

A Dance with Deviants:
The Sexual as Fantastic in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

by
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For Hannah, who has accompanied me on our journey through Westeros

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J.R.R. Tolkien said that *The Lord of the Rings* was a tale that grew in the telling. I would have to echo Tolkien's sentiment with regards to this thesis and thus have a great many people to thank for its growth and eventual completion.

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Abstract

Though it occupies substantial cultural space, fantasy literature is a relatively understudied corpus. This thesis seeks to illumine some of the rhetorical strategies the genre employs by drawing parallels between the rhetorics of gender, sexuality, and the fantastical in George R.R. Martin's dark heroic fantasy *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

Specifically, I use Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the equivocated fantastic to argue that Martin's text constructs societally aberrant individuals and behaviors in an equivalent fashion to supernatural occurrences. These Todorovian constructions involve orchestrated efforts to obfuscate certain subjects from the perception of the reader or from textual characters, but this obvious clouding also reveals, emphasizes, and enriches portrayals of the subject.

I begin with a brief introduction, which acquaints the reader to the flavors of Martin's World of Ice and Fire and the tale he weaves within it. In this section, I also offer a sketch of Todorov's theoretical framework and explicate how it applies to my own assertions.

Following the introduction is an outline of the methodologies I employed while formulating this thesis. My investigative approach couples traditional modes of literary analysis, such as close reading, with applications of digital methods. In particular, I use vector space models to assess the underlying lexical patterns in thematic areas such as motherhood, queerness, and sexual promiscuity. Combining these digital readings with my human readings bolsters my ability to identify the textual strategies surrounding sexual and supernatural forces in Martin's expansively complex tale.

Next comes the meat of this thesis, which is broken down into three chapters, each of which focuses on a different deviant identity. I set the stage for these chapters by addressing medieval influences that color the portrayals of these identities.

The first chapter considers Westerosi mothers and the extent to which they are permitted to stray from their prescribed feminine gender roles to occupy spaces of male vengeance and violence. Catelyn, Olenna, and Cersei are the primary focuses. This chapter also includes a discussion of which socially disruptive or politically destabilizing maternal maneuvers require Todorovian concealment.

My second chapter looks at how queerness functions in *Song*. Here, I explore how queer sexualities can help or hinder the sociopolitical aspirations of those who hold them and I interrogate the motivations and ramifications of the obfuscations of these sexualities. I consider the gendered disparity in representations of male and female queerness as well, comparing Loras and Renly's veiled gay romance to Cersei and Daenerys' blatantly depicted but transient same-sex encounters.

Finally, in my third chapter, I analyze the broader sexual discourse which pervades *Song*'s linguistic and narrative milieus. Both the supposed and certain debaucheries and the lascivious natures of figures such as Cersei, Margaery, and Melisandre are assessed within this third chapter, and I examine the tension between coarse sexual depictions and ambiguous or veiled instances of female sexual profligacy. Additionally, I pay especially close attention to how fantastical presences intersect with sexual endeavors and expressions.

All of the societally marginalized figures I scrutinize are united by the fact that their identities and actions are sometimes hidden. Varied as the purposes for these Todorovian concealments are, they are ultimately used to obscure deviant activities which threaten to disrupt, as emergent fantastical forces do, the patriarchal social order of the pseudo-medieval society which exists within the novels.

Key Words: Gender, Sexuality, Fantasy, Digital Humanities, Medievalism

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Short Titles

ACoK: Martin, George R.R. *A Clash of Kings*. New York: Bantam Books, 2011.

ADwD: Martin, George R. R. *A Dance with Dragons*. New York: Bantam Books, 2011.

AFfC: Martin, George R. R. *A Feast for Crows*. New York: Bantam Books, 2011.

AGoT: Martin, George, R.R. *A Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam Books, 2011.

ASoS: Martin, George, R.R. *A Storm of Swords*. New York: Bantam Books, 2011.

Song: *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The title of the series which comprises the five novels above.

TWoIaF: Martin, George R.R. Elio M. Garcia, Jr., and Linda Antonsson, *The World of Ice and Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and the Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam Books, 2014.

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Introduction

Modern fantasy, as it was established by Tolkien, finds its roots in chivalric medieval romances. These works from the Middle Ages are studded with dauntless gallants concerned with noble pursuits. Thus, texts in the fantasy canon, influenced as they are by Tolkien's formative books, are often richly perfumed portraits of glamorized medievalism and masculine valor, rife with valiant deeds, virtuous heroes, and extraordinary feats of fantastical splendor.

It is curious, then, that the most popular fantasy of the contemporary moment is George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a sweeping fantistorical which Lev Grossman dubs a tale of "men and women slugging it out in the muck, for money and power and lust and love."¹ You will find chivalric heroes of unassailable honor scarce in Martin's world, and when you do find them, they often either expire quickly or are hamstrung by intense societal prejudices. To be sure, Martin crafts a grimier tale than his Inklings predecessors, saturating his novels with grit, gore, slime, and sex. All the same, Martin continues to write in the medievalist traditions of his fantasist precursors, crafting a world inspired by a slew of pre-modern mindsets.

Boasting a ridiculously complex latticework of plots, subplots, pseudo-plots, implied plots, and unresolved plots—not to mention several tomes of supplemental fabricated encyclopedic and historical information—for which adequate summarization alone would likely extend beyond the length of this thesis, *Song* is an accomplishment of modern mythopoeia which knows few peers. That said, at the heart of the text is a brutal struggle for the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros between a horde of bitterly feuding noble families. In the game these nobles play—the "game of thrones" from which *Song's* first volume takes its name—there are no rules. It is commonplace for children to be shoved out tower windows, for bastard kings to

¹ Lev Grossman, "The American Tolkien," *Time*, November 13, 2005, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1129596,00.html>.

be born of incest, for princes to be castrated, for princesses to wear masks of freshly dead human flesh, and for mothers to watch their sons grotesquely perish at wedding feasts. It is also commonplace for the dead to return, for dragons to be hatched in exchange for burnt human offerings, and for central protagonists to lose their heads as the narrative is barely off the ground. As one of the series' many queens, Cersei Lannister, succinctly puts it: "when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground."²

While the epic structure of the high fantasy model remains intact within it, *A Song of Ice and Fire* oscillates its focus between the traditional militaristic struggles among competing factions which typically populate high fantasies and intimately personal conflicts.³ Profound and penetrating, these intra- and inter-personal skirmishes are often deeply ingrained with matters of identity. Westerosi society is a steaming cesspool of systemic misogyny, toxic masculinity, classism, ableism, and xenophobia which is a breeding ground for fascinating portrayals of repressed, shamed, and curtailed identities. It is this unabashed focus on identity and the quiet traumas⁴ they entail which truly sets *Song* apart from earlier blockbuster fantasies.

Given the violently oppressive, masculinist culture Martin suffuses throughout his secondary world, his novels may not seem likely to focus on progressive depictions of the lives

² George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 488.

³ Sub-categorizations of fantasy literature are often vaguely defined or interchangeable. High fantasy usually involves a quest to determine the destiny of a secondary world. Epic fantasy is similar, but it is usually a term applied to long, complex works. Heroic fantasy looks at the more scaled back, often episodic, conflicts between a central hero and any number of villains. *Song* can and has been classified under all these genres, but what makes the series unique is its sustained focus on internal turmoil in addition to external conflicts. For further reference, peruse entries in John Clute's *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

⁴ The term 'quiet trauma' refers to the quotidian sufferings that distress individuals (often in privatized spaces). T.H. Lührman, "The Traumatized Social Self: The Paris Predicament in Modern Bombay," in *Cultures Under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma*, ed. Antonius C.G.M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

of women and queer characters. However, it is precisely because of *Song*'s brutal, feudalist societal milieu that women and characters on the fringes of sexual identity stand out as so starkly revolutionary. For, in spite of the monumental obstacles which threaten their physical person and social standing, these characters still find ways to subversively exercise agency in their society. Indeed, a cursory survey of George R.R. Martin interviews reveals a general consensus among his readers that he commendably depicts characters of marginalized identities by arming them with agency in diverse arenas of action.⁵

It is this collection of characters—this parade of the despised, derelict, and deviant—wherein the focus of this thesis lies. Specifically, this thesis addresses the assemblage of a certain sort of deviants from Martin's robust *dramatis personae*: those who transgress the boundaries of sexuality or gender assigned to them—vengeful matriarchs, gay knights, profligate princes, and promiscuous priestesses. Throughout the novels, many of these characters experience mobility in their positioning in the game of thrones, transitioning from abject to agented roles.

My investigation of these aberrant characters is rooted in rhetorical portrayals of their sexuality. Tacitly and openly acknowledged taboos feature strongly in Martin's prose; characters' sexualities are not limited in their content to monogamy nor stifled in their semantic presence to fleeting remarks. Depictions of menstruation, masturbation, incest, promiscuity, homosexual activity, and prostitution are thoroughly embroidered into the narrative fabric. However, while Martin does not shy away from crafting agented female and queer characters, he maintains an artificial sense of ambiguity around them by withholding explicit confirmations of

⁵ My favorite is this Strombo interview, in which Martin candidly replies to a question about how he writes women so well with "You know; I've always considered women to be people." Strombo, "George R.R. Martin on Strombo: Full Extended Interview," aired March 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHfip4DefG4>.

their sexual tendencies from the reader, or by forcing the characters to withhold such information from others.

This literary stratagem is reminiscent of Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic, which suggests that the legitimacy of the fantastic hinges on a consistently indefinite explanation of supposedly supernatural elements. As Todorov puts it, the fantastic is

[T]hat hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event...total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life.⁶

This prolonged hesitation, which allows for both mundane and mystical justifications for the fantastic, invites an air of intrigue.⁷ While Todorov's framework is not directly pertinent to all of *Song's* fantastical components, it is reflected in the obscuring of sexually transgressive acts, such as the Lannister twins' carnal relations and Loras Tyrell's queerness. Throughout this thesis, I assert that Martin uses these obfuscating moves, which I have termed "Todorovian constructions" to achieve several ends. The first is to politicize sex and gender. *Song* is a tale about men and women struggling to maintain fragile political statuses, statuses often threatened by the possible exposure of their sexual delinquencies or deviances. Thus, by convoluting the lascivious activities of his sexual reprobates, Martin dramatizes their precarious grasps on life, love, and power and emphasizes the intrinsic connection between the messiness of Westerosi politics and the messiness of sexual debauchery.

The second use of Todorovian constructions in *Song* builds on the first: to bind the sexually-charged, political "game of thrones" operating in the plot's foreground to the enigmatic,

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by Richard Howard (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 25, 31.

⁷ Todorov refers to things which evoke this phenomenon as 'uncanny.'

supernatural agents of the apocalypse slowly emerging in the novels' marginal subplots. In other words, Martin uses Todorovian constructions for their classic function as well—to obfuscate the fantastic. In doing so, Martin parallels mysterious fantasy emblems, such as dragons and zombies, that incite narrative tension with mysterious sexualities that threaten to overturn societal convention and stability.⁸ I argue that by intentionally equivocating about sexually aberrant individuals' lifestyles, Martin entices his reader to engage in the frivolous game of thrones and, like most of Westeros, ignore the warning portents of looming disaster. By producing this readerly experience, Martin replicates the problematic preoccupation with and mystification of queer and feminine identities exhibited by his more condemnable characters. Additionally, by utilizing analogous narrative techniques to depict fantastical elements and deviant genders and sexualities, Martin grants the latter an elevated echelon. After all, most fantasy readers choose to pick up *Song* for the dragons and shadow demons; yet Martin uses equivalent rhetorical techniques to signify both supernatural entities and unorthodox gender expressions and sexualities. Moreover, portrayals of these unorthodox identities take up significantly more page time than depictions of the supernatural, further increasing the importance of gender and sexuality in *Song*.

What vests this point of tangency between societally marginalized sexualities and geographically marginalized fantasticalities with particular significance is the fact that both

⁸ Dragons and zombies, being explicitly fantastic, would not traditionally fall under Todorov's definition of uncanny fantastical forces. Rather, he would call them 'marvelous.' For the purposes of this thesis, however, I am broadening the applicability of Todorov's definition of the uncanny so that it pertains both to sexual deviance concealed from the reader (such as male homosexuality) and to deviances concealed from the majority of the Westerosi public (such as Cersei's many forms of sexual indecency). Using this more robust definition, plainly fantastical forces like dragons become eligible for attachment to Todorovian constructions because almost every character in the novel (save for those who have seen them) doubt their existence.

waver on the edge of eruption or resurgence. An intrinsic part of *Song*'s lore is the historical thinning of magic which occurred, depleting Westeros of dragons, direwolves, sorcery, and other emblems of the fantastic.⁹ However, from the very first chapter, Martin sets up a portal world dynamic wherein magic exists in lands physically cut off from Westeros proper by boundaries such as the enchanted Wall or the Narrow Sea.¹⁰ A central anxiety of the series is that these barriers will collapse or be traversed, thus merging the realm of the fantastic with the realm of reality. In classical fantasies, this reversal of the thinning often heralds a restoration of order. This is not the case in *Song*. Instead, the immanent reinstitution of the fantastic in Westeros symbolizes an imposition of apocalyptic disorder. Aberrant sexualities serve to augment this encroaching chaos, for they are also anarchic forces transgressing frightfully permeable borders. The key differences between sexual and fantastic intrusions, though, are that the fantastic crosses spatial borders while the sexual crosses social ones. In effect, radical fantastical forces claw at the framework of Westerosi society from the periphery while deviant sexualities undermine it from within. Thus, contraventions of social convention within the spheres of gender and sex become charged with devastating potential to raze or refashion those social conventions altogether.

To thoroughly explore how *Song* handles sexuality at narrative and lexical levels, I employ a two-pronged approach, combining traditional close readings with digital methods such as vector space models (VSMs). VSMs sift through a computerized text, clumping words

⁹ See John Clute's entry on this term in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (available online). A 'thinning' refers to a fantasy trope in which the world's magical systems undergo a diminishment, perversion, or death.

¹⁰ The portal fantasy is one of the four categories Farah Mendlesohn divides the genre into. It requires two distinct worlds which are travelled between using a portal (think Wonderland). Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

together in linguistic and thematic clusters. Through this technique, I have created visualizations of the lexicons associated with certain concepts, such as motherhood, promiscuity, and queerness. These VSMs provide a broader understanding of how Martin's literary and rhetorical techniques function at a linguistic level—something not readily apparent to most human cognitions.

In essence, this thesis will use these digital readings as a springboard and comprise case studies of several character cohorts (prefaced by a brief chapter on the digital methodologies I employ). Each of these cohorts is composed of individuals united by similar gender roles or sexual proclivities.

I shall start with the women who may appear to conform to their prescribed roles as mothers. Catelyn Stark, Cersei Lannister, and Olenna Tyrell feature here; these individuals embody three wildly different maternal types who are, in some ways, comfortable in their societally assigned positions. However, these women, feminine as they appear according to norms set by the text, often extend their reach into the masculine domains of revenge, violence, and justice. Thus, I consider just how masculine those concepts truly are in the context of the novels, and I examine how much a mother can breach textual gender norms before being considered 'bad.'

Next, I investigate queerness in *Song*. In this chapter, I consider why some instances of sexual interactions between members of the same sex, such as rape, pedophilia, and experimental lesbian encounters, are explicitly acknowledged and described, while male homosexual love is revealed only through implication and innuendo. Moreover, I reflect on how the devaluation and occasional valorization of queer characters within the World of Ice and Fire serves to complicate and disturb the lineage-driven political dynamics of the narrative.

In my final chapter, I examine harlots, female profligates, and promiscuous priestesses. Studying these women (Westerosi society permits and nearly encourages men to be lascivious) inevitably results in connections to previous chapters. For example, Margaery Tyrell's perceived promiscuity is inextricably linked to her brother Loras as well as to the scheming Cersei. Moreover, Cersei herself engages in all manner of sexual debauchery. In tending to these female sexual behaviors, which are ubiquitous yet illicit in their society, I hope to expose, with the aid of digital readings, what promiscuous figures gain and lose by having Todorovian veils cast over their sexual encounters. Such information reveals to what extent subversively sexual individuals are able to operate beyond the roles established for them by the Westerosi patriarchy. Additionally, I conclude with a discussion of Melisandre, the mysterious, seductive witch from the far east who represents an ominous Todorovian nexus between the sexual and the fantastic.

These deviants, diverse as they are in their characterizations, are united by the fact that their very existence is in tension with the society they live in. Thus, Todorovian constructions conceal and shelter them from violence and ridicule, but they also call our attention to the disruptive potential of deviance. Sexual deviance is threatening because it makes vulnerable, by way of adultery and non-procreative sex, the strict system of male primogeniture through which political power flows and upon which Westerosi society relies. Fantastical deviances are threatening because they represent pathways through which natural, and thus narrative, law can be thwarted. Regardless of whether these deviances are fantastical or sexual, their flexibility is threatening to an otherwise unyielding world. As such, *Song's* deviants have a delicate task to perform as they dance their way through the game of thrones. In the subsequent chapters, I investigate the choreography of this dance, considering what it takes for characters to complete it with proficiency.

Before I proceed, though, I feel I am obligated to provide three disclaimers:

First, I must acknowledge the elephant in the room: *Game of Thrones*. HBO's television adaptation of *Song* has been wildly popular lately—and rightfully so. However, while the series is an incredible masterpiece of the silver screen, it does not handle sexuality as delicately as Martin's prose does. Indeed, the thought of subtlety or mystery when it comes to sex seems never to cross the showrunners' minds. Moreover, I simply do not have the space to address sixty-seven hours of film in addition to over five-thousand pages of text in the space of one senior thesis. Thus, *Game of Thrones* is not a focus of my coming discussions.

Second, I recognize that I am writing about constructions of a marginalized identity which I do not hold. I am not a woman and thus am not capable of fully understanding the experiences of wives, mothers, daughters, or women of any sexual orientation. All the interpretations I offer in this thesis are, of course, subjective, but while some of my analyses are grounded in the experiences I have as a person occupying a male social role, others are based only on the knowledge I have gathered about other genders through scholarly, literary, and interpersonal means. Therefore, it is not my intention to form a universal paradigm regarding femininity in *Song* (a work by a male author). Rather, I seek to scrutinize the ways in which Martin's language functions to manufacture and represent characters. I have tried to nuance my masculine reading of the text with the perspectives and voices of the women who have personally and academically influenced me, but without having lived their experiences, I may fall short.

Third, it is an odd moment in *Song*'s history to compose scholarship on it as the series is not yet complete. With at least two books left to write, Martin could easily dismantle many of the claims I make about his characters with future publications. Thus, I must recognize that my

assertions are limited in their scope to Martin's published corpus. However, *Song's* published plot, as well as the future plots preemptively revealed by the television series *Game of Thrones* (which has advanced beyond the scope of the novels) indicate strong potential for drastic imminent changes in the sociopolitical positioning of characters, changes which may substantially increase the political and narrative agency wielded by women and queer characters. Thus, I think it safe to say that, though we are in a state of Todorovian hesitation regarding *Song's* conclusion, many of the concepts I write about in this thesis will be pushed to the foreground in Martin's future novels.

Digital Methodologies

Texts are, by their very nature, designed to be consumed by the human eye (or at least by the human mind). However, with the emergence of computers in the twentieth century, another reader has become available: an exceedingly swift reader with unparalleled attention to detail and the ability to generate an endless supply of literary and lexical data in a matter of moments. With such an adept reader at their disposal, one might wonder why more scholars have not jumped on the digital humanities bandwagon and applied these new technologies to their objects of study. Though there are many possible reasons for this lack of scholarly activity, one of the more obvious ones is that at the end of the day computer analyses of texts are, like human analyses, limited. No digital reading has been or will ever be exhaustive and without error; computers read for organizational patterns and are ill-equipped to identify irony, emotion, sarcasm, and other human inventions.

However, imperfect as they are, computers are capable of observing things that even the most astute human readers cannot. Matthew Jockers suggests in his *Macroanalysis* that the digital humanities are at the intersection of scientific and literary analysis. Instead of collecting field data, however, digital algorithms mine and analyze literary corpora for analysis. At the core of Jockers' discourse is the term 'macroanalysis,' which he sees as an expansion of close reading. Whereas we commonly view close reading as zooming in on imagery and diction, Jockers defines macroanalysis as a means of zooming out from words and concepts to see how they operate, objectively, in a work or a body of works as a whole. Rather than eschew close reading in favor of macroanalysis, Jockers calls for a "neoclassical synthesis" of both techniques

in order to extend a reader's ability to analyze texts on a broader scale.¹¹ Thus, while human readings are generally effective at assessing texts at local intervals or identifying overarching trends, digital readings can literally look at entire books (or, for that matter, hundreds or thousands of entire books) in the space of a few seconds. Such comprehensive investigations reveal a world of nuances and patterns bound in the textual matrix which usually hover just beyond the edge of conscious human perception.¹²

In this sense, the machine readings I employ for this thesis perform complementary tasks to the human ones I conduct. Just as I will attempt in the following chapters to expose the purposes of Todorovian veils that Martin casts over his tale, the accompanying digital evaluations reveal concealed subtleties by indiscriminately (though, with an objective) mining Martin's prose for algorithmic insights about his linguistic choices. Digital readings are especially beneficial for analyzing Martin's novels because of *Song*'s significant length and relatively complex structure, factors which distribute lexical patterns in a way that makes their discovery less accessible through close readings. Ultimately, my goal in running these machine readings is to identify the qualitative characteristics of the lexicons Martin uses to construct various facets of gender, sexuality, and gendered and sexualized individuals.

¹¹Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 26.

¹²Stephen Ramsay explains the usefulness of digital readings like so: "It is not that such matters as redemptive worldview and Marxist readings of texts can be arrived at algorithmically, but simply that algorithmic transformation can provide the alternative visions that give rise to such readings. The computer does this in a particularly useful way by carrying out transformations in a rigidly holistic manner... It is in such results that the critic seeks not facts, but patterns. And from pattern the critic may move to the grander rhetorical formations that constitute critical reading." Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 16-17.

The modus operandi I employed for this particular digital analysis consisted of three primary steps: preparing the digital text to be processed by a program, coding said program, and producing visual models using the program. The first stage of this process, the “text cleaning” phase required the most legwork. In order to assess how Martin’s language functions around and about individual characters or groups of characters, I had to standardize the terms used to refer to these characters. Consider, for example, Tyrion Lannister. If I wanted to conduct an analysis on what sort of words, characters, or concepts are most closely (or most distantly) linked to him, I would need to either craft a program which sweeps the text for all of his titles and nicknames (e.g. ‘Tyrion,’ ‘Lion of Lannister,’ ‘the Dwarf,’ ‘the Imp,’ ‘the Hand (of the King),’ ‘Hugor Hill,’ etc.) and standardizes them or I would need to manually alter the text so that Tyrion only has one referent. While the former method may seem more efficient and, therefore, more attractive, it is a dangerous game to play, particularly for a narrative as expansive and complicated as *Song*. For instance, Tyrion is, on several occasions, called by his official title ‘the Hand’ (a shortened version of ‘the Hand of the King’). However, there are six other men who hold the same title over the course of the series.¹³ Similarly, Robert Baratheon is often referred to as ‘the king,’ but so are Robb Stark, Renly Baratheon, Stannis Baratheon, Balon Greyjoy, Viserys Targaryen, Aerys Targaryen, and Mance Rayder (to name a few). Thus, assessing each instance when these titles are used individually and editing them by hand ensures a greater degree of accuracy than having a program perform this task.

Thus, after procuring digital editions of the five canonical *Song* novels, I exported them into plain text files and altered the naming scheme so that each major character’s extraneous

¹³ Jon Arryn, Ned Stark, Tywin Lannister, Harys Swift, Orton Merryweather, and Mace Tyrell serve as Hand at some point during the story.

nicknames and titles were replaced with their actual name. In total, I altered the names of 105 characters. My designation of ‘major characters’ was somewhat arbitrary and subjective, but it was primarily informed by which characters are mentioned most in the novels.¹⁴ Once this task was complete, the text was ‘cleaned’ and prepared for digital analysis.

For this project, the primary digital tool I used to assess the text was the vector space model (VSM). Vector space is a term which refers to a digital landscape where unique words from the text being studied are positioned relative to each other based on how likely they are to appear near each other within the prose. Vectors themselves are essentially calculated measures of distance between words. What makes vector space a prime locale for powerful analyses is that it is high-dimensional, meaning that there could be hundreds of different axes that a word is categorized by. In traditional Euclidean space, there are two or three dimensions (think of the x, y, and z axes on geometric graphs), so adding a few hundred dimensions vastly increases the complexity of the tests one can run on texts. Of course, the human eye can only perceive so much, so the models I include are flattened into two dimensions. Nonetheless, the data they contain was ascertained within a high-dimensional environment.

The code I used to produce the VSMs is a very lightly modified version of an R script developed by Ben Schmidt.¹⁵ Schmidt’s program is fairly easy to use; it requires an input of a group of related words, and then it generates a VSM composed of the 200 words it deems most relevant to the input words. A ‘relevant’ word could be one that is used frequently in association with one of the input words or fulfills a similar function with the text’s syntactical structure. For

¹⁴ See this list: Shrijit Shaswat, “The 250 Most Mentioned Characters in ASOIAF so Far!” *The Lord of the Books*, June 2, 2017, <https://booksofthelord.wordpress.com/2017/06/02/the-250-most-mentioned-characters-in-asoiaf-so-far/>.

¹⁵ Ben Schmidt, “wordVectors,” *GitHub*, March 13, 2017, <https://github.com/bmschmidt/wordVectors/blob/master/vignettes/introduction.Rmd>

example, to digitally explore the lexical space that the theme of motherhood inhabits in *Song*, I fed the words ‘mother,’ ‘mercy,’ ‘children,’ ‘Catelyn,’ ‘Olenna,’ ‘Lysa,’ ‘Cersei,’ and ‘Daenerys’ into the program (view the resulting model Appendix 1). Essentially, this program sifts through computerized texts, clumping words together in linguistic and thematic clusters. This technique efficiently quantifies relative relations among large groups of words or concepts and constructs graphical visualizations of these terms and the relations between them.¹⁶ Thus, I used this method to manufacture digital spectrums of words that relate to motherhood, queerness, and promiscuity in *Song*.¹⁷

With these VSMs at my disposal, I proceeded to integrate their data into my Todorovian readings of the fantastical sexualities of the *Song* novels. In particular, I looked for terms and trends in the VSMs which were unexpected or uncanny—Todorovian trends. As I will discuss in the coming pages, I found several of these trends. I found that in Westeros, maternity and violence go hand in hand, queerness is enshrouded by the anxieties of succession, and courtly love and lechery are close relatives. These findings reflect scandalous pairings of concepts which are vividly present and vehemently repressed in *Song*’s textual society. Each of these trends reveals a fundamental Westerosi societal institution which antagonistically interacts with its respective group of nonconformists. Thus, these digital models identify the linguistic portents of social conflicts that underscore and shape the narrative structure of *Song*.

What are the broader implications of these initial observations? In general, they serve as

¹⁶ See Michael Gavin’s work for more information on the field of vector semantics. Michael Gavin, “Vector Semantics, William Empson, and the Study of Ambiguity,” *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Summer 2018): 641-673.

¹⁷ Some scholars have used vector space models as a means of character analysis. See Andrew Piper’s chapter on Characterization in his *Enumerations*, for instance. Andrew Piper, *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 125. The VSMs I created for this project are housed in the appendices, if you would like to view them.

the hand that pulls at the first thread of the Todorovian veil. Throughout the chapters that follow, I seek to pull on those threads more forcefully, fully unraveling the veils and decrypting the mysteries behind Martin's constructions of the supernatural and the sexual.

Chapter 1: Monstrous Mothers and Mothers of Monsters

Fairy stories and fantasy have long been marked by the trope of the absent mother; indeed, fairytale mothers are lucky if they survive the first page.¹⁸ We see this theme carrying over into more contemporary tales, with Frodo Baggins, Rand Al'Thor, Harry Potter, and Eragon all suffering from a similar maternal lack.¹⁹ When mothers do figure significantly into fantastic narratives, critics note that they tend to fall into archetypal roles which are, more often than not, starkly black and white: pious helpers or vindictive adversaries. *A Song of Ice and Fire* breaks tradition from older fantasies by not only disavowing truant mothers, but also by highlighting several mothers' voices and granting them their own sets of point-of-view chapters.²⁰ Within these chapters, complex women emerge who bend the boundaries of motherly tropes.

I begin my investigation of George R.R. Martin's gender rebels with maternal figures because these women demonstrate the breadth and elasticity of his feminine characterizations. Typically, shield-maidens and femme fatales might come to a reader's mind when thinking of interesting, complex, or 'modern' female characters in contemporary fantasy. However, Martin's mothers prove that a myriad of dynamic, nuanced women can arise from even the seemingly standardized restrictions of fantastic motherhood. In *Song*, we see both mothers who violently revolt against the gendered expectations associated with their role as well as mothers who comfortably conform to their designated societal positions. Yet, even in the latter case, mothers

¹⁸ Consider tales about Cinderella or Snow White, where the mother is either dead or dying at the story's beginning.

¹⁹ The respective heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Wheel of Time*, the *Harry Potter* series, and *The Inheritance Cycle*.

²⁰ *Song's* structure comprises a network of interlinked chapters told (so far) from the perspectives of 31 different characters. A tenth of these viewpoint characters (Catelyn, Cersei, and Daenerys) are mothers.

who seem to accept their constrained roles still generate complicated personas for themselves as a result of subversive appropriations of agency. The question, then, is what conventions regulate expressions and perceptions of motherhood in Westeros. A study of the text reveals that in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a ‘good mother’ puts her house before her self—this means that she is allowed to subvert the conventions of her gender, if they serve the interests of her family. Because Westerosi mothers are expected, in some cases, to transgress the barriers of their prescribed gender roles, Todorovian constructions are less evident in their stories. Though, these constructions are necessitated in the face of particularly grievous deviations from the motherly sphere. In effect, this limited allowance for mothers to experience fluidity in their roles parallels medieval depictions of matriarchs. However, Martin’s medieval emulation is diluted by later literary traditions as well which domesticate the motherly figure.

To locate where Martin’s conception of motherhood fits in along the temporal gradient of mothers in fantastic fiction, we must examine how his works interact with precedents set by medieval epics, fairytales, and the novel. After a survey of these sources, I will discuss how they shape Martin’s mothers into vessels of patriarchal subversion. Specifically, I will investigate Olenna Tyrell, Catelyn Stark, and Cersei Lannister—women who occupy varied niches along the spectrum of motherhood, from executor of vengeance, to ferocious guardian, to complete monster.

I: The Evolution of the Maternal Image in Fantasy

Westeros, a pan-medieval secondary world, borrows fragments of its culture from multiple eras and geographic regions. The amalgamated result is a fantasy society where women (particularly matriarchal figures) exercise considerable power and influence despite being intensely subjugated to male hierarchies. In terms of how their societal roles are imagined,

Westeros' female inhabitants most closely resemble their counterparts who populate Arthurian romances—such as those by the Pearl Poet and Chrétien de Troyes—of the High and Late Middle Ages in Christianized Western Europe. In these works, women are primarily portrayed as objects of desire and are subordinated to men. However, while the androcentric worldview Martin constructs in Westeros mirrors chivalric romance, his women's actions and purposes map more precisely onto characters from earlier Nordic and Germanic literatures, such as *Beowulf*, *Völsunga Saga*, and *The Nibelungenlied*. Though these texts are products of recently Christianized, increasingly patriarchal societies, they retain many pagan vestiges from their original oral forms, including less tame, more autonomous images of wives and mothers than we see in later medieval sources.

For example, in these medieval Nordic texts, noble women provide political counsel, choose their own husbands, and actively participate in satisfying their feud-based cultures' obligatory vengeance. *Beowulf's* Queen Wealhtheow provides a prime exemplar of the politically influential noble woman. Her ability to successfully advise her husband on matters of succession directly demonstrates medieval women's ability to dominate social arenas that later literatures exclude them from.²¹ Commenting on women's political clout in Germanic cultures, Michael Enright asserts that women's domestic mead ceremonies, such as the one Wealhtheow performs in *Beowulf*,²² were tools noble women used to strengthen bonds between their husband and his vassals, using charm, wit, and libations as social lubricants.²³

However, not all medieval mead ceremonies were meant to promote fellowship, just as

²¹ *Beowulf*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume 1*, 9th edition (New York: Norton, 2012), 67.

²² *Beowulf*, 54.

²³ Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy, and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Blackrock Company, 1996).

not all medieval Nordic women's duties were pacifistic. Indeed, in *Völsunga Saga*, Queen Borghild offers her step-son a horn of poisoned mead as recompense for his murdering her brother.²⁴ Such violent actions reflect Nordic women's compulsion to engage in familial feuds, regardless of the consequence. Further instances of such behavior exist in other portions of *Völsunga Saga*. For instance, in one episode, Siggeir's mother transforms into a wolf and devours her son's rivals.²⁵ Even darker, though, are Signy and Gudrun's murder of their own children in order to avenge the deaths of their brothers at their husbands' hands.²⁶ In Signy's case, her revenge also involved an incestuous union with her twin brother.²⁷ These women's choices to forsake their motherly responsibility to protect their children in order to orchestrate acts of vengeance serve as evidence that medieval women, when compelled, were able to disavow conventional maternal roles when the dignity of their families were threatened. Notably though, Signy commits suicide after her vengeance is complete, indicating that by producing an inbred son and killing her other children, her quest for vengeance had caused her to infringe too liberally upon the socially enforced limits of her gender's authority.²⁸

Song's women themselves most faithfully mirror the aggressive, influential women in *Völsunga Saga* and *Beowulf*, but the society that Westerosi women live in is steeped in ideologies that begin to emerge in later medieval texts, such as *The Nibelungenlied*. Another, newer retelling of *Völsunga Saga*, *The Nibelungenlied* comprises a tale which propagates patriarchal discourse by condemning women's attempts to defy subservience to men. This theme

²⁴ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, translated by Jesse L. Byock (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 51.

²⁵ *Volsungs*, 42.

²⁶ *Volsungs*, 45, 104.

²⁷ *Volsungs*, 43.

²⁸ *Volsungs*, 47.

manifests itself most obviously when the ferocious warrior Queen Brünhild, who violently rebuffs her husband's attempts to consummate their marriage, is made docile and weak when her husband enlists the aid of his friend to coercively deflower her.²⁹ Brünhild's taming signifies a changed ideal of the married woman in medieval culture. Instead of valuing vengeance and valor at all costs, a woman's honor came to be associated with submissiveness and passivity. In its closing chapters, *The Nibelungenlied* further censures feminine aggression by having Kriemhild sliced in half simply for daring to wield a sword and behead her brother's male vassal.³⁰

The differences between *Völsunga Saga* and *The Nibelungenlied* manifest the incipient relegation of women to domestic, nonviolent spheres. Nancy Armstrong posits that this separation became especially apparent with the rise of novel in the 18th century, where women became depoliticized, civilizing figures who rejected masculine risk and corrupting politics in favor of domestic sovereignty, a state which Armstrong argues was considered the purest, least biased expression of human experience.³¹ Perhaps influenced by this literary tradition, many contemporary fantasies, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, primarily portray women as keepers of home and hearth, practitioners of domestic arts, and keen readers of human emotion. In Westeros, on the other hand, where "women [are] made to fight their battles in the birthing bed"³² yet still fight tooth and nail for their survival³³ and the survival of their kin,^{34, 35} society compels women to refine their domestic crafts and courtly manners, but women also reject the

²⁹ *The Nibelungenlied*, translated by Arthur T. Hatto (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), 92-93.

³⁰ *Nibelungenlied*, 290-291.

³¹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³² George R.R. Martin, *A Feast for Crows* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 35.

³³ George R.R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 616.

³⁴ *AGoT*, 132.

³⁵ *ASoS*, 704.

shackles of domesticity. This dynamic is clearly illustrated by several chapters of Catelyn's story in which she spends weeks confined to her son's bedchambers, grieving madly but later chooses to abandon her maternal duties to her ailing son and instead venture out into the war-torn South to aid and advise her other son with his dangerous dalliance in the game of thrones.³⁶ In instances like these, *Song* pushes back against the trends Armstrong observes, restoring fantasy's wives and mothers to the political arena they inhabited in the age of *Völsunga Saga* and *Beowulf*.

Fantasy's reliance on medieval literature allows us to establish a sense of the uses and limits of maternal agency, but its fairy tale ancestry provides a different insight: the archetypal functions the mother fulfills in the genre. In fairy tales, mothers, when they show up, usually act as what Hilda Ellis Davidson refers to as helpers or adversaries.³⁷ According to Davidson, benign "helper" mothers, who are almost always dead, often assist their children in animal form from beyond the grave.³⁸ Conversely, adversary mothers, often vain or greedy step-mothers, scheme against the protagonist.³⁹ More sinister than the cold step-mother is the hungry mother, a child-eating abomination embodied in tales such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *Baba Yaga*. These three visions of fairy tale motherhood largely exclude mothers from acts of heroism, assigning them instead to supporting roles of assistance or antagonism.

In a last, modern analysis of mothers' fictional purposes, E. Anne Kaplan proposes four, slightly more robust, motherly categories: The Good Mother, The Bad Mother or Witch, The Heroic Mother, and The Silly, Weak, or Vain Mother.⁴⁰ The Good Mother is "self-abnegating"

³⁶ *AGoT*, 130, 606.

³⁷ Hilda Ellis Davidson, "Helpers and Adversaries in Fairytales," In *A Companion to the Fairy Tale*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson and Anna Chaudhri (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 99.

³⁸ Davidson, 102.

³⁹ Davidson, 110.

⁴⁰ E. Ann Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*," In *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 468.

and “marginal to the narrative” because of her total commitment to her husband and children, who dominate her story. The Bad Mother rejects the patriarchal bondage associated with the good mother, cruelly serving herself over her family. Ultimately, the bad mother’s selfishness leads to punishment. The Heroic Mother is a more complex version of the Good Mother. Though she shares the Good Mother’s moral unassailability, the Heroic Mother sacrifices and suffers for her family’s wellbeing, often making her more significant to the story. Lastly, the Silly Mother is a comedic figure subject to her family’s ridicule.

Marta Eidsvåg, who assessed Westerosi mothers in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* using Kaplan’s archetypes, argues that mothers in *Song* tend to evade archetypes, but fall most nearly into the categories of the Heroic or Bad Mother.⁴¹ But if these women do not conform to the stereotypes of contemporary media, then by what means does Martin delimit effective and ineffective mothers? While Martin fashions a society informed by a lineage of literary prejudices against women, his mothers find ways to circumvent systemic misogyny to exercise medievalistic authority. In the end, it is whether the mother works to benefit herself or her kin that determines her moral standing. In other words, while Martin’s mothers may not follow Kaplan’s archetypal forms, their status as heroes or villains depend on similar criteria.

II: Matriarchs in the World of Ice and Fire

As I have noted, Westerosi mothers exist to protect their children at all costs, but in theory, they are also expected serve as dispensers of peace and charity. Nowhere is this more clearly laid out than in a hymn sung to the Mother, one of the seven faces of the Westerosi god.⁴²

⁴¹ Marta Eidsvåg, ““Maiden, Mother, Crone”: Motherhood in the World of Ice and Fire,” In *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements*, ed. Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 153.

⁴² The Faith of the Seven is a mixed bag of pagan and medieval Catholic doctrines. While there are seven distinct gods (Father, Mother, Maid, Warrior, Smith, Crone, and Stranger), they are

Gentle Mother, font of mercy,
 save our sons from war, we pray,
 stay the swords and stay the arrows,
 let them know a better day.

Gentle Mother, strength of women,
 help our daughters through this fray,
 soothe the wrath and tame the fury,
 teach us all a kinder way.⁴³

The Mother, as one might intuit, represents an idyllic mother. As this song indicates, she is gentle, merciful, soothing, and seeks out peaceful resolutions to conflicts. However, beneath the surface, the language of this song is laced with clashing themes of pacifism and violence. For instance, this supplication suggests that the Mother, who is called upon to “save our sons” and “stay swords” and arrows that threaten them, is also expected to protect her children from harm. In some cases, one must presume that this would force the mother to abandon her serene disposition and get her hands a bit bloody. After all, the act of circumventing weaponry from causing harm requires that the circumventer either uses their body as a shield or takes up a weapon themselves. Moreover, the hymn also references the Mother’s responsibility to protect daughters from “fury” and “wrath.” In Westeros, this “fury” is most likely a euphemized form of sexual violence, implying that mothers are also expected to be involved in liberating their daughters from abusive relationships. In the context of Westeros’ hegemonic toxic masculinity, such liberations are often deceptive, gruesome, and defiant of patriarchal constructs sanctioning

considered aspects of one deity, similar to the Christian trinity. The Maid, Mother, and Crone are reminiscent of Celtic fertility goddess trios.

⁴³ George R.R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 814.

the degradation of women.

Another useful mode of determining the tenets of Westerosi motherhood comes from comparing the expectations of mothers to the expectations of fathers. To do this, we can examine another paean from the Seven Kingdoms which contains a verse regarding the Father:

The Father's face is stern and strong,
 he sits and judges right from wrong.
 He weighs our lives, the short and long,
 and loves the little children⁴⁴

Here, the Father is characterized as stoic, just, and even “stern.” His responsibilities include the daunting task of judging the actions of mankind. So, while the Father inhabits the domain of righteous judgment, the Mother doles out mercy to soften the punishments of the world and the Father’s divine punishments. In fact, the “Mother’s Mercy” is paralleled to the absolution that results from the Catholic sacrament of confession.⁴⁵ What these hymns illustrate are the distinct divisions Martin separates Westerosi mothers and fathers into. Generally, Westerosi people expect fathers to be harsh and mothers to be tender. However, this constructed image of mothers is not the one we receive when reading *Song*. Instead, mothers often leave the confines of saintly benevolence to venture into the masculine territories of violence, judgment, and vengeance. Such oversteps are socially sanctioned when the mother uses them to advance the welfare of her house, but they are masked in Todorovian obscurity when they threaten to undermine her family’s political footing.

To survey what underlying textual themes connect to the maternal in *Song*, I constructed

⁴⁴ *ASoS*, 641.

⁴⁵ George R.R. Martin, *A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms* (New York: Bantam Books, 2015), 140.

a vector space model which displays the lexicon of words most heavily correlated with the series' most prominent mothers (see Appendix 1). In this model, I found a tension between words and phrases such as “forgiveness,” “mercy,” and “sweetness” and “avenge,” “cruellest,” and “murdered.” These disparate terms suggest that maternity in *Song* is attached to a strange congruence of pure and profane practices. I have argued thus far that Westerosi mothers are embroiled in worldviews regarding gender proprieties from competing historical milieus, an argument which this VSM finds lexical support for. On the one hand, mothers are cast as saintly altruists in accordance with post-medieval social thought, evidenced by the virtuous terms present that are associated with Westerosi mothers according to my digital analysis. On the other hand, mothers engage in depraved and diabolical schemes for the benefit and sustenance of their kin. This less pleasant aspect of motherhood is jarringly blatant in the VSM, with unsavory, violent adjectives and verbs identified as being linked to mother figures. Evidently, Martin's linguistic patterns reflect an attempt to capture this duality of roles mothers assume as both peaceful and vicious guardians. With this knowledge in mind, we can assume that it is not bizarre for Westerosi mothers to utilize aggressive or vindictive forces. What is interesting, though, is to what ends such powers are used, to what extent they are tolerated by Westerosi society, and what circumstances call for obfuscating Todorovian constructions.

III: Olenna and Catelyn: The Successful Subversives

Performances of motherhood that socially succeed in spite of transgressions into masculine domains manifest themselves best in the cases of Olenna Tyrell and Catelyn Stark. Olenna, the aged grandmother of the ambitious Tyrell clan, is far from sweet or gentle—a fact evidenced by her consistently acerbic excoriations of others and prickly manners which garnered her the “Queen of Thorns” title. Despite other characters resenting Olenna's unyielding

temperament, her unconventional character ultimately behooves her house, making her an effective, respected mother.

Several key components to her successful deviance entail residues from the fairytale and epic traditions that comprise *Song*'s literary lineage. First, Olenna actively frames herself as a legitimate political player, once stating that "kings would do a deal better if they would put down their swords and listen to their mothers."⁴⁶ By asserting that mothers have inherent credibility as governmental advisors, Olenna fashions herself in the tradition of pagan medieval queens such as Wealhtheow who exerted considerable power when it came to influencing their male family members' decisions. Olenna goes on to prove that she knows best by poisoning the tyrannical boy-King Joffrey,⁴⁷ a table-turning act that upsets the entire game of thrones and benefits house Tyrell greatly. Murdering Joffrey left his newly-wed wife, Olenna's granddaughter Margaery Tyrell, free to marry Joffrey's younger brother: a malleable, good-natured boy the Tyrells have an easier time shaping to fit their interests. The manner of Joffrey's assassination itself constructs Olenna as a self-sufficient pseudo-medieval woman because it invokes the mead ceremonies where women held the lion's share of agency. Specifically, the fact that Joffrey is killed by poisoned wine invokes Borghild's twisted mead ceremony from *Völsunga Saga*. Additionally, Olenna's efforts to secure her granddaughter's monarchical potency casts her in the role of the fairytale helper—a perversion of the fairy godmother trope. In this case, however, that helper provides a boon of manslaughter instead of golden slippers. By imitating the spirit of medieval women and thus transgressing the anachronistically modern gender barriers in *Song*, Olenna's actions bolster her own house's political standings, consequently proving her unseemly actions

⁴⁶ *ASoS*, 84.

⁴⁷ *ASoS*, 935.

warranted due to her worthy maternal performance.

Where Olenna commits mild infringements on the boundaries of the feminine sphere that Martin establishes, Catelyn Stark embodies a more complex maternal figure who more provocatively flits in and out of proper motherly behaviors. Though Catelyn is, by most measures, a commendable mother who ferociously defends her children, the appearance of Todorovian obfuscations in her story arc signal that some of her actions approach taboos that reach beyond the scope of conventional maternal roles.

A point of view character, Catelyn's is the first female perspective we receive in *Song*, and it is a perspective characterized by love for her children and anxiety for all the gruesome disasters that might await them. However, Catelyn's identity as a mother and her devotion to her family do not supplant her individuality; rather, her steadfastness and passionate sense of duty richen her as a character. As Eidsvåg points out, while Catelyn is intensely attached to her family and pained by separation from them, she does not require their presence in order to function.⁴⁸ At one point, Catelyn goes so far as to urge her husband to leave her and go on a quest, despite the emotional duress she knows it will cause her, thereby demonstrating Catelyn's independence.⁴⁹

Catelyn's proclivity towards self-sacrifice extends beyond emotional pain. On several occasions, Catelyn suffers physical harm for the sake of her children. While grieving for her

⁴⁸ Eidsvåg, 158.

⁴⁹ Part of the reason Catelyn is pained by her husband's leaving is that he takes their two daughters with him. It is worth noting that these two children split the dual characteristics I have associated with motherhood. Arya represents violence and martiality, rejecting courtly practices and becoming a deadly agent of vengeance. Conversely, Sansa embraces feminine courtly conventions (for a time) to the point where she allows herself to lose all agency and become an object who is passed from man to man. However, even within this seeming binary, there are blurred lines. For example, Arya connects herself to the domestic by naming her sword Needle (an homage to Sansa's sewing implements). While Sansa has not yet taken on any masculine roles in the novels, her storyline in the television series constructs her as a ruler and avenger.

critically injured son, Bran, Catelyn doesn't eat, barely sleeps, and drives herself half mad with exhaustion. At the culmination of this sequence, a hired blade attempts to kill Bran, but Catelyn throws herself between the child and the killer.⁵⁰ As a result of this altercation, Catelyn's hands are badly wounded. In this case, Catelyn uses her body to "stay the swords," thus fulfilling her prescribed obligation to promulgate mercy and protection at the expense of her own wellbeing.

Of course, violence directed towards the mother's body, as in the scene at Bran's bedside, is not greatly subversive as the woman is not an agent in the action. However, Catelyn experiences many other forays with violence in which she is an actor, and therefore positions herself in a masculine role. In such instances, instead of serving as a fleshy shield, Catelyn goes on the offensive, threatening the security of others to achieve her ends. The first situation where this occurs is during Catelyn's arrest of Tyrion Lannister. Believing him to have been behind the assassination attempt on her son, Catelyn, who is surrounded by her father's vassals, urges them to seize Tyrion, proclaiming:

This man came a guest into my house, and there conspired to murder my son, a boy of seven...In the name of King Robert and the good lords you serve, I call upon you to seize him and help me return him to Winterfell to await the king's justice.⁵¹

This scene is deliciously complex because though Catelyn boldly usurps the patriarchal reigns of justice, she uses her position as a mother, a wife, and a daughter to do so. First, she references Tyrion's alleged heinous affront to her maternal dignity—his intrusion into the domestic realm of her house and his attempt to kill her child. Next, Catelyn, having established her clout with the "good lords" the assembled soldiers serve, uses her powerful father—the lord paramount of the

⁵⁰ *AGoT*, 132.

⁵¹ *AGoT*, 292.

region—as a conduit to exert influence over them. Finally, Catelyn calls upon the soldiers to return Tyrion to Winterfell, the place where she holds the greatest authority because it is her husband’s seat. Catelyn’s expert ability to maneuver within the confines of a misogynistic patriarchy—simultaneously juggling feminine and masculine authorities—to thwart those who menace her family reflects her mastery over the maternal profession.

It is in Catelyn’s final moments where motherly sacrifice and masculine violence merge, granting the reader one last, fully fleshed-out, glimpse at her uniquely subversive maternal form. During the infamous, ill-fated Red Wedding—in which Catelyn, her eldest son, and all his allied lords attend her brother’s marriage ceremony—an old grudge gets ugly, resulting in the wedding host’s treachery. Committing a crime denounced as the most vile in Westeros, Lord Walder Frey murders all the wedding guests, breaching the sacred law of guest right.⁵² As the slaughter nears its end, Catelyn, who is pierced by an arrow, endeavors to barter for her son’s life, seizing Walder’s own son and holding a dagger to his throat.⁵³ Catelyn’s taking up a dagger and threatening to kill another person’s child in exchange for her own drifts into the paternal domain of martial justice but is edged with a plea of mercy for her own child. In this way, Catelyn goes to extreme, gender role-bending measures to fulfill her motherly duty of securing mercy for her son. When this ploy fails and Catelyn witnesses her son die, she kills Walder’s child and claws her face to ribbons in her grief.⁵⁴ This final act embodies a convergence of violent fatherly justice and profoundly violent motherly sorrow. All her children dead or lost, her husband beheaded, her father gone, and her brother like to die in his wedding bed, Catelyn’s role as a

⁵² Inspired by a medieval custom, guest right is a pact made between a host and their visitors that so long as the latter party remains beneath the former’s roof, there must be peace between them. To injure or kill a guest is seen as an unforgivable abomination in the eyes of the Westerosi gods.

⁵³ *ASoS*, 704.

⁵⁴ *ASoS*, 704.

mother is, at this point, exhausted, and her character has nothing left to do but die—which she does.⁵⁵

If this was how Catelyn’s narrative ended, one might think that Martin’s mothers do not really do much to reinvent fantasy’s tired tropes of the absent, marginalized, or family-dependent mothers. However, this is not, in fact, where Catelyn’s story ends. For Catelyn returns, but she returns as a different sort of character—a vengeful, coldhearted killer who, without children to care for, turns to the task of creating corpses: an occupation beyond the pale for Westerosi mothers that thus requires accompanying Todorovian constructions.

Reanimated by a miracle, Catelyn reenters the realm of the living after three days of floating in a river. She is not a pretty sight; with “pudding soft” flesh the “color of curdled milk,” a “ravaged scalp,” and a face with “shredded skin and black blood where she had raked herself with her nails,” Catelyn hardly resembles a comforting nurturer.⁵⁶ However, etched on her face are bloody scars resembling tears—a permanent token of motherly grief—and the food-related imagery used to describe her ghastly form suggest a sense of maternal sustenance. Reborn in this manner, Catelyn takes it upon herself to hang all those who murdered her family, serving as the sole arbiter of justice for her victims. Not bothering to associate herself with any male authority before passing sentences, Catelyn blatantly flouts the gender norms constructed for mothers, audaciously positioning herself in a father’s stead. Moreover, believing she has no family left to defend, Catelyn’s violent actions, while reminiscent of medieval feud vengeance, do not intentionally serve her house. Thus, Catelyn’s taboo behaviors are masked in Todorovian ambiguity, with her Todorovian constructions taking the form of obscured identity. In her new

⁵⁵ *ASoS*, 705. Catelyn’s throat is slit, almost as an afterthought.

⁵⁶ *ASoS*, 1128.

guise, Catelyn is referred to primarily as ‘Lady Stoneheart,’ an ominous name which is sprinkled throughout the chapters and appendices of *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons* with no explicit explanation. However, this Todorovian construction is incomplete, as in the two scenes where the resurrected Catelyn does make an appearance, she is referred to by both her old and new name. This may point to the fact that, while Catelyn’s assumption of a decidedly masculine role threatens to overturn social order and thus must be repressed by Todorovian obfuscation, her actions are in line with medieval Germanic feud-based vengeance and technically benefit her family. For, while Catelyn believes her children to be dead, the reader knows that several of them live on. Thus, this grisly manifestation of Catelyn succeeds not only in continuing to serve her children by eliminating their foes, but also in fulfilling her societal function of settling a blood debt. Additionally, Catelyn’s slow culling of her children’s enemies casts her as a sort of fairytale helper figure (her resurrected form is even loosely associated with animals—common helpers⁵⁷). Considering Olenna is another helper figure who wears a Todorovian mask, there appears to be a sustained textual effort to represent good mothers as women who perform unspeakable acts for the safety of their families.

IV: Cersei: A Mess of Incest, Infanticide, and Other Poor Parenting Practices

Where Catelyn and Olenna ultimately bend the boundaries of feminine motherhood in successful attempts to preserve, protect, or avenge their families, Cersei Lannister, matriarch and Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, is less effective. A spiteful, proud woman who is quick to anger

⁵⁷ The Ghost of High Heart reports a dream in which she saw “a woman that was a fish. Dead she drifted, with red tears on her cheeks, but when her eyes did open, oh, I woke from terror.” This is a reference to Catelyn (*ASoS*, 302). Similarly, Arya Stark foreshadows a portion of her mother’s resurrection by stating, of a possible coat of arms, that “a wolf with a fish in its mouth... would look silly” (*AGoT*, 73). Catelyn’s corpse is dragged from a river by a direwolf. The sigil of Catelyn’s birth house—House Tully—is a trout.

and slow to think, Cersei's actions are motivated primarily by selfishness and hedonism—qualities which compound throughout the series to construct her as a truly grotesque mother.

As we saw with Catelyn, gothic monstrosity can enfold Westerosi matriarchs after death, but Cersei's characterization is shaded by the monstrous during her life. However, while Catelyn and her Stoneheart persona set up a distinct binary between the warm, living, human mother and the cold, dead, fantastical mother, Cersei's characterization is more twisted. Though not a literal monstrosity like the zombie Catelyn, Cersei's humanity is tainted by monstrous qualities. Not only does she perform atrocious deeds such as slaughtering babies and delightedly consuming her husband's future children,⁵⁸ she also produces progeny who are themselves monstrous on multiple levels. For example, Cersei's firstborn son Joffrey is primarily characterized by his inhumane cruelty.⁵⁹ A form of monstrosity that links the Lannister children more closely to their mother, though, is their identities as the bastard fruit of Cersei's incestuous unions with her twin brother. While monster children are not uncommon in *Song*,⁶⁰ Cersei's offspring are unique in that she corrupted and ostracized them simply by conceiving them. Not only is bastardy a damning offense in Westeros, it threatens the Lannister children's already tenuous grasp on the monarchy.⁶¹

Even though Cersei's socially aberrant behavior is a function of her carnal desires, her

⁵⁸ Cersei orders all of Robert's bastards killed in order to remove potential future contenders for the throne (*ACoK*, 129-130). Cersei recalls how she would "lick [Robert's] sons off [her] face and fingers...in the darkness [she] would eat [his] heirs" (*AFfC*, 693).

⁵⁹ Joffrey's decision to disembowel a pregnant cat succinctly exemplifies his twisted nature (*ASoS*, 864).

⁶⁰ Consider Daenerys' three dragons and Melisandre's shadow demons.

⁶¹ Tyrion notes that if Cersei had allowed Robert to father one of her children, suspicion regarding her children's parentage would have been dissuaded (Ned Stark deduces Cersei's incest using Mendelian genetics to determine that the odds suggest most of Robert's children should have black hair instead of blond) (*ACoK*, 242; *AGoT*, 486).

maternity always foregrounds her sexuality because of the drastic consequences her sexual choices have on her children. Furthermore, Cersei's conscious choice to mother not one, but three bastards points to the fact that Cersei's interest in promulgating the Lannister family genes is a narcissistic endeavor—one in which Cersei attempts to spread more images of herself rather than protect her children. Evidence for this comes from Cersei's lascivious obsessions with men who look similar to her, including her brother Jaime, her cousin Lancel, and even her son Joffrey.⁶² In a way, Cersei's procreative endeavors, tinged as they are with goals of producing offspring with very specific physical features, serve as a way of preserving her self through the generation of twins (or, at least, near twins). If you recall, in the medieval *Völsunga Saga*, Signy also bears her twin's child. However, that union is motivated by vengeful intent rather than narcissistic desire. Nonetheless, even though Signy's motivations for engaging in incest were to avenge her family members, she still considered her actions unconscionable and killed herself. Cersei's similarly taboo maternal activities do not result (as of yet) in her death, but they are marked in the narrative as reprehensible by other means.

Because of Cersei's risky incestuous practices and their accompanying dubiously selfish motives, she is forced to invoke Todorovian constructions of her own, veiling the identities of her bastard children to protect her life and their royal inheritance.⁶³ To do this, Cersei attempts to silence the people who discover the truth of her sexual transgressions and to forcibly suppress the rumors of her incest that arise from wartime propaganda against her house.⁶⁴ While there is

⁶² Cersei carries on an affair with Lancel in Jaime's absence and at one point subtly sexualizes Joffrey's facial features. George R.R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 938.

⁶³ In Westeros, it is high treason (a crime punishable by death) for a queen to commit adultery.

⁶⁴ Bran is pushed out a window after witnessing the Lannister twins having sex (*AGoT*, 85). Cersei imprisons Ned Stark when he threatens to expose her (*AGoT*, 528-529). Cersei orders all who speak of incest to have their tongues cut out (*ACoK*, 229).

never a Todorovian gauze separating the Lannister incest from the reader, there is one which shoddily obscures it from the masses of Westeros. As such, this Todorovian construction is a superb example of how Martin exercises this fantastical tactic to maintain a character's position in the game of thrones. Moreover, in cementing Cersei's scandalous incestuous tendencies as central components of her narrative arc, Martin accentuates the complexity of her sexuality in a way which pushes her unconventional, flawed maternal identity to the forefront.

All this aside, there is another strand of Cersei's characterization which denotes her ineptitude as a Westerosi mother and delimits the boundaries of feminine violence in *Song*. This strand is Cersei's handling of monarchical power during her regency. Cersei's intrusions into the masculine roles of kingship and violence which occur during this period are ineffective, selfish, and gratuitous. She impulsively decimates lives in attempts to manipulate others, but her actions are largely self-serving and, in some cases, the unnecessary results of paranoia. Without a reasonable political or familial justification for any of her violent overtures, Cersei's masculine actions are rendered pointless, making her a loathsome figure who toxically destabilizes her family as well as the economic, political, and spiritual wellbeing of the realm in which she seizes power.⁶⁵

On top of all these failings, what foundationally undermines Cersei's integrity as a mother is her utter preoccupation with the prophecy of her downfall. As a child, Cersei was told by a witch that she would be "cast down" by a "younger and more beautiful" queen, lose all her children, and be murdered by the "valonqar"—a gender neutral term for a younger sibling.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ To name just one example of Cersei's awful leadership decisions, she has a High Septon assassinated and allows the next one to reinstate the Faith Militant, thus igniting a massive amount of military and moral tension between the Crown, the Sept (i.e. Church), and the people.

⁶⁶ *AFfC*, 771.

Cersei's aggressive protections of her children and onslaughts against almost everyone else are thus read not as measures to preserve the Lannister family, but to prevent Cersei from meeting her inevitable fate.

Now, I do not mean to completely discredit Cersei of moral virtue. She is complicated and does care deeply for the welfare of her children, but this care is displaced and convoluted by narcissistic desires which damage her family, herself, and the kingdom she is (briefly) charged with governing. In the end, Cersei fails as both a mother to her children (who are all doomed to die before her, according to the witch's prophecy) and a mother of the realm.⁶⁷

V: Concluding Thoughts

As I have tried to illustrate in my discussions of this trio of Westerosi mothers, gender roles in *Song* are highly complicated. From their easily observable character interactions to the granular lexical fabric that narrates them, these texts create spaces for women where pacifism and aggression are simultaneously accepted and expected. Both the hymn of the mother and my VSM capture this trend, showcasing serene and familial motherly characteristics in addition to vengeful and violent ones. In effect, noble mothers strive to protect their own families to the point of taking ignoble actions (such as Olenna's decision to kill Joffrey or Catelyn's decision to kill every Frey she can get her hands on). The mark of ignobility, then, is placed on mothers who depart from the docile portion of their sphere out of self interest rather than familial duty.

Ultimately, it is these bouts of disruptive violence (or disruptive sexual activity) which conjure up Todorovian constructions. Cersei's unspeakable incest is cloaked from the Westerosi public while Olenna's treachery and Catelyn's resurrected form are veiled from the royal court. Interestingly, even the effectiveness of their associated Todorovian constructions are indicators

⁶⁷ King Joffrey is referred to as the "father of the realm" during Sansa's wedding (*ASoS*, 386).

of these mothers' valor—Catelyn and Olenna's secrets are known only to the reader and a select few characters while Cersei's transgression is quite nearly common knowledge.

Complex as these mothers are as characters, they communicate fairly clear messages about Westerosi motherhood to the reader. Despite blatantly disregarding the gendered restrictions their society places upon them, mothers are allowed, and sometimes expected, to flout the patriarchy—to an extent and with good reason—for the sakes of their families. Given that Westeros hinges its social order on the reproducible familial unit, mothers are almost always expected to be defending their families and, thus, undermining the patriarchal norms which discourage women from acting as conduits of violence or vengeance. This strange social paradox harkens back to early medieval societies and reveals the subtle ploys Martin uses to miraculously boost feminine agency in a world designed to eradicate it.

Chapter 2: Queens' Bedmaids and Knights of the Rainbow Guard: Queer Identities in the World of Ice and Fire

When J.K. Rowling declared in 2007 that well-known *Harry Potter* character Albus Dumbledore was gay, her more conservative fans expressed outrage.⁶⁸ Similarly, when the first season of *Game of Thrones* aired in 2011, many viewers condemned the screenwriters for introducing a graphic homosexual romance into the series which was not present in the books.⁶⁹ While these two instances both illustrate our culture's continued unease with mainstream representations of queerness, they are different in a major way. In the case of *Harry Potter*, there are no textual clues in any of the seven canonical novels that plausibly gesture at Dumbledore's sexuality. Indeed, Rowling's outing of her character, while superficially progressive, easily reads as an attempt to retrofit her work with a bolstered reservoir of marginalized identities. Unlike Rowling's reveal, the inclusion of homosexual characters in *Game of Thrones* was not, in fact, unprecedented by *A Song of Ice and Fire*. One need only read the novels with a slightly perceptive eye to pick up on references to homosexuality which are often subtle, but in some cases are plainly conspicuous. However, if one does not read too carefully, the existence of queer characters in *Song* could be overlooked (at least for the first three volumes), as Martin never makes explicit the sexualities of his primary homosexual lovers—Loras Tyrell and Renly

⁶⁸ Hanna Siegel, "Rowling Lets Dumbledore Out of the Closet," *ABC News*, October 20, 2007, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=3755544&page=1>.

⁶⁹ On an online forum, one commenter responded to a scene containing explicitly gay material with "Renly and Ser Loras GAY????? SERIOUSLY? doesnt anyone think that is weird besides me??? i never pictured either of them as being gay, matter of fact, I think the books picture Renly as being VERY STRAIGHT and VERY much like Robert in the fact that he is constanly fucking whores.How did you let this happen GRRM?? I dont know if I can watch any more man on man, shaving each others body scenes." Dan, "RE: Episode 5—The Wolf and the Lion—Recap," Comment # 103591, *Winter Is Coming*, May 15, 2011, Web. <https://winteriscoming.net/2011/05/15/episode-5-the-wolf-and-the-lion-recap/#comment-3272037621>.

Baratheon. Rather, references to their sexual behaviors are woven into the text in the form of innuendo, connotation, and insinuation.

While Loras and Renly are the most popular and prominent queer characters in the novels, there are several others. A few other non-heterosexual men are referenced in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its companion text *The World of Ice and Fire*, and some women also express queer proclivities. Additionally, there is a significant amount of male on male sexual assault and understated references to pedophilic relationships between knights and their squires. What differentiates male gay romances from female same-sex encounters and instances of sexual violence directed towards men is that the latter two are granted explicit, on-page descriptions, begging the question—why is male homosexuality nearly invisible, while female homosexuality and sexual violence among members of the same sex is gratuitously visible? The differing approaches Martin applies to depict various queer subjects reveal an effort to hybridize medievalist heterosexist attitudes with modern voyeuristic indulgence. The result is a mildly complex characterization of male homosexual intimacy which ultimately renders other depictions of queerness, by comparison, problematic. However, all of these depictions share the function of characterizing queerness as a disruptive force which threatens transmissions of power and the stability of social orders.

For homosexual male romances, Martin utilizes obscuring Todorovian constructions which fulfill two major functions. First, the obvious occlusion of gay sexualities serves to characterize them within the scope of the novels as particularly taboo. Second, Martin's extended pseudo-concealment of male homosexuality formally parallels the quality with others under Todorovian guises, namely mystical ones. In this case, this move sustains the vitality of *Song's* homosexual romance. As Westeros blindly demonizes aberrant sexualities, their survivals

depend upon a level of secrecy. Thus, for such sexualities to remain plausible within the lethal social world of Westeros and the world of the novel, their existence must remain Todorovian—that is, uncertain.

Though I will spend the bulk of my time considering how Loras and Renly function as the series' most prominent queer characters, my analysis will also include other scenes involving queer encounters (I hesitate to reuse 'queer characters' here, as Martin's portrayals of them typically incorporate ephemeral, isolated, even dispassionate departures from sexualities otherwise characterized as entirely heterosexual). Todorovian constructions enrich Martin's homosexual male romances, but they are left unused during other instances of queer activity, as Martin overtly details female homosexual scenarios. This gendered discordance between portrayals of homosexuality reduces the significance of female sexuality which, I will argue, contributes to the idea that queer sexuality is valued in correspondence to its effectiveness at advancing a character's political standing in the game of thrones. In essence, homosexuality functions as a positive or negative attribute for characters depending upon how it affects their ability to maneuver in the dynasty-driven world of Westeros.

I: Medieval Contexts for Homosexuality

Before advancing, I will offer a brief overview of medieval thought surrounding homosexuality. I find this useful as Martin leans heavily on historical trends to construct the Westerosi social atmosphere, and the reality of these trends provides insight for some of Martin's seemingly irregular choices. In this case, understanding medieval sexual culture allows us to deduce why Martin chooses to leave male homosexuality, for the most part, undefined.

Speaking to the history of male homosexuality, David Halperin suggests that there are in fact multiple histories because there were multiple disparate historical branches of what modern

people would refer to as ‘homosexual behavior.’ Specifically, Halperin posits that prior to the late nineteenth century establishment of the term ‘homosexuality,’ attraction and carnality between members of the same sex fell into four independently operating categories: effeminacy, active sodomy, male love or friendship, and inversion of gender roles.⁷⁰ None of these categories were mutually exclusive, nor would any of them have necessarily precluded their practitioners from being considered heterosexual by pre-modern societies. For instance, during antiquity and the Middle Ages, effeminacy—while today widely considered a marker of gay men—signaled either male interest in other men *or* excessive male interest in women. As Halperin puts it, effeminates may have been viewed as womanizers because “they deviated from masculine gender norms insofar as they preferred the soft option of love to the hard option of war.”⁷¹

In essence, Halperin’s argument suggests that homosexuality as a concept used to be significantly less cut and dry than it is today, with layers of complexity which made it more difficult to label a man as strictly homosexual simply because he had sex with other men or displayed certain behavioral cues. Halperin’s ideas are reflected in *Song* on numerous occasions, such as in instances of male-on-male gang rapes or in effeminate men who are not linked to homosexuality.⁷² This presence of behavior modernly associated with homosexuality among characters who modern readers would not classify as homosexual illustrates Halperin’s argument regarding earlier constructions of same-sex attraction and offers one reason why Martin may have chosen to avoid clear confirmations of sexualities.

⁷⁰ David M. Halperin, “How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality,” in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, eds. Donald E. Hall, Annamarie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter (New York: Routledge, 2013), 262-281.

⁷¹ Halperin, 266.

⁷² Maester Kerwin reports being raped by several male sailors (*ADwD*, 818). Varys is described as having a feminine appearance, but he is not strongly associated with homosexuality.

A relevant corpus to consider when looking for clues regarding medieval attitudes toward homosexuality are texts from the Middle Ages dealing with themes of pederasty or allusions to the myth of Jove and Ganymede. Often produced by members of the medieval clergy, such works of literature explicitly or implicitly referenced sexual relationships between older men and younger boys, suggesting that the practice was somewhat common and, to an extent acknowledged.⁷³ For example, consider the English translation of following poem by Hildebert of Lavardin:

A boy is hardly a safe thing; don't trust yourself to some of them.

A great house is said to have many Joves,

But you shouldn't expect to go to heaven for Ganymede's sin:

No one comes to the stars just through this soldier service.

A better law consecrates the heavenly citadels

To single young men: a male wife gets the underworld.

Although Juno grieved at the sin of her suspect husband,

She didn't have to grieve that this sin's reward would be heaven.⁷⁴

This poem references the homoerotic relationship that existed between Jove and his much younger cupbearer Ganymede. Hildebert clearly acknowledges that male homosexual desire was somewhat common in the Middle Ages, but he cautions strongly against it, assuring his reader that hell awaits any man who lusts after members of their own sex and indulges in “Ganymede's sin.”

⁷³ See The Boswell Thesis. Kuefler, Matthew. *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁷⁴ Hildebert of Lavardin, *Ad S. nepotem*, in *Hildeberti Cenomannensis episcopi carmina minora*, ed. A. Brian Scott (Berlin, 1969), 20-21.

This medieval view of homosexuality as deviant is something which Martin incorporates into his world's social milieu, with one character calling a group of male prostitutes “unnatural creatures” before drowning them.⁷⁵ However, Martin further reproduces the medieval mindset by including obvious acknowledgement of homosexuality in his novels. After all, *Song* has enough queer characters and discussions of queerness to suggest that even if non-heterosexual behaviors are scandalous, they are not unusual. Thus, Martin's choice to loosely veil (at least some) homosexual affairs resonates with a medievalist attitude of tepid tolerance towards illicit same-sex activities.

II: Ephemeral Hedonists

The most sustained, critically accessible example of homosexuality in *Song* is easily the affair between Loras and Renly. However, before I shift focus to that pair and the intense Todorovian features that accompany them, I wish to address the other, less developed, more extraneous instances of homosexual encounters which occur in the novels. This collection of vignettes consists primarily of two situations: queens' trysts with their bedmaids and rape (though, the former arguably falls into the domain of the latter). Neither of these groups function under the Todorovian veils that we see shrouding Loras and Renly's tale; they are blatantly acknowledged and, in some cases, depicted in the text. However, while explicit instances of homosexual rape serve to establish and refine the horrifyingly detailed social landscape of Westeros and thus provide an interesting contrast to the guised nature of homosexual male love, Martin's narrations of sexual interactions between women—which primarily function to develop character instead of the politics of sexuality—come off as gratuitous.

⁷⁵ *ADwD*, 912.

The two major scenes which depict sexual encounters between women mirror each other in that both are initiated by queens and involve their (supposedly) happily consenting handmaids. The first features Daenerys Targaryen and illustrates her attempts to rediscover her sexual identity after her husband's untimely death.⁷⁶ The second scene also features a widowed queen, Cersei, but her lesbian encounter is driven by a violent urge to supplant her deceased spouse's role by using another woman as a sex object. Indeed, during Cersei's scene, she is frustrated that she cannot feel "whatever Robert felt on the nights he took her."⁷⁷ Furthering the violent tone of the scene is Cersei's musings that the woman she is with "sounds as if she is being gored" and that "[Cersei] let herself imagine that her fingers were boar's tusks, ripping the Myrish woman apart from groin to throat."⁷⁸

In Cersei's case, the conflation of sex and violence illuminates some of her moral blemishes and her desire to usurp her husband's violent power while Daenerys' scene composes a segment of her adolescent character arc in which she attempts to replace her husband. However, while these scenes both revolve around homosexual behavior, both end in the narrator's decisive rejection of such pursuits.⁷⁹

Thus, in these instances, graphically detailed homosexual activities are manipulated in order to sculpt characters, and then homosexual desires are promptly erased. In other words, these scenes were used to advance characters' plots without advancing the characterization of

⁷⁶ *ASoS*, 325.

⁷⁷ Robert Baratheon is Cersei's dead husband. He was the king of the Seven Kingdoms up until his untimely death midway through *A Game of Thrones*. His demise precipitated the War of the Five Kings which forms the crux of the series' conflict. Throughout the series, we learn that he frequently had non-consensual relations with Cersei. *AFfC*, 693.

⁷⁸ It should be noted that Robert was killed by a boar, so this sexual act functions in part as Cersei fulfilling a fantasy of murdering her abusive husband. *AFfC*, 693.

⁷⁹ Cersei resolves that her sexual experience was "no good" and "had never happened." *AFfC*, 693.

homosexuality in Westeros. If anything, these scenes suggest that female homosexuality is simply an outlet for pleasure. Not only does it come off as peculiar that two characters would have these fleeting, entirely isolated urges to drift outside the boundaries of heterosexuality, it is also odd that only female characters are portrayed in this way. As Daenerys and Cersei never again show evidence to cast their heterosexuality into doubt, their lesbian encounters feel like exploitations of queerness—opportunities for the reader to gaze upon intimate behavior between two women. Such glimpses at homosexual intimacy are, as we shall see, expressly denied to the reader when the characters are male, suggesting a binary handling of homosexuality on the basis of gender which has few convincing justifications. One thing these scenes do serve to do is align female homosexual behavior with fantastical barrenness. Both Cersei and Daenerys are bound by supernatural prophecies that render them essentially unable to produce more children.⁸⁰ Thus, their same-sex encounters further accentuate their faulty ability to participate in the Westerosi inheritance system which lies at the heart of the game of thrones. Consequently, Daenerys and Cersei's queer choices represent compounded contraventions of the feudal power system.

III: Homoerotic Chivalry

Moving on, I shall address Loras and Renly's romance, which serves as a recurrently referenced tragic subplot throughout the novels and is enveloped in what is perhaps *Song's* best example of a Todorovian construction. As I have stated, no textual confirmation exists to prove these two men are gay. However, Martin's prose surrounding them is littered with innuendo and rumors hinting at their clandestine affair. Most blunt is Jaime Lannister's threat to Loras

⁸⁰ Maggy the Frog's Prophecy to Cersei explicitly tells her she will only have three children (*AFfC*, 771). Mirri Maaz Dur's prophecy to Daenerys implies that Daenerys' womb is as likely to quicken as the "mountains blowing away like leaves in the wind." (*AGoT*, 761). Intriguingly, textual evidence suggests that this prophecy may occur, so Daenerys might actually bear a child in the future.

instructing him to “*sheathe your bloody sword*, or I’ll take it from you and shove it up some place even Renly never found.”⁸¹ Other references do not go so far as to invoke anal penetration, but they do supply concrete evidence than a lewd comment. For example, Loras and his sister Margaery, who functions nominally as Renly’s bride, are twinned at various points, with other characters frequently noting how similar the pair look.⁸² Such ample comparison nearly makes the duo interchangeable, a notion visually reinforced when Cersei remarks “they could be twins.”⁸³ Further substantiation of Loras and Renly’s relationship comes when Jaime Lannister asks Loras why he chose to become a celibate member of the Kingsguard. In response, Loras essentially confesses his unrequited love for Renly, stating “When the sun has set, no candle can replace it.”⁸⁴ Though he maintains the anonymity of his dead lover by referring to them abstractly as the sun, to the reader’s knowledge, Renly is the only person Loras shared enough intimacy with to speak of in this manner.

In sustaining this balancing act of simultaneously obscuring and exposing the pair’s sexualities, Martin emphasizes them and constructs their characters around them. For Renly, this construction relies on how his lack of attraction for the opposite sex impedes his monarchical ambitions. As a contender for a throne inherited by way of male primogeniture, Renly must be able to produce heirs in order to be a successful king. Renly’s aberrant sexuality inhibits him from accomplishing this aim, as Renly’s brother and rival Stannis is quick to point out during a parley, stating “In your bed [Margaery]’s like to die [a maid].”⁸⁵ Interestingly, Stannis does not seem to be threatening to expose Renly’s sexuality here, indicating that there is a sort of

⁸¹ *ASoS*, 848.

⁸² Sansa notes that Margaery looks “very much like her brother Loras.” *ASoS*, 86.

⁸³ *AFfC*, 258.

⁸⁴ *ASoS*, 168.

⁸⁵ *ACoK*, 478.

medievalist social tolerance for homosexuality at play. Instead, by alluding to Margaery's continued virginity, Stannis means to wound Renly's kingly character by implying that he is incapable of generating a royal child.

The importance of producing an heir shows up in other ways in Renly's narrative as well. Linguistically, Renly is ensconced in the language of royal lineages. With the aid of a vector space model generated from Renly and Loras' storyline in *A Clash of Kings* (see Appendix 2), we see that words like 'marriage,' 'heir,' 'childbed,' and 'eldest_son' are significant to Renly's bid for the crown. However, Loras, who is positioned very closely to Renly in this model, represents an identity-based impediment to marriage, children, and other markers of an effective reign. Thus, this model suggests that the kingship and establishment of a lineage are of great import to Renly's storyline. However, the model also reminds us that Loras is tightly integrated into Renly's story. As human readers, we can connect the VSM's digital dots and recognize that on a lexical and thematic level, Renly's homosexual love operates as an obstruction to his kingly ambitions.

Further tarnishing Renly's chances of kingship is the stereotypic effeminacy of gay men which others associate with him. At one point, Tyrion Lannister quips that Renly is the "best dressed" king, and at another point, Master of Whisperers Varys likens Stannis to an "iron gauntlet" and Renly to a "silk glove."⁸⁶ The former critique is rooted in the modern cliché that gay men are fashion aficionados, which clashes anachronistically with the neomedieval atmosphere the books inhabit. All the same, when placed in conversation with Varys' clothing-based metaphorical critique which implies that Renly's grasp on power is delicate, feminine,

⁸⁶ *ASoS*, 923; *AGoT* 634.

impractical, and thus ineffectual, a key concern with Renly's ability to reign is traced to his sexual orientation.

David Nel goes so far as to suggest that Renly's death at the hands of a sorcerous shadow is an extended metaphor of his sexuality. Nel, noting the abundance of crude sword-related euphemisms for anal sex that are employed regarding homosexual affairs, regards Renly's fatal impalement as signifying "what the critic Miller calls "the penetrated, penetrable anus.""⁸⁷ Furthermore, Nel posits that "Renly's stabbing implicates male homosexuality in a discourse of danger and risk."⁸⁸ Essentially, Nel proposes that Renly's death denotes the hazardously fragile sociopolitical status attached to homosexuality in Westeros. However, there are deeper implications. As I have argued, Renly's sexuality kills the purpose of his character—to become a *dynastic* king. Thus, once the text reasonably establishes that Renly is homosexual and thus not incredibly well-suited to this task, the futility of his purpose is exposed, his character becomes defunct, and death is the next, inevitable step. Allowing the disintegration of a character to occur in this way is Todorovian in form; once the reader is supplied with enough information to demystify Renly's sexuality, the mystique—and thus his Todorovian fantastic construction—waned, signaling the end of his character arc.

Loras shares in Renly's Todorovian construction of the fantastic in that his sexuality is equally obfuscated, but his sexuality allows him to achieve greater valorization than his lover, thus lengthening Loras' presence in the story. Unlike Renly, Loras' ambivalence towards the female sex does not consign him to failure. As the third son of a noble line, he will not inherit

⁸⁷ David C. Nel, "Sex and the Citadel: Adapting Same Sex Desires from Martin's Westeros to HBO's Bedrooms," in *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. Jes Battis and Susan Johnston (Jefferson, NCL MacFarland & Company, 2015), 219.

⁸⁸ Nel, 219.

lands or titles.⁸⁹ Thus, it is less necessary for him to bear children. In fact, it is an engrained Westerosi custom for younger sons and daughters to enter celibate orders such as the Night's Watch,⁹⁰ the Faith,⁹¹ or the Citadel.⁹² So, Loras' disinterest in producing children not only removes him as a threat from his older brothers,⁹³ but it also augments his ability to chastely serve as a member of the prestigious Kingsguard. Knights engaging in sexual relations with courtly women create many problems in *Song*, so Loras' ability to remain celibate truly makes him noteworthy.⁹⁴

Furthermore, Loras' martial prowess as a knight is nearly unmatched—just a few of his accolades include winning a competitive tourney and heroically sacrificing himself to turn the tide at the siege of Dragonstone.⁹⁵ Moreover, Jaime Lannister states that Loras, upon seeing Renly's corpse, went “so mad with grief for Renly that he had cut down two of his own sworn brothers.”⁹⁶ Such sorrow-fuelled, violent retribution is associated in medieval literature with

⁸⁹ *AGoT*, 825.

⁹⁰ As “the youngest son of an ancient house with too many heirs,” it is implied that lesser nobles such as Ser Waymar Royce habitually turn to the Wall for honor and glory. (*AGoT*, 2). Benjen Stark, another younger brother from a powerful noble family, also chose to join the Night's Watch.

⁹¹ According to the encyclopedic legendarium of the Seven Kingdoms, two younger daughters of King Jaehaerys I were “given to the Faith.” George R.R. Martin, Elio M. Garcia, Jr., and Linda Antonsson, *The World of Ice and Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and the Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Books, 2014), 64.

⁹² Jaehaerys I's third son became a maester (*TWoIaF*, 64); Maester Aemon is also the younger son of a Targaryen king (*AGoT*, 664).

⁹³ During *A Game of Thrones*, Catelyn expresses concern that Jon Snow, her husband's bastard, may one day challenge her own sons for the seat of Winterfell (*AGoT*, 66). Such anxiety illustrates the competitive economy of feudal titles and holdings in Westeros which can even pit brother against brother.

⁹⁴ This is but one example: Ser Arys Oakenheart allows himself to be seduced by Arianne Martell and aids in a scheme which nearly ends in the death of the princess he is sworn to protect (*AFfC*, 268-289).

⁹⁵ *AGoT*, 315; *AFfC*, 755.

⁹⁶ *ASoS*, 925.

heroes avenging both their fallen vassals or lieges and their murdered loves.⁹⁷ Thus, Loras, being gay, kills both of these medieval romance tropes with one stone and significantly strengthens the echelon of his knightly image. In addition to being a pillar of masculine knightly valor, Loras is also a object of feminine desire, as is evidenced by the adolescent princess Sansa's frequent fantasies of him,⁹⁸ and confirmed by Tyrion's evaluation of Loras as a legendary figure who "half the girls in the Seven Kingdoms want to bed."⁹⁹ As Nel puts it, Loras is a "fantasy figure both for male Knights- in-training, and for starry-eyed young women."¹⁰⁰ In short, Loras' sexual orientation coupled with his comeliness and athletic skill construct him as a paragon of the chivalric knight.

Turning once more to the appended vector space model, we can see that words like 'gallant' and 'valor' surround Loras, suggesting their importance to his character (see Appendix 2). In contrast to Renly, though, who is not successful at achieving or obtaining the associated terms most relevant to his story (marriage, 'heir,' 'eldest_son' etc.), Loras is wildly efficacious when it comes to garnering knightly attributes. In fact, Loras' sexuality even makes him a more devoted defender to Renly, further perfecting his performance of knighthood. This VSM indicates, then, that male homosexuality is a double-edged sword (pardon the multiple puns encased in that phrase) which can help or hinder characters depending on their social stations.

Vested as he is with such a knack for knighthood, Loras' sexuality proves not to be a

⁹⁷ Numerous medieval tales depict warriors taking vengeance for their fallen vassals or lovers. For example, in the Nordic romance *Arrow-Odd*, the titular hero enters a fury and slays four bystanders to avenge his murdered supporter, Asmund. *Seven Viking Romances*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 51.

⁹⁸ Sansa claims she has "never seen anyone so beautiful" as Loras (*AGoT*, 297). Later, Sansa becomes titillated as she imagines "what it would be like to pull up [Loras'] tunic and caress the smooth skin underneath" (*ASoS*, 88).

⁹⁹ *ASoS*, 167.

¹⁰⁰ Nel, 222.

hindrance, permitting him to be valorized by the text and Westerosi society. Of course, Loras is scorned by one principle character, Queen Cersei, but her hateful attitudes are admonished by her brother. Cersei, discomfited by the prospect of having her son mentored by Loras, cogitates on the following:

Cersei had seen how tight the bonds grew between squires and the knights they served.

She did not want Tommen growing too close to Loras Tyrell. The Knight of Flowers was no sort of man for any boy to emulate.¹⁰¹

This is as close as we come to an open acknowledgment of male homosexuality in the novels. Cersei's thoughts reference the possible sexual dynamic that could emerge in between men in intimate chivalric relationships. As such, Cersei's concern is apparent: she fears that Loras and Tommen may forge homoerotic rather than homosocial chivalric bonds—or worse—through prolonged association, Loras may transmit his queerness to Tommen. These prospects do not appeal to Cersei, as she finds Loras' presumed sexual tendencies a poor subject of emulation. The notion that a character's queerness taints those who associate with them is pervasive throughout Westeros, as is proven by the criticism Jon Snow receives for choosing a former catamite as his steward.¹⁰² Furthermore, Cersei's homophobia bleeds beyond disdain for Loras' sexual endeavors and into his inadequacy as a man which she perceives to coexist alongside his sexuality. In a conversation with Jaime, Cersei makes this sentiment clear, countering Jaime's assertion that "Loras is thrice the man Ser Osmund is" with "Your notions of manhood have changed somewhat, brother."¹⁰³ While Cersei's words are meant to undermine Loras' reputation, this exchange does him more good than harm. Cersei is an ineffective, spiteful, morally bankrupt

¹⁰¹ *AFfC*, 499.

¹⁰² *ADwD*, 571.

¹⁰³ *AFfC*, 559.

ruler with no sense of honor or gallantry. Conversely, Jaime is a renowned knight who, though dubious in terms of honor, has committed acts that at least qualify him as a paragon of traditional Westerosi masculinity, complete with grit and gore. Thus, an endorsement from Jaime does far more to valorize Loras than a condemnation from Cersei diminishes him.

Beyond moral and heroic representations of these gay characters, the question still stands: why does Martin portray their sexualities so subtly? Critics have offered up a number of possibilities, and theoreticians supply a few more. In her analysis of *Song's* medievalisms, Shiloh Carroll corroborates Halperin's paradigm and points out that medieval societies had not constructed identities for homosexuality, and thus the rhetoric would not have existed to define same-sex relationships.¹⁰⁴ If Martin is attempting to manufacture a truly medieval world, this could be a plausible explanation, but labeling an act and depicting it are two different things. Moreover, as we have seen, it is only male homosexual relationships which are not made explicit; in more than one passing remark, female homosexual behavior is unambiguously named and it is plainly depicted in the text.¹⁰⁵ Carroll also suggests that Martin's delicate handling of queerness may have been necessitated by the 1990s' homophobic cultural atmosphere.¹⁰⁶ This may be partially true, as Martin's inclusion of same-sex relationships increase in his later books, but there are still graphic references to homosexuality in the earlier novels, most notably in the scene with Daenerys. Furthermore, in his works published in the current decade, Martin consistently reproduces sets of male characters connected by vaguely homoerotic chivalric bonds. This is the case for Jon Connington, who is heavily implied to have been smitten with

¹⁰⁴ Shiloh Carroll, *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2018), 101.

¹⁰⁵ Nymeria Sand casually says she was "abed with the [female] Fowler twins." *AFfC*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Carroll, *Medievalism*, 105.

Rhaegar Targaryen,¹⁰⁷ infamous lover of “boys” Ser Lyn Corbray,¹⁰⁸ and the historic Laenor Velaryon, who was rumored to have never consummated his marriage and to have had male “favorites.”¹⁰⁹ Martin’s continued use of invisible sexualities for gay men indicates a deliberate narrative strategy operating outside the constraints imposed on him by a potentially homophobic readership.

Yet another possible theory for Martin’s Todorovian constructions relate to the coming out process. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims that coming out of the closet is one of the acts queer people are expected to perform—quite frequently, in some cases.¹¹⁰ The dearth of confirmed queer sexualities in *A Song of Ice and Fire* may indicate Martin’s attempt to deconstruct this performance and subversively restore queer characters agency over their narratives. However, as none of the major point-of-view characters in the novels are queer, and those who engage in non-heterosexual activities disavow them afterwards, it is perhaps naïve to assume Martin’s main purpose is to progressively give platforms to LGBTQIA+ voices or narratives.

Rather, I suspect Martin’s signature equivocation of male queerness reflects an effort to grant his readers a firsthand glimpse at his attempted replica of the medieval mindset towards homosexuality. Clearly, homosexual activity occurs in Westeros, and clearly people know about it.¹¹¹ Thus, Martin’s ambiguity tactic is not necessarily employed to erase gay sexualities from his work, but to reveal to the reader how those sexualities are perceived in their societies. Martin

¹⁰⁷ *ADwD*, 876-889.

¹⁰⁸ *AFfC*, 489.

¹⁰⁹ *TWoIaF*, 71.

¹¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 4.

¹¹¹ Petyr Baelish mentions that it is “doubly difficult” to find Loras a wife. *ASoS*, 936.

conducts this revelation by positioning the reader in the same boat as a member of the Westerosi court—someone who is smart enough to deduce a person’s sexual tastes, but at the same time builds that conclusion on hearsay and hunches. This reliance upon perceived plausibility rather than solid factuality mirrors Todorov’s criteria for the genre of the fantastic. Suspended uncertainty upholds the crux of the political intrigue which underlies Renly and Loras’ affair similarly to how hesitation to reveal the fantastic maintains wonder for fantasy novels. During this plotline, the reader’s attention is thus transferred from the mystical peculiarities of Westeros to the sexual peculiarities of the continent’s kings. This obsessive attention which David Nel believes harmfully reduces LGBTQIA+ individuals to their sexualities coerces readers into engaging in frivolities similar to the nobles’ cutthroat game of thrones.¹¹² Readers are reminded of this frivolity when the object of their attention, Renly, is violently expunged from the narrative by a demonic shadow¹¹³—an emblem of the fantastic forces which should be occupying readers’ thoughts. In this way, Todorovian sexualities not only disrupt the rigid social structures of Westeros, but they also disrupt the reader’s focus on the *fantastic* components of the *fantasy* novels which contain those structures.

Using Todorovian tactics, Martin hijacks the medievalist taboos surrounding homoerotic homosociality to thematically bind his sexually infused political landscape to his emerging supernatural elements. While Martin, as I have argued, utilizes the medievalist tradition of public denouncement and private practice of homosexuality as a means of veiling gay love stories, the effects are closely linked to those of fantastical rhetoric. Just as Todorov’s hesitations regarding explanations of the fantastic grant the supernatural the ability to exist (after all, if there were an

¹¹² Nel, 213-222.

¹¹³ *ACoK*, 501-502.

explanation to the supernatural, one could hardly call it supernatural), Martin's hesitations to concretely reveal homosexuality allows it to flourish within the ruthless medieval patriarchy he constructs. Moreover, intersections of the sexual and the fantastic, such as Renly's demise, reinforce the consequences of rejecting a Todorovian framework and explicitly transmitting clandestine information to the reader.

Chapter 3: Courtesans, Lusty Queens, and the Red Woman: Sexual Profligacy in the Seven Kingdoms

As you have doubtless picked up on, George R.R. Martin does not shy away from frequent, forceful, and overt sexual discourse and portrayals of sex. Explicit references to genitalia, intercourse, sexual emissions, and lustful cravings abound throughout *Song*. Joseph Young points out that intrusions of low-mimetic sexual discourse are so ingrained in the narrative that Martin subcreates an entire slang vocabulary, including terms such as ‘teats,’ for them.¹¹⁴ If, then, Martin is so insouciant with his open handling of the ribald, why does he resort to coy innuendo on occasion? Take, for instance, the following character gloss from *A Feast for Crows*’ appendix:

EMMA, a serving wench at the Quill and Tankard, where the women are willing and the cider is fearsomely strong.¹¹⁵

Considering the astounding plentitude of brothels in the Seven Kingdoms, Martin’s reader, having made it to the fourth book in his series, can hardly be at a loss as to what Emma’s true profession is. So why does Martin insist upon veiling some sexual subject matter in euphemism or ambiguity while other instances of sexual content are bluntly addressed and graphically detailed?

I argue that Martin’s purposeful obscuring of some sexual discourse and promiscuity serves to perpetuate Todorovian constructions similar to those we observe around maternal figures and queer characters. In fact, the strategies Martin uses to equivocate about Margaery Tyrell’s sexual exploits are eerily analogous to those he uses to obfuscate her brother Loras’ sexual identity. As

¹¹⁴ Joseph Young, ““Enough about Whores”: Sexual Characterization in A Song of Ice and Fire,” *Mythlore* 35, no. 2 (2017): 45-61.

¹¹⁵ *AFfC*, 1017.

a result, feminine promiscuity and masculine homosexuality—two of the greatest taboos a Westerosi noble can engage in—operate equivalently to formally link courtly sexual politics to the mysterious rhetoric of the fantastic. However, unlike the consistent narrative strategies Martin uses to obscure male homosexual romance, unchaste feminine sexual behavior is only clouded on occasion. The purpose of this inconstant representation, I posit, is threefold. First, it functions to draw attention to sexual appetites, such as Margaery's, which are not made explicit—resulting in readerly uncertainty which mimics that associated with the supernatural. Consequently, by making other instances of sex quotidian, Martin mirrors and strengthens his efforts to similarly make portions of the supernatural seem natural. Lastly, Martin conflates partially obscured and partially revealed images of both the erotic and the fantastic in the darkly enigmatic red priestess Melisandre. In doing so, Martin, who often uses sex to distract and disrupt, ultimately utilizes this highly sexualized figure to point the reader towards the fantastic as its encroachments into the narrative space of the novels and the geographic space of Westeros become bolder and bolder.

In this chapter, I will first offer a glimpse into the historical foundations of sexuality in fantastic literature. Next, I shall provide a lexical analysis of *Song's* sexual discourse to unearth the mechanisms that construct its sexual portrayals. Finally, I shall examine women who keep the contents of their sex lives open, clandestine, and somewhere in between in order to understand how individuals linked to these dynamic sexual, political, and fantastic themes are fashioned into dangerous pawns in the game of thrones.

I: Sex from The Táin to Narnia

As with his production of motherhood and homosexuality, Martin's approach to feminine promiscuity reflects an attempt to replicate medieval attitudes towards sex and sexuality.

However, similarly to what we saw in the previous two chapters, Martin borrows sexual ideologies from across the medieval and modern eras to build a piecemeal Westerosi culture in which women, though they are told that female sexuality should be constrained to marriage and that loss of virginity translates to loss of social value, are generally open to partaking in adulterous ventures.

In early medieval literature based on pagan legend, feminine sexual agency was not only common and publicly expressed, it was seen as proper and even, at times, vital. The Celtic *Táin Bò Cuailinge* offers an excellent illustration of this worldview.¹¹⁶ Exemplifying a trope from Celtic mythology, one portion of the *Táin* features the Merrigan, the maiden aspect of the Celtic Triple Goddess,¹¹⁷ who requests to sleep with the tale's virile hero to symbolize the necessary, mutually beneficial union between land and mankind.¹¹⁸ The *Táin* also includes a scene in which the women of a village bare their breasts in the face of a frenzied warrior in order to draw him out of his bloodlust.¹¹⁹ Both of these episodes demonstrate pagan medieval beliefs that female sexuality was an inherently natural thing which had uses beyond childbearing. Moreover, these examples suggest that Celtic women had autonomy over their sexuality. This idea is reinforced by another moment from the *Táin* during which a king brushes off his wife's blatant infidelity because she shrewdly took advantage of her sexual charms to propel her political interests.¹²⁰

Using the *Táin* as a representative of early medieval depictions of sexuality in fantastic literature,

¹¹⁶ An Irish epic about a military struggle between two competing royal factions that centers around a legendary prize bull. The title roughly translates to "The Cattle Raid of Cooley."

¹¹⁷ The Triple Goddess is common in Celtic religions. A deity composed of three women representing youthful fertility, motherhood, and death, this archetype appears in the Westerosi seven gods as the Maid, Mother, and Crone.

¹¹⁸ *The Táin*, translated by Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 132-133.

¹¹⁹ *Táin*, 92.

¹²⁰ *Táin*, 103.

it is evident that women were allowed and expected to participate in sexual behaviors that Christianization would later render sinful.

It is this Christian prohibition of sexual craving that most substantially informs Westeros' culture. While many women in *Song* are not averse to openly discussing their sex lives (or having sex, for that matter),¹²¹ the society they live in stigmatizes and condemns licentiousness as Catholic Europe did. In primary sources from the late Middle Ages, it is plain that people, especially women, were socialized to disavow feelings of lust or sexual pleasure, which often resulted in painful complexes of sexual shame and guilt. The autobiographical *Book of Margery Kempe* serves as one example of the intimately internal effects this toxic social milieu had on women, as the titular character spends the first chunk of the text plagued by madness and grief over the loss of her virginity and the fact that she enjoys intercourse.¹²²

This is not to say that sexual deviance did not exist in Christian Europe—it most certainly did. Support for this exists in countless facets of medieval cultural history, from the raunchy acts of cuckoldry viscerally described in *The Canterbury Tales* to the profound popularity of Mary Magdalene, the patron saint of the sexually impure.¹²³ From the proto-fantasy canon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* involves a complicated game of courtesy in which Gawain attempts to fend off the seductive advances of a noble temptress married to his host.¹²⁴ Should Gawain give in to his base desires and accept the woman's propositions, he would undermine the chivalric

¹²¹ *AFfC*, 884; *ADwD*, 600.

¹²² Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, translated by Barry Windeatt (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

¹²³ Katherine Ludwig Jansen asserts that Magdalene was second in cultic devotion only to the Virgin Mary herself (among female saints). Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.

¹²⁴ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, translated by J.R.R. Tolkien (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006).

bond he has established between himself and the host while also eschewing his knightly purity and straying from his quest. What makes *Gawain* emblematic, then, of the late medieval stance on sexuality is that the Arthurian romance paints women's sexualities as being dangerous forces that have the potential to disrupt homosocial bonds and, therefore, must be forsworn rather than indulged. *Song*—especially at points where the Faith of the Seven is featured—is heavily laden with this ideology of sexual abnegation, however futile it may appear against characters' constant surrenders to carnal desires.¹²⁵

Bridging the gap between medieval and modern fantasies, fairy tales also tend to portray sexuality negatively, when it does come up. Of course, while earlier medieval fairy stories deal with sexual topics directly, collections from more recent eras—Grimms' *Tales*, for example—are often subtler. Ruth Bottigheimer suggests that while these fairy tales are “filled with erotic possibility and metaphor,” scenes that connote sex are rarely explicit.¹²⁶ Rather, a sexually charged scene sets the “erotic context” which subsequently allows for “nearly every image and metaphor” in a tale to be “read erotically.”¹²⁷ In the lack of specific description of sexuality in fairy tales, we see a parallel to Martin's more cryptic characterizations of gender and sex. For example, recall the implicitly homosexual relationship between Loras Tyrell and Renly Baratheon. There are perhaps one or two dozen vague indications that the pair are in fact romantically involved. These indicators serve as Bottigheimer's “erotic context”—without them, one would have no reason to assume that Renly and Loras' chivalric bond isn't any less platonic

¹²⁵ We discover that Lancel Lannister is wearing a hair shirt, an uncomfortable garment donned by medieval penitents who punished themselves for sexual indulgence (*AFfC*, 651). King Baelor the Blessed locked his sisters away in a chamber called the Maidenvault in order to obstruct his lust for them (*TWolAF*, 90-92).

¹²⁶ Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 157.

¹²⁷ Bottigheimer, 158.

than the thousands of others in the Seven Kingdoms. Understated as sexual themes are in fairy tales, erotic content becomes even less visible when you read through fantastic literature from the cusp of its modern boom.

Contemporary fantasies that have made names for themselves rarely handle sex explicitly. J.R.R. Tolkien, the progenitor of the genre, utilizes a very small set of women—platonically portrayed—in his masterwork *The Lord of the Rings*. The general lack of women in his novel results in the essential erasure of feminine sexuality (and, therefore, sexuality) altogether in favor of masculine fellowship. Following suit, Tolkien’s contemporary and companion C.S. Lewis omits plain references to sexuality in his *Chronicles of Narnia*. However, some critics argue that Lewis, known for being religiously didactic, does code feminine sexuality negatively. As Emily Wilson puts it, “poor Susan cannot get into heaven because she starts wearing lipstick.”¹²⁸ While fantasy’s female representation has increased and diversified since the time of its Inking forefathers, few novels have been as bold as Martin’s in terms of shaking the shrouds of innuendo and implication off of sex. Though, as I have argued, even Martin has not completely relinquished those shrouds. Yet, I doubt Martin is conforming to literary tradition by maintaining an air of mystique around select sexualities. Instead, he intentionally employs tactics of ambiguity and repurposes them, producing Todorovian constructions that point to the uncertain, potentially destructive effects rebellious sexual behaviors might have on Westerosi society.

II: Sex in Vector Space

As I noted at the opening of this chapter, Martin does not hold back when it comes to using explicit language, especially regarding sex. Indeed, a quick glance at any given chapter

¹²⁸ Emily Wilson, “The Narniad,” *The New Republic*, July 28, 2011.
<https://newrepublic.com/article/92803/cs-lewis-lost-aeneid>

from *Song* reveals a body of prose generously punctuated by bawdy, suggestive, and downright crude words and phrases. Occupied as they are with carnal matters, many members of the Westerosi population with more colorful vocabularies frequently invoke vulgar scatological terms when referencing sexual acts and eroticized portions of the (typically female, though occasionally male) anatomy. Relatively tame terms such as ‘member’ and ‘sex’ are sometimes used to indicate male and female genitalia, respectively, but lewder obscenities are more commonly employed. For referring to the act of sex itself, characters use a number of innuendos, euphemisms, and profanities ranging from clever to coarse such as ‘bedding’ and ‘fucking.’

While the lexicon associated with sexual behavior (particularly female sexuality) in *Song* is densely populated with expletives, also present are sets of terms connected to negatively stigmatized sexual overindulgence and cultures of courtly romance (see Appendix 3). The appended vector space model constructed around sexual themes features many terms that fall into these two disparate categories. On one hand, the model displays words often applied in derogatory contexts towards women like ‘whore,’ ‘wanton,’ ‘wench,’ ‘lover,’ and ‘slut.’ Moreover, the model shows that these words are used in similar contexts to terms like ‘wicked,’ ‘sinned,’ ‘disgusting,’ ‘teased,’ and ‘playful.’ Interestingly, more terms with more sophisticated contexts such as ‘highborn maid,’ ‘septa,’ ‘needlework,’ and the ‘ivory silk’ of wedding gowns are also closely linked to sexual themes in this VSM and appear in relatively close proximity to the less savory ones previously mentioned.¹²⁹

The makeup of this VSM suggests several things about promiscuous sexuality in Westeros. First, both inherently sexual women, such as prostitutes, and women that chivalric

¹²⁹ There are two ivory silk gowns in the series. The first is gifted to Sansa Stark when she is betrothed to Joffrey Baratheon (*AGoT*, 477). The second is worn by Margaery Tyrell at her weddings to both Joffrey and Tommen Baratheon (*ASoS*, 809; *AFfC*, 249).

romances would remove from the erotic domain, such as noble ladies, appear to be similarly correlated to the sexual language that drives this particular model (see Appendix 3 caption). Furthermore, the fact that terms like ‘wanton’ and ‘highborn maid’ are enmeshed with adverse terms such as ‘wicked’ indicates that women who express their sexuality or who are sexualized, regardless of their social status, are morally condemned in the Westerosi milieu. Thus, the lexical dynamics at play in *Song* reflect the later medieval concept that feminine valor was expressed through chastity.

Of course, vilification and valorizing are not black and white in *Song*, so while these linguistic trends offer a valuable foundation for understanding the social mechanisms of sexual thought Martin has underlain his novels with, they do not offer concrete evaluations of how sexual expression and its accompanying reactions impacts individual characters. For that information, it is necessary to look more closely at the profligate women of Westeros themselves.

III: Latent and Blatant Promiscuity

Having discussed the historical trappings of feminine sexuality across the chronology of fantasy literature, allow me to clarify where *Song* fits in. While the characters themselves may take cues from pagan expressions of eroticism, and while the rhetorical vagueness surrounding sex mimics similar structures from fairy tales, *Song*’s world-built social lore reflects a high-late medieval Catholic worldview on feminine sexuality, captured marvelously by the High Septon’s assertion that “all women are wanton at heart, given to using their wiles and their beauty to work their wills on men.”¹³⁰ Thus, *Song* is populated by a slew of women who fall anywhere from chaste to lascivious on the spectrum of sexual proclivities. Some women make explicit their

¹³⁰ The High Septon is the Westerosi equivalent of the Catholic Pope. *ADwD*, 792.

sexual histories, be they sparse, such as Brienne of Tarth's, or extensive, such as Arianne Martell's. However, because general sexual discourse is, as I have referenced, so common place in Martin's writing, I am more interested in the characters whose sexual tendencies are left unstated. For in this silence, there is uncertainty, and where there is uncertainty, there is—according to Todorov—room for magic.

Let us begin, then, with Margaery Tyrell. Margaery, Loras' sister, is the portrait of beauty, charity, grace, and charm—she is everything a queen should be (and she is queen several times). However, she is eroticized in two primary ways without the reader ever receiving verification that she has actually indulged in erotic activities. When we first meet Margaery, she is wedded to Renly Baratheon. Yet, it is not Renly who eroticizes Margaery. In fact, bearing in mind knowledge of his sexuality, Margaery's marital association with Renly desexualizes her, if anything. Additionally, compared to his older brother Robert's voracious fleshly appetites and inclinations toward lewd interactions with women, Renly treats Margaery in a far more chivalrous, kingly manner reminiscent of the platonic reverence men afford their love objects in chivalric romances. Even though she is portrayed innocently by the oral verbiage and situational contexts surrounding her, Margaery is often twinned with Loras, especially to describe the pair's striking beauty. By being represented as nearly interchangeable with Loras, who is an implicitly sexual figure, Margaery also takes on an eroticized persona. Queen Cersei demonstrates this eroticization during one of her spiteful internal monologues where she muses that “Margaery looked very like her brother” and “wondered if they had other things in common.”¹³¹ Not only does this association with Loras subtly implicate Margaery in scandalous, possibly homosexual, activities, it represents the second pathway through which Margaery's speculated sexuality is

¹³¹ *AFfC*, 146.

constructed: the wicked machinations of the scheming Queen Cersei.

While the Todorovian constructions we see for mothers and queer individuals suggest at least a portion of the truth, Margaery's sexuality is much more difficult to unriddle because Cersei purposefully fabricates it. Driven mad with jealousy and fear from a prophecy she received as a child, Cersei makes it her mission to do everything in her power to eradicate Margaery.¹³² As we have seen, prophecy plays an important role in *Song*. Though these divinations inherently rely on propagating tragic certitudes, they remain dangerous and Todorovian because the routes to their incontrovertible outcomes stay obscured. Thus, Cersei's persistent efforts to circumvent these foretold events position her in opposition to the fantastic.

To combat her fantastical foe, Cersei deploys another Todorovian agent: the mystery surrounding Margaery's sexual activities. Cersei's strategy to dispose of Margaery is to deceitfully frame her for licentiously cuckolding her husband, Cersei's son King Tommen.¹³³ To do so, Cersei grotesquely tortures one man into inventing lies about sleeping with Margaery and her attendants,¹³⁴ and uses her seductive charms to convince one of her household knights to falsely confess before the High Septon to bedding Margaery.¹³⁵ In constructing this plot centered around Margaery's sexual endeavors, Cersei both amplifies the Todorovian uncertainty attached to Margaery's chastity and draws attention to the towering irony of the entire conspiracy: it is Cersei herself whose lengthy list of carnal debaucheries match the allegations she seeks to thrust upon Margaery.

¹³² The prophecy foretells Cersei's death and involves the coming of a "younger and more beautiful" queen. See *AFfC*, 771. Evidently, Cersei believes Margaery to be this queen and therefore strives to circumvent the prophecy by disposing of Margaery.

¹³³ There is precedent for queens who commit adultery (a form of high treason) to be put to death. *TWolaf*, 59.

¹³⁴ *AFfC*, 827-830.

¹³⁵ *AFfC*, 835.

With charges of high treason for adulterous behavior thus functioning as the proverbial Chekhov's gun, Cersei's plan, inevitably, backfires. Giving her a taste of her own medicine, the High Septon tortures the truth out of the false witness Cersei sent him and arrests Cersei for the crimes of murder, incest, and adultery—all of which she is guilty of. To escape this predicament, Cersei abjures her sins before the High Septon, methodically stripping her own identity down to one of motherly devotion, procreative purpose and primal lust:

I have sinned, I have committed wanton fornication, but I did it for Tommen. Forgive me, High Holiness, but I would open my legs for every man in King's Landing if that was what I had to do to keep my children safe...I was a regent, but a queen is still a woman, and women are weak vessels, easily tempted¹³⁶

Following her confession, Cersei is made to walk through through the streets of the capital nude as penance for her sins. Though Cersei was at first determined to utilize the walk as a subversive authorizing tool, proudly flaunting her body for the kingdom to see, she soon loses her confidence as the crowd throws cruel invectives at her regarding her appearance and she becomes aware of “the stretch marks on her belly” and the way that her breasts “sagged against her chest.”¹³⁷ This undertaking further reduces Cersei to a sex symbol and effectively deprives her of the fragile clout she had amassed. As Kevan Lannister puts it,

Cersei was soiled goods now, her power at an end. Every baker's boy and beggar in the city had seen her in her shame, and every tart and tanner from Flea Bottom to Pisswater Bend had gazed upon her nakedness, their eager eyes crawling over her breasts and belly and woman's parts. No queen could expect to rule again after that. In gold and silk and

¹³⁶ *ADwD*, 791.

¹³⁷ *ADwD*, 939.

emeralds Cersei had been a queen, the next thing to a goddess; naked, she was only human, an aging woman with stretch marks on her belly and teats that had begun to sag.¹³⁸

Kevan's assessment reflects the Todorovian nature of sexuality in *Song* as it is experienced by characters. When Cersei's sexuality was implicit, concealed beneath suggestive silks, she was powerful. The veiling of sexual activity illustrated by the literal veiling of the body allowed Cersei to maintain a queenly image of a chaste figure of courtly love while still suggesting the sway of her sexual allures. However, once the mystery is purged beneath the public's gaze during her walk of penance, once Cersei's sexual promiscuity becomes as communal as one of *Song's* many prostitutes, Cersei's uncanny sexual potency crumbles along with her political authority.

The case of Margaery and Cersei is perhaps the clearest illustration of how Todorovian constructions of sexuality play into characters' political stability in the game of thrones. Cersei, by obsessively wasting her time grappling with Margaery's sexual construction, contributes to her own demise and, at the same time, horrendously misrules the Seven Kingdoms, weakening them to the point where any number of conquerors—fantastic or otherwise—could flounce in and snatch them up. Thus, Cersei's foolish dalliance with Todorovian sexual politics serves to cement the notion that Martin equalizes forces of the sexual and the fantastic in his world, as the mysteries of the latter—which have the potential to exterminate all life in Westeros—should be the focal point of characters' attention, but are eclipsed by fixation on the former.

One last character who deserves a mention in a chapter about veiled eroticism is the red priestesses Melisandre—who embodies nexuses of the known and the unknown and of the sexual

¹³⁸ ADwD, 1040.

and the fantastical. In many ways, Melisandre breaks free of Todorovian molds, but she also adheres to them in some respects. Melisandre herself is literally Todorovian in that “half of [Stannis’] knights are afraid to even say her name,” a fact which indicates that the sorceress’ disconcerting nature breeds anonymity within her identity.¹³⁹ Additionally, Melisandre transmits this Todorovian silence by refusing to name certain evils, such as the god of death and winter “whose name may not be spoken.”¹⁴⁰ However, not all aspects of Melisandre’s mystic and sexual identities are hidden. In fact, some portions of these identities are accentuated.

For example, unlike Margaery, Melisandre’s sexual acts are only partially obscured and their results are visible and explicated in the text. Though we never receive validation that Melisandre engages in sexual deeds with anyone, the proof is quite nearly in the pudding. The shadow demon that Melisandre births bears an uncanny resemblance to Stannis, and one might speculate that, in the World of Ice and Fire, baby shadow demons are conceived in the same manner as normal babies.¹⁴¹ Further textual evidence that Melisandre and Stannis are sexually involved comes during the priestess’ only perspective chapter, in which she mentions that Stannis sleeps in her bed.¹⁴² Moreover, Melisandre is sexually characterized right off the bat with the first description we get of her:

Her hair was not the orange or strawberry color of common red-haired men, but a deep burnished copper that shone in the light of the torches. Even her eyes were red . . . but her skin was smooth and white, unblemished, pale as cream. Slender she was, graceful, taller than most knights, with full breasts and narrow waist and a heart-shaped face. Men’s eyes

¹³⁹ *ACoK*, 162.

¹⁴⁰ *ASoS*, 348.

¹⁴¹ *ACoK*, 505.

¹⁴² *ADwD*, 450.

that once found her did not quickly look away, not even a maester's eyes. Many called her beautiful. She was not beautiful. She was red, and terrible, and red.¹⁴³

Here, Melisandre's unsettling attractiveness is languorously dwelled upon and she is yoked to the notoriously sensual shade of red. However, her beauty is so extreme that it is siren-like, 'terrible,' and almost inspires a fear that men entranced by it may be unable to tear their eyes away. Furthermore, Melisandre's allures are otherworldly, enchanting, and almost unnatural.

It is this unnaturalness that makes Melisandre a truly unique figure; sexuality and the supernatural converge in her character. Following Farah Mendlesohn's four rhetorical models of fantasy literature, Melisandre is an intrusive fantasy element, unexpectedly hailing from the distant, exotic East.¹⁴⁴ With a diverse skill set including soothsaying, summoning demonic thralls, and incinerating pesky birds, Melisandre is one of the first characters in the series who frequently wields magic. However, her sorceries are firmly intertwined with sexual undertones. Her ability to divine the future through images in the fire, for example, is linked to sexual ecstasy.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, to call upon magical servants, Melisandre must presumably complete an act of intercourse and then give birth. Consider the scene in which this occurs:

Melisandre had thrown back her cowl and shrugged out of the smothering robe. Beneath, she was naked, and huge with child. Swollen breasts hung heavy against her chest, and her belly bulged as if near to bursting...Her eyes were hot coals, and the sweat that dappled her skin seemed to glow with a light of its own. Melisandre *shone*...Davos saw

¹⁴³ *ACoK*, 23-24.

¹⁴⁴ Intrusive fantasies feature fantastical forces invading the real world. While Westeros is not a 'real world' per se, it has been devoid of magic for many years. Thus, Melisandre, dragons, and the white walkers can all be viewed as supernatural entities intruding upon a mostly natural Westeros. Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

¹⁴⁵ *ADwD* 448.

the crown of the child's head push its way out of her. Two arms wriggled free, grasping, black fingers coiling around Melisandre's straining thighs, pushing, until the whole shadow slid out into the world.¹⁴⁶

In this passage, Melisandre is placed under the scrutiny of a male gaze and is certainly sexualized, with Martin emphasizing various parts of her body, such as her breasts and belly. However, at the same time, Martin characterizes Melisandre's body as fantastic, with burning eyes and glowing skin. The duality of the sexual and the fantastic that exists in Melisandre, that exists in her diabolical progeny, represents the Todorovian marriage of the two concepts. Melisandre is sexually ambiguous, but also fantastically ambiguous. While some of her magical methods are revealed to be the products of alchemical powders, others, such as discerning visions in the flame, remain beyond the scope of her understanding. Yet, Melisandre's sexual and magical exploits are nowhere near as subtle as some of the other characters I have talked about. While her character remains mysterious enough to inspire awe, the fact that she openly symbolizes empowered feminine sexuality, supernatural manifestation, and unfamiliar foreign intrusion presents a number of threats to Westerosi societal norms. Thus, the narrative constructs Melisandre as a formidable figure who heralds revolutionary sexual liberty and fantastical possibility by relaxing the Todorovian constructions associated with her. The thought that characters such as Margaery, Loras, and Catelyn are also shedding, or are on the verge of shedding, these constructions hints at an approaching upending of strict patriarchal structures.

What Martin is ultimately able to do by combining traditional Todorovian constructions of the fantastic with his customary Todorovian constructions of sexuality in Melisandre is to use her to anchor the text as story where gender, sex, sexuality, and magic all play a part in weaving

¹⁴⁶ *ACoK*, 623.

the political mythopoeia that is the game of thrones. Proof for this notion reveals itself when Melisandre acknowledges the superior urgency of the War for the Dawn¹⁴⁷ over the game of thrones in her declaration that

The sand is running through the glass more quickly now, and man's hour on earth is almost done. We must act boldly or all hope is lost. Westeros must unite beneath her one true king, the prince that was promised, Lord of Dragonstone and chosen of R'hllor.¹⁴⁸

Melisandre, while affirming the idea that Westeros needs a single king, indicates that the purpose of that monarch is to ensure the persistence of humanity in the kingdoms. To justify her position, Melisandre invokes prophetic, political, and sacred authorizing agents (i.e. the prince that was promised, Lord of Dragonstone, and chosen of R'hllor¹⁴⁹). This move of drawing attention to the fantastic undermines the Todorovian misdirections that characterize the supernatural and sexual in other portions of *Song*. In doing this, Melisandre, an icon of enigmatic feminine sexuality, draws back the Todorovian curtain and gestures toward the impending invasion of the fantastic which nearly every other character ignores. It is also worth comparing Melisandre's embrace of prophecy to Cersei's hostility towards it. Where Cersei tries (and fails) to obstruct fantastical prophecies, Melisandre works tirelessly to fulfill them. Both of these women attempt to manipulate time and fate, actions which ultimately demonize them. In this way, interactions with the fantastical, similarly to expressions of deviant sexuality, are portrayed as taboo because of their disruptive capacities.

By supplementing her erotic mantle with a fantastic one, Melisandre canonizes sexual

¹⁴⁷ The name for the cyclic conflict between the armies of the living and the undead.

¹⁴⁸ *ASoS*, 500.

¹⁴⁹ The Red God Melisandre worships. He is diametrically opposed to the Great Other, the god Melisandre claims to be the lord over the legions of the undead.

deviance as functionally equivalent to supernatural lore in Westeros, allowing readers to understand characterizations of both phenomena as intrinsic agents of conflict, change, and chaos within the series.

Postlude

Though establishing a solid conclusion regarding an investigation of Todorovian uncertainties may seem sacrilegious, there are a few thoughts about Westeros' deviants which I would like to leave you with before signing off. Of course, the act of drawing any conclusions at all about *Song*, a work currently in-progress, may be somewhat futile. Nonetheless, I shall forge ahead in my discourse with the knowledge that all these findings could be abolished (or modified) when *The Winds of Winter* finally blow.¹⁵⁰

Ultimately, the literature of the fantastic, as Todorov sees it, depends upon uncanny disruptions. In the case of *Song*, aberrant sexualities and subversions of gender roles comprise a large portion of these uncanny disruptions. For Todorov's paradigm to hold water, however, the uncanny must be concealed for a reason—that reason being that the uncanny upends the world as we know it and therefore must not be granted confirmed existence as ontological truth. Nearly every time it rears its head, we see the fantastic (and fantastically constructed sexualities) threatening the world order of Westeros. The most obvious example of this is an army of the undead, the ignored disaster which has loomed on the outskirts of the Seven Kingdoms since *Song's* first chapter, which literally has apocalyptic potential. On smaller scales though, other supernatural forces also undercut the mortal game of thrones. Prophecies foretell the ends of old lineages and birth of new ones,¹⁵¹ the elusive Horn of Winter is supposedly vested with the power to bring down the Wall,¹⁵² and the laws of death themselves are undone by the divine potency of the Red God's faithful followers.

¹⁵⁰ *The Winds of Winter* is the long anticipated, unpublished sixth installment of *Song*.

¹⁵¹ *ACoK*, 701; *AFfC*, 771.

¹⁵² The Wall is a defensive structure which marks the northern limit of the Seven Kingdoms. It was built to keep the undead White Walkers out, but also trapped a faction of living people—the wildlings—on the other side.

Similarly, deviant sexualities threaten to unravel the fabric of Martin's fantastical society. Patriarchy and primogeniture—the doctrines upon which Westeros is built—become endangered when mothers begin acting as leaders, killers, and queens, when queer kings end lineages, and when inbred bastards usurp the birthrights of trueborn men. Indeed, the traditions of hierarchical chivalry are undermined by figures such as Brienne, a woman who is not a knight, but adheres to their codes of honor more closely than many of her male counterparts, and Melisandre, who claims that she is “a knight of sorts... a champion of light and life.”¹⁵³ Therefore, socially problematic sexualities and gender role inversions are hidden from the political world using Todorovian constructions (in the same way the unreal is concealed from the real in classical Todorovian scenarios). What makes these deviances especially Todorovian, though, is that they are not only cloaked in uncertainty, but they breed uncertainty. As we have seen, queer kings and incestuous mothers make for faulty vessels of power transmission through reproduction. Of course, a core moral of *Song* is that genetically inherited power is innately faulty and power structures which uphold it should be dissolved. Thus, the Todorovian veils ushered in to cover up sexual reprobates' procreative disturbances function, in part, to expose this critique.

Over the course of this thesis, I endeavored to draw back those veils. In part, I used VSMS to do so, thus making that which is invisible to the human reader visible and spoiling Martin's clandestine Todorovian maneuvers. Beneath these veils, disruptive sexualities reveal themselves to function comparably to, and frequently alongside, the fantastic; they are left unstated, but their repression makes them all the more present. In many cases, the sexual merges with the fantastic or even generates it. Indeed, the major fantastical forces in Westeros—dragons, shadow demons, and the white walkers—are all conceived through some unorthodox birthing

¹⁵³ *ACoK*, 620.

practice.¹⁵⁴ What makes the sexualization of the fantastic even more intriguing is that the power structures which repress sexual deviance also curb fantastical presences. The Dance of the Dragons exemplifies this principle. A civil war arising from a conflict over the inflexible laws of male primogeniture, the Dance of the Dragons was ultimately responsible for the demise of Westeros' dragons. This thinning of the fantastic is not undone until Daenerys resurrects the draconic species through pseudo-reproductive means. In effect, the supernatural and the risqué in *Song*—two of its most distinguishable attributes—depend upon each other to persist.

So, then, this voyage through Martin's Todorovian constructions reveals that the sociopolitical game of thrones, charged as it is with hazardous misogyny and homophobia, weaves a net of ambiguity over potentially scandalous identities just as it does with potentially threatening fantastical forces. In effect, it is this ambiguity which allows these aberrant identities to endure and, occasionally, thrive. Paralleling these sexual identities in form are Martin's magical elements, which also develop subtly under many layers of obfuscation. In sum, the sexual and the fantastic are two sides of the same coin, overlapping, echoing, buttressing, and clashing with each other. Given the gritty, brutal realism of Martin's world, ornamented as it is with unforgivingly violent power structures, neither fantasy nor non-conformity to gender norms should be able to survive. Yet, by infiltrating the narrative's margins and existing as thinly veiled secrets, both forces not only survive, but become essential to and complicate the rich melodies of the *Song of Ice and Fire*.

¹⁵⁴ Daenerys hatches dragon eggs through ritual sacrifice and breastfeeds them with the milk intended for her stillborn son. Melisandre gives birth to shadow demons after presumably engaging in adulterous activities with King Stannis. The white walkers are implied to be created using Craster's sacrificed inbred infant sons.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

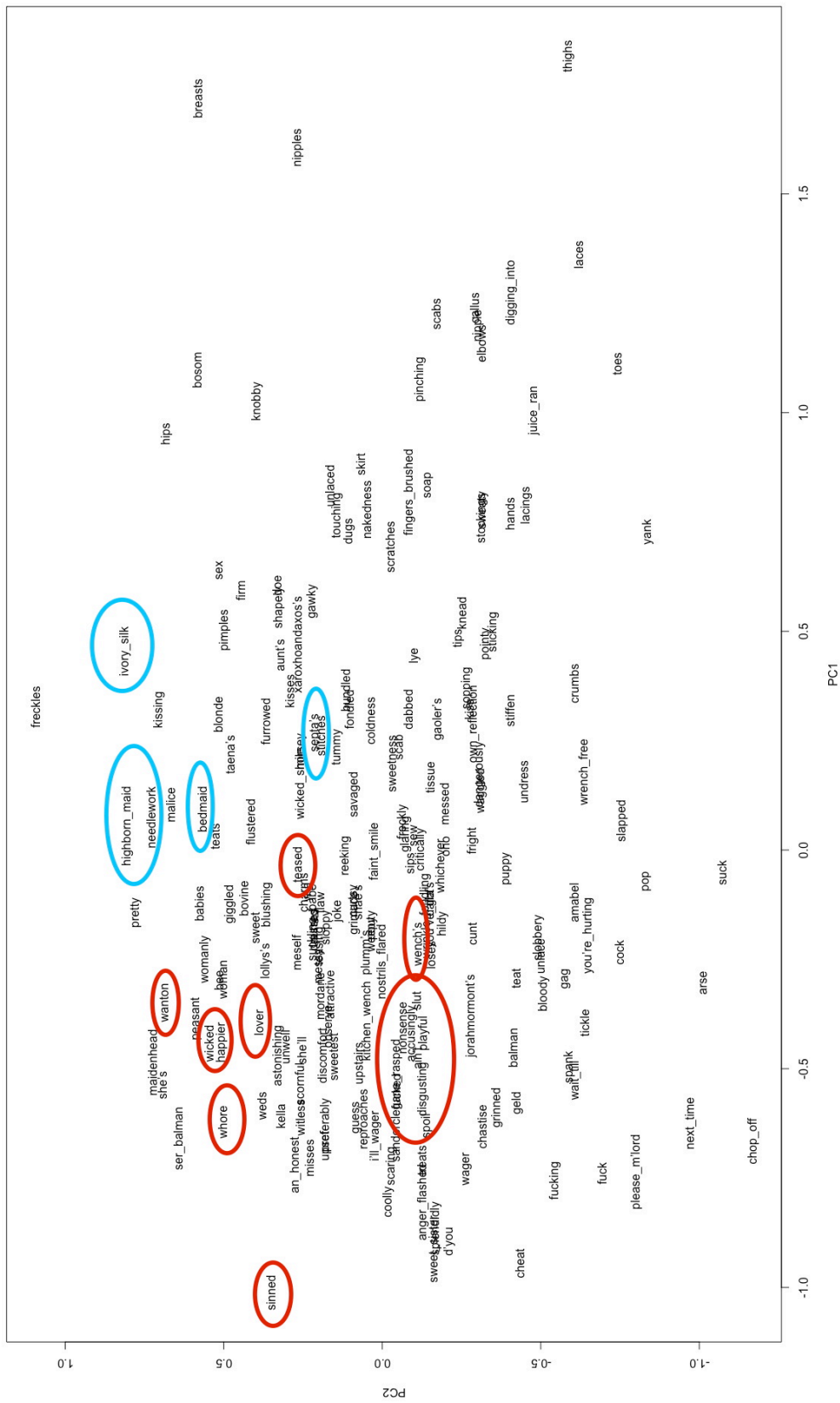
This vector space model represents the terms most associated with the major mothers in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. I used the following words to construct this visualization: mother, mercy, children, Catelyn, Olenna, Lysa, Cersei, and Daenerys. The purple circles indicate terms that align with Westerosi expectations and values of motherhood ('mercy,' 'gods forgive,' 'forgive me,' 'weep,' 'sweetest,' 'daughter,' 'husband,' 'maidenhood,' 'husband's'). Words circled in blue do not align with those values ('avenge,' 'murdered,' 'horrified,' 'cruellest,' 'moon tea'). You may notice 'moon tea' is circled in blue. This is a contraceptive substance enveloped in stigma; it is a major taboo for women in the World of Ice and Fire to use birth control, but many do anyways.

Appendix 2 (continued)

This vector space model depicts the words most closely linked to my custom designed “Growing Strong” theme. This theme consists of words related to the Baratheon-Tyrell alliance in *A Clash of Kings* (Margaery, Renly, Loras, Mace_Tyrell, Highgarden, Tyrell, chivalry). The words are clustered according to how functionally similar they are to each other or how likely they are to appear in close proximity to one another, with no particular variables controlling the axes.

Circled are several terms I found particularly intriguing (‘eldest son,’ ‘heir,’ ‘childbed,’ ‘eldest,’ ‘gallant,’ ‘valor,’ ‘marriage’), especially as they relate to Loras and Renly (also circled). If you’ve a keen eye, you may notice that `renly_baratheon` and `ser_loras` also appear on this chart. These nodes are less relevant than ‘loras’ and ‘renly’ because they appear far less frequently in the text (15 instances of ‘renly baratheon’ compared to 170 of ‘renly’). The only reason they are on this visualization is because they occur in frequent association with the Growing Strong theme. However, note that ‘`ser_loras`’ is nearly on top of ‘loras.’ This illustrates the principle I mentioned earlier regarding how words or terms with similar functions are nearer to each other.

Appendix 3: Sex in Vector Space



Appendix 3 (Continued)

Depicted here is a visualization of the *Song*'s sexual lexicon. Laced as the series is with candid and coarse language, a study of vulgar and, in some cases, offensive terms was required to construct this model. Namely, I inserted the terms 'sex,' 'teats,' 'teat,' 'fuck,' 'fucked,' 'breasts,' 'cock,' and 'cunt' into the modeling algorithm. These words are all frequently used in sexual contexts throughout the series, often in dialogue from less savory characters. I chose not to use the term 'breast' as it is often used in non-sexual anatomical references to the chest. Circled in blue are terms which relate to visions of women in the contexts of courtly love ('highborn maid,' 'needlework,' 'bedmaid,' 'septa's,' 'stitches,' 'ivory silk'). Conversely, the terms circled in red are names and attributes often ascribed to promiscuous women (such as prostitutes) whose sexualities result in their demonization ('sinned,' 'whore,' 'wanton,' 'wicked,' 'lover,' 'teased,' 'wench's,' 'disgusting,' 'spoil,' 'slut'). You will notice that I have left much of the top portion of the VSM untouched. This is because the terms there are fleshier than the others, and seem to be taken from some of *Song*'s more sensual scenes. While it is intriguing to see how such words relate to the less concrete ones, they do not lend themselves to analysis of Westerosi social attitudes toward sex. Rather, they suggest the aspects of sex which the narration tends to focus on.

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