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Mary Kate Hurley

“Scars of History”: *Game of Thrones* and American Origin Stories

“In some of my stories there’s this sense of a lost golden age, where there were wonders and marvels undreamed of.”¹

“*Lord of the Rings* had a very medieval philosophy: that if the king was a good man, the land would prosper. We look at real history and it’s not that simple. Tolkien can say that Aragorn became king and reigned for a hundred years, and he was wise and good. But Tolkien doesn’t ask the question: What was Aragorn’s tax policy? Did he maintain a standing army? What did he do in times of flood and famine? And what about all these orcs? By the end of the war, Sauron is gone but all of the orcs aren’t gone – they’re in the mountains. Did Aragorn pursue a policy of systematic genocide and kill them? Even the little baby orcs, in their little orc cradles?”²

Few works of medievalism have been as successful with a general audience as HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, a television show based on George R.R. Martin’s book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*.³ Time and again, Martin’s fiction is understood – and I would argue is *meant* to be understood – as being based on a medieval past. More specifically, Martin himself has suggested that we can understand the turbulent years of the Wars of the Roses as the inspiration behind his work.⁴ One need only look as far as the most recent round of headlines regarding the show to

1 Mikal Gilmore, “George R.R. Martin: *The Rolling Stone* Interview,” *The Rolling Stone*, April 23, 2014, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-20140423>.

2 Ibid.

3 Throughout this essay, I will refer to the novels as *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the television show as *Game of Thrones*.

4 Martin can be rather vague on this point, but he notes the piecemeal provenance of much of his work: “I’m proud of my work, but I don’t know if I’d ever claim it’s enormously original. You look at Shakespeare, who borrowed all of his plots. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, I take stuff from the Wars of the Roses and other fantasy things, and all these things work around in my head and somehow they jell into what I hope is uniquely my own” (Gilmore, see note 1). Interestingly, Martin seems to mingle fantastic and historical materials in this response, as he does elsewhere in his work. Later in the same interview, he avers that at one point he did consider writing historical fiction about this period in English history.

note that the dominant interpretation of its temporal disposition relies quite heavily on the Middle Ages as a cipher denoting “what modernity is not.”⁵

Both Martin’s novels and HBO’s rendition of them have been described as “medieval fantasy epic.”⁶ That term should not be accepted without inquiry: each component of it designates a specific and distinct literary or historical object. Literally, “medieval” and “fantasy” are mutually exclusive – one describes an historical period while the other is by definition fictional. Epic is here taken in its colloquial American context, simply meaning “long” rather than referring to the generic conventions of Homeric or even Anglo-Saxon epic poetry. Whatever genre these books might be, they are *not* medieval epics. By blurring these distinctions, however, the description is paradoxically quite accurate in that it mimics the kind of elision of the difference between a historical past and a historically-inspired narrative that Martin uses as a framing device in the novels.

In this essay, I suggest that one way to understand Martin’s fiction – and contemporary affective responses to it – is by examining its function through its effect as a fictional temporal archive⁷ which creates an alternative medieval “past” that is ultimately less complicated and nuanced than its historical referent. While *A Song of Ice and Fire* can be interpreted in this vein with reference to its readers, temporal archives also operate within Martin’s fictional universe to frame characters’ relationships to the past. This device is particularly evident in the literary motif of scars, both as literal and figurative phenomena.

In order to explain how scars function as temporal archives – “unstable amalgam[s] of unexhausted past and unaccomplished futures”⁸ – I will begin by considering how their essential nature indicates the heterogeneity of time in narratives. Scars necessarily invoke the past in which they were formed, serving as nostalgic reference points that inhere in the physical bodies of their characters. This concept of the scar as a form of temporal archive is particularly useful for considering Tyrion Lannister’s literal and metaphorical scars. For Tyrion, the scar’s potential to deform is crucial: his physical scarring links his present to his past even as it renders him (at times) unrecognizable.

While scars function this way within the narrative, the scar as a temporal archive also serves as a valuable heuristic for understanding the popular response to Martin’s work. Positioning the scar as a remnant of the past that

5 See below, notes 18–20.

6 See, for example: Bill Carter, “‘Game of Thrones,’ not ‘Mad Men,’ had the Bigger Sunday Night,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2013, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/business/media/game-of-thrones-not-mad-men-had-the-bigger-sunday-night.html>.

7 I borrow this terminology from Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

8 Strohm, *ibid.*, 80.

indicates an originary moment of violence, I will return to the notion of the temporal archive as it pertains to the American relationship to the medieval past that *A Song of Ice and Fire* may indicate. I will speculatively suggest that part of the series' popularity results from its representation of the medieval past as something that is at once accessibly familiar and fantastically remote. In the same manner that a scar simultaneously indicates a heightened moment in the past and the present that has safely transcended it, Martin's story engages his audience's desire to connect to an exotic past that it can selectively distance itself from. The key distinction is that, unlike a physical scar which only exists because of an actual historical moment, Martin's *fictional* temporal archive relies on a confusion between history and fantasy. *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* are successful because they offer an alternative vision of the past: one that is able to be endured, and even enjoyed, because it is born from this indeterminate zone between history and fantasy.

Scars of History: Time, Nostalgia, and the Wounds of the Past

Temporal archives and their narrative effects perform crucial tasks in relation to understanding the function of time in stories. Paul Strohm derives the idea of the temporal archive from Derrida's discussion of *mal d'archive*, the "compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement."⁹ Strohm, however, distances himself from the negative and destructive power of the archive in order to highlight its utopian possibilities – its ability to function as a "repository of meanings that await discovery."¹⁰ This ability to archive time results in the concomitant ability of an archive or text to create its own theory of time, or temporality. Strohm emphasizes that by existing as an archive of different times, a text demonstrates the heterogeneity of time in narrative. In other words, the "now" of a text is rarely (if ever) singular and "no text fails to bear within itself a range of alien temporalities, imported into its bounds as unavoidable part and parcel of the words and images of which it is made. No text, that is, can be temporally self-consistent, for the very reason that it does not own its words and cannot specify their prehistories."¹¹ Moreover, "each text *harbors* different notions of time"¹² – that is, time inhabits texts in complex ways.

9 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 91.

10 Strohm, *Theory and Premodern Text*, 80. Italics in original.

11 Ibid., 80–81.

12 Ibid., 81.

In fact, one might well say that each text harbors different notions of *times*. Each text becomes a repository for not only the present of its action but the present of its reading, the present of the events it narrates, and the present of its own composition. This heterogeneity of times becomes particularly meaningful when the text in question is a form of medievalism because of the nostalgic impulse inherent in such works. The “capacious now” of the text that Carolyn Dinshaw identifies – a kind of temporal heterogeneity that allows the past and the present to become coeval¹³ – also renders the Middle Ages presented in such texts paradoxically remote yet intensely engaging.

Such a sense of time risks encouraging a problematic nostalgia, one that, as Renée Trilling has observed, presents serious ramifications when turning to works of medievalism and the type of periodization that inevitably arises in these pieces. The nostalgic impulse of medievalism “pushes toward an absolute separation of the Middle Ages as not only past but also the realm of fantasy, where [. . .] self-flagellating monks [exist] comfortably alongside wizards and dragons.”¹⁴ As such, it also drives a lopsided view of the medieval period as one that is denied historical reality in favor of the fetishization of the Middle Ages as somehow more “alive” (or magical) than the present. The nostalgia of medievalist fantasy “provides the narrative – an endless narrative – to account for an endemic human longing for an always-already lost object which persists under different forms in different historical moments.”¹⁵ If the past – the medieval past – was not understood to be both fundamentally distinct from yet originary of its modern successors, there would be no impulse to long for it.

Scars can function as temporal archives and imply a kind of longing for the past.¹⁶ Take, for example, the paradigmatic scars of the Saint Crispin’s Day speech in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. Here, shared violence and anticipation of its recollection and commemoration give birth to a kind of advance nostalgia for the survivors of the battle. In exhorting his soldiers to bravery, Henry creates a prospective temporal archive in the form of the scars that he knows the battle’s survivors will have when they arrive home:

13 See Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). For her ideas about coevalness, Dinshaw draws on, among others, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

14 Renée Trilling, “Medievalism and its discontents,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2 (2011), 220 (doi: 10.1057/pmed.2011.7).

15 Helen Dell, “Nostalgia and Medievalism: Conversations, contradictions, impasses,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2 (2011), 121 (doi:10.1057/pmed.2011.6).

16 Another such example is found in the chapter on “Odysseus’ Scar,” in Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*. I wish to thank Martin B. Schichtman for pointing me to this example of scars in literary criticism, and for first suggesting that I pursue this essay.

He that outlives this day and comes safe home,
 Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named,
 And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
 He that shall see this day and live t'old age
 Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors,
 And say, 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian.'
 Then he will strip his sleeve and show his scars,
 And say, 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'
 Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
 But he'll remember, with advantages
 What feats he did that day.¹⁷

In this speech, the past, present, and future of these men cohere in the bodily feature of their scars. Cyclical time – the repeated celebration of the saint's day each calendar year – syncs with the future memories of the men who fought in that battle. The scars themselves, although still in the future of these men, will function as links not only to their individual pasts and futures but to the group as a whole, as an impulse to both memory and nostalgic self-identification as part of a specific group.¹⁸ The Saint Crispin's day speech indicates how a national history can emerge from battles fought and remembered across time. In this speech, scars are crucial to the process because they reposition violence as valor. Their persistence beyond the moment they are created as wounds becomes a specific impulse to narrative.

Martin's work requires a similar sense of history in order to create fictional depth – so much so that it defines both the relationship of his audience to his characters *and* that of his characters to their own formative "medieval" pasts. Martin chooses the high medieval period as the past his characters inhabit, but also creates a fictional historical memory relative to his characters' present that they frequently look back to in order to analyze their world. By paying attention to the scars that occur in this "medieval fantasy epic," the use of the temporal archive as it inheres in scars and scarring becomes an intrinsic part of how we might assess and interpret this aspect of the text's theoretical framework. This theoretical framework indicates the desired identities and alternative histories that epic fantasy can make possible. It also allows us as readers and critics to better understand the complex implications of *A Song of Ice and Fire's* strangely historical medievalism.

17 William Shakespeare, *Henry V* IV.3, lines 45–53, ed. Stanley Wells, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

18 I wish to thank Marshelle Woodward, who suggested I look to *Henry V* as a source for understanding the temporal functions of scars. She also gave helpful comments on an early draft of this work.

Scars of Fantasy: Westerosi History and Time's Wounds

At this juncture in American culture, it is nearly impossible to be unaware of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which exists in parallel as novels as well as the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. The ongoing series chronicles the story of a vaguely western European realm called Westeros, with the main conflict initially occurring between the Starks of Winterfell in the North and the Lannisters of King's Landing in the South. HBO (which produces the television series), the media at large, and even Martin himself have referred to the series as being intentionally "medieval." Some of the terms that critics have used to describe it include: a "fantasy epic set in a quasi-medieval somewhereland,"¹⁹ "a series whose veneer of medieval drama conceals more fanciful and mystical layers,"²⁰ and a "dense medieval fantasy."²¹ The co-occurrence of "medieval" and "fantasy" indicates the ways in which, as Trilling observed, audiences are more than willing to understand the fantastic and the medieval as holding same semi-real status, fundamentally and ineluctably separate from the present.²²

As one might expect of an "imagined historical universe" set in a "quasi-medieval" past where violence runs rampant,²³ scars play an important role in the narrative. In fact, they appear over 200 times in the course of the five novels that Martin has thus far completed – frequently enough to indicate some of their effect on the novels' narrative temporality.²⁴ Perhaps the most clearly scarred character – both physically and emotionally – is Tyrion Lannister. Tyrion is the disfigured, dwarf son of the cruel but powerful Tywin. Because he was born a dwarf in a family that privileged both beauty and physical power, Tyrion is hated by his father as a blot on the golden Lannisters of Casterly Rock. Early in the

19 Ginia Bellafonte, "A Fantasy World of Strange Feuding Kingdoms," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2011, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/arts/television/game-of-thrones-begins-sunday-on-hbo-review.html>.

20 David Itzkoff, "A Heroic Fantasy for Skeptics," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2011, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/10/arts/television/game-of-thrones-on-hbo-from-george-r-r-martin-novels.html>.

21 Neil Genzlinger, "They Just Can't Wait to Be King: 'Game of Thrones' on HBO," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2011, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/30/arts/television/game-of-thrones-on-hbo.html>.

22 See Trilling, *ibid.*

23 Bellafonte, *ibid.*

24 In my consideration of the fictional narratives regarding Westeros, I am consciously avoiding treating HBO's *Game of Thrones* as interchangeable with or equivalent to *A Song of Ice and Fire*. My reasoning is that the series is not quite so easily attributable to a single authorial vision as the novels, and thus presents a problem for interpretation – the myriad changes that have been made to the series as it progresses make the two rather incommensurate at present. Moreover, the added violence of the HBO series creates another layer of temporality that both heightens the public sense of the narrative as "medieval" while also, importantly, making it less "authentically" so.

books, Jon Snow observes the differences between Tyrion Lannister and his siblings, Queen Cersei and Jaime: "[a]ll that the gods had given to Cersei and Jaime, they had denied Tyrion. He was a dwarf, half his brother's height, struggling to keep pace on stunted legs. His head was too large for his body, with a brute's squashed-in face beneath a swollen shelf of brow. One green eye and one black eye peered out from under a lank fall of hair so blond it seemed white."²⁵ Tyrion's malformed body wounds his family by drawing attention to both his father's inability to sire another, more normative child and the fact that his mother died during his birth.

Tyrion's stature becomes disabling because it limits his usefulness to his family's political ambitions. The deep political controversies of Westeros can be difficult to parse for the casual observer. One representative set of alliances and grudges – in which Tyrion and his stature play an important role – is between two rival houses, the Lannisters and the Martells.²⁶ Oberyn Martell holds a deep grudge against the Lannisters because he believes his sister's untimely death during a rebellion was plotted by them. This grudge seems natural to him because the Martells rejected a Lannister offer of marriage between her and Tyrion. He pursues the feud into the present of the *Song of Ice and Fire* narrative. Oberyn's partial understanding of the situation is conditioned by everything he knows about the past. Tyrion too observes the situation with reference to the past, albeit one framed more in terms of social norms than individual actions. He recognizes that the feuds pursued by the great houses are part and parcel of a

25 George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones (A Song of Ice and Fire Book 1)* (New York: Bantam, 2011), 43.

26 The rivalry between the Lannisters and the Martells becomes understandable only in the context of a longer span of Westerosi history. For approximately three hundred years, Westeros was ruled by the foreign Targaryen dynasty, who came to power through their ancestor Aegon the Conqueror. The Targaryens fell slightly before the action of the novels begins, overthrown by Robert Baratheon and his supporters in what became known as Robert's Rebellion. Before this rebellion took place, the seven kingdoms of Westeros were united, with seven powerful ruling houses leading smaller kingdoms that answered to the Targaryen overlords. In the years before the rebellion, the Martells and the Lannisters (two of the most powerful houses) sought a marriage alliance. Initially, the Martells wished to marry their eldest son, Oberyn, to Cersei Lannister, Tywin's eldest daughter. Convinced that his daughter would one day marry the Targaryen Prince Rhaegar (the future king of Westeros), Tywin refused. As a result, the Martells attempted to secure the alliance by instead offering a union between their daughter Elia and Jaime Lannister. Tywin refuses that arrangement too, offering them the "deformed" Tyrion for Elia instead. The Martells are insulted at the suggestion and hold a grudge against the Lannisters as a result. Elia goes on to make a better match with Prince Rhaegar – a match that will lead directly to her death. However, when Prince Rhaegar leaves King's Landing as a result of his adulterous relationship with another woman, Elia is left alone with her children and the mad King Aerys when the rebels take the stronghold. The king is killed by Jaime Lannister, and Lannister leigeman Ser Gregor Clegane kills Elia's children before raping and killing her as well.

patrilineal society bent on power and aggression: “*It all goes back and back, Tyrion thought, to our mothers and fathers and theirs before them. We are puppets dancing on the strings of those who came before us, and one day our own children will take up our strings and dance on in our steads.*”²⁷

Tyrion’s interpretation of this situation – which refers to the “puppet strings” of the past – positions the present political situation as a kind of temporally-extended marionette, controlled by the remains of the past. This status results directly from a political interpretation of emotional scars: Obery’s mourning for his sister’s death takes the form of continued violence against the Lannisters. Tyrion, by contrast – and perhaps because of his outcast state within his family – can recognize the situation for what it is. The endless struggle for power and revenge is the logical result of the grudges and horror of the past which won’t be forgiven and cannot be forgotten. Those in the present are held hostage by their memory and interpretation of previous events. In their response to this partial knowledge, they propel history forward.

In fact, the interrelation of past and present conditions Tyrion’s family life far more than political power (or anything else). Tyrion’s stature serves as a reminder not only of his difference from his siblings and his father’s resentment of that difference, but also of his birth. Tyrion’s mother died in childbirth – and Tywin never forgives his son for this loss. Nowhere is his father’s hatred more clear than when Tyrion asks to inherit the Lannister family seat, Casterly Rock. He is the logical choice, because his siblings cannot inherit – Cersei on account of her sex and Jaime because of his position in the Kingsguard. However, Tywin’s explosive reaction makes it clear how deeply his wife’s death scarred him:

You, who killed your mother to come into the world? You are an ill-made, devious, disobedient, spiteful little creature full of envy, lust, and low cunning. Men’s laws give you the right to bear my name and display my colors, since I cannot prove that you are not mine. To teach me humility, the gods have condemned me to watch you waddle about wearing that proud lion that was my father’s sigil and his father’s before him. But neither gods nor men shall ever compel me to let you turn Casterly Rock into your whorehouse.²⁸

Tywin’s response belies the fact that Tyrion was not ethically responsible for his mother’s death, even if his birth caused it. It also indicates the pull of the past on the present in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Tywin’s present shame about Tyrion’s stature and behavior are linked inextricably to his grief for his dead wife. Tywin’s remarks yoke Tyrion’s mother’s death (“You, who killed your mother to come into the world”) to both his stature (“you are [. . .] ill-made”) and his behavior,

27 George R.R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords (A Song of Ice and Fire, Book 3)* (New York: Bantam, 2003), 969.

28 *Ibid.*, 65.

which Tywin believes will diminish the respectability of the family seat at Casterly Rock. Tyrion's past, and his implication in his mother's death, leads Tywin to read his younger son's physical difference as a metaphor for his morality. Moreover, Tywin internalizes what others have said of Tyrion: that his deformities are the gods' way to "teach [Tywin] humility." Tywin sees Tyrion as a kind of monster – and, like all monsters, his difference becomes a sign that his father (and indeed the world) can read.²⁹

Despite his high lineage, Tyrion is an outsider in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, made to feel distant and despised by the father that many characters say he, of all the Lannister children, most resembles. His stature brings the past in to his present: the loss of Tywin's beloved wife is made legible in the persistent survival of the malformed child that killed her. Tyrion knows his place, however – he perceptively speaks of it to that other misfit of Westeros, Jon Snow, admonishing the bastard-born young man: "Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not."³⁰ When Jon asks how Tyrion – a legitimate heir – could understand the position of a fatherless bastard, Tyrion observes that "All dwarfs are bastards in their father's eyes."³¹ The metaphorical scars caused by Tyrion's mother's death and the difference he embodies mar his relationship with Tywin.

Tyrion's literal scarring occasions a break with both his father and his brother. It marks another disfiguring attribute for Tyrion: "The gash was long and crooked, starting a hair under his left eye and ending on the right side of his jaw. Three-quarters of his nose was gone, and a chunk of his lip. Someone had sewn the torn flesh together with catgut, and their clumsy stitches were still in place across the seam of raw, red, half-healed flesh."³² Tyrion earns this scar while making his father's victory over a potential usurper-king possible.³³ In return, Tywin demotes his son from his crucial role as the "Hand of the King," taking it for himself during – and after – Tyrion's recovery.

Tyrion's physical scarring completes his alienation from his family, but not without a final resurrection of an old emotional scar. Upon his return to court, Tyrion struggles to reinsert himself into the Lannister political machine with disastrous results. When he is condemned to death for the murder of his

29 This formulation is indebted to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," where he writes "A construct and a project, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant." Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

30 Martin, *Game of Thrones*, 47.

31 Ibid.

32 George R.R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings (A Song of Ice and Fire, Book 2)* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 939.

33 The potential usurper king, Stannis Baratheon, is the brother of the King Robert Baratheon, whose death early in the *Song of Ice and Fire* novels precipitates much of the action later.

nephew,³⁴ his brother Jaime releases him from prison – noting as he does so that he owed a debt to Tyrion for a wrong now long past. When pressed, Jaime confesses a lie that, in many ways, had shaped Tyrion’s life: his first love – Tysha, who Tyrion has long thought was a prostitute bought for him by his brother – was not a prostitute at all. She was truly in love with him,³⁵ but because Tywin disapproved of their relationship, he coerced Jaime into helping him end it. Tywin’s punishment of his son – and the woman he loved – is grotesquely violent: Tysha is raped by every guard in Casterly Rock while Tyrion is forced to watch.

When Jaime reveals this deception, it rips open an emotional scar that Tyrion had long tried to forget. That old wound – sutured over by time but never healed – breaks Tyrion out of his father’s control. Tyrion murders his father for his betrayal. Although not linked explicitly with his facial scars, I would suggest that the scar itself stands in for Tyrion’s long marginalization by his father, represented by the episode with Tysha. Scars are physical remnants of a foundational wounding, one that can only exist because of this originary violence. Tyrion’s scar, and the revelations that follow it, suture together the past and present in the same way that Oberyn Martell’s memory resurrects the loss of his sister as a motivating force in his present. Tyrion’s stature, his family’s grief, and the grief of his own emotional wounds all inhere in the temporal archive of the scar. By doing so, they condition the possible futures of the youngest Lannister in the still-unfolding world of Westeros.

Scars of Time: Martin’s “Medieval” World

As previously mentioned, the acceptance of *A Song of Ice and Fire* as a faux-medieval world is commonplace. This conception is made more prominent by both HBO’s version of the novels and the enthusiasm that the series has generated. What makes *A Song of Ice and Fire*’s Westeros a compelling world is not only the complexity of the political situations of the characters’ present but also the deep history that is inscribed in the landscape. The physical environment in *A Song of Ice and Fire* provides a living backdrop for the characters, but it also

34 The boy King Joffrey is poisoned by an unknown assailant, and Cersei imprisons Tyrion for the murder in part because she has always hated him, much like her father.

35 In fact, she was precisely “what she seemed to be. A crofter’s daughter, chance met on the road.” Jaime confesses that Tywin coerced him into lying to his brother, explaining that Tywin was convinced that “all she wanted was the gold, which made her no different from a whore, so . . . so it would not be a lie, not truly, and . . . he said you required a sharp lesson. That you would learn from it, and thank me later . . .” Tywin meant Jaime’s lie to coerce Tyrion into leaving Tysha of his own accord. See Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 1064–1065.

provides a temporal archive itself – one seen most prominently through human marks on the landscape.

For example, as one central character – Catelyn Stark – approaches the capital city of King’s Landing, her thoughts turn to the deep past of the Westerosi landscape and the history written in it:

Three hundred years ago . . . those heights had been covered with forest, and only a handful of fisherfolk had lived on the north shore of the Blackwater Rush where that deep, swift river flowed into the sea. Then Aegon the Conqueror had sailed from Dragonstone. It was here that his army had put ashore, and there on the highest hill that he built his first crude redoubt of wood and earth.³⁶

This “first crude redoubt” has of course expanded exponentially, as suggested by Catelyn’s further observation that “now the city covered the shore as far as [she] could see.”³⁷ However, her musing on the violence that marked the entrance of the Targaryens into Westerosi history implies a temporal archive readable in the landscape itself. King’s Landing – in the present of the novels – shares space with the past. Even its name preserves an historical act tied to the location. That memory conditions the future, as another Targaryen (Daenaerys), spurred on by memories of her ancestors, seeks to regain their former glory in Westeros.

What remains unknown, however, is the fate of the fisherfolk that Catelyn mentions. Aegon’s Conquest has dire consequences for the elite people of Westeros, but Catelyn’s omission of the “smallfolk” does not mean they were any less affected. Indeed, the fisherfolk may be rendered nearly illegible in Catelyn’s reading of the past, but one could assume that Aegon’s Conquest displaced them. Both forest and village have been usurped by political violence. Catelyn’s thoughts, then, point toward the temporal heterogeneity of the scar: its connection to both the (violent) past and the present. Despite being symbols of healing, scars are also memorials to old wounds – and a landscape can be scarred as easily as a body. Even the name “Aegon the Conqueror” marks the necessity of an originary wound that remains only in the form and name of King’s Landing. Aegon did not arrive a king: his conquests made him one.

In this sense, the books themselves might be seen as a kind of temporal archive, albeit one that relies on a fictional – or fictionalized – landscape.³⁸ And

36 Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 141.

37 Ibid.

38 My thoughts on such fictionalization are drawn, in part, from Geraldine Barnes’ essay on “Nostalgia, medievalism, and the Vínland voyages,” in the abstract of which she writes “Whereas American poets celebrated an ideal of Viking heroism and nostalgia for the moment of ‘discovery’ as the basis of a myth of national foundation, British fiction of the same period is infused with regret at the failure of a promising venture that speaks to anxieties about empire. For both American and British writers, the ‘medievalism of nostalgia’ is less for an imagined ideal of the medieval than for the potential of a medieval

yet, the repeated assertion that Martin's epic novels are somehow also *medieval* demonstrates what is arguably a peculiarly American disposition toward the use of the term. By viewing Martin's novels the way he does – as an amalgam of alternative histories and pasts – we can begin to tease out the metaphorical scar that they indicate is present in the American psyche. The popularity of *Game of Thrones* is part-and-parcel of a fictive American relationship to a medieval past. The impulse toward the creation of alternative histories, ways of being-in-the-world that do not necessarily map onto the linear narratives that link past and present begets a strange relationship between an American-produced book series and the fictionalized European past.

Martin's own assertions about fantasy as a genre begin to demonstrate the stakes of this impulse toward medieval-fantasy writing. Martin's meditation, included in the section of his website *On Writing*, begins with some commonplaces about fantasy literature and its place as work that is purely of the imagination: "The best fantasy is written in the language of dreams. It is alive as dreams are alive, more real than real ... for a moment at least ... that long magic moment before we wake."³⁹ The suggestion that fantasy is "more real than real" suggests that Martin's vision of this world as "real" harbors more than a passing relationship to medieval theological readings of the world as a fallen, pale reflection of God's eternal glory. It is also fundamentally, if paradoxically, nostalgic: an infinitely receding object of desire that can never be regained because it was never possessed in the first place.

Fantasy, Martin suggests, shows "us" as "we" really are – or were. And yet these first person plural pronouns do not actually indicate a real community. The purpose that fantasy actually serves is to show us how Martin thinks we should be, or how we should (or do) long to be:

Fantasy is silver and scarlet, indigo and azure, obsidian veined with gold and lapis lazuli. Reality is plywood and plastic, done up in mud brown and olive drab. Fantasy tastes of habaneros and honey, cinnamon and cloves, rare red meat and wines as sweet as summer. Reality is beans and tofu, and ashes at the end. Reality is the strip malls of Burbank, the smokestacks of Cleveland, a parking garage in Newark. Fantasy is the towers of Minas Tirith, the ancient stones of Gormenghast, the halls of Camelot. Fantasy flies on the wings of Icarus, reality on Southwest Airlines. Why do our dreams become so much smaller when they finally come true?

We read fantasy to find the colors again, I think. To taste strong spices and hear the songs the sirens sang. There is something old and true in fantasy that speaks to

venture to shape the history of the modern world." See Barnes, "Nostalgia, medievalism, and the Vinland voyages," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2 (2011) 141 (doi:10.1057/pmed.2011.2).

39 George R. R. Martin, "On Writing," <http://www.georgerrmartin.com/about-george/on-writing-essays/on-fantasy-by-george-r-r-martin/> accessed 4 October 2015.

something deep within us, to the child who dreamt that one day he would hunt the forests of the night, and feast beneath the hollow hills, and find a love to last forever somewhere south of Oz and north of Shangri-La.⁴⁰

The equivalencies – or oppositions – that Martin sets up here between reality and fantasy are telling. Fantasy is color and taste and architectural wonder, consisting of “strong spices” and “the songs the sirens sang.” The fetishization of fantasy bears some commonalities with the fetishization of the East in Orientalist reading practices – not least of all through those bold colors and strong spices. In the case of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, this conceptual violence is paired with a very real emphasis on physical violence and carnage, one that some medievalists have argued far outstrips the medieval past, despite its obvious brutality.⁴¹

Martin’s musings range from considering the purely fictional places of Minas Tirith and Oz to the shadowy, legendary worlds of Camelot and Icarus’ Cretan prison, both of which have analogues that we could position in the “real world.” That so many time periods and degrees of reality blur together is not surprising: one of the key traits of fantasy is that it allows us to imagine a time, or a world, where we lived not only differently but *more*.⁴² As with medievalisms of all stripes, that world can only ever really exist in the past because its existence in the present would render moot a work like Martin’s. As he puts it: “there is something old and true in fantasy that speaks to something deep within us.” The implication of this equivalence is clear: while in our lifetimes we might only ever see Burbank, Cleveland, Newark – places, importantly, where manufacturing still happens and things are *made* in the real world – fantasy allows us to dwell (imaginatively at least) in a world where there is *meaning*.⁴³ Fantasy admits no

40 Martin, *ibid*.

41 See, for example, Kathleen Kennedy’s discussion of the rape of Sansa Stark and the permissibility of its inclusion in the television show because of the “reality of the times.” Kathleen E. Kennedy, “What Sansa Stark’s Rape Tells Us About Our Culture,” *Vice*, May 22, 2015, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.vice.com/read/a-medievalist-responds-to-san-sas-rape-on-game-of-thrones-585>.

42 For a more thorough understanding of the relationship between fantasy and the “more real than real” (as Baudrillard would have it), see Helen C. Dell, “Yearning for the Sweet Beckoning Sound’: Musical Longings and the Unsayable in Medievalist Fantasy Fiction,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2 (2011), 172–3 (doi:10.1057/pmed.2011.3).

43 Martin is not alone in his identification of the “old and true” with a more vibrant way of living. Take, for example, Johan Huizinga’s opening meditations on *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, where he writes, “To the world when it was half a thousand years younger, the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us. The contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking. All experience had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life.” See Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London: Edward Arnold & Co, 1924), 1.

technological mediation or loss of authenticity through simulacra – the only simulacra we need is fantasy itself.

The equivalence of the “old” with the “true” allows fantasy to bypass historical truth in its imaginative mode. That we insist Martin’s world is somehow “medieval” begins to demonstrate how this supercession works. Martin has spoken repeatedly about his dissatisfaction with many writers of fantasy-fiction, declaring that they wrote about “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.”⁴⁴ This *use* of a period without clear understanding of it is Martin’s presumed area of intervention into modern fantasy. Rather than a “Ren Faire” Middle Ages, where everyone can be upper class and healthy, Martin’s work tries to bring the techniques of historical fiction to bear on fantasy, combining the “gritty realism of the best historical fiction” with “the imagination and the sense of wonder that you get in the best fantasy.”⁴⁵ Yet as with historical fiction, fantasy set in a “medieval” period can just as easily push readers, or students, into recreating the Middle Ages in the image of such texts.

The techniques of historical fiction – and even, one might say, of historical analysis – create the sense of the *old* in Martin’s “medieval fantasy epic,” but where can we find the *true*? Perhaps the most pronounced correlation between the ostensibly “real” world of medieval Europe and the fantasy world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is “the Wall,” a gigantic structure that lies at the far north of Westeros. The Wall is a structure made entirely of ice, 700 feet tall. It was built to protect the Southern lands of Westeros from the Wildlings and the Others, a kind of zombie reanimated through a vaguely described magic. The Wall is a remarkable device for protection: “Almost seven hundred feet high it stood, three times the height of the tallest tower in the stronghold it sheltered.”⁴⁶ Eight thousand years old, the wall stands with “spells woven into it . . . old ones, and strong.”⁴⁷ Located on the border of Westeros, it serves a protective and delimiting function – it separates the Wild Lands from civilization.

And yet, rather famously, the Wall was imaginatively created by Martin’s visit to the the late antique construction called Hadrian’s Wall, which was built to keep the Scots from invading British territory during the Roman period. Mar-

44 Sean Sampson, “Transcript: George R. R. Martin, Author of ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ Series: Interview on The Sound of Young America” September 19, 2011, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.maximumfun.org/sound-young-america/george-r-r-martin-author-song-ice-and-fire-series-interview-sound-young-america#transcript>.

45 Ibid.

46 Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 154.

47 Ibid.

tin's description of its genesis demonstrates the imaginative contours of his borrowing:

The Wall predates anything else. I can trace back the inspiration for that to 1981. I was in England visiting a friend, and as we approached the border of England and Scotland, we stopped to see Hadrian's Wall. I stood up there and I tried to imagine what it was like to be a Roman legionary, standing on this wall, looking at these distant hills. It was a very profound feeling. For the Romans at that time, this was the end of civilization; it was the end of the world. We know that there were Scots beyond the hills, but they didn't know that. It could have been any kind of monster. It was the sense of this barrier against dark forces – it planted something in me. But when you write fantasy, everything is bigger and more colorful, so I took the Wall and made it three times as long and 700 feet high, and made it out of ice.⁴⁸

Martin's reading of his Wall as a cipher for Hadrian's – albeit it one that is seven hundred feet higher made of a far less quotidian material – exceeds the similarity of their placement in the beleaguered north of an island-nation. It also partakes of some of the same assumptions that characterize Martin's designations of the "old" and the "true." Martin begins by situating the experience as imagining himself as a Roman in that world: "For the Romans at that time, this was the end of civilization; it was the end of the world. We know that there were Scots beyond the hills, but they didn't know that." In fact, of course, the Romans *did* know that there were Scots beyond the hills – they were precisely who the wall was supposed to keep out of the Roman territories.⁴⁹ Martin himself has elsewhere rephrased this point: "You were looking off the end of the world. Protecting the civilized world against whatever might emerge from those trees. Of course, what tended to emerge from those trees was Scots, and we couldn't use that."⁵⁰ Yet the relationship between these two versions of Martin's creative inspiration is revealing: the reality of Scots that threatened Roman hegemony stands in stark contrast to the imaginative questions about what the Romans might have

48 Gilmore, "George R.R. Martin: The *Rolling Stone* Interview."

49 His alternative formulation of the Wall's genesis occurs in his interview with *Sound of Young America*. He frames his creation of the Wall as part of the process of writing fantasy: "That's the general process for doing fantasy, is you have to root it in reality. Then you play with it a little; then you add the imaginative element, then you make it largely bigger. Like the Wall in my books, of course, was inspired by Hadrian's wall, which I visited on my first trip to the United Kingdom back in the early 80s. We climbed to the top of Hadrian's Wall and I looked north and tried to imagine what it was like to be a Roman soldier stationed there in the first century. At the end of the known world staring at these distant hills and wondering what lived there and what might come out of it. You were looking off the end of the world. Protecting the civilized world against whatever might emerge from those trees. Of course, what tended to emerge from those trees was Scots, and we couldn't use that. So I made the Wall considerably bigger and made it of ice, that's the process of fantasizing" (Sampson, *ibid.*).

50 Sampson, *ibid.*

thought was “out there.” The juxtaposition indicates a key moment of interpretation in Martin’s work.

Martin’s inconsistent account of his own knowledge of history in the midst of telling and retelling the narrative of his encounter with Hadrian’s wall suggests part of his larger agenda in using this particular historical referent. Martin begins with reality: the Scots lived beyond Hadrian’s Wall. However, he quickly dismisses that reality, noting that for his novels, he “couldn’t use that” – perhaps, ultimately, because it is too realistic, too consonant with his readers’ understanding of “everyday” geopolitics. In Martin’s interpretive agenda, however, that indigenous landscape that is not yet Roman becomes (in both Martin’s memory and reality) an uncivilized void. The historical Scots disappear to be resurrected as White Walkers and other creatures of magical darkness. The “real” inhabitants of the void seem ultimately secondary to Martin. In a fantasy world, the work of the wall is less important than its resonance, its ability to provoke that very sense of foreboding that Martin sensed – fictively or not – on the Yorkshire moors at Hadrian’s wall.

That aboriginal inhabitants of various locales are turned, legendarily, into monsters is well-attested, as is the impulse to conquest that fictionally renders them as such.⁵¹ Martin’s use of the White Walkers and the Wildlings who dwell north of the Wall is rather more complex. On the one hand, Martin’s vision of the lands beyond the wall are multifaceted – they force the reader to empathize with, even root for, the “free” Wildlings, if not for the White Walkers who threaten both Wildlings and the Westerosi. Yet, on the other hand, the resonances with Westerosi history are clear: historical change only comes with invasion, whether by Aegon the Conqueror, Daenaerys Targaryen, or the hordes of the frozen, re-animated dead. The lands beyond the wall, however inhabited, must also be put under threat, and thence must acquiesce to Westerosi demands. The White Walkers precipitate the crisis that forces “civilized” people to come together. They can only do so if the alternative is non-existence.⁵²

In Westeros, the land functions as a temporal archive – in the deep history of the land at King’s Landing or in the ancient Wall of Ice, woven with magics to ward off the darkness. Characters can read the past in the scars inflicted on the landscape: Catelyn sees Aegon the Conqueror, metaphorically, when she looks at King’s Landing, much as Martin himself looked out from Hadrian’s Wall and

51 See, for example, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

52 One such moment in the *Song of Ice and Fire* mythos is the defeat of the Night’s King, a legendary leader of the Night’s Watch – the group tasked with protecting Westeros from the White Walkers and the Wildlings – who had fallen in with the White Walkers himself, becoming a monster. In order to defeat him, Wildlings and the Night’s Watch had to work together. See Martin, *A Storm of Swords*.

could imagine the feelings of a Roman soldier standing in the same place two millennia before him. The landscape points to a past that the people looking at it share in. Yet one wonders what the fisherfolk or the Scots had seen. For them, these structures are temporal archives too, but of a different sort. The memory of violence inheres in this landscape and its scars, similarly to how Tyrion's scars – both literal and metaphorical – link him, irrevocably and legibly, to the past.

A Song of Ice and Fire succeeds as an exercise in world-building because it creates a compelling illusion: that of a fictional realm that has a realistic sense of historical depth. Martin's recourse to the medieval past as providing the initial impulse for the series is deeply intertwined with that illusion. By creating an alternative medieval world – one which is safely fantastic, replete with dragons and magic – he both distances and denies the reality of the actual past despite claiming a certain authority that is explicitly derived from it. The temporal archiving effect of the *Song of Ice and Fire* series ultimately recreates the Middle Ages, marking it not only as distant from modernity but also fundamentally cut off from it. In so doing, the medievalism of Martin's vision eclipses the historicity of the period he drew it from, fundamentally reshaping both the old and the true.

Scars of History: Toward the American/Medieval

One interpretation of the American relationship to the Middle Ages that resonates with the historical fantasy of George R.R. Martin can be found in an excursus appended to Ernst Robert Curtius' English translation of *European Literature and Latin Middle Ages*. In a lecture titled "The Medieval Bases of Western Thought," Curtius traces the genealogies of humanistic and philosophical thought in Europe and North America. Of the American relationship to the medieval European past, he observes that while "the American mind might go back to Puritanism or to William Penn [. . .] it lacked that which preceded them. It lacked the Middle Ages."⁵³ In a particularly fascinating simile, Curtius suggests that the relationship between the United States and the Middle Ages is like "a man who has never known his mother. The American conquest of the Middle Ages has something of that romantic glamour of that deep sentimental urge which we might expect of a man who would set out to find his lost mother."⁵⁴

Curtius' reading of the American fervor for the medieval suggests a kind of nostalgic desire for a familial relationship – a maternal one – that is always

53 E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 587.

54 Ibid.

already lost. His understanding of American temporal imperialism – its “conquest” of the Middle Ages as a useful interlocutor for American literature – raises an intriguing possibility. Martin’s unabashed plundering of a fictionalized European Middle Ages simultaneously participates in something very old and strangely new. By rewriting and refashioning Hadrian’s Wall into a seven-hundred-foot wall of legendary magic, or creating a version of the “medieval” world that is meant to be somehow more real than other fictional renderings of either the period or the fantasy that serves as a cipher for it, Martin belatedly performs the conquest that Curtius describes. The equivalence of the “old” and the “true” that Martin makes in his writing replaces the reality of the Middle Ages with a fantastic and utterly remote version of them.

When considering Martin’s own musings alongside Curtius’ familial imagery, an even more fantastic possibility emerges. Martin’s peculiarly American medievalism participates in what might well be described as a fantasy of sharing both temporality and geography with a continuous past. It recreates a medieval world: one that in the American imaginary could potentially supercede a more realistic rendering of history, of either the European Middle Ages or the indigenous North American cultures that existed in the same time period. Read in its correct historical milieu, for a European-descended American audience, *they* are the invaders to Native American populations. In a version of this story based on the historical past, the Europeans who conquered North America are the White Walkers, the Scots – the uncivilized force restrained by a mighty wall made of Atlantic water rather than Westerosi ice. Only with a fictional referent – a fantasy of medieval Europe – can this audience identify with the desirable side of this story. In order for the “old” to be “true,” it must be safely distant from its audience, but sufficiently familiar that the audience can see in it its own image.

Admittedly, this interpretation is more impressionistic than definitive. However, it inspires a fruitful mode of analysis for exploring the “American/Medieval” of this volume’s title. Much like the “medieval fantasy epic,” American/Medieval implies the coexistence of terms that cannot in a literal sense work together. Medieval does not solely designate a time period: it designates a time period tied to a geography. Nor does American solely designate a geography. Rather, it implies a culture that relates to the land but is not reducible to it. “Medieval America” does not make sense as a conceptual category describing “actual” history – not in the way that “Medieval Europe” does. Similarly, Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* purports to recreate a fantastic version of what is arguably intentionally presented as an essentially historical period. “Medieval fantasy epic” only makes sense as a genre because *A Song of Ice and Fire* creates it through its imaginative reworkings of putatively “real” history. In the same sense, what we call American/Medieval reifies its own existence: it becomes legible only through the imaginative acts that give it form. If scars are the legacy

of a single moment from the distant past, embodying a connection to that past in a form that belies how much has changed, the creation of these new genres might be understood as the reworking of a specific communal past into a fictive narrative of historical continuity.

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