

George R.R. Martin's

# "A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE"

and the Medieval Literary Tradition



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## Introduction and Acknowledgements

Ever since I developed the idea to bring this book about it has been as much a labour of love as a professional academic enterprise. The project has been born out of a genuine fascination with an author whose work can yield as much reward in instinctive admiration as when it is professionally studied by a scholar of literature. Furthermore it has brought me into more contact with like-minded colleagues from around the world and so this collection would not truly come about without us all sharing our interests and it is in fact the creative fruit of our mutual inspiration.

Moreover, some old and new ties of friendship and affection have come out stronger from the efforts to see this project finalised.

For these reason when I proceed to distribute the due acknowledgements, it may truly seem, as John Donne said of debts to friends in *The Will*, “as though I gave, when I but restore”.

Thus I would like to say a simple *thank you* to George R. R. Martin for giving us all so very much of the finest literary adventure by bringing back to life all the old strength of the “boke of romaunce”.

Next I would like to thank my wife, Maria, for first succeeding in turning me on to Martin much against my initial wariness, then for being part of this study, and finally for her most loyal and constant support which I have enjoyed throughout my work on this volume.

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with the most exquisite examples of scholarship. It makes me both proud and indebted to be able to offer them now to a wider public.

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## Preface

### Fantasy and the Medieval Tradition

Before embarking on the main task at hand in this collection let us begin by laying out some necessary conceptual and methodological context for the exercise. What we have selected for literary analysis is a twenty-first century text. It has been the received opinion of the reading public and the critics that it belongs to the genre of modern fantasy. By such a term we commonly refer to those prose texts produced in the last six or seven decades which go beyond the immediate human sensory perception in the creation of their imagery, adopting the kind of supernatural component which is based on the principle of using magic as an equivalent mode by means of which the spiritual manifests itself in the material reality. This type of the supernatural has its origins in the theory and practice of the literary subcreation practised during the Middle Ages and then well into the Renaissance. From this definition of the supernatural we would thus exclude both the ghosts and apparitions of Gothic fiction and the epic machinery of *Paradise Lost*. If we then attempted to move on from a technical dictionary-form definition of the genre to a definition which attempts to capture its defining spirit we might further suggest that, whatever the degree to which fantasy texts rely on the explicit presence of magic (which in some cases is quite small, especially if compared to the extent to which the supposedly realistic novel has tended to rely on modern ideologies), their unifying feature is that they invariably take a stance as regards the traditionally

conceived spiritual dimension of reality, which may be either affirmative or evaluative, or else critical, but is never indifferent.

This observation will lead us from a synchronic to a diachronic context of the genre. Here we will, of course, observe that the modern concept of the genre of fantasy has been forged by the literary and critical legacy of J. R. R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. It is thus easily noticeable that within the mainstream of contemporary fantasy writing of the last half century each successive literary creation has had to position itself in relation to this looming legacy. Because of the pervasive impact which *The Lord of the Rings* and *On Fairy Stories* have had on defining the nature of fantasy fiction from the later 1970s, it has in fact come to pass that Tolkien's work is now situated at the pivotal point whereby all previous (post-medieval) critical theory dealing with the fantastic mode in literature has been rendered invalid or at least incomplete and ultimately ineffective for dealing with the emergent new genre which was based on distinctly different conceptual premises and exemplified different generic ramifications vis à vis other forms of literature. At the same time, all fresh theoretical discussion of the mode and the genre of fantasy has had to approach Tolkien's ideas as the conceptual starting point.

Now the effectiveness of Tolkien's ideas for the fantastic seems to consist in the fact that it has, on the one hand, connected modern fantasy with its rich and largely forgotten heritage of literary genres crucial for medieval literature, the abandonment of which, Tolkien rightly argued in his seminal essay *On Fairy Stories*, made contemporary literature unable to effectively come to grips with some central aspects of the human spiritual condition.

But reclaiming the imagery of the fantastic into the world of contemporary narrative fiction – long bound to reliance on narrowly-defined sensory perception, reinforced by three centuries of civilisation based on a conceptual outlook defined by empirical science – was no longer feasible. Tolkien, therefore, remodels the medieval notion of literature as human subcreation into the idea of the secondary world. The greatest genius of this is perhaps the way in which the ingeniously novel concept stems from, and brings one back into, the deepest layer of the tradition it seeks to reclaim for the contemporary intellectual reality.

Thus, for the medieval consciousness, the fantastic elements were a plausible extension of the common earthly sensory experience, by means of which imaginative subcreation sought to come closer to the unquestionable spiritual reality of which man's earthly existence was a function, or else to expose its underlying presence more emphatically. For the contemporary mind the (sub)creation of a secondary world, conceived of as an autonomous parallel universe, creates a plausible equivalent framework for the suspension of disbelief. The suspension of disbelief makes use of the culturally received tendency to rely on the notion of universally determined physical laws as the principles of orientation in physical reality, which will invariably characterise the contemporary mind. As a result, it effectively frees the recipient of the fictional world from an automatic reliance on the cognitive habits of the primary reality. This process allows for fantastic elements to be subsequently introduced as part of a coherent secondary fictional reality where, as in the medieval genres incorporating fantastic imagery, the overall effect is designed to bring the audience, by their experience of the fictional reality, into close contact with what once was the spiritual and is now termed as the existential human condition.

What this effectively achieves is the reversal of the four-centuries-old process of the progressive internalisation of human ethical conflicts by recreating the medieval overt moral universalism in an autonomous fictional reality where impressions based on immediate sensory experience and fantastic imagery are once again forged into a coherent creative framework.

Now the way in which the elements of fantasy functioned in literature created during the medieval period was of course founded on some of the defining, inherent characteristics which determined human cognition and intellectual condition at that time, and as such it extended well beyond the boundaries of any specific genre. Nevertheless, it is now of key significance that these elements would have normally manifested themselves in the specific context of a particular literary text – a text created in an age when generic conventions shaped the particular literary creation in a more determinate way than perhaps ever before, and certainly ever since.

This means in turn that by referring to and drawing upon the medieval heritage contemporary fantasy has been coming into constant and intimate contact with the medieval genres which provided what has become its stock imagery. It seems warranted to make the generalisation that the genres in question would be mostly those which originally operated in the broadly conceived context of myth. This would mean the dream allegory, the fable, the bestiary, the ballad and the folk tale and legend, the romance and the Breton lay, along with *chansons de geste* and the earlier tradition of heroic narrative poetry, as well as all the adjacent allegorical tradition.

What in fact happened in the process of the appropriation of the traditions of those genres for the purposes of the post-Tolkienian fantasy is that the wholesale adoption of their stock imagery meant now that it was not only the avowedly fantastic elements that were incorporated into the fabric of the newly emergent genre. Those elements of the original imagery which went beyond the contemporaneous sense-experience have become, by the twentieth century, distant enough from contemporary experience to share the appeal of the marvellous and, as such, to become inseparable from whatever in those original old texts exceeded the warrant of plausibility as testified to by the universal sensory capabilities of human perception. It thus turned out that the elements of the original genres of medieval literature, once understood to be realistic have achieved with time the same aura and appeal of cultural continuity and tradition which once made anachronistic poetic diction such a valuable artistic tool for primary as well as secondary epic poetry.

In consequence, all these elements of imagery acquire a newly defined poetic status, but what they potentially convey is of course essentially the same as in the original texts, i.e. the socio-cultural conditions of the life of the community which produced the original texts and the ethos and values which that community embraced and aspired to embody.

Thus, in the briefest possible outline, one may seek to define the nature of the relationship between the genre of modern fantasy and its medieval heritage. Of the many fascinating vistas which open up for the literary scholar who sets out to pursue the particular themes

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and issues some are deftly tackled by the individual authors of this collection. While it will certainly not exhaust the wealth of interpretative possibilities which the intriguing subject entails, it is nevertheless to be hoped that it offers a fresh collective insight into the perennial discussion about the ways in which literary culture constantly interacts with, and is sometimes so beautifully illuminated by, the legacy of its past.



## George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the Narrative Conventions of the Interlaced Romance

The aim of the argument to be unveiled in the following pages is to look at George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* in the context of the narrative conventions of the medieval romance.

The two principal medieval narrative structures which we shall trace in the context of *A Song of Ice and Fire* are interlacement and the diptych, or bipartite, division. We shall argue that by reference to a complex network of correspondences built by George R.R. Martin upon the foundations of these two narrative principles it is possible to develop a comprehensive understanding of some of the conceptual cornerstones and the principal meaning of Martin's text. It seems accordingly that whenever we encounter in the course of the narrative other literary conventions and genres (be it the medieval ones, like the tragedy or modern, like documentary realism) they will be found to be used in the context of these two dominant narrative techniques.<sup>1</sup>

Both interlacement and the diptych division have long been recognised as results of the specific character of medieval aesthetic principles and contemporaneous literary taste. This has been because both reflect the uniqueness of medieval literature as they diverge sharply from the literary tradition of Antiquity, blatantly

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<sup>1</sup> The relation of the romance to the "fairy-story" tradition is developed in Tolkien's discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*Monsters and Critics*) 72-108;



contradicting the principles of ancient Greek and Roman authorities. Likewise, both were emphatically rejected at the advent of the Renaissance and were never extensively used as principles defining narrative action between Thomas Malory and George R. R. Martin.<sup>2</sup>

Interlacement and the diptych structure were both developed out of the aesthetic cast of mind which challenged Aristotle's *Poetics* in some crucial points. First of all, it allowed for multiple plots of equivalent weight. Second, it discarded the concept of the plot being an ordered linear sequence of events connected by the strict and immediate necessity of their internal logic. Consequently, Aristotle's conceptual arrangement of beginning, middle and end is rendered invalid. Furthermore, medieval narrative philosophy of character creation would depart far from the Aristotelian model of appropriateness and proportion.<sup>3</sup>

Some of these differences have their roots in the distinct origins of medieval civilisation; some crucial aspects are here the consequence of the Christian outlook. In both the case of interlacement and diptych the essentially dynamic philosophy of narrative progress and dramatic culmination gives way to a tendency to view the literary work as a more statically arranged organic unity in which the interrelation of the constituent strands of the narrative is based on the idea of balance, not progression.<sup>4</sup> As the idea of an atemporal Divine Providence is the constant counterpoint to any medieval notion of the progression of human existence and consequently of a literary character's actions, both literary techniques help here to formulate and convey this essential existential dichotomy and consequently convey an accurate context for the ultimate conceptual message of a given text. In more contemporaneous terms, they are the means which help to account for the crucial balance between the *matière*, the received vehicle storyline, and the *sens*, or the underlying ideological context.<sup>5</sup> The diptych and interlacement here specifically constitute the principles according to which the *conjointure* – or linking of the

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<sup>2</sup> Based on Ryding 16-17; 24. For more on forms of continuation of the romance conventions in the Renaissance romance epic see Burrow 1-10;

<sup>3</sup> See Vinaver 68-98; Ryding 40.

<sup>4</sup> See Ryding 130.

<sup>5</sup> Compare Vinaver 23, 34-37, 51; Ryding 130.

events of particular *conte* so as to bring out this essential meaning – is brought about.

Of the two concepts the diptych predates the romance literature of the High Middle Ages with which interlacement is essentially associated. But it is the interlaced romance which both rose out of the philosophy of the diptych and in turn stimulated the growth in the sophisticated use of bipartite structures both within the romance and other genres, only partly, or sometimes not at all, connected to the general domain of heroic verse, such as the hagiographic tale or the dream allegory. As William W. Ryding puts it: “it appears to have been a standard structural device whose esthetic propriety was in some sense taken for granted” (116).

In fact, when approaching Old English literature, we find the bipartite structure to be the organising principle behind the narrative structure of *Beowulf* where the first part of the poem depicting the ascending hero overcoming the mighty ogre is designed to provide the juxtaposition to the doomed struggle of the aging king against the dragon.<sup>6</sup> The underlying conceptual outlook whereby two contrastive halves of a narrative contribute equally to the accumulative sense of grandeur without a catastrophic culminating point is here essentially the same as in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, where the more overly spiritual adventures of Perceval on his quest for the Holy Grail are juxtaposed with the latter part where Gawain undergoes a series of more worldly trials belonging to the realm of the *amour courtois*.<sup>7</sup>

If one now chooses to conduct both contrastive parts of a bipartite scheme simultaneously within a given work, one arrives at the simplest form of interlacement, which has proved to be the ideal form of conducting quest narratives so that they conform to the medieval conceptual framework which potentially places any human endeavour vis à vis the notion of Providence, not as much out of a conscious need for overt piety but more out of the innate mental habit of calculating the ultimate sense of any earthly activity with reference to

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<sup>6</sup> See Tolkien's classic analysis in *Monsters and Critics* 28-29.

<sup>7</sup> For more context see Vinaver's appraisal of the technique in Vinaver (42-45) against Loomis' earlier criticism (Loomis 59-66). Other important studies in this context are those of Dorfman 43-75 and Fisher 58-64.

such an obvious and self-evident circumstance as God's design for the life of every individual human being and mankind as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

When the interweaving of many individual strands of the narrative occurs within a given work a potentially very complex and intricate web of reciprocal relationships between particular events, characters or motifs may be created (like in the case of the French Vulgate Cycle's Arthurian romances). In such a case the principle of bipartite division may bifurcate throughout the work as binary oppositions give rise to multifarious forms of analogy which will multiply between various narrative lines as each one develops in order to contribute, by means of the standard medieval technique of *amplificatio*,<sup>9</sup> to the overall grandeur of the work's theme.

Consequently, instead of the Aristotelian principles of storytelling, the narrative is here structured around what Eugène Vinaver called "seemingly the impossible combination of *acentricity* and *cohesion*" which gives rise to the "excess of constructive subtlety" whereby "the impact of [...] two parallel situations upon the reader's mind is such that the whole sequence of events acquires a new *kind* of coherence" (77). As William W. Ryding continues: "The structure of a narrative work may, within this view, be seen as depending on a pervasive system of correspondences between sets of episodes" (33) consisting in all forms of contrast as well as straightforward analogy.<sup>10</sup>

Proceeding on finally to the analysis of George R.R. Martin's text we shall first try to define its general outline. We shall begin with a brief discussion of the textual organisation of each successive volume and then proceed to determine those diptych structures which extend over the whole text providing the underlying backbone of the work's construction.

Let us thus begin with the question of the prologues. These were always an important showcase for the artistic competence of the *trouvere* and an important factor in establishing the right context for the experience of the literary piece by his audience.

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<sup>8</sup> Based on Ryding 138-151. In the context of George R. R. Martin see Sigrist 223-234.

<sup>9</sup> For definitions see Vinaver 74-75 and Ryding 62-69, 130.

<sup>10</sup> See also Vinaver 99-122.

There were two basic types of literary prologues available to the medieval author: the *prologus ante rem*, which facilitated initial orientation in the contents of the following text, and the *prologus praeter rem*, which relates to issues beyond the immediate subject of the work and provides a counterpoint context for the questions and ideas raised by the text it opens.<sup>11</sup>

It seems evident that the prologues which open the consecutive parts of *A Song of Ice and Fire* would be classified within the latter category. The prologues do not directly introduce the plots of the respective sections of the narrative but envelop it in a counterbalance context which effectually distances the audience from the key events of the plot and at the very same time provides a crucial clue to the interpretation of some important events within it. Their role consists in establishing a sort of – to transform Genette's terminology – extra-diegetic competence for the audience, giving it a form of prescience which provides the kind of generalised context that would have been automatically evoked in the romance by the constant background presence of Divine Providence.

Thus, to be more specific, when, at the opening of *A Game of Thrones*, we witness the sorry end of a Night's Watch patrol led by Ser Waymar Royce, we are not directly introduced to the main theme of the first volume of *A Song of Ice and Fire* on the level of the plot, but to a context which puts the audience at a distance from the dramatic tension building up in the process of the unveiling events.

On the most transparent level we are provided here with a perspective which counterbalances the events of the plot against the context of a different kind of threat looming over the unexpected Westeros.

At the same time we are made to see the tragic end of a commander who stubbornly refuses to listen and the dissipation of those he leads. Thus when shortly thereafter we observe Eddar Stark executing the half-crazed Gared for deserting from the Watch we are given a context which reinforces those personality traits in the characterisation of the Lord of Winterfell which will in time determine his subsequent fate.

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<sup>11</sup> Based on Davenport 37.

Thus, as Lord Stark pursues the course of law and justice, his disinterest and inability to find out the reasons for the prisoner's desertion indicate the particular flaw of character which will in due course prove fatal. Consequently, when Lord Eddard dismisses Arya's report of the mysterious conversation to which she was inadvertently witness in the recesses of the Red Keep, as a product of a child's imagination, when he fails to take notice of Littlefinger's casual comment, uttered during the tournament in honour of the new Hand, that Tyrion Lannister never bets against his family (which constitutes a proof that he deliberately sought to mislead Catelyn Stark about the origin of the Valerian dagger), and, finally, when he fails to understand Cersei's intention behind the declaration "in the game of thrones you win or you die", we are each time reminded of the existential warning of the prologue, but also we see the tragedy of Eddard Stark not solely as a unique, individual story, but also as a natural consequence of the inescapable processes of life.

Furthermore, we may see the same pattern repeated in the fate of figures as potentially different as King Robert or Viserys, whose stories, for all the different context, are closely parallel as variants of the same tragic scenario. Hence the relation of the prologue to the main body of the text consists in the prologue providing a simple variant of the dominant pattern of the storyline – a kind of common denominator to be realised in different versions throughout the first volume. Furthermore, it indicates the defining importance of the genre of tragedy (in the medieval sense of the term) for this initial section of the story.

Consequently, the audience achieves a perspective equivalent to the sense of providential grandeur which is part of the medieval heritage of the genre of romance and the practice can also be compared to the various narrative strategies used to convey the epic anticipation in other forms of heroic literature.

When we take a look at the other prologues opening the successive volumes we may observe the same pattern of reference. Thus Maester Cressen's unsuccessful attempt at assassinating Melisandre is important in a number of ways. Most obviously, it again provides the audience with clues explaining future developments in the plot as it switches the narrative emphasis from tragedy to intrigue. Thus when we witness Ser Dontos presenting Sansa with a hair net

embossed with "black amethyst from Asshai" saying: "it's magic, [...] It's justice you hold. It's vengeance for your father" (*A Clash of Kings*, 669), we rely on the knowledge of the prologue to identify the amethyst as poison, although we are bound here to the perspective of Sansa, who does not realise this fact.

Here the prologue introduces and connects some themes which go beyond *A Clash of Kings* and it again functions on many levels of reference at once. It is not only the common denominator which connects the attempted poisoning of Daenerys by the wine seller Vaes Dothrak with Tyrion's poisoning of Cersei during his tenure as King's Hand in King's Landing and the later poisoning of King Joffrey, but it also foreshadows the Red Wedding. Perhaps more importantly, the conflict between the red priestess and the aged maester serves as a narrative parallel to the relationship between Cersei and, first, Lord Eddard and subsequently Tyrion, but also between Daenerys and Ser Jorah Mormont. The pattern may be also applied in an inverted variant to the relationship between Joffrey and Sansa and also in some aspects to that of Catelyn and Robb, but perhaps most revealingly to the relationship between Brienne and Jaime.

We might thus see the prologue as introducing the pattern of a struggle of wills and wits, where the interplay of temperament, will power, and sometimes sexuality, originally framed within the context of gender, is gradually channeled into a more massive conflict of ethics which condition and define the protagonists' respective stances.

In *A Storm of Swords* we are made to follow the plot of some of the Night's Watch recruits against the commander Mormont only to see it thwarted at the last minute by the assault of the wights and the Others, and the ensuing carnage. The motif of a powerful twist of fortune bringing about a destruction of plans laid out for the future and the motif of betrayal may easily be connected not only to King Robb's marriage and the Red Wedding, but also to Arya's desperate wanderings, the scheming concerning Sansa's marriage, Daenerys' rejection of Mormont as well as her political dilemmas in Quarth and Astapor, Tyrion's trial and his revenge on his father, and, very emphatically, Jon's spell with the wildlings.

*A Feast for Crows* opens with an account of the murder of a Citadel acolyte called Pate by a Faceless Man in Old Town. While in this

case the full significance of the episode still remains unrevealed, it is evident that it is again designed to provide the crucial information which is beyond the grasp of a focalising character – we are informed here that the acolyte revealing himself to Sam Tarly as Pate at the closure of the volume is in fact someone who infiltrated the Citadel from the outside and would presumably be the Faceless Man himself.

Beyond the volume, we are supposed to link the episode to Arya's first assassination assignment during her training as apprentice to the Faceless Men in Braavos, which is also conducted by means of a poisoned coin. Here again the prologue helps to fully explain the significance of later events.

On the level of reinforcing an underlying motif it seems that the fourth prologue is designed to underscore the question of the loss of identity. This motif appears to gather in significance and momentum throughout the two last volumes providing the common ground not only for the story of Arya, but also of Theon, Tyrion, Sansa, Jaime, Cersei and Ser Jorah, as all of these characters experience upheavals of fortune which have the power to reshape the core of their identity (which is, of course, reflected even in the titles of the chapters which designate them as focalisers).

The account of the death of Varamyr the warg, which opens *A Dance with Dragons*, likewise functions on a number of levels. It evidently continues to highlight the question of forging individual identity, which, as we have already indicated, constitutes the key motif in the fifth volume of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Its parallel aim is equally crucial, for it provides an extradiagetic commentary on both the struggles of Daenerys to control the dragons and the pathetic failure of Quentyn Martell in that respect. Once again the audience is provided in advance with the answer to the question which the characters are unable to solve. Thus, while neither Daenerys nor Prince Quentyn are in any way knowledgeable about the nature of the relationship between the human being and the dragon which must have once been the basis for controlling the beasts by the Targaryen kings, the audience is supposed to use the prologue to make the mental link and be positioned, as it were, a step in advance of the characters it follows in the course of the narrative.

It is also worth noticing that the two themes we have just described are united in the storyline concerning Bran Stark. It appears that the centrality of Bran's narrative strain is emphatically reinforced by being the meeting point of the various motifs indicated by the prologue to this particular part of the text.

Having thus briefly accounted for the role of the prologues, we shall proceed to trace the diptych structures which extend over the whole of the narrative as we have it so far, and which provide the context for other forms of analogy existing between the particular interlaced strains of the narrative. It seems that the overall structure of *A Song of Ice and Fire* rests on two basic pivotal *conjointures*, both of which contribute to extending a diptych-like frame over the multiple individual strains of the interlaced narrative structure.

The first of these is a standard bipartite division which separates the account of the feudal conflict which arose in Westeros in the wake of the death of King Robert Baratheon. The typical medieval arrangement of corresponding subject matter as far as literature in English is concerned was most usually expressed by means of two available narrative patterns. The first would be a contrastive diptych organisation of the narrative whereby the text pursued the "rise and fall" pattern comparable to medieval tragedy (an inversion of which was practised routinely in the hagiographic narratives). The most obvious examples of this form of bipartite division would be *Beowulf* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

The second possibility would be a sort of inversion of the first model where after the first part of a narrative describing a gradual disintegration of the feudal political order we witness a gradual process of rebirth and rejuvenation. We may observe this kind of pattern in the Middle English *Of Arthur and Merlin* in octosyllabic couplets and in the prose *Merlin*.

In the course of *A Song of Ice and Fire* neither of these two structures is adhered to in a straightforward manner. Instead we have a structure which balances two patterns of tragedy against each other. If we accept the event of the Red Wedding as the turning point on which the diptych structure revolves, we will be able to see a parallel process of political and moral tragedy as we trace the complete disintegration of two of the principal baronial houses which the providential pattern



of history pitted against each other. This choice of diptych structure stems from the fact that *A Song of Ice and Fire* is not centred around a single protagonist, as was the case in all of the texts we have just mentioned, but is instead united by something more akin to the idea of a providential quest as practised in the Holy Grail cycle. Here the individual interlaced narrative strains are in their sum an expression of the human effort in following the path laid out by Providence, shifting the heroic emphasis to the quest instead of any individual hero. What is new in Martin, if we view it against the medieval tradition, is that here we make use of the pattern of tragedy in the context of what is essentially a quest narrative.<sup>12</sup>

Let us trace this particular bipartite division in more detail. We have said that the first half of this diptych is concerned with the fall of the House of Stark, whereas the second follows the decline of the House of Lannister. The introduction of this scheme at the beginning of the first volume of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is in fact an exquisite example of balancing the pertinent literary tradition against individuality of approach done in a way which makes the new elements transform the traditional ones with all due reverence. In the proper heroic tradition we open here with the feast which bring together, for the first and only time, all the chief characters from both noble houses who will be involved henceforth in the individual interlaced quests.

Using a royal feast as the opening of this sort of narrative is, of course, a long and revered literary tradition which the interlaced romance had inherited with the legacy of the heroic narrative that preceded it in time and helped to shape it. We may indeed meet it at this narrative outset of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreall*, but also texts positioned lower in the medieval hierarchy of genre like *The Gest of Robin Hood*.

The purpose of this sort of opening is generally twofold. First, it provides an opportune and natural setting for the exposition of all the principal characters. In *A Song of Ice and Fire* the exposition is used to introduce the respective characters in a complex pattern of juxtaposition which will be exploited later on in the course of the

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the issue see Reichl 64 – 65.

text. Thus we have here a pairing of the principal figures of the Starks and the Lannisters against which we have the key correspondences highlighted (like, for instance, Joffrey and Sansa, and, crucially, Jaime and Tyrion making their entrance together). In a similar fashion the outdoor meeting of Jon and Tyrion has the obvious symbolic connotation which serves to stress the two characters' shared stigma of social exclusion.

However, the most important aspect in the exposition scene is that it is focalised through the character of Jon. Since the motif of exclusion is here already conveyed in a different way, at the level of the symbolic setting, we are entitled to expect that the choice of point of view serves a more profound function. In fact, what it does is to establish the role of the character of Jon Snow as the only one present at the feast at Winterfell who is placed outside the tragic diptych structure within which all the other characters will henceforth function and within which their significance will be contained. This is despite the fact that Jon's storyline emerges structurally from the overall interlaced structure set in motion by the feast-type exposition.

The second function of the feast exposition is that it is used for launching the plot of the narrative on a suitably heroic level. This is usually realised by means of the use of the narrative motif which W.T.H. Jackson once termed *heroic intrusion*. This traditionally refers to a situation where a royal feast held in the atmosphere of peace and prosperity is disturbed by the appearance of a new character who, despite his noble status, has hitherto functioned outside the status quo which the feast embodies and his introduction constitutes a challenge to the royal authority.<sup>13</sup> Here the Middle English romance challengers like the Green Knight or the ambassadors of Emperor Lucius have their counterparts in the young Beowulf, but also in Aeneas and Ulysses, as the tradition reaches back well into the heroic texts of classical Antiquity.<sup>14</sup> It is also made use of extensively in the course of *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *A Song of Ice and Fire* what we have is a standard royal-feast kind of opening, but we have an inversion of heroic intrusion. Here,

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<sup>13</sup> See W. T. H. Jackson 5-9, 21, 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> See also Miller 179-180.

instead of the monarch presiding over a noble gathering which exudes an aura of opulence but also the sense of complacency of a long and successful reign, we have the royal vassal Eddar Stark, playing a disinclined host to his liege and friend – Robert Baratheon – a king whose reign has been marked by a continuous failure of leadership and who is now about to drag the House of Stark onto a path of feudal warfare resulting in its almost total annihilation. Thus, instead of a young challenger appearing in a seeming response to a call for “marvels” expressed by a powerful monarch, we have a vassal host drawn into death and destruction by the intrusion upon his hospitality by his royal overlord, who is defined now first and foremost by his premature physical decline, bad judgement and political (and fiscal) irresponsibility.

If we were now asked about the reason for the inversion of the motif of heroic intrusion we may say that its apparent purpose is to indicate that neither Eddar Stark nor Robert Baratheon are meant to bear the weight of the heroic dimension of the story, or, to paraphrase words of the apparition of Rhaegar Targaryen, the Song of Ice and Fire is not theirs.

Consequently right up to the Red Wedding we are witness to a gradual process of destruction of the House of Stark: Eddar Stark is executed for treason, Catelyn finally breaks under the ever increasing emotional strain, surrendering finally to madness and death (and an unnatural afterlife of blind hatred), Robb ends up murdered in the wake of an intrigue caused at least in part by his grave and blatant violation of the principles of feudal rule, Sansa is confined to the Red Keep, mistreated and reduced to the role of a plaything in the feudal intrigues, Arya, after a series of harrowing experiences while trying to return home, finally faces the hopeless prospect of there being no place of refuge existing for her, while Bran and Rickon face the uncertain future of nameless exiles.

We may thus observe here a pattern which functions in the process of narration above the individual interlaced plot-lines in all their luxuriant variety of both arresting narrative twists and the multiplicity of genres represented.

At this narrative point, however, which constitutes the lowest ebb of fortune for the Starks, the second part of the diptych begins

to gradually work its way bringing about a parallel set of tragedies upon the House of Lannister. We should note here how close the parallelism in fact goes. We similarly witness the death of the head of the family as Lord Tywin dies at the hands of his son. Thus both nobles are killed in the wake of a vital truth being revealed. Thus the discovery of the true identity of Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella effectually results in Lord Eddar's tragic end, so the discovery of the true identity of Tysha is the final straw in Tyrion's mental disintegration. We should connect in this context Jaime's passing this secret to Tyrion with Sansa's unwittingly bringing about her father's death by revealing his plans to Cersei.

However dissimilar the circumstances of the barons' respective demise are, for one is in the extreme form public, while the other ultimately private, almost intimate, we should not fail to spot the underlying similarities between them which impose themselves forcefully at the level of the narrative structure. In fact, if we consider the patterns of moral behaviour, we may notice that the widely different stances taken by the two characters somewhat paradoxically connect them within the context of the bipartite arrangement, for Eddar and Tywin are here placed in opposition marking the two extreme attitudes, from the obsessively strict adherence to the letter of the law and custom represented by the northern lord, to the daring disregard for some of the most sacred social norms and conventions, enshrined in the laws regarding marriage and hospitality, displayed by the southern noble. From this perspective both heads of houses may be, in a sense, viewed as overreachers.

In a corresponding fashion one may bring together the characters of Cersei and Catelyn. Both eventually lose their first born sons at a wedding ceremony and have their firstborn daughters kept as hostages [Sansa in King's Landing and Myrcella in Dorne]. Both lose their other children in a roughly corresponding fashion, as Bran's conscious decision to follow his mission to find the greenseer beyond the Wall is an assertion of independence similar to Tommen's persistent loyalty to his royal wife, Margery Tyrell. As the motherly instinct was the defining characteristic of both of the Queen Mothers, their respective tragedies are in this context similar enough to be seen as parallels strengthening the bipartite division of the entire text.