



GAME OF TROPES: THE ORIENTALIST TRADITION IN THE WORKS OF G.R.R. MARTIN

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George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels (and their television adaption, *Game of Thrones*) have become arguably the most well known fantasy epic of the last decade. However, the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* conforms to many of the same Orientalist tropes that have dominated Western literature since the popularisation of the 'Arabian fantasy' in the 18th and 19th centuries and its subsequent perpetuation in film and television. Derivative imaginings of the real world Middle East are commonly reflected in non-Earthly fantasy worlds and Martin's work incorporates this standard vision of the Eastern Other. Owing to its popularity, the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series represents a significant reinforcement of Orientalist stereotypes and proves that fantasy locations have significant power to cement these ideas in the popular imagination. Moreover, the negative portrayal of the East in these works supports Said's argument that the Orient is an invention of the West, and that our depiction of the Other is a means of framing our own cultural superiority.

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Introduction: The history of the Eastern Other

The depiction of the Orient in Western popular culture has tended to follow certain well-worn paths ever since translations of the "Tales from the Thousand and One Nights" began to appear in Europe at the start of the 18th century.¹ Bolstered by other channels, such as visual art, these settings and characters then began to form the basis for popular interpretation of the Middle East (or 'Araby'). With continued growth of the publishing industry throughout the 19th century, the retelling of such Middle-Eastern tales, and others inspired by their imagery, meant that the genre became entrenched within Western literary tradition (Lowry 2012). The standard components of such 'Arabian fantasies' include "...deserts, oases, bazaars and slums, jewelled caravans and minaret topped edifices...The cast – beggars, houris, eunuchs, caliphs, viziers, adventurers, genies...magic carpets" (Clute and Grant 1997). This despite the European versions of the *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* being of doubtful provenance and of little cultural import in their supposed places of origin (Clute and Grant 1997). Like many of the *Tales* themselves, these visions of the Orient were therefore nothing more than a Western creation; a means of viewing a cultural and geographic "Other".

In his work *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) analyses this process and argues that the West's view of the Orient (including such fantasy as the *Tales*) was forged from a position of cultural strength and assumed superiority. From this assumption grew much of the Western interpretation of the East, including

¹ This collection of stories has been published under a number of similar titles, such as *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*," and so on. There is no definitive collection, version or title of these stories.

a mistrust and disdain for its inhabitants, as well as a romanticised vision of strange and exotic lands. In quoting the British Controller-General of Egypt, Earl Cromer, Said describes the "canon of Orientalist wisdom":

Orientalists or Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, 'devoid of energy and initiative', much given to 'fulsome flattery', intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals....Orientalists are inveterate liars, they are 'lethargic and suspicious,' and in everything oppose the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race (Said 1978: 38-39).

In addition to these images of the Easterner as 'fallen', irrational, hysterical and treacherous, Said noted the tradition of sexual fantasy that had developed in Western depictions of the East:

...harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys....The Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe...readers and writers could have it if they wished without necessarily going to the Orient (Said 1978: 190).

Through literature, art, politics and colonial rule, the West therefore perpetuated a series of stereotypes about the East. These in turn informed the next generation of artists, scholars, leaders and so on until a cultural and ideological hegemony of the Orient was established: "...the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it a reality and presence in and for the West" (Said 1978: 5).

Through the 20th century film and then television followed this path of presenting a standard set of Arabian fantasy tropes. Orientalist masterpieces such as *The Sheikh* (1921), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924, 1940), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and countless other examples have imparted a vision of the Middle East that incorporates themes such as desert settings, duplicitous inhabitants, sexual licentiousness and predation, mysticism, casual cruelty, slavery, violence and corruption (Shaheen 2003). Whether films are set in 'real' or fictive locations, these same stereotypes have remained largely unchanged for decades. Children's film and television present the same unquestioned memes of geography, appearance and behaviour. Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) is a noted example of this, but the Arabian fantasy is pervasive, appearing in whole series such as *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-70), *The Arabian Nights* (1969) and *Shazzan* (1967-69) or in episodic form in cartoons ostensibly unrelated to the geographic Middle East, such as *Bugs Bunny (Hare-Abian Nights)* (1959)), *Scooby Doo (Scooby-Doo! in Arabian Nights)* (1994) or *Josey and the Pussycats (Swap Plot Flop)* (1970)).

The presence of such Orientalism in Western cinema has attracted a great deal of scholarly analysis over the years. Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* (2003) is perhaps the most widely regarded benchmark study of these tropes and he finds that depictions of Arabs invariably draw upon a narrow set of demeaning stereotypes. Whilst some stereotypes may have been modernised over the decades, such as the terrorist replacing the nomadic warrior, the palette is essentially the same. Totman (2009) explored the link between the way that Hollywood depicted certain Middle Eastern states and concurrent trends in US foreign policy, with the finding that negative cinematic portrayals of these regions and their peoples reflected a synchronous lowering of American public opinion toward those same locations. Semmerling (2006), in line with Said's contention, concluded that the overwhelming presence of the "evil" and mythical Arab in American film warranted an examination of why the West needed to construct such stereotypes. As a source of threat or a place with which to contrast Western standards, the East is a popular target.

It is important to stress that in many of these representations in film and literature, the Middle East is not the main concern of the story. This geographic setting serves as nothing more than an exotic backdrop for Western characters to progress through or else permit their interaction with the clichéd inhabitants and tropes noted above. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, for example, the story is fundamentally an Americans versus Nazis thriller. The only significant Egyptian character is Sallah (played by a Welshman), who fits many of the stereotypes of the bumbling and physically cowardly Arab. The locations in Cairo and at

archaeological digs are nothing more than plot points and window dressing for the American and European characters, including the short scene where Indiana Jones guns down an Arab swordsman who is obviously too dim to assess the threat and falls victim to superior Western tactics and technology.

The result of these generations of Orientalist interpretation is that the Westerner has little trouble associating certain motifs with an imagined Middle East – albeit a likely conflation of Arabic, Ottoman, Persian and Moghul cultures and locations. It is not relevant how paranormal these Arabian fantasy ideas are, they will still be pinned to actual geography. For example, whilst everyone knows that magic carpets and genies do not exist, few would associate the idea of them with Central America or China. If one were to picture a harem or sexual 'stable', the setting would invariably be Ottoman or Arab, not Indonesian or Scandinavian. The common use of real locations (such as Cairo or Baghdad) as the setting of these fantastic stories assists in reinforcing this connection. Even the fictional land of Agrabah in Disney's *Aladdin* offers an unmistakably Middle Eastern backdrop to its tale, instantly familiar to an audience steeped in such tropes. As Said argued, these stereotypes, and the attitudes stemming from them, begin to form an intrinsic basis for our representation of the East, one built upon centuries of European colonialism and the innate belief in the superiority of Western culture over Oriental backwardness (Said 1978).

But what about when a fantasy is *explicitly not* set in our own world? A story that occurs on another planet or a completely invented geography? Can there be a clichéd and disparaging representation of the Middle East in an imagined world where there has been no history of Western colonialism or centuries of assumed cultural superiority?

Examining the genre of fantasy fiction shows that this is indeed overwhelmingly the case.² Moreover, even the most creative fantasy authors tend to reach for the same set of established Orientalist tropes in their invented worlds, offering their audience familiar replicas of the Earthly clichés. Just as Shaheen and others have described these tropes in films purportedly representing the 'real' Middle East and its inhabitants, the fantasy genre uses analogous settings to communicate the same assumptions of geography, ethnicity and behaviour. Deserts, oases, nomadic warriors, shifty merchants in teeming bazaars, harems, cruel caliphs and swarthy slave traders: all of these are recurrently evident. In most cases in these imagined worlds, these Orientalised lands are distant from 'civilisation' and inhabited by a cultural Other that contrasts with the identity of the central protagonists. These Others are adept at theft and prone to betrayal, immorality and sadism. It takes little imagination to place this trend in congruence with Western thoughts regarding the (real world) Middle East.

The result is that Western audiences are receiving these same Orientalist stereotypes through channels that are not always obvious. One could avoid watching films or reading novels set in Egypt or Iran, yet still be exposed to all the same cultural discourse just from reading fantasy novels, which are ostensibly free from real world settings. That is to say, even when one thinks they are looking *beyond* the fences of the real world they are still using the same foundations to stand upon. No matter how un-earthly a fantasy world is, the genre does not transcend our received cultural assumptions (Balfe 2004).

Literature on the Literature: Oriental geographies in the fantasy genre

The use of the geographic east in a fantasy universe to house amalgams of real world oriental cultures as well as a foreboding 'Other' is commonplace. In the 1930s, Robert E. Howard's *Conan* stories employed quite direct Orientalist tropes to depict the eastern realms of the "Hyborian Age", which was an imagined pre-Atlantean period of our own planet. For the nobly savage Conan, who hails from the uncomplicated north-west of the world, the eastern lands are sinks of duplicity, evil, snake worship and perverse necromancy. A decade after the *Conan* stories first appeared, Tolkien's Middle Earth used a similar east-west divide to distinguish the moral from the immoral. The ultimate source of evil, Sauron, has his

²The Fantasy genre can be defined as texts that are either set in (impossible) other worlds or else set in our own world, yet incorporate elements of the impossible; for example, magic (Clute & Grant 1997:338).

domain in the East. More significantly though, and in comparison to the more noble Western humans, large contingents of men collectively and unambiguously known as "Easterlings" form a significant part of Sauron's host arrayed against the "Free Peoples". In Middle Earth, the further east one travels, the more corrupt, evil and threatening the world becomes both in terms of human and physical geography.

Countless fantasy worlds have since followed this geographic stereotyping. Their central setting involves a society similar to medieval Europe, and Anglo-Celtic Europe at that. This region may even be metonymically denoted as to its occidental cultural geography (e.g. "The Westlands" of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series or "The Western Realm" of Raymond E. Feist's *Riftwar* books). To the east and south of this location lie other lands that are invariably infused with Orientalist tropes and tend to be the source of some sort of threat, or at least identified as regions of immorality, cruelty and inhumanity. Slavery, sexual servitude, assassination, espionage, black magic, nomadic warriors and barbaric punishments tend to be part of these cultures. In contrast to the cold and snowy western lands full of muscular warriors, the eastern territories are hot and arid, the home to physically smaller, sly and indolent ethnicities.

The physical geography of these fantasy settings tends to fit a standard pattern with resemblance to our own world. The eastern lands are cut off from the western settings by seas, vast deserts, steppes, mountains or cataclysmic wastelands. Examining seminal fantasy works by Robert E. Howard, J.R.R. Tolkien, Stephen Donaldson, Robert Jordan, David Eddings and Raymond E. Feist, DiTomasso (2006) found that all six authors used steppes and/or deserts to denote the geographic east. With the exception of Jordan, the authors bolstered this geography with deserts and scrublands to the south as well, in an analogy of North Africa's location relative to Europe. A notable example of this African parallel is the Midkemian world of Feist, who uses the south as the location of his Egyptian/Persian amalgam "The Empire of Great Kesh" (Feist 1989).³

Even within the Euro-western lands of these universes there can be gradations of prestige based on the compass. The further west, and often the further north a character hails from (i.e. paralleling the Anglo-Celtic zones of our own world), the more honourable, heroic, straightforward and down-to-earth they tend to be depicted. Martin's Starks of Winterfell fit this trope, as does Howard's Conan the Cimmerian and the conDoins of Crydee from Feist's works. Aragorn, the paragon of nobility in Tolkien's works, was a "Dúnedain" ('Man of the West'), a group from kingly stock living a frontier existence in the north-west of Middle Earth.

The governance and social development of these imagined geographies also tend to fit a pattern. Again looking across his representative authors, DiTomasso found a congruence with the depiction of the eastern (or south-eastern) lands as 'despotic'; the location of sprawling kingdoms or empires ruled by whimsical sadists. "These eastern states represent the great bogeyman of Western civilization since the Persians, a role that has been subsequently filled, depending on the perspective consulted, by the Parthians, Huns, Arab Muslims, Mongols, Turks, Russians, or Chinese" (DiTomasso 2006: 114).

This similarity amongst leading authors in the fantasy genre indicates a latent re-telling of the Arabian fantasy that is so pervasive in Western imagining of the Orient. The stereotypes cross the bridges between the real and the imagined, presenting consumers of fantasy with an unchallenged monolith of Orientalist assumption.

³ Feist also includes an Indian and a Japanese analogical setting for his *Riftwar* books, though the former is distanced from the main world of Midkemia by a vast ocean and the latter exists on another planet accessible only by a magic rift.

A familiar song

The lands of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASoIaF) series and its TV adaptation, *Game of Thrones* (GoT), fit these same patterns.⁴ In both the literary version and the TV series a range of Orientalist clichés are presented, which despite the breadth and scale of Martin's story, offer few points of difference in their depiction of the Eastern Other. In its physical and human geography, ASoIaF is the heir to decades of the Arabian fantasy formula, from slave girls to pyramids.

Singling out ASoIaF for study may seem unjust given that the saga is no more culpable of stereotypical Orientalism than any of its genre peers. However, given its sheer popularity and crossover into a successful TV franchise, it is appropriate to use ASoIaF as a case study, if only because its latent Orientalism is currently reaching far more people than that of other fantasy authors, such as Feist or Jordan.⁵ The popularity and endurance of the GoT TV series across five series (with more to come) is demonstrated in its viewing figures. Host network HBO declared the fourth season of GoT as its most watched programming ever, with an average 18.6 million people watching each episode in the United States. Similarly high ratings were evident in other English-speaking territories where the broadcast was readily and cheaply available. Add to this that the show is regularly described as the 'most pirated' in the world, constantly breaking illegal download records (R. Williams 2014) and the sheer extent of the viewership is stark. The success of the TV series has in turn reinforced the readership of the books, with the works figuring in the Top 30 of Amazon's best seller list every year from 2011-2014. Significantly, this indicates that ASoIaF has successfully crossed over to mainstream popular culture, becoming a "gateway drug" to the fantasy genre for people not normally consumers of such work (J. Williams 2012).

The successful TV adaptation of the works also means that the inherent elements of Orientalism are reinforced through visual channels, further highlighting the differences between West and East. Costumes, mannerisms, skin complexions, landscapes and architecture are all used to convey the Oriental theme. Filming locations in Morocco and Malta assist in this regard. Placing the eastern plot arcs in an Arabian fantasy setting therefore takes less imagination on the part of the viewer.⁶

Moreover, as with so many representations of the real world Orient in film and literature, the eastern lands of ASoIaF serve as little more than a stage set for plot lines and characters from further west. The continent of Essos is merely the *mise-en-scène* for progressing the story of Daenerys Targaryen and a

⁴ Given that the books and the TV adaption are known by different names, for the purposes of this paper ASoIaF will be used when referring to material found within the books only and GoT used in reference to material unique to the television series. However, given the strong involvement of G.R.R. Martin in the production and writing of GoT, the two different forms of the story can often be treated collectively and canonically.

⁵ In the 21st century it could be argued that film has been eclipsed as a medium for transmitting cultural stereotypes. The amount of time that consumers devote to films is dwarfed by the time they spend viewing television, playing video games or being online. Whilst indeed some of this TV and online time may involve watching films, the duration of a TV series or video game means much greater passive exposure to its content than occurs from viewing a film. For example, the single player mode in a video game such as *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* can involve 60-80 hours of gameplay at a minimum. The tendency to spin video games off from film franchises (and vice versa) can also mean that fans will spend much more time absorbing the messages/images of the movie via the game than through the original film. Meanwhile, serialised TV franchises such as *Game of Thrones* or *Breaking Bad* contain dozens of hours of content. Finally, with films, games and TV shows there is often an incalculable volume of online content generated by fans or commercial third parties, further immersing consumers in the product and its messages.

⁶ The visual similarities between scenes in GoT and European Orientalist painting are striking. The scenes of Daenerys being bathed by her servant Missandei are strikingly similar to Jean-Leon Gerome's painting *The Bath* and other harem fantasy paintings. The Unsullied in GoT appear very similar to the subject of *The Palace Guard* by Ludwig Deutsch. Exchange the dragons for felines and the reception court of Daenerys and her dragons is reminiscent of Rudolph Ernst's *Salomé and the Tigers* or other artists' depictions of the Queen of Sheba.

slew of other Western characters whose storylines intersect with hers. Indeed, much of Daenerys' heroism stems from her attempting to erase the cruelty and despotism of the eastern cultures. As a young, blonde, pale skinned woman with (somewhat inexplicable) progressive liberal values, she contrasts dramatically and heroically with the darker and older eastern males she conflicts with.

For these reasons of scale, popularity and orthodoxy, it is appropriate to scrutinise the ASoIaF books and the GoT series as a vehicle for fantasy Orientalism. Elements of landscape, culture and behaviour will be explored below to demonstrate the contention that even within these fantasy tales the same perspectives on the Eastern Other noted by Said, Shaheen and others are perpetuated. When we admit ASoIaF through the gates of our imagination, the Trojan Horse of Orientalism rumbles in too.

Landscape

From the start, the continental geography of ASoIaF establishes a division between the Occident and Orient. The two main land masses in the saga are Westeros and Essos, the names leaving little doubt in the reader's mind as to their real-world parallels. The northern latitudes of Westeros align geographically and culturally with the Anglo-Celtic or Scandinavian regions of Earth. Travelling south from these frontier lands, the central belt of the landmass seems more akin to continental Europe, with some attendant rise in treacherous behaviour and fiscal greed. In the south of Westeros, isolated by the proverbial mountains and the continent's only desert, lie the lands of Dorne. The location and depiction of Dorne accords with DiTomasso's (2006) observations of physical and cultural geography in fantasy. This region is a classic Orientalist trope, which Martin describes as having been influenced by Moorish Spain and Palestine (Martin 2000a). It's inhabitants are generally darker of skin than the other Westerosi (Martin 2000b: 520), as well as having a reputation for hot-bloodedness, treachery and promiscuity (including differing sexual orientations, something more scandalous in the north). They are garbed in all the Orientalist clichés of Moorish costume "silk and satin robes with jeweled belts and flowing sleeves. Their armor was heavily enameled and inlaid with burnished copper, shining silver and soft red gold" (Martin 2000b: 520). Their royal family lives in palaces inspired by Granadan architecture, replete with fountains, marbled pools and citrus groves (Martin 2005: 42-51).

Whilst Dorne is an example of Orientalist stereotyping in fantasy, it is the continent of Essos that offers the true platform for this practice in ASoIaF. Again in accordance with DiTomasso's findings, the major depiction of Oriental amalgam cultures occur in the geographic east, across a sea and in a Eurasian sized landscape of steppe and desert. The people of Essos are diverse, but tick off the range of Arabian fantasy stereotypes, from nomadic Mongol warriors, through Ottoman slavers to cunning Levantine merchants. It takes little effort to place these representations within the canon of Orientalist tropes. In GoT these stock characters and their backgrounds are reinforced by their visual appearance, with little difference from the portrayals noted by Shaheen and others in films of decades past. Even the names of the Easterners become steadily more bizarre with distance, shifting from the European analogues of Westeros (Robert, Jon, Catelyn) to more alien concoctions replete with Z's, Q's, X's and harsh gutturals.

Starting at the western edge of Essos, where the two continents are closest, lie a series of "Free Cities", analogous to those Mediterranean trading and banking cultures such as Venice, Genoa or the Greeks. Like their European inspirations, the Free Cities of ASoIaF bridge the gap between the Orient and Occident, both in terms of trade and transport, but also culturally, representing an apparent halfway point in morality and foreignness. Whilst these Free Cities have some differences, the common motivation for their inhabitants seems to be financial gain. Dealing in exotic commodities and human traffic, the cities are also home to shady brokers such as Illyrio Mopatis, who shelters the exiled Targaryens and supports their claim to the Iron Throne in the expectation that he will be repaid with high office once they achieve it (Martin 2011: 74). The fickle mercenary pirate Salladhor Saan is another Free Cities character, loyal only to coin and practising trade, piracy, smuggling and warfare as interchangeable business plans.

East of the Free Cities lies the bulk of the continent, mostly covered in steppe but with arid lands to the south. Again concordant with DiTomasso's findings is the presence here of despotic leadership and the sprawling lands of nomad hordes.⁷ It is these eastern realms that we find many of the standard representations of Arabian fantasy and the depiction of a threatening and foreign Other. The cities that Daenerys Targaryen spends much of her time passing through and dealing with are painted in menacing tones. Practices such as slavery and cruelty are emphasised heavily, as well as the duplicitous and mercenary nature of the oligarchic rulers. Moreover, these cities are depicted as being in a terminal decline, long fallen from the past glories of their historic wealth and power; a potential echo of Europe's assumed cultural superiority over the ancient world. Located in what would be the 'Middle East' of Essos, the nature of these cultures warrant further elucidation since they are where the bulk of the Targaryen plotline occurs.

Slavery

The three metropolises of Slaver's Bay - Astapor, Meereen and Yunkai - serve as showcases of Orientalist barbarism in the universe of ASoIaF. It is through these desert cities that so many of the standard Orientalist tropes are presented to the audience, even down to pyramids and ziggurats. In addition, the efforts of the culturally Western Daenerys to expunge the cruelty and despotism of these cities position her as a heroic figure in the story.

The slaving practices emanating from these cities are depicted graphically within the books and TV series. Whilst there is obviously no flattering way to portray human slavery, the excesses described by Martin create a very Orientalist flavour, squarely in line with the sort of horrors imagined by Europeans when they read salacious reports of the Ottoman Empire or contemplated the works of Orientalist painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme. In the slave cities of ASoIaF conniving and greedy magnates mete out cruel and unusual punishments to their human chattels whilst living lives of amoral opulence. Decrepit and obese merchant princes are carried on giant palanquins borne by dozens of straining slaves (a depiction similar to that of King Xerxes in the film *300* (2007)) whilst others float on pleasure barges in the cool of the evening. In the standard Western harem fantasy, young women (and men) serve as sexual playthings, trained by specialists to provide maximum pleasure for their owners. The dehumanised 'Unsullied' are taken as boys and raised in a barracks (much like the Ottoman Janissaries), before being castrated, trained to absolute loyalty and then 'graduate' by murdering babies torn from their slave mothers (Martin 2000b: 318). Gladiatorial combat is the preferred spectator sport, but besides fighting, such spectacles also feature whimsically cruel spectacles such as animals eating children: "A bear and three small boys. One boy will be rolled in honey, one in blood and one in rotting fish, and she (*Daenerys*) may wager on which the bear will eat first" (Martin 2000b: 321).

Tellingly, the atrocities, economies and the scale of the slavery in these three cities are implausible. Sitting on the edge of desert lands and seemingly a great distance from any other population centres, it is puzzling how these city states seem to acquire, provide for and trade slaves that implicitly number in the tens or hundreds of thousands at any time. This apparently lucrative business is doubly puzzling given that much of the rest of the world (including all of Westeros) does not practice slavery, or in the case of many of the Free Cities, the involvement seems to be limited to *trading* slaves rather than as a significant end consumer of them.⁸ It is only in the free city of Volantis where any significant detail is given about

⁷ The romanticised nature and martial prowess of the Martin's nomadic Dothraki replicate the Western fascination with the Mongols; a mystique that Porter (2009) refers to as "Military Orientalism".

⁸ In Westeros, the only notable practice of slavery is in the Iron Islands, where captured thralls are used as labourers in fields and mines and captured females as concubines (Martin 2005: 620, Martin et al. 2015: 177). They may not be bought or sold, however, and their offspring are born free. So averse to slavery is Westeros, that Ser Jorah

use of slaves. In that city, mention is made that there are five slaves for every free citizen (Martin 2011: 73), a demographically perilous scenario and in stark comparison to a real world metropolis such as ancient Rome, where slaves are estimated at about a third of the total population. Moreover there seems to be no economic output mentioned for these slaves: some serve as soldiers, sex workers, servants, translators or labourers, but there is as yet no revealed equivalent of the plantation economies that were the underpinning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade or Roman agrarianism. Finally, the rate at which slaves seem to be executed or maimed by their owners is puzzling, given that they are a commercial commodity, and in some cases bred over generations for optimum characteristics. For a continental economy to be built on their exchange, they must be of value, so why destroy them?

This economic paradox is of course irrelevant to the role these slave cities serve in the story as showcases of Orientalist barbarism. The human bondage, sexual servitude, castration and cruelty are all reinforcing of the enduring Western identification of such practices with the Orient. The missionary role of Daenerys in defeating these cities, and their subsequent inability to transcend their entrenched culture, aligns well with Said's argument about implicit Western assumptions of superiority over the East. For Daenerys, dealing with the slave cities and their mulish inhabitants is a fantasy genre version of the "White Man's Burden".

Betrayal

Betrayal is a constant theme of the books, and a great deal of treachery happens in both Westeros and Essos. However, in this Western setting the duplicity and atrocities are often depicted as somehow more clever, more pragmatic or even more merciful than what goes on in the east. The Machiavellian Tywin Lannister justifies his plot (a word he "mislikes") of murdering unarmed rivals at a wedding feast by comparing it to the wasteful slaughter of warfare: "Explain to me why it is more noble to kill ten thousand men in battle than a dozen at dinner. The price was cheap by any measure" (Martin 2000b: 720). The spymaster Varys orchestrates any number of perfidies and assassinations, but excuses this as a necessity for a greater good "I serve the realm, and the realm needs peace" (Martin 1996: 636). The murder of the last Targaryen king by his sworn bodyguard Jaime Lannister is done to save the capital city's innocents from the mad monarch's intended Götterdämmerung (Martin 2000b: 507). In other cases, where treachery does occur, the perpetrators are often depicted as outcasts (such as the Freys), war criminals (The Brave Companions) or as unstable lunatics (King Joffrey). In these Western cases of perfidy there is thus some form of effort to justify the act, paint it as outside the norm, or provide for a strenuous objection from the more noble characters (as in the case of Eddard Stark defying King Robert over plans to assassinate Daenerys).

In contrast, the depiction of treachery in Essos is as something more culturally standard. The leaders of the slaving city of Yunkai are described as "steeped in corruption", for example (Martin et al. 2014: 14). The mercantilism or militarism of the cultures within the saga implies an 'at any costs' mentality in dealing with opponents. Betrayal and cheating are to be expected or even lauded. Good deeds and altruism are generally absent, and when they do occur are either presented as being performed only for some advantage on the part of the actor (Magister Illyrio) or else as part of a grander deception (such as Xaro Xhoan Daxos, whose backstabbing is even more pronounced in the TV series).

In Essos disloyalty is also standard practice in warfare. For centuries there has been a dependence on "sellsword" mercenary companies to fight campaigns on behalf of the various competing city states whose noble citizenry have little taste for throwing their lives away on battlefields (Martin 2000c; Martin et al. 2014). The fickle treachery of these companies is consistently described in the novels. A tendency to desert, to switch sides for better pay or even to fall out amongst themselves is noted, making warfare a small-scale and haphazard enterprise in Essos. The exception proves the rule: the Golden Company is

Mormont, counsellor to Daenerys Targaryen, is only in Essos because he has been exiled for selling convicted criminals to slavers.

famously loyal to its contractors, impeccably disciplined and notoriously expensive for these reasons (Martin 2005: 281). This singularity is perhaps made possible because the company largely consists of and is led by exiled Westerners or their descendants.⁹ Additionally, the Unsullied slave soldiers are the premier product of Astapor, commanding a high price specifically because of their unbreakable fidelity. In Essos, martial loyalty is thus shown to be a rare and costly commodity and one beyond the norm.

The manner in which Daenerys comes into possession of an Unsullied army is another contrast between the manner in which Westerners and Easterners are depicted in ASoIaF. Entering into a bargain she knows she will not need to keep, she turns the tables on the Good Masters of Astapor in what is essentially a murderous swindle. However, this deception is performed in the context of being for a greater and more noble good: the messianic liberation of the slaves and the righteous punishment of their masters. It is significant that immediately after utilising the robotic loyalty of the Unsullied to win the day, Daenerys offers them freedom, an offer which few accept, with most instead choosing to stay and serve her voluntarily. Daenerys is thus cleansed of the stain of utilising forcefully bonded soldiers, contrasting her morality with that of the Easterners.

Religious threat

The concept of West and East experiencing a "polemical confrontation" (Said 1978: 58) through religious difference, or else the use of faith to denote an 'Other' are standard tenets of Orientalist cultural discourse. In ASoIaF the presence of a proselytising religion creeping in from the East adds to the threatening sense of an Oriental Other. The dualistic and messianic faith of R'hollr, the Lord of Light, is spreading westwards from Essos, seeking converts at the juncture of the two continents. The religion is depicted as having an in to lérance to other faiths and involves human sacrifice, dark magic (necromancy and the summoning of supernatural creatures) and a certain amount of fanaticism on the part of its followers. Moreover it seems to have a degenerative effect upon its practitioners, subverting them to sinister mechanisms of power (in the case of King Stannis) or corrupt and draining forms of death magic (in the case of Thoros of Myr and Beric Dondarion).

It would be too great a leap to identify the worship of R'hollr with any current Earthly religion, though its tenets of light versus darkness do accord with the Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism that stemmed from the Persian Empire and its off-shoots. It is to be remarked upon that the warfare between the Sassanian practitioners of these faiths and the Byzantines is an early example of conflict between a 'western' Christian society with an eastern one of a different creed. In the centuries since that time, religious fervour and the drive to do battle with an 'Other' have played a significant role in Western relations with the Middle East.

In contrast, the dominant religion of the Seven Kingdoms, the Faith of the Seven, has little emphasis for much of the series. The Faith and its pantheon feature mainly as a backdrop to state functions or as something to cling to in times of trouble, particularly for female characters. It is only in *A Dance with Dragons* (Martin 2011) that a growing fanatical interpretation of the Faith of the Seven becomes important. Contrary to the depiction of R'hollr's followers however, there is as yet no indication that the reinvigorated Faith of the Seven has any link with corrupt and supernatural forces. If the new zealots of the Seven have faults, it is in their asceticism and 'letter of the law' approach to justice (Martin 2011: 603). However even this latter is motivated by a righteous desire to shield the weak from the strong. Whilst it is noted that the Faith of the Seven was itself originally an invasive religion from the east, largely supplanting the "Old Gods" of Westeros, it tends to be portrayed with less dread than R'hollr's worship.

Nevertheless, the contrast between East and West in ASoIaF is infused with an implicit cultural clash between a native and an invasive faith. The ambitions of King Stannis to sit the throne of the Seven

⁹ Indeed the Golden Company *do* break a contract in the course of the series, but this is so they can fulfil an older, more compelling dream of their exiled founder.

Kingdoms are underpinned by his conversion to R'hollr and the sinister practices of his spiritual adviser Melisandre. The messianic beliefs of the latter, along with the attendant burning of 'false' gods and their followers, offers an implied vision of 'holy war'. Again it is to be stated that labelling the worship of R'hollr with a direct parallel in the real world is not warranted. However, the use of conflicting faiths in ASoIaF follows established patterns of painting religious threat as stemming from the east.

Medieval or Baroque? The internal Orientalism of Martin's world

The view of the East that is displayed within the universe of ASoIaF is consistent with the growth of historical Orientalist thought in Europe. That is, the depictions of the East and its inhabitants reflect similar ideas to those expressed by Europeans of centuries past as they dealt with their neighbours to the east. The musings in the council chamber in King's Landing about political movements in the Free Cities and the threats posed to power and trade could plausibly mirror historic discussions held in the strongholds of Europe regarding the Ottomans. The significant anachronism however is that such consideration of the East in our own world would have been peaking much later than the medieval milieu posed by ASoIaF.

Breen (2014) however argues that the world of ASoIaF is not a medieval fantasy setting at all, instead describing it as an early modern or post-Colombian period analogous to the 16th and 17th centuries. His reasoning is that although the battlefield technologies of ASoIaF are medieval, the globalised scale of informational, cultural and economic development and exchange is far ahead of the Middle Ages:

A world where merchants trade exotic drugs and spices between continents, where professional standing armies can number in the tens or hundreds of thousands, where scholars study the stars via telescopes, and proto-corporations like the Iron Bank of Braavos and the Spicers of Qarth control global trade. It's also a world of slavery on a gigantic scale, and huge wars that disrupt daily life to an unprecedented degree. (Breen 2014)

Aiding this globalisation is a prevalence of transportation superior to medieval Europe. Like the Age of Discovery, travel in ASoIaF seems to be nothing like the impediment it was in the medieval world. Characters undertake land and open sea journeys of thousands of miles on a regular basis. In the opening novel the royal court travel to Winterfell, a distance of around 1,500 miles each way, so that King Robert can ask his old friend Ned Stark a favour. In the TV series, even a tavern prostitute from Winterfell sets off on that same journey to seek her fortune in the capital. Such a network of travel and trade in ASoIaF increases the contact and familiarity between East and West to a point that reflects Breen's more 'early modern' dating.

In addition to these logistical achievements, there is also the basis of an 'enlightenment' sharing of scholarship and scientific advancement in Westeros. The Citadel in Old town serves as an academy of research and training and its "maesters" are embedded throughout the realm, advising the nobility on matters of lore, medicine, science, economics and metallurgy. They also offer a primitive postal service via their ravens. The maesters demonstrate an advanced understanding of anatomy, surgery, chemistry and pharmacology, placing their development even further along the historical parallels with our world, perhaps even into the 18th and 19th centuries (Yglesias 2012). Significantly, the Order of Maesters appears to be a secular meritocracy (albeit male-only), distancing the pursuit of knowledge in Westeros from the religious or aristocratic spheres. This contrasts with the medieval European period, where scholarly pursuit was within the purview of the church, and even then tended to focus on matters of religious doctrine and history.

Comparing this state of development in ASoIaF with real world history shows parallels between the societies depicted in the novels and those modern European cultures that were the crucible of real-world Orientalist thought. After the failure of the crusading movement in the Holy Land, Western Europe's relationship with the Orient remained distant until around the 16th century. At this point, consciousness of the Orient began to accelerate, either through military and diplomatic contact with the Ottoman Empire or via the expanding trade and colonial networks of the European maritime nations. From this point on the Middle East was more tangible for the West; a real domain ascribed with a developing suite of images and characteristics - though not necessarily valid ones.

The world of ASoIaF seems at a similar stage in its cross-cultural consciousness. The events, peoples and nations of Essos are known to certain cognoscenti close to the Iron Throne, but this knowledge is acquired distantly through spies and hearsay. Individuals from the Free Cities are present in Westeros and trade links are well developed, so the eastern lands are substantial for those Westerosi proximate to certain cities and trade routes. However most citizens will never have personal experience of these foreigners, nor travel to their lands. In response, they rely on assumptions, stereotypes and the received wisdom of ancient fiction to fill in their narrative. In this respect the characters of Martin's work are much like ourselves.

Conclusion

As a one of the most popular fantasy series of recent years, ASoIaF (and GoT) represents a significant reinforcement of the same Orientalist stereotypes that have informed Western vision of the Middle East for centuries. Moreover, by utilising these same set of tropes the works demonstrate that fantasy locations have the power to cement these ideas in the popular imagination.

Within Martin's novels and their television adaptations, the Eastern cultures are generally presented in a negative manner, with aspects of slavery, treachery and cruelty being consistently emphasised. Whilst the western lands are also shown to be violent and home to perfidious individuals, these representations are often mitigated or counter-balanced. At the very least, the West is shown to be more 'grey' than the uniformly barbaric East. Despite Martin's laudable success in breaking many established patterns of story-telling (Walton 2014), in physical and human geography, the series has much in common with previous popular fantasy sagas; themselves based upon customary imaginings of the real world Orient.

The excesses of the East in ASoIaF and its use primarily as a backdrop for Western characters to be painted upon accords with previous scholarship on fictional portrayals of the real world Middle East. Additionally, by contrasting the liberal Western behaviour of Daenerys Targaryen against this setting, we are offered a strong example of Said's contention that our depiction of an Oriental Other is a means of framing our own cultural superiority: even in a world that does not exist. Just as a central concern of ASoIaF is family and bloodline, it is worth noting that the novels themselves are the scions of a long ancestry of Orientalist invention, within and without the boundaries of the fantasy genre.

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