



GAME  
OF  
THRONES  
VERSUS  
HISTORY

*Written in Blood*

EDITED BY  
BRIAN A. PAVLAC

WILEY Blackwell



## **Game of Thrones versus History**

# ***Praise for *Game of Thrones versus History: Written in Blood****

By unlocking the history behind the hugely popular books and TV series, this collection demonstrates how pop culture can be just as important as scholarship in defining what we mean by the “Middle Ages.”

**-Matthew Gabriele**, Associate Professor of Medieval Studies,  
Department of Religion and Culture, Virginia Tech

*Game of Thrones versus History* takes Martin’s novels back to their avowed roots in medieval history, revealing the supports underpinning one of the most remarkable cultural phenomena of the past decade. In doing so, the authors illuminate not only the novels themselves but also a wide variety of episodes from our own bloody and conflicted past.

**-Ross King**

Fantasy isn’t born in a vacuum; it’s actually a studied tweaking of the real, the recognizable, and the historical. This collection masterfully explores that artful blurring, unlocking Martin’s world-making wizardry.

**-Benjamin Woodring**, Ph.D., English, Harvard University,  
J.D., Yale Law School

This thoughtful and thought-provoking work clearly demonstrates the power of popular culture to simultaneously educate and entertain.

**-Kristine Larsen**, Professor of Astronomy,  
Central Connecticut State University

# **Game of Thrones versus History**

Written in Blood

*Edited by Brian A. Pavlac*

**WILEY** Blackwell

This edition first published 2017

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*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

*Editorial Offices*

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data applied for*

ISBN: 978111924929 (paperback)

Cover image: Antique Paper © skodonnell/Getty Images; Sword © Kornelia Karkowska /

EyeEm/Getty Images

Cover design: Wiley

Set in 10/12pt Warnock by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Notes on Contributors

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**Shiloh Carroll** teaches in the writing center at Tennessee State University. She is currently working on a book examining the medievalisms and neo-medievalisms of Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* and HBO’s *Game of Thrones*. She has previously published work on *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the works of Joss Whedon.

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**Kavita Mudan Finn** earned her PhD in English Literature from the University of Oxford and has taught Medieval and Renaissance literature, Renaissance history, women's studies, and writing at several universities, including Georgetown University and the University of Maryland at College Park. In 2012 she published a book on fifteenth-century queens; she is now working on a second book, on representations of premodern women on television. She also edited *Fan Phenomena: Game of Thrones* (in press).

**Giacomo Giudici** recently completed a PhD in history at Birkbeck, University of London. His research on the relationship between textual practices, sociopolitical practices, and material culture has received awards from both the Royal Historical Society and the Society for Renaissance Studies in the United Kingdom. He has held visiting fellowships at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign and at the Huntington Library of San Marino, California.

**Mat Hardy** is senior lecturer in Middle East studies at Deakin University, Australia. His research interests include the use of role-play in teaching political science and aspects of leadership in Libya. A youth misspent in pursuit of fantasy role-playing games and fiction has also encouraged him to marry fantasy with academic writing about the East.

**Robert J. Haug** is assistant professor of Islamic world history before 1500 in the Department of History at the University of Cincinnati, where he has taught a course titled "Playing the Game of Thrones: Kingship and Court Politics in the Premodern World." His research interests focus on the eastern frontiers of the Abbasid caliphate and its successors throughout eastern Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia; and on the continuity of local elites from the pre-Islamic period until the arrival of the Seljuqs.

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**Steven Muhlberger**, before his recent retirement, was professor of history at Nipissing University in North Bay, Ontario. He has researched and published in a variety of areas, including chivalry and warfare in the later Middle Ages, democracy as a worldwide phenomenon, and the chronicles of late antiquity.

**Sonia Murphy** is an amateur medievalist and a long-time fan of *Game of Thrones*.

**Brian A. Pavlac** lives a dual life as professor of history at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and priest-in-charge of St. Stephen's Episcopal Pro-Cathedral. Published books authored by him are *A Concise Survey of Western Civilization* (2010) and a general interest work on *Witch Hunts in the Western World* (2010); he also translated a medieval biography, *A Warrior Bishop of the 12th Century by Balderich* (2008). His research interests include witch hunting, medieval Germany, and prince bishops of the Holy Roman Empire (for example Nicholas of Cusa).

**Joseph Percer** is currently the chief heraldic and onomastic officer of a worldwide medieval non-profit organization devoted to the study of the Middle Ages.

**Gillian Polack** is currently based at the Australian National University. Her recent books include *The Middle Ages Unlocked: A Guide to Life in Medieval England* (2015); *The Time of the Ghosts* (2015; novel); and *The Art of Effective Dreaming* (2015; novel). Her monograph *History and Fiction: Writers, their Research, Worlds and Stories* was published in 2016.

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**Don Riggs** studied myth at Dickinson College, where he focused on the mythical underpinnings of both ancient and modern literature. At UNC-Chapel Hill he earned degrees in comparative literature, which included the study of the French, Latin, and English Middle Ages. He has since published on Renaissance astrology, medieval and modern literature, and Tolkien. He has also translated, with Jerome Seaton, *Chinese Poetic Writing* by Francois Cheng (1984).

**Kris Swank** is library director at Pima Community College, Tucson, Arizona. She holds master's degrees in library science, international management, and language and literature with an emphasis on Tolkien studies. She has published in the field of fantasy literature, in the journals *Tolkien Studies* and *Mythlore* and in the edited collections *Fantasy and Science-Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to A Game of Thrones* (2015) and *Harry Potter for Nerds II* (2015).

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## Foreword

*William Irwin*

What a great idea! *Game of Thrones* versus history. Historians are storytellers, and the best historians, like the best storytellers, have ways of making their subject matter come to life. The challenge for the historian in the classroom is to find a hook or produce an example that will speak to a captive audience of students.

It's particularly effective when a teacher can start from something everyone thinks they know to be true, and then proceed to show that it wasn't exactly true. Something like "people think Columbus believed the earth was flat, but really he knew it was round." In this sense, a negative example can be just as effective as a positive example.

All too often, though, students do not know much about the past and so do not have incorrect ideas about it to be supplanted. Thus the historian's task becomes even more challenging. She needs to both explain and intrigue. This is where connections to popular culture can come in handy. When we can draw on what students are already interested in and knowledgeable about, we are halfway to the goal of engaging them with history.

I had a similar experience while teaching philosophy in the late 1990s. That's why they asked me to write this foreword, so please forgive the self-reference as I explain. Practically all my students were familiar with my favorite television show, *Seinfeld*. Many of them were even bigger fans than I was and could quote lines and cite episodes like scholars. It was only natural, then, to use the show to jump-start explanations and discussions of philosophy. Jerry Seinfeld's stand-up routine and observational humor could be compared to Socrates' questioning of his fellow citizens in the marketplace of Athens. It wasn't a perfect comparison, but that was part of the point. Seeing the initial similarity, students became interested in the differences as well.

I wasn't alone in doing this. Far from it.

Philosophers have always looked for vivid examples to illustrate complex ideas, and lots of professors were seizing on *Seinfeld*. When it was announced that the show was going off the air at the end of its ninth season in 1998, I was saddened as a fan and worried as a teacher. No longer would George, Jerry, Kramer, and Elaine deliver new philosophy resources. There was nothing left for me to do but

build a memorial. There would be many tributes to mark the end of the show, but my idea was to capture in a book what had been happening in the classroom, not just in my classroom but in classrooms all over the country.

*Seinfeld and Philosophy* and the many books that followed have all been team efforts, in which many writers and editors brought diverse points of view together between the covers of a book. A recent success among the books is *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords*, edited by Henry Jacoby. As you might expect, the volume includes essays about understanding Westeros in terms of the political philosophies of Plato, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Nietzsche. But the book also includes musings on the nature of happiness, magic and metaphysics, moral luck, and just-war theory. Like other books in its genre, *Game of Thrones and Philosophy* works because it speaks to fans. The writers are fans who can quote Tyrion Lannister and speak Dothraki. They relish the chance to discuss *Game of Thrones* as much as they appreciate the chance to spread philosophy. This same infectious enthusiasm pervades the pages of the book you hold in your hands.

Despite its subtitle, *Game of Thrones versus History* is not actually written in blood. It is, however, written instead with verve, insight, and enthusiasm, displaying love for both history and literature. Connections to the kings and castles of medieval England would be expected in a book of this nature, but other, less likely connections also lurk in what lies ahead. There were no real dragons in medieval Europe, of course, but examining the Seven Kingdoms reveals surprising insights into cultural history concerning the nature of childhood, the lives of powerful women, pagan religions, and forgotten celibate societies.

We can learn history by comparing it to *Game of Thrones*, and *Game of Thrones* can teach us something about history by making us reconsider it in terms of alternative possibilities. Historians face the difficult task of constructing a narrative from multiple sources that sometimes conflict with one another. The authors of this book face a similar problem concerning their sources: the differences between the accounts given by the books and the television show. What really happened in Westeros and the rest of the known world?

*Game of Thrones versus History* works brilliantly, not just because its authors are excellent historians, but also because their source material is wonderfully rich. The smart, compelling writing in the books and on the television show takes us on flights of imagination and keeps us at the sword's end of excitement. Appealing to a mass audience well beyond readers of fantasy literature, *Game of Thrones* is a pop culture force. Indeed, with its huge following of intelligent and devoted fans, *Game of Thrones* wins Emmy awards and takes the ratings crown. George R. R. Martin may be an American J. R. R. Tolkien, but he has created a global phenomenon. As evidence, consider the contributing authors in this book, who hail not just from the United States and our wintry neighbor to the north but from far-flung kingdoms in Australia—and from Europe as well. Take my advice and let them be your guide through worlds of fantasy and reality. If you read carefully, you may even get to keep your head.

## Acknowledgments

In my tender years, my brother, Ross R. Pavlac, lit a fire in me for fantasy and science fiction. Despite several efforts, though, I could not follow him into that strange world of fandom, where he met George R. R. Martin long before *A Game of Thrones* was written. Tragically, my brother's life ended far too early: he died from cancer 20 years gone. I, meanwhile, pursued a path to academia, which by good fortune led me to my position as a history professor at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. There I watched my friend and colleague Bill Irwin launch a book series comparing popular culture and philosophy. The series "Philosophy and..." made me think about "History versus..."—and I am indebted to Bill for his help with this project. My daughter, Margaret Mackenzie Pavlac, got me watching the series. I am also grateful to Janice Liedl, whose books on Harry Potter and on the Hobbit and history caught my attention and led to my proposal for this volume. I offer thanks to Andrew Davidson, who welcomed my proposal with enthusiasm. My appreciation goes to Denisha Sahadevan, my editor at Wiley, and her assistant, Maddie Koufogazos for bringing this work to the world; to the commissioning editor, Haze Humbert; to the erudite editing of Manuela Tecusan; and also to the production editor, Nivetha Udayakumar. Much credit, of course, goes to the many authors of this book, who took the time and the risk to offer their hard work and scholarship to make it a reality. What virtues exist in the essays are theirs; what deficiencies appear are mine, as editor.

Lastly, this book's appearance owes a great debt to my spouse, Elizabeth S. Lott, PhD, without whom it, and much else in my life, could not have been accomplished. Her advice, her discipline, her editing, and her inspiration have been treasures beyond compare. *Yer Jalan Atthirari Anni*—You are the moon of my life.



## Introduction

### The Winter of Our Discontent

Brian A. Pavlac

People have surely been enjoying stories based on history since the first tales were told around fires in the night. Sometimes the stories are true, or at least as true as people can make them. Sometimes they are improved through creativity, adding elements that did not happen, or even could not happen. In our cultures, the oldest surviving stories were written down with huge doses of imagination. The first such story to survive was *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which told of the founding king of Uruk in ancient Mesopotamia. King Gilgamesh not only interacted with gods and goddesses but, being partly divine, had superhuman strength himself. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the two ancient Greek epic poems traditionally attributed to Homer, centered around what was believed to have been a historical conflict in a very distant past: the Trojan War. The heroes of these epics, Achilles and Odysseus (or Ulysses, by his Latinized name), possessed respectively strength and intelligence within human capacity, although the narratives also included divine beings and dangerous monsters who wielded powers far greater than mere mortals.

Today we call such stories “myths,” even if they refer to events that may have happened and the characters in them might once have been living people. But for the listeners entertained by these stories, the tales held truth.<sup>1</sup> First, they offered answers around the fundamental question of human existence: What is the meaning of life? Gilgamesh intentionally goes off in search of an answer to that question (and the one he finds is not reassuring). Achilles and Odysseus address the same question more obliquely, in the heat of battle and in the excitement of adventure. Of course, one big part of any awareness of life or of the human condition is the reality of death. “*Valar Morghulis*,” say the Braavosi. “All men must die.”<sup>2</sup>

Second, the tales also allowed readers and listeners to escape mundane burdens and the boredom of everyday life. As George R. R. Martin hesitantly explains:

Conflict and ... and, uh, conflict and danger and, uh, all of these things are ... are the strong spices that we want. You know when they occur in our real life, we hate them. But they're part of what makes life "life," as opposed to just unending days of boredom. And, uh, I think we crave them in our ... our fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Third, the tales helped form values, perspectives on right and wrong beliefs and actions. Until modern times, people, as noted above, saw these stories as true, believing that they had actually happened. Learning the important stories was part of a person's education. Moral lessons came from interaction with characters and their choices, whether the tragically flawed hero or the comedically gifted fool.

Today we call these stories literature and classify them in our libraries as "fiction." Books in that part of the library are "made up," written from their authors' imaginations. Even in ancient times, though, historians began to write accounts that aimed to separate myth from fact. The earliest historians, such as Herodotus and Thucydides, tried to write about what people actually did, deleting any alleged involvement of supernatural beings and incredible occurrences. In libraries, history books are filed in sections called "non-fiction"—the opposite to fiction. This is a rather awkward name: it is like calling empirical reality "non-imaginary."

Among the most popular genres in recent writing are historical fiction and fantasy.<sup>4</sup> In historical fiction, authors start with what they know about the real past, then they fill in the blanks with imaginary speeches, conversations, meetings, and conflicts. In the Middle Ages conscious works of historical fiction were tales of knights and kings. *The Song of Roland*, *El Cid*, and even tales of the Knights of the Round Table included some historical rulers and historical events, although medieval audiences probably didn't know or care about historical accuracy. The great English playwright William Shakespeare certainly knew that his "historical plays" fleshed out history, adding dialogue and events to improve dramatic needs. The opening lines of his *Richard III*, "Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this son of York," make a clever transition from his play *Henry VI* but were surely never spoken by Richard III in real life—not even if you turn them into prose.<sup>5</sup>

The genre of fantasy writing reaches back again to those ancient epics—Gilgamesh, the Homeric poems—which placed human characters in environments of supernatural beings, magic, and monsters. Leading the way to modern fantasy were the works of two scholars who worked together at Oxford: J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) in particular brought fantasy writing to an adult audience.<sup>6</sup> Almost all other works in the

fantasy genre are now measured against Tolkein's. *The Lord of the Rings* drew on Norse myth, classical epics, medieval history, and an overarching concept of Good at war with Evil, all set in an imaginary world where everyday life is similar to that of the European Middle Ages. Key heroes were regular folk—"hobbits"—who found in themselves strength they did not know they possessed.

In 1996 George R. R. Martin added his contribution to the genre with the publication of *A Game of Thrones*, originally planned, following Tolkien, as the first part of an epic trilogy called *A Song of Ice and Fire*.<sup>7</sup> The increasingly popular television series on HBO, which is based on these books and called simply *Game of Thrones*, has turned Martin's creation into a worldwide entertainment phenomenon. While Martin is not a professional scholar, as Tolkien was, his colorful and richly complex realms clearly derive from wide reading and reflect a deep knowledge of history.<sup>8</sup> Like Tolkien's Middle-Earth, Martin's Known World is set in a culture similar to our Middle Ages and touched by sorcery and dragons. His characters, like people throughout our history and literature, struggle with making the right choices in perilous times and places. As one way of appreciating Martin's work, this collection of essays connects *Game of Thrones*' fantasy fiction with historical fact.

## You Know Nothing

For historians, the first step in answering any problem is to find the sources. Any record of past human activity is a source, but most useful for historians are written records: letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, writs, laws, accounts, speeches, and literature. Without sources we know nothing of what happened in the past. And, even with sources, our knowledge is incomplete, tentative, and uncertain. The word "versus" in the title of this book underscores the tension of understanding facts and reality, whether in fiction or in history. The narrators in *Game of Thrones* are sources, and, like all people, they offer individual perspectives that contradict and confuse one another.<sup>9</sup> The Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea (c. AD 500–560) offers the most famous example of such a discrepancy. In *The Wars of Justinian*, Procopius openly and fulsomely praises his emperor and patron. Hundreds of years later, however, historians discovered his *Secret History*, in which he denounces Justinian. Some historians are not bothered by such ambivalence and the discrepancies it produces, while others strive to determine a single, definitive "truth" about the past. Fiction is, of course, another matter, since it is—well, fictional. Nevertheless, many fans prefer one flawless canon, even though the reality of producing the television series and adapting Martin's books has created two divergent versions of his story; and Martin is fine with that.<sup>10</sup>

To get a handle on the confusing sources, scholars have established what is known as the historical method.<sup>11</sup> In an imitation of the scientific method,

historians propose a hypothesis supposed to answer a historical question, collect and study the sources, draw conclusions, then share their results with other historians at conferences and in academic publications. When the results are published in articles and books, key parts of the historical argument are contained in references, or in notes such as the ones the reader of this book will find at the end of each essay. References serve two functions. Explanatory or content notes add detail to an argument in the main text or give additional information on a related topic. Source notes show the origins of the historian's information. The second type is essential to scholarly argument; it allows other scholars to retrace and review the research, forming an independent evaluation of its conclusions.

By asking questions about the sources, historians try to resolve the conflicting points of view apparent within the sources themselves, decided upon by the writers of history, and brought to the material by the readers. Until the 1960s, historians mostly chose to write about political, diplomatic, and military subjects. This choice was partly due to people's fascination with violence in the past, such as reflected in the American Civil War or in World War II. Martin himself comments:

I have to take issue with the notion that Westeros is a "dark and depraved place." It's not the Disneyland Middle Ages, no, and that was quite deliberate [...] but it is no darker nor more depraved than our own world. History is written in blood. The atrocities in "A Song of Ice and Fire," sexual and otherwise, pale in comparison to what can be found in any good history book.<sup>12</sup>

Historians chose to write about wars also because sources on political–military topics were readily available. The historical record is replete with what men of means have accomplished. It is women and children, the poor and the oppressed who died unrecorded.

Since the 1960s, though, historians have increasingly concentrated on social and cultural topics that typically include underrepresented people.<sup>13</sup> Feminists began gender studies by identifying and questioning patriarchy, or how social structures have been dominated by men for most of the past.<sup>14</sup> More recently masculinity studies have begun to look at how men decided that they were men. And as for the oppressed, they can still be found in sources only by reading between the lines and by using the concept of "the other" or "otherness."<sup>15</sup> People of privilege, who write history, define and capture themselves in their historical records by identifying others, the evil, and opposite versions of themselves as embodying faults and vices that the privileged claim not to have. But, as historians argue, even when marginalized, oppressed or "subaltern" people still possess "agency," the ability to make choices on their own behalf, if only to subvert or work against the powers that dominate them.

Definitions of what is good and bad throughout history have often been drawn from religion and faith. This is a delicate matter for historians. Today's scholars uphold a position of skepticism about things like divine intervention, miracles, the supernatural, or the paranormal. No good evidence exists that any of these things actually has changed history, except insofar as people have taken action on the basis of their personal or communal beliefs in them. Most notoriously, the witch hunts clearly happened because people believed that witches conspired with the Devil to overthrow Christian society, even though there was never any proof of a diabolic conspiracy, much less of the efficacy of curses and spells.<sup>16</sup> Many of Martin's characters are skeptical or dismissive of religion. But fantasy fiction such as Martin's usually assumes that the supernatural is real, especially as manifest in characters that defy biological science—whether creatures in their own right (White Walkers, wights, dragons), perfect disguises like the Faceless Men, or resurrected dead.<sup>17</sup> The historical profession does not, in the absence of proof, preclude the possibility of the supernatural and takes a neutral stance toward the relative truth of one religious belief or another. Importantly, historians recognize the significance of religion and how much it has shaped people's lives and decisions in the past.

Scholarly opinions can be as massive and enduring as the Wall in *Game of Thrones*. Yet the wildlings can go around, climb over, and even pass through its gates; this suggests that scholars, too, should be flexible enough to find alternative explanations. Scholarly ideas can be as grand as the castle Harrenhal, only to be burned down by dragonfire when new evidence destroys them. Scholarly theories can be blown up like the Great Sept of Baelor, leaving other scholars to rebuild a thesis from the rubble. Readers like to be reassured that history offers the definitive explanation of the past; but our understanding of history is constantly changing.

## When Things Were Rotten

Popular images of the medieval period often begin and end with the label "dark ages" (which is used for other periods of history as well). The word "dark" raises expectations of ignorance, barbarism, and cruelty.<sup>18</sup> The phrase "Middle Ages" also evokes the image of medievalism, a time of lords and ladies that exists only in the popular imagination. But the historical period of the Middle Ages was much more rich and complex. One reason historians use the plural form "Ages" is that an enormous amount of change happened during medieval history.

The way historians define the Middle Ages, however, raises a fundamental problem. First, they love to argue about dates. Periodization means clumping various years into one category (a century, an age, an epoch, a period) that experiences common political, social, and ideological trends. In the grand sweep of chronology, historians of western civilization usually recognize four

great categories or historical periods.<sup>19</sup> The first is prehistory, which started before 3500 BC, the date assigned to the invention of writing. “BC” refers, of course, to the time “before Christ,” while AD abbreviates *anno Domini*, which means in Latin “in the year of the Lord” (namely Christ).<sup>20</sup> The second historical category is ancient history, which starts from the invention of writing and lasts until the beginning of the Middle Ages—the third period. Lastly, there is modern history, which begins at the end of the Middle Ages.

Where, then, does that third period of the Middle Ages begin and end? For historians, medieval history begins with the fall of the western half of the Roman Empire, which is traditionally placed in AD 476. (The eastern half of the Roman Empire continued for another thousand years, as the Byzantine Empire, until the Ottoman dynasty conquered it in 1453; and this date is sometimes conventionally given as the “end” of the Middle Ages.) But many events are significantly associated with the fall of the western half of the Roman Empire—from the Sack of Rome by the Visigoths in AD 410 to the removal of Emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476. Sometimes an arbitrarily rounded date like 450 or 500 is used. The label “dark ages” does fit the first few centuries after these events. Civilized Rome, with its wealthy cities, imperial bureaucracies, formal legal systems, paid armies, and schools had collapsed under the occupation of “barbarian” Germanic tribes with poor rural villages, kings who ruled through personal rule, oral legal traditions, armies held together by loyalty oaths, and widespread illiteracy. Only the Christian church managed to maintain a few centers of learning and knowledge. But the church placed limited value on needs of this world. Christianity urged believers to live an earthly life that would determine what their eternal life would be after death: either to suffer in hell or to rejoice with God in heaven. The influence of Christianity on medieval culture was so important that some historians call the Middle Ages the “age of faith.”

After an initial “dark age” that followed the fall of Rome, stability and culture began to return during the reign of Charlemagne, crowned emperor of the Romans in AD 800 by the pope. But this return, called “Carolingian Renaissance” (after Charlemagne’s Latin name, Carolus Magnus), collapsed soon after his death, through civil wars and through invasions by Magyars (Hungarians), Northmen (Vikings), and Saracens (Muslims). New military innovations of knights (armored warriors on horseback) and castles (fortified homes of the knights) enabled western Europeans to survive the political chaos. Knights banded together as lords and vassals, swearing oaths of fealty or loyalty to each other. They would then come to fight together in battle and celebrate together at their castle courts. Society became rigidly stratified, the clergy being the most respected members, nobles the most powerful, and peasants standing at the bottom and doing the farming that fed everyone. The priests prayed, the knights slayed and ruled, and the serfs toiled. With this restoration of some semblance of order, the early Middle Ages passed into the high Middle Ages.

The conventional dates for this transition range from AD 900 to the millennial year 1000 (a date that was not as frighteningly apocalyptic or notable as some modern myths suggest), and maybe even to 1050.

The high Middle Ages embody the "forsoothly" medieval way of life that is popularly imagined. An improving economy encouraged trade; some simple manufacturing began, especially of textiles; and towns started to flourish. Townspeople were something new; they did not fit into the previous threefold division of clergy, nobles, and peasants. Slowly the "bourgeois" increased their rights and privileges. Kings began to claim power over clearly delineated territories. Knights fought for the king and against each other. The clergy, headed by popes who claimed true sovereignty in Christendom, briefly offered a serious alternative to leadership. But by the end of the High Middle Ages kings had reduced the pope's authority over political affairs, although his dominance in the Latin church was vastly increased.

The event most closely linked with the beginning of the late Middle Ages is the Black Death, the spread of plague that began about 1348. Many thought that the world was ending, but the plague actually killed only about a third of the population. "Only." The ensuing period—the late Middle Ages—was a time of questioning and hesitation. Expansion into Eastern Europe collided with the advance of the Ottoman Empire. The increased wealth generated by bankers and the new banking system drove criticisms of materialism. Royal authority struggled to accommodate demands for representative bodies. The Hundred Years War (1337–1453) saw the decline of knights on the battlefield and the end of castles as strategic points, most importantly as a result of the use of gunpowder weapons. The authority of the papacy was much weakened, first through transfer from Rome to the city of Avignon, then through the Great Western Schism, when multiple rival popes were elected, all living in growing opulence.

The end of the Middle Ages is marked by the great changes in culture, religion, and geography that also mark the beginning of modern history. The Renaissance (which might have begun around 1400, 1450, or 1494) broke the intellectual monopoly of the Latin Christian church in Western Europe. The Reformation, traditionally taken to begin in 1517, with Martin Luther, shattered the unity of the church in the West. Various denominations—Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Anglicans—rejected the papacy to form their own Protestant versions of a Christian church. European ships sailing out into the Atlantic soon unleashed the power of Europe around the world. Some historians suggest that the Middle Ages lingered until the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, or even until the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. To choose reasonably significant dates, though, we could say that the early Middle Ages lasted from about 450 to 1050, the high Middle Ages from about 1000 to 1350, the late Middle Ages from 1300 to 1500, the Renaissance from 1400 to 1600, and the early modern period from 1517 to 1648 or 1789.

## 'All this Divided, York and Lancaster, Divided in their dire Division'

Perhaps the greatest historical influence on George R. R. Martin has been that of the Wars of the Roses (1455–1485), a civil war in late medieval England.<sup>21</sup> Given this reality, it is worth offering a brief history of the conflict. William Shakespeare also tackled the subject in a tetralogy (i.e. a group of four linked history plays); the line that heads this section comes from one of them.<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare's previous tetralogy ended at the point where Henry V (r. 1413–1422) of the Plantagenet dynasty defeated the French royal army at Agincourt, married a royal princess, and won the French throne for England. Unfortunately Henry died young.

Shakespeare begins his account of the Wars of the Roses with three plays that cover the reign of Henry VI (r. 1422–1461, 1470–1471), Henry V's son, who inherited the French and English thrones when he was only nine months old. Various factions fight to control him even when he becomes an adult, since he keeps suffering bouts of mental illness perhaps inherited from his maternal grandfather, Charles VI "the Mad" (r. 1380–1422). One faction supports the Lancaster branch of the Plantagenet house and has a red rose for its emblem; the other faction supports the York branch and is symbolized by a white rose—hence the name of the conflict. In spite of Henry V's successes, England had lost the Hundred Years' War and people were looking for someone to blame. Richard, duke of York (1411–1460), used popular resentment to attack the factions around the king, but lost his life at the Battle of Wakefield. A few weeks later, though, at the Battle of Towton, his son won the throne as Edward IV (r. 1461–1470, 1471–1483). Edward's unpopular marriage to Elizabeth Woodville and enmity of his main supporter—Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, called "the Kingmaker"—cost him the throne and forced him into exile in 1470. The next year he returned with an army and won the throne back. He enjoyed being king and lived the high life until an early death.

His brother Richard, duke of Gloucester, was supposed to act as guardian to Edward's two young sons. But, as portrayed in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, a villainous Richard of Gloucester seized the throne for himself, becoming King Richard III (r. 1483–1485). Richard sent the two princes to the Tower of London and they never emerged again. He had other enemies and rivals executed, in the fashion of his time, but not enough of them, apparently. Henry Tudor had a weak claim to being a legitimate heir to the throne, but was supported by the Lancastrians. He invaded the realm and killed Richard in the closely fought Battle of Bosworth Field. The new king, Henry VII (r. 1485–1507), ended the Wars of the Roses and established the Tudor dynasty, which had its own ups and downs over the next century.

Martin drew on this historical conflict to create his novel: at its core lie the houses of Stark (York) and Lannister (Lancaster).<sup>23</sup> The doomed Richard of

York influences the character of Eddard Stark. Robert Baratheon resembles Edward IV both in his warrior prowess and in his neglect for rule. Robb Stark, also like a valiant Edward IV, makes a politically foolish marriage. Among the Lannisters, Tywin is a bold and sharp ruler, just like Edward I, "the Hammer of the Scots." Richard III's wit, insight, and alleged hunchback are exaggerated in the character of the dwarf Tyrion. His sister Cersei receives the same kind of abuse hurled at Margaret of Anjou (1430–1480), the wife of Henry VI. And young Danaerys combines the attributes of an inspirational Joan of Arc with those of the claimant to the throne, Henry Tudor. For more on these characters, see the brief summary below and many of the chapters in this volume.

## The Story so Far

To go by the title that Martin has given the whole series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the overriding storyline involves fantasy elements. On an unnamed planet (sometimes called "the Known World"), humans live on the continents of Westeros and Essos, while the environment fluctuates between long and short spells of warm or cold weather. The "song's" first element is ice. "Winter is coming," says the original protagonist Ned Stark repeatedly. The Others or the White Walkers represent that winter. In the opening prologue they assault rangers of the Night's Watch, who normally defend the Wall. Then, progressively through the story, the Night King slowly, glacially builds up forces of White Walkers and wights (the old-fashioned term for zombie-like undead), eventually to attack the Seven Kingdoms to the South.<sup>24</sup>

The overwhelming bulk of the story so far is, however, about people trying to use power. At the highest level, the "game of thrones" involves struggles over the constituent Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. At the lowest level, Martin tells about outsiders trying to make a place for themselves in turbulent times. This human problem is, of course, universal, which is how the book can appeal to many folk who will never approach the power of a king who sits on the Iron Throne, a perilous seat made of swords.

The good guys are the Stark family: patriarch Ned, the Warden of the North, lord of the castle Winterfell; his wife Catelyn; and his legitimate children, Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon, along with Ned's alleged illegitimate son, Jon Snow.<sup>25</sup> The wealthy and well-connected Lannisters are the opposing family. Patriarch Tywin is ruthlessly building his family's fortunes even as his gold mines run dry. His twin children, Jaime and Cersei, are in an incestuous relationship, although she has married the current king, Robert Baratheon. Their three royal offspring, Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen, are actually issue of the incest between Jaime and Cersei. Their younger brother, Tyrion Lannister, is trying to find his own place, which is complicated by his stature as a dwarf. A third family is the Targaryens, who had held the royal dynasty until Robert

seized the throne. Two surviving Targaryen children, Viserys and his sister Daenerys, scheme to return to Westeros and reclaim the crown. Daenerys represents the second element in the novels' title, "fire": it is connected to her dragons, which help to bring magic back into the world.

These various characters' efforts to manipulate power for their own ends or for the benefit of others drive the various plots, all seen from first-person perspectives. The storyline begins after the suspicious death of the king's "Hand"—his chief advisor and the administrator of the realm. King Robert asks his old friend Ned Stark to take his place, drawing Ned and his family into the "game" of royal intrigue. This request leads to Bran's crippling, Ned's beheading, Robb's rebelling, Sansa's constraining, and Arya's wandering. Ned's exposure of Jaime and Cersei's incest provokes King Robert Baratheon's death and the War of the Five Kings. As king, vicious Joffrey spreads cruelty, Robert's brothers Stannis and Renly rebel against the illegitimate king, and Stannis commits magical fratricide on Renly through the Red Woman, Melisandre. Meanwhile old grudges encourage the rebellion of the ironmen from the Iron Islands, who attack both Stark and Lannister. Stannis' attack on the capital, King's Landing, fails, due to Tyrion's strategy and courage, along with Tywin's warfare and plotting ("swords and spears [...] quills and ravens").<sup>26</sup> Tywin also arranges the murder of Robb and his mother Catelyn Stark by the Frey and Bolton families, at the "Red Wedding." Stannis is briefly diverted northward to defeat the wildlings in their assault against the Night's Watch on the Wall. His attack against the Boltons who hold Winterfell fails and leads to his death.<sup>27</sup> Jon Snow, who had become Lord Commander, is murdered by mutinous members of the Night's Watch, but he comes back from the dead in a good way. Season 6, which is based on the novel *The Winds of Winter* (still unpublished at the time of this writing), ends with Jon and his half-sister Sansa reunited and back in Winterfell, having defeated the Boltons. Their sister Arya is beginning a career as an assassin, and their crippled brother Bran has become a seer, the three-eyed crow or raven.

Meanwhile the wealthy Tyrell family gains influence in the capital. As a result, Tywin's grandson, King Joffrey, is poisoned at his own wedding—the Purple Wedding—which leaves his vulnerable and weak brother Tommen, now king, to marry Joffrey's widow, Margaery Tyrell. Tyrion is about to be wrongly executed for the crime but escapes with the help of his brother Jaime although he stops on the way in order to kill his father, Tywin. Cersei tries to outflank her enemies by appointing a zealous preacher, the High Sparrow, as High Septon, leader of the main religion in Westeros. The High Sparrow arrests not only Tyrell's enemies, but also Cersei herself. Forced into a humiliating walk of atonement and threatened with still more punishment, Cersei wreaks vengeance on many of her enemies by blowing them up. As season 6 ends, Cersei takes the iron throne as the first regnant queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

Across the Narrow Sea in Essos, Daenerys Targaryen has been developing from a shy slip of a girl to a charismatic and dominating queen. Her marriage

to Khal Drogo of the Dothraki horse-riding warriors was supposed to provide her brother with an army, but her sibling's foolishness got him gruesomely killed.<sup>28</sup> Drogo dies soon after, although out of his funeral pyre an unburnt Daererys appears with three dragons. She slowly builds allies and armed forces, conquering the slaver cities of Yunkai, Astapor, and Meereen. She gets stalled for a while in Meereen, where she tries to rule a rebellious population while gathering resources for an invasion of Westeros. At the end of season 6, with a vast fleet combining forces from Dorne, the ironmen, and the Dothraki and advised by Tyrion Lannister, she has set sail to reclaim the Iron Throne. But, as Ser Davos Seaworth warns: "The real war isn't between a few squabbling houses. It's between the living and the dead, and make no mistake, my lady, the dead are coming."<sup>29</sup>

## Scholarly Studies

This volume proposes to help readers understand and appreciate the vast tapestry of George R. R. Martin's fiction by hanging it alongside the great vista of history. From various perspectives, the authors take a look at Martin's plots, characterizations, and settings and discuss, from the vantage point of history, whether Martin's creations are possible or fantasy. Each author has his or her own voice, own perspective, and own methodology in applying sources. Such a collection of chapters is perforce not comprehensive; it cannot cover every relevant facet of *Game of Thrones*. There is also some repetition and redundancy among the authors, as well as some disagreement of interpretation. But, because of that, the collection offers insights into the real practice of historians. Point by point, a scholar takes a thesis and argues it out, until a stately edifice is built to encompass our understanding of the past.

The chapters are grouped into five parts. Part I covers largely political issues. The opening chapter of Kavita Mudan Finn appraises women rulers, who have become increasingly important over the course of the *Game of Thrones* and in our own view of the past. Jacopo della Quercia quizzes Machiavelli for advice that he might offer to historical or fantasy rulers, either male or female. Steven Muhlberger analyzes the role of knights and their behavior in medieval and Westerosi society. Then Brian A. Pavlac probes the moves by which kings win and play with power.

Part II digs into the cultural history of those on the fringes of Western Europe or Westeros. Shiloh Carroll surveys how invaders and conquerors transform societies. Brian de Ruiter then constructs a more narrow argument around Hadrian's Wall. Turning eastward, Mat Hardy illustrates how foreign both Essos and Asia might seem—or not. Robert Haug then sharpens the argument on the use of slave-soldiers in both places.

Part III raises issues of women and children, to whom Martin's stories give pride of place, even if history often has not. Janice Liedl starts from the top of the family unit, the parents, and what choices they typically made in medieval or made-up society. Helle Strandgaard Jensen and Magnus Qvistgaard continue from the bottom up, presenting the limited perspectives of children. Nicole Mares examines the overall possibilities for women to direct their own lives, while Danielle Alesi concentrates on Sansa Stark.

Part IV covers religious issues. Don Riggs compares religions in Europe with those in Westeros. Maureen Attali exposes the more violent sides of people of faith. Daniel Clasby blends together the tension between tendencies for violence among religious believers and their attempts to live in harmony. Finally, Kris Swank takes a peek at the world from under the covers of those believers who practice sexual abstinence.

Part V does, admittedly, collect essays without any thematic cohesion. Giacomo Giudici's piece on communication speaks to some accurate and inaccurate methods of writing and talking. The article by Sara Uckelman, Sonia Murphy, and Joseph Percer identifies qualities of medieval and fantasy names. Concluding the volume, Gillian Pollack highlights various means by which Martin evokes the Middle Ages.

We hope these scholarly efforts will feed an interest in history while deepening an appreciation for George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

- 1 C. S. Lewis, "The Dethronement of Power," in *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, edited by Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 16, notes that myth helps us rediscover reality.
- 2 George R. R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire, Book Three: A Storm of Swords* (New York: Bantam, 2011 [2000]), 910. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 67–68, notes how stories can address the desire to escape from death, partly through the concept of the "happy ending," which he calls a *eucatastrophe* (from the ancient Greek compound adjective *eukatastrophos*, "turned well, turned to a good conclusion," and by analogy with the Aristotelian concept of *catastrophē*, "reversal").
- 3 "Game of Thrones: A Dance of Dragons and the Winds of Winter Original Trilogy, George R. R. Martin and Robin Hobb—Exclusive Event!" 2014, August 26 (accessed October 25, 2016 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXLYSnMlrXM&feature=youtu.be>).
- 4 Martin thought to combine "epic fantasy that had the imagination and the sense of wonder that you get in the best fantasy, [with] the gritty realism of the best historical fiction. If I could combine those two threads, I might have something fairly unique

- and well worth reading" (John Hodgman and George R. R. Martin, "George R. R. Martin, Author of 'A Song of Ice and Fire,' Series: Interview on The Sound of Young America," 2011, September 19. Accessed August 3, 2016 at <http://www.maximumfun.org/sound-young-america/george-r-r-martin-author-song-ice-and-fire-series-interview-sound-young-america>).
- 5 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 1, lines 1–2.
  - 6 For more on the origins of modern fantasy, see the chapter by Uckelman, Murphy, and Percer in this volume.
  - 7 George R. R. Martin, "The Long Game ... of Thrones," in Not a Blog (on his website), 2016, August 1 (1: 13 a.m.) (accessed August 2, 2016 at <http://grrm.livejournal.com/496185.html>). Tolkien's "trilogy" was actually in six books, each with its own title; his first words were: "This tale grew in the telling" (J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring, Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings*, 2nd edn., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 1. Martin's work has reluctantly grown to seven planned books; see Dave Itzkoff, "His Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy: George R. R. Martin Talks 'Game of Thrones,'" *New York Times ArtBeat*, 2011, April 1 (accessed August 8, 2016 at <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/his-beautiful-dark-twisted-fantasy-george-r-r-martin-talks-game-of-thrones>).
  - 8 For some of his book recommendations, see George R. R. Martin, "FAQ," in For Fans (on his own website), 2016 (accessed August 4, 2016 at <http://www.georgerrmartin.com/for-fans/faq>).
  - 9 Laura Miller, "George R. R. Martin Reveals Which Inconsistencies in 'Game of Thrones' Are Actually Deliberate," 2015, June 1 (accessed October 12, 2016 at <http://uk.businessinsider.com/george-rr-martin-game-of-thrones-inconsistencies-2015-6>).
  - 10 George R. R. Martin, "The Show, the Books," in Not a Blog, 2015, May 18 (12: 55 p.m.) (accessed January 20, 2016 at <http://grrm.livejournal.com/427713.html>).
  - 11 An updated classic is Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (6th edn., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004 [1957]).
  - 12 David Itzkoff, "George R. R. Martin on 'Game of Thrones' and Sexual Violence," *New York Times ArtBeat*, 2014, May 2 (accessed August 8, 2016 at <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/02/george-r-r-martin-on-game-of-thrones-and-sexual-violence/>).
  - 13 For a good survey of new trends, see John Tosh with Seán Lang, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (4th edn., Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006).
  - 14 Martin draws on medieval patriarchy for his novel. See the unsigned "Patriarchy in Westeros," in *The Citadel: So Spake Martin*, 1999, January 7 (accessed August 6, 2016 at <http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/962>). Nevertheless, many of his female characters fight against the restrictions of patriarchy. On this topic, see the chapters by Mares and Alesi in this volume.