



# Game of Thrones — A View from the Humanities Vol. 2

Heroes, Villains and Pulsions

*Edited by*  
Alfonso Álvarez-Ossorio  
Fernando Lozano  
Rosario Moreno Soldevila  
Cristina Rosillo-López

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The chapters in this book focus on G. R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the TV series *Game of Thrones*. To avoid confusion *Game of Thrones* in Roman type refers to the universe, *Game of Thrones* in italics alludes to the TV series, whereas *A Game of Thrones*, usually abbreviated as *GoT*, is reserved for the homonymous first novel of Martin's saga.

Titles in *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*ASOIAF*) are cited as follows:

*A Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam, 1996 = *GoT*

*A Clash of Kings*. New York: Bantam, 1999 = *CoK*

*A Storm of Swords*. New York: Bantam, 2000 = *SoS*

*A Feast for Crows*. New York: Bantam, 2005 = *FfC*

*A Dance with Dragons*. New York: Bantam, 2011 = *DwD*

References to the novels are presented as follows: title of the novel + chapter number + the name of the character from whose point of view the chapter is written + the number of the chapter from that character's point of view. Example: *SoS* 23 Arya 4.

*Game of Thrones*, the television series, is shortened as *Thrones*. References to specific passages are presented as follows: *Thrones* + season number + episode number + episode title. Example: *Thrones* S1: Ep.1, "Winter is Coming".

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# Heroes, Villains, War and Violence in Game of Thrones

*Alfonso Álvarez-Ossorio, Fernando Lozano,  
Rosario Moreno Soldevila, and Cristina Rosillo-López*

The characters of the Game of Thrones universe are one of the mainstays and inducements of both the novels and the TV series, for they are not one-dimensional or even black and white; as with all humans, they have their good and bad points, and their strengths and weaknesses. Some of them may be occasionally cruel and other times compassionate; others

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seem to be “on the good side” and then behave in a way that places them firmly on the other. All of G. R. R. Martin’s characters have many shades of grey; he has peopled his universe with three-dimensional characters that are fascinating for readers and spectators, alike. Accordingly, most of this second volume is devoted to the universe’s heroes, villains and those in between.

In the world of *ASOIAF*, attention is not only paid to the leading characters, but also to the secondary ones. So far, Martin has mentioned 2103 in his books and, in his own words, has tried to see the world through the eyes of each one of them:<sup>1</sup>

Dwelling where I am now, deep in the heart of Westeros, I find myself surrounded by my characters, the children of my mind and heart and soul. They are real to me, as I write them, and I struggle to make them real to my readers as well. All of them are flawed, from the best to the worst. They do heroic things, they do selfish things. Some are strong and some are weak, some smart and some stupid. The smartest may do stupid things. The bravest may have moments when their courage fails. Great harms may be done from the noblest motives, great good from motives vile and venal. Life is like that, and art should reflect that, if it is to remain true. Ours is a world of contradiction and unintended consequences.<sup>2</sup>

Strikingly, Martin has asserted that Boromir is his favourite character of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*, a heroic, flawed, multidimensional character who is far removed from the *topos* of the perfect hero. The US author’s world is peopled with such characters, both men and women.

In an interview, Martin claimed, tongue-in-cheek, that his female characters were different because “I’ve always considered women to be people”.<sup>3</sup> This goes against the grain, especially in fantasy fiction in which they tend to be relegated to second place or depicted in an oversimplified fashion. Martin has conscientiously created women who subvert the classical *topoi* of the fantasy genre. For instance, it has been held that Daenerys is “a fantasy hero who breaks generic patterns” by combining “emotions

<sup>1</sup> *Business Insider*, 21 April 2016. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/number-of-characters-in-game-of-thrones-outweighs-those-in-shows-2016-4> (accessed 4 April 2022).

<sup>2</sup> “Life After Death”, blog post by G. R. R. Martin, 26 August 2020. Available at: <https://georgerrmartin.com/notablog/2020/08/26/life-after-death/> (accessed 4 April 2022).

<sup>3</sup> George Stroumboulopoulos, *Tonight on CBC*, 13 March 2012. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHfip4DefG4> (accessed 4 April 2022).

and elements that are stereotypically gendered male and female”.<sup>4</sup> The figures of Cersei Lannister and Catelyn Stark represent different aspects of motherhood and power. The depiction of Brienne of Tarth and her life choices are remarkable, insofar as they flesh out a multifaceted, strong and idealistic female character. Other martial women, such as Arya Stark and Yara Greyjoy, evince that creation of powerful (and flawed) female characters who are leaders. Some of them, including Sansa Stark, have gone through literary arcs that have taken them from being mere pawns to being powerful queens in the game. Even the secondary female characters are multifaceted, rather than token women.

The second major thread of this volume is devoted to warfare and violence, both pervasive in the Game of Thrones universe. The TV series’ depiction of violence was explicit, even going beyond limits that have seldom been crossed in primetime television. In fact, some of the most well-known episodes are loaded with extreme violence: the execution of Ned Stark is frankly horrific; the “Red Wedding” comes as a shock to everyone because of the violent end that many of the most popular characters meet; gory scenes abound in many battles, particularly the “Battle of the Bastards”; and the tortures endured by Theon Greyjoy at the hands of Ramsay Snow are occasionally almost unbearable to watch.

In the Game of Thrones universe, violence is not only restricted to warfare, but is an everyday occurrence, a result of the social and gender inequalities characterising the world created by Martin. The fate of the Unsullied is an example of violence against people who have been enslaved since childhood, castrated and subjected to a brutal regime, whose objective is to strip them of all vestiges of empathy, individuality and even self-preservation. Sansa Stark is an example of that everyday violence, from which she is not protected despite her status as the lady of a great house. She was struck several times in public on the orders of King Joffrey; she is almost raped in a riot after the departure of Myrcella for Dorne; her first period is marked by nightmares of her being stabbed to death; her second husband, Ramsay, rapes her on their wedding night (whose representation caused a public outrage) and on every following night. Indeed, *Game of Thrones*’ depiction of violence, especially sexual violence against women, is one of the major controversies surrounding the series. Critics have rightly commented on its exploitation, for instead of emphasising the horrors and brutality of war, such depictions normalise violent behaviour. However,

<sup>4</sup>Schubart (2016).

Martin has always claimed that his desire is to show not only the glory of war, but also its horrific consequences, making readers or viewers fully aware of the implications and repercussions of violence.

As this volume shows, violence as part of the Game of Thrones universe is an element closely linked to the development of the characters. In a 2013 interview on the late-night show *Conan*, Martin watched, amused, fan reactions to the “Red Wedding”, while pondering on the fact that in books readers tend to bond with the main characters, because they assume that they are going to survive.<sup>5</sup> This, however, is not the case in his world, where uncertainty prevails to a great extent: will readers become attached to characters, if they may die soon? Will their favourite or most despised character survive? In a 2016 interview, the author stated that killing only secondary or extra characters was cheating, since “once you’ve accepted that you have to include death, then you should be honest ... and indicate it can strike down anybody at any time”.<sup>6</sup> This decision has given rise to a universe in which violence and death are a relevant and unavoidable part of the lives of the characters, thus making it extremely unpredictable and, at the same time, fascinating and addictive. As those themes are closely interrelated, they define the richness and originality of this universe.

If in the first volume the focus is placed on analysing the Game of Thrones universe, including its physical, cultural, aesthetic and linguistic aspects, in this one the characters, plus their moral implications and motivations, violence and warfare take centre stage. The analysis of the characters and the factors of violence and conflict in the literary saga and its TV adaptation is chiefly—although not exclusively—based on their comparison with the Graeco-Roman classical sources, from perspectives inherent to classical studies.

As noted in the introduction to the first volume of this book, other studies have already analysed the reminiscences of the classical past in Martin’s fantasy saga. Be that as it may, it seems like a convenient moment to recall the studies performed by Attali (2014), Haimson Lushkov (2017), Rolet (2018) and López Güeto (2020), to name just a few.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azr99OfKLxk> (accessed 4 April 2022).

<sup>6</sup> *The Guardian*, 16 May 2016. Available at: [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/17/george-rr-martin-game-of-thrones-characters-die-it-has-to-be-done-song-of-ice-and-fire?CMP=twt\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/17/george-rr-martin-game-of-thrones-characters-die-it-has-to-be-done-song-of-ice-and-fire?CMP=twt_gu) (accessed 4 April 2022).

<sup>7</sup> A slightly more detailed presentation of the scientific literature on the Game of Thrones universe can be found in the introduction to Volume 1, as well as in the specific bibliography of each chapter.



Likewise, the collective monograph edited by Lowder (2012) seems like a good departure point for analysing the characters and their moral traits. As to the female characters, mention should go, without being exhaustive, to Frankel (2014), Gjelsvik and Schubart (2016), and Rohr and Benz (2020).

The first section, entitled “The Things I Do for Love”, is devoted to the universe’s heroes and villains, beginning with the chapter written by Antonino Pittà, who enquires into the archetype of “Littlefinger” in Graeco-Roman historiography and biographies, especially Plutarch, Tacitus, Suetonius and Velleius Paterculus. Performing a subtle study on the figure of the manipulative advisor of the powerful (exemplified by personages like Gaius Scribonius Curio, Aelius Sejanus and other people at the court of the emperors Claudius and Galba), he compares him with Petyr Baelish in Martin’s saga. This comparative analysis allows for reflecting on issues relating to narrative technique and the characterisation of “good” and “evil” advisors. Lastly, Pittà assesses how history presents characters of this type differently in terms of their successes and failures, in such a way that this analysis of a fictional work also begs new questions about history.

As reflected in its title, the chapter by Víctor A. Torres-González and Marcos R. Cañas Pelayo has also drawn inspiration from Plutarch. There are historical figures and families with which House Lannister bears a reasonable resemblance. These two authors enquire into some of the historical (and fictional) figures from different ages who might have inspired Martin when fleshing out his characters, with an eye to shedding light on his complex and fascinating creative process.

But not only historical and fictional narrative has served as inspiration for Martin’s characters and their characterisation and development. As already noted, one of the most shocking moments in both the first novel, *A Game of Thrones*, and the TV series is doubtless the decapitation of the “hero” Eddard Stark, one of the most beloved central characters. This should come as no surprise if he is analysed as a “tragic hero”, as Isidro Molina Zorrilla does in his chapter. The influence of tragedy on the Game of Thrones universe has been highlighted before, with special emphasis being placed on its Shakespearian connotations (e.g. Wilson 2021). Nevertheless, in his chapter Molina analyses how some of the life stories described in the fantasy saga, such as that of Ned Stark, can be understood as being tragic not only in the general, but also Aristotelian, sense. Analysed through the prism of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Ned is a tragic hero whose life becomes most convoluted as a result of his recognition (*anagnorisis*) of

the nature of his error (*hamartia*), which brings about a radical change in developments (*peripateia*) and his disgrace. His story can also be viewed as a meta-tragedy that causes, as in Greek tragedy, pity and fear, and which has a cathartic effect.

One of the crucial elements in both *ASOIAF* and in *Game of Thrones* is the presence of magical and religious elements which, more often than not, are hard to differentiate. In her chapter, Maureen Attali studies the relationship between these two concepts in the literary and audio-visual universe of *Game of Thrones* by means of a vibrant and exhaustive comparison between this and the Graeco-Roman literary sources. As the authoress demonstrates, patriarchal Westerosi society has many aspects in common with that of ancient Greece as regards people with magical powers, who are conceived as “the others”. She also describes the different kinds of magic appearing in the *Game of Thrones* universe and their objectives, while underscoring the many parallels that can be drawn between them and those described in the ancient sources. Attali then ends her chapter with some interesting reflections on the diverse ways in which supernatural aspects are treated in the literary saga and the TV series. In the former there is no clear distinction between magic and religion, in line with the current anthropological approach to religion, whereas in the series a hierarchy of religions is indeed established, as scholars did with those belonging to the “primitivist school” at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The second section of this volume (“Some Allies are More Dangerous than Enemies”) addresses violence and war, both crucial aspects in the *Game of Thrones* universe, as before from the perspective of classical studies. In the first chapter, Louis Autin yet again focuses on other possible historical influences, beyond its clear medieval inspiration. To this end, the author places the spotlight on the first novel of the saga and on Roman historiography, clearly relating the situation described in the novel to that in 69 CE, known as the year of the four emperors. As in the aforementioned studies, it is not so much a question of drawing exact or totally equivalent parallels as of illustrating Martin’s narrative, namely, the way in which he combines popular and high culture by resorting to collage or assemblage aesthetics. According to Autin, Martin’s political pessimism contrasts with the political optimism of “medieval philosophy”, more evident in the works of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.

In the same vein, the following two chapters address the influence of other ancient wars and ages on specific armed conflicts in the *Game of*

Thrones universe. For his part, Iván Moreno-Marín offers a detailed account of the similarities between the protracted armed conflicts between the Romans and the Carthaginians (the Punic Wars) and those between the Valyrians and the Ghiscari (the Ghiscari Wars). For his part, Carlo Lualdi analyses the famous “Battle of the Bastards” in light of different historical wars, such as the Battle of Agincourt, some of the battles fought during the American Civil War, the Battle of Cannae (during the Second Punic War) and the military tactics adopted by Alexander the Great, with special emphasis on the wars waged in Antiquity.

Moving on, Denis Álvarez Pérez-Sostoa establishes links between capital punishment and executions in both the TV series and the novels and those of the Roman Age. From the very beginning, in the fantasy saga and its TV adaptation the characters are tried, sentenced and punished in a way that recalls some of the procedures followed by the Romans in this regard: beheading, being thrown off a precipice, *crematio* and *damnatio ad bestias*. In this chapter, the author, like Maureen Attali in the first part of the volume, offers a detailed description of all the similarities between the Game of Thrones universe and the ancient world, thus contributing to round off its many classical sources of inspiration.

Together with the “Battle of the Bastards”, perhaps one of the most memorable episodes of the saga is, as noted above, the “Red Wedding”, an authentic bloodbath that ends in the death of several of the main characters belonging to House Stark. As with the character of Ned Stark, analysed above, the death of Robb and Catelyn Stark also corresponds more to the pattern of classical tragedy than to that of the epic tale. In addition to the feelings of pity and fear, which for Aristotle were part and parcel of tragedy, in this scene other distinctly classical elements can be glimpsed, such as the violation of hospitality—*xenia*, the cornerstone of Greek culture. In this chapter, Alexia Dedieu performs an enlightening analysis on the “Red Wedding”, as described in *A Storm of Swords*, through the prism of Greek tragedy, with the accent being placed on Euripides’ Hecuba. When approached from the perspective of tragedy, Catelyn Stark acquires new nuances, but with Shakespearian undertones and belonging to the suffering woman or *mater dolorosa* archetype.

All the chapters of this volume illustrate, from different perspectives and approaches, how modern fantasy, and in particular Martin’s work, has the ability to combine very different aesthetic elements, including the strong influence of Graeco-Roman culture, with a view to creating a surprising product that challenges the preconceptions of readers—and

viewers—while including recognisable cultural references. The aim of our work as editors of this book, arranging the different contributions, has been to offer the most coherent reading experience possible, although we are aware of the fact that, as pieces of a kaleidoscope, any other arrangement would have been just as stimulating and inspiring. The possibilities of interpreting Martin’s lengthy fantasy saga and its TV adaptation do not end here. Further studies should be performed for the purpose of explaining the keys to the success of this currently unparalleled cultural product on the basis of the Humanities.

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PART I

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“The Things I do for Love”: Heroes,  
Villains and None of the Above



## CHAPTER 2

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# Scheming in the Shadow of Tyrants: The ‘Littlefinger’ Type in Roman Historiography

*Antonino Pittà*

*Inter turbas et discordias pessimo cuique plurima vis*  
“In times of violence and civil strife  
the worst men have the greatest power”  
Tacitus, *Histories* 4.1.5

### 1 FROM SYRACUSE TO KING’S LANDING

A new tyrant sits on his throne, a throne which was gained illegally by his father. He is vicious and cruel,<sup>1</sup> uneducated and plainly unequipped to rule: the perfect subject for the schemes of ambitious courtiers.

<sup>1</sup>Plutarch, *Life of Dion* 7.7.

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Accordingly, the royal counsellors display two opposite attitudes towards him: the majority of them second the tyrant's vices to acquire personal power, while only one man, by means of subtle advice, tries to direct him to do well.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, we may notice that the leader of this first group is a former exile,<sup>3</sup> a previously irrelevant character who has suddenly become one of the most influential members of the court. His only opponent, on the contrary, belongs to the state council by his own right, being linked with the royal family, but suffers from a lack of political influence. The court is thus turned into the main setting for an endless duel between the good counsellor and the bad one. They fight their battle with those weapons that best fit this kind of war: diplomacy, slander and mutual aggression. They act in similar ways, but with opposite ends: the 'good' one, in fact, attempts to force the tyrant down and restore the previous constitution.

This overview of the political environment resembles the situation at the court in King's Landing after the death of Robert Baratheon: a battlefield where Littlefinger, on the one side, and Varys, on the other side, challenge each other to manipulate the new king, the young and unreliable Joffrey. Littlefinger fosters Joffrey's worst attributes,<sup>4</sup> so that he might create a situation of political chaos which fits his long-term plans. Varys, on the contrary, follows a secret strategy aimed at the restoration of the Targaryen dynasty.

Despite appearances, the framework outlined above is not related to King's Landing. It instead describes ancient Syracuse in the fourth century BCE. After the death of Dionysius the Elder, the inept Dionysius II rules over Syracuse.<sup>5</sup> Among his counsellors, Philistus may be regarded as the leader of the 'bad' counsellors (in other words, the villain of the story), while Dion may be seen as the 'hero', who rightfully works for a return to legality. Such, at least, is the way both characters are described in Plutarch's *Life of Dion* (written in the second half of second century CE, almost five hundred years after the events). Dion, who is styled by the biographer as the champion of justice and democracy,<sup>6</sup> was a statesman mostly known

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Dion* 7.3–4.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Dion* 11.6–7.

<sup>4</sup> Even when Joffrey has not yet become king: cf. the suspicion that Littlefinger was the 'mind' behind the attempted assassination of Bran.

<sup>5</sup> On Dionysius II and his representation in ancient literature, see Muccioli (1999, with further bibliography).

<sup>6</sup> See Sanders (2008: 195).

for his friendship with Plato the philosopher.<sup>7</sup> The historical reality, however, was quite different:<sup>8</sup> Dionysius II was not so bad, Dion was not so ‘pure’, and Philistus was definitely more than a villain. Indeed, he was a skilled general and administrator, and the author of a valuable historical work about Sicily.<sup>9</sup> First of all, Dion was not devoted exclusively to an abstract concept of the ‘realm’, as Varys is. Being both brother-in-law and son-in-law to Dionysius I (Dionysius II’s father), Dion was a full title member of the tyrant’s family. Accordingly, he fostered a cadet branch on his own—a possibility denied to Varys—and in his political conduct he was led by concrete interests, ambitions to the throne included.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, both Dion and Varys are exiled to the East, where they enlist an army to win back the supremacy of their party. So, both characters start a civil war, but with a remarkable difference: Varys is just the strategist behind a Targaryen *Reconquista*, from which the queen Daenerys would benefit, while Dion is the actual leader of the war, fighting primarily to gain power for himself.

However, the falsifications in Plutarch’s account are exactly the most relevant aspect to our point. Plutarch wants to provide a sort of hagiography of Dion,<sup>11</sup> and therefore is forced to sketch a wholly positive portrait of his hero and a wholly negative one of Dion’s opponents. As the *Life of Dion* moves into the realm of pure fiction, it develops the most common of novel clichés: intrigue at court. By using stereotypes and devices common to a fictional novel rather than to historiography, Plutarch follows a path which is common to all storytelling. Hence the strong impression of

<sup>7</sup> Plato’s letters 7 (a philosophical autobiography, mostly devoted to the account of his relationship with Dion and Dionysius II) and 8 (thoughts on the political situation in Syracuse), generally regarded as genuine, are addressed to members of Dion’s family and intellectual circle; to Dion and his kindred are also addressed letters 4 and 10, whose authenticity is questionable. For a commentary on these texts, see Isnardi Parente (2002); besides letter 7, the most important ancient source on Plato’s activity in Sicily is Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Plato* [= Book 3], 18–23.

<sup>8</sup> See Evans (2016: 163–188); Orsini (1994).

<sup>9</sup> On Philistus of Syracuse as an historian, see Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* 556; Zoepffel (1965); on his attitude towards the tyranny, cf. Pownall (2017).

<sup>10</sup> “Plutarch’s overall idealization of Dion as virtuous (1.3; 4.6; 8.1; 47.8), good (2.6), just (1.3; 22.1), dignified (8.1), noble (8.2), manly (4.3) and an individual of high character (4.3) is belied by the facts supplied in the biography presenting Dion as a skillful intriguer within Syracuse for his dynastic interests” (Sanders 2008: 194).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sanders (2008: 176–199); on the ‘hagiographical’ dimension of the biography as a genre, see Hägg and Rousseau (2000).