons* 498). Bran seems to blame the Children for their own extinction because they do not react in a way he would expect; withdrawing rather than fighting for their lives is a failing in Bran's mind, as he projects his beliefs and experience as a human onto another race. He does not, however, voice these thoughts to Leaf or Brynden, their human greenseer; rather, he accepts their ways and training in order to become their new greenseer. In a way, Martin removes the responsibility of the conquerors for their conquest, instead implying that such conquest is either the natural way of things—the Children were unable to defend themselves against a greater force and thus were destroyed—or otherwise inevitable. Both implications fall in line with his "Barbaric Age" medievalism and his insistence on historical realism; the first matches the brutality and wanton violence of his Middle Ages, while the second keeps the history of Westeros on a similar path as that of Britain.

While Bradley sets her novel in the midst of the struggle between Christian and pagan, highlighting the slow decline of those she portrays as the original, rightful inhabitants of Britain and the invading culture, Martin's novels are set long after the fight between the Children of the Forest and the First Men. Thus, Martin is able to evoke a sense of nostalgia and romantic loss for a time when the inhabitants of Westeros were connected to nature. At the time of the novels, the Children of the Forest, the giants, the shapeshifters, and those who sympathize with them have all been driven north of the Wall, a great structure that protects the world of men from the supernatural threat of the Others. The choice of both authors to adhere to a sense of historicity lends an inevitability to the disappearance of both the British Celtic pagans and the Children of the

Forest; because other cultures and religions overtook the British Isles and industrialized, pushing aside the nature-conscious pagans—as ecofeminists would interpret historical events—so must Bradley's Christians overtake her pagans and Martin's Andals overtake his Children of the Forest. Both sets of people are erased by imperialism, and Bradley and Martin attempt to restore their voices—at least, what the authors imagine those voices would have been.

"The Eagle has Flown and will Never Return": Difficulties with Postcolonialism

While Bradley and Martin's attempts to speak out for colonized peoples and their way of life may be well-intentioned, problems with their approaches still arise. An author's life circumstances and socialization have an impact, however subliminal, on his or her writing. As Edward Said has argued, "[n]o one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society" (10). While Martin can be lauded for including people of color in his novels, as such inclusions are admittedly rare in neomedieval fantasy, his characterization of the non-Westerosi peoples tends toward Orientalism and race essentialism. Likewise, both authors' tendency to idealize Celtic culture and mythology over Mediterranean can be problematic. Both of these issues are best examined through the lens of postcolonialism, as they involve recovering the voices of those swept aside by imperialist dogma.

Postcolonialism is a complicated approach to literature that becomes more complicated when applied to medievalist and neomedieval fantasy texts. Pramod K.

Nayar defines postcolonialism as "a mode of reading, political analysis and cultural resistance that negotiates with the native's colonial history and neocolonial present" (4). Like most postcolonial theorists, Nayar focuses primarily on Asian, African, and South American peoples and their colonization at the hands of the British and other European empires, yet colonialism and imperialism have existed and occurred throughout human history. England alone has been invaded and colonized at least four times in its history—by the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings, and the Normans—and the resulting mix of cultures and languages and the literature can be read postcolonially.

Despite the long history of nations conquering and occupying other nations, critics tend to struggle with applying postcolonial ideas to the Middle Ages. Part of this struggle seems to stem from the ways in which race is tied to postcolonialism; contemporary non-scholarly understanding of the Middle Ages tends to be that of a monolith of culture and race, specifically Caucasian. Lisa Lampert claims that "[a]longside the stereotyped portrait of the European Middle Ages as a backward, brutal period exists an idealized nostalgia inflected by notions of racial and religious purity" (393). However, ideas of race in the Middle Ages were different from contemporary, appearance-based ideas of race, focusing more on ethnic groups and religion than skin color (Lampert 392). Postcolonial themes can be found throughout medieval literature: Seth Lehrer reads Norse postcolonialism in *Beowulf* through the poet's awareness of remnants of Roman occupation, and Michelle Warren sees postcolonial overtones in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*.[4] Yet medievalist interpretations of the Middle Ages can also be read as postcolonial: Uri Baram and Yorke Rowan discuss the ways in which the past is "commodified," being defined and used for

nationalism, tourism, and other appropriations (6-7). They claim that "[t]he commodification of the past is part of a trajectory on which more and more aspects of social life and localized resources become objects for consumption. For instance, nature has become a good that can be evaluated via the market as well as visited or even bound into a theme park," and point out that curators of historical sites often must balance the historical and archeological record with public beliefs or political considerations when deciding how to present their findings (6-8).

Medievalist fantasy is a unique blend of the modern and the medieval, and thus contains many postcolonial issues to be parsed. Despite the possibilities offered by the fantastic to explore unfamiliar realms inhabited by creatures that do not exist and humans with magical abilities, writers are still restricted by their own experiences as well as the necessity of communicating their ideas to an audience. Thus, ideas and cultures from the familiar world will still creep in, and for Western writers, this can include an almost subliminal imperialism. Nancy Batty and Robert Markley argue that science fiction is frequently imperialist in its assumption of the "manifest destiny" of human exploration and colonization of space (6). Fantasy, as Myles Balfe argues, tends to be set in a "moralized neo-medieval Europe," and the plot often involves "the efforts of various (male) heroes to defend 'their' (Good/familiar/known) landscapes from attacks by 'Others', or with the inability of the heroes' emasculated Eastern counterparts to do the same" (78-9). The people of the "Eastern" lands in these tales, Balfe claims, are in some way evil or corrupt and need the efforts of the Western heroes to save them, as they "cannot redeem their cultures, their selves, let alone [. . .] protect their landscapes from

outside invaders. Indeed, 'their barbarous nature' arguably serves to continually threaten the landscapes and homelands in which they live" (79).

Two different approaches to postcolonial ideas are evident in Bradley and Martin: recovering a heritage lost to imperialism and witnessing imperialism in action. In both sets of novels, the heritage recovered is Celtic in origin. When Western peoples such as the Celts have been colonized, their cultures are idealized and romanticized through the process of recovery, occasionally leading to a sense of exclusionary nationalism. For example, C.W. Sullivan argues that within fantasy literature, Celtic myth and legend are more frequently celebrated than Greek myths; Sullivan speculates that this preference is due to fantasy's descent from medieval romance, which in turn descended from Welsh Celtic literature (10). Sullivan's argument is strongly political and highly controversial; he argues that Welsh Celtic myth is superior to the more traditional Greek mythology, claiming that Celtic myth was largely ignored by the academy because they were not the "high culture" artifacts of Greek and Roman legends, because they belong to races that were subjugated by the dominant English races, and because they were used in fantastic literature (2-3). He argues that Celtic literature, and to a lesser extent, Norse literature, has a more positive set of ethics than the Greeks, more egalitarian than patriarchal, with a code of chivalry that "a clear ethical structure" for tales of Arthur and Robin Hood, which has then filtered into fantasy (146-7). Thus, despite the scarcity of academic attention paid to Celtic mythology, Sullivan argues that it is far more important to contemporary fantasy literature than the "high culture" Greek and Roman literatures (2).[5] The argument that Celtic myth is superior to European myth can be traced back to the Celtic Revival, which pushed back against English imperialism and argued that the Irish were a superior

race with certain inherent traits; Seamus Deane credits Matthew Arnold with politicizing the term "Celtic" and "persuad[ing] himself and a considerable number of his readers that the dull and hard English could not, by virtue of their blighted middle-class nature, legislate effectively for the sanguine, vivacious and overly imaginative Irish" (22). David Lowenthal argues that heritage recovery in general is pseudo-religious, creating community and requiring devotion, but is ultimately exclusionary:

> The traits that align heritage with religion help explain its potent pull, but they also pose serious risks. A dogma of roots and origins that must be accepted on faith denies the role of reason, forecloses compromise, and numbs willpower. Credence in a mythic past crafted for some present cause suppresses history's impartial complexity. Touting our own heritage as uniquely splendid sanctions narrow-minded ignorance and breeds belligerent bigotry. (2)

Thus, while celebration of Celtic heritage in fantasy is common, the exclusion of other types of mythology or examinations of other cultural heritages tend to limit the genre. Both Bradley and Martin celebrate Celtic heritage and idealize the pagan Celts, prizing them over other cultures—the Romans in Bradley's case and the people of pseudo-Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern Essos in Martin's.

In Westeros, Martin creates a layered postcolonial structure that in many ways mirrors medieval England's. According to Winterfell's maester, Luwin, the first inhabitants of Westeros were the Children of the Forest, a non-human race of diminutive people who "lived in the depths of the wood, in caves and crannogs and secret tree towns" (*Game of Thrones* 737). Then came the First Men, conquerors from the south

who crossed a land-bridge from the continent of Essos, bringing horses and bronze; they nearly wiped out the Children before they reached an agreement and forged a peace Pact (*Game* 738). For four thousand years, the First Men and the Children lived in peace, with the First Men even adopting the Children's gods (*Game of Thrones* 738). The Andals were next, conquering the south of Westeros with steel, while the north held out against the incursion (*Game of Thrones* 739). Roughly three thousand years later, the Targaryens of Valyria invaded with dragons and conquered the entire continent, uniting it into the Seven Kingdoms of the novels. Although there are very few one-to-one historical correlations in Martin's work, the waves of conquerors in *A Song of Ice and Fire* might be read as analogous to the Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings, and the French conquest and settlement of England. Any correlation between British or English settlers and Martin's peoples are subject to interpretation; as with much of Martin's historicism, the relationship between history and Westeros is less than allegorical. The defining characteristics of the various historical peoples are distributed among the various Westerosi settlers so that the Children of the Forest can be interpreted as analogous to the Picts and the Celts; the First Men as Romans, Celts, and/or Anglo-Saxons; and the Andals as Anglo-Saxons, Danes, and/or Normans. Likewise, the various pre-Roman and pre-Anglo-Saxon tribes of Britain are often conflated in neomedieval fantasy and imbued with special powers or morality, which adds to the problematic way in which those tribes or their analogues are portrayed in novels such as these.

The Children of the Forest, then, seem analogous to the Picts and Celts, and as has been discussed above, are idealized and romanticized due to their presumed extinction. The godswoods may provide a physical reminder of their previous inhabitance, but this

reminder can be read the same way Deane reads early Revival translations of Celtic poetry: "little more than obituary notices in which the poetry of a ruined civilization was accorded a sympathy which had been notably absent when it was alive" (34). Their successors, First Men, are idealized, held up as paragons of honor and virtue, especially in the north. This treatment echoes Sullivan's argument that fantasy writers privilege Norse ideas such as *comitatus*, as the First Men seem analogous to the Anglo-Saxons (148). The men of the north are proud of being descendents of the First Men and embrace the Old Ways, including worship of the weirwoods, as the First Men learned from the Children of the Forest. Eddard explains to Bran why he executes a deserter from the Night's Watch himself rather than turning him over to a headsman:

> [O]ur way is the older way. 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 in his eyes and hear his final words. And if you cannot bear to do that, then perhaps the man does not deserve to die. (*Game of Thrones* 16)

Catelyn Stark finds a notable difference in the atmosphere of Winterfell, the seat of House Stark, and her childhood home to the south; in Riverrun, the godswood "was a garden, bright and airy, where tall redwoods spread dappled shadows across tinkling streams, birds sang from hidden nests, and the air was spicy with the scent of flowers" (*Game of Thrones* 22). Winterfell's godswood, by contrast, is "a dark, primal place, three acres of old forest untouched for ten thousand years as the gloomy castle rose around it" (*Game of Thrones* 22). Despite being built to worship the same gods, the

godswoods of the south and those of the north reflect the differences in culture; the south is of the Andals, while the north is of the First Men. The country is divided and dualistic, united only due to the efforts of the Targaryens, who no longer rule Westeros. By describing the differences in culture between the north and south, Martin sets up the schism that will later lead to the Seven Kingdoms fracturing.

Unlike the Children, the First Men built with stone and thus left tangible marks on the world, primarily in the form of barrows and ruins scattered across Westeros, though concentrated primarily in the north. While traveling south, Eddard shows King Robert a "wide plain spread out beneath them, bare and brown, its flatness here and there relieved by long, low hummocks," which Eddard tells Robert are "the barrows of the First Men" (*Game of Thrones* 111). He tells Robert that "[t]here are barrows everywhere in the north[. . . .] This land is old" (*Game of Thrones* 111). Caitlyn rides into Moat Cailin, an ancient stronghold of the First Men, which now lies mostly in ruins:

> Immense blocks of black basalt, each as large as a crofter's cottage, lay scattered and tumbled like a child's wooden blocks, half-sunk in the soft boggy soil. Nothing else remained of a curtain wall that had once stood as high as Winterfell's. [. . .] All that was left of the great stronghold of the First Men were three towers . . . three where there had once been twenty, if the taletellers could be believed. (*Game of Thrones* 596-7)

History weighs heavily on the various ruins and structures of the First Men, as Bran discovers when he reaches the Nightfort, an abandoned castle at the Wall. All of his nurse's stories about the Nightfort return to him, most of them bloody and horrifying. Bran thinks that "[a]ll of that had happened hundreds and thousands of years ago, to be

sure, and some maybe never happened at all," but the Nightfort is oppressive both in size and age, keeping Bran in a constant state of anxiety during his stay (*Storm of Swords* 756). The ruins and barrows, along with the tales about the ruins, contribute to a sense of postcolonialism similar to that which Nicholas Howe and Seth Lehrer have identified in Anglo-Saxon literature.[6]

The ruins of the First Men and the godswoods remind the people of Westeros of the Children of the Forest and the First Men, standing as visible history as well as adding a sense of gloom and fatality to the north, where the greatest concentration of such ruins and barrows stands. Despite the physical remains, the First Men's written language consisted of "runes on rocks"; according to Sam, the apprentice historian for the Night's Watch:

> The oldest histories we have were written after the Andals came to Westeros. The First Men only left us runes on rocks, so everything we think we know about the Age of Heroes and the Dawn Age and the Long Night comes from accounts set down by septons thousands of years later. There are archmaesters at the Citadel who question all of it. Those old histories are full of kings who reign for hundreds of years, and knights riding around a thousand years before there were knights. (*Feast for Crows* 114).

Written language, in this case, is power, since written language lasts longer and can be disseminated further than oral histories or runes on rocks; in this way, Martin creates a power imbalance that highlights the imperialism of the Andals over the First Men and the Children of the Forest. Yet the written history is clearly corrupted and inaccurate, which

implies that the oral history of the Children and the First Men may be purer and more honest despite its impermanence.

The various reminders of the past in the north allow the people to retain their heritage as First Men, and they define themselves as an opposing binary to the people of the south. The Andals did not conquer the north; the First Men turned them back at the Neck, midway through the continent (*Game of Thrones* 739). Until the Targaryens, the final wave of invaders, arrived and united the continent, the north had its own king and an uneasy truce with the south (*Storm of Swords* 147). Yet the memory of their former sovereign status, despite the roughly three hundred years between the Targaryen conquest and the events of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, drives the men of the north to rebel when the succession to the throne of the Seven Kingdoms comes into question and Eddard Stark is executed. Greatjon Umber declares that he will no longer submit to rule from the south:

> Renly Baratheon is nothing to me, nor Stannis neither. Why should they rule over me and mine, from some flowery seat in Highgarden or Dorne? What do they know of the Wall or the wolfswood or the barrows of the First Men? Even their *gods* are wrong. The Others take the Lannisters, too, I've had a bellyful of them. [. . .] Why shouldn't we rule ourselves again? It was the dragons we married, and the dragons are all dead! [. . .] *There* sits the only king I mean to bow *my* knee too, m'lords. [. . .] The King in the North! (*Game of Thrones* 796)

With every tie that bound the north to the south severed, the men of the north decide they will no longer submit to the various colonial forces that have pressed on them for three hundred years. Their heritage is ten thousand or more years old, and the reminders of the

First Men's greatness allow the men of the north to keep that heritage always in mind. In many ways, the descendents of the First Men exemplify the Irish and Welsh attempts to reclaim the heritage they believe stolen by the English; the First Men define themselves in opposition to the Andals, and as Kath Filmer-Davies says of the Welsh Celtic revival, their heritage is used to encourage violence against the "oppressors" (2).

While Martin seems primarily interested in exploring the results of postcolonialism in England and presenting as realistic an analogue to it as possible given his narrative choices, Bradley's approach to the Celts is much more political and purposeful. Frank Doden claims that "there are two types of medievalists: Christians who endeavor to show that medieval English literature reveals Christian 'truths,' that Christianity ennobled the pagan populace and its arts; and atheists, who strive to show that Christianity ravaged pagan culture and literature" (112). As this chapter has shown, Bradley's narrative in *The Mists of Avalon* strongly argues for the latter. However, Christianity does not arrive in Britain independently; it is a postcolonial artifact of the Roman occupation. Early in the novel, Bradley establishes that Roman influence is still strong in Britain, "even though Rome was gone from all of Britain" (4). Igraine is married to Gorlois, a "Romanized Duke of Cornwall, a citizen who lived [. . .] in Roman fashion" (4). Despite the fact that Rome has withdrawn from Britain, the nobles still follow the Roman ways and often wish for the return of Rome; Uther complains that one of the contenders for king "thinks everything can be solved by sending a messenger to Rome" (Bradley 46). Roman architecture still marks the land, with the characters frequently utilizing the Roman roads, while Caerleon is built on "the site of an old Roman fort, and some of the old Roman stonework was still in place" (Bradley 272).

Roman law persists in Britain, as Uriens points out to Morgaine after their wedding: "I suppose, as your husband, my dear, I am Duke of Cornwall" (Bradley 577).

Since Bradley's major focus is Christianity's oppression of paganism, the most prominent examples of Roman influence on Britain are in the religious sphere. While Romans did not introduce Christianity to Britain, they worked against the pagan religion and the Druids in the name of Christ:

> For a time, Christian and Druid had dwelt side by side, worshipping the One, but then the Romans had come to the Isle, and although they were widely known for tolerating local deities, against the Druids they had been ruthless, cutting and burning down their sacred groves, trumping up lies that the Druids committed human sacrifice. Their real crime, of course, had been that they heartened the people not to accept the Roman laws and the Roman peace. (Bradley 113)

Thus, though the Roman opposition of paganism was more political than religious, the Christians of Britain continued the opposition, believing it to be religious in nature. Archbishop Patricius' arrival from Ireland exacerbates the intolerance, as he declares that "having lately driven out all the evil magicians from Ireland, I am come to drive them forth from all Christian lands" (Bradley 260). Just as Rome is equated with civilization and the tribes of Britain with barbarism, so is Rome equated with Christianity; Gwenhwyfar argues that Arthur should not carry his Pendragon banner into battle with the Saxons because "[t]his battle shall be the stand of civilized men, followers of Christ, descendants of Rome, against those who know not our God" (Bradley 379). Thus, the

destruction of the traditional religion of Britain comes at the hands of those who follow the ways of a colonizer.

Counter to the romanticized Western cultures, Eastern cultures are often portrayed as lesser or savage, as discussed in Said's *Orientalism*. Said defines Orientalism as an "enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, socially, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively" (3). As with many "isms," however, definitions of the Orient through Orientalism provide more insight into the minds of those practicing Orientalism and the dominant culture that produces them than they do about the Orient itself (Said 22). In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the eastern cultures, primarily represented by the Dothraki and the cities of Slaver's Bay, are juxtaposed against and unfavorably compared to the cultures of Westeros, a typical Orientalist construction that Said describes as "a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans against 'those' non-Europeans" (7). Martin may be credited with including people of color, as critics often lament the tendency of neomedieval fantasy literature to focus on the European Middle Ages and exclude the Middle East or Asia, but he does not present them in a new or provocative manner; rather, Martin's non-Western peoples fall prey to the issues of Eastern Otherness and Orientalism. While his description of Westeros presents a settled postcolonialism, his treatment of Essos, particularly Slaver's Bay, describes imperialism in action.

The first introduction the reader has to a non-Westerosi society is early in the first book, through the eyes of Daenerys Targaryen as she is given in marriage to a Dothraki warlord. The wedding celebration provides the first impression of Dothraki society both for the reader and Daenerys; Illyrio tells Daenerys that "[a] Dothraki wedding without at

least three deaths is deemed a dull affair" (*Game of Thrones* 103). He also tells her that "[t]he Dothraki mate like the animals in their herds. There is no privacy in a *khalasar*, and they do not understand sin or shame as we do" (*Game of Thrones* 102). While these statements can be read as Illyrio's particular view of the Dothraki, colored by his bias against them as a city-bred man, the events of the wedding itself are more objective; while the reader sees the events through Daenerys' point of view and interpretation, the culture itself is presented quite straightforwardly. The women of the *khalasar* dance for Drogo while the men watch, until the men interfere in the dancing: "One of them finally stepped into the circle, grabbed a dancer by the arm, and mounted her right there, as a stallion mounts a mare" (*Game of Thrones* 102). Several other warriors join in, until two men fight over a woman, the loser is disemboweled, and the winner "took hold of the nearest women—not even the one they had been quarrelling over—and had her there and then" (*Game of Thrones* 102-3). Though the wedding scene is likely intended to show Daenerys' plight, being sent to live in a culture utterly alien to her own, thrust into it with no period of adjustment, it sets the tone for the reader's expectations of the Dothraki. Although Daenerys comes to embrace the Dothraki culture, their practices are still utterly alien to a Western reader and are portrayed as barbaric. For example, in order to ensure the health of her unborn child, Daenerys must consume an entire raw horse heart: "The heart of a stallion would make her son strong and swift and fearless, or so the Dothraki believed, but only if the mother could eat it all. If she choked on the blood or retched up the flesh, the omens were less favorable; the child might be stillborn, or come forth weak, deformed, or female" (*Game of Thrones* 489-90). Though Daenerys has come to accept the warrior culture that would consider "female" of equal undesirability as "deformed," it

is an attitude that a contemporary Western reader will likely find less acceptable, and it codes the Dothraki as savage and barbaric. Even Daenerys' acceptance has its limits, which she discovers when Drogo begins raiding peaceful villages to gather the wealth needed to invade Westeros. The *khalasar*'s warriors gather women and children to sell as slaves, and while Daenerys pities their fate, she does not stop it (*Game of Thrones* 666). Only the cries of a young girl stir Daenerys to action: "Across the road, a girl no older than Dany was sobbing in a high, thin voice as a rider shoved her over a pile of corpses, facedown, and thrust himself inside her. Other riders dismounted to take their turns" (*Game of Thrones* 667). She orders her personal bloodriders to stop the rape, which her Westerosi knight Jorah finds perplexing, claiming that "you have a gentle heart, but you do not understand. This is how it has always been. Those men have shed blood for the *khal*. Now they claim their reward" (*Game of Thrones* 668). In order to stop the rapes, Daenerys claims all of the female slaves for her own, taking them under her protection. This incident marks the beginning of Daenerys' rejection of the markers of barbarism that Martin has placed in the text, particularly rape and slavery.

Slavery becomes a central motif for Daenerys' interactions with Eastern cultures, and Martin frequently uses slavery as shorthand for barbarism or poor moral character. Jorah Mormont is an exile from Westeros because he engaged in slave trading; according to Eddard, "Ser Jorah had tried to swell the family coffers by selling some poachers to a Tyroshi slaver. As the Mormonts were bannermen to the Starks, his crime had dishonored the north. Ned had made the long journey to Bear Island, only to find when he arrived that Jorah had taken ship beyond the reach of [Eddard's sword] Ice and the king's justice" (*Game of Thrones* 111). This revelation establishes Jorah's lack of

trustworthiness early, and his callous regard for the lives of others—as seen in his words to Daenerys about the rape above—and lack of honor continue through the books. Jorah convinces Daenerys to buy slaves to fight her battle for Westeros, and when Daenerys protests that her brother Rhaegar, whom she strives to emulate, only led free men into battle, Jorah replies that "all you say is true. But Rhaegar lost on the Trident. He lost the battle, he lost the war, he lost the kingdom, and he lost his life. His blood swirled downriver with the rubies from his breastplate, and Robert the Usurper rode over his corpse to steal the Iron Throne. Rhaegar fought valiantly, Rhaegar fought nobly, Rhaegar fought honorably. And Rhaegar *died*" (*Storm of Swords* 330). Likewise, Martin uses slavery to show Euron, the new king of the Iron Islands, as unfit; Victarion argues that "there were no slaves in the Iron Islands, only thralls. A thrall was bound to service, but he was not chattel. His children were born free, so long as they were given to the Drowned God. And thralls were never bought nor sold for gold" (*Feast for Crows* 620). Euron intends to sell slaves to the cities in Slaver's Bay to raise the money for supplies to begin incursions into Westeros in order to take the country (*Feast for Crows* 628). Although taking thralls is a form of slavery, Victarion considers outright slavery—buying and selling human beings—to be beyond the bounds of Ironborn morality, thus making Euron unfit to rule. By establishing slavery as a practice in which no moral country will engage, Martin clearly casts Westeros as "good" and most of the cities of Essos as "bad," and this moral judgment continues throughout the books.

Despite the heavy-handed approach to slavery as an immoral act and those who engage in it as immoral people, the condition of slavery is often a grey area. Daenerys agrees to buy a slave army, called the Unsullied, from Astapor in order to facilitate her

invasion of Westeros. Jorah convinces her to buy slaves rather than raise a free army partly by telling her how awful war is:

> Your Grace [. . .] I saw King's Landing after the Sack. Babes were butchered that day as well, and old men, and children at play. More women were raped than you can count. There is a savage beast in every man, and when you hand that man a sword or spear and send him forth to war, the beast stirs. The scent of blood is all it takes to wake him. Yet I have never heard of these Unsullied raping, nor putting a city to the sword, nor even plundering, save at the express command of those who lead them. (*Storm of Swords* 328-9)

Since it is Jorah who convinces Daenerys to buy the slaves, and Jorah's attitudes so often line up with those portrayed as typically Essos, one could argue that Daenerys' agreeing to buy the slaves is a sign that the East, through Jorah, is corrupting her. Daenerys finally agrees to purchase the Unsullied, then turns them against the slavers of Astapor. After they sack the city and free the slaves, Daenerys frees the Unsullied from slavery, yet they do not leave her service (*Storm of Swords* 573). Likewise, Missandei, a slave girl included with the Unsullied as a gift, stays with Daenerys after being freed, claiming that "there is no place for me to go. [. . .] I will serve you, gladly" (*Storm of Swords* 372). Though Daenerys frees all of her slaves, they continue to serve her because they know no other life. Others request the right to return to slavery, much to Daenerys' surprise; Daario explains that these are "well spoken and gently born[. . . .] Such slaves are prized. In the Free Cities they will be tutors, scribes, bed slaves, even healers and priests. They will sleep in soft beds, eat rich foods, and dwell in manses. Here they have lost all, and

live in fear and squalor" (*Storm of Swords* 984). The lack of personality or character development in most of the former slaves exemplifies Naamen Gobert Tilahun's statement that in colonialist literature, the colonized people "are not allowed to participate in their own liberation" (42). Daenerys does not seem to respect the slaves of Essos so much as she seeks to assuage her own guilt about and discomfort with slavery by setting them free.

Finally, Martin presents a disturbing theory of slavery through Tyrion Lannister, who thinks that many slaves have better lives than Westerosi peasants: "Slaves were chattels, aye. They could be bought and sold, whipped and branded, used for the carnal pleasure of their owners, bred to make more slaves. In that sense they were no more than dogs or horses. But most lords treated dogs and horses well enough" (*Dance with Dragons* 952). Besides, Tyrion thinks, there is always a choice: "*There has never been a slave who did not choose to be a slave,* Tyrion reflected. *Their choice may be between bondage and death, but the choice is always there*" (*Dance with Dragons* 952). Though this attitude characterizes Tyrion's privilege—before being taken into slavery, he was the son of a powerful Westerosi lord, acting Hand of the King, and Master of Coin—it also casts slavery even further into a morally grey area and ventures disturbingly close to victim-blaming; if a person can choose to die rather than be a slave, then it is ultimately that person's own fault that he or she is a slave, not the slavers'. Tyrion's ideas are reinforced by some of the slaves' request that they be allowed to return to slavery, as they actively choose to be slaves; in their case, the discomfort and possible death by starvation they face as free men and women is less appealing than the softer lives lived in slavery. However, no one suggests that the former slavers hire the skilled former slaves for a

living wage; the only option the former slaves see is to return to slavery rather than selling their skills and abilities, despite those abilities presumably being in high demand.

Slavery is a difficult topic in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, perhaps because Martin's medievalism and liberalism come into conflict. The hallmark of Martin's neomedievalism is an insistence on what he sees as historical accuracy, yet contemporary audiences cannot accept slavery as a normative practice. Thus, the institution of slavery continues to be a marker of immorality, perhaps because Daenerys, the primary point of view character in Essos, sees it so. Meereen in particular is cast as a hive of immorality. In her quest to free the slaves of Essos, Daenerys uses her dragons and Unsullied to sack the cities of Slaver's Bay. As they approach Meereen, they discover that not only have the Meereenese lords burned the fields between Yunkai and Meereen, they have "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" (*Storm of Swords* 775). After Daenerys takes and occupies the city, the former masters begin fighting back, forming the Sons of the Harpy and engaging in guerrilla tactics against her Unsullied as they patrol the streets; Barristan brings her the body of one named Stalwart Shield, who was stabbed at least six times, his body left in the street with a harpy drawn in his own blood near his head and a goat's genitals forced down his throat (*Dance with Dragons* 41-2). The Sons escalate their attacks until one night nine different men lie dead in the streets, both Unsullied and freedmen; Daenerys reflects that "[a]ny freedman who became too prosperous or too outspoken was marked for death" (*Dance with Dragons* 168). The masters of the city are not only trying to make Daenerys leave, but also punishing those she freed for being and acting free. Perhaps the clearest

mark of barbarism in the city is the fighting pits, which Daenerys agrees to reopen as part of the price of peace in the city. The first fighter to die is a sixteen-year-old boy, whom Daenerys' consort Hizdahr insists is "[a] man grown, who freely chose to risk his life for gold and glory" (*Dance with Dragons* 757). However, Daenerys draws the line at loosing lions on a pair of dwarven jousters, claiming that "[t]hese dwarfs did not consent to battle lions with wooden swords" (*Dance with Dragons* 759). Hizdahr and the pit master argue that failing to release the lions will disappoint the people and ruin the fun, but Daenerys insists. The people of the city are shown to be a bloodthirsty mob, "scream[ing] its approval" when fighters die, "hiss[ing] their disapproval" when the dwarves are allowed to leave unscathed (*Dance with Dragons* 757, 759). When the noise and blood attracts Drogon, Daenerys' largest and wildest dragon, Hizdahr's reaction to Drogon killing and eating one of the fighters is "a queer look [. . .] part fear, part lust, part rapture" (*Dance with Dragons* 761-2). Hizdahr, as the owner of most of the fighting pits in the city, as well as one of the possible leaders of the Sons of the Harpy, represents the worst of the Meereenese, power-hungry, bloodthirsty, and corrupt.

Unfortunately, there are no Meereenese point-of-view characters to provide a different perspective, just as there are no Dothraki point-of-view characters. Indeed, Martin has included no point-of-view characters who originate from any of his eastern cultures, so the only perspectives provided are Daenerys's, Barristan's, Quentyn's, and Tyrion's; all four of these characters are originally from Westeros. Martin thus relegates all things eastern to a subaltern state, failing to allow the east to speak for itself.[7] When asked about the two-dimensionality of the Dothraki, Martin replied that "I haven't had a Dothraki viewpoint character, though," indicating that the internal view of the Dothraki

would be much different than the external view provided through Daenerys (Anders). Yet Martin has no plans to rectify this issue: "I could introduce a Dothraki viewpoint character, but I already have like sixteen viewpoint characters" (Anders). He also argues that while the Dothraki seem barbaric, they are partially based on the Mongols, who "became very sophisticated at certain points, but they were certainly not sophisticated when they started out, and even at the height of their sophistication they were fond of doing things like giant piles of heads" (Anders). Though Martin's world is entirely imaginative, his claims to historical realism and attempts to find the "truth" of such issues as chivalry, politics, communication, and labor in the Middle Ages would seem to demand an attempt at such "truth" for the Middle East, as well. Instead, Martin constructs his eastern city-states much as Said argues the Occident constructed the Orient in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Martin's historical research and thus his accuracy may be bound not only by his own cultural understanding, but by the culture of the historians he reads, who likely engage in Orientalism due to their own cultural circumstances. However, that Martin is content to portray the eastern cultures and characters entirely externally with no attempt to explain their behavior or traditions from the inside is problematic, especially when considered in light of Daenerys' character and choices.

While Martin makes it clear that the leaders of Slaver's Bay are corrupt, at least from the viewpoint of a Westerosi character or Western reader, Daenerys' choice to take down the slave trade carries many markers of the "white savior" trope or the "white man's burden." Coined by Rudyard Kipling in 1899, the "white man's burden" refers to the tendency of Western people to believe they have a duty to colonize and rule non-

Western, non-white peoples for their own betterment (Makariev 636). Daenerys believes herself the rightful ruler of Westeros because she is the last living Targaryen, and frequently lays claim to certain virtues because she is "the blood of the dragon." Yet Daenerys turns away from her plan to invade and retake Westeros in order to combat the slave trade in Essos. Her decision to free the slaves of Essos is never explicated in the text; the only reason given is her discomfort with the suffering of the people, first the victims of her own *khalasar*, though she only protects the women from rape, and then the people of the cities of Slaver's Bay. After she protects the women of the raided village from rape, she has an overinflated idea of both her own impact and the appreciation of the women. Mirri Maz Duur, the village healing woman, disabuses her of that notion by purposefully treating Drogo's wounds badly so that he nearly dies; Daenerys tells Mirri "I spoke for you. [. . .] I saved you" (*Game of Thrones* 760). Mirri replies:

> Three riders had taken me, not as a man takes a woman, but from behind, as a dog takes a bitch. The fourth was in me when you rode past. How then did you save me? I saw my god's house burn, where I had healed good men beyond counting. My home they burned as well, and in the street I saw piles of heads. [. . .] Tell me again what you saved. (*Game of Thrones* 760)

Despite this forthright rejection of Daenerys' idea that her intervention requires appreciation and service, Daenerys does not learn the lesson immediately. This failure is partly due to Martin's characterization of the slaves she frees as she moves through Slaver's Bay; when Daenerys' army takes Yunkai, the freed slaves gather around her crying "*mhysa*," which Missandei tells her means "mother" (*Storm of Swords* 588). This

is the reaction Daenerys expects, both because of her actions in freeing the slaves and because of a vision she was granted of "[t]en thousands slaves lift[ing] bloodstained hands as she raced by on her silver [horse], riding like the wind. '*Mother!*' they cried. '*Mother, mother!*'" (*Clash of Kings* 707). Daenerys thinks of the slaves as her children, partly because she is barren after having miscarried her first child, partly because they call her "mother." She assumes a mother's responsibility for them, refusing to force them to fend for themselves outside Meereen, where there is no food, arguing that "I will not march my people off to die," while thinking, "*My children*" (*Storm of Swords* 783). Tilahun argues that the lack of agency on the part of the colonized people "marks the culture and its people as needing supervision: in other words, they are in need of colonization and the patriarchal White guiding hand that comes with it. At the same time, the whole culture is set up as nothing more than props for the spiritual advancement of the protagonist" (42). Daenerys' insistence of thinking of the slaves as children, and Martin's choice to enable that line of thinking through the faceless mob of former slaves calling her "mother," disenfranchises the newly freed slaves from responsibility for and ownership of their newfound freedom. Like children, they need guidance, and they immediately turn to Daenerys for lack of any other adult figure. Ironically, Daenerys is not much more than a child herself; she is about fifteen years old when she frees the slaves of Essos. Hence, her insistence on acting as a savior may be read as youthful naiveté and exuberance, but Martin's choice to have the slaves worship her is problematic.

Though Mirri's lesson is restated when some of the slaves ask to be allowed to return to slavery, since freedom is a lower standard of living than that to which they have

become accustomed, Daenerys still does not quite learn it. Despite the urging of her people to leave Slaver's Bay behind and return to her plan to conquer Westeros, Daenerys decides to stay in Meereen, asking them "how can I rule seven kingdoms if I cannot rule a single city?" (*Storm of Swords* 995). Instead, she means to use Meereen as practice, claiming that "[m]y children need time to heal and learn. My dragons need time to grow and test their wings. And I need the same" (*Storm of Swords* 995). Thus, Daenerys does not seem to see Meereen as a real place, its people as real people; rather, they are a group on which she can practice without fear of failure, because she can leave for Westeros at any time. She sees herself as an example of propriety for the Meereenese, thinking that "*Perhaps I cannot make my people good,* [. . .] *but I should at least try to make them a little less bad*" (*Dance with Dragons* 757). This thought comes to her during the pit fights, when the Meereenese are presented as a monolithic, bloodthirsty mob. They cheer her as "mother," making Daenerys want to reply "I am not your mother[. . . .] I am the mother of your slaves, of every boy who ever died upon these sands whilst you gorged on honeyed locusts" (*Dance with Dragons* 756). She finds the Meereenese ungrateful for her leadership; they leave a session of court in "sullen silence," making Daenerys think "*They have what they came for. Is there no way to please these people?*" (*Dance with Dragons* 56). To Martin's credit, other than the hordes of freed slaves who serve Daenerys and call her "mother," none of the people she thinks she is helping cooperate, indicating that they do not see her as a savior, but rather as an uninvited foreign interloper. However, Daenerys' centrality to the plot of *A Song of Ice and Fire* casts her as a positive protagonist, if not a hero, and the expectation that she will eventually rule Westeros serves to reinforce her role as conqueror and may lead

readers to believe her actions justified. Thus, Martin invites the self-congratulatory gaze of the white imperialist by idealizing his white savior and demonizing those who wish to be free from her influence and rule.

Since contemporary writers are, by definition, outsiders to medieval cultures about which they may try to write, they may struggle with assumptions and generalizations that may lead to potentially racist or otherwise oversimplified characterizations of medieval or non-western people. Even well-intentioned attempts to provide these cultures with a voice may fail when the writer's cultural background does not provide the insight or knowledge necessary fully to characterize a culture outside of his or her own. While Martin's arguments against imperialism are clear, ultimately his attempt fails due to the lack of deeper understanding of the pseudo-Eastern cultures with which he populates Essos. Similarly, Bradley's approach creates and defines the pre-Christian culture of Britain through her understanding of neo-paganism, about which she has admitted to knowing very little (Fry 76). This is not to say that Western authors should not include people of color or non-Western cultures in their novels, or that contemporary writers should not attempt to recreate past cultures, especially if their intention is to draw attention to the tendency to omit these people from fantasy works or to give voice to a traditionally silenced group. However, careful consideration must be given to the impact of the portrayal of non-Western peoples, especially if they have contemporary analogues, which postcolonial approaches can help to illuminate.

Notes

[1] Some studies on Tolkien and ecology include Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans' *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Lexington, UP of Kentucky, 2006; Patrick Curry's *Defending Middle Earth: Tolkien, Myth, and Modernity*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004; and Chris Brawley's "The Fading of the World: Tolkien's Ecology and Loss in *The Lord of the Rings*," *JFA* 13.9 (2008): 292-308.

[2] Lynn White argues that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," and that man's belief in his transcendence over nature leads to mistreatment of nature (9-10). Ecofeminists believe that Christianity co-opted and replaced paganism; Daly says that Mary is the Goddess downgraded, made into a vessel rather than the creator, and blended with Zeus, who gave birth to himself. The woman in this scenario is needed only as a temporary vessel, not as part of the creative process (172-3). She claims that "the gods of the patriarchy are pale derivatives and reversals of ancient yet always Present Goddess(es)" (91). White says that Christian indifference to nature replaced pagan animism (10), while King puts it thus: "In the project of building Western industrial civilization, nature became something to be dominated, overcome, made to serve the needs of men. She was stripped of her magical powers and properties and was reduced to 'natural resources' to be exploited by human beings to fulfill human needs and purposes which were defined in opposition to nature" (*What is Ecofeminism?* 28).

[3] Starhawk refers to the belief that all living things possess a life force as "immanence" (177).

[4] Seth Lehrer, "'On Fagne Flor': The Postcolonial *Beowulf*, from Heorot to Heany," *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures*, ed. Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams, New York: Cambridge, 2005, 77-108; Michelle R. Williams, "Making Contact: Postcolonial Perspectives through Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittanie*," *Arthuriana* 8.4 (1998): 115-34.

[5] However, other critics' arguments indicate that Sullivan overlooks non-Western cultures' influence on medieval Europe and its literature, which makes Sullivan's argument fallacious; for example, Maria Menocal's *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004.

[6] Howe reads postcolonial overtones in *The Ruin*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*, claiming that "[t]he stones that litter the texts of Gildas, Bede, and the Old English poets can be read as the visible traces of a colonial past" (34). Lehrer finds similar colonial traces in *Beowulf*, pointing to descriptions of architecture that would have been Roman in origin, such as the paved road or the "*fagne flor*" of Heorot. He claims that the descriptions of the Roman remains set *Beowulf* in a specific place in history, as well as adding a sense of inevitability of the destruction of a culture (77-8).

[7] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak analyses the idea of the subaltern and the tendency for the privileged classes to speak for a colonized or otherwise subordinated group, in the process essentializing and Othering said group, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris, New York: Columbia UP, 2010, 21-78.

CHAPTER V

Embracing the Present: The Impact and Effects of Fantastic Neomedievalism

This study has primarily focused on the uses and appearance of medievalism and neomedievalism in fantasy literature. However, the influence of the imagined Middle Ages does not stop at the literature, but affects the reader and the reader's perception of the Middle Ages, creating a tide of neomedievalism that flows from influences on the author to the author's work to the reader to the culture. Though many historians or critics may be frustrated by what they perceive as widespread ignorance and misinformation about the Middle Ages, fantasy, like all forms of medievalism, needs to be examined and analyzed beyond the boundaries of authenticity or accuracy. Fantasy neomedievalism permeates American culture, driving beliefs about the medieval people and culture, competing with what students may learn about the medieval era in their classes. Understanding the literary and other popular culture forces at work on people's ideas and beliefs about the Middle Ages is necessary to understanding the ways in which those ideas and beliefs in turn ripple into other forms of medievalism.

Few studies of the direct effect of fantasy medievalism on audiences exist, likely because medievalism can be found in politics, heritage studies, military culture, and other sociological structures, and thus is so pervasive that pinning down beliefs about the Middle Ages caused specifically by fantasy texts can be difficult if not impossible. Yet, as Martin's insistence on referring to neomedievalism as "Disneyfied" shows, it can be argued that the animated Disney films are many people's first introduction and exposure to neomedievalism and thus set the foundation for their beliefs about the Middle Ages. With this in mind, Paul Sturtevant has studied Disney's portrayal of the Middle Ages to

determine how its neomedievalism has affected the audiences, interviewing several dozen British teenagers about "how Disney's animated films influenced their current perceptions of the Middle Ages, whether those films were self-evidently medieval in setting and provenance or not" (77). Specifically, he examines the ways in which audiences experience cognitive dissonance or a fusion of ideas from history classes or other educational media and fantasy neomedievalism.

Disney's animated films make no claim to historical accuracy in any form; rather, Disney's use of the past has been described by Tison Pugh as "an inherently flexible reinterpretation of history guided not by dates and facts but by an asynchronous nostalgia for fairy tales and fantasies set in the past, while inspired by an American view of the future" (5). Yet Sturtevant argues that children's ideas about the Middle Ages are strongly driven by Disney nonetheless. Disney introduces children to the neomedieval trappings of the Middle Ages—castles, knights, dragons—while creating confusion about the historical time period defined as the "Middle Ages." Sturtevant allowed the participants to define which Disney films contributed to their ideas of the Middle Ages, and notes that "these included four films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. [. . .] Interestingly, these participants did not mention the three Disney films that are set in the Middle Ages: *Robin Hood*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *The Sword in the Stone*" (81). According to Sturtevant, the students' grasp of the difference between fairy tale and legend was tenuous, as was their grasp of the actual time period involved in the Middle Ages: "All that is required to acquire the label 'medieval' is a similar vocabulary of settings and icons that have come to denote the period" (83). Due to Disney's influence, many children's first exposure to

the Middle Ages means that they "become accustomed to seeing elements of the fantastical Middle Ages (like wizards and dragons) alongside elements of the historical Middle Ages (such as knights and castles)" (Sturtevant 80). Obviously, as children age, they come to realize that the more fantastic elements are fictional, "but the sense that these fantastical creatures are located within the context of the Middle Ages remains," and their discussions show that "their concepts of discrete divisions separating historical fantasy, legend, and reality, and modern medieval mash-ups of history, fantasy, and legend are slippery indeed" (80, 83). Sturtevant spends some time examining the ways in which films such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* evoke the medieval despite their settings being "hybrids of different periods" and cultures, including Renaissance Germany, Victorian England, and eighteenth-century France.

The students Sturtevant interviewed expressed an awareness of their own cognitive dissonance when it comes to the Middle Ages and its people, especially the people of the Middle East; several of Sturtevant's interviewees admitted that *Aladdin* (1992) strongly influenced their understanding of medieval Middle-Eastern culture, architecture, and dress (90). However, they had also seen the 2005 film *Kingdom of Heaven* and struggled to reconcile the sophisticated, intelligent Muslims with the silly, barbaric Arabians of *Aladdin* (90-1). Thus, Disney's neomedievalism shapes children's ideas of the Middle Ages from a young age, influencing their beliefs about the era and passing the trappings of medievalism down to another generation.

Unfortunately for fans of neomedieval fantasy and those who study medievalism and neomedievalism, the link between Disney's neomedievalism and children, combined with the silly and sometimes culturally offensive inaccuracies in Disney's animated films,

lays a foundation for detractors to refuse to take medievalism and medievalist fantasy seriously. Rather, this link perpetuates the idea that neomedievalism, and by extension the Middle Ages themselves, is childish and escapist, and that it has no place in serious adult literature. Yet as has been shown, the attitude toward medievalism in general and fantasy in particular predates Disney's fairy tale adaptations. Thus, the trouble is not with Disney so much as it is with an elitist insistence that adults must face reality rather than run from it, and that fantasy is the epitome of running from reality. That neomedieval fantasy tends to be rife with tropes that critics see as historical inaccuracies further separates the traditionalists from those who study medievalism and fantasy literature.

Since fantasy medievalism does not provide reliable historical information, nor is that its primary goal, one could ask what continues to draw audiences to stories set in neomedieval worlds, what need medievalist fantasy fulfills. One answer that critics repeatedly return to is "nostalgia." Medievalist fantasy seems to provide a sense of timelessness, of returning to a home one never had. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition" (xv). Historians and critics frequently point to nostalgia as the impetus for the medievalist movement; Alice Chandler, Dwight A. Culler, and Veronica Ortenberg all claim nostalgia as the reason the Victorians romanticized and idealized the Middle Ages, or at least their idea of the Middle Ages. The Victorians believed that the

Middle Ages held more order, more faith, more connection to nature than their own era did. Chandler describes Victorian nostalgia thus:

> The more the world changed, and the period of the medieval revival was an era of ever-accelerating social transformation, the more the partly historical but basically mythical Middle Ages that had become a tradition in literature served to remind men of a Golden Age. The Middle Ages were idealized as a period of faith, order, joy, munificence, and creativity. (1)

Kim Selling claims that in such texts, "[p]rogress is regarded as ultimately dehumanizing, and there is a yearning for the richness and authenticity that medieval life is imagined to possess, and a lament for the lost sense of wonder that less rational people supposedly feel in relation to the natural world" (215). Thus, historicism has never truly been a concern of medievalism; rather, ahistoricism is necessary to the aesthetic of medievalism. Nostalgic projection requires the Middle Ages to remain a nearly blank slate so that it may take on the anxieties or desires of the contemporary culture. As Culler puts it, the Victorians "took refuge in another age, and that age was large enough, various enough, sufficiently unknown and even mythical, that each person could find there what he wanted" (159). Medievalist nostalgia is less about the historical Middle Ages and more about the desires of the audience for a time free of their current concerns. Thus, attempts at a "realistic" or more historically accurate Middle Ages, as George R.R. Martin claims to provide, are essentially another kind of fantasy; despite an author's best efforts and research, medievalism is so ingrained in contemporary ideas of the Middle Ages that true authenticity is practically impossible.

That the Middle Ages are the focus of this nostalgia is of some concern to some critics. After all, the Middle Ages are not truly a completely blank slate, but carry their own baggage, such as feudalism, patriarchal social structures, religious dominance, and holy wars. Renee Trilling worries about the tendency to focus nostalgia on a fantasy Middle Ages, claiming that this focus is "decidedly disturbing":

> [T]he common thread that runs through most of these medievalist fantasies is the graphic description of violence and sex in a world of lawlessness and the hegemonic dominance of brute force over all. [. . .] What explains our fascination with a world characterized primarily by violence, pain, and suffering? Do we seek license to indulge in bloodshed, misogyny and racism without the attendant guilt? Do we secretly long for an existence that absolves us from challenging social injustice? Do we desire a sense of belonging that transcends the individual with an unquestioned tribalism or nationalism? (217-18)

To a point, the answer to these questions is probably yes; some readers or writers do turn to the Middle Ages due to their latent desire for a return to a feudalistic, patriarchal system of order. Perhaps some of Martin's readers, particularly those who insist on the "realism" of the Middle Ages as Martin presents them, read *A Song of Ice and Fire* for this reason. However, this study has shown many ways in which the traditional rigid gender roles or class systems associated with the Middle Ages have been subverted or overturned in medievalist fantasy, indicating that while "violence, pain, and suffering" may be a few of the Middle Ages' attractions, they are not the only ones. The approaches examined tend to elevate and vindicate traditionally repressed and suppressed groups,

such as women and people of color, indicating that the authors in question may be more interested in atoning for the perceived faults of Middle Ages society than in celebrating them, even if the execution is not always fully successful.

Thus, fantasy's neomedievalism is not meant to be educational, but ahistoric for the purposes of worldbuilding, political and sociological commentary, and, ultimately, entertainment. Colin Manlove claims that "the concern of fantasy is not with the minutely faithful record for the sake of fidelity to fact, but with the sense of individuality that comes from making things strange and luminous with independent life in a particular setting" (ix). Although the ahistoric neomedieval Middle Ages to which children are exposed early in life may prove confusing for casual students of history, they can also prove to be a useful stepping-stone to introduce students to historical material and pique their interest. As Michael Drout puts it, "[n]ot only is fantasy literature the way that the majority of the general public encounters medieval materials (albeit transformed medieval materials), but it also [. . .] influences the community of scholars who interpret medieval texts" (17). Material which may otherwise appear to be dry or confusing, such as the Wars of the Roses, may attract new interest when compared to the War of the Five Kings in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Likewise, initial interest in the medieval may be sparked by neomedieval fantasy, leading interested readers to discover more about the era on their own or take classes that would provide more knowledge and information. Amy Kaufman argues that such transitions should be recognized and encouraged rather than scoffed at:

> For the world is awash in medievalism: *Vikings*, *Arrow*, *Merlin*, *Skyrim*, *Dragon Age*, *Robin Hood*, and yes, *Game of Thrones*. This is the cultural

> food on which our students and our peers subsist, and whether we like it or not, these are the paths most likely to lead students into Medieval Studies. Gamers who go on a quest for a fragment of the *Edda* in *Skyrim* want to read the real one; they are surprised but titillated when they encounter a sinful King Arthur and a lecherous Merlin in Thomas Malory instead of the boyish duo they loved watching on the BBC. *Dragon Age* taught them about the Hundred Years War by analogy and *Game of Thrones*, love it or loathe it, fuels their desire to interrogate the façade of chivalry, rumors of royal incest, and the treatment of women and the disabled in medieval Europe. ("Lowering the Drawbridge" n.p.)

Recognizing that medievalist and neomedieval texts are gateways to Medieval Studies can be invaluable for scholars and teachers, leading students toward intellectual curiosity about the Middle Ages rather than driving them away through protests that these texts are getting the Middle Ages all wrong. Generally speaking, students are more interested and engaged when the curriculum includes material in which they are already invested. Connecting the canon with genre fiction by pointing out similarities and analogues between the texts can not only help raise interest in the medieval past, but can help to show a professor's knowledge of and appreciation for contemporary culture, which may also encourage student engagement. Unfortunately, the academy has a tendency to ignore or demonize popular genres and media, and thus the possibility of drawing students to the humanities through their enjoyment of popular culture is often lost. Likewise, the opportunity for both professors and students to explore current affairs and

concerns through a metaphorical intermediary such as that provided by neomedieval fantasy is missed.

Ultimately, it is not the responsibility of fantasy authors to recruit medievalists or to educate their readers about the Middle Ages. Their only true responsibility is to entertain, though the methods by which they attempt to entertain can reveal much about their beliefs as well as the beliefs of their audiences and societies. Due to the tendency of medievalist writers to project anxieties and desires onto the Middle Ages, whether they are aware of this projection or not, medievalism studies can provide the tools to address the contemporary issues embedded in the medievalist world. By moving past the impulse to judge the historical authenticity of a medievalist work, a critic can find the underlying sociological reasons behind an author's choices and, ultimately, form a better understanding of both the present and the past.

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