Game of Tropes:

Subversion of Medieval Ideals in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

MA Thesis Literary Studies

Student name: Luuk Verweij

Student number: 1394223

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First Reader: Dr. M.H. Porck

Second Reader: Dr. K.A. Murchison

Leiden University, Department of English Literature and Culture

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INTRODUCTION

George R. R. Martin's fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* incorporates many elements that make the genre of fantasy so appealing, such as dragons, zombies, magic, wars, kings, and knights. Scholars have observed that Martin's world is influenced greatly by medieval history and literature. Carolyn Larrington, for instance, states that "*A Song of Ice and Fire* constructs its fantasy out of familiar building blocks […] chiselled out of the historical and imaginary medieval past" (1). Larrington points out that Martin draws on both early medieval and high medieval history, incorporating into his work warrior tribes like the Anglo-Saxons as well as important themes from a later medieval period, such as chivalry (2). From the twelfth century onwards, Larrington explains, chivalry became concerned with courtesy, good manners, and respect towards women (121). In spite of this medieval knightly ideal, many of Martin's princes and knights lack manners and treat women badly: Martin does not only incorporate these medieval "building blocks" into his own work, he also deviates from them.

Sansa Stark's story exemplifies this deviation: always dreaming about knights and princes, she is beside herself with excitement when she is betrothed to crown prince Joffrey. As the story unfolds, however, Joffrey turns out to be rather vile and sadistic. Eventually, Sansa is forced to accept that her romantic view of kingship and chivalry was far removed from reality. The different approach to chivalry that Martin offers is not the only way in which *A Song of Ice and Fire* contrasts with conventional medieval values. A number of scholars, such as Larrington and Buchanan, have commented on Martin's use of strong female characters. Daenerys Targaryen, Asha Greyjoy, and Brienne of Tarth are all examples of women not behaving according to the roles they would normally have in a medievalist society like Westeros. Crucially, by presenting the story in a pseudo-medieval world, but at the same time bringing down many of the medieval core values and social structures, Martin seems to offer a critique of these medieval ideals.

As Martin is not the first author to make use of medieval imagery in fantasy literature, it is important to address the field of medievalism. Kim Selling describes medievalism as "both an interest in the Middle Ages and a type of social movement characterised by and adoption or recreation of particular aspects of the medieval world" (211). Selling also points out the correlation between fantasy literature and medievalism which she calls "fantastic neo-medievalism", naming J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* an archetypal example of a work of high fantasy giving "a very selective and positive image of the Middle Ages" (212-214). This thesis will consider Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* from a medievalist

perspective, placing the saga within a tradition of authors who, like Martin, have used fantasy literature as a vessel to either praise or criticise medieval ideals.

This thesis will analyse how Martin's representation of gender roles and chivalry may be interpreted as subverting the medieval ideals that Martin so clearly based himself on. Each chapter will deal with a particular theme, comparing the conventional medieval ideal to Martin's representation in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Because the portrayal of gender in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a popular topic among scholars, I will take that as a starting point and discuss the portrayal of women such as Daenerys and Asha in the first chapter. Afterwards, both the second and third chapter will deal with the concept of chivalry. Chapter two will focus on the romantic aspect of chivalry, focusing on Sansa's romantic expectations of the court of King's Landing. The representation of chivalry in *A Song of Ice and Fire* will be discussed further in chapter three, arguing that in Westeros knights often fail to live up to their vows. Altogether, this thesis argues that Martin consistently subverts both medieval ideals and tropes of medievalist fantasy fiction, providing a harshly realistic approach to medievalism.

This thesis will provide a close reading of the five volumes in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series that have been published so far. Secondary sources on medievalism will also be taken into account, including Larrington's *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones.* Other examples of secondary sources that will be considered is Richard Kaeuper's work on chivalry in medieval society, as well as Jane Tolmie's article on feminist medievalist fantasy fiction. I will make use of a source criticism approach, summed up by Risden as follows: "finding writers' sources allows us to see what they studied, what they brought from those studies directly into their own work, what they used but changed, and what they wanted to challenge or correct" (20-21). In other words, by comparing Martin to his medieval and medievalist sources, we can see how he deviates from his sources to problematize the medieval.

CHAPTER ONE – G.R.R. MARTIN'S FEMINIST HEROINES AND MEDIEVALISM

In an interview on *The Strombo Show*, presenter George Stroumboulopoulos asked George R.R. Martin about Martin's portrayal of women. Stroumboulopoulos states that Martin "write[s] women really well and really different" (*Strombo* 18:41), and asks Martin where that particular approach towards women comes from, to which Martin replies: "you know, I've always considered women to be people" (18:53). Although Martin's reply may be seen as facetious, because it is obvious that women are people, it is clear that according to George Stroumboulopoulos there is something striking about women in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and that they have a distinctive quality. This chapter will analyse how Martin's portrayal of women in *A Song of Ice and Fire* compares to that in other medievalist fantasy fiction. Firstly, as Tolkien's Middle-earth legendarium is a landmark for this type of fiction, the role of women in Tolkien's work will briefly be discussed. Jane Tolmie points out that after Tolkien, the extensive use of mediævalia in relation to fantasy was popularised and became pervasive within the genre (148). This chapter will take Tolmie's article as the basis for discussing the role of the feminist hero in contemporary medievalist fantasy, comparing the elements of feminist medievalist fiction to the representation of Martin's female characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

The Women of Tolkien: Empowered or Powerless?

Tolkien's Middle-earth works have been analysed by numerous critics among many different fields, and feminist scholars are no exception. Aline Ripley indicates that scholars are divided when it comes to gender roles in Tolkien's works. Ripley points out that feminist critics have commented on Tolkien's "membership in all-male groups like the Inklings and the TCBS" (202) and argue that Tolkien was negative towards feminism, having a conventional view on the role of women (Ripley 202). Feminist critics have argued that Tolkien in the creation of his world "chose not to redefine the role of women but instead preserved the gender hierarchy of his own familiar patriarchal society" (Ripley 202). In Tolkien's fiction, according to critics, the female characters are underrepresented and "nothing more than traditional stereotypes" (Ripley 202). According to some critics, such as Candice Frederick and Sam McBride, not even Galadriel and Éowyn are able to "fulfill their potential of being active, non-traditional heroines" (Ripley 202).

However, several critics express a different view on Tolkien's representation of women. Nancy Enright, for example, while admitting that female characters are few in number, states

that they "are very important in the defining of power" (93). Enright also comments on the role of Éowyn, who "as a woman […] has been patronizingly kept from activities that she proves herself to have been more than capable of performing" (Enright 104). Enright claims that, through Gandalf's praise of Éowyn[1], Tolkien expressed sensitivity "to the pain felt by a woman such as Éowyn living in a male-dominated world" (104). Though it is true that some female characters in Middle-earth are empowered, gender roles are not emphasised in Tolkien's works. As Enright argues, "it is only through a careful examination of Tolkien's depiction of power that the role of his female characters can be fully understood" (95). It is clear that Tolkien's legendarium is indeed male-centred, and that almost all female characters are not part of the main characters: there is no place for a woman among the Fellowship. Arwen, who almost solely functions as a love interest for one of the male heroes (Ripley 202), is virtually omitted from the main narrative, and though she is of major significance to Aragorn, their story is told only through an appendix.

George R.R. Martin's representation of women in *A Song of Ice and Fire* differs from Tolkien in a number of ways. Firstly, in *A Song of Ice and Fire* there are numerous female characters, many of which are essential to the series. By merely looking at the third person points-of-view characters of the novels this becomes clear: the different storylines are presented through the eyes of certain viewpoint characters, and of the twenty-four viewpoint characters nine are female, some of which are much more important than some of the male viewpoint characters. Out of the six viewpoint characters with the most chapters, four of them are female: Arya Stark, Daenerys Targaryen, Catelyn Tully, and Sansa Stark. Only major male protagonists Jon Snow and Tyrion Lannister have more viewpoint chapters than these four women. Therefore, it is clear that women are not underrepresented at all, but are rather important characters.

Furthermore, an interesting difference between the worlds of Tolkien and Martin is the inclusion of rape and sexual violence. Both Tolkien and Martin based their fictional worlds on the medieval, but whereas Tolkien omits this issue in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is part of *A Song of Ice and Fire.* Carolyne Larrington explains that the inclusion of rape and sexual violence is one of the similarities between medieval Europe and Westeros, as she quotes Martin himself in saying that "rape and sexual violence have been a part of every war ever fought […] To omit them […] would have been fundamentally false and dishonest" (qtd. in

[1] Enright refers to Gandalf's conversation with Éomer about Éowyn's role on the battlefield: "My friend . . . you had horses, and deeds of arms, and the free fields; but she, born in the body of a maid, had a spirit and courage at least the match of yours. Yet she was doomed to wait upon an old man […] and her part seemed to her more ignoble" (qtd. in Enright 104).

Larrington 28). Therefore, it may be argued that Martin tries to construct a harsh, but more realistic version of the medieval world than Tolkien did.

G.R.R. Martin and the Medievalist Fantasy Heroine

In her article "Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine", Jane Tolmie discusses the increasing popularity of female heroes in medievalist fantasy of the post-Tolkien era. She analyses various novels that are based on medievalism, in which the heroes are female. Tolmie explains that in such novels, the most important accomplishment of these female heroes is mainly that they overcome difficulties based on gender expectations. According to Tolmie, the fantasy novel *Glenraven* is a case in point. This novel aims to "reconcile […] the initially opposed categories of woman and hero" (Tolmie 145), and "offers a feminist critique of female disempowerment in an imagined world isolated in space and time" (Tolmie 145). However, despite the fact that it is a fictional world, Tolmie stresses that "it depends on ideas about medieval patriarchy to delineate exceptional women" (146). This holds true for many novels of this ilk, Tolmie notes: "[t]he emphasis remains on the individual woman rising above a system that keeps her down – triumphing over it, reversing expectations" (147). This "trajectory of the heroine" usually features several stock elements: rape, forced marriage, cross-dressing, and taking up arms (Tolmie 146-148). In the following paragraphs these aspects of the fantasy heroine will be compared to the heroines in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

Like in feminist medievalist fantasy, motifs of rape are of major importance in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. As has been mentioned earlier, for a woman in Westeros sexual violence is as endemic as it was in medieval Europe (Larrington 28). In Westeros, the threat of rape was not only present for people of low birth, but also for women of nobility. During the Battle of the Blackwater, Queen Cersei tells Sansa: "[…] if Maegor's Holdfast should fall before Stannis can come up, why then, most of my guests are in for a bit of rape, I'd say. And you should never rule out mutilation, torture, and murder at times like these" (*ACOK* 846). Cersei's grim premonition exemplifies Martin's harsh realistic approach, but also illustrates the dangers women have to face in such situations. Another important female character, Brienne of Tarth, seems to share Cersei's sentiment. Brienne claims she "had never slept easily in the presence of men", as "the risk of rape was always there. It was a lesson [Brienne] had learned beneath the walls of Highgarden, and again when [Brienne] and Jaime had fallen into the hands of the Brave Companions" (*AFFC* 88). It is clear, therefore, that rape is indeed prevalent in Westeros.

Over the course of the series, several heroines in *A Song of Ice and Fire* survive rape assaults. The situation Brienne refers to above is one of the instances in the series where one of the heroines has do deal with the imminent threat of rape: the Brave Companions threaten to rape Brienne multiple times – "[t]urn her over and rape her arse, Rorge" (*ASOS* 292) – and they would almost certainly have done so had Jaime Lannister not intervened. A similar escape from rape involves Sansa Stark, who during mob riots in King's Landing is almost pulled from her horse by a man, before Sandor Clegane comes to her aid. During the same riots, a girl called Lollys is "raped […] half a hundred times" (*ACOK* 640). Therefore, it is safe to assume that Sansa was rescued from the same fate.

However, not all female heroes in *A Song of Ice and Fire* manage to escape rape. After Daenerys Targaryen is married off to Khal Drogo – another feature listed by Tolmie –, she has to endure marital rape. Although Drogo is surprisingly tender during the consummation of their marriage on their wedding night (Larrington 28), sex is usually a painful experience for Daenerys:

> […] every night, some time before the dawn, Drogo would come to her tent and wake her in the dark, to ride her as relentlessly as he rode his stallion. He always took her from behind, Dothraki fashion, for which Dany was grateful; that way her lord husband could not see the tears that wet her face, and she could use her pillow to muffle her cries of pain. (*AGOT* 228)

This passage, along with Brienne and Sansa's narrow escapes, are in accordance with what Tolmie argues. The heroines of medievalist fantasy identified by Tolmie usually "avoid, avert or survive rape" (148) and the same can be said for *A Song of Ice and Fire* heroines.

Another element of the typical trajectory of the heroine is the issue of forced marriage. As Carolyne Larrington argues, "women of Westeros and Essos are […] subject to the rule of patriarchy" (27). As a result, women were mostly used to construct marriage alliances between families, denying women control over their own lives. Daenerys' hesitant feelings when she is forced to marry Drogo illustrate this: ""I don't want to be his queen," she heard herself say in a small, thin voice" (*AGOT* 38). Viserys responds by saying that he does not care: "I'd let [Drogo's] whole khalasar fuck you if need be, sweet sister, all forty thousand men, and their horses too if that was what it took to get my army" (*AGOT* 38). In other words: Daenerys does not have a choice. Such marriage alliances are ubiquitous in Westeros. Sansa Stark, for example, is "a key pawn in the marriage game" (Larrington 28). At the beginning of the first novel, King Robert Baratheon and Sansa's father Eddard arrange her betrothal to crown prince Joffrey, and when she subsequently gets replaced by Margaery Tyrell she is wed to Tyrion Lannister. However, that marriage is never consummated, and as Tywin tells

Tyrion, "a marriage that has not been consummated can be set aside" (*ASOS* 437). Thus, Sansa in fact – albeit through considerable luck – escapes two unwanted marriages. Arguably, Sansa is like the fantasy heroine in this respect, as escaping such marriages is important in this type of fiction according to Tolmie (148).

A third trope of feminist medievalist fantasy is the cross-dressing of heroines, which also occurs in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Tolmie states that typical fantasy heroines "dress up as men to escape restraints on their freedom" (148). This notion also applies to several heroines in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. When the reader is introduced to Brienne, she is described as a "blue knight" (*ACOK* 342) fighting in a melee against Ser Loras. The reader, following Catelyn's point of view, only learns that the "knight" is female when Catelyn is told so by Ser Colen: "[…] he is no man, my lady. That's Brienne of Tarth, daughter to Lord Selwyn the Evenstar" (*ACOK* 343). As women are not able to become knights, the armour of knights is an intrinsically male outfit, and thus the people who meet her instantly assume that she is male. In other words, Brienne's masculine attire enables her to engage in melees and other fights.[2] As Brienne often roams Westeros, her skills as a fighter and use of knightly attributes such as her helmet and sword, are also a means for her to possibly defend herself against rape attempts.

Brienne is not the only woman in *A Song of Ice and Fire* who challenges the traditional border between male and female. Arya Stark is another interesting character when it comes to gender representations. From the beginning of the novel, she goes against the stereotypical expectations. Arya and Sansa are taught to behave like ladies, but Arya exclaims that she "[does] not want to be a lady" (*AGOT* 221). Instead, Arya likes to play at swords, even asking the butcher's son Mycah to practise with her (*AGOT* 149). Furthermore, Arya's half-brother Jon Snow presents her with her own small sword, which she names Needle (*AGOT* 98). This name is particularly interesting as it refers to her embroidery lessons with Septa Mordane. She loathes that stereotypically female needlework (*AGOT* 75) and thus, naming her sword Needle is an ironic way to criticise the traditional gender roles. Though her father Eddard says that having a sword is "not for children, least of all for a girl" (*AGOT* 220), he eventually complies to Arya's wish, as he arranges for her to be taught in sword fighting. Her teacher, the Braavosi warrior Syrio Forel, introduces himself as her "dancing master" (*AGOT* 224), and the type of sword fighting he teacher Arya is called "the water dance" (*AGOT* 225). Like the name of her

[2] Another possible example of cross-dressing women in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is Alleras the Sphinx. A popular fan theory suggests that he is in fact Sarella Sand, a women disguised as a man to be able to get an education as a maester, which women were not allowed to have. Thus, Sarella would be doing exactly what Tolmie states typical fantasy heroines do.

sword, the term 'dancing lessons' is another example of giving a feminine twist to a masculine action. She has to do this in order to hide what she is really doing – as a woman, it is much more appreciated to have "dancing lessons" than openly announce one's lessons in sword fighting. It may also be noted that Syrio calls her "boy" (*AGOT* 223) at first, and when Arya corrects hem he tells her that it does not matter; boy or girl, she "is a sword, that is all that matters" (*AGOT* 224). Furthermore, after Eddard is executed and Yoren aims to escort her to the Wall, she makes the journey in the guise of a boy as Yoren cuts off her hair (*AGOT* 728). Thus, Arya in many facets of her character explores the boundaries of gender expectations, and actively tries to subvert them, and although she does not dress up like a man voluntarily, it is a part of her journey nonetheless. Arya's training, as well as Brienne's skill as a fighter, are closely related to another asset of the medievalist heroine Tolmie described: taking up arms. Tolmie refers to several traditional feminist heroines taking up arms, some of which so do by being trained in arms (Tolmie 148).

Altogether, many elements of feminist medievalist fantasy can also be seen in *A Song of Ice And Fire*. Martin includes many strong women in his series and thus women are not underrepresented. Moreover, the traditional gender roles integral to the patriarchal society of Westeros are emphasised by the inclusion of female characters that challenge the boundaries between male and female.

"Excelling Within the System": Martin's Heroines and Overcoming the Patriarchy

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Tolmie explains that for the fantasy heroine, "[t]he emphasis remains on the individual woman rising above a system that keeps her down – triumphing over it, reversing expectations" (147). In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, several female characters attempt to overthrow patriarchal systems. The following paragraphs will focus on the quest of two of such characters, Daenerys Targaryen and Asha Greyjoy. Both Daenerys and Asha are point-of-view characters, and are therefore important females in the series. The journeys of both women will be compared, thereby analysing at how Daenerys and Asha fit in with Tolmie's description of fantasy heroines.

At the start of the series, Daenerys Targaryen appears to be a fragile girl in patriarchal and misogynist surroundings. She is subject to a marriage alliance: in exchange for an army, Daenerys is married off to Khal Drogo at the age of thirteen. Viserys puts Daenerys under considerable pressure instead of comforting her. When Khal Drogo comes to inspect Daenerys and judge whether he would accept Viserys' proposal, Viserys tells Daenerys she "must look like a princess" (*AGOT* 28). Moreover, he hurts her physically whilst evaluating

her naked body, pinching a nipple after he threateningly says to Daenerys: “You will not fail me tonight. If you do, it will go hard for you. You don’t want to wake the dragon, do you?” (*AGOT* 29). To add to Daenerys’ misery, The Dothraki society she has to join after the wedding is a violent and misogynist one. On her wedding night this already becomes apparent, as several Dothraki engage in fights over women. The winner of those fights raped the nearest woman publicly, as per Dothraki custom. On the night of Daenerys and Drogo’s wedding, twelve men died and multiple women were raped (*AGOT* 103). This abundant (sexual) violence illustrates the position of women in Dothraki culture. The wedding gifts offered to Daenerys also exemplify the misogynist culture. Daenerys traditionally has to refuse these gifts: ““This is a gift worthy of a great warrior, O blood of my blood, and I am but a woman. Let my lord husband bear these in my stead” (*AGOT* 105). At this point, therefore, Daenerys is not akin the “strong, feisty, and passionate” woman in feminist fantasy fiction (Tolmie 146), but can be seen as a small, fragile, and frightened girl who is forced to live in a brutal, barbaric, and misogynist culture.

Like Daenerys, Asha Greyjoy has to deal with a harsh society. Being a Greyjoy, Asha belongs to the ruling family of the Iron Islands, of which her father Balon is king. Larrington describes the people of the Iron Islands, the Ironborn, as akin to the Vikings of the eighth to eleventh centuries (69). Like the Vikings, the Ironborn are “ferocious seaborne raiders” (Larrington 68), and “[t]heir military power is underpinned by their slim, beautifully designed warships in which they strike at will along the coastline” (Larrington 69). Because they favour raiding and pillaging to trading, they despise the farmers on the Westerosi mainland (Larrington 69). In such a harsh and belligerent society, women faced a difficult life. Theon Greyjoy, Asha’s brother, explains that in the ideal Ironborn society, a man may take a women woman (often without her consent) as sexual partner, even when the man is married: “A man had his rock wife, his true bride, Ironborn like himself, but he had his salt wives too, women captured on raids” (*ACOK* 168).

However, Asha Greyjoy, despite the tough society in which she lives, is portrayed as a strong woman from the moment she is introduced. Upon Theon’s arrival on the Iron Islands, she pretends to be Esgred, pregnant wife of a shipwright named Sigrin. Theon does not realise it is Asha, for he has been away for ten years, and Asha makes use of this by playing him. She lets him grope her, gropes him in return, and they exchange all kinds of sexual discourse. When it is finally revealed to Theon that Esgred is in fact Asha, his sister, he is ashamed: “[h]e could not possibly have made a more appalling fool of himself” (*ACOK* 390). Asha enjoys the situation, and says she has tricked Theon because she “wanted to see who he was

first" (*ACOK* 389). As such, from the moment she is first introduced, she is shown to be a licentious, strong, and bold woman. When Asha and Theon join their father Balon in the Great Hall, it also becomes apparent that she is a fighter, as she pulls a dagger from between her breasts, claiming that that is her "baby" (*ACOK* 392). This passage shows Asha's bold and daring moves, but also her skills with weapons and tough character. She even confronts Theon for his arrogance, claiming that he "prince[s] about the islands" (*ACOK* 392) without knowing anything about them. Furthermore, Asha is capable of defending herself against possible assaults. For example, when Tristifer Botley asks her to marry him, and grabs her by the arm, Asha threatens him by pressing her dagger to his throat and saying: "[…] do not presume to grab at me again. I am your queen, not your wife. Remember that" (*AFFC* 243). Altogether, when one compares how both characters are introduced, Asha resembles the strong and feisty fantasy heroine much more than the small and fragile Daenerys does.

However, as the story unfolds, Daenerys starts to find her strength and there is a noticeable change in her personality and the way in which she handles tough situations. Firstly, she becomes aware of her high rank as wife of the Khal. At one point she commands the entire khalasar to stop when she wants to, and when Ser Jorah compliments her on her ability to talk like a queen, she responds "Not a queen […] a *khaleesi*" (*AGOT* 227) which shows that she is slowly starting to accept her position. Even in the bedroom, Daenerys shows more confidence. Had she been forced to endure marital rape numerous times at first, she later takes control of the situation and proposes a new sex position, so that she can look at him while they make love (*AGOT* 236). As this is not Dothraki custom, it may be considered a bold move by Daenerys, but this move does establish a passionate bond between Drogo and Daenerys, and Daenerys becomes pregnant that night as well (*AGOT* 236). Furthermore, Daenerys becomes increasingly aware of Viserys' malignity, and when he confronts her she now has the strength to fight back. She once makes him walk behind the khalasar (*AGOT* 231), and on one occasion she slaps him and makes a threat: "pray that Khal Drogo does not hear of this, or he will cut open your belly and feed you your own entrails" (*AGOT* 394). Eventually, when Viserys threatens Daenerys and her unborn child Drogo kills him, with consent of Daenerys, who is left virtually indifferent by her brother's death: "He was no dragon, Dany thought, curiously calm. Fire cannot kill a dragon" (*AGOT* 500). Through fighting against rape and domestic abuse, which are typical elements of the fantasy heroine's journey, Daenerys becomes a stronger personality and is able to get past her initial fear.

Eventually, the loss of a beloved person triggers both Asha and Daenerys to aim for leadership. In Daenerys' case, it is after the death of Drogo and the birth of her dragons that

she becomes a leader, aspiring to gather an army to take to Westeros to conquer the Iron Throne. All but one hundred people of Drogo's *khalasar* have left, so Daenerys truly has to start from the bottom. Those who remained follow her loyally. Naturally, having three dragons is an important factor, but as Mark Buchanan points out, the warriors present at the birth of the dragons "could have easily dispatched Daenerys and taken the dragons for their own. Instead, many chose to follow her, and look upon her as their leader" (20). Similarly, for Asha, it is the death of her father Balon that sets her claim for the Seastone Chair in motion. Although Euron Greyjoy, Balon's eldest brother, has proclaimed himself king of the Iron Islands, it is decided that there should be a kingsmoot where the Ironborn choose their new leader. Asha is willing to cooperate with her other uncle Victarion by asking him to let her be his Hand, so as to share the rule and make a claim together, but Victarion denies her and Asha decides to pursue the crown herself.

After Asha expresses her desire to claim the Seastone Chair, she is met with scorn and doubt on the basis of her sex. Aeron Greyjoy, priest on the Iron Islands and brother to Balon, explains that Balon wants Asha to succeed him as ruler of the Iron Islands:

> "That was Balon's blindness; he saw himself in his wild, headstrong daughter, and believed she could succeed him. He was wrong in that, and Aeron tried to tell him so. "No woman will ever rule the Ironborn, not even a woman such as Asha," he insisted, but Balon could be deaf to things he did not wish to hear. (*AFFC* 32)

Aeron's remark "not even a woman such as Asha" indicates that the Ironborn do perceive Asha's strong personality and power. However, this passage also illustrates the resilient patriarchal system of the Iron Islands: "[n]o woman will ever rule the Ironborn". Aeron subsequently tells Asha that she will not be chosen because she is a woman (*AFFC* 235), a notion that is repeated by Victarion. Asha dares to defy the men who doubt her on the basis of her gender. When Jon Myre exclaims that "[t]his girl forgets herself […] Balon let her believe she was a man" (*AFFC* 374), he is effectively saying that her behaviour would be acceptable if she were a man. Asha is displeased, and tauntingly retorts: "[y]our father made the same mistake with you" (*AFFC* 374). The fact that her male relatives tell her she has no chance of taking the crown does not curb Asha's willingness to keep trying, and she is bold to those who criticise her for not behaving according to the stereotypical gender roles.

Daenerys is also subject to scorn on the basis of her sex. During Daenerys' journey in Essos, she meets many male leaders who underestimate her and scorn her because she is a woman. Firstly, the leader of Astapor, Kraznys mo Nakloz, does not take Daenerys seriously. He says that his "tongue is wasted wagging at women" and calls Daenerys a "whore" (*ASOS* 321). Such insults are abundant in Kraznys' speech. When Daenerys treats with sellswords

fighting on behalf of Yunkai, Prendahl na Ghezn calls her "a horselord's whore" (*ASOS* 576) and says "[w]oman, you bray like an ass, and make no more sense" (*ASOS* 576). Daenerys, like Asha, defies men that disrespect her because of her gender and boldly retorts: " "[w]oman?" […] Is that meant to insult me? I would return the slap, if I took you for a man" (*ASOS* 576). Asha and Daenerys' comments illustrate another similarity between them and Tolmie's heroines: "[t]hese female fantasy characters […] often do speak up and participate vigorously in overtly anti-patriarchal discourses" (Tolmie 147).

Eventually, through her own cunning lead and with some help from skilled advisors, Daenerys is able to punish the misogynist leaders in Slaver's Bay, gain an army, and become a queen in Meereen. Kraznys' misogynist speech infuriates Daenerys, but he is unaware of the fact that Daenerys can understand everything he says – her advisor Ser Jorah gave her the idea to conceal her skills in the Valerian tongue which Kraznys speaks. Thus, Daenerys is able to trick Kraznys, promising him that she would buy his army of Unsullied in exchange for Drogon (*ASOS* 370). When Kraznys and Daenerys complete the deal and exchange Drogon and the whip that makes one master of the Unsullied, Kraznys finds himself unable to control Drogon. Daenerys then hits Kraznys in the face with the lash, and commands Drogon to burn him (*ASOS* 380). Thus, Daenerys in a clever way manages to gain Astapor's vast army of highly skilled warriors, without having to pay for them, and at the same time punishes the misogynist Kraznys. Daenerys is victorious in Yunkai as well, because one of Prendahl's fellow sellswords Daario Naharis is mezmerised by Daenerys' beauty and swears fealty to her: "[m]y sword is yours. My life is yours. […] I live and die at your command, my queen" (*ASOS* 583). Thus, one might argue that it is in fact her gender playing out positively in this case, for this is what Daario motivates to help her conquer Yunkai. Additionally, when she enters the city victoriously, and frees all the slaves within the city, the city's inhabitants hail her as *Mhysa*, meaning "mother". The fact that mother is a characteristically female term is telling, because it highlights Daenerys' gender. Eventually, with her army and her dragons, Daenerys conquers Meereen and rules as its queen. Thus, Daenerys has successfully risen above the patriarchal and misogynist society, and traditional gender expectations are reversed.

Contrary to Daenerys, Asha's quest ultimately fails, as she loses to Euron at the kingsmoot and falls back under patriarchal rule. The claim Asha makes at the kingsmoot challenges multiple Ironborn traditions. Firstly, by simply making a claim to the throne she is already going against their misogynist patriarchal system, and secondly by propagating peace instead of more warfare. She realises that the Ironborn often do not hold their ground on the Westerosi mainland, and instead she advocates peace, land, and victory, as opposed to more

war and more defeat, which she states will happen when Victarion is crowned. As has been mentioned before, the Ironborn tradition is largely centred on their wars, reaving, raping, and pillaging, so a woman trying to advocate peace can be considered a remarkable feat. However, as Aeron observes, Asha manages to convince "more men than the priest would ever have believed… for a *woman!"* (*AFFC* 392). In the end, though, despite all of Asha's efforts and achievements, she is bested by Euron, who turns up with a horn which he claims will make him able to tame the dragons he has seen in the East. Euron promises the Ironborn all of Westeros: "[m]y brother would have you be content with the cold and dismal north, my niece with even les… but I shall give you Lannisport. Highgarden. […] I say we take it *all*! I say, we take *Westeros!*" (*AFFC* 395). With this claim, Euron wins over the Ironborn and is crowned King of the Iron Islands. While Asha returns to Deepwood Motte in the North, she learns that Euron has married her off (*ADWD* 371). From this moment onward, Asha realises she will never be queen (*ADWD* 368). Thus, although Asha's character shares several traits with the strong-minded fantasy heroines described by Tolmie, taking up arms and defying the traditional gender roles, she is ultimately not able to escape the harsh reality of patriarchy. The forced marriage exemplifies this, as this is a major factor in a patriarchal society.

From the journeys of Daenerys and Asha one may conclude that Martin uses also his harsh realistic approach to gender roles. While Daenerys often succeeds in overthrowing patriarchal systems, a strong women such as Asha eventually fails. Nevertheless, the journeys of these two strong women are examples of Martin emphasising the role of women.

Conclusion

In Tolkien's legendarium, the benchmark of contemporary medievalist fantasy, women are underrepresented. Although there are several female characters in his Middle-earth works, the focus is almost solely on the male characters. Furthermore, the issue of gender is not a central theme in Tolkien's works. George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* differs from Tolkien in these aspects. In his series, there are numerous female characters crucial to the plot. Martin's harsh realistic approach foregrounds the struggles that women have in times of war. By including sexual violence, and plotlines such as Asha's and Daenerys', gender expectations and taking up arms against patriarchal structures become major themes of the series. Thus, Martin's representation of women is closer to that of the feminist medievalist fantasy that Jane Tolmie discusses in her article. Many aspects of the fantasy heroine that Tolmie describes are also apparent in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. However, in contrast with those

feminist works, the heroines in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are not always successful in their attempt to rise beyond oppression.

In conclusion, Martin may have more of a feminist agenda than Tolkien did, and criticises the patriarchy in the same way that feminist medievalist fantasy does. However, the "game of thrones" is neither biased against them nor is it rigged in their favour. Though Daenerys is successful in her rise to the throne, Asha cannot escape from patriarchal society as she is bested by Euron. Thus, Martin does foreground gender roles and creates many strong-minded and skilled female characters, but the harsh realism he opts for in *A Song of Ice and Fire* limits the female exceptionalism of feminist fantasy fiction, since Martin's female characters are not always successful.

CHAPTER TWO – "LIFE IS NOT A SONG" : CHIVALRY AND ROMANCE IN *A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE*

Carolyne Larrington points out that *A Song of Ice and Fire* is based largely on medieval European history, naming the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses as a major inspiration for Martin (2). Recurrent wars in this era meant that chivalry became a "cultural institution, associated with mounted noble fighters" (Larrington 121). Apart from possessing skill on the battlefield, knights were also expected to uphold Christian ideals, such as defending the weak and respecting women (Larrington 121). The concept of chivalry is also "integral to the culture of the southern parts of the Seven Kingdoms" (Larrington 119). The southern parts to which Larrington specifically refers is the region in which the capital of Westeros is located, King's Landing. Being the capital, King's Landing is home to many knights, lords and ladies, and the king himself, whose court resides in the castle known as the "Red Keep". This chapter will analyse how Martin presents this court culture in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, focusing mainly on Sansa Stark's expectations of this culture, and how Sansa's experiences in the capital compare to the medieval ideals of chivalry.

Chivalry in the Middle Ages

In order to understand how Martin's portrayal of chivalry fits in with medieval tradition, it is important to address the concept of chivalry. In the *The Arthurian Encyclopedia,* Norris J. Lacy indicates that it is difficult to determine an exact definition of chivalry, but explains that there are several key aspects to the idea of it (103). In a military sense, the word "chivalry" means no more than "mounted soldier", derived from French *chevalier* (Lacy 103). However, as Lacy points out, "in its literary (and social) implementation chivalry was for more than that. It could develop into an elaborate code" (103). This code is linked to the concept of courtly love, which will be discussed later. The chivalric code that Lacy refers to is summarised by Grant Uden, who provides a list of ten key rules that knights were supposed to follow:

1. Unswerving belief in the Church and obedience to her teachings.
2. Willingness to defend the Church.
3. Respect and pity for all weakness and steadfastness in defending them.
4. Love of country.
5. Refusal to retreat before the enemy.
6. Unceasing and merciless war against the infidel.
7. Strict obedience to the feudal overlord, so long as these duties did not conflict with duty to God.
8. Loyalty to truth and to the pledged word.

9. Generosity in giving.
10. Championship of the right and the good, in every place and at all times, against the forces of evil. (Uden 54-55)

In these ten commandments, the "Decalogue" (Uden 54), many references to Christianity can be found, making religion central to the knight's ethos. According to both Lacy and Uden, Christianity was a major factor in the development of chivalry from a military construct to a social one, including sentiments of piety and the protection of women (Lacy 103). Thus, the image emerged of a knight as a "Christian soldier" (Uden 55) intent on doing good and honourable deeds to defend their lord and their faith. Through the performances of such deeds a knight could gain "a reputation for valor and courage" (Lacy 122). This sense of personal honour could be heightened by the knight's skill in combat. Richard Kaeuper addresses the importance of tourneys, indicating that in Geoffroi de Charny's *Book of Chivalry*, an important fourteenth-century book on knighthood, it is established that "individual jousting in tournament is good, free-form fighting in the *melée* of tournament teams is better, but real war (involving both previous types) is best" (100). Thus, while protection of the lord and church were of paramount importance, knights also had a sense of personal honour. How Martin presents chivalry with regards to honour, loyalty and righteousness will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Another important aspect of knighthood is the concept of courtly love. Lacy's *Arthurian Encyclopedia* states that courtly love is based mainly on the knight's duties to serve his lady. According to Lacy, courtly love "wedded the adoration of the lady to the chivalric ethic" (103). This adoration sometimes even surpasses the duties that knights had to their lord and church (Lacy 103). Furthermore, Sarah Kay argues that courtly love entailed a "set of social qualities and skills required for distinction at court, and which include refined speech, elegance of manner and dress, cheerfulness and deference" (84-85). Altogether, "[t]he knight was sworn to uphold the good and overturn evil, and he was obligated to protect the poor, the weak, the downtrodden (and specifically […] widows, maidens, and orphans)" (Lacy 104). As such, the image of the knight that is created by the demands of the chivalric code leads to the figure of a perfect warrior, loyal to his liege lord and to the church, but also devoted to women and in possession of social skills at court.

Medieval romances played a vital role in the creation of this image. Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot* is perceived as one of the primary and earliest examples of chivalric romance (Lacy 104). In *Lancelot*, the eponymous heroic knight adheres to the ideals of courtly love, having to serve his lady loyally "with no thought of his own welfare" (Lacy 122). As Richard

Kaeuper demonstrates, since medieval romances such as *Lancelot* were also read by knights themselves, knights brought many aspects of the chivalric ethos and ideal courtly behaviour as portrayed by these romances into their world (98). This meant that chivalry indeed became an "active social force" (Kaeuper 98). In other words, through the implementation of courtly love into the chivalric ethos, presented in medieval romances, an ideal code of conduct in court emerged. However, Lacy argues that in several romances, a conflict arose between the ideals of courtly love and the actual practice of chivalry (122). Lacy comments on a particular passage in *Lancelot* in which Guenevere rejects Lancelot because of his brief hesitation to dishonour himself (by riding in a cart reserved for criminals) in order to come to her aid. Lancelot's hesitation exemplifies the "tensions between a knight's duty to his lady and his duty to himself and his chivalric calling" that Lacy describes.

In contemporary medievalism, it is the romantic image of chivalry that remains the popular view of knighthood. Bordone argues that Walter Scott's eighteenth-century medievalist works greatly influenced 1950s American film. This influence caused the emergence of a medieval Hollywood style, with films dedicated to medievalist characters such as Ivanhoe and Robin Hood (Bordone 295). The Hollywood style that appeared was "loosely based on the costumes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries". Thus, according to Bordone, a "romantic and somewhat sugary vision of the Middle Ages" was created. Bordone adds that, apart from American cinema, traces of the chivalric ethos also found its way into fantasy and science fiction, with *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* being early examples (Bordone 295). Kim Selling shares Bordone's view, stating that Tolkien's works are archetypal for the genre of fantasy. *The Lord of the Rings*, she notes, inspired many authors to make use of a "simplified version of the Western European Middle Ages […] where the characters wear medieval dress" (212). Key attributes of this version of the Middle Ages are "beautiful princesses and knights-in-shining-armor" (212). Selling argues that Tolkien-inspired medievalist fiction "presents a very selective and positive image of the Middle Ages", resulting in a "romanticized, idealistic version of the medieval" (214). Thus, the romantic image of medieval knighthood became widespread in contemporary fiction, as it appears in both film and literature.

Furthermore, as a result of the popularity of medievalist works such as *The Lord of the Rings*, the public became increasingly interested in the medieval. As Bordone points out, events are organised in which some parts of the medieval conventions are re-enacted, and popular festivals experienced a "medievalisation" (Bordone 297). To put it in Bordone's words, "alongside medieval peasants and foods prepared correctly, we again find knights and

ladies, witches and jesters in line with the models presented in films and advertising" (297). Medievalism therefore became a tourist attraction in which people dress up as knights and ladies, imitating medieval court culture. Bordone argues that "[a]n adventurous, chivalrous Middle Ages thus remains the dominant image of the period" (297). In other words, the romantic image of knighthood that is presented in medievalist literature and film, and the popularity of those works, led to a romantic view of chivalry. It is this view that Sansa Stark has in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, causing her to have great expectations of court life in King's Landing, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Sansa Stark's Romantic Expectations

From the outset, Sansa is presented as a typical lady. She is skilled at typical women's work like needlework: "Sansa's work is as pretty as she is" (*AGOT* 68) according to Septa Mordane, who teaches both Sansa and her sister Arya to behave ladylike. Sansa's skills are contrasted heavily to Arya; while her younger sister has "the hands of a blacksmith" (*AGOT* 68), Sansa's hands are described as "fine, delicate hands" (*AGOT* 68). The differences between the two sisters is highlighted by how Arya describes Sansa:

> Sansa could sew and dance and sing. She wrote poetry. She knew how to dress. She played the high harp and the bells. Worse, she was beautiful. Sansa had gotten their mother's fine high cheekbones and the thick auburn hair of the Tullys. Arya took after their lord father. Her hair was a lusterless brown, and her face was long and solemn. […] It hurt that the one thing Arya could do better than her sister was ride a horse. (*AGOT* 70)

Thus, right from the beginning it is made clear that Sansa is beautiful, elegant, and in possession of several of the skills that Sarah Kay argued were of great importance in medieval court culture, such as "refined speech, elegance of manner and dress, cheerfulness" (Kay 84-85). In this regard, it is unsurprising that Sansa names her pet wolf "Lady" (*AGOT* 71). Furthermore, when it is decided that Sansa should marry crown prince Joffrey (*AGOT* 48), her mother Catelyn states that while Arya needed refinement, "Sansa would shine in the South" (*AGOT* 64).

Sansa has a somewhat naïve romantic view of Joffrey, and is thrilled by the idea of marrying Joffrey and going to the court of King's Landing. Sansa "did not really *know* Joffrey yet, but she was already in love with him" (*AGOT* 140). Her supposed love for Joffrey is based only on his looks: "[h]e was all she ever dreamt her prince should be, tall and handsome and strong, with hair like gold" (*AGOT* 140). Sansa's imaginings of her stereotypical handsome prince are inspired by her love for songs and stories. After a quarrel with Arya, it is

stated that "[a]ll she wanted was for things to be nice and pretty, the way they were in the songs" (*AGOT* 143). Furthermore, when Joffrey sends away The Hound, who confronts Sansa and frightens her deeply, (*AGOT* 145), Sansa says that Joffrey's act "was almost like the songs, like the time Serwyn of the Mirror Shield saved the Princess Daeryssa from the giants, or Prince Aemon the Dragonknight championing Queen Naerys's honor against evil Ser Morgil's slanders" (*AGOT* 148). What Sansa naively fails to notice it that Joffrey merely acted on his mother's wish (*AGOT* 145), and that Sansa was in no actual immediate danger. Arguably, the songs that Sansa refers to resemble the typical medieval adventure stories about knights, indicating Sansa's interest for chivalric romance.

Sansa is unwavering in her expectations of King's Landing and its court, as is her love for Joffrey. After a clash between Arya's wolf and Joffrey, which will be elaborated on later, Joffrey lies about the situation and Cersei orders for Sansa's wolf to be executed as a punishment (*AGOT* 158). Sansa's obstinately romantic view of Joffrey has led her to convince herself that it was Arya's fault, and the queen's. "[a]t first she thought she hated him for what they'd done to Lady, […] The queen had done it; she was the one to hate, her and Arya. Nothing bad would have happened except for Arya" (*AGOT* 298). Sansa continues to fall for Joffrey's good looks – "[h]e was too beautiful to hate (*AGOT* 298) – and the false courtesy he suddenly expresses when they arrive in King's Landing: "Joffrey smiled and kissed her hand, handsome and gallant as any prince in the songs" (*AGOT* 298). In other words, when Joffrey starts acting as is expected from him at court, possibly only at his mother's behest, Sansa immediately sees it as confirmation of her romantic expectations of courtly love and chivalry by referring once more to the songs.

The tourney that is held in honour of her father thrills Sansa, as she sees her interpretation of chivalry in the songs and stories being confirmed. Sansa's excitement is apparent from the beginning of the tourney:

> "The splendor of it all took Sansa's breath away; the shining armor, the great chargers caparisoned in silver and gold, the shouts of the crowd, the banners snapping in the wind … and the knights themselves, the knights most of all. "It is better than the songs," she whispered. (*AGOT* 293)

Her enthusiasm is heightened when Ser Loras Tyrell comes towards her after a joust, giving her a red rose and saying "[s]weet lady […] no victory is half so beautiful as you" (*AGOT* 297). As Larrington points out, Sansa is dazzled by the "grace and showiness of Ser Loras" (57). Sansa is thrilled by the fact that Loras gives her a red rose instead of the white ones he gave to other maidens, and she was "struck dumb by his gallantry" (*AGOT* 297). It may be noted that later, Sansa and Ser Loras briefly talk about their encounter at the tourney: "He

doesn't remember, Sansa realized, startled. He is only being kind to me, he doesn't remember me or the rose or any of it. She had been so certain that it meant something, that it meant everything" (*ASOS* 79). Thus, even though Loras seems to be a true knight, his gallantry is revealed to be rather meaningless and hollow.

Sansa's remark about the tourney being better than the songs indicates that Sansa has not lost her esteem for knights and songs. As Siavash Rohani and Hassan Abootalebi argue, because of Sansa's "infatuation with chivalric songs and virtuous knights, Sansa Stark came to believe that all knights are true and chivalrous" (119). When The Hound confronts Sansa with the story about how his face was burnt by his malevolent brother Gregor Clegane, who later became a knight, Sansa simply replies that "he was no true knight" (*AGOT* 303). Moreover, she incorporates Gregor's malignity into her own understanding of romantic chivalry: "she'd been sure she was about to see one of Old Nan's stories come to life. Ser Gregor was the monster and Ser Loras the true hero who would slay him" (*AGOT* 472). Similarly, when Eddard says he will send Sansa and Arya safely home after several of his men were slaughtered, Sansa is mortified and tells her father the following: "I love [Joffrey], Father, I truly truly do, I love him as much as Queen Naerys loved Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, as much as Jonquil loved Ser Florian. I want to be his queen and have his babies" (*AGOT* 478). Thus, Sansa seems convinced that her romantic idea of chivalry and knighthood, which stems from old stories and songs, are actually true, and although she is confronted with examples to the contrary by witnessing Joffrey's own behaviour, hearing The Hound's scepticism on the matter, and having the northern household being murdered by Lannisters, she continues to believe in the existence of the true knight and still relishes the thought of being Joffrey's wife.

The Deconstruction of Sansa's Romantic View of Court Culture

Even before Sansa arrives at the court of King's Landing, she is exposed to Joffrey's unchivalrous nature, which is illustrated in the aforementioned confrontation between Joffrey, Arya, and Mycah. When Sansa and Joffrey stumble across Arya and Mycah playing with wooden swords, Joffrey shows to be arrogant and cruel towards the butcher's boy Mycah. Joffrey humiliates Mycah by saying that he is "only a butcher's boy, and no knight" (*AGOT* 150), and goes on to physically hurt him: "[a] bright bud of blood blossomed where his sword pressed into Mycah's flesh, and a slow red line trickled down the boy's cheek" (*AGOT* 151). Arya is infuriated and manages to beat Joffrey with the help of her wolf Nymeria, who bites Joffrey (*AGOT* 151). When Sansa offers to get help, Joffrey responds harshly: "His eyes

snapped open and looked at her, and there was nothing but loathing there, nothing but the vilest contempt" (*AGOT* 152). Later, in a trial, Joffrey lies about the situation, claiming to be attacked out of nowhere (*AGOT* 155). The execution of Sansa's wolf that follows can be considered as Sansa's first share of the harsh realism of Westeros. It is clear that Joffrey's behaviour is far from chivalric; though he is no knight, it may be argued that being the crown prince, similar rules should apply. However, he shows that he is cruel to the weak and innocent like Mycah, is rude towards Sansa, and his untruthfulness leads directly to the unfair death sentence of Sansa's wolf. Joffrey's behaviour, thus, stands in clear contrast with the chivalric ethic as described earlier in this chapter.

It is the death of Sansa's father that functions as a catalyst for Sansa to finally realise Joffrey's true nature. When her father is imprisoned for treason, Sansa expects that Joffrey will grant Eddard mercy: "[h]er gallant prince would never hurt her father, no matter what he might have done. If she went to him and pleaded for mercy, she was certain he'd listen" (*AGOT* 550). Sansa does go to Joffrey to plea, and Joffrey seems to meet her wish:

> King Joffrey looked her up and down. "Your sweet words have moved me," he said gallantly, nodding, as if to say all would be well. "I shall do as you ask … but first your father has to confess. He has to confess and say that I'm the king, or there will be no mercy for him." (*AGOT* 626-27)

However, at the trial, Joffrey orders Eddard to be executed despite Eddard's confession. Sansa reminisces on the terrible ordeal and recalls that "he'd *smiled* and she'd felt safe" (*AGOT* 741). It is from this moment onwards, that Sansa realises that Joffrey is a vicious person instead of the gallant prince she expected and saw at first. She makes a mental note to never again have the same gullibility: "Once she had loved Prince Joffrey with all her heart, and admired and trusted his mother, the queen. They had repaid that love and trust with her father's head. Sansa would never make that mistake again" (*ACOK* 52). Thus, her father's execution has made her realise that Joffrey and Cersei are not to be trusted, and that she should be more cautious in the future rather than naively hold on to romantic beliefs. That she has fully let go her feelings for Joffrey also becomes apparent when she truthfully describes him to Margaery and Olenna Tyrell after Sansa's betrothal to Joffrey is ended: "Joffrey is a monster. He lied about the butcher's boy and made Father kill my wolf. When I displease him, he has the Kingsguard beat me. He's evil and cruel, my lady, it's so. And the queen as well." (*ASOS* 87). Sansa's words clearly show that she now fully understands Joffrey's nature.

Sansa is mistreated by Joffrey throughout her stay in King's Landing, but the knights who are present at court do not lend a hand to help her. As Larrington argues, "the knights of King's Landing only pay lip service to the idea that ladies should be cherished" (126). Joffrey

often orders knights of his Kingsguard to hit Sansa. For example, when she whispers to Joffrey that she hates him for having his father executed, he orders Ser Meryn to strike her: "[t]he knight was on her before she could think, yanking back her hand as she tried to shield her face and back-handing her across the ear with a gloved fist" (*AGOT* 744). Such beatings happen regularly; after a particular sadistic action by Joffrey, making Sansa look at her father's severed head on the wall (*AGOT* 748), Sansa brashly tells Joffrey that her brother Robb might give her Joffrey's head someday, and Joffrey has Ser Meryn beat her up once more (*AGOT* 750). Ser Meryn himself indicates that he beats her because he, like Sansa, has to do "whatever his Grace commands" (*AGOT* 745). However, he does not sympathise with Sansa's misery: "He did not so much as glance at the bruise he had left her. He did not hate her, Sansa realized; neither did he love her. He felt nothing for her at all. She was only a … a thing to him" (*AGOT* 745). A similar notion is expressed by Ser Boros Blount when Tyrion stops him from beating Sansa while tearing her clothes off, which is "shockingly unchivalrous behaviour" (Larrington 126). When Tyrion asks "what sort of knight beats helpless maids?", Boros replies: "[t]he sort who serves his king" (*ACOK* 488). Ser Meryn and Ser Boros' statements express the same conflict that Lacy described. Because of their loyalty to the king, which was inherent to the chivalric ethos, Ser Meryn and Ser Boros have to beat Sansa when the king orders them to. Their indifference to Sansa's suffering and willingness to strike her at Joffrey's command demonstrates the conflict between the traditional chivalric code and the ideals of courtly love. Sansa addresses the failure of the knights to come to her aid when she is beaten: "[k]nights are sworn to defend the weak, protect women, and fight for the right, but none of them did a thing" (*ACOK* 490). Furthermore, the beatings make Sansa realise that not all knights are noble and chivalrous. She thinks to herself that "[t]here are no heroes" and recalls that Petyr Baelish once told her that "life is not a song" (*AGOT* 746). Because of the harsh reality of her life in King's Landing, Sansa has to conclude that "in life, the monsters win" (*AGOT* 746).

Those who are kind to Sansa, and actively try to help her, are presented as being vastly different from being the kind of knight that she had dreamt of when she was younger. Firstly, the Hound, though Sansa is frightened by him, is more gentle to her than the other knights of the Kingsguard. The Hound is the only member of the Kingsguard not to obey Joffrey when he gives orders to beat Sansa (*ACOK* 39). Furthermore, he occasionally hints at feeling sympathetic towards Sansa. When Ser Boros is beating Sansa violently, the Hound exclaims that it is "enough" (*ACOK* 488) after a while, indicating that he does not agree with beating her. Additionally, it is also the Hound who throws her his own cloak to cover herself with

(*ACOK* 488). He also gives Sansa advice to prevent beatings from happening in the future: "[s]ave yourself some pain, girl, and give him what he wants. […] He wants you to smile and smell sweet and be his lady love" (*AGOT* 744). The Hound thus tries to convince Sansa that court culture is all a facade. As mentioned in chapter One, the Hound also saves Sansa during the mob riots, presumably preventing her from being raped. Over the course of her time in King's Landing, Sansa comes to appreciate the Hound. During the Battle of Blackwater Bay, when Sansa finds refuge in the castle with the other women, she laments the fact that it is Ser Ilyn who is present to protect them, as she states that she "would be gladder if it were the Hound […] Harsh as he was, she did not believe Sandor Clegane would let any harm come to her" (*ACOK* 818). In addition, when Clegane flees from the battle and leaves King's Landing, Sansa is saddened and wishes for him to return, as it made her feel more secure (*ASOS* 76). It may also be noted that before he left, the Hound offered to take Sansa with him, away from the capital (*ASOS* 76). This exemplifies the Hound's attitude towards Sansa, namely that he is genuinely concerned with her well-being, which knights such as Ser Meryn and Ser Boros are not.

Another character that acts kindly towards Sansa is Ser Dontos, a drunken knight-turned-fool. Like the Hound, Ser Dontos has none of the markings of a "true knight" in Sansa's eyes. He appears drunk in the tourney on Joffrey's nameday, "clad in breastplate and plumed helm and nothing else. His legs were pale and skinny, and his manhood flopped about obscenely" (*ACOK* 45). This appearance immediately differentiates Dontos from other knights such as Ser Loras who always look splendid in their armour. Joffrey intends to have Dontos drowned, but Sansa pities him and convinces Joffrey to make him his fool instead, which placed him in her debt (*ACOK* 46). Eventually, Dontos becomes one of Sansa's sole hopes of escape: they meet in the godswood and Dontos tells her he will arrange a ship for her to escape on. Sansa is hesitant at first: "I prayed to the gods for a knight to come save me […] Why would they send me a drunken old fool?" (*ACOK* 284). She is eventually convinced when Dontos claims that Sansa has made him realise what knighthood should be about: "I have never been a hero […] . I've won no tourneys, no renown in war … but I was a knight once, and you have helped me remember what that meant" (*ACOK* 285). Thus, Ser Dontos presents himself in the opposite manner that Ser Meryn and Ser Boros do: while the latter two are intent on serving their king and have no regards for the welfare of the lady, Dontos realises that helping Sansa is all what knighthood should be about, thereby taking the opposite side of the conflict between chivalric ethic and courtly love that the knights of the Kingsguard do. It is also important that Sansa and Dontos often refer to each other as Florean and Jonquil,

the main characters in her favourite songs. For example, when Dontos offers to beat Sansa instead of Ser Meryn or Ser Boros, ensuring that less damage would be done to Sansa, she thinks "[m]y Florian. She could have kissed him, blotchy skin and broken veins and all" (*ACOK* 487). Thus, Dontos is another unlikely ally for Sansa.

Thirdly, Tyrion Lannister proves to be more chivalrous towards Sansa than his nephew Joffrey is, despite the fact that Tyrion is a dwarf instead of a handsome knight or lord. Larrington discusses the traditional role of dwarfs in medieval literature, arguing that rather often, dwarfs are antagonists. As Larrington states, "in medieval belief dwarfs were often considered as malignant" (105) and adds that in medieval romances, they typically had a "churlish" (105) role. However, Martin subverts that medieval stereotype through the character of Tyrion Lannister (Larrington 107), which can be observed by analysing how Tyrion treats Sansa. From the moment that they meet, Tyrion is kind to Sansa, expressing compassion so shortly after her father's death: "My lady, I am sorry for your losses. Truly, the gods are cruel" (*ACOK* 50) and says that he is "only a little lion, child, and I vow, I shall not savage you" (*ACOK* 51). Throughout her stay in King's Landing, Tyrion is helpful to Sansa. For example, Tyrion is infuriated when he catches one of the aforementioned beatings by Ser Boros in which her clothes were torn off. Tyrion asks Boros "is this your notion of chivalry?" (*ACOK* 488) and he puts an end to the violence. He subsequently confronts Joffrey, stating the latter has "the wits of a goose" (*ACOK* 489). Thus, Tyrion defends Sansa and shows that he is concerned with Sansa's wellbeing. Tyrion's kindness towards Sansa is also illustrated in his modesty when the two are wedded on the orders of Tyrion's father Tywin. "I know I am not the sort of husband young girls dream of, Sansa," he said softly, "but neither am I Joffrey." (*ASOS* 385). Moreover, Tyrion defies certain wedding traditions. Traditionally, there would be a bedding ceremony in which the bride is stripped of her clothes and put into bed along with her new husband. However, Tyrion refuses to have such a bedding ceremony despite Joffrey's orders (*ASOS* 390). Similarly, when Sansa and Tyrion are supposed to consummate the marriage, Tyrion refuses to have sex with Sansa, as it does not feel right for him: "I will not touch you until you want me to" (*ASOS* 394). Such behaviour is rare in Westeros, where rape and marital rape was ubiquitous, as discussed in Chapter One. Thus, Tyrion is a third example of an unexpected ally for Sansa: though being almost the opposite of a traditional handsome knight, his behaviour towards Sansa might be the most chivalrous of all of King's Landing. He is modest, kind, and has a striking concern for Sansa's safety.

Conclusion

In medieval society, the concept of knighthood and chivalry was of major importance. Lacy and Uden describe the various rules that knights were meant to adhere to, explaining that because of both religion and of literature, chivalry became a social construct rather than merely a name for military prowess. Medieval romances played a major part in this, constructing the image of the perfectly chivalrous knight and stressing the importance of servitude to the lady, even though that sometimes conflicted with the traditional chivalric ethic. Renato Bordone explains that the popular image of knighthood in medievalism is akin to the romantic medieval image, of the knight in shining armour, often going on adventures to save a woman in distress. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Sansa Stark shares this traditional view of chivalry, but this image is deconstructed by her experiences in King's Landing. At first, Sansa is unconditionally in love with the cruel prince Joffrey, but after her father is beheaded on Joffrey's orders Sansa realises that her gallant prince is in fact a cruel monster. She is beaten by the knights of the Kingsguard, and the only people who actively try to help and protect her are the Hound, Dontos, and Tyrion; none of which confirmed to the traditional stereotype of handsome knight. Over the course of her experiences in King's Landing, Sansa starts to question her romantic view of knighthood, and has to admit that not all knights are benevolent.

Altogether, Martin subverts the trope of the traditional knights in shining armour. This is not to say that no good knights exist in Martin's world, on which will be elaborated in Chapter Three. King's Landing's knights, however, and Joffrey himself as well, prove to be vastly different from what Sansa expected on the basis of the heroes and knights she found in the traditional romantic songs she loved. This difference is in accordance with the harsh realistic approach that has been mentioned several times earlier in this thesis already: as Petyr Baelish tells Sansa, "Life is not a song", and this notion is one that is also presented by Martin through his portrayal of Sansa's life at King's Landing. The next chapter will also deal with knighthood and chivalry, but instead of focusing on the romantic aspect, the emphasis will be on the relationship between chivalry and honour and how the traditional dichotomy of good and evil is explored in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

CHAPTER THREE – CHIVALRY AND HONOUR IN *A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE*

Although the treatment of women, discussed in Chapter Two, is certainly telling about a knight or lord's personality, there are other important aspects of chivalry. In the previous chapter it was established that chivalry became a code of conduct, especially for those at court. Knights were generally expected to fight for the right and good cause, as can be seen in Uden's list discussed in Chapter Two: "[c]hampionship of the right and the good, in every place and at all times, against the forces of evil" (55). For lords and kings, the same ideals applied, since "[k]ings and knights had much in common. By the High Middle Ages kings (joined by all lay lords) considered themselves knights" (Kaeuper 107). This chapter will discuss how Martin presents certain key aspects of chivalry, and how this portrayal provides insight into Martin's understanding of the traditional fight between good and evil.

Ideals of Chivalry in A Song of Ice and Fire

Like its medieval counterpart, knighthood in Westeros is rooted in religion, resulting in a comparable chivalric code. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the concept of knighthood is affiliated with the Faith of the Seven, the dominant religion in almost all of the Seven Kingdoms (Larrington 99). Noting that the Faith of the Seven "has a great deal in common with medieval Catholicism" (Larrington 99), this religion unsurprisingly functions as a centre for the chivalric code of the knights, just as Christianity was central to the medieval chivalric ethos. Jaime Lannister recalls how he has to stand vigil in the sept on the eve of his knighting: "Jaime had laid his sword across the Warrior's knees, piled his armor at his feet, and knelt upon the rough stone floor before the altar" (*AFFC* 176). Larrington points out that a vigil such as Jaime's was a common practice in medieval knighthood as well. Thus, there is a resemblance between the Faith of the Seven and Christianity in their influence on knighthood.

The obligations that knights are assigned with are expressed in the sacred vow they swear in their traditional knighting ceremony. In a passage from another work of Martin, *The Hedge Knight*, also set in Westeros, the expectations of knights become apparent. Rohani & Abootalebi discuss a traditional knighting ceremony that is presented in this prequel to *A Song of Ice and Fire*:

> In the name of the Warrior I charge you to be brave. In the name of the Father I charge you to be just. In the name of the Mother I charge you to defend the young and innocent. In the name of the Maid I charge you to protect all women. (qtd. in Rohani & Abootalebi 116)

Thus, a code of conduct is established that is similar to that of medieval chivalry. Importantly, the Warrior, the Father, the Mother, and the Maid – four of the seven elements of the Faith –

are addressed, stressing the importance of piety for a knight. As Rohani & Abootalebi indicate, different versions of the ceremony above occur frequently (116). One other instance of knighting in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is Beric Dondarrion's knighting of Gendry:

> Gendry, do you swear before the eyes of gods and men to defend those who cannot defend themselves, to protect all women and children, to obey your captains, your liege lord, and your king, to fight bravely when needed and do such other tasks as are laid upon you, however hard or humble or dangerous they may be (*ASOS* 540)

Although this version of the ceremony does not address the gods as much as the ceremony from *The Hedge Knight* does, the gods are still called upon as witnesses to Gendry's oath swearing. Altogether, the code of chivalry in Westeros is akin to its medieval equivalent, placing the protection of women, children, and the poor central to the ethos of the knight.

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, chivalry is further linked to the issue of personal honour. Since chivalry is closely related to military prowess, many knights of Westeros are famed for their skill with a sword. One such knight is Ser Barristan. According to Barristan, chivalry is what set knights apart from other killers, calling it "the code that made a knight more than any pit fighter" (*ADWD* 806). Barristan later adds that "[i]t is chivalry that makes a true knight, not a sword. […] Without honor, a knight is no more than a common killer. It is better to die with honor than to live without it" (*ADWD* 961). Clearly, Barristan values honour, and is of the opinion that knights are elevated above common killers because of their approach to sword fighting. The chivalric honour that Barristan refers to has two different meanings. On the one hand, a knight's honour meant the level of one's reputation and glory. The other aspect of honour, Larrington notes, is "closely bound up with ideas of truth and morality, of doing what someone thinks is right" (19). These issues, closely related to chivalry, are therefore what make knights rank higher than ordinary soldiers and other fighters, according to Ser Barristan.

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, an honourable manner of fighting is not always rewarded. In a trial by combat, the common sellsword Bronn defends Tyrion Lannister, and takes on Ser Vardis Egen, a knight chivalrously fighting on behalf of Lysa Arryn, who has accused Tyrion of poisoning her husband. Larrington argues that a trial by combat is a typically medieval practice, and a common feature in medieval romances (40). For instance, in Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Sir Lancelot wins two of such judicial combats, ensuring Queen Guinevere's innocence in both trials (Larrington 40-41). In this particular instance of *A Song of Ice and* Fire, however, it is the sellword who defeats the knight. Sellswords can be considered the antithesis to the code of chivalry, as they are not sworn to a particular lord, nor essentially

fighting for a good cause. Instead, their "loyalty is for sale", as Larrington puts it (127). Whereas Ser Vardis wears traditional knightly attire, carrying a heavy shield and armour, Bronn is clothed in much lighter fashion. Bronn's agility enables him to consistently dodge Vardis' attacks and exhaust him in the process. Bronn is scorned for his tactics: "[t]he man is craven! […] Stand and fight, coward!" (*AGOT* 439). Nonetheless, Bronn emerges victorious and slays Ser Vardis (*AGOT* 442), illustrating Martin's tendency towards harsh realism, as the knight would traditionally have been expected to beat a common sellsword. In addition, Bronn eventually being knighted himself arguably demonstrates a certain emptiness of knighthood in Westeros. He clearly shows to have no particular chivalric morals: when Tyrion asks him if he would kill an infant girl, Bronn says that he would not do it without question, but he would merely ask "how much?" (*ACOK* 135). Since the killing of infants goes against all knighthood supposedly stood for, Bronn's preparedness to do such a vile act demonstrates that Bronn has no interest in the chivalric ideals. However, Bronn is elevated to knighthood nonetheless after he plays an important role in the defence of King's Landing during the battle on the Blackwater, earning him the title Ser Bronn of the Blackwater. The fact that Bronn is knighted establishes a certain hollowness of knighthood in Westeros, demonstrating Martin subversion of medieval chivalry.

As mentioned earlier, maintaining a good reputation is of vital importance to many knights in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. A major factor in achieving such a reputation is by fighting in tourneys. Larrington notes that the tournaments in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are similar to their medieval counterparts, indicating their usefulness in "keeping the nobility battle-fit" as well as providing knights a chance to win money, glory, and favour from the king (124). The first tourney described in the series, the Tourney of the Hand held in Eddard Stark's honour, is a prime example of "the glamour and the glory of medieval chivalric culture" (Larrington 124). Illustrating the tourneys' importance in achieving a good reputation is the Book of the Brothers, which records the deeds of the Kingsguard. In this book, many references to tourneys can be found. Amidst some reports of deeds in war, frequent statements are made about knights' glorious performances in jousting and mêlées (*ASOS* 914-916). Apart from all the splendour, however, Martin also shows a more gruesome side to the jousting, as Gregor Clegane kills a young knight of the Vale by driving his lance through the knight's throat (*AGOT* 295). Thus, Martin highlights the grisly events that also took place during these tournaments.

Catelyn Stark's comments on the practice of tourneys strengthen the notion that knights are overly concerned with their own reputation. When she arrives at the camp of Renly

Baratheon, who has proclaimed himself king and is preparing for war, Catelyn criticises the tourneys that take place: "[t]his is madness […] Real enemies on every side and half the realm in flames, and Renly sits here playing at war like a boy with his first sword" (*ACOK* 340). Noting the behaviour of many young knights in Renly's camp, boasting and drinking, she adds: "[i]t is all a game to them still, a tourney writ large, and all they see is the chance for glory and honor and spoils" (*ACOK* 349). By claiming that true warfare would "make them old", Catelyn contrasts the practice of knights fighting in tourneys to real warfare, which according to Catelyn is much more brutal and unforgiving than partaking in tourneys.

In addition, the importance of personal honour is exemplified in knight's indignity upon having their honour questioned. For instance, when Jaime Lannister appoints Ser Boros food taster, he shamefacedly retorts: "I am no food taster! I am a knight of the Kingsguard! […] You speak to me thus? *You?* […] You should be the food taster, it seems to me. What else is a cripple good for?" (*ASOS* 919). It is clear that Ser Boros is very much concerned with the issue of honour, as he becomes insolent even towards his commander Jaime. Boros scorns Jaime for his bad reputation as Kingslayer, and ridicules him for his amputated hand. Thus, whereas Boros did not object to beating Sansa, as shown in Chapter Two, he does object to an order from the commander of the Kingsguard because he takes it as a slight upon his honour. Comments such as Ser Boros' are ubiquitous throughout the series, indicating the importance of personal honour. Arguably, the knights' focus on status demonstrates their hypocritical nature, since their vows obliged them to put the interest of others before their own.

In contrast to some of the knights discussed above, The Hound completely rejects the ideals of chivalry, and is rather cynical towards the entire concept of knighthood. Voicing an opinion completely opposite to Ser Barristan's, the Hound says to Sansa: "[w]hat do you think a knight is for, girl? You think it's all taking favors from ladies and looking fine in gold plate? Knights are for killing" (*ACOK* 756). It is clear that the Hound thinks that knights are not elevated above common warriors and killers. He later says to Arya that "[a] knight's a sword with a horse. The rest, the vows and the sacred oils and the lady's favors, they're silk ribbons tied round the sword. Maybe the sword's prettier with ribbons hanging off it, but it will kill you just as dead" (*ASOS* 466). Again, the Hound is ridiculing the ideals of chivalry and proposes a much more grim and harsh outlook on knighthood, contrasting heavily with Ser Barristan's words. The Hound also rejects the notion of personal honour: "[k]nights have no bloody honor. Time you learned that, old man" (*ASOS* 655). The Hound's cynicism, according to Rohani & Abootalebi, is caused by the behaviour of his brother Gregor Clegane, nicknamed the Mountain. Once, in his childhood, Gregor shoves his brother's face into a

brazier as punishment for playing with his toy. This horrible act is covered up with a fake story, and Gregor goes unpunished. Gregor's later became a knight, "completely shattering Sandor's illusions about knighthood and all it stood for" (Rohani & Abootalebi 113). Rohani & Abootalebi argue that the Hound is exaggerating in his critique, and that in Westeros several knights do not delight in killing. Naming Ser Barristan an example of a traditional "true knight", Rohani & Abootalebi argue that the Hound is wrong in claiming that all knights are by definition malignant in nature (115-16). Nonetheless, through his portrayal of the Hound's cynicism towards knighthood Martin presents an alternative view on chivalry, underscoring the brutal side to the concept.

In *A Song of Ice of Fire*, the grim side of knighthood is shown in the horrible deeds that some of the knights perform. Though the Hound may just be bitter about his aforementioned childhood trauma, he is not wrong in noting that Gregor's behaviour is unchivalrous even after being knighted. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the Mountain kills the young knight during the jousting. The Hound indicates that this was no accident, but a brutal killing: "[t]hat gorget wasn't fastened proper. You think Gregor didn't notice that? […] Gregor's lance goes where Gregor wants it to go" (*AGOT* 302). Later, during the same tourney, he is unhorsed by Loras Tyrell, and in his wrath he beheads his own horse and takes up arms against both Ser Loras and the Hound, who steps in to protect Loras (*AGOT* 315). He even tries to kill his brother, but is not successful and is eventually stopped by King Robert (*AGOT* 316). The ferocity of the Mountain's rage is telling about his malevolent nature. Furthermore, during a trial by combat against Oberyn, he admits to having brutally killed his sister Elia's children – the infant son and daughter of Elia and Rhaegar Targaryen, crown prince of the Seven Kingdoms – during the sack of King's Landing: "I killed her screaming whelp. […] Then I raped her. […] Then I smashed her fucking head in" (*ASOS* 975-76). Throughout the series, he displays such atrocious behaviour, burning and raiding villages and killing commoners, even women with new-born children (*AGOT* 465). Thus, by killing and raping women, as well as killing infants, Gregor clearly shows to have no regard for the code of chivalry he once swore to live up to.

In addition, the Mountain is not the only knight acting unchivalrously, as even the knights of the Kingsguard sometimes fail to adhere to the chivalric code. Firstly, Chapter Two already shows how Ser Meryn and Ser Boros mistreat Sansa. Secondly, at the start of the series, Jaime Lannister throws Bran Stark out of the window in order to preserve the secret of his forbidden, incestuous relationship with his sister Cersei, queen of the Seven Kingdoms (*AGOT* 85). He claims that he does it out of true love for Cersei, but throwing a seven-year-

old boy from the top of a tower can scarcely be considered courtly, whatever the circumstances. Lastly, a knight of the Kingsguard called Ser Osmund Kettleblack lies about Tyrion's involvement in the death of king Joffrey: "Ser Osmund Kettleblack, a vision of chivalry in immaculate scale armor and white wool cloak, swore that King Joffrey had long known that his uncle Tyrion meant to murder him" (*ASOS* 902). Being true and just is a major aspect of chivalry, and by lying in front of the judges and the entire court, Ser Osmund's behaviour is undeniably unchivalrous. Ultimately, though not all knights are malicious killers as the Hound claims, numerous knights in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are shown to forsake the chivalric code.

Interestingly, some of the characters who are not officially knights do act according to the chivalric code. Brienne is one of the most clear examples. According to Brienne, "It is a rare and precious gift to be a knight […] and even more so a knight of the Kingsguard" (*ASOS* 158). In many ways, Brienne herself resembles a traditional knight. Firstly, she is a skilled fighter, as discussed in Chapter One. Furthermore, she holds loyalty in high esteem, repeatedly swearing vows to those who are kind to her. The first instance of Brienne's oath swearing is when she joins Lord Renly's Rainbow Guard:

> I ask the honor of a place among your Rainbow Guard. I would be one of your seven, and pledge my life to yours, to go where you go, ride at your side, and keep you safe from all hurt and harm. […] My life for yours, Your Grace. From this day on, I am your shield, I swear it by the old gods and the new. (*ACOK* 344)

Brienne is loyal to Renly because of her "intense love" for him (Larrington 33). Her love for Renly stems from an act of kindness Renly once showed her:

> He even danced with her, and in his arms she'd felt graceful, and her feet had floated across the floor. Later others begged a dance of her, because of his example. From that day forth, she wanted only to be close to Lord Renly, to serve him and protect him (*AFFC* 87)

After Renly dies in Brienne's arms, stabbed to death by the shadow of his brother Stannis, Brienne is haunted by her failure to protect Renly, even though she was not to blame (Larrington 33). She vows to avenge Renly's death by killing Stannis (*ACOK* 560), indicating that her loyalty towards him continues even after his death. Brienne is grateful to Catelyn Stark, as the latter "helped [her] … In the pavilion … when they thought that I [killed Renly] […] you did not have to do that" (*ACOK* 562). Subsequently, Brienne swears another oath of service: "I will shield your back and keep your counsel and give my life for yours, if need be. I swear it by the old gods and the new" (*ACOK* 562). Thus, it is shown that Brienne greatly values Renly's chivalric behaviour and Catelyn's kindness.

Brienne is determined to hold true to her vows. When she is charged with bringing Jaime Lannister safely to King's Landing, Jaime notes that Brienne "would gladly hack [him] to pieces, but for her precious vow" (*ASOS* 158). The other part of that vow is that Brienne would return Sansa (and possibly Arya) to Catelyn. As a result, she spends most of *A Feast For Crows* roaming the Seven Kingdoms looking for Sansa. Arguably, Brienne's quest resembles the typical knightly quest, to rescue a lady – even more so when one takes into account that Sansa is located in the Eyrie and is therefore quite literally a traditional "princess in a tower". Thus, despite the fact that since she is a woman she will never be knighted, Brienne is presented as a typical knight. She is a strong fighter, loyal to her superiors, and she respects the chivalric code of knights and their holy vows.

In conclusion, knighthood in Westeros shares several traits with the medieval version. A similar chivalric code is established, rooted in religion. However, the knights in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are not always chivalrous, and their pursuit of glory and a good reputation suggests that knighthood in some cases may be more about status than about true chivalry. Equally, Brienne demonstrates that one does not have to be a knight to act chivalrously. Characters such as Gregor Clegane, Ser Meryn, Ser Boros, and Jaime show that knights too are capable of doing horrific things instead of fighting for a noble cause, as the typical knight often does in medieval romance. The next section of this chapter will discuss the notion of doing the honourable thing in some more detail, focusing on Eddard Stark and Jaime Lannister.

Doing the Right Thing: Chivalry and Morality in A Song of Ice and Fire

Eddard Stark, being a man from the north, has little interest in ideals of chivalry and knighthood. As Larrington argues, "the north is a place for warriors, not knights" (57). Furthermore, it is stated by Larrington that "the men of the north have little time for the rituals of chivalry". Eddard's resentment towards the tourney of the Hand exemplifies this notion. According to Eddard, the Hand's tourney is "an extravagance the realm cannot afford" (*AGOT* 195). When the tourney is organised nonetheless, Eddard resents the fact that it is named "the Hand's tourney", proposing for it to be called "the king's tourney", as "the Hand wants no part of it" (*AGOT* 272). By dismissing the tourney's importance, he distinguishes himself from knights who regarded the tourney as a chance to win glory. Seeing as the tourney is held in Eddard's honour, Eddard's bitterness towards the event suggests that Eddard is not interested in such personal glory. Furthermore, whereas most lords and knights have no trouble with the dangers of the tourneys, Eddard laments the "needless" death of the young knight, and claims that "[w]ar should not be a game" (*AGOT* 306). Eddard's apathy for

tourneys signifies his different feeling to fighting than knights: Like Catelyn, he compares the killing

Eddard Stark has a reputation in Westeros for being a just lord. As the Warden of the North, it is Eddard's duty to execute those who desert the Night's Watch. Eddard's approach to beheading the man at the start of the series is telling about his personality. He insists on doing it himself, rather than using a headsman, as is the common in the court of King's Landing. Eddard holds to the belief that "the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword" (*AGOT* 16). According to Eddard, "[i]f you would take a man's life, you owe it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words. And if you cannot bear to do that, then perhaps the man does not deserve to die". In this claim, Eddard's perception of justice is illustrated, as it shows that he takes the life of a man seriously and intends not to kill without reason. Furthermore, Catelyn notes that "whenever he took a man's life, afterward he would seek the quiet of the godswood" (*AGOT* 22). This custom suggests a pious attitude, as the godswood is inherently a religious place – not affiliated with the more knightly Faith of the Seven, but with the old gods, the religion of the north. It also indicates that Eddard is not fond of performing the execution, in contrast to the headsman in King's Landing, Ser Ilyn: a knight who "does so *love* his work" (*AGOT* 471). Eddard's sense of justice is also illustrated in his condemnation of the Mountain. Upon hearing of his raiding and raping in the Riverlands, Eddard intends to bring the Mountain to justice: "bring the king's justice to the false knight Gregor Clegane […] I denounce him, and attaint him, and strip him of all rank and titles, of all lands and incomes and holdings, and do sentence him to death" (*AGOT* 470). Eddard is considered one of the most honest and just men in Westeros: Stannis Baratheon claims that "only a fool would doubt his honor or his honesty" (*ASOS* 1055).

Although Eddard himself is no knight, and has no particular interest in chivalry, he proves to hold many beliefs that are similar to the traditional chivalric code. As is clear in the examples discussed earlier, he is true and just, and fulfils his duty to his king. Importantly, he also regards the safety of women and children of utmost concern. In chapter Two, it is shown that because of conflicting oaths, Ser Meryn and Ser Boros forget their duty to protect girls, harming Sansa on Joffrey's orders. However, when Eddard is confronted with a similar issue – plotting the murder of Daenerys Targaryen – he fervently disagrees with King Robert: "Robert, I ask you, what did we rise against Aerys Targaryen for, if not to put an end to the murder of children?" (*AGOT* 353). Afterwards, after Robert's council agrees to send a mercenary to kill Daenerys, Varys suggests to kill Daenerys using poison. Robert then claims that using poison is cowardly, much to Eddard's outrage:

> You send hired knives to kill a fourteen-year-old girl and still quibble about honor? […] Do it yourself, Robert. The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. Look her in the eyes before you kill her. See her tears, hear her last words. You owe her that much at least. […] I will not be part of murder, Robert. Do as you will, but do not ask me to fix my seal to it. (*AGOT* 354)

The passage above illustrates Eddard's strong resentment to the killing of children. He is even willing to give up his position as Hand of the King for it (*AGOT* 355), offering critique on Robert once more as he says that he "though we had made a nobler king" (*AGOT* 355). Later, on his deathbed, Robert eventually states that Eddard had the right of it: "The girl. Daenerys. Only a child, you were right […] Let her live. […] don't let them kill her" (*AGOT* 504-05). The ordeal with Daenerys shows that Eddard scorns his king and is willing to give up his personal honour as Hand because Robert's wishes are in conflict with Eddard's moralities.

Crucially, Eddard's tendency to do the just thing eventually becomes his downfall. Eddard's honourability is epitomised in the offer he makes Queen Cersei. After he has found out that Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen are Jaime's instead of King Robert's, Eddard confronts Cersei: "[w]hen the King returns from his hunt, I intend to lay the truth before him. You must be gone by then. You and your children […] If I were you, I should take ship for the Free Cities, or even farther, to the Summer Isles or the Port of Ibben" (*AGOT* 488). Thus, Eddard punishes Cersei for her unfaithfulness, but also wants to provide her with an opportunity to escape because he wants to prevent the murder of Cersei's children. Due to King Robert's untimely death, however, Eddard never has the chance to tell him about Cersei's unfaithfulness. Afterwards, it is Eddard's sense of honour and justice that maintains his steadfastness in proclaiming the truth about Joffrey's illegitimacy, but it leads to grief, as Larrington points out (20). He is imprisoned for treason in one of the black cells, in which he learns from Varys that Sansa has pleaded for his life. Larrington notes that because of Eddard's love for his daughters, he is willing to publically shame himself by making a "dishonouring confession of his treason" (20). Nevertheless, he is beheaded with his own longsword Ice, thus dying with his reputation as honourable man besmirched. This is one of the most important cases of harsh realism in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, because in the series' first instalment *A Game of Thrones*, Eddard is presented as the main point-of-view character and protagonist. Essentially, Eddard's fate undermines the idea of acting out of honour and love, presenting a rather bleak reality. The fact that even such a central character is not able to escape the harsh reality of Westeros epitomises Martin's approach.

Another character that is closely related to the idea of morality and righteousness is Jaime Lannister, who is scorned all across the Seven Kingdoms for slaying King Aerys

Targaryen. As Jaime belonged to the Kingsguard of Aerys Targaryen, the murder is considered a vile act of treason and oath breaking on Jaime's part. It earns Jaime the nickname "Kingslayer", and Ser Barristan Selmy, who propagates the ideals of chivalry, describes Jaime as "[t]he false knight who profaned his blade with the blood of the king he had sworn to defend" (*AGOT* 623). Crucially, however, Jaime had good reason to kill Aerys. Jaime recalls that Aerys planned to burn the entire capital: "The traitors want my city […] but I'll give them naught but ashes. Let Robert be king over charred bones and cooked meat" (*ASOS* 507). Jaime was given the order to kill his own father, to prove his loyalty to Aerys. By choosing to forsake his vow to Aerys, killing the king instead of his father, Jaime arguably does the right and just thing, as he saves the city from great disaster. He indicates that a brother of the Kingsguard, Ser Gerold Hightower, once told him that he "swore a vow to guard the king, not to judge him" (*ACOK* 798). Jaime adds that Ser Gerold was "loyal to the end and a better man than me, all agree". Even though the entire realm knew that Aerys was mad, being loyal to a mad king was valued higher than taking up arms against him, undermining the idea of upholding oaths. Jaime resents the fact that he is "reviled by so many for [his] finest act", and it leads him to become cynical towards the concept of oath swearing. When Catelyn scorns Jaime for breaking his vow, he replies:

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

From the passage above it becomes clear that Jaime thinks one can never hold true to all the parts of the chivalric code. The conflicting duties of knights are already mentioned in Chapter Two, in Ser Boros' statement about serving his king whilst beating Sansa. Jaime therefore makes a valid point about the complex nature of oaths, if they encompass many different aspects.

Jaime's perception of chivalry changes after his sword hand is cut off. At first, Jaime often displays antagonistic behaviour, by throwing Bran out of the window and attacking Eddard Stark in the streets of King's Landing. When his hand is cut off, Susan Vaught indicates that "[a]ll that Jaime Lannister once was – handsome, powerful, strong, skilled with the blade – has now been destroyed" (104). He starts contemplating about his identity as a knight: "[t]hey took my sword hand. Was that all I was, a sword hand? Gods be good, is it true?" (*ASOS* 415). Influenced by his interaction with Brienne, who shows him her determination in fulfilling her oath to Catelyn, he starts acting more chivalrously. Jaime's newfound chivalry is illustrated most clearly in his decision to go back to rescue her from the

bear pit her captors have put her in. As Vaught notes, he "chooses to place himself at risk […] in order to rescue Brienne" (104), which is a typically chivalric thing to do. Furthermore, whereas pre-amputation Jaime often disdainfully calls her "wench", post-amputation Jaime addresses her more chivalrously: "[b]lue is a good color on you, my lady […] It goes well with your eyes" (*ASOS* 1006). Jaime also proves to have a new standpoint on the issues with oath swearing. He confronts Ser Meryn for chastising Sansa: "[h]ere, show me where it is in our vows that we swear to beat women and children" (*ASOS* 921). When the knight indignantly replies that he simply served his king, Jaime responds:

> Henceforth you will temper that obedience. My sister is Queen Regent. My father is the King's Hand. I am Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Obey us. None other. […] The king is eight. Our first duty is to protect him, which includes protecting him from himself. Use that ugly thing you keep inside your helm. If Tommen wants you to saddle his horse, obey him. If he tells you to kill his horse, come to me. (*ASOS* 921)

Thus, Jaime shows a much more just and righteous approach to the concept of knighthood. By instructing his Kingsguard to not blindly obey the king when he is giving unchivalrous orders, he shows to have gained a certain understanding of what chivalry stood for. Furthermore, in *A Feast For Crows*, Jaime acts as a peace negotiator in the Riverlands, "bringing battles to an end around Westeros, creating unity – the ultimate act of good", Vaught argues (104). Lastly, he sends Brienne on a mission to find Sansa and bring her safe[3], even though Cersei wants her dead. He chooses to do this so that both Brienne and Jaime fulfil an oath sworn to Catelyn (*ASOS* 1009), exemplifying how Jaime now chooses to do the right and honourable thing.

Martin's portrayal of Eddard and Jaime's morals, as well as his representation of knighthood, provides insight into Martin's perspective on issues such as good and evil. In an interview with TIME Entertainment, Martin argues that in much of the Tolkien-inspired medievalist fantasy fiction, good versus evil became based on clichés. During the interview on *The Strombo Show* mentioned in Chapter One, Martin explains that one such cliché is "[h]andsome guys in white cloaks who fight ugly guys who dress all in black" (*Strombo* 7:45). It is clear that Martin proposes a different kind of battle between good and evil: "[m]y opinion has always been that the battle between good and evil is fought within the individual human heart. All of us have the capacity for good, all of us have the capacity for evil" (*Strombo* 7:55). Characters such as Jaime Lannister and Sandor Clegane perfectly reflect Martin's comments, as both Jaime and the Hound are responsible for both horrible and

[3] There is a sense of irony in naming, just like Arya's sword "Needle" and her "dancing lessons" referred to in Chapter One. In AFFC, Jaime's horse is called "Honor", and he names the sword he gives to Brienne "Oathkeeper". As honour and oath keeping were matters Jaime was least associated with, the naming is rather ironic.

honourable deeds. Martin's claims about good versus evil are also reflected in his portrayal of the Night's Watch. Consisting mostly of bastards, criminals, and orphans, dressed all in black, the Night's Watch is contrasted heavily with the grandeur of the Kingsguard in their shiny white cloaks. However, men of the Night's Watch swear an oath to protect the entire seven kingdoms of Westeros (*AGOT* 522): one of the most noble and praiseworthy causes, and of major importance to safety in all of Westeros. By dressing them all in black, Martin subverts the traditional "good guys in white" versus "bad guys in black" trope. Altogether, *A Song of Ice and Fire* distinguishes itself from other fantasy fiction by not presenting the issues of good and evil as two separate entities fighting against each other, but more complex and individual.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed how various themes of chivalry and knighthood are explored in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. While there are several important similarities between chivalry in Westeros and in medieval Europe, such as its foundation in religion and the establishment of a code of conduct, Martin problematizes the concept of chivalry in various ways. First of all, he shows that some knights behave terribly, forsaking their holy vows. It is also clear that for many knights, their knighthood is more about their own reputation and status than about the chivalric code, as is exemplified in Ser Boros' insolence to Jaime when he thinks he is being insulted. Furthermore, non-knights such as Brienne show to possess chivalric principles. Crucially, Martin shows that one does not have to be a knight in order to act chivalrous. Doing the right and honourable thing, however, is not always rewarded, and in some cases even punished. Eddard Stark has a strong sense of what is right and just, but eventually pays for it with his life because he gave Cersei the chance to outwit him. Jaime Lannister is disparaged for being a Kingslayer, even though by slaying him he saved countless lives. Thus, some characters intent on doing the just thing become victims to Martin's harsh realism.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has provided an analysis of how George R.R. Martin subverts traditional medieval tropes in his epic saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Addressing several important issues such as medieval chivalry and the role of women in medievalist fantasy fiction, this thesis has examined how Martin's representation of these issues compares to the traditional ideals. In general, Martin's portrayal differs in some key elements: Martin opts for a more harsh and realistic approach, creating a more grim and brutal depiction of medieval society than medievalist writers like Tolkien.

Chapter one discussed gender roles in *A Song Ice and Fire*, comparing Martin's heroines to traditional medievalist fiction. As Tolkien is a benchmark for medievalist fiction, his portrayal of women was first discussed. Though there are some examples of strong women Tolkien's work, the role of women is altogether marginalised. Furthermore, Tolkien does not include the issue of rape in his legendarium. Contrastingly, Martin's series consists of many important women integral to the plot, and occurrences of sexual violence are abundant in Martin's saga, signifying Martin's harsh realism. Furthermore, on the basis of Jane Tolmie's article, it was shown that *A Song of Ice and Fire* shares several of the traditional tropes of feminist medievalist fantasy: a patriarchal society is established in which women are subject to issues such as rape and the custom of forced marriage. Importantly, some of Martin's heroines subvert medieval gender roles by not behaving according to traditional gender expectations, with Arya and Brienne being prime examples. Martin's portrayal of gender roles thus bears a resemblance to several aspects of feminist medievalist fantasy. However, Martin differs in one key aspect: the unfailing success that the traditional feminist heroines have in their quest to overcome the patriarchal society they live in. Although Daenerys makes it to Queen of Meereen, Asha's similar attempt ends in failure. Altogether, Martin's representation of women indicates that in some cases he is interested in subverting gender roles, but also that his saga is not biased in favour of strong women.

Chapter two focused on the romantic expectations of chivalry that Sansa Stark has. Firstly, it was shown that knights were expected to be just and noble, placing the interest of women central to their cause. The image of the perfect "knight-in-shining-armour" was established in medieval romances such as *Lancelot.* As Sansa Stark is greatly moved by songs and tales resembling medieval romances, she expects all knights to be perfectly gallant. She falls for Joffrey's kind and chivalrous words to her and is thrilled by the prospect of marrying him one day. At first, Sansa is mesmerised by the splendour of the tourney and the courtesy of

knights such as Ser Loras. However, after her father is beheaded on Joffrey's orders, Sansa is forced to accept that her perception of chivalry was wrong, and that the romantic appearance of chivalry is merely a façade. Sansa is beaten severely by the knights of Joffrey's Kingsguard, thus further illustrating Martin's tendency towards harsh realism. Interestingly, those who aid Sansa are not knights: the dwarf Tyrion Lannister, who is mocked by many for his size, the knight-turned-fool Dontos, and the coarse yet gentle Sandor "the Hound" Clegane. Thus, Martin subverts the traditional tropes of romantic chivalry and court culture: Sansa is hurt badly by the supposedly romantic characters she admired, and those who helped her are far removed from the handsome knights in songs and stories.

The third and final chapter also dealt with chivalry, but in chapter three the focus was shifted to the knights rather than Sansa, analysing to what extent knights in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are able to live up to their vows. Firstly, it was shown that in Westeros, knighthood has a similar function as its medieval counterpart. Rooted largely in religion, a code of conduct is established, obliging knights to at all times be true and just, obey the king, and protect women, children, and the weak. Although some knights, such as Ser Barristan and Loras Tyrell, hold chivalry in high esteem and try to live by its rules, there are numerous knights in Westeros who do not act in accordance with the code of chivalry at all. Examples discussed in chapter three include Gregor "the Mountain" Clegane and Ser Jaime Lannister. Another important character when it comes to knighthood is Bronn: he clearly has no interest in the ideals of chivalry, but becomes a knight nonetheless. Thus, Martin again undermines the medieval ideal of all knights being benevolent "knights-in-shining-armour". Importantly, chapter three demonstrated that there are characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* who are not knights, but do adhere to many aspects of the chivalric code. The clearest example that was provided is Brienne. Her attention to oath swearing, and determination to uphold those vows, present her as a typically knightly figure. Thus, Martin suggests two things: one does not have to be a knight to act chivalrously, and not all knights in fact do act chivalrously.

Chapter three also discussed the issue of morality and righteousness. Both Eddard Stark and Jaime Lannister at a certain point choose to do a right and just thing, for which they are both punished. Firstly, Eddard gives Cersei a chance to escape with her children to prevent needless bloodshed of innocent children. Eventually, he pays for this chivalrous act with his life, as he is incarcerated and later beheaded for treason. Jaime Lannister, part of the Mad King Aerys' Kingsguard, stabs his king to prevent the slaughter of thousands of civilians. Jaime is scorned for this act all his life. The fact that being loyal to a mad king was valued over the elimination of a dangerous madman, undermines the idea of swearing oaths. Thus,

Martin again subverts a traditional medieval trope. Altogether, Martin's representation of chivalry provides insight into Martin's attitude towards the traditional medievalist trope of good versus evil. Martin subverts this trope as well, as Martin's notions of good and evil are not two easily identified categories of handsome knights dressed in white versus ugly-looking antagonists in black. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a more complex understanding of good and evil is established, which is most clearly represented in characters such as Jaime and the Hound, who are capable of doing both good and evil deeds.

In conclusion, Martin subverts numerous medieval ideals, as well as certain tropes of traditional medievalist fiction. By means of this subversion, Martin presents a harsh realistic approach to these issues. Whereas Tolkien's depiction of the medieval may be perceived as romantic, Martin's harsh approach arguably makes for a more honest depiction of the Middle Ages. As adaptations of medieval ideals are generally also telling about the present day, Martin may comment on some issues he thinks are topical in our day and age, such as the somewhat feminist agenda he seems to convey in his depiction of women. He also laments the clichés that have become dominant in the genre of medievalist fantasy, and by presenting a harshly realistic world which even his main characters cannot escape, Martin succeeds in creating an enthralling series in which the reader is left completely unaware of what is going to befall their favourite characters. In that respect, his subversion of medieval and medievalist tropes also has a literary function.

Naturally, there are many more elements in Martin's work that have not been discussed in this thesis. An interesting topic for further research, for instance, is Martin's portrayal of different religions in the series, considering the Red Priestess Melisandre, as well as groups such as the Faith Militant and the Sparrows. Another interesting theme to analyse would be the roles played by various forms of magic in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. One might analyse how blood and fire magic (for example, Daenerys and her dragons or Melisandre and her leeches) oppose instances of ice magic, such as the Wall and the Others. For now, this thesis has demonstrated Martin's attitude towards several important medievalist topics, arguing that his portrayal of gender roles and chivalry demonstrate a subversion of the medieval world that inspired Martin, in order to create a more brutally honest work of medievalist fiction.

In general, comparing a fantasy author to his traditional forebears like Tolkien provides insight into the author's deviations from his sources. This thesis has indicated that inspired by Tolkien, medievalist fantasy mostly establishes an idealised version of the medieval. By analysing how Martin deviates from his medieval and medievalist sources, it becomes apparent that the harsh realism in *A Song of Ice and Fire*'s distinguishes it from other,

romanticised medievalist fantasy. As of writing this thesis, two instalments of *A Song of Ice and Fire* are yet to be published, and it is safe to assume that these works will also be full of interesting plots inspired by, and undoubtedly subverting, medieval ideals. But, who knows? Martin might surprise us all with a traditional, happy ending.

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