

## 13 Music in fantasy pasts: neomedievalism and *Game of Thrones*

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It almost seems as though the task were to guard history so nothing could come of it but stories...

(Nietzsche, 1980, p. 29)

Philosophers of history have long engaged with the opportunities and difficulties associated with excavating the past for use in the present—whenever that present might have been. The above quotation represents Nietzsche’s distinctly anti-historicist perspective on the subject. The past, he thinks, should be a source of inspiration and of invigoration, rather than a plain and regulated site for objectivistic study.

Important here is the distinction between the ‘past’ and what we call ‘history’. History, arguably, is one (or a collection of many) example(s) of the way the past is so often creatively reanimated in a present time. The implications of this are far reaching. For this collection, however, this observation helps in delineating a space for the examination of certain types of fiction which draw upon historical themes and ideas. Considering its outstanding success and increasing currency in current popular culture, this chapter will turn its attention towards HBO’s epic fantasy television series *Game of Thrones* (2011): its eclectic musical scoring practices, both inside and outside the narrative frame, and its relationship to history, musical and otherwise. What are the lessons we could learn from the no-doubt historicised, but ultimately (and overwhelmingly) fantastical, *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) if not exactly those that Nietzsche seems to be advocating?

As the fast-growing field of medievalist studies has been demonstrating, medievalist and neo-medievalist settings present major opportunities at the intersection of both creative and scholarly practice, constituting, in the words of Richard Utz, a ‘semantic site for the fusion of creative and scholarly engagement with the past’ (2011a, p. 109). Emblematic of this medievalist paradigm, the

fantasy fiction genre embodied in *GoT* is a pure enjoyment of history. To advance Nietzsche's disciplinary criticism, invigorating forms of history are indeed found when its guards are—as they quite often are—given the slip.

## **Neomedievalism, between fantasy and reality**

Alongside its source novels, the series *A Song of Ice and Fire (ASOIAF)* by George R. R. Martin, *GoT* belongs to a canon of popular post-Tolkien 'high' fantasy fiction, populated by a large and revolving cast of characters and characterised by ambitious themes and a vast internal mythology. Upon closer inspection, however, *GoT* and its source novel resists easy classification, exemplifying—or intersecting—many of the current trends in popular fantasy in television, film, and video games today: medievalism/neomedievalism, science or speculative fiction, and horror. A burgeoning scholarly literature on the show has had, therefore, to engage with questions of genre first and foremost.<sup>1</sup>

There is no currently agreed definition distinguishing 'medievalism' from 'neomedievalism' and the terms are often used interchangeably. A broader explanation for the two hinges on the use of medieval themes to 'comment on the artist's contemporary socio-political milieu' (see Pugh & Weisl, 2013, p. 1). Umberto Eco was responsible for the first appearance of this particular neo-prefix, speculating in 1973 about an always-present Middle Ages wherein revivals oscillate between 'fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination' (1986, p. 84). Carol Robinson has charted neomedievalism's slippery usage since, coming to locate neomedieval artworks or products at the centre of a multimedia digital vortex, characterised among the rubrics of modernism and postmodernism. Neomedievalism—unlike medievalism proper—as she understands it, is playful and intertextual, a bricolage made somewhat remote from the past through processes of irony and a knowing awareness of its own construction (2012, p. 7). Richard Utz likewise posits that

neomedieval texts no longer need to strive for authenticity of original manuscripts, castles, or cathedrals, but create pseudo-medieval worlds that playfully obliterate history and historical accuracy and replace history-based narratives with simulacra of the medieval.

(2011b, p. v)

These definitions are useful, but the notion of ‘authenticity’, as noted by Shiloh Carroll, is ‘problematic and counterproductive’ to a debate of a ‘fictional text’s portrayal of the Middle Ages’ (2015, p. 60). Indeed, *GoT*, a fantasy in which dragons and magic (not to mention an army of snow zombies in the distant north) reside, has no obvious authenticity, typically defined, by which to be judged. It is set in a parallel universe for which there is no historical source which it might obliterate for productive or playful reasons.<sup>2</sup> *Ivanhoe* (1820)—the early example of nineteenth-century romantic medievalism *par excellence*—could likewise hardly be described as striving for authenticity. It is a fantastical depiction of an idealised waning Saxon nobility, in which real and fictional characters interact. Both works, nevertheless, offer a mode through which historical narratives of our own past can be created or reinterpreted—albeit in different ways.

All the same, *GoT* and *ASOIAF* are conditioned in a compelling and real way by history. Consider the gritty attention to material detail, and multiple narratively significant allusions to historical events and ideas.<sup>3</sup> It would be wrong, then, to preclude a productive role for debates about authenticity here entirely, discounting overly determined or essentialist definitions of the word which do not account for its oftentimes overlooked historical contingencies.<sup>4</sup> George R. R. Martin, for instance, has himself claimed to have produced a text more realistic—and, in a sense, more authentic—than his competitors, whom he accuses of pushing a ‘Disney Middle Ages’ (Martin in Carroll, 2015, p. 60). Unlike an overly sanitised post-Tolkien competition characterised by ‘castles and princesses’, Martin’s universe is full of gratuitous sex, violence, and profound shades of moral ambiguity. As Carroll notes though, his rejection of fantasy clichés is itself entirely artificial (2015, pp. 72–73).

Lauryn S. Mayer, labels the result ‘fetish medievalism’, characterising *ASOIAF* as ‘neither whole nor playfully neomedieval’, whilst refusing any other ‘consolatory framework’ (2012, p. 63).

The modes through which medievalism or neomedievalism interact with genres like fantasy, speculative/science fiction, or horror in *GoT* is complex to say the least. Fantasy, for example, has strong medievalist roots. The earliest artistic products designated as such—originating in nineteenth-century Romantic literature—took clear and avowed inspiration from an imagined medieval world.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, *GoT* is no different, and the world and inhabitants of Westeros have clear European medieval roots.

The film industry, Alec Worley notes, has long struggled with the classification of ‘fantasy’, using it rather as a ‘dumping ground for movies that fail the more recognisable dress code of sci-fi and horror’ (2005, p. 8). But genre distinctions are not monoliths, especially in long-form television media. Indeed, Helen Young sees fantasy and science fiction as interrelated threads in a post-Tolkien tapestry, wherein medievalism acquires layers of dialogic meaning, across the artificial and porous boundaries of genre and text (2015, pp. 6–7).<sup>6</sup> We begin to inhabit a sort of broad medieval ‘world view’ when we enter fantasy worlds, one unmediated by Enlightenment thinking, and populated by a different order of subjectivity or subjectivities. As a reaction against the so-called rationalistic, anti-heroic, materialist, and empiricist bent of modern society, medieval-tinged fantasy, according to Charles Elkins, offers a pure form of escapism into a world where old certainties can be reasserted (1985, pp. 23–31), even if those certainties are, invariably, fictions.

Nonetheless, *GoT* (and *ASOIAF*) self-consciously challenges its fantasy-escapist roots and, in so doing, exemplifies what current television fashion has light-heartedly referred to as offering a ‘sexy blueprint’ (Elliott, 2015, p. 90). Andrew B. R. Elliott locates this tendency towards sex and gore in a complex nexus of commercial and societal demand and audience expectation (2015, p. 101). This is crucial, and the trend of which *GoT* appears a part—variously referred to in the press as a golden (or second golden) age in television—is one unique to television in an internet era.<sup>7</sup> The television

phenomena today proffers an interesting new kind of self-reflexivity, one which shapes audience and genre expectations as much as it subscribes to them.

What really unifies the current moment in popular medieval/neomedieval fantasy fiction in television (and, arguably, also videogame) is precisely a fluid and dialogical approach to style and genre, and a new form of open text unfolding in time and across platforms. Indeed, franchises make use of current immersive storytelling strategies reliant on multi- or, per Henry Jenkins, transmedia, or media mixing techniques (2008, p. 110). *GoT* exists simultaneously across many platforms including novels, television (including a likely future spin-off series), various videogame franchises, online communities and podcasts, licensed music CDs and concert tours. The *GoT* soundtrack and score must be understood in this context.

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*GoT* exemplifies, in many ways, what it means to be postmodern. It is self-consciously popular and knowingly responsive to the hot-topic issues of our age: gender issues, for example, in which it is both curiously progressive and regressive in its celebration of female leadership and in its exploitation of their sexualised bodies. To turn to musical themes, its extra-musical sound world is playfully intertextual. But *GoT* has modernist traits too. It proudly boasts a level of psychological depth for its characters: depictions which evoke a mid-century modernist-realist ideal. While, on one hand, it challenges the grand 'winner' narratives and indeed the entire concept of the narrativisation of history—as in the pop-spectacle of the Red Wedding massacre in season 3, episode 9 'The Rains of Castamere'—its historical goals seem reconstructive rather than deconstructive. The story unfolds, for example, in a liminal epoch which echoes the transition in the late Middle Ages from a decentralised feudal power structure towards an increasingly centralised nation state centred on the Iron Throne at King's Landing.<sup>8</sup>

Underneath the subversive plot twists and cliffhangers (well calibrated for an internet age where novelty and speculation travel fast), heroic and romantic ideals seem ever-poised, promising

historical renewal at the story's eventual closure, be that Daenerys with her dragons on the horizon or rustic Northmen with their own, eminently more likeable, King. Music here likewise straddles worlds old and new, digital and analogue, cinematic, but also fluid in its new digital and transmedial horizons.

## **Music and its fluid medievalisms**

History—and the medieval in particular—is central to fantasy, a genre which could itself be seen as one of many ways to 'do' history, that is, a modern manifestation of myth, legend, and allegory.

Music, a medium through which myth and legend were conveyed in pre-modern times, is,<sup>9</sup> fittingly, often crucial not only to the representation of fantasy worlds, but also to their very construction. To do this successfully, however, it must follow the generic and formal conventions which lend a language like music its (perhaps exemplary) world-building potential in narrative media. Music, then, occupies complex, but privileged, territory. A fundamentally sonic phenomenon, music—despite its preservation in manuscripts—is lost, truly, to history. Its re-emergence in fantasy is revealing, and like fantasy it sits, productively, inside and outside of history: it conditions, and is conditioned by, a fluid narrative context.

Consider the high-fantasy videogame *The Witcher III*, which features many of the sonic shorthands for the past outlined throughout this volume; chant-like male voices, orientalism, and (especially Celtic) folk are exploited adroitly. Music, Foley sound design, and the timbre and accent of the voice actors are combined into an essential strategy of implying certain types of social structure through established medievalist associations: a medievalist soundscape. Rather than waste time with lengthy narrative expositions, such structures are instead sketched through widespread association with a distinctive vocabulary of medievalisms, be they pagan, Christian, urban, rural, etc.<sup>10</sup> Strategies of this sort abound in fantasy. They serve to establish a complex pattern in which both the alterity and

familiarity of the fantastical world is created and maintained. It is this contradiction that has much narrative power, making the fantasy world the perfect site to negotiate complex issues.

*GoT* is no different in this respect, borrowing tokens of medievalism to construct a believable world whilst constantly making nuanced references to, from, and outside of an analogous Middle Ages, and/or present day. Take, for instance, its theme tune by Ramin Djawdi. It continually hints at medieval themes, and the ambiguous minor-then-major third figure in its opening motifs, for example, apes the mutability of (especially) early thirds and sixths through *musica ficta*. The exploitation of the interval of a fifth in the melody, alongside this chromatic instability, helps to give at least a flavour of modality—an instantly recognisable musical signifier for the rural medieval. The limited range of the theme itself is highly reminiscent of chant, perfectly occupying the authentic range of a chant with the lower leading-note extension. As with many chant melodies, it may be divided into two basic units (or *species*), the first of which extends only to the fifth (therefore fitting, with the lower leading-note extension, the plagal range) whilst the second occupies the authentic range perfectly (see Example 13.1). Even the theme's rhythmic and metrical features may be seen to relate to medieval and medievalist aspects. Like so many early works, it may be rendered either in 3/4 or 6/8 (or perhaps *tempus perfectum prolatio minor* or *tempus imperfectum prolatio maior*) and the highly repetitive double iambic rhythmic backing may be seen in many other medievalist film and television scores (see Example 13.2).

<COMP: Place Example 13.1 Here>

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The title sequence and theme tune's real '(neo)medievalness' is born from the subtle marriage of the above with the ahistorical, filmic, string, and percussion scoring. Its message is clear and effective. As K. J. Donnelly notes, a title theme's primary responsibility is to 'provide product differentiation within a crowded area of competing television programmes' (2005, p. 145) and it is certainly effective in terms of 'essential branding'. To this end, we will return to the theme tune and

opening sequence later. We might also consider extra-musical sounds in the opening sequence as important to its medievalist texture: apparently diegetic sound effects (including burning and a metallic swish) which appear to emanate from a giant and floating three-dimensional astrolabe containing a sun and the *GoT* title card. Indeed, the presence of these sounds, in a sense, tussling with the music itself, is a visceral effect that works on a sublinguistic level—sounds, like a metal swish recalling a sword near the listener’s ear, are truly felt.<sup>11</sup>

*GoT*’s wider score exists, likewise, in a nexus of diverse musical genres, tropes, and thematic associations, defying simple categorisation. The cold opening of the first episode of series one, ‘Winter is Coming’, wherein a Night’s Watch expedition north of The Wall meets a grisly end, plays far more heavily on horror tropes (musical and otherwise) than it does on anything we associate with medievalism per se, for example. If not for the presence of swords or the occasional linguistic cue (such as a reference to medieval honour codes), its setting would seem entirely ambiguous and the score, appropriately, goes so far as to avoid what you might call sonic markers of medievalism entirely. In horror film, music has a different sort of presence than it has in other genres, aiming instead for what Donnelly sees as ‘direct access’ to the listener (2005, p. 90), which it achieves through a ‘direct engagement with the physical’ (p. 105).<sup>12</sup> To achieve this, horror film has long drawn on some of the techniques of musical modernism using, in the words of Neil Lerner, ‘unresolved dissonance, atonality, and timbral experimentation as part of its characteristic stylistic qualities’ Lerner (2010, p. ix). It also makes use of the heightened presence of ambient or diegetic sounds, which—like those picked up in the title sequence that follows this scene—have a material, and primal effect on the listener. Donnelly’s suggestion, then, that a horror film score produces a kind of enveloping ‘sonic architecture’ inhabited by the listener (p. 106) is entirely relevant, and an understanding of the musical scoring of the opening scene of ‘Winter is Coming’ would be incomplete without the inclusion of its broader sonic environments. Sound and music interact across diegetic and non-diegetic boundaries to insert its audience into the drama, physically and psychologically.

An overtly 'medieval' approach would have undermined the clearly intended horror effect of these opening scenes. That cold opening transitions immediately into the title sequence and the effect is all the more striking for it. The theme tune's latent medievalism (and thereby the fantasy medievalism of the show itself) is dramatised, and therefore truly introduced, via a noticeable tonal shift.<sup>13</sup> Our earliest moment of recognisable sonic medievalism in the underscore is reserved for the first scene following the credits. As the knights of the North hunt down a deserter from the Watch, we hear something resembling a militaristic drum motif (doubling as an aural bridge from the signature theme tune accompaniment), whilst our first glimpse of Winterfell a moment later is met with a whispered fanfare on synthesised brass: the scoring, however, is understated.<sup>14</sup> As Haines has noted, trumpet fanfares and horn calls are medieval film's most 'visible music', and establish an appropriate sound world instantly, allowing the audience to crisscross diegetic and non-diegetic zones (2014, p. 66). A further scene, 10 minutes later, when King Robert Baratheon retinue's approach to Winterfell is watched by a young Bran Stark from the castle tower, strikes a more stereotypical tone as an upbeat folksy number with modal leanings heralds the arrival of royalty.<sup>15</sup>

For a further example of porous genre definitions, we may skip forward to series six, episode ten 'The Winds of Winter' (the final episode of series 6). This departs entirely from the usual scoring, abandoning medievalist (and horror) tropes in favour of a romantic post-minimalism, characteristic of the composer Ramin Djwadi's other recent work for television (such as 2016's *Westworld*). From the very opening, the use of the piano (otherwise absent from the score) is an arresting choice, and its anachronistic presence stands out in a score necessarily dominated by already anachronistic instrumental textures. Djwadi and the show makers have acknowledged this, stating in an interview that

the piano is not really in the language of the *Game of Thrones* score[...] it's a fantasy show and fantasy world, and already in the history of the show, I've run wild with

instrumentation. There's [sic] modern synthesizers in it and all kinds of things. So why not? Let's have the piano. It'll be a big surprise[...]

(Wigler, 2016)

Djwadi's observations are revealing. This episode was made a full six years after the 'Winter is Coming' episode, and a long-running show like *GoT* reflects complex creative processes which unfold in time itself, demanding something different than the kind of filmic assumptions we have been drawing upon in much of our analysis. The motivic language of this episode too eschews the usual leitmotifs that have been developed throughout the series: we see Lannisters, but do not hear their familiar sonic cue, the 'Rains of Castamere' (something to which we will later return). The overall effect is complex. A profound sense of unease permeates the scene; we are cut free from everything we have come to expect sonically in the world of *GoT*. The dual effect of this is to deepen our uneasiness (perhaps mirroring that of character Margaery Tyrell on screen) whilst giving no hint of what is to follow. An explosive climax, to which the series had been building, at the apex of this scene is therefore particularly shocking.

Clearly, the soundtrack contributes to an interesting fluidity which encompasses horror and the medieval (and more beside) in the show's fantasy-medieval whole. And, as is so often the case within *GoT*, the soundtrack is key to the transition between different modes of cinematic experience. This is vital, and the experiential breadth offered by a show like *GoT* is widely considered new for a medium historically thought to trail behind film for narrative scope and spectacle. Indeed, *GoT* is thought to be at the forefront of a trend now popularly referred to as a golden (or second golden) age in television, made possible by current technological advancements and audience trends relating to streamable content.<sup>16</sup>

Big budget and long-form television storytelling can do much that film cannot. Its story (or stories) is told over years, not hours. Moreover, trends and techniques of production (and their creative

personalities and personnel) change and evolve along with an audience whose engagement with this 'text' is conditioned as much by the time *between* episodes as it is by the episodes themselves. There is a resultant creative space occupied in what might variously be described with the rubrics of intermediality or transmedia,<sup>17</sup> a borderless creative repository which the *GoT* promotion team (drawing on a ready-made audience of creatively involved fantasy readers) have ably exploited and into which music can come to reside naturally.

## **Music, song, and transmedia (across boundaries)**

There are a number of clear, if subtle, interconnections between *GoT* and rock music. Two examples appear in the diegetically occurring songs *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* and *The Rains of Castamere*. *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* (the text of which, as found in the book and as found—notably adapted—in the show, is given below) is taken directly from the source material on which *GoT* is based, the *ASOIAF* series of books. In the novel, it is presented as a folk song which is known throughout the Seven Kingdoms and enjoyed by both the nobility and the peasantry. The full text of the song is given within the book and it is performed in a variety of contexts within the text, appearing at least once in most of the books of the series.

The Bear and The Maiden Fair: *ASOIAF*

A bear there was, a bear, a bear!  
All black and brown, and covered with hair!  
Oh, come, they said, oh come to the fair!  
The fair? Said he, but I'm a bear!  
All black, and brown, and covered with hair!

And down the road from here to there.  
From here! To there!  
Three boys, a goat, and a dancing bear!  
They danced and spun, all the way to the fair!

Oh, sweet she was, and pure, and fair!  
The maid with honey,  
In her hair! Her hair!  
The maid with honey in her hair!

He smelled the scent on the summer air!  
The bear! The bear!  
All black and brown and covered with hair!  
He smelled the scent on the summer air!  
He sniffed and roared and smelled it there!  
Honey on the summer air!

Oh, I'm a maid, and I'm pure and fair!  
I'll never dance with a hairy bear!  
A bear! A bear!  
I'll never dance with a hairy bear!  
He lifted her high into the air!  
The bear! The bear!

I called for a knight, but you're a bear!  
A bear! A bear!  
All black and brown and covered with hair!  
She kicked and wailed, the maid so fair,  
But he licked the honey from her hair!  
Her hair! Her hair!

Then she sighed and squealed and kicked the air!  
My bear! She sang. My bear so fair!  
And off they went, from here to there,  
The bear, the bear, and the maiden fair.

## The Bear and The Maiden Fair: *GoT*

From there, to here. From here! To there!  
All black and brown and covered in hair!  
He smelled that girl on the summer air!  
The bear! The bear!  
The maiden fair!

Oh, I'm a maid, and I'm pure and fair!  
I'll never dance with a hairy bear!  
I called a knight, but you're a bear!  
All black and brown and covered in hair!

He lifted her high in the air!  
He sniffed and roared and he smelled her there!  
She kicked and wailed, the maid so fair!  
He licked the honey all up in her hair!

From there to here. From here! To there!  
All black and brown and covered in hair!  
He smelled that girl on the summer air!  
The bear! The bear!  
The maiden fair!

And the bear, the bear!  
The maiden fair!  
And the bear, the bear!

She sighed and she squealed and she kicked the air!  
Then she sang: My bear! My bear so fair!  
And off they went into the summer air!  
The bear, the bear,  
And the maiden fair!

From there to here. From here! To there!  
All black and brown and covered in hair!  
He smelled that girl on the summer air!  
The bear! The bear!  
The maiden fair!

And the bear, the bear!  
The maiden fair!  
And the bear, the bear!  
The maiden fair!  
And the bear, the bear!

Author of the source novels, George R. R. Martin, sought to create a rich and fully formed world, complete with its own musical culture. Even in a medium without sound as such, music plays a crucial role in processes of world-building. This places *ASOIAF* into a tradition which includes the works of Tolkien, whose output is packed, noticeably, with song.<sup>18</sup> In evoking participatory music making of this sort, Martin draws not only on present practices for depicting the past, but on medievalist conceptions of musicality within the Middle Ages as well, by evoking ideas of folk music and minstrelsy.<sup>19</sup> Such a strategy serves an effective narrative function, evoking certain social structures as part of a broader feeling or aesthetic. In mirroring a famous device associated with Tolkien, it also serves to situate the work squarely within the canon of medievalist fantasy of which Tolkien is considered a founding figure.<sup>20</sup> Martin's otherwise unheard medieval sound and song world, therefore, is doubly medievalist, drawing both on popular conceptions of the 'real' medieval, and of the fantasy medieval as filtered through diverse and modern literary traditions.

*The Bear and the Maiden Fair* offers narrative parallels through the common device of foreshadowing,<sup>21</sup> and its text makes obvious allusions to the relationship between several central figures, for example, the 'fair maid' of Daenerys and the bear that is the house sigil of Jorah Mormont, or the frightening and strong (bear-like) figure of Sandor Clegane rescuing Sansa Stark. This symbolism of an ostensibly frightening character later coming to embody chivalric ideals and

offering rescue is something which is frequently played upon by the musical use of this song, not only straightforwardly but also in inversion: monsters may become knights but so too do knights become monsters.<sup>22</sup>

Like the source material, *GoT* makes extensive use of *The Bear and the Maiden Fair*. Our first glimpse of the song on screen is a diegetic rendering of it sung solo on horseback as a band of soldiers (who join in with the song during the chorus) travel through the woods (see Figure 13.1) in season 3, episode 3 'The Walk of Punishment'. Here the song serves many functions: the Northern Irish accent of the singer, played by Gary Lightbody of the band Snow Patrol evokes concepts of Celtic medievalism discussed elsewhere in this collection, for example.<sup>23</sup> The song's performance itself likewise recalls tropes of brotherhood and shared identity between the on-screen soldiers. Lightbody's presence moreover serves a strategy of intermedial spectacle, in which the subtle celebrity cameo can play into *GoT*'s broader cultural capital. Perhaps most importantly, however, it serves to foreshadow a number of recapitulations of the song in the show's numerous story arcs. Following the shocking removal of Jamie Lannister's hand at the end of that same episode, an abrupt jump cut to the ending credits introduces a somewhat ironic tonal shift when *The Bear and the Maiden Fair*, sung by indie rock band The Hold Steady, appears in up-tempo punk form. Heavily distorted electric guitar, bass, and drums are entirely absent from the usual musical language of *GoT*. It is an incongruous moment designed to shock, but in the liminal and culturally porous space of the closing credits, the song's transmedia transformation acquires extra narrative potential.

<COMP: Place Figure 13.1 Here>

Viewed through the lens of its punk rock recomposition (which, moreover, occurs truly outside, not just of the show's diegesis, but of the show proper), the initial and 'authentic' version of *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* takes on an entirely different meaning. What had seemed a joyous folk ballad, sung to evoke a sense of camaraderie, becomes more potent, powerful, and violent. That ostensibly the same group were responsible both for the initial version of the song and the shocking removal of

Jaime Lannister's hand completes our inversion of the trope: knights have become monsters, again. The character of Jaime himself seems to vacillate between the chivalric and the monstrous too, and with the removal of his hand he is robbed of his martial prowess, an important part of his chivalric identity (he was formally the premiere knight of the King's Guard)—a monstrous transformation for a nobleman.<sup>24</sup> Four episodes later (series three, episode seven 'The Bear and the Maiden Fair'), the song returns, chanted by a crowd who watch Brienne of Tarth fighting a bear in a bear pit. On face value, we have a bear and a maiden but, at a different narrative level, it signals a character vacillating between the poles of chivalry and monstrosity. Jaime Lannister, despite his recent wound, leaps into the pit, rescuing Brienne and again making the move from monster to knight. The presence of the song thus signals key points of character development and occupies centre stage in the narrative process.

*GoT*, then, makes real the music and song of the novels, imbuing them with associations inside, and outside, its narrative world, and then raising them to a type of leitmotif: the song's melodies coming to infuse the underscore in more traditional filmic scoring conventions. Music becomes—through its changing leitmotivic associations—imbricated into the moral or ethical ambivalences or subversions that characterises *GoT*'s much praised televisual storytelling milieu.<sup>25</sup> The transformation of *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* is central to the dramatisation of the relationship of the characters of Brienne and Jaime—a relationship which typifies the rare emotional complexity which has won the show plaudits. Brienne, for example, offers a critique of the archetypal 'fair maiden' and is a woman who, despite her noble birth, possesses considerable martial prowess, size, and strength (pursuing a career as a knight despite the scorn she receives for it).<sup>26</sup> Jaime's story arc, by contrast, is characterised by fraught transformations between stereotypically handsome chivalric knight and monster or bad guy (and perhaps back again).<sup>27</sup> Against the text of the song, which has acquired by now a knowing sense of irony, it is unclear who of the two is acting as the damsel in distress, who is the monster, and who is the chivalric knight. These latent associations with the song, once established, recur elsewhere. Its appearance at the wedding of Sansa Stark and dwarf Tyrion (season

three, episode eight ‘Second Sons’), for example, points to the latter’s physical deformity—and therefore his rejection among the Lannisters—casting him in the role of the bear, yet his relatively chivalric intentions set him apart, despite the song’s implied cruelty toward him.<sup>28</sup>

*The Bear and the Maiden Fair* is again heard diegetically on a set of seemingly period medieval instruments during the (so-called Red) wedding of Edmure Tully and Roslin Frey (season three, episode nine ‘The Rains of Castamere’)—a clear nod to a tradition of celebratory court music in medieval cinema (see Figure 13.2).<sup>29</sup> This ensemble includes two lutes, a psaltry, a bass viol (played with a modern cello bow hold, rather than a viol hold), a kind of bodhrán (played by Coldplay’s drummer Will Champion), and some kind of portative organ, all of which are seen on screen. Other heard instruments are unseen (i.e., residing off-screen, or in the score, a recurrent trope of medievalist diegetic scoring).

<COMP: Place Figure 13.2 Here>

The second of the two Westerosi songs to be discussed in this chapter, *The Rains of Castamere* (the text of which is given below), is, in many ways, handled similarly to *The Bear and the Maiden Fair*. It is heard initially in seasons 2 and 3 as a diegetic tune sung or whistled by several characters. After its appearance in season three, episode nine ‘The Rains of Castamere’,<sup>30</sup> it acquires a position of vital importance: thereafter becoming a prominent leitmotif for the Lannister family. Indeed, the musicians themselves turn out to be bow and arrow-wielding assassins. Celebratory court scenes with diegetic music such as this (tragically subverted in *GoT*, of course), are another prominent idéologème in John Haines cinematic Middle Ages (2014, p. 67). In the implied pre-modern world of *GoT*, such spaces function as zones of shared musical experience, much like the cinematic concert hall scenes detailed by Ben Winters (2014). Winters’ notion that such scenes reflexively reconfigure the nature of music’s presence in a film (or, indeed, television) seems apt here. Spaces which allow music to operate across diegetic, non-diegetic, and—in so far as they appear to have also been experienced internally by a principal character—metadiegetic boundaries,<sup>31</sup> provide ways of thinking

about the score as a sort of character in the narrative.<sup>32</sup> A physical character's response to the score then implies shared subjectivities between musicians and performers on film, and with listeners at home or in the theatre. Indeed, it is Catelyn Stark's apparent, and sole, recognition of the tune which signals a tragic change in tone. It becomes the model for our response to the song as a leitmotivic underscore later in the series.

The Rains of Castamere (*ASOIAF* and *GoT*):

And who are you, the proud lord said,  
that I must bow so low?  
Only a cat of a different coat,  
that's all the truth I know.  
In a coat of gold or a coat of red,  
a lion still has claws,  
And mine are long and sharp, my lord,  
as long and sharp as yours.

And so he spoke, and so he spoke,  
that Lord of Castamere,  
But now the rains weep o'er his hall,  
with no one there to hear.  
Yes now the rains weep o'er his hall,  
and not a soul to hear.

*The Rains of Castamere* has a backstory, which is gradually revealed to the audience throughout the series, and especially to those with knowledge of the novel or those engaged in its vast transmedia universe (be that in videogames or online discussion communities).<sup>33</sup> The song's text depicts the Lannister's victory over, and total destruction of, another, once allied, family. Its appearance serves as warning to the viewer and victim alike. Indeed, on screen, its significance is only recognised by Catelyn Stark, by which time it is far too late for an intervention. The return of *Rains of Castamere*, again at a wedding and this time before the death of Joffrey in series four, episode two 'The Lion and

the Rose', is another cheeky act of foreshadowing, which promises another, much more anticipated, slaughter.

As with *The Bear and the Maiden Fair*, its meaning is supplemented, and indeed abounds in, its trans- and intermedia associations. The song appears in two closing credit sequences, once performed by The National (season two, episode nine 'Blackwater') and the second time by Sigur Rós (season four, episode two 'The Lion and the Rose'), The latter also cameo as musicians—maligned by King Joffrey—for a diegetic performance of the song on portative organ during another wedding in the same episode (see Figure 13.3).

<COMP: Place Figure 13.3 Here>

A constant reference to or use of rock music, from regular cameos by famous rock musicians to the use of rock 'recompositions' of Westerosi songs in the ostensibly Earthen credits, is one of the more innovative aspects of the score. Of course, there is a long tradition bridging rock and fantasy medievalism and the styles, imagery, and subject matter of popular music since the folk revivals of the 1960s and 1970s have seen innumerable invocations of our medieval past.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the most interesting aspect of how it is employed by *GoT*, however, is the degree to which it occupies the liminal spaces of the credits and the intertextual transmedia of the all-star cameo.

Even if such transmedial aspects are relatively new (or at least explored and exploited more thoroughly today), types of digital marginalia—adorning and extrapolating at the narrative's edges—are themselves nothing new. Similar moments may be seen in the score to *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), in which pop music performers such as Enya, contributed songs for the credit sequences, songs that provide additional layers of narrative commentary. Traditions of convergence between popular music and film, and with television go as far back as the 1980s and 1990s (Donnelly, 2005, p. 148), and reflect competing commercial and corporate interests, and create new audiences or markets. They are today, generally speaking, never allowed to intrude into the film world itself, however.

Alongside its presence in the credits, popular rock music is a continuous silent diegetic character in each of the cameos, and indeed in the show itself. By recognising famous rock musicians, for example, we can experience anachronistic genres or idioms without interruption to the show's tightly constructed sonic verisimilitude. The evocation of folk music (however anachronistic it might actually be) may carry the obviously 'authentic' medieval affect for creators, but rock, because of its own peculiar medievalist traditions, has extra power to collapse a sense of historical distance between our fantasy past and today.<sup>35</sup> In the episode-delineating space that is the closing credits, a playful intertextuality recalls the medieval motet in which a sort of polyphony of 'text' is as important as polyphony in musical voice. The space of the credits may be read as an additional polyphonic voice in a dialogic cacophony, a musical text that comments on the main score, on the drama itself, and that directs viewers in anticipation for future episodes. Indeed, while the credits collapse our sense of the suspension of disbelief, deconstructing and dematerialising a cast of characters with their real names, a commentary persists, one which critiques, and elaborates the themes within.

Analysed earlier in this chapter, the title sequence and its attendant—now instantly recognisable—music has been a particularly successful signature for the *GoT* franchise. Its neomedievalism is cogently expressed in double iambic accompaniment and triadic (slightly modal) harmony, whilst the viewer soars across the continents of Westeros and Essos which are located on the inner surface of a sphere. Finally, we come to rest on the 'Game of Thrones' title card. Such a sequence, as with the liminal closing credits, delineate a space between our world and that of the fictional narrative. James Buhler (2017) has commented on the role of music in corporate franchises and immersive world building. As a vestige of ritual, music, he says, seems to encourage a viewer, like nothing else, to embrace a fictional universe (p. 5), but it does so through the language of corporate branding and ownership. Therein lies a tension: epic scores 'initiate' a world whilst allowing us to forget its 'corporate origins' (p. 8). The score's function as a form of epic branding, then, is its ultimate asset in

a complex transmedia landscape, providing the bridge between realities, giving *GoT*, its universe and its brand, substance in our world as well as its own.

## **Conclusion: (fantasy) past made present**

*GoT* may not, strictly speaking, be historical, but it nonetheless draws deeply on many of the medieval or historical tropes explored elsewhere in this book. To assess its true import to history and its role in relevant types of fiction—and to carve out a space for a discussion of what music does particularly well in this regard—a different type of language might be necessary. This would avoid interpretive dead ends and what we might call a stifling hermeneutics of chronology or temporality and go beyond epistemologies of authentic (or inauthentic) anachronisms.

In this we follow literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who offers the notion of ‘presence’ as a post-hermeneutic strategy of interpretation which emphasises sense and experience (or, rather, presence itself) over types of meaning, rationalistic and narrowly defined. Indeed, ‘time’ as an abstraction for Gumbrecht is the ‘primordial dimension for any meaning culture’ (2004, p. 83).

Porous types of atemporality, recurrent in this book, then become different when understood for their ‘presence effects’ as opposed to effects of ‘meaning’ and ‘interpretation’. Such ‘presence effects’ induce magic-like ‘moments of intensity’ (p. 97) or ‘epiphany’ (p. 111), and to reify them through interpretation would be short shrift for experiences crucial to our ‘world-appropriation’ (p. 86). He advocates, ultimately, that we should practically aim to ‘oscillate’ between presence and meaning ‘effects’, finding a ‘productive tension’ (p. 19)

It is fitting then that, for Gumbrecht, the European Middle Ages is an example of a true ‘presence culture’, employing this notion of ‘presence’ to articulate creative engagements with the medieval world from the fifteenth century in early *cancioneros*. Reading some fifteenth-century *cancioneros* through this lens, he argues that the stories, which were simultaneously historical, self-referential, and satirical, established a courtly ‘play world without a beyond’ (Gumbrecht, 1991, p. 328). The

formation of such a fictive world that crosses boundaries through a process of relativisation has clear synergies with the strategies at work in *GoT*. In effect, Gumbrecht's notion of presence, used to illuminate the recurrence of themes from the Middle Ages in fifteenth-century literature with a more modern bent, suggests that such 'synchronism of the asynchronous' (1991, p. 328) is far from a new phenomenon. *GoT* might be seen as establishing a similarly rich 'play world' that affords synchronicity to inherently asynchronous elements.

*GoT* makes versions of the past 'present'. This 'presence' is something that is felt, or performed, and in which a person is immersed. *GoT*, of course, has particular strategies for doing this: by availing itself of new trans- and intermedia narrative and marketing techniques; by disrupting genre conventions; through its sonic, visceral, interplay of music and sound; and by facilitating shared subjectivity in the transition of music between its realities.

Such a perspective can be cast back—critically—across this collection, be that in the recurrent use of Celtic musical tropes, for example, the transmutation of history with geography, or in the complex interplays of 'high' and 'low' culture (and more beside). Through 'presence', examples such as these give the past materiality in a way not easily defined, and not, by the usual definition, authentically. Set in fantasy, however, *GoT* becomes a helpful metaphor for the historic themes of this collection. Why not then, cast those ideas onto history itself; we did, after all, begin by saying that the past is a sort of fantasy. *GoT* like other medievalist fantasy, for all its intellectual intrigue and contradiction, reproduces the past by making it present.

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Figure 13.1 Bolton Soldiers march whilst singing *The Bear and the Maiden Fair*; Gary Lightbody of Snow Patrol leads the song at the front.

Figure 13.2 Period style ensemble plays at the Red Redding of Edmure Tully and Roslin Frey. Coldplay's Will Champion can be seen playing a drum in the centre.

Figure 13.3 Sigur Rós perform for King Joffrey at the latter's wedding to Margaery Tyrell.

Example 13.1 *Game of Thrones* main title melody.

Example 13.2 *Game of Thrones* main title accompaniment.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this literature will be touched upon in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Except, perhaps the book which serves as its source material, something that it famously has no issue diverging from in often-extreme ways.

<sup>3</sup> After all, the central War of the Five Kings takes inspiration from the War of the Roses. And what is the northern Wall, if not a mythologised and nightmarish reimagining of Hadrian's wall?

<sup>4</sup> The idea that producing an interpretation of a text 'authentic' to a particular age is a contingent assumption promulgated by modernists is well known to musicologists concerned

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with the performance of medieval, or so-called early, music. See, for example, Taruskin (1988) and Morgan (1988).

<sup>5</sup> In particular, that of western Europe as a geographical, historical, and cultural setting. For more information, see Schlobin (1982, p. 236). Indeed, even those aspects that might be described as monstrous or magical are, by and large, drawn straight from the folios of medieval bestiaries, the genre of the romance, or the histories of medieval historians such as Geoffrey of Monmouth.

<sup>6</sup> George R. R. Martin's writing career testifies to this: a former screenwriter, his bibliography covers fantasy, science fiction, and horror genres.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Hoel (2016, pp. 93–109) for a consideration of the role of the novel in an era dominated by television shows like *GoT*. In the 1990s, a similar perspective was taken up in McGrath (1995).

<sup>8</sup> The stylised violence, perpetual feeling of decayed decadence, eroded chivalry, and constant, cloying dirt perhaps brings to mind comparisons with the historical *tour de force* of Huizinga (1924) whose touch could be felt for many years on the historiography of the late Middle Ages.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Lindekens (2017) in the present volume for a discussion of the potential for music to connote the fantastical in the realms of dramatick opera.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this in the context of the *Witcher III*, see Cook (2016). The concept of plural medievalisms is discussed more fully in Pugh and Weisl (2013).

<sup>11</sup> This idea will be taken up again in the discussion of horror film music below.

<sup>12</sup> Donnelly refers here to the use of the 'very high' (as in the stabbing strings in the shower scene in *Psycho*) or 'very deep' drones. Such sounds are tied to the 'intrinsic sounds of the human body' (2005, p. 105).

<sup>13</sup> Imagine, for instance, the strident rhythmic theme tune or heraldic brass fanfare, both of which would certainly work against the intended mood. Perhaps the only medievalist strategy that would evoke the intended pacing and aesthetic would be chant (in a similar manner to how it is used in the *Black Death*, discussed in Whittaker, 2018) and yet this would be striking in an outside setting (and, moreover, chant tends to be avoided in the score as a whole).

<sup>14</sup> As with other examples from screen media, vocal accent seems to play a part in the faux-medieval soundscape. Here, Yorkshire accents clearly stand for medieval accents as they do in films such as *Black Death* (whilst, in this example, also signalling the 'northernness' of the characters).

<sup>15</sup> For more on folk and early music crossovers, see Nugent (2017) and Breen (2017) in the present collection.

<sup>16</sup> See such journalistic criticism as Leopold (2013) and Plunkett and Deans (2013).

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of these terms, see Ryan and Thon (2014).

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Eden (2010) for a discussion of Tolkien's use of music.

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<sup>19</sup> The singing minstrel, of course, being one of Haines' idéologèmes of the Middle Ages (2014, p. 44).

<sup>20</sup> Many examples abound, a good example from the past decade being Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind* (2007) in which music and minstrel culture clearly occupy a central position within the fantasy world he creates.

<sup>21</sup> This particular filmic and televisual technique has become increasingly common in recent years. For an exposition on its theoretical function within television narrative structure in general, and 'satellite scenes' more specifically, see Porter, Larson, Harthcock and Nellis(2002).

<sup>22</sup> This is in tune with the vogueish moral ambiguity that characterises the show and the current television zeitgeist.

<sup>23</sup> See Nugent (2017).

<sup>24</sup> For more on the ethics of disability, see Massie and Mayer (2014).

<sup>25</sup> A growing corpus of critical literature on *GoT* outlines many of the ethical questions explored within the fictional world. See, for instance, Fugelso (2014).

<sup>26</sup> This, and a broader examination of the role of chivalric ideals play in *GoT* is taken up in Goguen (2012).

<sup>27</sup> For an examination of this in the context of his disability, see Massie and Mayer (2014, pp. 52–53).

<sup>28</sup> Tyrion's 'disability' as a dwarf has been the subject of some critical discussion. Indeed, Pascal J. Massie and Lauryn S. Mayer discuss how medievalist fiction is a space where ableist narrative traditions can be, to some extent, overturned, and the medieval landscape is populated by people with disabilities of all kinds: be that through war or disease (etc.). Martin's *ASOIAF* (and by extension *GoT*) is daring in this regard, and by not shying away from such subjects offers the experience of characters who 'refuse to conform to the conventional tropes surrounding disability and launch an implicit challenge to ableist normative standards' (2014, p. 52).

<sup>29</sup> Again, the song has an ironic application. Edmure, who assumes he will be forced into an arranged political marriage with an unattractive bride (our metaphorical bear) discovers her to be the opposite (a maiden fair), but only at the last minute. The book and show ve a reputation for tasteless sexual humour.

<sup>30</sup> Also in the abovementioned on-screen ensemble's set list, signalling literally, and figuratively, the set-piece violence of The Red Wedding.

<sup>31</sup> This is as the term is understood by Gorbman (1987).

<sup>32</sup> See also Ben Winters (2010) for how this might be an alternative to traditional notions of diegesis. The comparison is to think of music as materially embedded in the (inherently unrealistic) film world much as we do with opera.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of *GoT* through the lens of transmedia worlds, see Klastrup and Tosca (2014).

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<sup>34</sup> As well as the obvious links between rock and fantasy in bands that might be described as ‘Tolkien Metal’ who draw deliberately on Tolkien and other fantasy works for lyrical and narrative content—take for example, the concept album epics of Blind Guardian, or even select songs from a much earlier Led Zeppelin—a deeper aesthetic connection pervades much heavy metal. As Straw (1984, p. 118) has noted, the popularity of Tolkien within psychedelic hippy counterculture fed into an iconography of prog rock in the 1970s which drew on fantasy, playing up its images of carnage and pseudo-pornographic themes. This hyper-masculinised version of fantasy imagery then, along with correlated Satanic imagery, came to be an important aspect of heavy metal iconography. For more on these links, see Gibbons (2017) in the present collection.

<sup>35</sup> It ought to be said, by comparison, that, *as per* cinematic conventions, most of the score is typically ahistorical, besides some modal inflections and instrumental textures embedded in an ensemble otherwise dominated by strings and percussion.