

# Introduction

Warrior queens, child kings, royal bastards, scheming uncles, feuding families, shifting allegiances, usurpation, decapitation, incest, toxic masculinity, toxic monarchy, a sprawling cast of characters, genealogical charts, ardent fans, a global literary event—take Shakespeare, add dragons, zombies, naked people, and corporate interests, take away the verse, and you get *Game of Thrones*.

Widely known for these naked people and magic dragons, the hit HBO series *Game of Thrones*, adapted from George R.R. Martin's fantasy novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, drew its central storyline from historical source material in the Wars of the Roses, a bloody fifteenth-century civil war among feuding noble families in England.<sup>1</sup> The Wars of the Roses involved the House of Lancaster (whose emblem was the red rose) and the House of York (the white) battling for the English crown amidst competing claims to the proper line of hereditary succession. Yorks unseated Lancasters, then were unseated by the upstart House of Tudor, inaugurating a period of peace and prosperity in England that included the reigns of Henry VIII and his daughter, Elizabeth I. The central parallel in *A Song of Ice and Fire* involves the Starks as the Yorks, the Lannisters as the Lancasters, and the Targaryens as the Tudors, as detailed in books and websites recounting “the history behind *Game of Thrones*.”<sup>2</sup> Even the cadence of Martin's title, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, recalls the Wars of the Roses, the ice pointing to the white rose, the fire to the red. In the author's own words from 1998:

The Wars of the Roses have always fascinated me, and certainly did influence *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but there's really no one-for-one character-for-character correspondence. I like to use history

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to flavor my fantasy, to add texture and versimillitude, but simply rewriting history with the names changed has no appeal for me. I prefer to reimagine it all, and take it in new and unexpected directions.<sup>3</sup>

Four hundred years before Martin gave the Tudors dragons, another famous writer told the story of the Wars of the Roses in a very different way. Written in collaboration with other authors in the early 1590s, William Shakespeare's dramatization of the Wars of the Roses comprises his "first tetralogy"—his first set of four plays that tell a single story (Shakespeare's "second tetralogy" was composed later in the 1590s as a prequel of sorts, depicting the English history that led up to the Wars of the Roses).<sup>4</sup> Martin clearly knew the Wars of the Roses, but was he also familiar with and influenced by Shakespeare's plays about them?

Martin—who taught English and Journalism for three years at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa in the late 1970s<sup>5</sup>—is certainly familiar with Shakespeare in general. Statements on his website include references to *Julius Caesar* ("Shakespeare wrote that Brutus was 'the noblest Roman of them all'"), *Romeo and Juliet* ("Shakespeare had to kill Mercutio because he was taking over play"), and *Richard III* ("Shakespeare's Richard is a great character, even if he doesn't have much to do with the real historical Richard").<sup>6</sup> Martin put lines from Shakespeare's *Sonnets* into CBS's *Beauty and the Beast* (1987–90), where he was a staff writer.<sup>7</sup> His favorite sci-fi movie is *Forbidden Planet*, which he notes is an adaptation of *The Tempest*.<sup>8</sup> He quotes *Julius Caesar* in interviews ("The evil that men do lives after them; / The good is oft interrèd with their bones" [3.2.67–68]).<sup>9</sup> And he cites Shakespeare when asked about the horrors of war:

Shakespeare refers to it, in those great scenes in *Henry V*, where King Hal is walking among the men, before the Battle of Agincourt, and he hears the men complaining. "Well, I hope his cause is just, because a lot of us are going to die to make him king of France."<sup>10</sup>

Martin even characterizes his very first publication as a shot at Shakespeare: "It was *Fantastic Four* #17. It was a letter. It said something like, 'Stan Lee, better than Shakespeare'."<sup>11</sup> In keeping with this comment, Martin places Shakespeare in a circle of his three greatest influences: "Maybe Stan Lee is the greatest literary influence on me,

even more than Shakespeare or Tolkien.”<sup>12</sup> Martin even aligned his approach to adapting the Wars of the Roses with Shakespeare, when asked about his imagination:

I don't know if I'd ever claim it's enormously original. You look at Shakespeare, who borrowed all of his plots. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, I take stuff from the Wars of the Roses and other fantasy things, and all these things work around in my head and somehow they jell into what I hope is uniquely my own.<sup>13</sup>

Shakespeare scholars such as Amy Rodgers have identified allusions to specific Shakespearean moments: Robert Baratheon gored by a boar during a hunting accident recalls Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*; one of Martin's characters saying “Heavy is the head that wears the crown” is almost a direct quotation of Shakespeare's Henry IV saying “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (2 *Henry IV*, 3.1.31); Martin's Varys musing “And who would mourn poor Varys then?” is an ironic twist on Antony's lamentation for Caesar, “What cause withholds you, then, to mourn for him?” (*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.95); the noble bastard Jon Snow parallels the Bastard in Shakespeare's *King John*; and, according to Rodgers, “Winterfell's set is a ringer for Macbeth's stronghold in Roman Polanski's 1971 adaptation.”<sup>14</sup> Fans in online forums have found additional connections: allusions to three Shakespearean tragedies (*King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*) in a single chapter (*GoT*, Daenerys IX); the army of moving trees attacking Asha Greyjoy resembling the Birnam Wood in *Macbeth*; the ambitious witch-fueled Stannis Baratheon as an echo of Macbeth; Jon Snow's death and Julius Caesar's; the Thyestean feast in *Titus Andronicus* and the Frey pies; and *The Bloody Hand*, a play-within-the-novel from the “Mercy” chapter of *The Winds of Winter*, which echoes *Richard III* and *Hamlet*.<sup>15</sup> Blog posts propose more parallels, including Petyr Baelish as Iago and Robert Baratheon as Falstaff.<sup>16</sup> Actors in the show have made analogies, as when Gwendoline Christie glossed Jaime Lannister's road trip with Brienne: “There is this thing in Shakespeare that when people go into the woods, it's often symbolic of confusion.”<sup>17</sup> And, shifting from specific allusions to thematic echoes, scholars such as Jessica Walker have emphasized similar ways of remembering the past in Shakespeare's first tetralogy and *A Song of Ice and Fire*:

The parallel historiographies in question include the role of Providence, which surfaces in *A Song of Ice and Fire* through the act of prophecies and portents; Fortune's Wheel, symbolized in Martin's

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work through the unusual passage of seasons in his world and his use of rise-and-fall imagery; the related but distinct concept of *memento mori* or *valar morghulis*, which reminds the reader of the inevitability of death; and the use of proto-Gothic imagery to underscore a cyclical interpretation of history, embodied here by the forces of ice and fire.<sup>18</sup>

Turning from texts to receptions, Dan Venning argues that the Shakespearean ancestry of *Game of Thrones* helps the show, like Shakespeare's plays and their afterlives, bridge highbrow and lowbrow culture—professional literary critics and pop-culture fans.<sup>19</sup>

For instance, the artist Mya Gosling, who draws “the world’s foremost (and possibly only) stick-figure Shakespeare webcomic,” *Good Tickle Brain*, celebrated Shakespeare’s birthday in 2015 with a comic suggesting the only difference between Shakespeare and *Game of Thrones* is dragons (see Figure I.1).<sup>20</sup> Fans have written Shakespeare and *Game of Thrones* mash-ups, one in 2016 imagining how showrunners Benioff and Weiss would butcher *Much Ado about Nothing* (“Hero falls in love with Don John because she is a stupid young woman and has no foresight”).<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most amusing connection to

### SHAKESPEARE'S 451st BIRTHDAY



HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SHAKESPEARE!



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(pity about the dragons...)

[www.goodticklebrain.com](http://www.goodticklebrain.com)

Figure I.1 Mya Lixian Gosling, “Happy 451st Birthday, Shakespeare!” *Good Tickle Brain* (April 23, 2015), <https://goodticklebrain.com/home/2015/4/22/happy-451st-birthday-shakespeare>.

Shakespeare came in “George R.R. Martin’s Open Letter About the Deaths in *Game of Thrones*,” written in 2014 in response to online chatter about his habit of killing off main characters:

Allow me to pose this question to you—how many of you have heard of **William GODDAMN Shakespeare**? In case you illiterate shitlords aren’t familiar, he’s the most famous, accomplished, well-known author in human history—and a guy who would kill off characters in insanely brutal ways like it was nothing ALL OF THE GODDAMN TIME.<sup>22</sup>

The letter continues with a series of comparisons (“Let’s just say *MacBeth* makes the Red Wedding look like a bridal shower”). The massive attention the letter received online forced Martin to publicly clarify that it wasn’t actually written by him (it was a satirical essay by a blogger named Andrew Bridgman).<sup>23</sup>

The missing piece in all these intersections of Shakespeare and Martin is sustained attention on the most obvious and meaningful connection between the two authors: the shared source material of the first tetralogy and *A Song of Ice and Fire* in the Wars of the Roses. This book asks what someone who knows Shakespeare’s first tetralogy (as opposed to the history of the Wars of the Roses more generally) understands about *A Song of Ice and Fire* (the books) and *Game of Thrones* (the show) that someone unfamiliar with the Shakespearean texts might miss. In keeping with the expansive and episodic nature of the texts under consideration, there is not a single story told in this book but, rather, a series of interweaving observations. My hope is that, taken together, these vignettes reveal Martin’s debt to the literary strategies and achievements in Shakespeare’s first tetralogy as distinct from Martin’s use of the history of the Wars of the Roses as source material. These comparisons also illuminate how Shakespeare and Martin worked as authors and the conditions of literary production during the different eras in which they wrote. I include interviews with some *Game of Thrones* actors, and some reflections on how *Game of Thrones* fits into the history of Shakespearean adaptation. And in the end, I suggest the comparison with Shakespeare helps us understand how Martin changed the ending of *Game of Thrones*, and why fans love these texts so much.

Because its narrative is long and complex, *Game of Thrones* starts with a title sequence mapping out the locations of the narrative. I’ll follow suit here with a map of the disciplinary locations of the book that follows. After Chapter 1 surveys the relevant historical

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background, Chapter 2 delivers the book's main argument, laying out a case for Shakespeare's powerful yet indirect presence in *Game of Thrones*, drawing upon the discourse on Martin's medievalism led by scholars such as Shiloh Carroll and Kavita Mudan Finn. Chapter 3 invokes Adaptation Studies to analyze *Game of Thrones* as what Kevin Wetmore and Adam Hansen call a "Shakespearean echo," viewing George R.R. Martin as what Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes call a "Shakespeare user." Authorship Studies inform Chapter 4 (about collaboration). In the first half of the book, Chapters 4–9 are comparative, examining parallels and divergences, invoking disciplines such as Film and Television Studies (Chapters 3, 4, 7, and 8), Genre Studies (Chapters 5 and 6), Performance Studies (Chapter 9), and Audience Studies (Chapter 10). The second half of the book shifts from a comparative to a historicist methodology, Chapters 11–19 asking how Martin used Shakespeare as a source, and how their different time periods influenced their shared tropes, motifs, devices, characters, and plots. These readings are interdisciplinary: Political Science informs Chapters 12 and 17; Sociology appears in Chapters 13, 14, and 19; and Gender Studies arise in Chapters 14 and 15. Theory from these disciplines is used to explicate our literary texts, but Chapter 12 offers an example of "Shakespeare for Theory" where literature is not the recipient of theory in the service of exegesis but the origin of new theory then offered to other disciplines. The final third of the book also spotlights questions of reception. Chapter 15 looks at criticism on race and gender in Shakespeare and Martin's texts, building on conversations begun by Carroll, Finn, Helen Young, and Mat Hardy, among others. Chapter 18 shows Martin cycling the various possible endings of *A Song of Ice and Fire* through Shakespeare. And Chapter 19 concludes the book from the vantage of Fan Studies.

## Notes

- 1 References to the novel series are to George R.R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (New York: Bantam, 1996-Press) and are cited in-text by abbreviated volume title: *GoT* = *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *CoK* = *A Clash of Kings* (1999), *SoS* = *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *FfC* = *A Feast for Crows* (2005), *DwD* = *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). References to David Benioff and D.B. Weiss's television show *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-Present) are cited in-text by season and episode.
- 2 See Jamie Adair, *History behind Game of Thrones*, <http://history-behind-game-of-thrones.com>. For more scholarly examinations, see Carolyne Larrington, *Winter Is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016); *Game of Thrones versus History: Written in Blood*, ed. Brian Pavlac (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2017); Ayelet Haimson

- Lushkov, *You Win or You Die: The Ancient World of Game of Thrones* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Ken Mondschein, *Game of Thrones and the Medieval Art of War* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017); Carol Parrish Jamison, *Chivalry in Westeros: The Knightly Code of A Song of Ice and Fire* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018); David C. Weinczok, *The History Behind Game of Thrones: The North Remembers* (Havertown: Pen & Sword, 2019); and Ed West, *Iron, Fire and Ice: The Real History that Inspired Game of Thrones* (New York: Skyhorse, 2019).
- 3 George R.R. Martin, "More Wars of the Roses," in *The Citadel: The Archive of 'A Song of Ice and Fire' Lore* (Nov. 27, 1998), <http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/950>.
  - 4 References to Shakespeare's plays are to *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Modern Critical Edition*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and are cited in-text by abbreviated play title.
  - 5 Kyle Munson, "Iowa Tie to 'Game of Thrones' Series," *Des Moines Register* (May 20, 2014), <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/local/kyle-munson/2014/05/21/game-thrones-series-ex-iowa-professor-wrote-kyle-munson/2303526/>.
  - 6 On *The Citadel: The Archive of 'A Song of Ice and Fire' Lore*, see "Odyssey Con 2008 (Madison, WI; April 4–6 2008)" (April 6, 2008): [http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/Odyssey\\_Con\\_2008\\_Madison\\_WI\\_April\\_4\\_6\\_20081](http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/Odyssey_Con_2008_Madison_WI_April_4_6_20081); "Matters of Honor" (June 19, 2001): [http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/Matters\\_of\\_Honor](http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/Matters_of_Honor); and "Producing Valyrian Steel" (March 11, 2001): [http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/Producing\\_Valyrian\\_Steel](http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/Producing_Valyrian_Steel).
  - 7 Seth Abramovitch, "George R. R. Martin on Writing TV's 'Beauty and the Beast': 'It Was Such a Smart Show'," *The Hollywood Reporter* (March 16, 2017), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/george-r-r-martin-writing-tvs-beauty-beast-was-a-smart-show-986786>.
  - 8 Kathy Wang, "Interview with George R.R. Martin," *Feather Factor* (Feb. 15, 2012), <https://www.featherfactor.com/2012/02/interview-with-george-r-r-martin.html>.
  - 9 Charles Yu, "George R. R. Martin, Fantasy's Reigning King," *The New York Times Style Magazine* (Oct. 15, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/t-magazine/george-rr-martin-got-interview.html>.
  - 10 Mikal Gilmore, "George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview," *Rolling Stone* (April 23, 2014), <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-242487/>.
  - 11 Andrea Warner, "Fantasy for Non-Fantasy People," *AbeBooks* (2006), <https://www.abebooks.com/docs/Fantasy/george-martin.shtml>. Martin's letter gushing about *Fantastic Four* doesn't actually mention Shakespeare; see Michael Rothman, "See: 'Game of Thrones' Author George R.R. Martin's Letter to Marvel When He Was 15," *ABC News* (June 20, 2014), <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/game-thrones-author-george-rr-martins-letter-marvel/story?id=24218804>.
  - 12 Fiona Macdonald, "Who Inspired the Game of Thrones Creator," *BBC* (Oct. 21, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140826-who-inspired-george-rr-martin>.
  - 13 Gilmore, "The Rolling Stone Interview."

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- 14 Amy Rodgers, "History as Echo: Entertainment Historiography from Shakespeare to HBO's *Game of Thrones*," in *Shakespearean Echoes*, ed. Adam Hansen and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 142–54, quote from 150.
- 15 See Reddit discussions including [glass\\_table\\_girl](https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/3cmq0s/will_daenerys_die_spoilers_all/csxdvdy/), "Will Daenerys die?" (2016): [https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/3cmq0s/will\\_daenerys\\_die\\_spoilers\\_all/csxdvdy/](https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/3cmq0s/will_daenerys_die_spoilers_all/csxdvdy/); Bristol\_Aero\_Student, "GRRM & Shakespeare" (2015), [https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/2hxf3j/spoilers\\_all\\_grrm\\_shakespeare/](https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/2hxf3j/spoilers_all_grrm_shakespeare/); and GooseCogens, "Richard III in 'Mercy'" (2015), [https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/24mqdu/spoilers\\_all\\_richard\\_iii\\_in\\_mercy/#bottom-comments](https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/24mqdu/spoilers_all_richard_iii_in_mercy/#bottom-comments). And see the fan website *Shakespeare of Thrones*, whose author Lauren Swiderski, gave the presentation "The Influence of Shakespeare in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*," at the second annual *Con of Thrones* in Dallas, TX (May 2018), as well as her essay, "Stannis Baratheon: Macbeth Revisited," *Shakespeare of Thrones* (May 18, 2018), <https://shakespeareofthrones.com/2018/05/18/stannis-baratheon-macbeth-revisited/>.
- 16 See, for example, Jun Yan, "Shakespeare's Shadow on *Game of Thrones*: The Art of Villainy," *History Behind Game of Thrones* (Oct. 23, 2014), <http://history-behind-game-of-thrones.com/warofroses/richardiii/villainy>; Andrew Lanham, "Shakespearean Echoes: Game of Thrones as History Play," *The Millions* (July 10, 2017), <https://themillions.com/2017/07/shakespearean-echoes-game-thrones-history-play.html>; and Lisa Waugh, "Everything *Game of Thrones* Stole from Shakespeare," *Ranker* (n.d.), <https://www.ranker.com/list/things-game-of-thrones-took-from-shakespeare/lisa-waugh>.
- 17 Gwendoline Christie, quoted in C.A. Taylor, *Inside HBO's Game of Thrones II: Seasons 3 & 4* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), 135.
- 18 Jessica Walker, "'Just Songs in the End': Historical Discourses in Shakespeare and Martin," in *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. Jes Battis and Susan Johnston (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), 75.
- 19 Dan Venning, "*Game of Thrones* as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Adapting Shakespeare and Wagner," in *Vying for the Iron Throne: Essays on Power, Gender, Death, and Performance in HBO's Game of Thrones*, ed. Lindsey Mantoan and Sara Brady (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018): 148–58.
- 20 Mya Lixian Gosling, "About," *Good Tickle Brain*, <https://goodticklebrain.squarespace.com/about/>.
- 21 Zach, "Benioff and Weiss Adapt Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*," *The Fandomentals* (March 8, 2016), <https://www.thefandomentals.com/dd-adapt-shakespeare-much-ado-nothing/>.
- 22 Andrew Bridgman, "George R.R. Martin's Open Letter about the Deaths in *Game of Thrones*," *Dorkly* (June 5, 2014): <http://www.dorkly.com/post/63864/george-rr-martins-open-letter-about-the-deaths-in-game-of-thrones>.
- 23 Andrew Bridgman, "We Pranked the Internet So Hard That George RR Martin Had To Get Involved," *Dorkly* (April 11, 2016), <http://www.dorkly.com/post/77792/we-pranked-the-internet-so-hard-that-george-rr-martin-had-to-get-involved>.