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#ForTheThrone:
A Study of the Emphasis on the Medievalism in the Paratext of
G. R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* in HBO's *Game of Thrones*

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In "Introduction to the Paratext," Gérard Genette starts by defining paratext as "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public."[1] More broadly defined, paratext is material surrounding the text which can change the reception of the text or influence its interpretation by the public.[2] This article examines the paratexts of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and HBO's *Game of Thrones*, but, in doing so, limits its understanding of what constitutes an "official" paratext to anything included in promotional materials for the books and series, including book covers, DVD cover art, and interviews of people involved in producing these items.

As Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* has grown in popularity and accumulated success, the paratext of the series has changed in a way that illustrates how the author and his publishers were attempting to gain wider readership by distancing his books from some of the trappings of fantasy. These changes are partly due to the fact that fantasy literature is still stigmatized despite the genre's many strengths (it is not simply escapist), and it is the opinion of those who recognize the value of fantasy literature that great works, like *A Song of Ice and Fire*, should help to bring the genre into the mainstream and general acceptance rather than turning their backs on their core fandom once they reach popular success. Early paperback editions of *A Song of Ice and Fire* did not hide that they were fantasy, sporting many of the emblematic signs of sword and sorcery fantasy, such as bright (almost garish) colors, knights on horseback, fair ladies, and castles (Figures 1-4). The 2011 mass market paperback edition of the books completed the transition from the sword and sorcery covers to the covers one might expect on books of historical fiction: the pommel of a sword, a crown, a knight's helmet, a chalice (Figure 5).

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[1] Gérard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext," *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 261.
[2] Lincoln Geraghty, introduction to *Popular Media Cultures: Fans, Audiences, and Paratext* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1-13.

Figure 1: Stephen Youll, cover art for *A Game of Thrones*, 1997[3]

Figure 2: Stephen Youll, cover art for *A Clash of Kings*, 1998[4]

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[3] Stephen Youll, cover art for *A Game of Thrones* (Bantam, 1997), accessed January 7, 2020, http://www.stephenyoull.com/stephenyoull.com/ART-ARCHIVE.html#29. Stephen Youll's cover art was used for the first edition of the first three books of *A Song of Ice and Fire*; he created cover art for the fourth book, but it was never used.
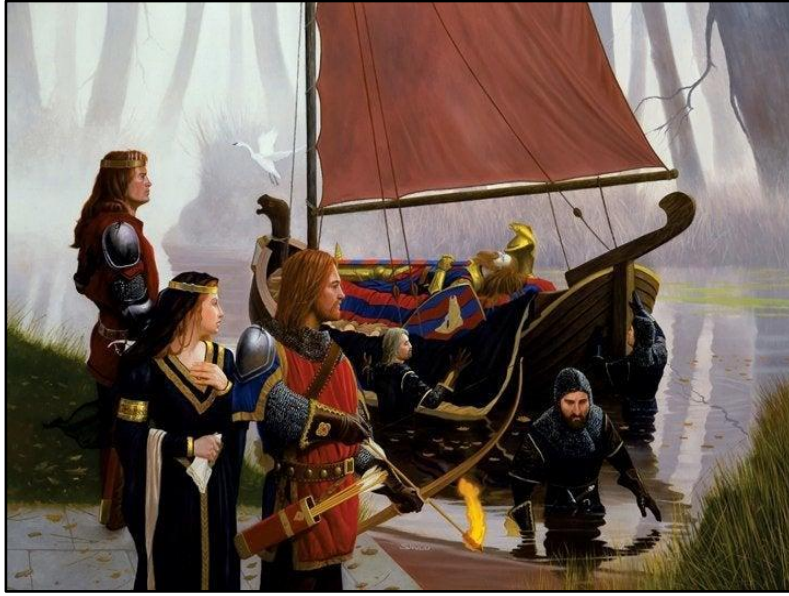[4] Stephen Youll, cover art for *A Clash of Kings* (Bantam, 1998), accessed January 7, 2020, http://www.stephenyoull.com/stephenyoull.com/ART-ARCHIVE.html#30.

Figure 3: Stephen Youll, cover art for *A Storm of Swords*, 2000[5]

Figure 4: Stephen Youll, cover art for *A Feast for Crows*, 2005[6]

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[5] Stephen Youll, cover art for *A Storm of Swords* (Bantam, 2000), accessed January 7, 2020, http://www.stephenyoull.com/stephenyoull.com/ART-ARCHIVE.html#31.

[6] Stephen Youll, cover art for *A Feast for Crows* (Bantam, 2005), accessed January 07, 2020, http://www.stephenyoull.com/stephenyoull.com/ART-ARCHIVE.html#32. Cover art commissioned but was never used in print.
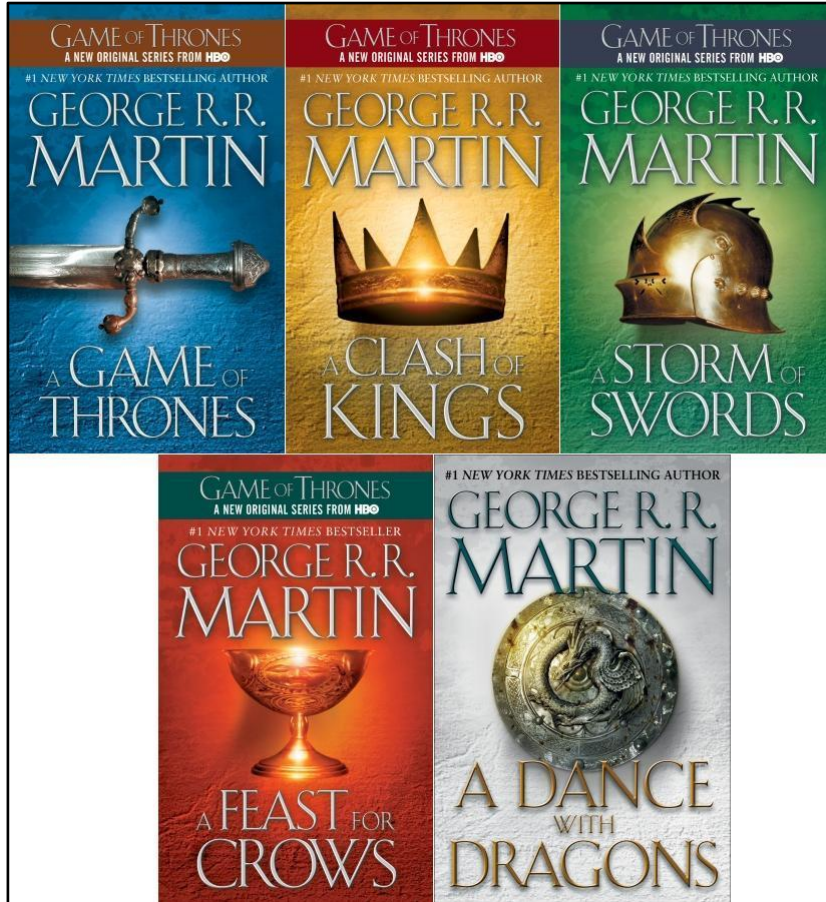
Figure 5: Larry Rostant cover art for *A Song of Ice and Fire*, 2011[7]

This change in presentation can be explained by the fact that the publishers wanted to reach a wider demographic, beyond the realm of fantasy enthusiasts. Publishers are acutely aware of the fact that although you shouldn't judge a book by its cover everybody does it anyway: "Book covers – the wrapping of image, typography and puff prose that surrounds the written content of a book – really matters. They matter because . . . as readers, we do indeed judge books by their covers."[8] Martin explains that the same need to reach a wider audience was at play adapting *A Song of ice and Fire* into *Game of Thrones*:

> There's an enormous appetite [for fantasy] among my readers, that's
> obvious. At the same time, to be successful, the show has to win an
> audience that has not read the books. Although my books are very
> popular and hitting the best-seller lists regularly, the amount of

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[7] Larry Rostant, cover art for *A Song of Ice and Fire* (Penguin Random House, 2011), accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/series/SOO/a-song-of-ice-and-fire.
[8] Nicole Matthews, *Judging a Book by its Cover* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007), xi.

readers that buy even a No. 1 best-seller is small compared to the audience you need to sustain a television show. So, if the only audience we get is my readers, then the show is going to be short-lived indeed. But from the very start, my publishers have said, this is the fantasy for people who hate fantasy.[9]

Martin and HBO knew, or at least they were convinced, that to get a large audience to watch *Game of Thrones* they needed to make sure even the people who "hated fantasy" would watch it. To do so, they focused their emphasis on the perceived medievalist realism of the fiction over its traditional fantasy elements.

The general reception of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is of a realistic fantasy and a realistic representation of the hardships of life in the Middle Ages. Several medievalist scholars have convincingly argued that Martin's fiction is not as realistic as the fans seem to believe and that the claims to authenticity are actually often used "to defend the novels from critics who decry the series' violence, frequent rape, and other such offenses."[10] While such criticisms are well founded, this article focuses mainly on how the people involved with the show talk about it, and how the marketing for the books and the show try to catch the interest of the audience. This raises the questions of whether or not the paratexts of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* elevate fantasy by making the genre more popular through their combined success, and whether or not their realism elevates Martin's fiction while simultaneously pushing the rest of fantasy deeper into a cultural niche sometimes called nerddom? Despite the fact that the texts are fantasy and therefore should participate in bringing the genre more into the mainstream through their success, their paratext suggests that these stories are realistic and therefore atypical of fantasy, so much so that it could be argued that the paratext of the books and the show is doing a disservice to the genre.

In order to reach the proposed broader demographic and keep the show on the air, the showrunners felt the HBO adaptation needed to distance itself from some

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[9] Dave Itzkoff, "His Beautiful, Dark, Twisted Fantasy: George R.R. Martin Talks *Game of Thrones*," *New York Times*, April 1, 2011, accessed January 7, 2020, https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/his-beautiful-dark-twisted-fantasy-george-r-r-martin-talks-game-of-thrones/.

[10] While Pam Clements' article on "Authenticity" does not refer to Martin's work specifically, it is an excellent critical source to ground the discussion around claims to authenticity in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Carol Jamison and Shiloh Carroll also directly address the many sins that the shield of authenticity can cover, specifically referring to Martin's work. See Pam Clements, "Authenticity," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 19-26; Carol Jamison, "Reading Westeros: George R.R. Martin's Multi-Layered Medievalisms," *Studies in Medievalism* 26 (2017): 131-42; and Shiloh Carrol, *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018), 10.

of the stereotypically fantastic elements of the books. As Linda Hutcheon writes in *A Theory of Adaptation*, "Adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without any conscious adapting or alterations of setting."[11] While the show started as a close adaptation of the books, it gradually distanced itself from the original text, especially as the show approached Season 6 and the publication of *The Winds of Winter* was delayed. Although the content of the adaptation and the adapted text were fairly similar in the earlier seasons, the paratext reveals the greater differences. The content had equal amounts of fantasy, but the show's marketing distanced the adaptation from the fantasy genre, presenting it instead as a neomedieval[12] fictional period drama.

While co-showrunner Daniel Weiss described the show as exciting because it allowed him to "do history with all the good parts and dragons and demons," he was careful to note that they tried hard "to keep [the show] grounded in that historical accuracy as much as possible."[13] This quotation is one example of many similar interviews in which the "historical accuracy" receives greater importance than the fantasy by a host of people involved in the show, from the showrunners to members of the cast. Peter Dinklage, who plays Tyrion Lannister, said several times during the early seasons of the show that he does not think *Game of Thrones* is a fantasy show:

> I wouldn't be quick to use the word fantasy with [*Game of Thrones*] ... I know that's the word that's been used, maybe a lot of people would disagree with me but what I see, I don't see it as a fantasy. At least from the stuff I've done that actually was truly fantasy, where water creatures are coming out of the ground and lions are talking. ... That, to me, is a bit more fantastical.[14]

As part of their marketing strategy for the buildup to Season 8, HBO released several videos titled "The Cast Remembers." In his video, Dinklage doubles down, saying:

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[11] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 7.

[12] Neomedievalism is here referred to as a representation of a Middle Ages that never actually existed but that we nevertheless recognize as medieval because of the hegemonic influence of the way the English Middle Ages has been represented on screen and in literature as the Middle Ages par excellence. See M. Jane Toswell, "Lingua," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 120-2.

[13] Daniel Weiss, "Game of Thrones at the Oxford Union," March 20, 2015, *YouTube*, 25:40, accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfvVluNxujc.

[14] Scott Edelman, "Peter Dinklage Says Game of Thrones Isn't Fantasy [Oh Really?]," *SyfyWire*, December 14, 2012, accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/peter_dinklage_says_game.

When I first heard they were interested in me for a fantasy show, I went, "Ugh. No." Especially being my size and… I'm not really interested in portraying a fantasy of a person. I'm an actor; I like to portray real people. And sometimes, in the world of fantasy, that gets lost. This was the opposite because of the relationships between these characters, because of who Tyrion is, how flesh-and-blood he is. It's the most realistic show that I've ever done that also happens to have dragons and dead people walking around in it.[15]

Dinklage's argument, once again, revolves around the fact that *Game of Thrones* is too serious and too realistic to be fantasy. Therefore, by opposition, fantasy is unrealistic and by extension, not serious. While most of the cast has embraced the idea of marketing the pseudo-realist neomedievalist aspect of the show, Jon Bradley, who plays Samwell Tarly, is critical of this idea:

A lot of people involved with the show say this isn't really a fantasy, and that it's mainly about humanity, and that's all great. But if you do like fantasy it is a fantasy. And if you like it, the show is going to cater to the parts of you who like it. We shouldn't distance ourselves from fantasy too much.[16]

Bradley accurately recognizes the show as fantasy and eloquently explains that by distancing the show from the label of fantasy, the showrunners, cast, and HBO itself are all reinforcing the negative prejudices people have towards the fantasy genre. Such prejudices are explored at length in studies such as Farah Mendlesohn's highly influential book, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*,[17] and, in 1984, Ann Swinfen wrote a defense of fantasy where she argued that

Modern fantasy, far from being the escapist literature which it is sometimes labelled, is a serious form of the modern novel, often characterized by notable literary merit, and concerned both with heightened awareness of the complex nature of the reality and with the exploration beyond empirical experience into the transcendent reality, embodied in imaginative and spiritual worlds. Through

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[15] "The Cast Remembers: Peter Dinklage on Playing Tyrion Lannister | Game of Thrones: Season 8 (HBO)," *YouTube*, 4:04, accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_RgcV-ljGI.

[16] James Hibberd, "*Game of Thrones* John Bradley defends fantasy fans," *EW*, March 27, 2013, http://www.ew.com/article/2013/03/27/game-of-thrones-john-bradley.

[17] See Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

Fantasy man does indeed enter the Perilous Realm, and may find there both the familiar made strange, and the strange made familiar.[18]

Game of Thrones is a successful fantasy show which could popularize the genre, bringing it more into the mainstream; however, by constantly explaining how *Game of Thrones* is different from other kinds of fantasy—due to its "historical accuracy"—the people involved in the production are actually reinforcing the negative stereotypes and prejudices associated with fantasy literature.

The choice to name the show *Game of Thrones* rather than *A Song of Ice and Fire* also contributes to signaling that the show is distancing itself from fantasy. Adaptation is a process that requires condensing the adapted text, as Bradley remarks:

> What you have to bear in mind is carrying on with this template of ten episodes a season, we have ten hours. And if you look at the size of the books, they're . . . over 600 pages long. So, we realized that to condense those into ten hours, some stuff is going to have to go, some things are going to be conflated, some things are going to be changed around a little bit.[19]

Martin wrote *A Song of Ice and Fire* as a complex interweaving of many plots and subplots. By naming the series *Game of Thrones*, HBO signals that the show will focus on the quasi-medieval fight for the Iron Throne, the family politics, and the struggle of living in a grim representation of the Middle Ages, drawing attention away from the fantastic elements of the novels. The phrase "song of ice and fire" appears in *A Clash of Kings*, when Daenerys is in the house of the undying and has a vision of her dead brother Rhaegar. She sees him talking to an unnamed woman holding a baby in her arms. The woman is either Elia Martell (if this is a vision of things past) or Lyanna Stark (if this is a vision of what might have been). Rhaegar says: "Aegon. What better name for a king. . . . He is the prince that was

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[18] Ann Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 234. By speaking of the Perilous Realm, Swinfen is referring to a collection of J. R. R. Tolkien's short stories called *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (posthumously published in 1997 and then expanded in 2008 with an introduction by Tom Shippey), as well as his description of Fairy as the "Perilous Realm," a theory he outlines in his renowned essay "On Fairy-Stories." See *Tales from the Perilous Realm, Illustrated by Alan Lee* (London: HarperCollins, 2008) and *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 27, 32.
[19] John Bradley, "Game of Thrones at the Oxford Union," 2015.

promised, and his is the song of ice and fire."[20] The "song of ice and fire" is linked to visions and prophecies, themes usually associated with fantasy literature. The process of adaptation makes the kind of prophecy Martin likes to write rather difficult, given that adaptation requires interpreting the words on the page, and such choices necessarily rule out many other possible interpretations. For example, if Rhaegar's prophecy was filmed you would need to cast an actress as either Elia or Lyanna to hold the baby Aegon, which would narrow down the possible interpretations of the prophecy. HBO presents very clear adaptations of Daenerys' prophecies in the house of the undying, whereas, in the books, the experience is more confused and hallucinatory, further reinforcing the differences between the grounded, realist show and the fantasy books.

The last two upcoming books of Martin's series, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*, are different from the previous book titles because they draw the reader's attention to the unrealistic way the seasons work in Westeros, where summers and winters can last for years. Furthermore, the association of winter with the threat of the White Walkers (the Others in the books) is also brought back to mind with the last two book titles. Many fans believed that the final season of the show would build up to a climactic Battle for the Dawn, between the forces of life and death. However, that battle happens halfway through the season. The show thus focuses on the struggle for the Iron Throne and ruling Westeros, staying true to its title, *Game of Thrones*.

The choice of focusing on the struggle for the Iron Throne rather than on the fantasy can moreover be observed in the way HBO markets the show. The promotional posters announcing the date at which the first episode of each upcoming season would air the same image as the cover art for the DVD boxes, with some minor variations. The promotional material for the first season of *Game of Thrones* shows Ned Stark, in leather armor, sitting on the Iron Throne with his great sword drawn (Figure 6). The style of the Iron Throne is the only indication that this poster is not about a period drama set in medieval England. Those who have read the book will see the small signs that this is set in Martin's fictional world: the insignia of the Hand of the King on Ned's breast, the raven at his side, and the sword, Ice. The main purpose of this poster is to attract the audience through the promise of a medievalist drama. The poster for the second season features a hand grasping the crown of the late king, Robert Baratheon—the crown everybody is fighting for now that Robert is dead (Figure 7).

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[20] Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 701.

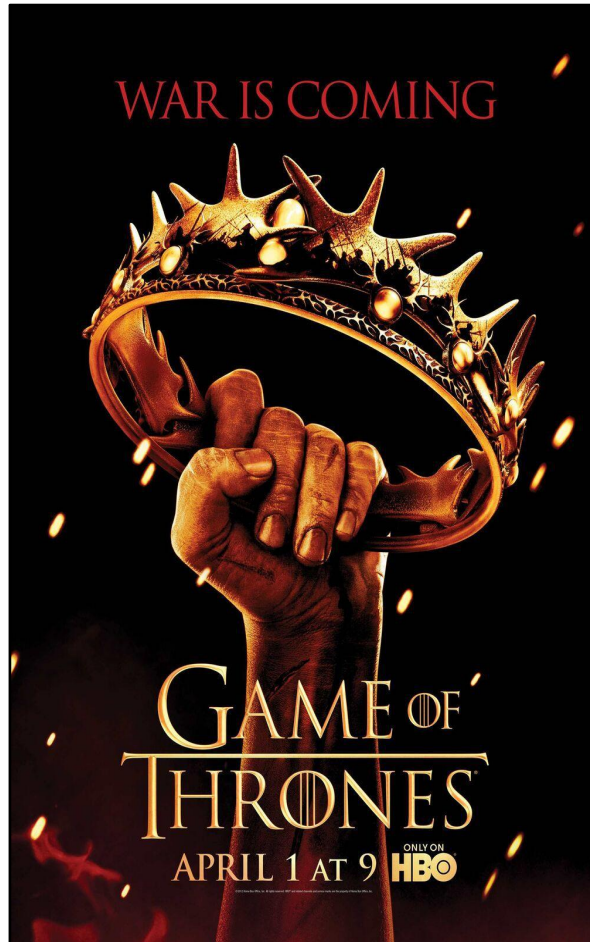Figure 6: HBO *Game of Thrones* Season 1 poster, 2011

Figure 7: HBO *Game of Thrones* Season 2 poster, 2012

Although the symbol has changed from the throne to the crown, the message remains the same: this show is about the fight for the throne. By the time the show made it to the end of Season 2 there had been almost no overt reference to fantasy in the promotional material. Season 3 is when fantasy elements are, perhaps reluctantly, put at the center of HBO's marketing for *Game of Thrones*. The poster depicts the shadow of a young dragon on a warm grey field (Figure 8). It is worth noting that it is only the shadow of a dragon, as if HBO was afraid that having the dragon itself on the cover would be too much of a fantasy statement and would scare away the established audience or deter new audience members from engaging with the show. The fourth season is heralded by a raven with swords falling out of its feathers (Figure 9).

Figure 8: HBO *Game of Thrones* Season 3 poster, 2013
Figure 9: HBO *Game of Thrones* Season 4 poster, 2014

The medievalist presence of the swords is far more visible than the subtle third eye of the fantastic raven. The raven itself ties the English medievalism with the legend of the ravens of the Tower of London, and the carrion bird is one of the beasts of battle often associated with medieval or medievalist literature. The poster for season five shows Tyrion on a ship, his back to the viewer, looking at a dragon coming out of the mist (Figure 10).
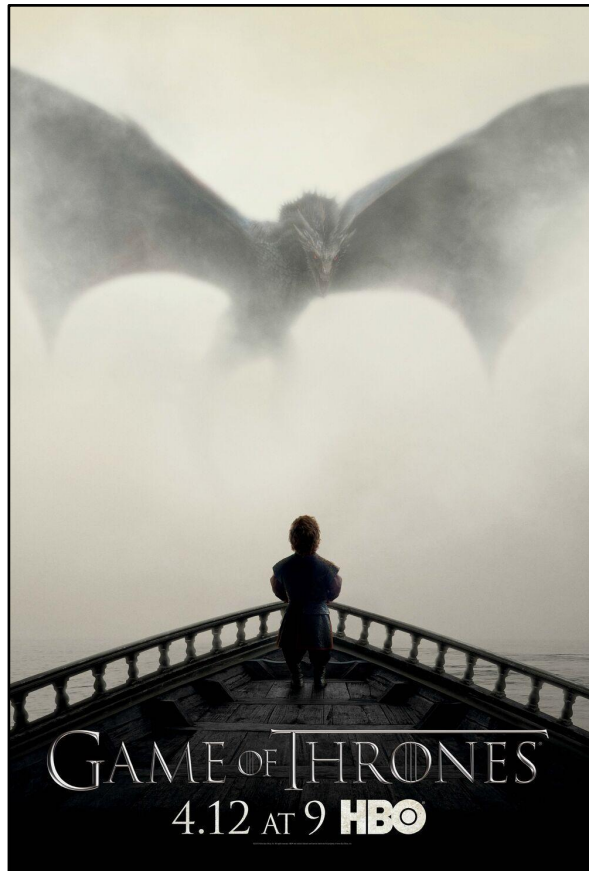
Figure 10: HBO *Game of Thrones* Season 5 poster, 2015

Much like with the poster of season three, the dragon is shrouded in mystery, never fully revealed. The fantasy is far more overtly on display than at any other point, but there still seems to be some reluctance, symbolized by the mist that partly shrouds the dragon. The cover of the DVD box for the fifth season is the same image, except that there is no more mist shrouding the dragon. The success of the season and the overwhelmingly positive reception of the dragons allowed HBO to display the fantastical creatures more openly. The poster for the sixth season shows the heads of several prominent characters in a crypt, reinforcing the idea (whether accurate or false) that *Game of Thrones* is a realistic representation of a barbaric Middle Ages, while simultaneously foreshadowing the role of the faceless men in this season (Figure 11).

Figure 11: HBO *Game of Thrones* Season 6 poster, 2016

The seventh season finally fully embraces the fantasy genre by putting the Night King's face on the cover. His (its?) glowing, ice cold blue eyes aren't anything natural. Even here one could argue medievalism is still present, because the Night King is shown wearing a crown of ice, anchoring the white walkers in this neomedievalist world.[21] Throughout the evolution of the show, the, HBO grew more comfortable with marketing *Game of Thrones* as a fantasy, but only fully embraced the genre when the fantasy elements, such as the dragons and exploding wildfire, swallowed up large portions of the budget with CGI renderings and became central to the plot of the show.[22]

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[21] Presenting the prime evil villain with a royal icy crown is a long-standing fantasy tradition with examples like C. S. Lewis' White Witch (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) and Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen ("The Snow Queen").

[22] Kim Renfro, "Each Episode of 'Game of Thrones' Season 6 Costs a Crazy amount," *Business Insider*, Mar 31, 2016, accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/game-of-thrones-season-6-cost-10-million-per-episode-2016-3.

As *Game of Thrones* ramped up for its final season, HBO started a new marketing strategy revolving around the hashtag #ForTheThrone.[23] The idea was that their promotional material retraces the steps characters have been through in their pursuit of the Iron Throne, which seems like a logical ending for a show called *Game of Thrones*—a culmination of the neomedievalist theme that has been running through the show. While the general public did not know how the show would end, many believed that the threat of the White Walkers made the struggle for the Iron Throne rather insignificant; the fantasy elements of the show eventually overshadowed the fight for the Iron Throne, or so we thought. Often in fantasy the ever-growing apocalyptic threat becomes the focus of the climactic ending, such as the battle of Hogwarts in *Harry Potter*, the Last Battle in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or the Battle at the Black Gate in *The Lord of the Rings*. Not so in HBO's adaptation. Ultimately, the show focused on the question of who would sit on the Iron Throne. Furthermore, I would argue that part of the fan's backlash against the show's final season is precisely that once the white walkers were defeated, the show was barely about fantasy at all.

While the label of fantasy was once a stigma, the genre is growing in popularity and respect thanks to successful texts like *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*. Fantasy texts—including Martin's—should be heralded by fantasy paratexts which embrace the label of fantasy without fear or shame. In the early chapters of *A Game of Thrones*, Tyrion Lannister teaches Jon Snow how to accept the labels that are placed on him: "Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armor yourself in it, and it will never be used against you."[24] Those who write or adapt fantasy should learn from Tyrion's words.

[23] "For the Throne," *HBO*, accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.hbo.com/game-of-thrones/for-the-throne.
[24] Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 57.