



Book Review:
Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones

Don Riggs

Carroll, Shiloh. *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones*. D. S. Brewer, 2018. ISBN 978 1843844846.

Shiloh Carroll's analysis of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and, to a lesser extent, the HBO television series adapted from it, *Game of Thrones*, deals – as her book's title suggests – with issues of historicity and the multiple versions of the “Middle Ages” as they apply to Martin's works of fiction and the televised series they have spawned. In addition, though, Carroll also critiques these works in terms of misogyny, toxic masculinity, racial stereotypes, and class issues. Carroll does this using a wealth of specific examples, all carefully analysed, and sets these analyses in a rich theoretical framework of scholarship in the field of medievalism, which is the study of the use of the historical Middle Ages as a setting for literature, cinema, opera, and the visual arts. Throughout this study, the main thrust of Carroll's argument is that Martin uses an argument from “authenticity” to justify his relegation of women to traditional female roles, the validation of men through violence, and the depiction of non-Westerosi characters through tropes long associated in Western literature with “Orientalism”.

Although Martin admittedly depicts certain female characters in very assertive roles, even roles in which they rule and lead armies – Daenerys Targaryen and Cersei Lannister are obvious examples – Carroll points out that they achieve mastery through adopting elements of toxic masculinity in their own actions. Also, Cersei's comeuppance for her sexual interactions with men whom she has used in her manipulations in the court – a punishment and humiliation not meted out to any male characters – is the “walk of shame” where she is forced to walk naked through King's Landing.

According to Carroll, this element of toxic masculinity characterises the entire novel, both in terms of those male characters, like the “Mountain” Clegane, who are particularly brutal, and also in terms of the “weaker” males, like Samwell Tarly and Tyrion Lannister. Carroll points out that, although both characters’ strongest feature is their literacy, they are nonetheless “redeemed” by success in battle – Sam through killing one of the Others with a dragonglass blade, and Tyrion through devising the trap that destroys Stannis Baratheon’s navy.

Although the primary focus of the study is Martin’s series of novels, in the final chapter, “Adaptation and Reception”, Carroll deals with the HBO series, in part because at the time of the study’s publication the adaptation had outstripped the novels and gone into territory uncharted as yet by Martin’s writing. In fact, as of the writing of this review, the HBO series has concluded, but only five of the projected seven volumes of the novels have appeared. Still, most of what Carroll addresses in this last chapter involves comparison between page and screen.

For readers not familiar with the field of medievalism, Carroll outlines the most prominent conceptions of that period among artists and scholars. There are the “barbaric” middle ages, where warriors clash, rape, and pillage, and then there are the “courtly” middle ages, where elaborate protocols of romantic relationship are formulated and massive cathedrals rise to the heavens. As Carroll points out, subsequent to the actual historical period itself, there are degrees of development of these modes of medievalism on the part of idealising artists and critics like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, its extension into the twentieth-century public consciousness through the Disneyfication of the Middle Ages in animated feature films, and also the medievalist tales of J.R.R. Tolkien like “Farmer Giles of Ham” and probably the Matter of Middle-Earth. Martin is shown to reject the idealising of the Middle Ages in favor of his “grimdark” version of a “barbaric” medieval period. For Carroll, Martin wrongly uses this aesthetic preference to justify what she considers problematic about the novels, particularly their view that women cannot rule except by guile and manipulation from behind the scenes, or, in the fantasy trope of the “exceptional” woman, where a woman has the physical prowess of a man, as with Brienne of Tarth.

In the chapter “Romance and Anti-Romance”, for example, Carroll sees Martin delving into the tropes of actual medieval Romance, following such High Medieval writers as the twelfth-century Chrétien de Troyes, only to subvert them through curtailing the reader’s expectation with “real-life” intrusions. This part of Carroll’s study reveals one source of the power of Martin’s writing in that the reader must confront both the romanticised medievalism that many of us have inherited from the nineteenth century or Walt Disney’s adaptation of fairy tales and T. H. White’s *The Sword in the Stone*. Sansa Stark is perhaps the primary target of Martin’s anti-romanticising savagery, as Sansa initially believes in the courtly romance tropes that she has heard growing up. It is to her that Petyr Baelish says that “life is not a song, sweetling” and, although he is for once telling the truth, it conceals layers of irony. Carroll’s point is that, though Martin has a valid position in “debunking” the overly idealised medievalisms of Victorian and later writers, much of this debunking involves the misogynistic treatment of women, and that these acts of rape and humiliation are not justified by the claim of realism. Cersei is an example of the rape of a royal woman by her drunken husband, Robert, and then, after having used what she says are a woman’s weapons, namely sex and tears, she is forced to walk, naked and shaved, in public – and she is aware that “the people will never be

able to take her seriously as a leader again” (67). Indeed, as Carroll points out, neither Cersei nor Daenerys is a powerful leader on her own, but only when there are strong men – or dragons – to enforce their decrees.

Carroll brings postcolonial theory to bear on Martin’s writing, just as some scholars and critics of medievalism and medieval literature alike have pointed out the history of colonisation within Britain itself. The concept of “Orientalism” as presented by Edward Said is shown to be applicable to both Essos – the Eastern Other of Westeros – and Dorne, two regions where many tropes directed at southern Spain and northern Africa in classic European literature apply to the HBO adaptation to a greater extent than to Martin’s novels: tropes such as hypersexuality, deviousness, and magic. Carroll acknowledges that Martin creates in Dorne a society in which women have more agency than elsewhere in Westeros, but the televised adaptation results in “the characterization of these women ... [with] unfortunately stereotypical, hyper-sexualized portrayals that so often plague female characters of color” (173). On the continent of Essos, Daenerys Targaryen is shown to be presented as the Great White Hope of dark-skinned slaves; the Dothraki into whose society she is wedded are similarly stereotyped.

The extensive scholarship and highly detailed investigation of Martin’s narrative that Carroll marshals in this work are convincing, if perhaps somewhat overwhelming, in their very volume and specificity. Surely only someone with a fan’s passion and a highly retentive memory will be able to follow the argument through the book. Although Carroll generally footnotes any references to Martin’s text, in one instance, Carroll’s mention that Lysa admits to poisoning her husband Jon Arryn at Littlefinger’s instigation (97) so shocked me that I had to search online for some indication of where in the text this was stated; a specific reference would have been welcome. However, Martin’s thousands of pages of published text probably exceed the ability of even the most scrupulous exegete to document every detail.

The overall impression that the reader gets after having read the entire study is that Martin’s novels are misogynistic and filled with a toxic masculinity that has less to do with the “real” Middle Ages than with contemporary Western attitudes – specifically, Martin’s own; however, Carroll concludes her introduction with the statement: “While not without its flaws, the series [of novels] is an impressive, influential work of medievalist fantasy that has made a deep and lasting mark on the fantasy genre” (22). She cites instances, for example, of college courses based on either the novels, the HBO series, or both (186 n. 6, 7). In the closing pages of the study, Carroll notes that, because it is impossible to “get back to” the Middle Ages as they really were, “the sort of accuracy [Martin] strives for is impossible, but that does not mean that *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a failure. In reaching for realism, Martin has created compelling characters, complex plots and subplots, and a masterpiece of worldbuilding” (182). Carroll acknowledges that the novels are gripping and have created a large following, and her implication seems to be that, as the novels have so many negative representations of gender, class, and race, it is important for readers to be made aware of them. Perhaps the most important thrust of the study is to encourage subsequent writers and scholars to go in different, and improved, directions.

Biography: Don Riggs studied medieval French, Latin, and English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has published essays on medievalist works in *Fantasy and Science-Fiction Medievalisms from Asimov to A Game of Thrones* (ed. Helen Young) and *Game of Thrones vs. History: Written in Blood* (ed. Brian Pavlac).