

# LEMBAS KATERN

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## Thomas Honegger's *Tweaking Things a Little* A Review Essay of Snails and Salt

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That G.R.R. Martin of *Game of Thrones* fame, or notoriety, has been called “the American Tolkien” (Foreword, xix), practically begs for a comparison between the two. This has been done, but as far as I know not yet in book form. But now we have *Tweaking Things a Little: Essays on the Epic Fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien & G.R.R. Martin*, by Thomas Honegger. In five parts, containing some texts published previously in books or journals, he highlights aspects of the worldbuilding approaches of the two authors, including the HBO series for Martin’s part, but without claiming to be exhaustive. As an additional bonus, the volume is richly illustrated. My favourite picture was the badger (325) illustrating Théoden’s unwillingness to be caught in a trap. Dutch readers may think back to the badgers caught for undermining railroads and banished to new locations – and sympathize, knowing the critters were lucky compared to Théoden, had he been caught.

Unfortunately, though, Honegger’s assumption that the author of *A Song of Ice and Fire* remained involved with the content of the HBO series *Game of Thrones* from start to finish, and that therefore the

entire series is also his work, is erroneous. In August 2022, the *New York Times* published an interview with Martin, in which he stated: “By Season 5 and 6, and certainly 7 and 8, I was pretty much out of the loop.” In other words, the ending we see in the series is not his.<sup>1</sup> This interview was published eleven months before *Tweaking Things a Little* appeared, most likely too late for Honegger to make major changes to his book. Still, it ought to have been possible to add a few paragraphs acknowledging Martin’s statement and pointing out that the current ending is just the way showrunners Benioff and Weiss rounded off the series, based on snippets of information from the author. As early as 2019, Martin described the conclusion of *Game of Thrones* as “an ending”, implying it was not his.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. WORLDBUILDING, ICEBERGS, DEPTH AND ENCHANTMENT

After a foreword by Caroline Larrington, author of a study about Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASoIaF),<sup>3</sup> we get to Part 1, ‘Worldbuilding, Icebergs, Depth and Enchantment’. The first three are interconnected. After a brief introduction of worldbuilding in general,

1) <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/10/arts/television/house-of-the-dragon-hbo-got.html>.

2) <https://ew.com/tv/2019/05/21/george-r-r-martin-game-of-thrones-finale-books>

3) Caroline Larrington. *Winter is Coming: The medieval world of Game of Thrones*. I.B. Tauris, 2016.

the so-called iceberg-model, based on a statement by Ernest Hemingway, is introduced. This refers to how a story as we have it, can and often will be merely the tip of the iceberg, whereas the much larger, submerged part serves to lend the world in which it is set, depth and credibility. In a story like *Beowulf* – Tolkien’s great example – we see how the unknown poet links the deeds of the hero “to the universe of the (mostly) lost Germanic myths and legends” (8) Fragments or brief mentions, like the ‘Finn and Hengest’ episode or the reference to the dragon-slaying Sigemund the Wælsing, are presented in a way suggesting a vast, underlying tradition filled with other chunks of (hi)story. Honegger points out that it takes a skilled cook to turn all this into a palatable soup: too many ingredients would spoil it. The *Beowulf* poet was skilled.

So was Tolkien. His *LotR* rests on the vast bulk of First Age matter later published in *The Silmarillion* and other Tolkien texts. Tantalising references to this pop up occasionally, like the song of Beren and Lúthien, Elrond’s reference to the War of Wrath, and Treebeards musings about the elder days, etc. But along with this world-internal stuff, Tolkien has also added a third level to the iceberg consisting of allusions and references to primary world stories like Grimm’s *Rapunzel* and the Welsh story of Culhwch and Olwen in the tale of *Beren and Lúthien* – and even to history: Aragorn as a parallel to Charlemagne. All these elements connect Tolkien’s secondary world to our primary one. Honegger skilfully shows how world-internal and world-external material have met and fused in the *Legendarium*.

Most of the attention in this part goes to Martin. In an interview he characterised his efforts as a fantasist as “a magician’s trick”: heaping ice on a raft to suggest an iceberg below (23). Later, an underwater part was added by underpinning *ASoIaF* with background stories information: the ‘Grimarillion’, consisting of the Dunk & Egg novellas, *The World of Ice and Fire* and the first *House of the Dragon* material. But Honegger believes this view of Martin’s world-building is too simplistic: there was ice beneath the raft from the beginning: allusions to other fantasy, notably Tolkien’s; fantasy *topoi* – at times subverted – history, and historical fiction (like Druon’s *Rois Maudits* series)<sup>4</sup>.

One of the highlights of the volume is a lengthy, original, and insightful analysis of two songs and a poem in *ASoIaF*: ‘The Rains of Castamere’, ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’, resp. ‘The Doom of Valyria’. Honegger shows how they both support the worldbuilding and provide a running accompaniment of, and comment on, the unfolding narrative as well. ‘The Doom of Valyria’ is Martin’s version of the *translatio imperii*, analogous to the one from Troy to Imperial Rome to the Holy Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages this was placed within “a larger framework of eschatological biblical and Christian history” (55), the departing point being Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the giant with the feet of clay (Book of Daniel). Honegger remarks that unlike the primary world example, the conquest by the Targaryens lacks such an ideological-mythical core and a deeper motivation. But this is not entirely true. Martin’s Nebuchadnezzar, Daenys the Dreamer, Aegon the Conqueror’s aunt, had a prophetic dream about the Doom of Valyria. This enabled the Targaryen family to escape with their dragons, which ultimately resulted in the hostile takeover of Westeros. Daenys had other visionary dreams, but almost nothing of their description survived. Still, all this suggests the existence of a mythological core and a motivation beyond sheer dragon power. Maybe the book containing Daenys’s dreams is/was meant to show up in *ASoIaF*, but this is conjecture.

The next section tackles Martin’s and Tolkien’s versions of the Atlantis myth – Valyria versus Númenor. The hybris of the original is echoed by both authors, but Martin is shown to depend more on Tolkien than on Plato’s story; throughout his work, he consistently reaches back to the postclassical tradition. Oddly enough, Tolkien’s *translatio imperii* after the Fall of Númenor is not mentioned in this context. Yet it is not only Aragorn who restores the Holy Roman Empire in the *Legendarium*: Elendil is the ‘Trojan’ survivor who founds the Roman Empire – though it splits up much sooner than the primary world version.<sup>5</sup>

The last section, ‘Songs of Enchantment’, takes a look at the technique Tolkien uses to enchant, illustrated by the Hall of Fire scene in Rivendell, and the way Martin subverts traditional enchantment techniques in the banquet scene at the Hand’s tour-

4) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Accursed\\_Kings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Accursed_Kings).

5) Thanks to Pamina Fernández Camacho for this idea.

ney in *ASoIaF*, Vol. 1, where Sansa succumbs to the glamour (= “enchantment enslaved”, to quote Patric Curry (74)) of the banquet, which the reader know is false. It is more realistically medieval in character than Tolkien’s scene: chivalrous ideals clash with the raw violence of the tourney itself. For a genuine enchantment, we have Danaerys submerging herself in the Dothraki sea, a water image like Tolkien’s “Frodo felt that an endless river of swelling gold and silver was flowing over him” (79). Well spotted.

## 2. NAMES, ONOMASTICS AND ONOMATURGY

Part 2 is about ‘Names, Onomastics and Onomaturgy’. The first term speaks for itself, and heads sections about connotations and associations of names, and about requirements that names must meet to suit specific cultures, the most important of which is the avoidance of unwanted cultural and personal associations. Honegger argues convincingly that *Delle Doanne*, though it does not violate Old English language rules, does not work as an Old English name because it goes against the naming customs of the Anglo Saxons and sounds Italian. Despite a near miss like *Bingo*, later changed to Frodo, Tolkien usually avoids unwanted associations (with *UT*’s *Teleporno* as a notorious exception, I may add). Martin’s *Davos* may not be the luckiest choice for Swiss living in or near the town of that name,<sup>6</sup> yet it is a successful rebranding of an existing name.

After a discussion of appropriate styles and the concept of the ‘original language’ in which names represent the true nature of the things named, we get to the onomastics, the study of the history of proper names and naming habits, and from there to what is most important for names in fantasy literature: onomaturgy. This is the study of the aesthetics of names and their evocative and associative function,<sup>7</sup> or more briefly, “enchantment working on the level of names” (109). Using examples from various fantasy authors who adapt and employ existing names and terms from the primary world, Honegger shows how this works, and why it sometimes doesn’t work. Rowling’s Remus Lupin is discussed as a prime example of a name that needs decoding

by the reader to attain its full effect, with greater satisfaction for the reader as a reward.

The inspirational name that set off Tolkien’s *Legendarium* was Éarendel, the star from Germanic legend, allegorised by Anglo Saxons as the brightest of angels. As *Eärendil*, Tolkien made him the “lyric core” for his *Legendarium* (114) by turning the allegory “into historical-mythical truth” and giving him an agency of his own (118). This allows for the same kind of typological interpretation that is used for the Bible, one approaching Tolkien’s own concept of applicability (good call). The conclusion is that the story of Eärendil “started out as history and became part of the *legendarium* only to partake once more in history via the typological relationship of the Gospel”. But while his analysis of Tolkien’s Eärendil story in itself qualifies as stellar, I wonder why fifteen pages’ worth of decoding ending in the Gospel are necessary to achieve the enchantment of successful onomaturgy. Once the reader becomes aware that “Éarendel brightest of angels sent to Men over Middle-earth” is the opening line of an Old-English poem titled ‘Christ’, he has reached the Gospel via a short cut. In other words: was this still about onomaturgy, or more about how a name can inspire someone to create an entire mythology? Personally, I’d have preferred some more examples of effective Tolkienian onomaturgy<sup>8</sup> and the euphonical component in them.

Martin, in his turn, did not begin with a name, but (just like C.S. Lewis in the *Narnia* books) with a mental picture: the direwolf and the stag, symbols for House Stark and House Baratheon, that killed one another in a fight, with only the pups of the direwolf surviving. This prefigures “the political and dynastic conflicts that rumble on in the underground until they erupt and lead to the deaths of King Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark” (129). There is no full allegory here,<sup>9</sup> rather another form of applicability, but the example can serve to illustrate the difference between Tolkien’s logocentric and Martin’s imagocentric worlds. Once again, we get the iceberg versus the raft with the ice. But

6) Honegger may be underestimating the fame of said town. It took me a while to get rid of associations with skiing and the World Economic Forum.

7) As defined in Honegger & Turner, ‘Get your names right: Onomastics, Onomaturgy and Literary World-Building’. 2017: *Fastitocalon 7, Subcreation: Worldbuilding in the Fantastic*, 91-107, p. 92.

8) Maybe from the Honegger & Turner article in note 7. Or a brief mention of some examples discussed by Shippey in *The Road to Middle-earth*.

9) One of the arguments here is that Eddard Stark “is not a female like the direwolf” (129), which in itself is true. But there is a female Stark who has died giving birth to a pup that plays a crucial role in *ASoIaF*: Lyanna Stark.

Honegger leaves it at this, which suggests that either Martin doesn't engage in onomatopoeia at all (I think Stark versus Lannister, intended to evoke York versus Lancaster in the Wars of the Roses, as mentioned in Part 1, would belong here), or that his onomatopoeia is hardly worth discussing in light of Tolkien's achievements in that field.

### 3. LANGUAGES

'Languages' is the title of the third part. It's a short one that only discusses a few aspects of the subject (about Tolkien and languages, volumes could be written). Honegger applies the iceberg model from Part 1 to Tolkien's Elvish languages, which developed "apace with the expansion of the narrative universe of Tolkien's mythology". (137). After an excursion to the Indo-European language family, which provided a model for Tolkien's construction of the interrelated Elvish languages, the focus shifts to the role the Germanic branch plays in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Most fascinating for a translator like me was the section about the translation of Rohirric. As this language relates to the Common Speech as Anglo Saxon (or to be precise, Old Mercian) relates to modern English, should it be rendered into older stages of the target languages of the *LotR* translations, if possible? For instance, Old High German for German, or Vulgar Latin for French? If I recall correctly, at the Birmingham conference of the Tolkien Society in 2005 a paper was read in which Old Norse was suggested for the Scandinavian languages. More recently this subject came up at a conference in Galicia, Spain; vulgar Latin was mentioned as an option for Spanish there (of course). But in the end Honegger rejects the idea. Tolkien's Rohirrim do not just speak Anglo Saxon, they are modelled on the Anglo Saxons of poetry, and Rohirric culture and character are closely tied up with them. This will not translate well, as it involves more than just words and phrases. There was a reason why Tolkien advised against translating their names.<sup>10</sup>

The remaining pages of this part are reserved for Martin. For his Known World he created less than a few dozen foreign words, most of them Dothraki,

some Valyrian. For the TV-show a professional linguist, David J. Peterson, worked out these languages so they could be used in a convincing manner in scenes featuring Danaerys Targaryen. Fascinating detail: Peterson had not read *ASoIaF* beforehand (160).<sup>11</sup> Martin himself actually constructed a language *family*: High Valyrian with all its branches and dialects, spoken from Slaver's Bay to the Free Cities. Because of this, his world resembles Tolkien's a bit more closely than the average fantasy world – yet its languages remain storytelling and dramatization aids, not integral parts of the whole. Meanwhile, like Tolkien's, the languages of the Known World have their own devotees.

### 4. RIDERS, CHIVALRY AND KNIGHTHOOD

The fourth part of the Volume, about 'Riders, Chivalry and Knighthood' is the longest (127 p.) and the one most pervaded with references to the Middle Ages – Honegger's specialism. It is also the most Martin-centric of the volume. But Tolkien is discussed first, and Honegger uses several textual examples to show that Tolkien didn't like the high-medieval concept of chivalry, which is why he avoided the word in *LotR*, despite using 'knight(hood)' dozens of times. Said examples are *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's son* (anti pride and the pursuit of glory); *The Fall of Arthur* (anti adulterous love); the impulsive oaths of fealty by two rustic hobbits (avoiding Christian knightly rituals), and the Northern heroic spirit of the Riders of Rohan (illustrating the courage of despair absent from the concept of chivalry). He also believes, probably rightly so, that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the chaste English answer to the adulterous French version of the story, did not appeal to him as much as the older heroic poems did. Finally, his suggestion that Tolkien consciously chose the word 'rider', horseman, as a replacement for the later medieval 'knight' in the case of the Rohirrim, aware as he was of its connotation of servant, *knecht*, is a little confusing. After all, the Riders of Rohan served their King. Maybe 'rider' was meant to differentiate between the Rohirrim and the Gondoreans; earlier Honegger argued that the high-medieval term 'vambrace' (like chivalry of French origin) for a piece of Imrahil's armour, may have been used to that particular purpose.

<sup>10</sup>) He advised Max Schuchart to translate Dunharrow into its Dutch cognate Dunharg, but Dunharrow is the modern English form, like all the Rohirric names. This advice, which reflects Tolkien's earlier stance on the matter, is at odds with his instruction to leave Rohirric names alone. Honegger points out this inconsistency.

<sup>11</sup>) In this context, I can recommend Peterson's book *The Art of Language Invention: From Horse Lords to Dark Elves to Sand Worms, the Words Behind the World-Building*. Penguin, 2015.



Like Tolkien, Martin was not too keen on chivalry, though for different reasons. Many knights in *ASoIaF* do not have a chivalrous bone in their bodies, and having been knighted is no guarantee for moral behaviour. Skipping those specimens, Honegger concentrates on three other categories: 1) flawed knights; 2) ideal knights and 3) new knights. Among the flawed ones, Jaime Lannister is less evil than he seems at first, whereas Loras Tyrell is less wonderful. The chief focus in this category, however, is on Sandor Clegane, the Hound – who technically isn't a knight at all: Sandor has refused to be dubbed: his horribly abusive brother is a knight, which tells him the institute of knighthood is morally bankrupt. Honegger's very ingenious analysis of this character was published as 'The Dog, the Cynic and the Saint' in an anthology of essays on Martin's work.<sup>12</sup> This is another highlight of the volume, linking the Hound's nickname to the term cynic (and Sandor certainly is one!), which ultimately goes back to Greek *κύων* (dog), while his mask is being linked to the use of dogs in warfare, to medieval images of the cynocephali, the dog-headed people first mentioned by Pliny Sr., and finally to St. Christopher, sometimes depicted with a dog's head in Orthodox Christian imagery. The Hound is a textbook example of the sinner-to-saint trajectory prominent in medieval texts and still popular today.

The two 'ideal knights' Honegger discusses are Duncan the Tall and Barristan Selmy, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. The latter has a stain on his blazon, having switched to the Baratheon camp after the defeat of the Targaryens. But he is morally unable to serve the appalling King Joffrey and redeems himself by joining Danaerys Targaryen, willing to serve her in any capacity, even as a royal fool. He is contrasted with other knights who in similar situations made worse choices than he, and in addition he serves as an example of those who forswear personal fulfilment in service of the realm, comparable to the members of the Nightwatch and the maesters, also briefly discussed.

The other ideal knight, Duncan the Tall or Dunk, is the protagonist of three novellas set almost a century before the events of *ASoIaF*. His story is of the 'bottom-to-top' type. Starting out as an orphan

from Flea Bottom in King's Landing, he will end up as Commander of the Kingsguard. When he does what true chivalry demands: protecting the defenceless, he is lauded as "a knight who remembers his vows". Unfortunately, the irony of this escapes Honegger, who does not question Duncan's status as a knight. Yet despite his claims to the contrary, it is strongly implied he was not knighted at all. Martin officially confirmed this at Noreascon 2004.<sup>13</sup> The irony becomes tragic when Baelor 'Breakspear' Targaryen, a paragon of chivalry and Heir to the throne of Westeros, takes a leaf out of Dunk's book and comes to his aid in a trial by combat. To almost everyone's dismay Baelor is inadvertently slain by his younger brother. In fact, the ideal knight here is not Dunk, but Baelon Targaryen. Honegger sees the tragedy but overlooks the irony. As in the Clegane section, he rather pays attention to the frequency of unchivalrous behaviour among a class of fighters who haven't learned to be gentlemen (yet) in a world where "martial abilities constitute an indispensable part of chivalric identity" (245).

The category of the 'new knights' consists of Davos Seaworth and the first female knight of Westeros, Brienne of Tarth. Davos is an upstart, a smuggler knighted by Stannis Baratheon for having provided succour during a siege. He becomes Stannis's PM (= Hand of the King), then Jon Snow's, and ends up as King Bran's admiral-in-chief (=Master of Ships). Yet he always remains a no-nonsense type with an onion in his coat of arms and his finger joints (cut off for smuggling by Stannis) in a pouch hanging from his neck. He embraces his own moral greyness and only wants to do what's right and take care of his family. Honegger considers Davos Martin's contribution to an ancient dispute about 'gentillesse' (nobility), as described by Chaucer in an eponymous poem: no one is born noble and "every generation must prove its nobility anew" (278). Davos shows how ennoblement functions in Westeros. On the one hand, this is not wrong. On the other hand, Davos's knighthood seems mostly a trick used by Stannis to avoid stepping on the toes of his noble followers. He wants him as his second in command and knighting him is the best way to go about. Basically, Ser Davos remains a common sea captain with his heart in the right place, and knighthood is not all that important, not even to him.

12) Carolynne Larrington & Anna Czarnowus, eds. *Memory and Medievalism in George R.R. Martin and Game of Thrones*, Part III, 'Faith and Salvation'. Bloomsbury, 2022.

13) <https://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/1307>.

It definitely is to Brienne, a tall ungainly woman considered a freak of Nature. If she were a man, she would possess all the qualifications of a chivalrous knight. Though she briefly becomes a Kingsguard member for Renly, who, being gay, doesn't subject her to the typically male gaze, she has no chance to be formally knighted in misogynous Westeros. This makes her the poster girl for all female characters subject to misogyny. Honegger rightly points out that Martin, much more than Tolkien, uses many of his female characters – Danaerys, Sansa, Cersei, Catelyn, Arya, Asha (Yara) – but not Ygritte – to provide a mirror for contemporary problems concerning women's rights and desires. Or even those men who do not conform to the predominant machist ideals, like Sam Tarly (though calling Sam feminine strikes me as a bit odd). When she is threatened with gang rape, we get the classical 'taming of the shrew' motif. This gives medievalist Honegger a chance to bring up the violent subdual of Brunhild in the Nibelungenlied, a great example in my opinion. Unlike Brunhild, Brienne is saved – by Jaime of all people, robbed of his macho-status by the loss of his sword-hand. To which I'd add that the knighthood she eventually receives, in the show also from Jaime, is important, because it is important to *her*.

Though Honegger's analysis of these individual characters is for the most part good, his subdivisions look a tad random to me. The flawed knight Sandor is not a knight, the ideal knight Duncan is not a knight, the new knight Brienne is not a knight for most of the story, (assuming Martin will grant her knighthood in the end, like the showrunners did). Yet in the end they are better knights than many who were dubbed. It could be that they embody the superfluity of formal knighthood. Or Martin's love of real or fake knights with some sort of misfit or outsider status, to which handless Jaime, gay Loras, dead-and-often-resurrected Beric Dondarrion, spy and unlucky lover Jorah Mormon, and greyscale sufferer Connington (in the books) also belong. Ser Barristan would then be the exception that confirms the rule.

## 5. ETHICS

The fifth part, titled 'Ethics', is easily the most thought-provoking one. It covers a range of subjects: besides ethics, also politics, philosophy, and religious beliefs. It is in this final part that the comparison of Tolkien's work and world with Martin's was potentially the most interesting. However, as

mentioned at the beginning, the assumption that Martin remained involved with the HBO series until the end is incorrect, which has some repercussions for the conclusion of this part.

But not for the Tolkien part, of course. This establishes, first, that ethical rules in *LotR* often come in the shape of proverbs, either traditional or coined by Tolkien in such a way that one feels they should have been. Then, in a section called 'Parallel Lives' Denethor is compared unfavourably to Théoden. The former, despairing at what he sees as the inevitable loss of another son, looks into the Palantir to discover what fate awaits Gondor. Honegger takes the opportunity to make "a digression into matters of Time and foreknowledge of the future", aka Providence (309), using J.W. Dunne's observer theory – with which Tolkien was familiar – as brought up by Flieger in *A Question of Time* (1997): limited observers only see what is directly behind and in front of them, whereas only the 'ultimate observer' (God, if you like, though not necessarily) has the full overview. Denethor oversteps his bounds by imagining himself an ultimate observer, unaware Sauron has the mastery over the Palantir. Seeing the Corsair ships with their black sails, he fears all is lost and succumbs to madness. Théoden on the other hand, keeps the overview but does not try to elevate himself to the position of an ultimate observer. He takes whatever comes at him in stride, subordinating himself "to the greater wisdom of wyrd" (328), another word for Providence in a Tolkienian context. The application of Dunne's theory to this part of *LotR* is another of those gems we find strewn throughout the volume. Rephrasing ethics as the question "How shall I behave?" Honegger distils these insights into the answer: "Do not arrogate to yourself the position of the ultimate observer! Keep in mind that what you are able to comprehend and see is never the entire picture [and] remain humble and simply do the best you can to the best of your knowledge and ability" (333). This may sound a bit preachy and maybe not quite proverbial, but it strikes me as sound advice.

The quest for ethics in *A Song of Ice and Fire* turns out to be less successful. There's a "heterogenous mix of precepts and concepts that seem to contradict or negate each other" (335). There exists a handful of different faiths but no overarching principle or religion, and no deeper meaning – just different people reacting to others and/or events. Honegger lists seven

categories of them, which he admits may not be exhausting: Idealists, Power Players, Loyalists, Family People, Lost Souls, Good Guys and Wise Guys. This list is not convincing. And as the category of 'good guys', unlike the others, does not refer to character traits or natural inclinations, it does not fit in with the others, which Honegger indirectly admits.

Then follows a discussion of two characters in the Idealist category: the High Sparrow and Varys the Eunuch. Both are men, and so is Littlefinger, who is analysed along with Varys. To me, this choice was a bit disappointing. That men were dominantly present in the part on chivalry was inevitable, and the one woman in the group gets her share of attention. But women do not take a back seat in *ASoIaF* as a whole. By way of compensation, at least one of the people singled out for an in-depth analysis in this part could have been a woman.

The High Sparrow is a minor character and a religious zealot of the Savonarola type. That his religion provides a link with our world's Catholicism, which facilitates the analysis, seems the chief reason behind his choice. However, a discussion of the more important Melisandre, supported by a comparison with Thoros, her fellow priest of the "Manichaean" (337) religion of R'hllor, could have addressed the question whether ethics are only personal in Martin's world, or a little more, after all.

The choice of Varys as a focus for discussion, on the other hand, was an excellent one and has resulted in one of the strongest sections of Honegger's study. Risen from humble beginnings, the eunuch becomes a powerful player of the Machiavellian type in the game of thrones. If this sounds negative, we should remember that according to Macchiavelli the end only justifies the means if it serves the preservation of peace and stability in the realm, from which all benefit. Varys' negative foil is Petyr Baelish, aka Littlefinger; ends justify means for his personal benefit alone, while Varys does indeed serve the good of the realm and has peace for his objective. This is why he questions Ned Stark's mercy towards Cersei's and her children: it has enabled her to put her horrible son on the throne to the detriment of the realm, with war as a result. Martin once asked the question: "What constitutes good and what constitutes evil? What happens if our good intentions

produce evil?"<sup>14</sup> Honegger is right to consider Ned Stark Martin's answer to Tolkien, who has Gandalf praise the mercy that made Bilbo spare Gollum, allowing Providence to destroy the Ring via him.

In Martin's world there is no such thing as Providence, and Varys wants to keep the system in place no matter what, as the alternative is chaos (Littlefinger's favourite means of furthering his ends). At this point, Honegger introduces the medieval image of the Wheel of Fortune, which lifts people up and takes them back down. Man is the passive victim of this wheel, except when he manages to ride it like Varys does – for a while, that is. It is this same wheel that Danaerys wants to break, at least in the HBO show. But she fails, and the wheel (round like the Ring?) keeps turning. According to Honegger, here lies the fundamental difference between Tolkien and Martin. If there is a greater scheme of things, if there are metaphysical conflicts, for instance the fight against the Night King, it doesn't matter, as Martin's protagonists remain caught up in their existential struggles. The wheel stays intact. So, it does in *LotR*, but Tolkien offers a liberating outlook beyond the ending of his epic. A quote from the conclusion of the ethics discussion:

The Small Council taking charge of the fate of Westeros at the end of the HB) series consists of misfits, cripples and survivors, who are picking up the pieces and try to return to business as usual. The heroic-magical era in Westeros has ended with the departure of the last dragon carrying away Danaerys's body and thus removing the last prominent representative of messianic magic (...) Both Westeros at the end of the War of the Five Kings and Middle-earth at the end of the third Age are worlds diminished. Yet, while Tolkien, as a practising and believing Catholic, has inscribed his world into the larger story of salvation so that it can look forward to the Incarnation of Christ and the partial reversal of the effects of the Fall, *A Song of Ice and Fire* does not offer such consolation. Martin, as a lapsed Catholic, shares Tolkien's view of the fallen world, yet he does not believe any longer in the certainty of salvation (371-2).

Now Martin definitely does not point to Christian salvation, that much is true. The wheel references

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14) <https://newrepublic.com/article/112791/game-thrones-season-three-review-george-rr-martin-interview>.

hint at a cyclical idea of history. The existence of this in the Known World seems to be confirmed by Archmaester Rigney's Stoic-Nietzschean claims, quoted in *A Feast for Crows*, that "what has happened before, will perforce happen again"<sup>15</sup> – though we should not too readily assume his views are identical with the author's. But why does a discussion about ethics, the branch of knowledge dealing with moral principles of any kind, provenance and background, blend seamlessly into a specific statement about the Christian doctrine of Salvation at all? This is the province of primary world theology.

Strictly speaking, the incarnation of Christ and Salvation lie outside the Legendarium, which is set in an imaginary time on this Earth, according to Tolkien himself (*Letters*, 211). This problematizes the ontological status of 'Tolkien's world' and its prospects: can one look forward to predicted events in our world from an imaginary period in an imaginary past? Or is it the readers that can look forward to them? Projecting ideas onto a work for external reasons is usually considered a fallacy. Moreover, because of the negative wording regarding Martin, it looks as though his (read: the HBO-show's) ending is being judged on terms of Tolkien's Catholicism (which he intended to keep outside his secondary World), instead of on its own terms: it is perceived to lack something Tolkien's ending is said to have. This is like saying that Wagner did not compose a Requiem like Verdi's, or that Munch never painted a Café Terrace at Night à la Van Gogh, instead of mentioning what they did paint or compose.

The reason behind this last move may lie in Honegger's attempt to find a guiding ethical principle or deeper meaning in *A Song of Ice and Fire*/the TV-series. Because of this vain search he calls Martin's *Ice and Fire* universe "meaningless" and, quoting Macbeth, "a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (335-338). He adopts Lukas Schepp's dubious idea that Martin, like the existentialist French author Albert Camus, considers the world absurd (335). His qualification of the Targaryen magic as "messianic" (371)

suggests he may have looked for a spiritual principle in the story arc of Danaerys and her dragons. But the dragon fire controlled by the Targaryens<sup>16</sup> is shown to be a neutral instrument of power. It can bring deliverance, but it can also bring destruction, as both the books and the HBO series make clear. Ultimately, Danaerys is not a messianic character in the HBO-show, and I doubt Martin has such a role in mind for her in the remaining books. Meanwhile, it is odd that no attempt is made to make sense of the many references to messianic figures like Azor Ahai or the Prince that was Promised. Here, too, the idea that the HBO-ending had Martin's blessing seems to have interfered with the analysis.

However, Honegger was on to something when he brought up the struggle against the Night King. Its relevance is soon dismissed, though: "There may or may not exist a great scheme of things and the intrusion of the supernatural in the form of the dragons and the Others suggests a larger conflict on a metaphysical level." But this doesn't play out; "most protagonists remain caught up in and are limited to their very concrete existentialist struggles" (370-371). Here, the disastrous final HBO season and the assumption that it had Martin's blessing, interfere with the analysis. That the books are called *A Song of Ice and Fire* while the TV-series sticks to *Game of Thrones*, ought to give anyone pause. Daniel Stride, replying to a podcast about Tolkien versus Martin, was closer to the mark. Like many others commenting on the finale of the HBO-series, he knew why the showrunners should not have turned the struggle for the Iron Throne into the climax of the story:

Martin (...) makes the point that political squabbling is a waste of time when humanity is confronted by a genuinely existential threat. The *Game of Thrones* is an irrelevancy when ice-zombies are invading, and the real battle is defeating the Others, not in claiming the Iron Throne.<sup>17</sup>

This may not involve metaphysics in the sense Honegger had in mind,<sup>18</sup> but then, Martin was not

15) <https://awoiaf.westeros.org/index.php/Rigney>.

16) Danaerys' personal fire resistance is an invention of the showrunners. Martin has stated that her survival of the flames at the end of Book 1 was a one-time thing. See <https://www.businessinsider.com/game-of-thrones-daenerys-targaryen-not-immune-to-fire-2016-5?international=true&r=US&IR=T>.

17) <https://phuulishfellow.wordpress.com/2022/05/09/defending-george-r-r-martin-a-reply-to-reading-tolkien>. The blogger has more good points to make about Martin, and a few about Tolkien as well.

18) Carolyne Larrington, though, sees a connection between the threat of the White Walkers and the Apocalypse of Norse mythology, Ragnarök: Carolyne Larrington. *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2023, 283-4.



writing Tolkien's kind of fantasy.<sup>19</sup> And in a meaningless, absurd universe the threat posed by the Others wouldn't have a unifying function. Ironically, Honegger caught a whiff of what *ASoIaF* is working towards – but he didn't follow the scent.

Meanwhile – and what follows is my take on the subject – it is possible to say a few things regarding the ethics of *ASoIaF*. Martin's world contains various rivalling religions, plus characters adhering to (n)one of these, which makes the existence of one, overarching ethical system practically impossible. The Known World is diverse, not seemingly dualistic with an underlying assumption of monism and predicated on natural theology, like Arda (this is part of the iceberg in the by now familiar model). Reading *LotR*, we are basically invited to follow along with Tolkien's ethics; he shows us who's right: Frodo, not Sam in the case of giving Gollum the benefit of the doubt; Faramir, not Boromir, about ends and means. His world is essentialist.

Martin's is existentialist, if anything, and unlike *LotR*, his books are character driven. We are invited to follow an increasingly varied list of characters who bare their hearts and souls to us readers – Martin has been known to quote William Faulkner's dictum that "the only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself".<sup>20</sup> Then he gives us a look into the hearts of antagonists, or characters we took to be antagonists, and we find we can sympathise with them, maybe pity them. Others get ample opportunity to explain themselves, like Varys and the High Sparrow, we get an insight into their diverging priorities, and we can applaud or boo them, judging their deeds. Some characters have motives that are no better than their actions, and we feel vindicated in hating them. Yet right when we think they deserve what's coming to them, they may turn out to be redeemable after all. (And no, this is not moral relativism – it's showing Cicero's 'alteram partem').<sup>21</sup> It could be argued that

our ethical judgements are tested more thoroughly in *ASoIaF* than they are in *LotR*, where it's easy to see what to think of which characters.<sup>22</sup> Maybe the guiding ethical principle in *ASoIaF* is our own – with whatever ice there is below the surface.

Of course, authors are authoritarians, and we're being manipulated by Martin as much as by Tolkien. But maybe he has not quite thrown out Catholic ethics with Catholic doctrine. Showing us how we may have been too judgmental of certain people seems perfectly in accordance with Matthew 7:1-2. And there's another hint. Giving the crippled Bran Stark a saddle, he had especially made for him, Tyrion says: "I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples and bastards and broken things." (*A Game of Thrones*, Bran 4). That Tyrion himself falls into this category, could explain the tender spot. But given the sheer number of characters that in some way or other answer to his description, one might guess that Tyrion also speaks for Martin, with his consistent tendency to side with underdogs, or underdog aspects of characters who are not pitiable per se. Even Cersei scores sympathy points with her deep frustration as a woman in a strongly male-dominated society. Martin's ethics seem to favour the unfortunate and disempowered, say, some of the people blessed by Jesus in the Beatitudes. He is enough of a realist to know that some misfits are hopelessly bad eggs, yet his ethics still include souring the sensitive reader's satisfaction when the anticipated payback turns out to bring agonizing torture.

"The Small Council taking charge of the fate of Westeros at the end of the HBO series consists of *misfits, cripples and survivors*<sup>23</sup> who are picking up the shattered pieces and try to return to business as usual", wrote Honegger (see above). This may not be quite the ending Martin had in mind, but at least the show seems to have followed his lead in that "cripples, bastards and broken things" have survived the carnage and make a fresh start. The cripp-

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She also considers Tolkien's Dagor Dagorath (mentioned in *The Silmarillion* and described in several volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*) to be a combination of Ragnarök as told in the *Völuspá*, and the Biblical Apocalypse (ibid, 277). As Ragnarök considered to have been influenced by Christianity (see <https://www.worldhistory.org/Ragnarok/>) this would indirectly close part of the gap between Tolkien and Martin.

19) Martin on his part also missed that point when he asked after Aragorn's tax policy as a king. See: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-242487>.

20) <https://entertainment.time.com/2011/04/18/grmm-interview-part-2-fantasy-and-history>.

21) 'Other party', accusative.

22) People who started questioning some of Danaerys's actions from the end of the first Book onwards, will be less surprised at the further development of her character.

23) Italics mine.

pled King Bran the Broken – whose ascension to the Iron Throne was something Martin *did* plan<sup>24</sup> – possesses a wisdom and power none of his predecessors boasted of (he could be and has been interpreted as a type of Christ and a true Messiah from a story-external perspective)<sup>25</sup>, Tyrion the Dwarf gets his third chance as Hand of the King, and the ‘freaky’ Brienne is the first woman in Westerosi history to command the Kingsguard. Although misfit Sam Tarly’s suggestion to let everyone choose the ruler is laughed away, not all those present laugh (I don’t see Bran doing so), and who shall tell if this tiny seed of an idea will not take roots one day – as it has in our world. Finally, the Night King, who haunted the North for millennia and threatened human civilisation, is gone. A similar threat may arise in the future, for always after a defeat and a respite, the shadow takes another shape and grows again. But that is a different story.

#### CONCLUSION

Much and more in *Tweaking Things a Little* is worth reading and studying; it contains many excellent observations, strung together in a logical way and showing connections that seem obvious once you see them through Honegger’s lens. The essays are also strong in character study. There are few things

to whinge about in the sections dealing with Tolkien’s work and world. When it comes to Martin, however, Honegger drops the ball at times.<sup>26</sup> Some of the main characters, like Jon Snow, get very little attention. His mistake regarding Martin’s (non-)involvement with the later seasons of *Game of Thrones* problematizes the conclusion of Part 5. The other chief problem is that Tolkien’s work is used as a yardstick for measuring Martin’s work. But that two of his three best analyses in the volume also concern *ASoIaF*, tips the final balance in favour of it.

Oh, and the parting shot is priceless. Having quoted Martin’s remark that he’d sooner go to Middle-earth than to heaven after his death, Honegger writes:

I imagine this ‘Middle-earth’ to be a place like Niggle’s Parish in Tolkien’s short story ‘Leaf by Niggle’ where both Martin and Tolkien, like Niggle and Parish, will work together to create a world where every fantasy aficionado would love to end up. Till then, we have to make do with the subcreated worlds available – until the dragon comes. (375)

A true fantasy aficionado would almost look forward to the dragon.

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24) <https://screenrant.com/game-thrones-bran-king-george-rr-martin>.

25) <https://theologyculturebarnett.wordpress.com/2019/06/07/bran-the-broken-as-archetype>.

26) To be fair, he has run into what may be the worst possible kind of reviewer: a translator who happens to have translated most of Martin’s works into Dutch and as such has read the texts multiple times.