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George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the Narrative Conventions of the Interlaced Romance

The aim of the argument to be unveiled in the following pages is to look at George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* in the context of the narrative conventions of the medieval romance.

The two principal medieval narrative structures which we shall trace in the context of *A Song of Ice and Fire* are interlacement and the diptych, or bipartite, division. We shall argue that by reference to a complex network of correspondences built by George R.R. Martin upon the foundations of these two narrative principles it is possible to develop a comprehensive understanding of some of the conceptual cornerstones and the principal meaning of Martin's text. It seems accordingly that whenever we encounter in the course of the narrative other literary conventions and genres (be it the medieval ones, like the tragedy or modern, like documentary realism) they will be found to be used in the context of these two dominant narrative techniques.[1]

Both interlacement and the diptych division have long been recognised as results of the specific character of medieval aesthetic principles and contemporaneous literary taste. This has been because both reflect the uniqueness of medieval literature as they diverge sharply from the literary tradition of Antiquity, blatantly

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[1] The relation of the romance to the "fairy-story" tradition is developed in Tolkien's discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*Monsters and Critics*) 72-108;

contradicting the principles of ancient Greek and Roman authorities. Likewise, both were emphatically rejected at the advent of the Renaissance and were never extensively used as principles defining narrative action between Thomas Malory and George R. R. Martin.[2]

Interlacement and the diptych structure were both developed out of the aesthetic cast of mind which challenged Aristotle's *Poetics* in some crucial points. First of all, it allowed for multiple plots of equivalent weight. Second, it discarded the concept of the plot being an ordered linear sequence of events connected by the strict and immediate necessity of their internal logic. Consequently, Aristotle's conceptual arrangement of beginning, middle and end is rendered invalid. Furthermore, medieval narrative philosophy of character creation would depart far from the Aristotelian model of appropriateness and proportion.[3]

Some of these differences have their roots in the distinct origins of medieval civilisation; some crucial aspects are here the consequence of the Christian outlook. In both the case of interlacement and diptych the essentially dynamic philosophy of narrative progress and dramatic culmination gives way to a tendency to view the literary work as a more statically arranged organic unity in which the interrelation of the constituent strands of the narrative is based on the idea of balance, not progression.[4] As the idea of an atemporal Divine Providence is the constant counterpoint to any medieval notion of the progression of human existence and consequently of a literary character's actions, both literary techniques help here to formulate and convey this essential existential dichotomy and consequently convey an accurate context for the ultimate conceptual message of a given text. In more contemporaneous terms, they are the means which help to account for the crucial balance between the *matière*, the received vehicle storyline, and the *sens,* or the underlying ideological context.[5] The diptych and interlacement here specifically constitute the principles according to which the *conjointure* – or linking of the

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[2] Based on Ryding 16-17; 24. For more on forms of continuation of the romance conventions in the Renaissance romance epic see Burrow 1-10;

[3] See Vinaver 68-98; Ryding 40.

[4] See Ryding 130.

[5] Compare Vinaver 23, 34-37, 51; Ryding 130.

events of particular *conte* so as to bring out this essential meaning – is brought about.

Of the two concepts the diptych predates the romance literature of the High Middle Ages with which interlacement is essentially associated. But it is the interlaced romance which both rose out of the philosophy of the diptych and in turn stimulated the growth in the sophisticated use of bipartite structures both within the romance and other genres, only partly, or sometimes not at all, connected to the general domain of heroic verse, such as the hagiographic tale or the dream allegory. As William W. Ryding puts it: "it appears to have been a standard structural device whose esthetic propriety was in some sense taken for granted" (116).

In fact, when approaching Old English literature, we find the bipartite structure to be the organising principle behind the narrative structure of *Beowulf* where the first part of the poem depicting the ascending hero overcoming the mighty ogre is designed to provide the juxtaposition to the doomed struggle of the aging king against the dragon.[6] The underlying conceptual outlook whereby two contrastive halves of a narrative contribute equally to the accumulative sense of grandeur without a catastrophic culminating point is here essentially the same as in Chriétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, where the more overly spiritual adventures of Perceval on his quest for the Holy Grail are juxtaposed with the latter part where Gawain undergoes a series of more worldly trials belonging to the realm of the *amour courtois*.[7]

If one now chooses to conduct both contrastive parts of a bipartite scheme simultaneously within a given work, one arrives at the simplest form of interlacement, which has proved to be the ideal form of conducting quest narratives so that they conform to the medieval conceptual framework which potentially places any human endeavour vis à vis the notion of Providence, not as much out of a conscious need for overt piety but more out of the innate mental habit of calculating the ultimate sense of any earthly activity with reference to

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[6] See Tolkien's classic analysis in *Monsters and Critics* 28-29.

[7] For more context see Vinaver's appraisal of the technique in Vinaver (42-45) against Loomis' earlier criticism (Loomis 59-66). Other important studies in this context are those of Dorfman 43-75 and Fisher 58-64.

such an obvious and self-evident circumstance as God's design for the life of every individual human being and mankind as a whole.[8]

When the interweaving of many individual strands of the narrative occurs within a given work a potentially very complex and intricate web of reciprocal relationships between particular events, characters or motifs may be created (like in the case of the French Vulgate Cycle's Arthurian romances). In such a case the principle of bipartite division may bifurcate throughout the work as binary oppositions give rise to multifarious forms of analogy which will multiply between various narrative lines as each one develops in order to contribute, by means of the standard medieval technique of *amplificatio,*[9] to the overall grandeur of the work's theme.

Consequently, instead of the Aristotelian principles of storytelling, the narrative is here structured around what Eugène Vinaver called "seemingly the impossible combination of *acentricity* and *cohesion*" which gives rise to the "excess of constructive subtlety" whereby "the impact of […] two parallel situations upon the reader's mind is such that the whole sequence of events acquires a new *kind* of coherence" (77). As William W. Ryding continues: " The structure of a narrative work may, within this view, be seen as depending on a pervasive system of correspondences between sets of episodes" (33) consisting in all forms of contrast as well as straightforward analogy.[10]

Proceeding on finally to the analysis of George R.R. Martin's text we shall first try to define its general outline. We shall begin with a brief discussion of the textual organisation of each successive volume and then proceed to determine those diptych structures which extend over the whole text providing the underlying backbone of the work's construction.

Let us thus begin with the question of the prologues. These were always an important showcase for the artistic competence of the *trouvere* and an important factor in establishing the right context for the experience of the literary piece by his audience.

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[8] Based on Ryding 138-151. In the context of George R. R. Martin see Sigrist 223-234.

[9] For definitions see Vinaver 74-75 and Ryding 62-69, 130.

[10] See also Vinaver 99-122.

There were two basic types of literary prologues available to the medieval author: the *prologus ante rem,* which facilitated initial orientation in the contents of the following text, and the *prologus praeter rem,* which relates to issues beyond the immediate subject of the work and provides a counterpoint context for the questions and ideas raised by the text it opens.[11]

It seems evident that the prologues which open the consecutive parts of *A Song of Ice and Fire* would be classified within the latter category. The prologues do not directly introduce the plots of the respective sections of the narrative but envelop it in a counterbalance context which effectually distances the audience from the key events of the plot and at the very same time provides a crucial clue to the interpretation of some important events within it. Their role consists in establishing a sort of – to transform Genette's terminology – extra-diagetic competence for the audience, giving it a form of prescience which provides the kind of generalised context that would have been automatically evoked in the romance by the constant background presence of Divine Providence.

Thus, to be more specific, when, at the opening of *A Game of Thrones,* we witness the sorry end of a Night's Watch patrol led by Ser Waymar Royce, we are not directly introduced to the main theme of the first volume of *A Song of Ice and Fire* on the level of the plot, but to a context which puts the audience at a distance from the dramatic tension building up in the process of the unveiling events.

On the most transparent level we are provided here with a perspective which counterbalances the events of the plot against the context of a different kind of threat looming over the unexpecting Westeros.

At the same time we are made to see the tragic end of a commander who stubbornly refuses to listen and the dissipation of those he leads. Thus when shortly thereafter we observe Eddar Stark executing the half-crazed Gared for deserting from the Watch we are given a context which reinforces those personality traits in the characterisation of the Lord of Winterfell which will in time determine his subsequent fate.

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[11] Based on Davenport 37.

Thus, as Lord Stark pursues the course of law and justice, his disinterest and inability to find out the reasons for the prisoner's desertion indicate the particular flaw of character which will in due course prove fatal. Consequently, when Lord Eddar dismisses Arya's report of the mysterious conversation to which she was inadvertently witness in the recesses of the Red Keep, as a product of a child's imagination, when he fails to take notice of Littlefinger's casual comment, uttered during the tournament in honour of the new Hand, that Tyrion Lannister never bets against his family (which constitutes a proof that he deliberately sought to mislead Catelyn Stark about the origin of the Valerian dagger), and, finally, when he fails to understand Cersei's intention behind the declaration "in the game of thrones you win or you die", we are each time reminded of the existential warning of the prologue, but also we see the tragedy of Eddar Stark not solely as a unique, individual story, but also as a natural consequence of the inescapable processes of life.

Furthermore, we may see the same pattern repeated in the fate of figures as potentially different as King Robert or Viserys, whose stories, for all the different context, are closely parallel as variants of the same tragic scenario. Hence the relation of the prologue to the main body of the text consists in the prologue providing a simple variant of the dominant pattern of the storyline – a kind of common denominator to be realised in different versions throughout the first volume. Furthermore, it indicates the defining importance of the genre of tragedy (in the medieval sense of the term) for this initial section of the story.

Consequently, the audience achieves a perspective equivalent to the sense of providential grandeur which is part of the medieval heritage of the genre of romance and the practice can also be compared to the various narrative strategies used to convey the epic anticipation in other forms of heroic literature.

When we take a look at the other prologues opening the successive volumes we may observe the same pattern of reference. Thus Maester Cressen's unsuccessful attempt at assassinating Melissandre is important in a number of ways. Most obviously, it again provides the audience with clues explaining future developments in the plot as it switches the narrative emphasis from tragedy to intrigue. Thus when we witness Ser Dontos presenting Sansa with a hair net

embossed with "black amethyst from Asshai" saying: "it's magic, […] It's justice you hold. It's vengeance for your father" (*A Clash of Kings,* 669), we rely on the knowledge of the prologue to identify the amethyst as poison, although we are bound here to the perspective of Sansa, who does not realise this fact.

Here the prologue introduces and connects some themes which go beyond *A Clash of Kings* and it again functions on many levels of reference at once. It is not only the common denominator which connects the attempted poisoning of Daenerys by the wine seller Vaes Dothrak with Tyrion's poisoning of Cersei during his tenure as King's Hand in King's Landing and the later poisoning of King Joffrey, but it also foreshadows the Red Wedding. Perhaps more importantly, the conflict between the red priestess and the aged maester serves as a narrative parallel to the relationship between Cercei and, first, Lord Eddar and subsequently Tyrion, but also between Daenerys and Ser Jorah Mormont. The pattern may be also applied in an inverted variant to the relationship between Joffrey and Sansa and also in some aspects to that of Catelyn and Robb, but perhaps most revealingly to the relationship between Brienne and Jaime.

We might thus see the prologue as introducing the pattern of a struggle of wills and wits, where the interplay of temperament, will power, and sometimes sexuality, originally framed within the context of gender, is gradually channeled into a more massive conflict of ethics which condition and define the protagonists' respective stances.

In *A Storm of Swords* we are made to follow the plot of some of the Night's Watch recruits against the commander Mormont only to see it thwarted at the last minute by the assault of the wights and the Others, and the ensuing carnage. The motif of a powerful twist of fortune bringing about a destruction of plans laid out for the future and the motif of betrayal may easily be connected not only to King Robb's marriage and the Red Wedding, but also to Arya's desperate wanderings, the scheming concerning Sansa's marriage, Daenerys' rejection of Mormont as well as her political dilemmas in Quarth and Astapor, Tyrion's trial and his revenge on his father, and, very emphatically, Jon's spell with the wildlings.

A Feast for Crows opens with an account of the murder of a Citadel acolyte called Pate by a Faceless Man in Old Town. While in this

case the full significance of the episode still remains unrevealed, it is evident that it is again designed to provide the crucial information which is beyond the grasp of a focalising character – we are informed here that the acolyte revealing himself to Sam Tarly as Pate at the closure of the volume is in fact someone who infiltrated the Citadel from the outside and would presumably be the Faceless Man himself.

Beyond the volume, we are supposed to link the episode to Arya's first assassination assignment during her training as apprentice to the Faceless Men in Braavos, which is also conducted by means of a poisoned coin. Here again the prologue helps to fully explain the significance of later events.

On the level of reinforcing an underlying motif it seems that the fourth prologue is designed to underscore the question of the loss of identity. This motif appears to gather in significance and momentum throughout the two last volumes providing the common ground not only for the story of Arya, but also of Theon, Tyrion, Sansa, Jaime, Cersei and Ser Jorah, as all of these characters experience upheavals of fortune which have the power to reshape the core of their identity (which is, of course, reflected even in the titles of the chapters which designate them as focalisers).

The account of the death of Varamyr the warg, which opens *A Dance with Dragons*, likewise functions on a number of levels. It evidently continues to highlight the question of forging individual identity, which, as we have already indicated, constitutes the key motif in the fifth volume of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Its parallel aim is equally crucial, for it provides an extradiagetic commentary on both the struggles of Daenerys to control the dragons and the pathetic failure of Quentyn Martell in that respect. Once again the audience is provided in advance with the answer to the question which the characters are unable to solve. Thus, while neither Daenerys nor Prince Quentyn are in any way knowledgeable about the nature of the relationship between the human being and the dragon which must have once been the basis for controlling the beasts by the Targaryen kings, the audience is supposed to use the prologue to make the mental link and be positioned, as it were, a step in advance of the characters it follows in the course of the narrative.