

Returning the King: The Medieval King in Modern Fantasy
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ABSTRACT

In an interview with Hy Bender, Neil Gaiman states, “We have the right, and the obligation, to tell old stories in our own ways, because they are *our* stories.” While fantasy stands apart from other types of fiction, it still provides a particular kind of commentary on the culture/time it is being created in, often by toying with older themes and conventions. Stories of the quest for kingship tend to fall by the wayside in favor of the “unlikely hero” tale. While the king’s story is not always vastly different from that of the hero, there are some key points that need to be taken into consideration. Unlike many heroes, especially in the modern sense, kings (whether recognized at first or not) are born for the duty they must eventually fulfill. A hero may be unaware of the problem at first or later reluctant to engage it; more often than not in tales of kingship there is a deep awareness of the problem and the knowledge of their potential in solving it. There is always a sense of inherent purpose and destiny: they must undertake quests in order to legitimize themselves and their power – their right to rule. These stories bear a similar structure and shared themes that can be found in medieval sources as well as earlier myths.

Tales of kingship in modern fiction, specifically in the work of Neil Gaiman (*The Sandman*) and George R. R. Martin (*A Game of Thrones*), are similar to the medieval models, as kingship and the requirements of kingship were popular themes in medieval texts, including *Beowulf* and *King Horn*. The role of the king in epic tales varies from hero to villain, at times even occupying both roles depending on the story. In the tales explored herein and in much of the medieval source material that inspired the fantasy tradition, the king also takes on the role of healer. The interwoven plots of George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series revolve

around the struggle for the rightful rule over seven kingdoms, and while the protagonist in *The Sandman* is in many ways vastly different from Tolkien's Aragorn, the character still exists with a sense of purpose, responsibility, and duty; a regal bearing that does not necessarily occur in the majority of typical heroes. The influence of Tolkien's work both as a scholar and an author is apparent in Gaiman's use of mythology and Martin's style of world creation; both authors have admitted their creative debt to and continuing admiration of Tolkien's style of fantasy. It is impossible to discuss modern fantasy without acknowledging Tolkien as an influence to these two more recent authors. This paper will discuss *The Lord of the Rings* as a bridge between modern fantasy and medieval/mythological sources.

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Returning the King: The Medieval King in Modern Fantasy

Introduction

Andre Malraux said, “The next century’s task will be to rediscover its gods.”¹ Included among these gods are our kings. In a market where the common hero thrives, the king-as-hero has been experiencing resurgence, especially in fantasy fiction. While kingship tales may never enjoy the same consistent popularity as their common-man hero counterparts, they have never fallen by the wayside or been forgotten. King Arthur has enjoyed the most consistent popularity, but even Camelot faded into the background with the onset of modern fiction until Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy appeared. Verlyn Flieger observes, “Larger-than-life heroes are rare in twentieth-century literature; they do not fit comfortably in an age which seems preoccupied with the ordinary.”² Tolkien managed to bring a king, Aragorn, back to center stage by pairing his story with that of the more popular folktale hero Frodo. Since then, Tolkien’s legacy of epic fantasy and world-creation has informed the current fantasy genre. The challenge for more recent fantasy writers has been to not only bring their king-characters to the central point of narrative plot, but to do so without alienating their audiences. In following the outline of Aragorn and medieval kings before him, Gaiman and Martin find a balance between epic heroes and relatable characters.

The popularity of Tolkien’s stories, both in print and as film adaptations, has paved the way for this resurgence of fantasy and the story of the king: *A Game of Thrones* has become a best seller and a popular HBO series; *The Sandman* has won countless awards, including a World Fantasy Award, and there have been talks for the last twenty years about eventually adapting it

¹ Malraux qtd in Hy Bender *The Sandman Companion: A Dreamer’s Guide to the Award-Winning Comic Series* (New York: Vertigo): 1999, xi.

² Verlyn Flieger, “Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero.” *Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Neil D. Issacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), 41.

into a film or TV series. In an interview³ Gaiman suggested that the time for adapting the series may be at hand, given the interest in not only adapting comic books but the returning interest in fantastic tales, including those featuring kingship as a major theme. Many (perhaps most) modern fantasy writers cite Tolkien and medieval stories as a source of influence, and many of them show a continued interest in medieval literature, folklore, and classical mythology.⁴ This influence shows in the common motifs and characteristics that can be traced from tales like *Beowulf* and *King Horn* through *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *The Sandman*, despite the vast difference in the modern genres. The influence of Tolkien's work both as a scholar and an author is apparent in Gaiman's use of mythology and Martin's style of world creation; both authors have admitted their creative debt to and continuing admiration of Tolkien's style of fantasy.

While authors strive to weave unique tales, there is nothing *new* in the stories themselves, not at their core. Story builds upon story; characters come and go under different guises and names; plots and twists and devices are reworked, renamed, given new performances but are rarely ever *new*. Gaiman has said, "We have the right, and the obligation, to tell old stories in our own ways, because they are *our* stories."⁵ In telling stories that feature a king as hero, these authors are calling upon past visions of greatness and drawing modern audiences in with larger-than-life heroes that not only save the day, but bring renewal and strength and hope to their respective kingdoms. Unlike many fairy tale or folk heroes, kings are born for the duty they must eventually fulfill; while a folk hero may be unaware of a crisis, or later reluctant to engage it, kings (epic heroes) bear a deep awareness of the problem and the knowledge of their potential role in solving it. Kayla Wiggins elaborates in Aragorn's case, "While the Aragorn of the novel

³ Geoff Boucher, "Neil Gaiman dreams of Morpheus onscreen: 'A Sandman movie is an inevitability'" *LA Times* 03 Dec 2008.

⁴ Bender, 12.

⁵ Gaiman qtd in Bender, xi.

may occasionally doubt his choices... he is always sure of his fundamental role in life... His entire life has been a training ground for the assumption of the throne.”⁶ This sense of inherent purpose and destiny underlines the mission for legitimacy: the right to rule.

The qualities, rights, and rewards associated with kings and rightful rulers are still a source of inspiration and intrigue in modern fantasy. The role of the king and the character of the king are recurring themes within these stories, which often explore what a king ought to be. The traits of a proper king are often shared with certain characteristics found in more typical heroes, but there are many facets that are unique to the king archetype, including the often sacral/sacrificial nature of their existence. Tolkien’s model of Aragorn fits here again, drawing on the influence of medieval epic heroes: “He is the king, and his destiny will be, must be, to confront the forces of [evil] and reestablish his kingdom. He has endured a long exile, served a hard apprenticeship... His life has been one of self-sacrifice and obscurity as he has fought from the shadows to defend his people, and only he can know at what cost to his personal happiness and peace of mind.”⁷ The interwoven plots of George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series revolve around the struggle for the rightful rule over seven kingdoms, and while the protagonist in *The Sandman* is in many ways vastly different from Tolkien’s Aragorn, the character still exists with a sense of purpose, responsibility, and duty; a regal bearing that does not necessarily occur in the majority of typical heroes. In each of these modern fantasy tales of kingship, healing and reunion become major themes, tied into the right/duty of a ruler.

While fantasy stands apart from other types of fiction, it still provides a particular kind of commentary on the culture/time it is being created in, often by toying with older themes and

⁶ Kayla McKinney Wiggins, “The Art of the Story-teller and the Person of the Hero.” *Tolkien on Film: Essays on Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings*. Ed. Janet Brennan Croft (Altadena, CA: The Mythopoeic Press, 2004), 114.

⁷ Wiggins, 114.

conventions. Stories of the quest for kingship tend to fall by the wayside in favor of the “unlikely hero” tale. While the king’s story is not always vastly different from that of the hero, there are some key points that need to be taken into consideration. Unlike many heroes, especially in the modern sense, kings (whether recognized at first or not) are born for the duty they must eventually fulfill. A hero may be unaware of the problem at first or later reluctant to engage it; I feel that more often than not in tales of kingship there is a deep awareness of the problem and the knowledge of their potential in solving it. There is always a sense of inherent purpose and destiny: they must undertake quests in order to legitimize themselves and their power – their right to rule. These stories bear a similar structure and shared themes that can be found in medieval sources as well as earlier myths.

Background

The lives of these characters follow the pattern of epic heroes past, including obscure births, trial and suffering, movement from obscurity to acknowledgement. They are often considered “other”, different somehow from their companions and those they surround themselves with. In medieval tales this particular motif is known as the “fair unknown” and often involved physical traits that make a king stand out from those around him: young Horn is unusually fair, which causes the Saracens to spare his life;⁸ in Aragorn we see a noble, semi-Elven appearance that harkens back to the Númenorean kings; Dream is the ultimate other, inhuman and distant even when he takes on the guise of humanity; and Daenerys Targaryen bears the silver hair of her family line and an immunity to fire found in some of her ancestors. The struggle faced by modern authors is that kings, or similar characters, are often difficult for audiences to relate to as they are “traditional epic/romance hero[es], larger than life, a leader, fighter, lover, healer... We admire him, but we do not identify with him.”⁹ To circumvent or work through this challenge, Gaiman and Martin, and to a lesser extent Tolkien, found ways to make their larger-than-life rulers seem more human, more relatable, often through their character flaws or the circumstances they find themselves in. The concept of king-as-other has not been abandoned, but these writers concede to the fact that these characters are “above the common herd... We are not like [them], and we know it.”¹⁰ This absence is noted in both literature and popular culture (including comic books), where audiences easily relate to heroes that come from somewhere familiar: from the suburbs or the high school down the road or even the Shire before they launch into some adventure larger than themselves. The larger-than-life heroes, comparable to Beowulf, Horn, or Arthur, have existed on the fringes of popular culture but rarely make it to

⁸ *King Horn* ll. 10-20

⁹ Flieger, 41.

¹⁰ Flieger 41.

the center. These characters are different from the superheroes and vigilantes (including Batman, the X-Men, Spiderman, and Superman) that emerged in the 30s and 40s and continued to rise in the 80s and 90s – they begin in a place of power, even if they are hidden until the right moment, and have a keen awareness of their grand destinies.

Neil Gaiman’s graphic novel series, *The Sandman*, introduces comic book audiences to a more literary comic; as an author he “drew on the religious diversity of his childhood to create a series that became the rarest of mythological constructs – a comic book for people who don’t read comic books.”¹¹ The outstanding, fantastic style of *The Sandman*’s narrative, as well as the themes of kingship and gothic horror, set it apart from other series being published at the time. Gaiman mentions his early exposure to fantasy, especially that of Tolkien, Lewis, and a handful of other writers, as a formative experience that began his interest in the genre. In an interview Gaiman admitted,

I don’t have what it takes to do superhero stories, even though that’s what the vast majority of comic buyers like to read... On the other hand, I can write science fiction, fantasy, and horror... I thought, ‘Okay, I’ll do a series that starts out with characters who are virtually all-powerful and I’ll see where I can go from there.’¹²

The majority of the action in *The Sandman* is set in a modern context with deeply mythological and folkloric overtones. The sole concern of Dream, also known as Morpheus, is to care for the infinite, ever-changing landscape that is his realm, the Dreaming. He is “rake-thin, with skin the color of falling snow... Dream accumulates names to himself like others make friends; but he permits himself few friends... Dream casts a human shadow, when it occurs to him to do so.”¹³ He has no secret identity that allows him to fit into society; he avoids society, he is above it and the consummate *other*. He is not human, instead a billions of years old member of the Endless, a

¹¹ Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Books* (San Francisco: WeiserBooks, 2007), 202.

¹² Gaiman qtd in Bender, 233-234.

¹³ Gaiman, *Season of Mists*, 23.

family of anthropomorphic personifications of universal forces including destiny, death, desire, despair, destruction, and delight/delirium. They are immortal in the sense that they are the personifications of ideas, and therefore cannot be eradicated, though this does not stop them (or others) from trying to end current incarnations of each other.

Gaiman summarizes his ten volume series in a single sentence: “The king of dreams realizes that one must change or die, and makes his decision.”¹⁴ At the beginning of the series, Dream is held prisoner by mortal men intent on stealing his power. After his escape, he spends the rest of the series rebuilding his kingdom and righting past wrongs, which forces him to reevaluate his very existence. A few scholars, most notably Stephen Rauch, have attempted to frame Dream’s tale using Joseph Campbell’s outline for what a hero myth ought to be/typically is. However, these explanations often involve twisting, adjusting, and inverting the model they wish to compare *The Sandman* to in an attempt to make it fit. Rauch admits, “The question of whether *Sandman* is a hero myth is a complex one.”¹⁵ He suggests that one must first expand, then invert Campbell’s notion of hero mythology before attempting to apply it to Gaiman’s work, which leaves something to be desired by way of analysis. If the model must be adjusted so much, does it really fit in the first place? While it is absolutely appropriate to discuss this particular work as a modern myth, by solely addressing it as a Campbellian hero myth (inverted, skewed, or otherwise) much of the subtleties and the influences of medieval folklore and mythology are lost. Peter Rawlik, Jr uses Campbell more successfully, analyzing Dream in terms of archetypes rather than attempting to directly fit the model of the heroic myth. Rawlik goes so far as to address Dream’s failings in fitting the heroic model and discusses his role as a king (and

¹⁴ Gaiman, *Endless Nights*, i.

¹⁵ Stephen Rauch, Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* and Joseph Campbell: In Search of the Modern Myth. (Holicong, PA: Wildside Press) 2003: 39.

his failings in that as well).¹⁶ Despite this success, Campbell's model will not be used in this project. Though Campbell's model provides a general structural outline that fits many myths and folkloric tales, it disregards important cultural elements that play a heavy role in the creation of these heroes and their stories. By generalizing or setting aside these factors, Campbell leaves a one-size-fits-all model that does not account for cultural variances, storytelling styles, or historic influence and interplay. The model also does not seem to account for variations in the hero-type, as it seems to focus on the folkloric hero without any discussion of epic or romantic heroes.

The folkloric/fairy tale hero has enjoyed consistent popularity, as these characters are typically easy for readers, viewers, or listeners to relate to. They come from a humble beginning with no knowledge of their role in the grand designs often featured in their stories. They are often reluctant to take up the call of duty or are unaware of what help they might be. This hero is the "small hero of folktale who proves that even the weak and helpless can succeed, giving hope for the journey to all those who identify with the disenfranchised and the displaced of society."¹⁷ In contrast, the epic hero is one inherently aware of their destiny, whether it has been fully revealed to them or not, and the plot of their tale follows a trajectory toward the fulfillment of their fate. The hero-as-king often falls into this category of epic (and at times romantic) hero. They are born with a purpose, and often this purpose involves the reunification or healing of a kingdom that is either without a ruler or plagued by pretenders to the throne. Their entire lives are often "a training ground for the assumption of the throne"¹⁸ and unlike fairy tale heroes, there is often exile in the beginning of the king's tale, as well as a period of apprenticeship to mentors or even to other kings as they learn the skills needed to fulfill their duties to their own kingdoms. Though fairy tale and epic heroes both have a tendency to come from obscurity, the epic hero's

¹⁶ Rawik, Jr. 45.

¹⁷ Wiggins, 115.

¹⁸ Wiggins, 114.

is generally enforced (often by exile). Wiggins briefly outlines the epic hero pattern as: “an obscure birth from an extraordinary heritage, being reared in secrecy with no knowledge of his true identity, and his movement through trials and sufferings from obscurity to acknowledgement.”¹⁹ This model, while still general and not consistently applicable to some of the monarchs discussed herein, is more useful in analyzing the tales and their medieval influences.

The pattern established in Wiggins’s model, while helpful, is still not enough to establish any on-going patterns from birth to death for kingly characters. To supplement this each of the texts, medieval and modern, have been examined for commonalities. The following events occur consistently: exile, finding mentors, travel, tests of skill, acquisition of symbols of authority, betrayal, and the healing/reunification of a kingdom. Each of these moments marks a significant point in the development of a character into a king, not just a hero. While some of these events coincide with patterns established in the folklore hero’s tale, there is also significant divergence. The exile or obscure birth serves to protect characters whose destiny is key to the resolution of the story; mentors, though not exclusive to king-heroes, play a vital role in the development of leadership characteristics. Questing is another vital aspect of any hero, and in the case of kings these quests often focus around the acquisition of authority and the proving of their right and ability to rule. The betrayal, in some tales, marks the downfall of a king but more often than not provides instead a counterpoint to the rising king-hero, forcing them to prove their worth in serving “the greater good” of their followers and their own purpose. The healing and reunification of kingdoms is often unique to these characters, as they alone have the authority and the power to bring scattered peoples and ravaged lands back together. This is perhaps one of the key differences between the king and the folklore/fairy tale hero as seen in these tales, and

¹⁹ Wiggins, 114.

this healing often comes with some kind of sacrifice on the king's part for the sake the health and wellness of their kingdom.

A Song of Ice and Fire, by George R. R. Martin, is an ongoing medieval fantasy series that is quickly becoming epic in scope. Of the five published novels, the first three (*A Game of Thrones*, *A Clash of Kings*, and *A Storm of Swords*) will be discussed herein. The story is set on two different continents in a fictional world, Westeros and Essos. At the beginning of the series, Westeros, also called the Seven Kingdoms, is under the rule of Robert Baratheon, who won the throne fifteen years ago after a brutal civil war to overthrow the Targaryen dynasty. His death, as well as the execution of Ser Eddard Stark, sets into motion another civil war (called the War of the Five Kings) for the Iron Throne. Across the sea in Essos, the sole surviving members of the Targaryen family, Viserys and his sister Daenerys, live in exile while Viserys plots ways to return to Westeros to reclaim the throne. Part of his planning involves wedding his sister to a barbarian chieftain with a massive army, trading Daenerys for the loyalty of the Dothraki horde. He is eventually killed by his sister's husband, leaving Daenerys the sole survivor of the house Targaryen and the (supposedly) rightful heir to the Iron Throne. Like Dream and Aragorn, Daenerys is seen as "other" by her husband's people and by most of the cultures she encounters in Essos. Her physical difference is often marked, and later her possession of three dragon hatchlings sets her further apart from the people she is surrounded by.

Perhaps most familiar to modern fantasy readers and broader audiences is J. R. R. Tolkien's king, Aragorn. Introduced as Strider in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Aragorn exemplifies the medieval influence on the creation of his character as much as, if not more than, any other monarch discussed herein. Tolkien's direct interaction with the source material as a scholar likely heavily influenced the details of his king-in-exile and the path Aragorn must

follow from unknown ranger to acknowledged king. His development through the trilogy mirrors many of the motifs and tropes found in recorded medieval tales. Like the modern fantasy narratives *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *The Sandman*, *The Lord of the Rings* explores and details the qualities and qualifications of a rightful king. Aragorn's success in gaining loyalty and building armies, as well as proving himself as a capable leader and warrior to his allies, is as crucial as Frodo's success in destroying the ring. The destruction means almost nothing if a rightful ruler is not in place to give structure and authority even with the onset of a peaceful and prosperous age.

Daenerys, Dream, and Aragorn all have certain traits and life events in common with each other and with medieval kings from epic tales, including Beowulf and King Horn. These similarities create an almost unbroken line between literary past and present, marking the qualities valued in rulers and the paths they must take from exile to reunification.

Exile

Exile is an easy way to demarcate important characters from others that appear within a narrative. It immediately creates a sense of otherness, whether the exile is immediately explained or not, and sets the character in exile on a path to reclaim their rightful place within their homeland, either by heroic deed or quest fulfillment or even by conquest. The effect of the exile of a king or heir on their homeland is often devastating with a marked decline either through physical decay or conquest by enemies. This lays the groundwork for a crucial characteristic found in medieval kings and their modern counterparts: the ability to heal and restore their kingdoms. “Where there is no king, or where the king is infirm, the land will also be barren;”²⁰ this concept ties deeply into the exile and loss of the rightful king or heir, and audiences are often first introduced to the barren, chaotic world that is left behind when the king is gone.

The loss of a homeland, in some fashion or another, is a common beginning for many future kings. Whether they are hidden for their own protection, forced into exile by circumstances beyond their control, or voluntary wanderers, the regal beginnings of a king’s life are often hidden or disguised for the sake of the king’s survival. This motif of loss that eventually leads to recovery is used in several stories concerning kings, including *King Horn* and nearly all retellings of the Arthurian legends, most notably T.H. White’s *Once and Future King*. As in *King Horn*, the *Song of Ice and Fire*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, these losses happen early in the future king’s life. It should be noted that for the purposes of this paper, Daenerys will be referred to as a king rather than a queen, despite that this is how she titles herself in the narrative. In pursuing the throne, Daenerys takes on attributes and roles typically ascribed or limited to men in Martin’s created worlds. She grows dedicated to becoming a king in her own right rather than

²⁰ Flieger 50.

remaining content as a queen-consort. She pointedly does not seek a stronger husband to support her, and later in the series makes it clear that any lover she takes is *her* consort.

Daenerys Targaryen's birth is similar to that of Aragorn's in that they are both born in a state of exile and hiding: Aragorn's bloodline has been hidden for generations to protect heirs from the constant search of Sauron and his minions; Daenerys's family was in flight when she was born, and not long after her mother's death she is taken across the sea so that the Usurper (Robert Baratheon) cannot kill her or her brother. Daenerys's state of exile is not entirely realized by her, as she was too young to remember her homeland when she fled it. Unlike Aragorn, Daenerys's royal beginnings are not kept a secret. Viserys constantly reminds his sister that they have a throne waiting for them across the sea and openly proclaims himself to be the rightful heir to anyone that will listen. Daenerys's naivety and youth is shown throughout the first novel, and one of the most telling encounters is with her brother, Viserys, who is desperate to regain his throne:

“Please, *please*, Viserys, I don't want to. I want to go home.”

“Home? How are we to go home, sweet sister? They took our home from us!”

“I don't know...” she said at last, her voice breaking...

“I do,” he said sharply. “We go home with an army, sweet sister. With Khal Drogo's army, that is how we go home. And if you must wed him and bed him for that, you will.”²¹

Daenerys has never thought of Westeros as home, despite that it was where she was born. She has no memory of the land, or the people, other than what her brother has shared with her. Viserys sees her as nothing more than a pawn in the game he plays, a queen to sell to a barbarian king in return for his army and his loyalty. Though Daenerys at first sees herself as nothing more than a prize her brother has sold, she often consoles herself in times of fear or stress with the

²¹ George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam, 1996), 31.

mantra, “I am the blood of the dragon.”²² Even if she does not see herself as rightful heir while Viserys is alive, she has some sense of her specialness, of this unique quality she (and her brother) alone possesses. After Viserys is killed by her husband, Daenerys realizes he was never a dragon, as he so often proclaimed, as “Fire cannot kill a dragon.”²³

Not all future kings suffer exile before or shortly after their birth or during their childhood; Beowulf voluntarily leaves behind his country to seek renown elsewhere, and in *The Sandman*, Dream is already billions of years old when exile is forced upon him. When Dream’s story begins, the protagonist is in a state of vulnerability as a prisoner to unknown assailants. King Horn and Aragorn’s tales are similar in the sense that the young heirs are the victims of loss and exile from their homelands. Though Dream is in no way young, he has been kept away from his kingdom and his duties for seventy years, resulting in the destruction and decay often seen in a king’s homeland with the absence of the rightful ruler. When Dream finally breaks free from his prison he remarks, “I left a monarch. Yet I return naked, alone... Hungry.”²⁴ Dream’s exile in the narrative is considerably shorter than that of Daenerys or Aragorn: he returns to his kingdom as a monarch within the first volume of the series, though he finds it in severe disrepair. He comes across Lucian, a loyal servant, and asks what happened in his absence to cause the current state of things. Lucian replies, “What *happened*? *You* are the incarnation of this Dreamtime, Lord. And with *you* gone, the place began to *decay*, began to crumble...”²⁵ Lucian goes on to chronicle in more detail some of the losses, including the vanishing of parts of the castle and the disappearance or dispersal of many of the servants. Dream knows that he must eventually rebuild, but first he must regain his lost power and strength.

²² Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 84-88.

²³ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 418.

²⁴ Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*, (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 43.

²⁵ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 67.

Following the exile or loss of the rightful king, the lands once ruled often fall into turmoil, darkness, and decay and tend to remain that way so long as the throne is unoccupied, or is in the hands of an undeserving or inappropriate ruler. This state of chaos is seen in the civil wars in Westeros, in the decay and disrepair of the Dreaming, and in the darkness that shadows Middle Earth. In the medieval tales, Beowulf comes to find Hrothgar's kingdom in a state of fear and uncertainty as the monster Grendel roams free²⁶, and Horn must set to right and reconquer his kingdom before taking back the throne. The state of being in exile forces the king to take on a different perspective, often allowing them to look from the outside in, giving them a broader view of the problems at hand. This exile often sets the future king's journey in motion: they must eventually return to their kingdoms and set things to right.

²⁶ *Beowulf*. Trans. Seamus Heaney. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), ll. 126-150; 189-193.

Finding Mentors

Finding a mentor (or several) is often a pivotal part of a future king's story. This teacher helps to set them on, or keeps them on, the path they must follow to the throne, often offering advice or moral support to the unsure or untested monarch. Just as Aragorn gains several mentors in his travels, including Elrond, Gandalf, and Théoden, Daenerys and Dream collect followers and supporters throughout their respective journeys.

Though Aragorn has no shortage of advice-givers in *The Lord of the Rings*, his most important mentors are Elrond, Gandalf, and Théoden. These men all play crucial roles in Aragorn's upbringing and journey to his throne. Elrond raises Aragorn in Rivendell, educating him and hiding his true identity until the time comes for Aragorn to begin training in earnest for his future role. He is the keeper of important family heirlooms and the secret of Aragorn's true lineage, as well as the shards of Isildur's sword, which will someday be reforged and given to Aragorn. Gandalf aids in Aragorn's training, encouraging him to ride with the Dunédain to protect what is left of the northern kingdom. He provides advice and guidance when needed and helps pave the way for Aragorn to enter Gondor as heir to the throne rather than as an unknown ranger. Before the opening of *The Fellowship of the Ring* it is suggested that Aragorn rode often in Rohan, Théoden's kingdom, where he aided the Rohirrim in their battle against Sauron's and later Saruman's minions. He even served in Gondor, the kingdom he later reclaims, under the steward there. Serving other kings is a way for (often unacknowledged) heirs to earn allies and to learn what is expected of monarchs. This same scenario is seen in *King Horn* and *Beowulf*, in which the heroes prove themselves in service to kings in other lands before returning their own. In dealing with Hrothgar Beowulf sees both the qualities necessary to a good king (generosity, hospitality) and a bad king (the inability to protect his people/the provocation of Grendel).

Beowulf becomes a mirror for this behavior later in the poem after he has been king in his homeland. Horn and his followers serve King Ailmar and King Thurston before returning to their homelands as seasoned warriors.

Daenerys begins as an uncertain princess, lost in her brother's fiery shadow, but takes strength from those close to her. Ser Jorah Mormont is among the first she meets, "The exile had offered her brother his sword the night Dany had been sold to Khal Drogo; Viserys had accepted eagerly. Mormont had been their constant companion ever since."²⁷ Like Daenerys and Viserys, Jorah is a man from Westeros, also in exile to avoid punishment for the crime of owning and selling slaves (a crime in Westeros, but not Essos). She sees him as a comforting reminder of the home she cannot remember and a friendly face and ally in the face of her brother's blind ambition and her husband's foreign people and culture. During her wedding, while others offer her expensive and often extravagant gifts, Jorah presents the young princess with "histories and songs of the Seven Kingdoms... written in the Common Tongue."²⁸ These are a subtle but fitting gift for any heir, as they will educate her in the history of the people she may someday rule. Throughout the first novel, Jorah often gives her advice on how to behave amongst her new people, whom he has lived with for several years. His advice aids her in becoming more confident as a *khaleesi* (tribal queen), and as a future monarch. The first glimmer of her growing authority appears not long after she begins her new life with the Dothraki,

"Wait here," Dany told Ser Jorah. "Tell them all to stay. Tell them I command it."

"You are learning to talk like a queen, Daenerys."

"Not a queen," said Dany. "A *khaleesi*." She wheeled her horse about and galloped down the ridge alone.²⁹

²⁷ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 82.

²⁸ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 86.

²⁹ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 191.

This shift in the way Daenerys sees herself is telling, but not as strong as it could be. She identifies herself as a *khaleesi*, but even she still sees her position as that of a barbarian queen, at the head of a foreign people. If not for her husband's approval and backing, it is likely that *khalasar* (nomadic clan/tribe) would ignore her, especially her husband's blood riders. However, this change in her self-perception is still important, marking the first time that Daenerys claims authority for herself and exercises it.

Eventually Viserys comes to berate her, enraged that his sister, a barbarian queen, has commanded him to wait with the rest of the horde. His violence against her prompts her riders to come to her defense, and it is only her command that keeps them from killing Viserys. After her brother is released, Dany sees him differently, "He was a pitiful thing. He had always been a pitiful thing. Why had she never seen that before? There was a hollow place inside her where her fear had been."³⁰ She has never pitied Viserys before, only feared him. This revelation comes at the price of her brother's pride, and it will eventually make him more dangerous as he feels the loss of his standing among the Dothraki, especially as his sister's popularity grows. Though this is a moment of strength for Daenerys, it is important to know that the "hollow place" left over after her fear leaves her is not immediately replaced with confidence. She must gain that slowly, despite this momentary triumph.

The loss of fear of her brother's temper is among the first turning points in Daenerys's development into a stronger woman, bolstered by her new role among the Dothraki and supported by Jorah's wisdom and assurance that she is acting appropriately. Following this encounter, she strips her brother of his horse (a grave insult among the Dothraki, as only slaves walk). When Viserys demands that Jorah punish Daenerys on his behalf, Jorah simply confirms Dany's orders and takes the horse. The conversation between Jorah and Daenerys that follows

³⁰ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 194.

reveals the knight's belief that Viserys is no more rightful heir than he is a dragon – it becomes increasingly clear that Jorah has sided with Daenerys, perhaps believing her to be a more capable ruler than her brother could ever be. Daenerys comes to the same conclusion herself, suddenly and sharply,

“My brother will never take back the Seven Kingdoms,” Dany said. She had known that for a long time, she realized. She had known it all her life... “He could not lead an army even if my lord husband gave him one. He has no coin and the only knight who follows him [Jorah] reviles him as less than a snake... He will never take us home.”

“Wise child.” The knight smiled.

“I am no child,” she told him fiercely.³¹

This chapter is fraught with revelation for Daenerys, realizing both her brother's weakness and her new people's disdain for him. It is these moments that lead to Daenerys realizing that she might be the only true heir to the Iron Throne, the only one left with the blood of the dragon. This is also the point at which she begins to think of Westeros as home, marking the start of her desire to return there herself with her husband's *khalasar* at her back.

Dream's mentors are as varied as those of Daenerys, Aragorn, and Horn, and run the gambit from siblings to gods. Throughout the series, Dream seeks advice from a triad of women called the Three-in-One, the Weird Sisters, the Fates, and the Hecateae. They are the archetypal maid-mother-crone grouping, always appearing together and willing to offer advice, so long as it abides by their rules. In *Preludes and Nocturnes* they allow Dream to ask one question of each of them, and provide him with only one answer, forcing him to choose his questions wisely.

Though they reveal answers to him, upon their departure the sisters warn, “Your troubles are only just beginning!”³² We meet Dream's closest companion (if any of them can be called close) and most honest mentor at the end of the first volume. Having successfully recovered his objects

³¹ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 191.

³² Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 76.

of power, Dream visits his elder sister, Death. He confesses to her that he feels disappointed, despite his success, and rather than giving her sympathy, Death gives her brother the truth:

“You are *utterly* the stupidest, most *self-centered*, appallingest *excuse* for an *anthropomorphic personification* on *this* or any *other* plane! An infantile, adolescent, pathetic specimen! Feeling all *sorry* for yourself because your little *game* is *over*, and you haven’t got the—the *balls* to go and find a *new* one!”³³

Despite this ego-crushing rant, Dream follows his sister as she does her work, and by the end of the volume he has come to realize that, though his “game” of revenge is finished, he has much to do: “Much to restore. Much to create.”³⁴

³³ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 219.

³⁴ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 234.

Travel and Tests of Skill

Traveling and tests of skill are also key elements in the tales of kings and heroes, as movement is often used to show progress or used to introduce certain quests. In *Beowulf* and *King Horn*, journeys are noted and often discussed in terms of structuring the tales. John Hill elaborates, “*Beowulf* is a poem of arrivals and departures... each one usually generating either social tension or expectation... Thus it is a poem of socially dramatic, socially complex scenes galvanized by arrivals and defined in changing, dramatic movements by departures far more so than it is a poem of architecturally balanced oppositions.”³⁵ Similarly, Georgianna Ziegler divides *King Horn* into four sections: Destruction (loss of family and exile), Learning (wiles of courtly love and knighthood), Initiation (moral challenges), and Reconstruction (the rescue of Rymenhild and reestablishment of kingdoms).³⁶ She notes that these sections are bridged by moments of travel between kingdoms. Aragorn’s journey through *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy involves almost constant motion, but can be divided by pauses he makes in Rivendell, Lothlorien, Rohan, and Gondor; Daenerys and Dream, though frequent travelers, cannot always have their stories evenly divided in terms of departure/arrival.

Like Aragorn and Horn, Daenerys spends a significant amount of her story traveling. Her new people are generally nomadic and once she is married to Khal Drogo, the Dothraki horde makes the return journey to their only city, Vaes Dothrak, so that Daenerys can be presented to the *dosh khaleen*,³⁷ the wise women of the tribes and former *khaleesi* themselves. It is in Vaes Dothrak that Daenerys faces a test of her endurance and resolve. Now pregnant with the *khal*’s child, she must eat the raw heart of a stallion before the gathered tribe to satisfy the superstitions

³⁵ John M. Hill, *The Narrative Pulse of Beowulf*. (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 4.

³⁶ Georgianna Ziegler, "Structural Repetition in King Horn." *Neophilologische Mitteilungen: Bulletin de la Societe Neophilologique/Bulletin of the Modern Language Society* 81.4 (1980): 403.

³⁷ The *dosh khaleen* is a group of women, all of them widowed *khaleesi*, that are the only permanent residents of the Dothraki city Vaes Dothrak. They are revered as priestesses and fortune tellers.

of her new people, “Her cheeks and fingers were sticky as she forced down the last of it... The oldest of the crones, a bent and shriveled stick of a woman with a single black eye, raised her arms on high. ‘*Khlakka dothrae!*’ she shrieked. *The prince is riding!*”³⁸ After completing this arduous task, the *dosh khaleen* perform a seeing ceremony to look into the unborn child’s future, proclaiming him to be a prince, “the stallion who mounts the world.”³⁹

After her husband’s death, Daenerys’s travels continue further east, following a comet she first sees on the night she burned Drogo, and on the night her dragons are born. Despite that her followers warn her of the harsh lands ahead, she forces her small *khalasar* onward, testing their endurance and her own in the harsh, unforgiving sands of the red lands.⁴⁰ She knows her people are suffering and weak, but she tells herself, “I must be their strength. I must show no fear, no weakness, no doubt. However frightened my heart, when they look upon my face they must see only Drogo’s queen.”⁴¹ As Daenerys leaves the city of Qarth, beyond the red lands, she gains another ally in Arstan Whitebeard, an old man that calls himself a squire to a eunuch warrior. Arstan saves Daenerys from an assassination attempt and pledges himself to her service after explaining that he and his master have been sent to bring her back to the city of Pentos.⁴² Though Jorah suspects that Arstan is not what he says he is, Daenerys feels indebted to him and trusts him, allowing him to join her *khalasar* before they set sail. Though Arstan never enjoys the close confidence that Daenerys shares with Jorah, the young queen begins to ask for his opinions, trusting his honest and blunt manner.

³⁸ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 410.

³⁹ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 411. Later in this chapter, Ser Jorah explains to Daenerys that her unborn child is part of a Dothraki prophecy: “The stallion is the *khal* of *khals*, promised in ancient prophecy, child. He will unite the Dothraki into a single *khalasar* and ride to the ends of the earth, or so it was promised. All the people of the world will be his herd.” (415)

⁴⁰ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, (New York: Bantam, 1996), 142-143.

⁴¹ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 143.

⁴² Daenerys and Viserys lived in Pentos until Daenerys was wed to Khal Drogo; their host there, Illyrio, has asked that Daenerys return and has sent two servants to fetch her.

Though Dream has less to prove than Daenerys in terms of right and ability to rule, he still faces an arduous test of his skill to negotiate, mediate, and ultimately reward appropriately. In *Season of Mists*, Lucifer abandons his role as ruler in Hell. In an attempt to rescue a former lover, Dream returns to Hell at the height of his power and encounters Lucifer emptying it and locking the known gates. Lucifer explains that he is tired, exhausted of his role and responsibilities and so rather than bearing the burden any longer, he is quitting.⁴³ Dream is baffled by his behavior, unable to comprehend or how why a monarch could come to this decision to simply abandon his realm. When he is finished, Lucifer gives the only key to Hell to Dream, in a way fulfilling the promise he made in *Preludes and Nocturnes*:

“I swore once I would destroy you, did I not?”

“Yes, you did.”

“This is for *you*, Dream Lord. Take it.”

“The key to Hell?”

“*Exactly*. It’s yours now. *Perhaps* it will destroy you, and *perhaps* it won’t. But I *doubt* it will make your life *any* easier.”⁴⁴

The moment he comes to possess the key, Dream receives messages from envoys of various pantheons, including Norse, Egyptian, and Japanese gods, as well as representatives of order and chaos. All of them want the key for their own reasons, and it is left to Dream to decide to whom he will give the key. “In many ways, the gift of the key to Hell is a traditional riddle-problem in that there is really no satisfactory solution that does not engender other problems;”⁴⁵ Dream’s problems begin the moment the ambassadors and messengers start showing up, including two angels from Heaven who are there to observe, and a contingent of demons that want the key

⁴³ Gaiman, *Season of Mists*, 73-74.

⁴⁴ Gaiman, *Season of Mists*, 88.

⁴⁵ Rawlik, Jr. 41.

back. The conundrum Dream faces is that in giving the key to any of these groups, he will inevitably cause problems or provoke the enmity of the all the others. This series of negotiations highlights Dream's ability to act as mediator and host: he must see to the needs and desires of all his guests, and he must treat them all with dignity and respect as they make their arguments before them. Despite his cool temperament and cautious counsel, at one point between negotiations Dream tosses the key down and sighs, "If only it were that easy."⁴⁶

By the end of the volume, Dream has not actually reached a decision and is saved, literally, by a *deus ex machina*. The Creator (though not necessarily the God of Judeo-Christian mythology) speaks through the angelic observers and reclaims the key, placing Hell under Heaven's control.⁴⁷ Dream is relieved and graciously returns the key to its appropriate owners, and just as graciously explains his decision to the other envoys, "I did not create the Hell of Lucifer... nor the realm of which it is a shadow. If its creator wishes to take it back, that is its creator's affair, not mine."⁴⁸ Relieved as Dream is to no longer be responsible for the key, he seems to have little sympathy for the fact that ownership of the key, and of Hell, ultimately means the corruption and downfall of those that have it.⁴⁹ His realm is no longer in direct threat, and so it is no longer his concern.

⁴⁶ Gaiman, *Season of Mists*, 166.

⁴⁷ Gaiman, *Season of Mists*, 176-178.

⁴⁸ Gaiman, *Season of Mists*, 181.

⁴⁹ In this way, the corrupting power of the key to Hell is remarkably similar to that of the Ring of Power in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* – it does not matter *who* has it, the power to corrupt is inherent in the object.

Signs of Authority

Not only must potential kings prove themselves in battle and in their ability to lead and rule, but it is often required that they find or otherwise acquire symbols of their authority and power. In medieval tales these symbols were often weapons, especially swords. Beowulf is presented with a torque and mail by Wealtheow⁵⁰ and later given a sword by Unferth, “a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting... This was not the first time it had been called to perform heroic feats.”⁵¹ During the battle with Grendel’s mother, Beowulf comes upon yet another sword in her gold hoard, “Then he saw a blade that boded well,/... an ancient heirloom/from the days of giants, an ideal weapon,/.. but so huge and heavy of itself/ only Beowulf could wield it in battle.”⁵² For Aragorn, this includes Andruil, the sword reforged from the shards of Narsil (the sword of his ancestor Isildur), the ring of Barahir, and the Scepter of Annuminas. This final item was withheld by Elrond until Aragorn “came to the right” to possess it. Daenerys and Dream must also collect signs of their authority: Dream’s were stolen from him, while the last wealth of the Targaryens, including a crown, was sold to fund Viserys’s and Daenerys’s survival.

Dream’s symbols of authority are all imbued with his being: he created them, and upon losing them he lost a significant amount of his power. Each of the items requires a small quest and each subsequent object is more difficult to procure, the task more arduous. The first item is one familiar to the folkloric tradition of the Sandman: a bag of sand that he uses to conjure

⁵⁰ *Beowulf*, ll. 1216-1270.

“Wealhðeo mæpelode; heo fore þæm werede spreac:/ ‘Bruc ðisses beages. Beowulf leofa,/ hyse, mid hæle, ond þisses hrægles neot,/ þeodgestreona, ond geþeoh tela”

⁵¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 1455-1464.

“Næs þæt þonne mætost mægenfultuma/ þæt him on ðearfe lah ðyle Hroðgares;/ wæs þæm hæftmece Hrunting nama./ þæt wæs an foran ealdgestreona;/ ecg wæs iren, atertanum fah,/ ahyrded heaþoswate; næfre hit æt hilde ne swac/ manna ængum þara þe hit mid mundum bewand,/ se ðe gryresiðas gegan dorste,/ folcstede fara; næs þæt forma sið/ þæt hit ellenweorc æfnan scolde.”

⁵² *Beowulf* ll. 1557-1562.

“Geseah ða on searwum sigeeadig bil,/ eald sweord eotenisc, ecgum þyhtig,/ wigena weorðmynd; þæt **wæs** wæpna cyst,/ buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer/ to beadulace ætberan meahthe,/ god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc.”

dream-things. After getting advice from the Hecateae, Dream decides this item, in the possession of a human, will be the easiest to recover in his weakened state. He temporarily joins with John Constantine, protagonist of the *Hellblazer* comics,⁵³ to find it. Though this is the easiest of his recovery missions, there is still an element of danger, especially from Dream's human companion. The house the pouch resides in has been taken over by dreams, consuming any humans that pass through, and making a prisoner of the one that keeps the bag. The pouch itself is easy to recover: Dream simply takes it, though the loss of it will kill the woman that kept it much like a heroin addict going through withdrawal. This encounter prompts Dream's first act of mercy, though it is Constantine's demand and not any sense of obligation on Dream's part that causes him to give the woman a peaceful death:

“You can't leave her like this.”

“Why not? Her metabolism is obviously *destroyed*. The sand was the only thing keeping her *alive*. She will soon die. Painfully, I would imagine.”

“I said you can't bloody leave her like this!”

“Very well, Constantine. Go outside.”⁵⁴

Using the newly recovered sand, Dream gives the woman one last good dream as she dies. Dream spends some time reveling in the return of even a small amount of his power, letting the sand slide through his fingers as he contemplates his next quest: he knows that his helm is in Hell and that he “cannot bluff Demons as I bluffed the errant dreams with Constantine. But I have the pouch. I have a modicum of power... I have hope.”⁵⁵ The recovery of his helm requires more of his strength as Dream faces off against the demon that has possession of it in a game of words

⁵³ Gaiman, *Preludes & Nocturnes*; *Hellblazer* is another title released by DC Comics that features heavy modern fantastic and mythological themes. Several times throughout *The Sandman* characters from other DC universes make cameo appearances, including members of the Justice League.

⁵⁴ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 101.

⁵⁵ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 109.

that is potentially just as deadly as a physical battle. His success is tied in to his ability to manipulate reality, a skill he has not lost despite being at a disadvantage.

The last item to be recovered is a gemstone, a ruby that Dream calls the “eaglestone,” in which he has invested a substantial amount of his power. This is by far the most arduous task he has faced since escaping his prison and he is nearly defeated by John Dee, who has been using the ruby’s power to wreak havoc as a villain in the mortal world. When Dee destroys the gem (thinking it will hurt Dream), the power inside it is released and instantly reabsorbed by Dream. This final piece of himself recovered, Dream is once more at his full strength and able to begin rebuilding his kingdom.

Unlike Dream and Aragorn, Daenerys must find symbols of her authority rather than recover ones that have been lost. The first signs of her future power come to her as wedding gifts: “... resting on top, nestled in the soft cloth, [were] three huge eggs... The surface of the shell was covered with tiny scales, and as she turned the egg between her fingers, they shimmered like polished metal.”⁵⁶ Dragons are believed to be extinct and the dragon eggs Daenerys is presented with are supposedly petrified, but it is later revealed that they are not petrified, merely in a state of hibernation until someone – Daenerys – can figure out how to make them hatch. Daenerys is constantly drawn to her eggs, often touching them, cradling them, and leaving them in her brazier when she feels they should be kept warm. She suspects that they enjoy the heat, and though she often dismisses these thoughts as silly or irrational, that does not keep her from continuing the behavior. Her treatment of the eggs and her apparent connection to them allude to the “dragon blood” she carries. Viserys sees them as nothing more than something to sell, and even attempts to steal them from his sister so that he can buy an army and ships when he believes the Dothraki will not fulfill their promise to him. Her ability to later hatch the eggs

⁵⁶ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 86.

earns her the title Mother of Dragons, and gains the respect and envy of everyone she encounters for the rest of her journey through Essos.

One could argue that Daenerys's child is yet another sign of her authority, as she does not only become pregnant with a son (or so all believe), but one that will fulfill a prophecy among the Dothraki. However, the child is lost and so too is this symbol of her ability to produce, as she is told soon after that she will never bear children again. She eventually acquires part of her husband's *khalasar*, loyal followers who still see her as a queen, and blood riders:

Wordless, the knight fell to his knees. The men of her *khas* came up behind him. Jhogo was the first to lay his *arakh* at her feet. "Blood of my blood," he murmured, pushing his face into the smoking earth. "Blood of my blood," she heard Aggo echo. "Blood of my blood," Rakharo shouted.

And after them came her handmaids, and then the others, all the Dothraki, men and women and children, and Dany had only to look at their eyes to know that they were hers now, today and tomorrow and forever, hers as they had never been Drogo's.⁵⁷

Among the Dothraki, blood riders are three men that are considered brothers to the *khal*, his closest body guards and allies. By gaining the loyalty of three such riders, Daenerys fashions herself to be a *khal* in her own right rather than retiring to Vaes Dothrak as widowed *khaleesi* are expected to. Following this incident, she also proclaims Ser Jorah Mormont to be the first knight in her Queensguard.⁵⁸ By establishing both a Queensguard and her group of blood riders, Daenerys fashions herself as a ruler in both her native culture and the one she has adopted in exile. This is a crucial move to establish loyal followings in each group, though her Queensguard remains small it is still a representation of what she expects to have in Westeros, as well as an important status symbol in the kingdom she hopes to conquer. With the declaration of loyalty from her newly established blood riders Daenerys has affirmed her right to be *khal* rather than just *khaleesi*. While there has never been mention of a female ruler of the Seven Kingdoms, one

⁵⁷ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 674.

⁵⁸ The Kingsguard is a group of men dedicated to the service of the king of the Seven Kingdoms as personal guards.

might imagine the idea would be better tolerated than that of a female *khal* among the Dothraki.

In taking on the roles and characteristics (especially external symbols such as the braids and bells in her hair) typically ascribed to men, Daenerys asserts herself as an appropriate leader for her *khalasar* despite being female. This balance between masculine strength and the feminine compassion she shows her followers is something Dany struggles with throughout her travels.

Daenerys's ability to survive her husband's funeral pyre and the successful hatching of her dragons gives her unquestioned authority in the face of her *khalasar*, allowing her to finally lead them as she begins her journey back to Westeros.

Battle and the Removal of Rivals

While there are many cases throughout history and fiction of monarchs succeeding by birthright alone, this pattern is lost or found to be wanting in both medieval texts and modern fantasy novels. Though Beowulf will rule by birthright, he seeks to prove himself as worthy of the throne he will inherit; he leaves his people to travel abroad, to earn himself a reputation, before returning to take his place. Horn must take back his kingdom by force and therefore must prove himself capable of the task of first winning it and then maintaining it. Despite the revelation of Aragorn's lineage at the Council of Elrond, "no one expresses the idea that Aragorn *should* be crowned... [this] reflects instead a notion of kingship in which a candidate's bloodline makes him eligible to be king, but is not in itself sufficient to make him king."⁵⁹ It is a requirement for medieval kings to earn their place; especially in Germanic tribes, rulers were not guaranteed the throne by blood/birth right alone.⁶⁰ This concept is played out early on in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, specifically in *A Game of Thrones*, in the character of Viserys. He is the last living son of the Targaryen line and therefore eligible to be heir, but he is unworthy/unproven, whereas Daenerys, who also has a blood-claim to the throne, begins to outshine him early in the first novel. Where Viserys expected others to accept him as king simply because of his lineage, heirs like Aragorn and Daenerys see the need to prove themselves – neither of them expects acceptance or submission from their people without earning it.

Though Daenerys is not a warrior outright, she fights the battles that come her way. In the first novel, they all involve her brother and his temper. The first happens after she is married and offers to sup with her brother. He takes her invitation as a command and considers his sister's gifts insulting, tossing them back at her before threatening violence on Daenerys and the child

⁵⁹ Judy Ann Ford and Robin Anne Reid, "Councils and Kings: Aragorn's Journey Towards Kingship." *Tolkien Studies* 6 (2009): 74; emphasis mine.

⁶⁰ Ford and Reid, 74.

she is pregnant with, “His fingers dug into her arm painfully and for an instant Dany felt like a child again, quailing in the face of his rage. She reached out with her hand and grabbed the first thing she touched... a heavy chain of ornate bronze medallions. She swung it with all her strength.”⁶¹ A few months before this, Daenerys would have never considered violence against her brother and took his abuse placidly, often blaming herself for rousing his temper. Now she fights back, drawing blood when she hits him and then threatening to have her *khas* (bodyguards) finish the fight on her behalf. She uses her husband as a threat, knowing Drogo would likely kill her brother for the insult to her person. She is learning the power that she has at her fingertips, if she has the strength and resolve to command it. Khal Drogo’s army is as good as her own, and her word is law the same as her husband’s in most regards, though Daenerys is often reluctant to use it.

The next time Viserys threatens her, Daenerys finally makes use of her power to influence her husband, effectively removing the only rival she has for the Iron Throne:

The sound Viserys Targaryen made when that hideous iron helmet covered his face was like nothing human... Thick globs of molten gold dripped down onto his chest, setting the scarlet silk to smoldering... yet no drop of blood was spilled. *He was no dragon*, Dany thought, curiously calm. *Fire cannot kill a dragon.*⁶²

Daenerys feels almost nothing at her brother’s death at her husband’s hands, something that might not have been possible earlier in her story. In this last ‘battle’ against Viserys, Daenerys has ensured that she and her son are unchallenged and the only survivors of the House Targaryen. Soon after this, Drogo promises a gift to his wife and unborn son: he will take his *khalasar* across the sea and conquer the Seven Kingdoms for them. Though Drogo is unable to fulfill this promise due to his untimely death, the fervor of it helps to flame the fire already growing in Daenerys.

⁶¹ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 330.

⁶² Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 418.

After Drogo's death and her *khalasar's* journey across the waste, Daenerys faces another battle, this one more spiritual, against the Undying Ones of Qarth. Believing these strange beings will give her a glimpse into her future Daenerys enters their palace, passing tests of memory and courage along the way until she finally reaches them. While the Undying Ones give her what she wants, they soon try to consume her, "Teeth found the soft skin of her throat. A mouth descended on one eye ... Then indigo turned to orange, and the whispers turned to screams... Perched above her, the dragon spread his wings and tore at the terrible dark heart."⁶³ Daenerys escapes the palace with Drogon, her black dragon. Later, her servant Jhiqui braids a bell into her hair, a symbol of victory among the Dothraki. Though it was her dragon that did the killing, Daenerys accepts the bell, knowing "The Dothraki would esteem her all the more for a few bells in her hair."⁶⁴

Like the Germanic tribes and the Norse people of *Beowulf* and the Sagas, the Dothraki will only follow a leader that has proven themselves in battle. A king that is not lucky in battle is one that is unfavored, and not worth following.⁶⁵ Daenerys does not face any true battles until the third book, *A Storm of Swords*, in which she conquers three cities in an attempt to build an army and free slaves. Though she still does not engage in battle directly, she orchestrates the overthrow and conquering of Astapor⁶⁶ and Meereen⁶⁷ and negotiates the surrender of Yunkai.⁶⁸ With the conquering of Meereen, the final city in her sweep through the coastal south of Essos, Daenerys settles her debts with the mercenaries that have made up a part of her army, rewarding her soldiers in a fashion similar to that of Germanic, Norse, and Anglo-Saxon kings – a king that

⁶³ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 531.

⁶⁴ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 656.

⁶⁵ Ford and Reid, 75.

⁶⁶ Martin, *A Storm of Swords* (New York: Bantam, 1996), 314-315.

⁶⁷ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 804-805.

⁶⁸ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 487-488.

did not reward his loyal followers was one that could not count on that loyalty lasting. It was expected that a good ruler rewards great deeds, as Hrothgar and Wealtheow reward Beowulf with treasure and armor from their hoard. Rather than continuing on her intended path through Essos, Daenerys stops in Meereen, deciding that now that she has had practice with military strikes and leading her wandering people that she must settle for a time, “My children need time to heal and learn. My dragons need time to grow and test their wings. And I need the same. I will not let this city go the way of Astapor. I will not let the harpy of Yunkai chain up those I’ve freed all over again.”⁶⁹ Daenerys realizes that while she has been successful thus far, she has never ruled a city, never mind seven kingdoms. In order to confront her usurper, she must learn to govern a kingdom as well as lead an army, and by settling in Meereen she hopes to accomplish the former before moving closer to Westeros.

Dream’s battles happen primarily in the first volume and the ninth. One could argue that his first real triumph is his escape from captivity early in *Preludes and Nocturnes*. This test of his endurance – both the ability to wait for seventy years and then mustering the strength for revenge upon release – ends fairly quickly with the weak king barely able to return to his kingdom. Despite this weakness, Dream decides he must recover the symbols of his power after he receives what little information the Hecateae are willing to give.

The bag of sand is relatively easy to retrieve; the second battle for the recovery of his helm is more challenging, though not in the physical sense. Like the riddle games found in Norse myth and in Tolkien’s novel *The Hobbit*, Dream decides to match wits with the demon that has stolen his helm with the vast population of Hell and its princes as witnesses and judges. Since he cannot use his power to coerce the return of his helm, this battle, despite being one of words, has deadly consequences; Dream must outsmart the demon in order to win, or else risk being trapped

⁶⁹ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 817.

in Hell while still too weak to truly defend himself. Unlike Beowulf, Horn, or Aragorn, Dream is starting at a disadvantage, weakened after years of imprisonment, but his imagination and ability to weave words is undamaged, “A change in direction, but still an old gambit. I think... I think I understand how Choronzon plays. How I can turn it against him.”⁷⁰ Though he wins, Dream must still convince the princes of Hell, especially Lucifer Morningstar, to allow him to leave. He accomplishes this by reminding the princes what power dreams have⁷¹ even in Hell. This humiliates Lucifer, which leads to him promising “to destroy [Dream]”⁷² – this threat is later followed up in *Season of Mists*, in which Lucifer gives Dream the key to Hell, believing the riddle of disposing of it will lead to his downfall.

Dream’s second true battle against John Dee to recover his ruby is more physical and is taxing on what strength Dream has managed to recover thus far. Like the helm, he cannot simply take back what is his, but must win it, as this object is the most powerful of the three. Dream is forced to pursue Dee through the fringes of the Dreaming and is nearly lost as Dee draws on the corrupted power of the ruby. Thinking it will end Dream, Dee destroys the gem, releasing its power and allowing it to be reabsorbed by Dream: “Destroying it, you released the power stored in it. My control of the dream world, it’s all mine again.”⁷³ Dream also admits the power Dee wielded, at least for a while, and debates on what he should do with his new prisoner: “You pretended to power not yours, wreaked havoc in my realm, inflicted pain upon my person. For that, you should be punished.”⁷⁴ This was never a fight between equals, nor was Dream threatened to be overwhelmed as he had been in Hell. However, rather than destroying or punishing Dee, as he might with other rivals or usurpers of his power, Dream returns him home

⁷⁰ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 124.

⁷¹ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 128-129.

⁷² Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 129.

⁷³ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 205.

⁷⁴ Gaiman, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, 205.

(to Arkham Asylum), conceding that owning the ruby in the first place might have been punishment enough, given the extensive damage it caused John Dee's mind. These early battles are done in a state of relative weakness, similar to Beowulf's first fight with Grendel: Beowulf fights without weapons, putting himself in a relatively weaker state though it is by his own choice rather than a force of circumstance.⁷⁵

Though Dream does not have many direct rivals to his position as king in the Dreaming, he must in *A Doll's House*, "battle against a pretender to the throne, a usurping staff, an evil knight, and a seceded nobleman."⁷⁶ During his absence from the Dreaming, several dream-things fled or escaped and their freedom threatens the stability of the kingdom. Three of the escapees are nightmares: Brute and Glob are former servants that create their own kingdom and place a false king on a false throne; the Corinthian forms an army of serial killers, calling them "swashbucklers and heroes and kings of the night."⁷⁷ The last and perhaps most grievous escapee is the Fiddler's Green, who is not a servant but more of a vassal, and thus his flight from the Dreaming reflects a deeper betrayal, even if his purpose in doing so is far less treacherous than the machinations of the nightmares. When they encounter each other again, Dream asks, "Why did you leave? I relied on you. I trusted you. You were so steady."⁷⁸ Rawlik points out, "as a king, [Dream] can no longer assume the role of hero and battle against the unknown. Instead, [he] must assume the role of the warrior, man of war, and make war against known enemies."⁷⁹ Dream destroys the Corinthian, as he poses the biggest threat to the realm; Brute and Glob return to his service and are to be appropriately punished. Fiddler's Green occupies a unique position as vassal-lord to the king, but Dream "cannot find it in [his] heart to punish [Fiddler's Green] for

⁷⁵ *Beowulf* ll. 703-835.

⁷⁶ Rawlik Jr, 39.

⁷⁷ Gaiman, *A Doll's House*, 172.

⁷⁸ Gaiman, *A Doll's House*, 210.

⁷⁹ Rawlik Jr, 39.

leaving.”⁸⁰ Instead, Dream returns his vassal to his appropriate place in the Dreaming, expecting Fiddler’s Green to resume his duties and continue to carry them out faithfully. In these three encounters, Dream acts as both scouring warrior, just punisher, and (somewhat) forgiving monarch.

Dream’s final battle of the series happens in *The Kindly Ones*, and is comparable to Beowulf’s fight with the dragon. The Furies are a source of destruction like nothing encountered before in the series, and like the dragon they seem insurmountable:

“When evil does appear in epic, however great and terrifying, it is formally confined [in Beowulf’s dragon]. The epic hero knows his opponent and the source of his strength, though this knowledge avails him little. To suggest an overriding destinal element and a recognizable configuration of evil in epic is not to deny the epic hero, or the people he represents, responsibility for his or their downfall.”⁸¹

Dream’s critical decision as hero and king, protector of his realm, comes in the last few issues of *The Kindly Ones* arc. Since he cannot ignore the Furies, he must find a way to confront them, though like Beowulf (“It threw the hero/into deep anguish and darkened his mood”)⁸² he broods over the sheer destructive power of the Furies. Eventually Dream prepares himself for battle, donning his cloak and helm before he goes to face them in the heart of the Dreaming.

A king facing impossible odds is a motif that is repeated throughout medieval tales and recurs with Tolkien’s Aragorn in his decision to make a stand at the Black Gate. Like Dream, Aragorn dons the winged crown of Gondor, announcing himself as king before the gates.⁸³ At this point in Dream’s journey he has reached the end of his ability to mature and change. At first he disregards the threats of the Furies as they wreak havoc on his kingdom, “I can create another [gatekeeper], who would not even know it had ever died... This is my world, ladies. I control it.

⁸⁰ Gaiman, *A Doll’s House*, 212.

⁸¹ Stanley B. Greenfield, “Beowulf and Epic Tragedy.” *Comparative Literature* 14.1 (1962): 98

⁸² *Beowulf* ll. 2327-2328.

⁸³ Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 178-186.

You will neither destroy it nor will you destroy me.”⁸⁴ This is similar to Beowulf’s reaction to the evidence of the dragon’s power: “He had scant regard/for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all/of its courage or strength, for he had kept going/often in the past...”⁸⁵ Despite Dream’s assertion, the Furies begin destroying everything they can while Dream attempts to stall for time. He has realized he cannot be the king the Dreaming deserves and prepares for his final battle once his safe-guards are in place. Dream can no longer be compared to Horn, as at this point in his narrative he has begun the descent from kingship into his final act of duty.

⁸⁴ Gaiman, *The Kindly Ones* (Part 8), 18-19.

⁸⁵ *Beowulf* ll. 2347-2351

Betrayal

Many of the kings that follow this pattern of development eventually experience a moment of betrayal. This treachery is usually committed by those closest to the king and is deeply personal, though in some stories the betrayal may be against the kingdom at large, or against someone near to the king. How a king responds to this betrayal can be an indicator of how they will respond to future crises or failures. It is also a mark of their character, as both mercy and the strength to follow through with punishment are traits expected in good kings.

In the period of reconstruction in *The Sandman*, we are exposed to patterns of betrayal and danger from those we believe to be closest to Dream. Similarly, throughout *King Horn*, Horn is surrounded by his companions, but also must endure betrayal from one of them: Fikenhild schemes at least twice to foil Horn, first by having him exiled (again) and then by attempting to marry Rymenhild, Horn's beloved.⁸⁶ Dream faces a similar betrayal from someone much closer to him: his brother/sister Desire schemes throughout the series to find a way to force Dream to spill family blood, which would bring down the Furies on him in an act of vengeance. First s/he conceives a child on a mortal woman, who becomes a vortex to the Dreaming that Dream must destroy in order to restore balance. Through a series of interventions, the young woman that was the vortex is spared as her grandmother takes her place. Dream confronts desire at the end of the volume,

“What did you truly intend, Desire? Was I to take the life of one of our own blood, with all that would entail? Or was it more devious than that?”

“Does it matter, big brother? It didn't work.”⁸⁷

This is not the end of Desire's sniping at its older brother. In *Season of Mists* s/he provokes Dream at a family meeting, bringing up his past wrongs against a former lover. This provocation

⁸⁶ *King Horn* ll. 1369-1470.

⁸⁷ Gaiman, *A Doll's House*, 225.

sets into action the next arc of Dream's saga, in which he sets about righting past wrongs, a way of morally rebuilding himself now that he has physically rebuilt his kingdom and regained his power. Desire's verbal provocations are similar to those of Unferth in *Beowulf*, which ultimately prompt the hero to respond and provides Beowulf with the opportunity to prove himself.⁸⁸ While Dream's acts are ultimately ennobling, his final act of mercy, killing his son Orpheus to release him from a hellish existence, ultimately brings about Dream's destruction. Now that he has spilled family blood, that of his own son, Dream is subject to the wrath of the Furies.

Daenerys faces several moments of betrayal, starting partially with her relationship with her brother Viserys. His constant undermining of her position among the Dothraki and his petty behavior eventually leads to his death before too much harm can be done. However, towards the end of *A Game of Thrones*, Daenerys faces a deeper betrayal from a woman she has saved from enslavement. Drogo's *khalasar* attacks and destroys a village of what they call "Lamb people" (farmers rather than nomads). As the men of the *khalasar* take their rewards in the form of pillaged goods and Lhazareen women, Daenerys begins claiming the conquered women as her own. This enrages one of Drogo's riders, who challenges her claim and Drogo's tolerance of her behavior. The two men fight to settle the argument and though Drogo is victorious he suffers a deep wound to his chest. Rather than waiting for the Dothraki healers to arrive, one of the enslaved women, a "god's wife", volunteers her services to the *khal* and *khaleesi*. Despite her help (or perhaps because of it) Drogo's wound is infected and nearly kills him. Daenerys pleads with the *maegi* woman for help and she performs a spell that eventually requires the sacrifice of Dany's unborn son. The result is a near-comatose (but living) Drogo and a deeply disappointed *khaleesi*. When Daenerys confronts the *maegi*, the woman explains herself:

⁸⁸ Ziegler, 407.

“The stallion who mounts the world will burn no cities now. His khalasar shall trample no nations into dust.”

“I spoke for you,” she said, anguished. “I saved you.”

“*Saved me?*” The Lhazareen woman spat. “Three riders had taken me... The fourth was in me when you rode past. How then did you save me? I saw my god’s house burn, where I had healed good men beyond counting. My home they burned as well... Tell me again what you saved.”⁸⁹

This betrayal has resulted in the loss of Daenerys’s husband and child, as well as most of the *khalasar* that followed Drogo. She is left with almost nothing, and it is after this conversation with the *maegi* that she learns she cannot assume the goodness in everyone, or what face gratitude will take. This marks another turning point in Daenerys’s development as a leader: until now she has been merciful to all those she comes across, deploring the keeping of slaves or harsh punishment of crime. Not only must she decide what to do with Mirri Maz Duur, but Daenerys must also come to terms with Drogo’s state of existence and decide what is best for him as well. She finds the strength to smother her husband, knowing that this “life” is beneath him, is not worthy of the man he was. The *maegi*’s crime, the underhanded murder of a *khal*, must be answered. Her decision to burn Mirri Maz Duur on her husband’s pyre as both a sacrifice and a message shows her shifting judgment: crimes against Daenerys’s person and those close to her, those depending on her protection, will no longer be tolerated. The *maegi*’s betrayal and subsequent execution fosters the birth of the three dragons, Daenerys’s new children.

In *A Storm of Swords*, Daenerys must cope with two devastating betrayals shortly before the conquering of Meereen. It is revealed that her two most trusted advisors, Ser Jorah Mormont and Arstan Whitebeard, are not the men they have presented themselves to be. After Arstan saves Daenerys from an assassination attempt by a well-trained swordsman, Jorah demands the truth from him: “The Titan’s Bastard was a nasty piece of work. And good at killing. Who are

⁸⁹ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 635.

you, old man?”⁹⁰ Jorah then recognizes him and reveals him to be Ser Barristan Selmeyer, who served in the Kingsguard under Daenerys’s father, then accepted Robert Baratheon’s pardon and served the “Usurper” after Aegon Targaryen’s death and the overthrow of the Targaryen dynasty. Though Barristan served Robert loyally, he tells Daenerys, “When [Joffrey Baratheon] took the cloak that the White Bull had draped about my shoulders, and sent men to kill me that selfsame day... That was when I knew I must find my true king.”⁹¹

Barristan’s betrayal is only in his withholding of information about his past; by this point in the story he has saved Daenerys twice from would-be assassins and has given her his honest advice whenever she asks for it. Daenerys seems willing to forgive him, but Jorah is eager to kill him. In his own defense, Barristan reveals Jorah’s dark secret: he has been spying for the Baratheons, sending them information about Viserys and Daenerys since he met them in hopes that he might be pardoned and allowed to return to the Seven Kingdoms. Barristan’s revelation is filled with apologies, and as blunt as every other truth he has told Daenerys thus far:

“You are watched, as your brother was... Whilst I sat on the small council, I heard a hundred such reports. And since the day you wed Khal Drogo, there has been an informer by your side selling your secrets...”

“You are mistaken.” Dany looked at Jorah Mormont. “Tell him he’s mistaken. There’s no informer. Ser Jorah, tell him. We crossed the Dothraki Sea together, and the red waste...” Her heart fluttered like a bird in a trap.

“The Others take you, Selmy.” Ser Jorah flung his longsword to the carpet. “*Khaleesi*, it was only at the start, before I came to know you...”⁹²

Daenerys is deeply hurt by the revelations of Jorah’s on-going treachery and she dismisses both men in a fit of emotion. The next time she addresses either man, it is to decide what exactly she will do with them, after her victory at Meereen. Barristan is humble and dignified before her,

⁹⁰ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 651.

⁹¹ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 652.

⁹² Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 652-653.

telling Daenerys the full truth of why he kept his identity a secret: he wanted to be sure she was not insane, like her father or her brother. He then tells her, “You are the trueborn heir of Westeros. To the end of my days I shall remain your faithful knight, should you find me worthy to bear a sword again.”⁹³ Barristan’s behavior is that of a true knight: he has sought to serve the best master, the one he feels to be the appropriate ruler. He concedes that Robert Baratheon was a good man and a good warrior, merciful in his time to those that earned it, but after his death and Joffrey’s succession, Barristan sought the true king after seeing the boy’s wretched nature. Joffrey mistreats his courts and his knights and eventually loses their loyalty; Barristan believes Daenerys to be the rightful heir to the Iron Throne and has come to her to support her cause, as best he can. Satisfied by his answers and his honesty, Daenerys knights Barristan and he swears himself to her service, the second knight of her Queensguard.

Unlike Barristan, Jorah is petulant and guilty before Daenerys, angry and ashamed as he confesses that he sent messages to Varys (a spy for the king’s household in the Kingdoms) for much longer than Daenerys suspected: the last one was sent months after Drogo’s death, when Daenerys and her *khalasar* were in Qarth. Unlike Barristan, Jorah demands Daenerys’s forgiveness despite the severity of his betrayal. His *demand* for the young queen’s forgiveness seals his fate, “She could not pardon him as she’d intended. She had dragged the wineseller [a poisoner] behind her horse until there was nothing left of him. Didn’t the man who brought him deserve the same?”⁹⁴ When she announces her decision, Jorah tries to gain her mercy by pointing out that she forgave Barristan, but the old knight’s lie was about his name, whereas Jorah “sold [her] secrets to the men who killed [her] father and stole my brother’s throne.”⁹⁵ Daenerys cannot forgive Jorah, and so she banishes him from her service under the threat of death. Jorah’s

⁹³ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 811.

⁹⁴ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 813.

⁹⁵ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 813.

betrayal deeply troubles her and she continues to reflect upon her decision long after she has dismissed her small court. For the first time since the first book, Daenerys questions her right and ability to lead: “*I shouldn’t have banished him. I should have kept him, or I should have killed him.* She played at being a queen, yet sometimes she still felt like a scared little girl.”⁹⁶

These moments of betrayal are often deeply disturbing to the monarchs (or future monarchs) that experience them. They are often forced to reevaluate those they allow close, whether they are family or close companions. For Daenerys, the betrayal of a mentor is almost too much to bear; for Dream, the constant interference of his sibling Desire is disturbing, but increasingly common and expected, while the treachery of a lover scorned comes as a surprise, though he understands her motives. These moments of doubt and uncertainty are necessary, as they allow (or force) the king to carefully consider their own actions as well as those of the people they keep close.

⁹⁶ Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 814.

Healing and Reunification

In *King Horn*, the reunification and reclaiming is the end of the story, as Horn reestablishes all of the kingdoms that have suffered from the Saracens and rewards his loyal followers, eventually taking up the throne in his homeland.⁹⁷ This is also the end of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as Aragorn (now Elessar) has taken the throne and rules both Gondor and Arnor. However, in *Beowulf*, Arthurian legend, and in *The Sandman*, this return (and rebuilding) is the peak of the story. After his release from his prison and the recovery of his power, Dream seeks to rebuild his kingdom and take care of the inhabitants that have strayed or disappeared, bringing a sense of unity and authority back to his realm. According to Rawlik, “Transformed from hero to king, the protagonist must now undertake the tasks of keeping his kingdom running.”⁹⁸ This reconstructive and prospering period also marks another turning point, after which the monarch (though not the realm) begins to decline: “The wholeness and health of the realm and its citizens actually required more than just the presence of the ‘rightful’ king, it required sacrifice from him.”⁹⁹ As part of healing and reunification, the king often gives up something, sometimes even his own life, for the sake of his people. All of the kings discussed herein have made sacrifices for their people and for the preservation of their lands.

Towards the end of Dream’s moral reconstruction, he joins a search for his estranged brother, Destruction. Upon finding him, Dream is told by his brother that he still will not return to the family. Upon seeing his older brother’s obvious change and weariness, Destruction suggests passively to Dream that he could abandon his realm, as Destruction himself did 300 years before the current storyline takes place. But Dream cannot simply leave his realm unlooked

⁹⁷ *King Horn* ll. 1009-1546.

⁹⁸ Rawlik, Jr. 43.

⁹⁹ Karen Simpson Nikakis, "Sacral Kingship: Aragorn as the Rightful and Sacrificial King in *The Lord of the Rings*." *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 26.1-2 [99-100] (2007): 83.

for and uncontrolled; he must find a way to make sure that it will endure and be protected after he leaves it. Since he cannot simply cast aside his responsibilities, Dream plans carefully (and perhaps unconsciously) for the day when he does decide to give everything up. The death of Orpheus forces Dream to acknowledge the extent of his personal growth and change. When the Furies come to avenge Orpheus, Dream is forced to make a decision: to leave his realm as the Furies destroy it, or find a way to make sure that it will survive beyond his passing. Rather than just abandoning his realm, Dream puts an heir in place and accepts his own death as a form of final release. Like Beowulf, and Aragorn at the end of his life, Dream is aware that the end is near. The final step in Dream's plan to put his heir in place for succession is the literal burning away of the child Daniel's mortality, enabling him to take over as the new Dream once the battle with the Furies is over.¹⁰⁰ It is worth noting this use of fire as a form of purification and rebirth – Daniel's transformation is similar to that of Daenerys as they are both consumed by flames and come out on the other side as leaders. The transformation of both characters is closely linked to the destruction/death of former rulers: Drogo and the first Dream. It is also of note that Dream/Daniel, Daenerys, and Beowulf all face destructive and restorative fire either at the beginning of their leadership (Daenerys, Daniel) or at the end (Dream, Beowulf).

Beowulf dies after slaying the dragon with Wiglaf, and though Dream's last moments are spent confronting the Furies, his death is more similar to that of Aragorn, who chooses the moment he is to die.¹⁰¹ Both are reminiscent of medieval sacral kings in the Celtic and Germanic

¹⁰⁰ Gaiman, *The Kindly Ones* (Part Eleven), 20.

¹⁰¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Return of the King*, Appendix A (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994) 388-389.

"Yet at last he felt the approach of old age and knew the span of his life-days was drawing to an end, long though it had been... Aragorn laid him down on a long bed that had been prepared for him. Then he said farewell to Eldarion, and gave into his hands the winged crown of Gondor and the scepter of Arnor."

Aragorn later addresses Arwen when she wishes him to delay his death but a while longer, saying, "Take counsel with yourself, beloved, and ask whether you would indeed have me wait until I wither and fall from my high seat

traditions, “The concept of the king as healer derives from the early Celtic principle of sacral kingship, whereby the health and fertility of the land are dependent on the coming of the rightful king.”¹⁰² As part of healing and reunification, the king often gives up something, sometimes even his own life, for the sake of his people. In this way Dream is further linked to Beowulf and the archetypal Maimed King of the Grail legend. This king is mortally wounded and fails to win his final battle and “pays a heavy price for his struggle.”¹⁰³ Dream has realized the limit of his ability to change and grow, and recognizes this as a weakness in any ruler. Dream sacrifices himself to give the Dreaming a ruler that will be more fit, one that can exist in a changing world, one that is more flexible than he believes he can be. Death is not only a sacrifice in this case, but like Aragorn’s comes with a sense of relief. Unlike the more tragic medieval epic of Beowulf, in which the downfall of the Geats is foreshadowed, there is hope in the end of *The Sandman*. Immediately upon his death, Dream is in a sense reborn, or reincarnated. The child that was his heir takes on all the aspects of Dream, filling the void left with his predecessor’s death/cessation of existence. In Gaiman’s mythology of the Endless, only aspects of them can be destroyed, not the personification itself. The new Dream remarks, “I have existed since the beginning of time. This is a true thing. I am older than worlds and suns and gods. But tomorrow I will meet my brother and sisters for the first time, and I am afraid.”¹⁰⁴ In the tradition of monarchs past, the new Dream’s servant remarks, “The king is dead. That’s what they say. The king is dead. Long live the king.”¹⁰⁵

unmanned and witless. Nay, lady, I am the last of the Númenoreans and the last King of the Elder Days; and to me has been given not only a span thrice that of Men... but also the grace to go at my will, and give back the gift.”

¹⁰² Flieger, 50.

¹⁰³ Flieger, 60.

¹⁰⁴ Gaiman, *The Wake*, 49.

¹⁰⁵ Gaiman, *The Wake*, 92.

This concept of sacral kingship can be applied more loosely to Daenerys, who has given up much in order to get as far as she has by the close of *A Storm of Swords*. After her husband is wounded and suffers from a festering infection, Daenerys inadvertently sacrifices their unborn son in an attempt to give Drogo his life back, as well as her ability to bear children altogether. Despite her painful sacrifice, the only life Drogo is given is that of a coma patient, alive but no longer even a shade of the man he once was. Her inability to heal her husband or save her son devastates Daenerys; in her grief and anger she sacrifices the *maegi* woman that contributed to her husband's death on his funeral pyre, along with her dragon eggs. She joins them all in the fire, but rather than being consumed and destroyed, she survives and emerges from the smoldering remnants with three newborn dragons:

Only death can pay for life.

And there came a second *crack*, loud and sharp as thunder... *The fire is mine. I am Daenerys Stormborn, daughter of dragons, bride of dragons, mother of dragons, don't you see?* With a belch of flame and smoke... the pyre collapsed and came down around her. Unafraid, Dany stepped into the firestorm, calling to her children.

The third *crack* was as loud and sharp as the breaking of the world... And for the first time in hundreds of years, the night came alive with the music of dragons.¹⁰⁶

Daenerys has sacrificed everything for this moment, and she is rewarded with the birth of three dragons, the first in centuries, and they are the key to reclaiming her throne in Westeros, as it was dragons that allowed her ancestors to unite the Seven Kingdoms at the beginning of their dynasty. The symbolism of fire as form of cleansing and rebirth appears in *The Sandman* and even in *The Lord of the Rings* with the reforging of the sword. Daenerys's time in the fire is more than just the culmination of her sacrifices, it is also a rebirth. She rises from the ashes fully

¹⁰⁶ Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 673-674.

embracing the blood of the dragon she has always believed she has in her, and like Daniel,¹⁰⁷ this trial-by-fire has burned away the doubt that has been holding her back, that has made her think of herself as only sister-to or wife-of until now.

The sacrifices made by kings are so grand in scope that often it means that their very lives are offered in service to their kingdoms. Like Aragorn and Beowulf, Dream makes the ultimate sacrifice to ensure the continuation of his realm and chooses his time to die so that he does not linger endlessly, until he is no longer able to care for his kingdom. Daenerys gives up those closest to her, even if it is against her will, in order to move forward toward what she begins to feel is her destiny, her fate. Before Drogo's death, taking back the Seven Kingdoms was her brother's dream, her husband's promise, or her hopes for her unborn son. After she has lost all of them it becomes *her* goal, *her* quest, and she believes, at last, that it is *her* right. When the maegi woman promises Daenerys she will have no more children, Daenerys embraces many of the people she comes across as her children, making herself mother and ruler to them as she is to her dragons. She becomes intent on changing the face of Essos and reclaiming the Iron Throne in Westeros, believing that the kingdoms will suffer wretchedness until she does.

¹⁰⁷ Gaiman, *The Kindly Ones* (Part Three), 4. Daniel is the child chosen by Dream to become his successor, and in a round-about plot Puck and Loki kidnap the child, thinking to hold him ransom. They burn away Daniel's humanity/mortality in a sacred fire, leaving only the immortal part of him behind. When Daniel is rescued, he is ready to inherit the guise of Dream and become the new ruler of the Dreaming.

Conclusion

Though modern audiences may continually show a more consistent interest in the “everyman” hero, the underdog, and the guy-next-door, the recurring interest in the qualities and characters of kings seems to suggest an underlying desire for strong, *rightful* rulers. Not only do these kings protect, serve, and reward, but they promise growth and renewal and strive to ensure the continuing prosperity of their kingdoms. Many of the medieval sources for these stories end in reunification and healing, as does Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. This tradition of hope and renewal is continued in Gaiman’s *The Sandman*, in which the appointed heir carries on where his predecessor could not. Dream of the Endless is never actually destroyed, only reinvented. Dream’s journey throughout his tale mirrors aspects of *Beowulf*, *King Horn*, and Aragorn’s trials in *The Lord of the Rings*; Daenerys’s growth and development into an increasingly capable (though at this point still learning) ruler mirrors these medieval kings as well and I will be very interested to find how the rest of her story fits into the pattern proposed in this paper. The structures of *The Sandman* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* are not necessarily as rigid or easily divided as its predecessors, but they bear striking similarity in style and theme. Dream and Daenerys appear to have traits of both medieval kings and of Tolkien’s, gaining maturity throughout the series and eventually (in Dream’s case) dying to do what is best for their kingdoms.

The most remarkable thing about these more modern stories is the ability of the authors to draw in a wide range of readers. Grant Morrison, another prolific and genre-bending comic author, points out

[Gaiman’s] *Sandman* borrowed the traditional trappings of superhero comics: the skinny, pale hero had a cape and a helmet that he sometimes wore; he had a magical ruby of destiny; he had a castle in the Dreaming; and he even had a kind of team of his own in the form of the Endless, a group of anthropomorphized eternal principles... Gaiman’s ambition grew so far

from their roots in superhero comics that the book basically invented a new genre at the intersection of fantasy, horror, and literature.¹⁰⁸

Martin's reinvention of the medieval fantasy genre is not as drastic as Gaiman's mix-up of comics, but that his series has made it onto bestseller lists is a feat unmanaged by most fantasy writers. By combining elements of medieval epics and highly realistic (and also sometimes extravagant) political intrigue, Martin weaves an incredible tale of betrayal, struggle, and questions just what "the right to rule" truly entails. He exposes his readers to several kings, including the displaced Daenerys Targaryen, and keeps audiences on their toes with surprising revelations in each of the characters, whether it is Robert Baratheon's drunken whoring, Cersei Lannister's mad ambition, or Daenerys's seemingly divine right that is perhaps proven with the birth of her dragons. In playing with these more realistic, brutal themes, the series is "groundbreaking in all kinds of ways. Above all, the books were extremely unpredictable, especially in a genre where readers have come to expect the intensely predictable."¹⁰⁹

The power of these authors, perhaps more so than that of Tolkien, is their ability to make modern audiences care about characters that might normally seem nearly impossible to relate to. Despite the success of films like *Beowulf* (2007), *King Arthur* (2004), and of course *The Lord of the Rings*, (2001, 2002, 2003), it is still difficult for many people to identify with kingly characters, especially those facing epic journeys. The strength of these films, Martin's work, and Gaiman's, is the characterizations of Aragorn, Dream, Daenerys, Beowulf, and Arthur: the authors and directors all found some very human aspect of these epic kings and heroes and brought that humanity to light. This combination of ruler, healer, and man (or woman) creates a

¹⁰⁸ Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2011), 239.

¹⁰⁹ Joe Abercrombie, "Influences, Ideas, and *A Game of Thrones*." JoeAbercrombie.com. 16 Feb 2008.

deep appreciation for what these kings manage to accomplish, and generates sympathy that the medieval epics, and at times even Tolkien's work, lack.

Audiences will always be fascinated by kings and epic heroes, even if we cannot always relate to them on the same level that we relate to fairy and folk tale heroes. Modern authors are faced with the task of presenting these characters in a way that makes them relatable to a culture that has so long given privilege to the folk hero and the underdog. Gaiman used "a comics-based mythos to expand on, or interact with, and deepen classical legends of mythology and popular history"¹¹⁰ and Martin has drawn in a swirling cast of characters that give an incredible depth to the tale he is telling, rushing to some epic finish that even academics are holding their breaths to see. Both have shaken up modern storytelling in a way that has not been seen since Tolkien's works became popular, and they are giving audiences more to think about beyond the heroes we have all grown up with, beyond the stories we *expect* to hear.

¹¹⁰ Mikhail Gilmore, "Introduction." *The Wake*, ii.

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