

“Tuneful Tragedy:” Aesthetization of Horror in *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin

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Abstract

In the world of George R. R. Martin, horror seems ubiquitous. Hatred, aggression, violence and death are ever-present themes in his bestselling epic saga. The paper aims at presenting horror as a source of aesthetic stimulation in Martin's novels. First of all, it may be argued that the language and imagery of *Ice and Fire's* horrifying descriptions can be traced back to the nightmarish violence of medieval drama. The conventions first used in Corpus Christi plays were developed to create a special moment of simultaneous attraction and revulsion, of acknowledgement and denial; this particular moment provides an important key to understanding the representation of horror in Martin's fiction. Another aspect of the spectacular nature of horror in *Ice and Fire* is the theory of the sublime as developed by Burke and Kant. The sublime may be delightful even in its terrible aspects, connected with transgressing the moral order of the universe. As a result, literary expression of terror becomes, as if by definition, an aesthetic expression: a representation already theatricalized and framed. George R. R. Martin's spectacle of violence depicted in *A Song of Ice and Fire* thus becomes appalling and appealing at the same time.

Key Words: Aesthetization, violence, medieval drama, *A Song of Ice and Fire*

Mereen was as large as Astapor and Yunkai combined. Like her sister cities she was built of brick (...). Behind [the walls], huge against the sky, could be seen the top of the Great Pyramid, a monstrous thing eight hundred feet tall with a towering bronze harpy at its top.

“The harpy is a craven thing,” Daario Naharis said when he saw it. “She has a woman's heart and a chicken's legs. Small wonder her sons hide behind their walls.”

But the hero did not hide. He rode out the city gates, armored in scales of copper and jet and mounted upon a white charger whose striped pink-and-white barding matched the silk cloak flowing from the hero's shoulders. (...) Back and forth he rode beneath the walls of

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multicolored bricks, challenging the besiegers to send a champion forth to meet him in single combat. (...)

The pink-and-white hero taunted the besiegers for an hour, mocking their manhood, mothers, wives, and gods. Meereen’s defenders cheered him on from the city walls. “His name is Oznak zo Pahl,” Brown Ben Plumm told her when he arrived for the war council. (...)

They watched Oznak zo Pahl dismount (...), undo his robes, pull out his manhood, and direct a stream of urine in the general direction of the olive grove where Dany’s gold pavilion stood among the burnt trees. He was still pissing when Daario Naharis rode up, *arakh* in hand. “Shall I cut that off for you and stuff it down his mouth, Your Grace?” (...)

“It’s his city I want, not his meager manhood.” She was growing angry, however. *If I ignore this any longer, my own people will think me weak.* (...) “This challenge must be met,” Arstan said again. (...) “It will be.” Dany said, as the hero tucked his penis away again. “Tell Strong Belwas I have need of him.” (...)

A thrum of excitement went through the siege lines when Belwas was seen plodding toward the city, and from the walls and towers of Meereen came shouts and jeers. Oznak zo Pahl mounted up again, and waited, his striped lance held upright. (...)

“A chivalrous man would dismount,” said Arstan. (...) Oznak zo Pahl lowered his lance and charged. Belwas stopped with legs spread wide. In one hand was his small round shield, in the other the curved *arakh*. (...) He stood in the horse’s path, his vest stretched tight across his broad back. Oznak’s lance was leveled at the center of his chest. Its bright steel point winked in the sunlight. *He’s going to be impaled,* she thought. And quick as the blink of an eye the horseman was beyond him, wheeling, raising the lance. Belwas made no move to strike at him. The Meereenese on the walls screamed even louder. “What is he doing?” Dany demanded.

“Giving the mob a show,” ser Jorah said.¹

The world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin is a dark world, filled with dread and despair. In this compelling saga of fantasy middle ages, horror takes multiple forms as the reader has many an

opportunity to be scared. There are times when the source of the novels' disturbing atmosphere is just a vague mention of some ancient, forgotten power, dark and malevolent, as distant as the Shadow Lands. Most times, however, this source is quite real and tangible: it is human violence, in its many forms and aspects. To come back to the duellists:

Steel sang against steel, too fast for Dany to follow the blows. It could not have been a dozen heartbeats before Belwas's chest was awash in blood from a slice below his breast, and Oznak zo Pahl had an *arakh* planted right between his ram's horns. The eunuch wrenched the blade loose and parted the hero's head from his body with three savage blows to the neck. He held it up high for the Meereenese to see, then flung it toward the city gates and let it bounce and roll across the sand.

“So much for the hero of Meereen,” said Daario, laughing.²

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, violence is inflicted for various reasons. As a reviewer for Sunday Times rightly points out, Martin's wars are as multifaceted as they are ambiguous, “as are the men and women who wage them and the gods who watch them and chortle, and somehow that makes them mean more. A Feast for Crows isn't pretty elves against gnarly orcs. It's men and women slugging it out in the muck, for money and power and lust and love.³” There are times when honour seems to be involved, as in the example quoted above. At other times, characters resort to violence in order to protect their love ones. Still, as often as not, a gruesome death is nothing but honourable, a sacrifice made proves futile, and, as another reviewer points out, “the wrong people die.”⁴ What is more, in *A Song of Ice and Fire* there is no sense of higher purpose behind horror: unlike Tolkien, Martin refuses to embrace a vision of the world as a Manichaean struggle between Good and Evil.

Why does the reader enjoy the novels, since the author's approach is obviously anti-escapist? What makes the blind hatred, aggression and violence of *Ice and Fire* appalling and appealing at the same time? I want to argue that in order to answer this question, one needs to analyze Martin's strategies of making horror the source of aesthetic stimulation. I believe that he achieves this goal by staging the gruesome and the horrible in the form of a spectacle, while using the conventions that bring to mind the nightmarish violence of medieval drama.

In the Medieval era, a great deal of graphic violence was presented onstage. Unlike the extant early Greek theatre that would place scenes of death and physical violence offstage, the horror was enacted in full view of

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the spectators. For instance, *The Death of Herod* within the Ludus Coventriae involves a detailed portrayal of the Massacre of the Innocents, including blood effects and dismembered bodies. In Corpus Christi plays as well as Passion Plays, gruesome scenes of the flogging and crucifixion of Christ occurred on stage. Also familiar are the graphic scenes of violence in the Shakespearean and Jacobean theatres. *The Revenger's Tragedy*, for instance, attributed to Cyril Tourneur, is a portrayal of lust and ambition in an Italian court. A young man is driven to avenge a lover's death, which was caused by the villainy of a powerful older man; the avenger schemes to effect his revenge, and he finally succeeds in a bloodbath that costs him his own life as well.

Nevertheless, I believe that what needs to be emphasized is not the form and content of the plays, but the relation that form and content bears to reality. In her *Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence*, Jody Enders analyzes in detail the fluid boundaries among drama, rhetoric, and violence. She argues that medieval religious theater came to include the representation of physical suffering as a crucial means by which to “reveal its own truths.”⁵ Enders believes that much of that theater “not only *was* violent but that, at some level, it *had to be* violent because it was unable to escape the conceptual and philological similarities among creative invention, dramatic catharsis, and human suffering that emerged from the rhetorical treatments of torture (which circulated in the classical, medieval, and early Renaissance educational systems).”⁶ In other words, the medieval understanding of torture and punishment both enabled and encouraged the dramatic depiction of violence, as a means of coercing theater audiences into accepting the various “truths” enacted didactically in mysteries, miracles, and even farces. “The spectacularity of violence was embedded in the very language of the law, and the violence of law was expressed in the theater.”⁷

This *spectacular* nature of violence is vividly described by Glynne William Gladstone Wickham:

Realism was carried into actuality in the Middle Ages: the gruesome, pitiful and awe-inspiring rituals of public execution. Raised scaffold, gibbet, hangman (or masked hangman with axe) magistrate, priest-confessor and convicted felon combined to proclaim the process of justice (at least as interpreted by mortals at the time) to the world at large in an outward figuration that was at once emblematic and realistic. The presence of a public audience provoked from the sacrificial victim the customary scaffold speech which, whatever its content and however it was delivered, was automatically endowed by its frightening

finality and a violent theatricality. The burning of heretics was carried out no less publicly and with even greater ceremony. Such spectacles inevitably made a vivid impression on the public imagination: and just as the spectre of Death summoning Pope, emperor, merchant and peasant alike in the wake of plague and pestilence found its outward expression in art and literature, so the scaffold with all its grisly rites entered the drama as a scene calculated to arouse terror and pity in the highest degree or, in the wake of a rare last-minute reprieve, a corresponding joy in the hearts and minds of the beholders.⁸

Still, public executions and other sorts of physical punishment were not the only forms of medieval violence. There were also duels, similarly theatricalized, and often equally gruesome. In *A Great Effusion of Blood?: Interpreting Medieval Violence*, Oren Falk describes the duel as a staged event which bears uncanny resemblance to a theatrical performance:

Such acts (of which the duel is only one specialized instance) form an idiom of social exchange, performed before an audience who are to a great extent the interpreters, enunciators, and indeed authors of unfolding events. Bystanders, in a very real sense, come first; only when this pivotal role has been manned can other, secondary participants in the violence - viz. the combatants themselves - assume their positions. We ought to be thinking not of witnesses to a fight, then, but of fighters to a witness.⁹

In the Middle Ages, horror was indeed a *spectacle* to be watched upon by an audience. Moreover, for some reason the audience reacted as if the horror had been aesthetically pleasing. I believe that a similar moment of simultaneous attraction and revulsion is created in George Martin's novels: it is a moment in which "the theatricality of violence and the violence of theatricality are coterminous."¹⁰ Moreover, I am convinced that the medieval tradition of making violence into a spectacle is not continued in horror writing *per se*, or in gore cinema, but in the horrible as depicted in fantasy epics, such as those written by George Martin.

Let us consider yet another passage from *A Song of Ice and Fire*:

The sounds of drums and horns swirled up into the night.
Half-clothed women spun and danced on the low tables,
amid joints of meat and platters piled high with plums and

dates and pomegranates. Many of the men were drunk on clotted mare’s milk, yet Dany knew no arakhs would clash tonight, not here in the sacred city, where blades and bloodshed were forbidden. (...)

Suddenly Doreah was tugging her elbow. “My lady,” the handmaid whispered urgently, “your brother...” Dany looked down the length of the long, roofless hall and there he was, striding toward her. From the lurch in his step, she could tell at once that Viserys had found his wine...and something that passed for courage. He was wearing his scarlet silks, soiled and travel-stained. His cloak and gloves were black velvet, faded from the sun. (...) A longsword swung from his belt in a leather scabbard. The Dothraki eyed the sword as he passed; Dany heard curses and threats and angry mutterings rising all around her, like a tide. The music died away in a nervous stammering of drums. (...)

Her brother drew his sword. “There she is,” he said, smiling. He stalked toward her, slashing at the air as if to cut a path through a wall of enemies, though no one tried to bar his way. “The blade...you must not,” she begged him. “Please, Viserys. It is forbidden. Put down the sword and come share my cushions.” (...) “Do as she tells you, fool,” Ser Jorah shouted, “before you get us all killed.”

“Viserys laughed. “They can’t kill us. They can’t shed blood here in the sacred city...but *I* can.” He laid the point of his sword between Daenerys’s breasts and slid it downward, over the curve of her belly. “I want what I came for,” he told her. “I want the crown he promised me. He bought you, but he never paid for you. Tell him I want what I bargained for, or I’m taking you back. (...) He can keep his bloody foal. I’ll cut the bastard out and leave it for him.” (...) Viserys was weeping, she saw; weeping and laughing, both at the same time, this man who had once been her brother. (...)

Khal Drogo spoke a few brusque sentences in Dothraki, and she new he understood. (...) “What did he say?” the man who had been her brother asked her, flinching. (...) Daenerys had gone cold all over. “He says you shall have a splendid golden crown that men shall tremble to behold.” (...) Khal Drogo unfastened his belt. The medallions were pure gold, massive and ornate, each

one as large as a man's hand. He shouted a command. Cook slaves pulled a heavy iron stew pot from the firepit, dumped the stew onto the ground, and returned the pot to the flames. Drogo tossed in the belt and watched without expression as the medallions turned red and began to lose their shape. (...)

Viserys began to scream the high, wordless scream of the coward facing death. He kicked and twisted, whimpered like a dog and wept like a child, but the Dotkraki held him tight between them. Ser Jorah had made his way to Dany's side. (...) "Turn away, my princess, I beg you."

"No." She folded her arms across the swell of her belly, protectively. (...) When the gold was half-melted and starting to run, Drogo reached into the flames, snatched out the pot. "Crown!" he roared. "Here. A crown for Cart King!" And upended the pot over the head of the man who had been her brother. The sound Viserys Targaryen made when that hideous iron helmet covered his face was like nothing human. His feet hammered a frantic beat against the dirt floor, slowed, stopped. Thick globs of molten gold dripped down onto his chest, setting the scarlet silk to smoldering...yet no drop of blood was spilled.¹¹

The horror of the scene makes it no less fascinating in reception. Both quoted passages prove that for the author, form was equally important as the content itself. The setting of both scenes is so vivid and meticulous that it could be easily made into a theatrical exposition. We even get the description of clothing, portrayed by Martin in painstaking detail. What is more, it would simply not do to have Viserys strangled by an assassin in his sleep: he had to be crowned with melted gold, in the middle of a feast. All that - and more - in order to "give the crowd a show." A grim spectacle indeed.

The question remains: why do we like it so much? Even if we admit all the ghastly details of multiple deaths in *A Song of Ice and Fire* to be appalling, we find it appealing all the same. I want to argue that the answer to this question is connected with the key concept, which is the spectacle. The horror and violence in Martin's novels function as aesthetic stimuli; consequently, they do much more than simply satisfy our appetite for vicarious terror. I believe that horror depicted in *A Song of Ice and Fire* series is theatricalized to a degree that it comes through as a sublime aesthetic experience. This strategy of "aesthetization" is quite common in contemporary fantasy fiction.

The idea of the sublime as developed by Burke and Kant may be helpful when it comes to finding an explanation for the appeal of theatricalized horror in Martin’s novels. Burke writes:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body could enjoy.¹²

As the philosopher comments on Milton’s description of Death in *Paradise Lost*, he describes the poet’s style as capable of “heightening (...) or setting terrible things (...) in their strongest light.”¹³ According to Burke, Milton’s style is characterized by what he calls “a gloomy pomp.” It is easy to notice that grandeur and pathos are distinguished features of the passages quoted from *A Storm of Swords* and *A Game of Thrones*.

For Kant, astonishment is merely the first stage in the experience of the sublime. It is then followed by a sense of moral or intellectual superiority to the object causing terror or fear:

Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening, rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river, and such like; these exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might. But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height, and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.¹⁴

There is a substantial difference in the philosophers’ approaches as far as the object of fear is considered. Kant maintains that it must be *fearful* but must not evoke *actual fear*; that there must be no consciousness of

imminent personal danger, as the awareness of such threat would thwart the feeling of the “supersensible.”¹⁵ According to Burke, on the other hand, there must be *actual fear* but no *actual pain*. In other words, Kant believes that the presence of actual fear would render a pure judgment of the sublime impossible, “precisely as subservience to appetite would preclude a pure judgment of the beautiful.”¹⁶ Consequently, when it comes to the horrible spectacle of violence in Martin’s novels, we find Kant’s theory more in accordance with the nature of literary production.

One may argue that according to Kant, there cannot be a sublimity of character, of intellect, of art, but only of “rude nature, of physical might or magnitude.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, the experience of the sublime is an experience connected with the mind overcoming a certain discrepancy. It may be described as a “disagreement or incongruity between the aesthetical judgment of magnitude formed by the Imagination and the judgment of magnitude formed by Reason.”¹⁸ The feeling of pain arising from the perception of this want of accordance is counter-balanced by the feeling of pleasure “arising from the correspondence with rational Ideas of this very judgement of the inadequacy of our greatest faculty of Sense; in so far as it is a law for us to strive after these Ideas.”¹⁹ Such mental strife for compensation - or going beyond - a certain order of perception may be translated from the world of awe-inspiring nature to the world of terror-inspiring fictitious events. In other words, the sublime may be delightful even in its terrible aspects, connected with transgressing the moral order of the universe.

To conclude: even as George Martin has “set himself the task of stripping fantasy of its romanticism once and for all”²⁰ by upping the ante of violence and horror in his fantasy world soiled with blood and mud, the readers still find his novels aesthetically pleasing. In this paper, I have attempted to present the author’s strategy that enabled him to make horror the source of aesthetic stimulation. It consists mainly in presenting the horrible and the gruesome as a grandiose spectacle of Burke’s “gloomy pomp.” As such, the violence of *The Ice and Fire* saga may be perceived as a continuation of the medieval tradition of horror dramatized, theatricalized, and staged.

Notes

¹ G R R Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 2003, p. 214-218.

² *ibid.*, p. 219.

³ L Grossman, ‘The American Tolkien,’ in *Time*, Sunday, 13 November 2005, viewed on 20 April 2009,

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1129596,00.html>>

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⁴ T M Wagner, ‘A Storm of Swords,’ in *SF Reviews*, 2003, viewed on 15 April 2009,

<<http://www.sfreviews.net/stormofswords.html>>

⁵ J Foster, *Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1999, p. 5.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ G W Gladstone Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 168-9.

⁹ O Falk, ‘Bystanders and Hearsayers First: Reassessing the Role of the Audience in Duelling,’ in ‘*A Great Effusion of Blood?: Interpreting Medieval Violence*’ M D Meyerson, D Thiery, O Falk (eds), University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2004, p. 99.

¹⁰ Foster, p. 4.

¹¹ G R R Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, Bantam Dell, New York, 2005, p. 497-500.

¹² E Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 56.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁴ I Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Cosimo, Inc., New York, 2007, p. 75.

¹⁵ I Knox, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer*, Humanities Press, New York, 1958, p. 61.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁹ Kant, p. 80.

²⁰ Wagner, *op. cit.*

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