Mark Hammermeister, 'Game of Thrones', markdraws.com

Benioff and Weiss's Bleak Midwinter

Joseph Rex Young

Few cultural properties have experienced as abrupt a reversal of fortune as *Game of Thrones*. With its moral complexity, tangled web of subplots and unapologetically luxuriant world-building, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss's adaptation of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* acquired a huge, impassioned fan base and managed the rare feat of convincing the mainstream commentariat to take a fantasy narrative seriously. In 2019, however, the show's final season left many viewers vocally dissatisfied. 'Season Eight Has Been a Complete Failure and Everybody Knows It', spat the title of a YouTube post by vlogger IdeasOfIceAndFire.[1] Professional critics have been similarly querulous. Reviewing the series finale, Hugo Rifkind of *The Times* found it 'hard to remember what I'd ever been so excited about'.[2] *New Statemen* columnist Helen Lewis fairly gloated over her dwindling enthusiasm for the show, claiming she now followed the story as a break from anything in which she felt any emotional or intellectual stake.[3] In May 2019 an online petition was launched demanding that the final season be re-shot with scripts 'by competent writers'. This rebuke to Benioff and Weiss attracted a million signatures within twenty-four hours and was still attracting new signatories a month later. After eight years of avoiding spoilers, many fans were abjectly disappointed by what was eventually revealed.

Rumblings of such discontent predate the show's seemingly rushed denouement. *Time* commentator Judy Berman opined:

> Viewers looking for more than expensive spectacles have spent *the past few seasons* [emphasis added] mourning the witty, thought-provoking show they started watching. New episodes feel too thematically slight to justify all the chatter they inspire … Its final season has played so fast and loose with characters, it made Daenerys a monster, Tyrion a fool and reduced the formidable Brienne of Tarth into a weeping puddle of thirst for Jaime Lannister – arguably without earning any of it.[5]

A survey of commentaries on seasons six and seven bear out Berman's comments. YouTuber Danzie Reviews complained that the relationship dynamic between Sansa Stark and Reek in the season six premiere made no sense in light of their previous development.

Sansa, she observed, survived prolonged adversity via determined, explicit self-possession; Reek is a malnourished wreck tortured into dissociative psychosis. Surely she should be leading him to safety rather than vice versa.[6] Rushed and inconsistent writing and a lack of respect for the viewer's intelligence marred much of the remainder of that season, Danzie felt.[7] In 2017 *Radio Times* reviewer Thomas Ling compared the seventh-season episode 'Beyond the Wall' very negatively with the fifth-season instalment 'Hardhome'. Where the script of 'Hardhome' endowed the death of Karsi (a character created specifically for that episode) with great pathos, Ling argued, slapdash writing in 'Beyond the Wall' meant he barely cared about the death therein of Viserion, a character of cosmological significance.[8] Note the parallel with Lewis's comments in *New Statesmen* in 2019. Aforementioned vlogger IdeasOfIceAndFire described 'Beyond the Wall' as 'one of the worst episodes in *Game of Thrones* history… [the show] is just shenanigans now. Shenanigans! It has no substance.'[9] Professional critic Diana Wichtel more circumspectly described the seventh season as 'lacklustre'.[10] The recent backlash is not the result of six weak episodes. By 2019 people had been losing their patience with this show for some time.

The production schedule of *Game of Thrones* outpaced Martin's composition in 2015. It is therefore tempting to conclude that the central problem here is that Benioff and Weiss are less good at their jobs than Martin is at his. This is certainly the attitude taken by the author of the petition to re-shoot season eight, who suggests they have 'proven themselves to be woefully incompetent writers when they have no source material (i.e. the books) to fall back on'. The purpose of this article is neither to endorse or dismiss such accusations, but to offer an explanation for their emergence. Matt Hills observes that serial television dramas 'win most of their popularity with audiences when they exist in a phase of direct and focussed narrative enigma; the survival rate beyond this is limited'.[11] *Game of Thrones* demonstrates this in a particularly clear way. As a fantasy, it uses a recognisable method of constructing the enigma of which Hills speaks, and uses it to powerful effect. The show also, however, demonstrates his point about loss of popularity once that narrative presence is resolved. The root cause of all this disillusionment may be 'Hardhome', the 2015 episode cited by Ling as particularly powerful, and the consequences of its presentation of a narrative event, very much present in Martin's existing novels, on the subsequent televisual narrative. While it is tempting to blame Benioff and Weiss for the subsequent unengaging episodes, the real issue may in fact be the concept of trying to execute a tale of quite this nature as a long-format television drama.

An author of fantasy has unavoidable expositional responsibilities. Fantasy worlds and fantasy contrivances must be explained. The large majority of Martin's focalisers build their world via what Farah Mendlesohn refers to as immersive rhetoric. They discuss their world's cultural, historical, onomastic and geographical differences from Earth as if those differences were not unusual. Readers observe such pronouncements and construct the written world by interrogating them in the context of 'what is not said'.[12] Tyrion Lannister's admonition to

the librarian at Winterfell – "Be gentle with the Valyrian scrolls, the parchment is very dry. Ayrmidon's *Engines of War* is quite rare, yours is the only complete copy I've seen"[13] – furthers the reader's understanding of his invented society. Fragments of Valyrian literature evidently circulate in latter-day Westeros; well-read Westerosi seek to preserve and study the works of Ayrmidon much as primary-world classicists research Thucydides or Livy. Valyria is thus an Athens or Rome to Westeros's medievalist regime. Note the rationalism of such exposition. The reader observes the character's thoughts as they account for their observations. Tyrion wants Chayle to take care of the Valyrian scrolls *because* they are fragile, just as Catelyn Stark concedes the beauty of her husband's ancestral sword *because* it is made of Valyrian steel[14] and Illyrio Mopatis sees Daenerys's violet eyes as 'regal' – not odd – *because* they indicate her Valyrian heritage.[15] Martin's readers rationalise the assumptions evident in arguments. Westeros makes sense because most of it is built by people, both diegetic and heterodiegetic, making sense of it.

Among Martin's host of focalisers, however, there are a handful who exposit differently. Of immediate interest among these is Jon Snow, who focalises what Mendlesohn calls an intrusion fantasy. Something novel comes into Jon's world, and he must work it out. The engine of Jon's focalisation is not the rationalisation of what he already knows but his abiding sense that there is something out there which he *cannot* analyse.[16] Rather than a series of demonstrations of fact, therefore, Jon reports a compilation of intuitions, hunches, and dissonances that he struggles to articulate:

> Jon had often hunted with his father and Jory and his brother Robb. He knew the wolfswood around Winterfell as well as any man. The haunted forest was much the same, and yet the feel of it was very different.
>
> Perhaps it was all in the knowing. They had ridden past the end of the world; somehow that changed everything. Every shadow seemed darker, every sound more ominous. The trees pressed close and shut out the light of the setting sun. A thin crust of snow cracked beneath the hooves of their horses, with a sound like breaking bones. When the wind set the leaves to rustling, it was like a chilly finger tracing a path up Jon's spine. The Wall was at their backs, and only the gods knew what lay ahead.[17]

Note the privileging of sensation and intuition over logic in this passage; the haunted forest 'feels' different; its shadows 'seem' preternaturally dark; emotive similes – a sound *like* breaking bones – stand in place of rational deductions. This impregnates the narrative space with a sense of something latently and inscrutably wrong, a hallmark of intrusion

fantasy.[18] The focaliser does not understand what is going on here. The plot that emerges is that of their pursuit of such information, often contrary to common sense and mainstream opinion. This is why Jon Snow knows nothing. Comprehension is not his job. Jon's central role is to suspect, fear, and be irked by what is going on, but not to understand it.

Intrusion fantasies proceed via the focaliser's mystification, their willingness to meet the challenge of a heaven and earth that contains more than is dreamt of in their philosophy. Jon's subplot is thus motivated by his faith in a central, imponderable enigma, and takes the form of the gradual escalation of this hidden threat, without, crucially, bringing it to the surface or providing him with information whereby it can be rationally analysed. During Jeor Mormont's Great Ranging (a massive expedition of the Night's Watch to the lands beyond the Wall), for example, Craster denies knowledge of the walking dead, thanking Mormont 'not to tell such evil tales under my roof'.[19] Gilly, however, whispers that if her unborn child turns out male, her father will give it to the gods:

> "What gods?" Jon was remembering that they'd seen no boys in Craster's Keep, nor men either, save Craster himself.
>
> "The cold gods," she said. "The ones in the night. The white shadows."
>
> And suddenly Jon was back in the Lord Commander's Tower again. A severed hand was crawling up his calf and when he pried it off with the point of his longsword it lay writhing, opening and closing. The dead man rose to his feet, blue eyes shining in that gashed and swollen face. Ropes of torn flesh hung from the great wound in his belly, yet there was no blood. "What color are their eyes?" he asked her.
>
> "Blue. As bright as blue stars, and as cold."
>
> *She has seen them*, he thought. *Craster lied*.[20]

Gilly runs off before Jon can quiz her further. Jon therefore has a vivid reminder of what he is looking for, and a hint of something rottener than incest in the state of Craster's Keep, but no actionable intelligence about it. The crime scenes he investigates at Whitetree[21] and the Fist of the First Men[22] are similar; loci pregnant with hidden meaning, furthering his visceral faith in an occluded menace but devoid of practical intellectual value. Jon is confronted with a mystique, a great, imponderable diegetic presence he can neither ignore nor conclusively grasp. This is the 'direct and focussed enigma' of which Hills wrote.

That presence has an important effect in the broader narrative. Jon is chasing information about the demonic Others and their army of the dead. Martin's readers and Benioff and Weiss's viewers alike are made aware of this before they meet Jon.[23] These

creatures have none of the human agendas – wealth, lust, power, justice – that both motivate Martin's other subplots. They are literary artefacts that exist solely for the purpose of testing the humanity of the characters, and left unchecked they will seemingly destroy the entirety of Westerosi civilisation. Martin's characters are – not that they know it – grappling not with each other at all but with their universe.

This goes a long way to explaining the sense of moral ambiguity in Martin's narrative, a point on which he has been repeatedly praised.[24] Despite the assumption – evident in much of that praise – that such ambiguity is innovative within the fantasy genre, Martin in fact deserves credit for a well-orchestrated example. The threat of the Others provides a clear example of formalised Recovery, the accentuation of the human and natural via contrast with the inhuman and unnatural, cited by Tolkien as a central purpose of the literary supernatural.[25] Robb Stark, for example, excoriates Rickard Karstark for killing hostages[26] while Tywin Lannister specifically tasks henchmen with bloody-handed rapine.[27] Presented in a purely human context, this would be a case of a young hero attempting to conduct warfare decently while an aging villain throws morality to the wind. The fate of Karstark's young victims would be a thought-provoking complication to Robb's efforts, but the reader would have few qualms about who to side with. The presence of the Others, however, puts Robb and Tywin on much the same moral footing by sharply demonstrating the futility of their dispute. Martin's story depicts few objectively definable villains, but numerous decisive men and women of action – potential heroes – battering each other to pieces over trifles while an all-consuming common threat intrudes upon their world. With their battle lines drawn against each other, rather than the external foe, idealists like Robb, cynics like Tywin, avengers like Rickard and amoral political operators like Olenna Tyrell and Roose Bolton are all revealed to be equally human, equally fallible, and equally guilty. The supernatural element in the story irons out moral differentials, replacing any clear indication of who the reader is supposed to be rooting for with a sharp reminder of the inherent human potential for folly and wrongdoing.

Related to this point is Martin's apparent rejection of what John Clute calls a 'Story-shaped world'. His is a tale of people failing to live happily ever after. Robert's Rebellion led to the deposition of a tyrant, but this is not the end of the story. Petyr Baelish did not cease being a scheming arriviste, Lysa Arryn a neurotic fool, Maester Pycelle a compromised quisling, or Robert himself a profligate hedonist, just because the despot they all contended with was disposed of. Denied the authorial benediction of a conclusion, Robert must contend with a chilly political marriage, venomous palace politics for which he has little stomach and less skill, the grind of actually running a country, and his own unkingly character flaws. Martin's story thus begins with Robert employing Eddard Stark to salvage a story of righteous rebellion and reform that has collapsed into bathos. Eddard's investigation into Jon Arryn's death runs as a perfect literary detective story, until he moves to apprehend the culprit – at which point he is executed rather than commended. This seems to throw

the tale into chaos, both in terms of narrative events and the reader's ability to recognise what they are reading.[29] Across the Narrow Sea Daenerys Targaryen conquers Slaver's Bay, but the Great Masters of Meereen do not learn the error of their ways. They regard Daenerys's rule as temporary. If the paramilitary Sons of the Harpy do not bring her down, their colleagues in Yunkai and Astapor will re-establish slaver regimes and send armies to sort out this presumptuous interloper and get things back to business as usual. They suffer disappointments of their own; Astapor actually descends into grisly anarchy that Quentyn Martell describes as 'the closest thing to hell he ever hoped to know'.[30] But Meereen is indeed besieged, and Daenerys's plans for a reconstruction flounder. Just as Robert's deposition of Daenerys's father was just the beginning of his problems, the abolitionist crusade of which she tries to make herself the protagonist does not proceed *pro forma*. Much of the verisimilitude – and conflict, and suffering – in Martin's tale stems from human nature apparently unbridled by the demands of poesy.

But this *is* poesy. Despite consistently undercutting narrative conveniences, Martin is writing a song himself – a song of ice and fire – and as such he has responsibilities more general than those of a fantasist. Special experimental cases aside, novels require plots; plots must begin, proceed and, crucially, close. A story must chronicle action, be it physical, social or psychological, moving from one status to another via the logical progression of a period of dynamism during which issues must be pertinently, if not conclusively, addressed.[31] It is beyond the capacity of any of Martin's characters to address the human failings that motivate the game of thrones. The televisual Daenerys Targaryen demonstrates this when she describes Westerosi politics as an ever-rotating wheel with one dynasty after another grinding the others beneath it.[32] When quizzed about her plans, she announces her intention to 'break the wheel' – a metaphor of violence demonstrating that all she can actually do is perpetuate the problem. Martin therefore faces the peculiar task of constructing a cohesive narrative out of a series of depictions of narratives losing cohesion. He has, in fact, managed this demonstrably well; fans remain impassioned by his work and continue to eagerly await his forthcoming volumes even after the television series has played out. The Others are crucial to this success. They are, as noted above, not constrained by the human failings that motivate Martin's other subplots. They do not discriminate between victims and, left unopposed, will break Daenerys's wheel with fatal, all-consuming force. The possibility of this happening is what turns events like the execution of Eddard Stark, the marginalisation of Asha Greyjoy, the exile of Barristan Selmy and the death in action of Aerys Oakheart from examples of a theme – the evil that men do – into actual plot points. Each one robs Westeros of a capable, conscientious soldier, a resource of which their society will soon be in dire need. Since the prologue of the first novel, and the pre-credit sequence of the first televisual episode, this subplot has always been going somewhere, and giving the impression that the others were doing the same. The supernatural narrative keystone is what turns this quagmire of violence and ambition into an actual story.

The threat beyond the Wall therefore underpins the two key strengths for which Martin's story is celebrated – its sense of moral ambiguity, and the plethora of subplots that all seem to be going somewhere despite their apparent insolubility. Contrary to the common accusation that Martin uses sex and violence to sell fantasy, he in fact uses fantasy to illuminate and propel a meditation on the human drives that produce those activities. As such the differences in the way the prose and televisual iteration of the tale present that fantasy are of crucial interest in explaining the late-period fan reaction against the latter.

Game of Thrones perpetuates the intrusion structure of Jon's subplot. Shortly after his conversation with Gilly, for example, the televisual Jon tails Craster as the Wildling exposes an infant son. For two minutes – a long time in television – director Alan Taylor uses a series of aural cues (screeching owls, sweeping winds, cracking ice) to invest the moonlit forest with the latent menace of Mendlesohnian intrusion. The sequence ends with Jon catching a brief glimpse of the blue-eyed monster claiming the child.[33] From then on screenwriters give viewers occasional updates on the activities of the White Walkers – the televisual appellation of the Others – and their leader, the Night King. Martin's prose equivalents of these figures have, at this point in time, no discernible chain of command. In the books, Night's King (note the possessive construction) is a figure from folktale[34] who probably never existed, let alone survived into Westeros's present day, and has no stated connection to the Others. Depictions of the televisual Night King and his thralls do no particular harm to Jon's story, however. Intrusion fantasies often incorporate an element of heterodiegetic irony. In a cinematic example of the species, *Predator*, interpolated shots from an alien big-game hunter's point of view as it tracks its anthropoid quarry do not spoil the viewer's observations of human soldiers developing a sense of unease about the jungle around them.[35] Rather, such scenes represent screenwriters Jim and John Thomas giving the viewer notice that their characters are indeed Tolkienian heroes under heaven, facing a foe fundamentally different from the human opponents they handle with such self-assurance early in the film. The appearances of the White Walkers serve a similar purpose in *Game of Thrones*. Scenes depicting the White Walkers buttress the Tolkienian Recovery provided by Jon's narrative.

The scene in which he tails Craster does not appear in Martin's novels, however. Indeed Jon falls into the snow at the end of *A Dance with Dragons* having not looked into blue eyes since he burned those belonging to Othor, some 4,000 pages previously. During the Great Ranging Jon encounters almost everything – wargs,[36] giants,[37] heroes worthy of song,[38] beauties idiosyncratically ditto[39] – except the monsters in whose pursuit he rides. It is Samwell Tarly who meets both the dead[40] and the Others who evidently lead them.[41] *Evidently* is the operative word; exactly how this supernatural threat works remains unclear. Dragonglass has killed an Other, but Sam's dagger shatters when he tries to kill a wight with it[42] and the notion that Valyrian steel will prevail has so far only turned up in literary sources that the portly deuteragonist explicitly criticises as unreliable.[43] Such information is

inconclusive by authorial design. Jon's situation after the Great Ranging precisely mirrors that of Dutch, the hero of *Predator*, after the alien picks off one of his men, Blain, and the squad expends much of their ammunition in an under-conceived and impuissant counterattack – "We hit *nothing*." The death of Blain escalates the Mendlesohnian intrusion without breaking its latency; his comrade's earlier dialogic refrain "There's something in those trees" is gorily vindicated, but what to do about it remains unclear. In Martin's Great Ranging, similarly, a grave price has been paid to confirm Jon's misgivings about the Haunted Forest – the Night's Watch has lost what the televisual Mance Rayder refers to as their 'best fighting men'.[44] – but a practicable method of exorcising the threat is not yet apparent. This situation escalates further when Jon receives a hair-raising communique from a subaltern:

> *At Hardhome, with six ships.* Blackbird *lost with all hands, two Lyseni ships driven aground on Skane,* Talon *taking water. Very bad here. Wildlings eating their own dead. Dead things in the woods. Braavosi captains will only take women, children on their ships. Witch women call us slavers. Attempt to take* Storm Crow *defeated, six crew dead, many wildlings. Eight ravens left. Dead things in the water. Send help by land, seas wracked by storms. From* Talon, *by hand of Maester Harmune.*
>
> Cotter Pyke had made his angry mark below.[45]

Events at Hardhome enter the narrative record third-hand; Jon reads a maester's summary of the apparently illiterate Cotter Pyke's account of affairs there. This compares precisely with the discussion of the titular monster in H.P. Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu,' relayed to the reader via the focaliser's paraphrasing of an 'unlettered'[46] account of what someone else saw. As in Lovecraft's tale this insulation of focaliser from threat preserves the latency of the Mendlesohnian intrusion.[47] Jon is not sceptical about Harmune's references to 'dead things', as indeed he cannot be. He knows that – to quote another televisual intrusion fantasy, *The X-Files* – the truth is out there. But that motto of the subgenre carries connotations. A truth that is *out there* is by definition not yet *here*.

'Hardhome' treats matters differently. Rather than dispatching a rescue mission, the televisual Jon visits Hardhome himself to treat with various wildling tribes. An army of wights attack, with the White Walkers watching in reserve. Countless civilians are killed as Jon and his colleagues improvise an evacuation to the jetties of the seaside village. Jon finds himself toe to toe with a White Walker, who seems to expect little trouble fighting this puny mortal and is taken aback when Jon's Valyrian sword resists his own supernatural blade. Taking advantage of its confusion, Jon kills his foe, then flees by boat with the other survivors. The Night King walks insouciantly down the jetty, makes eye contact with Jon across the water, and raises his arms; the corpses littering the village rise as footsoldiers in an army of the

damned. To find fault with this sequence seems almost disrespectful to the characters who suffer in it – surely a sign of a narrative artefact working effectively. The subsequence in which Karsi is mobbed by dead children is, in itself, a superb utilisation of the strengths of a new medium to engage the observer with the emotive content of a story. This is, surely, exactly what adaptations are supposed to do. It is hardly surprising that the producers called on Miguel Sapochnik, the director of the episode, to shoot most of their subsequent war sequences.

Impressive as the scene is, however, it constitutes a climax for Jon's story. Clute argues that an attempt to make use of the transformative power of the literary fantastic almost inescapably chronicles a shift from a status of wrongness or absence to one of formalistic healing or restoration via a crucial moment of formalised 'Recognition' of the true nature of the world.[48] Mendlesohn notes that intrusion fantasy emphasises the earlier phase of this process. The protagonist's unease drives both exposition and plot, as Jon's reservations about the Haunted Forest and his pursuit of clues about it demonstrate. If that pursuit reaches its goal, effecting Recognition, the story is essentially over. In this, intrusion fantasy closely resembles detective fiction. A detective story is motivated by the faith that an unattributable offence against social propriety can be attributed via sufficiently assiduous analysis of the evidence. Once the detective knows whodunnit, the culprit may resist arrest, justifying an exciting denouement, but the plot is resolved. Mendlesohn therefore observes that 'Recognition is frequently a late, and hurried note'[49] in intrusion fantasy. This would be why, five volumes into a seven-volume narrative, Martin's prose iteration of Jon has not reached that point. The televisual Jon, by contrast, reaches his moment of Recognition at Hardhome. As he looks over the stern of his boat, Jon's line of thinking can be expressed mathematically:

$$(\text{Jon}+\text{stalwart fellow travellers})^{(\text{dragonglass}+\text{Valyrian steel})} \nless \text{Night King}^{\text{Wights}}$$

Note the absence of algebraic variables. The imponderable threat that fuels his narrative has become ponderable. The massacre at Hardhome gives Jon conclusive intelligence about where the living dead come from and (as demonstrated by his defeat of the individual White Walker) how to fight them. The man whose job is to know nothing now knows everything.

This drastically alters the function of the Tolkienian Recovery that Jon's story provides for the broader narrative. The moral ambiguity of Martin's tale depends on a state of ignorance, or at least dismissal, of the threat in the north. Martin's characters are rational people; this is what makes their pursuits of their quarrels understandable and their morality questionable. Tyrion Lannister sets Blackwater Rush afire not out of evil but because he understands the necessity to fight his corner. His father sets up the Red Wedding in concert with Walder Frey for roughly the same reasons. Ser Alliser Thorne murders Jon out of misplaced but rational concern for the institutional purity of the Night's Watch. Were any of these people fully appreciative of the intrusion beyond the Wall – as Martin's readers

and Benioff and Weiss's viewers are – they would know that unity against the threat was the only credible course of action, and work to that purpose. Martin, Benioff and Weiss therefore take care to place that threat outside the rational discourse that justifies the game of thrones. Osha is seen as a credulous savage; on neither page nor screen are her warnings taken seriously.[50] The televisual Tyrion Lannister dismisses Benjen Stark's reports of odd goings-on beyond the Wall.[51] When he later expresses a rather more open mind in a position of authority (a change from the books presumably made to impress the viewer with the character's intelligence), his sister scorns his belief in 'grumpkins and snarks', the bogeymen of Martin's diegetic folklore. Confronted with the possibility of wargs, Jon feels they 'belonged in Old Nan's stories'.[52] The enemy is not seen as real. While this situation continues, the threat demonstrates Tolkienian Recovery by making the game of thrones not only destructive but toxically short-sighted. Jon's encounter at Hardhome, and his open-handedness with the resulting intelligence, alters this. Just as no mortal character can respond to a supernatural problem they do not know about, none can responsibly ignore one that becomes apparent. Characters grasp that the mystique Jon pursued constitutes their defining moral challenge of the tale and present themselves for assessment in relation to it. The viewer's sympathies therefore shift promptly to those – Brienne of Tarth, Lyanna Mormont, Varys, Theon Greyjoy, the Knights of the Vale, the rumps of the Night's Watch and the Brotherhood Without Banners – who answer to Jon's call to arms. Rather than ironing out moral differentials, the supernatural now underlines the *humanitas* of those who put aside their squabbles to oppose it.

Those who ignore Jon's call meanwhile lose whatever credibility they may have accrued. When upbraiding her diminutive brother for his faith in grumpkins and snarks, Cersei Lannister is wicked and pathetic at the same time',[53] a textbook example of Martin's use of Tolkienian Recovery. The toxicity of her antipathy towards Tyrion, the product of decades of familial discord, is emphasised by the reader's knowledge that forces more malevolent than storybook bogeymen are indeed moving beyond the Wall. This shifts drastically after she is apprehended of the revelations of Hardhome. Despite admitting that 'all the monsters are real',[54] Cersei persists in her earlier frame of reference. This differentiates her from other formally morally ambiguous characters. Before Jon's discovery Arya Stark can claim no higher moral authority than Cersei. The notion of a ten-year-old child curating a hit list, let alone realistically pursuing it, is a chilling distillation of the native human capacity for savagery. Made aware of Jon's discovery, however, Arya grasps the true nature of the world and her place in it, and acts accordingly, presenting herself for the central moral challenge of the tale. Cersei damnably defaults on this. When she battles simply human foes, the presence of monsters in the remote regions of her world salts her complexity. When the inhuman makes itself wholly apparent, however, and she fails to oppose it, her willingness to put aside rationality in order to pursue her own thinly justified conceits and vendettas conclusively demonstrates what a petty, self-regarding fool she really is. Jon's breakthrough

at Hardhome means that the narrative presence that once furthered moral ambiguities now serves as the means by which those ambiguities are resolved.

'Hardhome' also explicitly makes the mystique Jon pursued the essential subject matter of that story. The engaged viewer has always known that the central narrative tension has been about whether Martin's characters could grasp and act upon the supernatural threat in the north. When the Night King makes himself known at Hardhome, Jon too grasps this; Clutean Recognition 'marks the moment when the story means itself'[55] and characters can begin planning and executing their role in the plot with epistemological as well as moral assurance. When Davos Seaworth opines 'The real war isn't between a few squabbling houses. It's between the living and the dead,'[56] he is demonstrating a grasp of the exact point that made his previous championing of Stannis Baratheon such an egregious waste of time, treasure and blood. This realisation is hardwired into the manner in which Martin employs the supernatural. As noted above, the presence of the threat beyond the Wall is what turns Martin's depiction of human nature into an actual story. Martin's characters are individuals, interesting in their capacity as portraits of human attributes – ambition, pride, frustration, familial discord or piety. As such they are what Attebery calls actors, defined by being rather than doing.[57] Davos is a commoner raised to nobility, devoid of aristocratic presumption and thus too savvy either to be wholly servile to his superiors or to gainsay them too brazenly. Were he ever to build the sorts of relationships that would stabilise this balancing act, his character would dissolve. Such characters are, Attebery observes, essentially 'portraiture, with very little narrative movement'.[58] The *Game of Thrones* writers deserve credit for adapting such characters mostly faithfully, following Martin's Tolkienian strategies to emphasise them. But stories must go somewhere, and the threat in the north pushes characters like Davos in a discernible narrative direction, turning them into what Attebery (following Greimas) terms 'actants', defined by doing rather than being, adopting narrative roles in relation to an essential crisis. That mystique instigates that function by its resolution.

Had no such resolution taken place, nothing and no*body* could have gone anywhere. Daenerys's wheel would have turned forever. Inevitable jests about the desirability of such a situation from a fan perspective may be countered with an old saw about why *Fawlty Towers* ran for only twelve episodes – how funny would the 112th really have been? Preserving Martin's denuding of his character's capacity to enact a conclusion amongst themselves, Benioff and Weiss brought forward their discovery of the truth of their world. This is not a flaw in itself, but the climax of 'Hardhome' is the climax of the series. Jon and his allies know what their story requires and act accordingly, defined narratively as well as morally by their actions in relation to an essential challenge. Seasons six, seven and eight all boil down to a single, very straightforward question: can these people handle this?

This is an entirely valid query. Furthermore Benioff and Weiss cannot honestly be criticised for their treatment of it. The battle against the Night King in 'The Long Night' reveals Jorah Mormont's dedication to his *khalessi*, Brienne of Tarth's courage, how seriously

Dolorous Edd took Sam Tarly; it shows exactly who the pompous ass Yohn Royce, the amoral murderer Arya Stark and the treacherous wretch Theon Greyjoy really are. They are people, prepared to assert their common *humanitas*, tragically or triumphantly, against a foe devoid of that quality – textbook examples of Tolkienian Recovery in action. The difficulty that arises is that *Game of Thrones* fans spent the 47 episodes leading up to 'Hardhome' celebrating the moral ambiguity and narrative inscrutability of the story. These qualities are greatly abetted by the execution of Jon Snow's subplot in the first five seasons, which constitute a striking demonstration of how effective intrusion fantasy can be. 'Hardhome,' however, replaces those qualities with new ones; the moral certification of those who understand what the story actually is and behave accordingly. Those are strengths indeed. Anglophone writers have been staging conflicts between people and purpose-written points of comparison for a thousand years for a very good reason. But presenting a viewership given to luxuriating in a particular narrative climate with an entirely new set of conditions was always going to produce discontents.

This all vindicates Hills's point about interest in television fantasies ebbing after the resolution of central enigmas. Intrusion fantasies are ultimately about 'the *approach* rather than the arrival of the fantastic', the arrival marking the end of the adventure rather than the beginning'.[59] The shift from visceral sensibility to intellectual sense flips the operation of Tolkienian Recovery on its head, turning the tale into something completely different from what it previously was and almost inescapably alienating much of the viewership. Other writers of televisual intrusion fantasy have mishandled this transition. Tim Kring, head writer for the television series *Heroes* (2006-10), placed his fulcrum at the end of his acclaimed first season. In later seasons Kring attempted to 'recreate the naïve response',[60] but unconvinced viewers abandoned the show in droves. Nor is a successful intrusion fantasy simply a matter of keeping one's narrative powder dry. Daniel Knauf, showrunner of *Carnivalé* (2004-6), frustrated his audience by escalating his intrusion only very gradually. Declining ratings prompted HBO to cancel the show with its storyline incomplete. The core problem in all these cases may be the demands that a long-format television serial makes on the viewer's time. The device tends to work better in cinema, in which there is less time for the story to drag either before or after the central turning point. The Thomas brothers, for example, place the Clutean Recognition in the 86th minute of *Predator*, roughly 80% of the way through a 107-minute film. The preparation and execution of Dutch's counterattack constitute a trim, efficient closing act. Jon Snow's story-shaping breakthrough comes as the cliffhanger to the 48th episode of *Game of Thrones*, or 64% of the way through the show's runtime. The differential gains significance in light of the fact that 16% of Benioff and Weiss's serial amounts to twelve hours – almost seven times the entire runtime of *Predator*. A total of 25 episodes (and four heterodiegetic years) elapse between 'Hardhome' and the show's finale. The timescale in which the medium operates creates ample time for an engaged

viewer to notice, or at least be affected by, the absence of the effects for which *Game of Thrones* was praised.

This article has deliberately avoided discussion of what might be called the tactical problems with the latter seasons of *Game of Thrones*; the subject matter here is the flaw in the broader narrative strategy. What made *Game of Thrones* stand out was not its moral ambiguity or plethora of engaging subplots. *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* all possess those. What made *Game of Thrones* unique was its use of fantasy to shape and propel those qualities. The moral compromises and misdeeds of the Westerosi are so vivid because the icy pall of the White Walkers renders their bitter, impassioned conflicts tragically ironic. The threat in the north also provides a ticking clock in relation to which the unresolvable human passions that drive Martin's subplots can be examined in a functioning story. The writers of *Game of Thrones* employed these devices to great effect. But once that implied conclusion becomes explicit, someone must, by force of logic, start acting like a hero, and be praised for it. This enshrines their story as the essential subject matter of the story and crystalises the previously fluid moral atmosphere. Great power and subtlety can be achieved with this sort of narrative. But after 'Hardhome,' the show spends a third of its total length shaped by completely different effects from those which produced the qualities for which it initially attracted praise. It is hardly surprising that these episodes tried the patience of viewers fond of the former dynamic. Benioff, Weiss and their collaborators made powerful use of Mendlesohnian intrusion fantasy, but they appear not to have avoided the common trap of the denouement of such tales being 'a bit of a let-down'[61] – at least on television.

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Notes

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