

WHAT'S IN A TITLE? SOME REMARKS ON THE SEMANTIC  
FEATURES OF KENNING-LIKE TITLES IN GEORGE R. R. MARTIN'S  
*A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE* SERIES

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ABSTRACT

Working on the hugely successful series of novels known collectively as *A Song of Ice and Fire*, George R. R. Martin is known to have drawn much of his inspiration from real-life events, landmarks in the history of the Middle Ages, such as the Hundred Years' War, the Wars of the Roses, and the Crusades. It is not known, however, to what degree he actually relies in his work on sources of genuinely medieval provenance, since he himself frequently admits that amongst those that made the biggest impact on his writing are modern works of fiction, such as Maurice Druon's heptalogy *Les Rois maudits* (2019 [1955–1977]). It is not impossible, though, that at least some features of Martin's series have more or less direct parallels in medieval literature. One such element may be so-called kennings, the highly-stylised circumlocutions found in plenty in the poetic works of early Germanic literature and whose diction appears to shine through some of the series' titles.

Keywords: George R. R. Martin; *A Song of Ice and Fire*; *Game of Thrones*; kennings; Old English poetry; Old Norse poetry.

## 1. Introduction

In the study of the paratextual features of George R. R. Martin's book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–) (titles, cover art, blurbs, other authors' praise) perhaps the most intriguing area in the field of philological research is the examination of the novels' titular peculiarities and their connotative associations, particularly regarding their various medieval inspirations and influences. Naturally, the semantic relationship between the title of a book and the text itself is very

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often highly conventional, in the sense that the former does not normally constitute more than an inevitably condensed commentary on the subject matter conveyed in the latter. However, since the title's main function is, first and foremost, the identification of the book, it seems perfectly reasonable that one should also take a closer look at each of the nine titles (as well as, to a lesser degree, the four subtitles) that have so far been used in connection with both George R. R. Martin's entire series and, most importantly, its particular instalments.<sup>1</sup>

In the postscript to the English translation of *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco maintains that, regardless of its obvious restrictions, the "title [of his book] is — unfortunately — a key for interpretation" (1994: 507). It would, perhaps, be very hard to apply these words to every single volume of fiction that came to be written in the post-Gutenbergian era, yet it cannot be denied that, at least in some measure, the title is, to use the words of Gérard Genette, "a construct, an artifact created for reception or commentary" (1988: 693) which may also act as one of the most fundamental incentives for many a prospective reader. If such indeed be the case, the title should obviously convey some of the book's general premises: narrative (e.g., *The Quest for Fire*), thematic (*War and Peace*), personal (*Jane Eyre*), or other. It could, moreover, specify the very genre of the work (e.g., *The Song of Roland*, *The Romance of the Rose*, *A Tale of Two Cities*). The title may also constitute a metonymic allusion to the book's content, sufficiently distinctive to relate to some particular event (or a chain of events) and, at the same time, communicate a more universal message, as in *Pride and Prejudice* or *North and South*.

The titles of George R. R. Martin's novels clearly belong to the last of the aforementioned categories. They are not only short and catchy, but they also appear to capture the thematic essence of each particular instalment of the series. By means of just two meaning-laden words (invariably nouns, at all times accompanied by an article and linked with a preposition), whose combination could cover a wide range of semantic domains, particular as well as universal, Martin manages to form conceptual associations of truly unique clarity and depth; associations which have already gone beyond his subcreated world and, like the 'game of thrones', the catch phrase originally uttered in the series by Queen Cersei Lannister,<sup>2</sup> continue their

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<sup>1</sup> Despite many of their plotlines appearing to have been unravelled in the television series *Game of Thrones* (seasons 5–8), the semantic implications of the last two novels will have to remain somewhat conjectural until the publication of the following instalments: *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*.

<sup>2</sup> "When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground" (*A Game of Thrones*, 471). Following that, the phrase seems to constantly reverberate — explicitly as well as implicitly — in the novels' political arena, arena where, to use the words of Shakespeare, numerous players "have their exits and their entrances" (*As You Like It*, Act II, scene 7, l. 141). Henceforth references to the novels in the George R. R. Martin's series will be given parenthetically in the text and will include title and page number.

existence in the vast realms of popular history and commerce. In the first case, the title of the series' first volume is now recurrently used as an instantly recognisable label denoting various, particularly (though by no means exclusively) medieval, dynastic conflicts and disputes regarding succession.<sup>3</sup> In the second, it has acquired a life of its own as the title of the HBO series and all the merchandise produced to accompany this televisual landmark.<sup>4</sup>

Yet another distinctive feature of the titles of Martin's novels, one which brings it even closer to the world of medieval symbolism and iconography that unmistakably inspired him, is their periphrastic quality which may so often call to mind the circumlocutory expressions known as kennings.<sup>5</sup> Regularly found in all sorts of poetic works of early Germanic provenance, kennings are stylistic metaphors in which two or more words are combined to illustrate a concept which could otherwise be expressed by a single substantive. To achieve the desired expressive effect, the Anglo-Saxon scop and Icelandic skalds thus regularly embellished their compositions with figurative phrases of varied length and depth; phrases whose descriptive colour sought to suggest certain semantic associations without, however, diverting the attention of their audience from the essential premises of their poetic works. Hence, a shield may be referred to as *vígtungl* (*Brúðkaupsvísur*, st. 24, 547)<sup>6</sup> 'moon of battle' or *garðahildr* (*Liðsmannaflokkur*, st. 6, 88) 'enclosure of battle', in this way laying symbolic emphasis on its shape (the former) or application (the latter). Likewise, a sword could be known as *randlinnr* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 48, 211) 'shield-serpent' or *morðbál* (Bjarni byskup Kolbeinsson, *Jómsvikingadrápa*, st. 16, 973) 'fire of killing', in each case highlighting the rather obvious fact that a well-wielded blade could indeed be a lethal weapon.

As has been observed, most kennings have a bipartite structure, that is to say they consist of two elements: the basic word, or *stofnorð* (respectively, *tungl*

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the series of columns titled *Gry o tron* "Games for the Throne" in the Polish monthly *W Sieci Historii*, in which, for four years (from May 2013 until May 2017), Marek Barański provided his readers with an overview of the dynastic disputes and succession issues in Poland from the mid-tenth until the late eighteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, owing to the enormous popularity of the television series, a considerable number of people (including literary critics and scholars) now tend to use the title *Game of Thrones* (often abbreviated to *GoT*) in connection with its literary counterpart too.

<sup>5</sup> The numerous medieval inspirations for *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* series have in the recent years been examined by a number of scholars. The monographs by Carolyne Larrington (2016) and Shiloh Carroll (2018) should be of particular interest here as well as the collections of essays edited by Bartłomiej Błaszkiwicz (2014) and Jes Battis and Susan Johnston (2015).

<sup>6</sup> References to poems will henceforth be given parenthetically in the text and will include title, stanza or line number(s), and page number(s) or, if the author is known, the author's name, title, stanza or line number(s), and page number(s).

‘moon’, *garðr* ‘enclosure’, *linnr* ‘snake’, and *bál* ‘fire, flame’), and the modifier, or *kenniorð* (respectively, *víg* and *hildir*, both meaning ‘battle’, *rqnd* ‘shield’, and *morð* ‘killing’).<sup>7</sup> Of these, the modifier either takes the form of the genitive, as in *heofones wynne* (*Beowulf*, l. 1801, 106) ‘heaven’s delight’ (i.e., “dawn”), or becomes an integral component of the nominal compound, as in *hronrad* (*Beowulf*, l. 10, 98) ‘whale’s road’ (i.e., ‘sea’). In Modern English translations these inflectional markers are usually rendered by means of the “X of Y” structure, where X is the modifying and Y the basic word. The referent, i.e., the person, thing, or concept that is being described, must also be called something which they are evidently not. To illustrate, the aforementioned shield is neither a moon, nor an enclosure. Nor is the sword a serpent or fire. Such associations, however, are all culturally-determined constructs (often within the mythological framework of the Germanic peoples), whose semantic significance should never be so removed from the intended meaning as to make it incomprehensible to the audience. After all, both the shield and the moon are in essence round, a serpent might be as lethal as a sword, and fire can harm a living creature just as effectively as a sharp blade.<sup>8</sup>

Most of these features also seem to apply to the titles of the novels that constitute George R. R. Martin’s series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. To begin with, all of them were undoubtedly considered to be figurative expressions whose meaning, despite some possible blurredness, should pose no serious interpretative challenges to the modern reader with any knowledge of the medieval world and its culture. Each of the titles also consists of two meaning-bearing words (e.g., ‘game’ and ‘thrones’), invariably linked by a preposition denoting possession or other form of relatedness between the two entities.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in each case, the first element evidently constitutes the base word (‘game’, ‘clash’, ‘storm’, ‘feast’, ‘dance’), while the second serves as its modifier (‘of thrones’, ‘of kings’, ‘of swords’, ‘for crows’, ‘with dragons’), in some measure specifying the thematic constraints of the title.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Multiword kennings are less common, though by no means unknown. A sword may, for instance, be referred to as an *ís rauðra randa* (Einar Skúlason, *Óxarflokkur*, st. 9, 149) ‘icicle of red shields’ and its wielder as a *stirðs herleiks hyrlund* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 16, 192) ‘tree of the fire [i.e., warrior] of harsh army-play [battle]’.

<sup>8</sup> For a more exhaustive discussion concerning Old English and Old Norse kennings, see, for instance, the publications of Rudolf Meissner (1921), Hendrik van der Merwe-Scholtz (1927), and Elena Gurevich (1994).

<sup>9</sup> The only exception here is the title of the entire book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which consists of three content words: ‘song,’ ‘ice’, and ‘fire.’

<sup>10</sup> Of particular interest here may also be the fact that of the nine titles (and four subtitles) that have so far been used in connection with both the series and its individual volumes, four (and two) use alliteration: *A Clash of Kings*, *A Storm of Swords*, *A Dance with Dragons*, *The Winds of Winter*, as well as “Steel and Snow” and “Dreams and Dust”, a common stylistic

Much like their Norse or Anglo-Saxon poetic counterparts, the titles of George R. R. Martin's novels also seem to draw extensively, though not always explicitly, upon the rather conventional stock of themes and tropes frequently used in the past by the Germanic verse-makers, in particular those for war and various war-related matters. This may come as no surprise, given the thoroughly bellicose character of the series and the fact that it is set in the medieval-like worlds of Westeros and Essos, yet it cannot be denied that in certain cases the very same (or comparable) expressions could have been and, indeed, were sometimes used in the poetic works of early medieval provenance. After all, various military conflicts and their immediate repercussions are the focal points of more than a few Old Germanic poems, from the fragmentary heroic lays in the mould of *The Finnesburg Fragment* or *The Battle of Maldon* (both in Old English), to the much longer narrative poems of primarily Christian character, such as *Beowulf* (also in Old English) and the Old Saxon Gospel harmony known as the *Héliand*.<sup>11</sup>

Martin is not the first writer to use kenning-like phrases for the titles of his novels.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most illustrative example of this sort of approach is J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, whose semantic content clearly builds upon the well-nigh archetypal notion of a generous ruler who lavishly rewards his loyal retainers with the gifts of gold, armour, weaponry, horses, land. Some analogous expressions are plainly to be found scattered throughout numerous poems of the early medieval canon,<sup>13</sup> yet the most likely candidate here is the expression *hringa fengel* (*Beowulf*, l. 2345, 185) 'lord of rings', which the *Beowulf* poet uses in connection with the poem's central figure, the mighty ruler of the Geats.<sup>14</sup> However, even Tolkien, with his enormous expertise in medieval philology (including both 'lit.' and 'lang.'), went no further in adopting Old English

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device used especially in early Germanic poetry. It is not, of course, a prerequisite for the formation of kennings. The two subtitles are, moreover, not in the least kenning-like in their compositional form. It is, nevertheless, a fairly common feature in early English and Norse poems (e.g., *grennir gunnmás* (Þorbjörn hornklofi, *Glymdrápa*, st. 6, 85) 'feeder of war-gull [i.e., raven/eagle]', and thus 'warrior').

<sup>11</sup> The depiction of Christ in the *Héliand* is quite peculiar in the sense that, in it, the Messiah is given the outward appearance of a *manno mahtig Drohtin* (l. 37, 4) 'mighty Lord of men' followed by His *sálige gisiðos* (l. 3959, 94) 'trustworthy retainers'.

<sup>12</sup> Nor is he the last one. See, for instance, Robert Low's debut novel *The Whale Road* (2007), the title of which is clearly a translation of the aforementioned Old English kenning *hronrad* (*Beowulf*, l. 10, 98).

<sup>13</sup> One such example is the depiction of King Æthelstan, the *beorna beahgifa* 'ring-giver to men', in the tenth-century English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* (ll. 2, 40, 44).

<sup>14</sup> Curiously, though, in his prose translation of *Beowulf*, first published in 2014, but completed almost a century earlier, in the early 1920s, Tolkien (2014) renders the said phrase not quite correctly as "the lord of gold" (81). Old English *hring* (as well as its Old Norse analogue *hringr*, both derived from Proto-Germanic *\*hringaz*) clearly means 'ring'.

(or other) kennings, and so *The Lord of the Rings* remains his only known work evidently inspired by the phraseological conventions of early Germanic poetry.<sup>15</sup>

The following examination of George R. R. Martin's titular preferences seeks to take a comprehensive look at the titles of those books that have been published so far in the series, as well as, to a far lesser extent, those that have not. This should enable one to see not only the various conceptual peculiarities in the titles of his novels, but also identify some of the cultural connections that, as has been observed, evidently exist between the books' titular conventions and early medieval poetry of chiefly Germanic provenance. The ensuing analysis will follow the chronological order of the volumes whose plotlines are (as of 2022) already known to the readers of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and, to a certain degree, the audience of the *Game of Thrones* TV series.

## 2. *A Game of Thrones*

As the first book in the series, *A Game of Thrones* (1996) in many ways prepares the ground for the subsequent novels, narratively as well as thematically. That is to say, it not only recounts the tragic tale of Eddard Stark's ill-fated promotion to Hand of the King and the arranged marriage of Daenerys Targaryen, both of which obviously spark the ensuing chains of events in, respectively, Westeros and Essos, but it also sets the essential tone for the following instalments, where the title game is, in point of fact, a perilous and multi-threaded confrontation in which, to use the far-sighted words of Queen Cersei Lannister, "you [can only] win or you die" (*A Game of Thrones*, 471). It is doubtlessly for this reason that the producers of the HBO series decided to use it (with a minor grammatical alteration) as the sole title for the entire, eight-season, or 73-episode, serialisation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*.<sup>16</sup>

The title of the opening novel of the series, *A Game of Thrones*, has no direct phraseological parallels in the poetic corpus of early Germanic literature. There are, however, numerous periphrastic allusions to all sorts of 'games', particularly in Old English and Old Norse verse (*plegan* and *leikar* respectively). They are, however, predominantly military in character, as in *wigplega* (*The Battle of Maldon*, l. 268, 65 and l. 316, 67) 'battle-play' or *herleikr* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 16,

<sup>15</sup> Other kenning-like titles include, for instance, the individual volumes in the trilogy of historical fantasy novels about Skald Ainar written by the Polish novelist and historian Łukasz Malinowski: *Karmiciel kruków* "The Feeder of Ravens" (2013), *Kowal słów* "The Smith of Words" (2014, 2015), and *Wężowy język* "The Serpent Tongue" (2016, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> *Star Wars*, the title now employed in connection with the entire franchise, was similarly at first only used to denote the original film (1977), later rebranded as *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope* (Brooker 2009: 10).

192) 'army-play'. The political implications that clearly underlie the title of George R. R. Martin's novel seem not to be recorded in the extant works of Old Germanic poetry. This does not, however, mean that the phrase 'game of thrones' (\**cynesetla plega* and \**leikr háseta* in Old English and Old Norse respectively) would have been incomprehensible to the inhabitants of, say, tenth- or eleventh-century England and Norway, where the incessant struggles for dynastic supremacy would often constitute the daily bread of political life.

Structurally, the expression 'game of thrones' follows the pattern outlined above, whereby the first component constitutes its semantic backbone, the *stofnorð*, or base word, of the kenning. Politics, in particular those of George R. R. Martin's subcreated world, is evidently a highly complex and often thorny matter that at times resembles certain organised forms of play, with two or more participants each striving to outdo their opponent(s). As such, it may therefore involve numerous tricks, such as bluffing, double bluffing or, at times, even outright cheating.<sup>17</sup> The second element, or what the medieval Icelanders and Norwegians would have called the *kenniorð*, makes the said game much more specific. It is a merciless contest in which legitimacy (Queen Cersei's three children, each born of the incestuous relationship with her brother), succession (Robert Baratheon's premature death), dynastic supremacy (Baratheons, Lannisters, Targaryens, and Starks), and, if ultimately short-lived, even the securing of one's authority over the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros evidently play the main roles. It is also a game which imposes certain crucial obligations (familial, feudal or other) upon its participants; participants whose very *raison* and, especially, *désir de jouer* might, nonetheless, easily overcome these apparently insuperable obstacles.

### 3. *A Clash of Kings*

The second book in the series, *A Clash of Kings* (1998), does not deviate in any notable way from the stylistic and thematic conventions of the first volume. The events that unfold before the reader's eyes are a natural consequence of what took place in *A Game of Thrones*, with the untimely death of King Robert Baratheon, severely mauled by a monstrous boar in what was officially declared to have been a hunting accident,<sup>18</sup> transpiring to be a catalyst for civil war (much

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<sup>17</sup> Of the major characters, perhaps the most notorious double- and/or triple-dealers in the series are the spymaster Lord Varys and treasurer Littlefinger Petyr Baelish.

<sup>18</sup> In reality, however, as is explicitly revealed in "The Winds of Winter", the last episode of season 6 of *Game of Thrones*, what seemed to be an accident was in fact orchestrated by his wife Cersei, fearful for her life, should the truth about her incestuous relationship come out. In the book series the reasons for Robert's death are less openly stated.



as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria on 28 June 1914, which led to the outbreak of the First World War). As a result, the Seven Kingdoms are soon mired in political chaos, with increasing numbers of conflicts of interests arising, both locally and nationally, whenever a new pretender proclaims their right to the Iron Throne, or tries to fulfil their regal ambitions in any one of the numerous realms of Westeros. In addition, several lesser characters (lesser, that is, in the political sense of that word) try to seize something for themselves (Lord Varys, Petyr Baelish, or Queen Cersei's brother, Tyrion Lannister). In effect, the overtly peaceful, though, in reality, deceptive and insidious, 'game of thrones' becomes a genuine 'clash of kings', a bloody war in which, as is often the case, there are far more losers than winners.

Regardless of its kenning-like construction, much like the preceding title in the series, *A Clash of Kings* has no direct phraseological analogy in the extant corpus of early Germanic poetry. The major problem here is that the essential lexical constituent of the second book's title, the noun 'clash' (in the sense of a violent confrontation) is just too evident in its semantic implications to be used as a truly convincing *stofnorð*.<sup>19</sup> While referring to all sorts of armed conflicts, be they duels, battles, or wars, the basic component of a kenning could, for instance, take the form of a 'play' (as in *eggleikr* [Ǫrvar-Oddr, *Ævidrápa*, st. 39, 918] 'play of swords'), 'movement (of weapons)' (*svip sverða* [Rognvaldr jarl & Hallr Þórarinnsson, *Háttalykill*, st. 65, 1073] 'swinging of swords'), or 'meeting/ council', [*odda þing* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 33, 202] 'thing (i.e., assembly) of spears'). Their modifiers might likewise often invoke some clashing-like connotations, of an onomatopoeic or otherwise mimetic character, as in *gný randa* (Óttarr svarti, *Höfuðlausn*, st. 9, 752) 'clash of shields' or *þruma branda* (Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Porfinnsdrápa*, st. 12, 243) 'thunderclap of swords'. None of these, however, are known to have been used in combination with any of the Old Germanic equivalents of the Modern English word 'king' (or, in fact, any of its many alternatives, figurative, connotative or other). Once again, however, as in *A Game of Thrones*, it is quite probable that, despite its only superficial resemblance to a kenning, the phrase would still be comprehensible, in the sense of a military conflict, to an early medieval English or Norse audience.

In *A Clash of Kings* the meaning of 'clash' would appear to be more than that of the military encounter between armies of warring kings that most people seem to envision from the cover of the HarperVoyager paperback edition of *A Clash of Kings*, featuring a diadem-like coronet with five triangular, dagger-shaped leaves. In the first place, it rather explicitly alludes to the unremitting series of hostilities involving the often self-proclaimed rulers of Westeros (or, at least, some of its

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<sup>19</sup> As has been observed, rather than faithfully duplicate the reality, the *stofnorð* is only supposed to suggest certain semantic associations with the concept that is being referred to by the poet.



lesser realms), yet it cannot be overlooked that these hostilities in fact involve more than just crowned monarchs, who, like the teenager Joffrey Baratheon, are not necessarily fully independent rulers. It is just as much a clash of politically experienced characters, such as Joffrey's grandfather Tywin Lannister, his daughter Cersei, or Lord Varys, who continue to play the 'game of thrones' behind the backs of their official sovereigns. On the other hand, it is a conflict which, in one way or another, involves thousands of people from different realms, going to war or suffering the numerous horrors of war only to satisfy their rulers' political ambitions. Officially, however, whether it be Martin's Westeros or Europe in the Middle Ages, it is the kings who are the foremost players, standing over the chessboard of political scheming. Paraphrasing the oft-quoted phrase attributed to the Pomeranian legist Joachim Stephani (1544–1623), one might consequently conclude that, should one ever be needed, the subtitle of *A Clash of Kings*, explaining the complex political factors which determine the course of events in the Seven Kingdoms ought to be *cuius regio, eius bellum*.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. *A Storm of Swords*

Published two years after *A Clash of Kings*, *A Storm of Swords* (2000a, 2000b) focuses principally upon the concluding stages of the War of the Five Kings, which has ravaged and depopulated considerable parts of Westeros. The bloody conflict rages on, despite some of its participants, such as Renly Baratheon, having already been killed and others, as his elder brother Stannis, seeming no longer to be amongst the foremost contenders for the Iron Throne in King's Landing. Robb Stark's court, together with much of his hitherto undefeated army, are brutally massacred in what comes to be known as the Red Wedding. In the north the Wall is ultimately besieged by the hordes of increasingly desperate Wildlings and in the east Daenerys Targaryen raises an army of her own with the intention of invading Westeros. Several important characters of royal blood lose their lives, including King Joffrey (poisoned at his own wedding), his grandfather (and chief advisor) Tywin Lannister (shot with a crossbow by his son Tyrion) and Ned Stark's heir, Robb. Jaime has his sword hand chopped off by Zolo of the Brave Companions and the apparently mortally wounded Hound Sandor Clegane is abandoned by Arya Stark, who refuses him the gift of mercy (the Westerosian equivalent of the *coup de grâce*) and leaves him to die slowly under a tree by the Trident.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The actual words of Joachim Stephani are *cuius regio, eius religio* "whose realm, his religion" (Ozment 1980: 259).

<sup>21</sup> Such is, at least for the moment, the reader's impression. In the HBO series, the Hound is seen

The terrifying intensity of wartime violence in Westeros and its effects on the many peoples who inhabit Martin's world are then impeccably captured in the title of the third book in the series. It is also one of only two titles in the entire cycle (the other one being *A Feast for Crows*)<sup>22</sup> which have almost direct phraseological counterparts in Old Germanic literature. There are several weather-related war kennings, particularly in skaldic poetry, many of them inspired by a variety of meteorological phenomena, such as rain, storm, hail, or blizzard, in which the precipitation invariably comes in the form of weaponry (e.g., spears, arrows) or protective gear (helmets, chain-mail, and shields).<sup>23</sup> Finally, there are the swords which, invariably in the plural, wreak great havoc in the ranks of various north and west European combatants. The *storm-of-swords*-like kennings therefore include, amongst many others, *sverðhrið* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 33, 202), *brandél* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 40, 205), both meaning 'sword-storm', and *hjørva hregg* (Bjarni byskup Kolbeinsson, *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, st. 30, 985 and st. 36, 990) 'storm of swords', all of them being lexical variations of the 'sword/blade/edge' + 'storm/rain' metaphor.

In *A Storm of Swords* (as well as in the other four volumes of the series) the eponymous swords are by far the most exploited props. In several ways they delineate, symbolically and literally, the dramatic, multi-threaded conflict which set the entire continent on fire. Long or short, single- or double-edged, the sword is naturally not the only weapon that proved itself of regular and extensive use in the Middle Ages. Nor is swordsmanship an exclusively medieval martial art.<sup>24</sup> Its frequency in all manner of works of indisputably medieval origin (e.g., Roland's Durendal, Arthur's Excalibur) or inspiration (Aragorn's Andúril, Ned Stark's Ice) renders it an almost iconic symbol of the Middle Ages, not always immediately associated with the art of warfare.<sup>25</sup> On the more figurative level, these sharp-bladed, and, no doubt, regularly blood-stained, weapons evidently intensify the semantic resonance of the titular storm, for it is a storm, a storm of hatred, violence, and, above all,

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fully recovered in seasons 6 (episodes 7 and 8), 7 (episode 1), and 8 (episodes 1–5).

<sup>22</sup> Or three, if we include the ultimately unused title *A Time for Wolves*.

<sup>23</sup> Some of the most illustrative examples of "battle" kennings in skaldic poetry include, for instance, the likes of *mélregn* (Einarr skálaglammm Helgason, *Vellekla*, st. 10, 295) 'arrow-rain', *oddregn* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 41, 206) 'spear-rain', and *geira veðr* (Eyjólfur dáðaskáld, *Bandadrápa*, st. 9, 468) 'storm of spears'.

<sup>24</sup> The earliest known weapons that might be referred to as swords are the nine blades (of arsenical bronze) found in the 1980s at Arslantepe. They are dated to the Early Bronze Age, about 3300 BC (Sagona 2006: 51–52).

<sup>25</sup> It could also be seen, for instance, used as an instrument of punishment, in medieval Europe as well as in Martin's Westeros. Cf. Ned Stark's oft-quoted, "the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword" (*A Game of Thrones*, 14).

soaring ambitions which germinates in *A Game of Thrones*, that sets the novel (or, in fact, the entire series *A Song of Ice and Fire*) in motion.

### 5. *A Feast for Crows*

The fourth novel in the series is somewhat different from the first three. First of all, its readers had to wait more than five years for the book to be published in October 2005. Once it came out, it became apparent that Martin had decided to split the narrative into two separate volumes,<sup>26</sup> each focusing upon the events which take place concurrently in the Seven Kingdoms (*A Feast for Crows*, 2005) as well as in Essos and the North, both on and beyond the Wall (*A Dance with Dragons*).<sup>27</sup> As a result, some characters, including the most popular ones such as Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen, and Tyrion Lannister almost vanish, not to be seen until six years later (2011a, 2011b), when the fifth volume was published. *A Feast for Crows* consequently mainly narrates the final stages and immediate aftermath of the War of the Five Kings. Stannis Baratheon has now gone north in order to aid the men of the Night's Watch in their fight against the surging Wildlings; Joffrey's eight-year-old brother Tommen is officially the ruler of the Seven Kingdoms, although, for the most part, his mother Cersei administers matters of the realm as a dowager queen; and Jamie Lannister and Brienne of Tarth have gone in search of Sansa Stark, who, in turn, following her escape from captivity in King's Landing, is hiding in the Vale under the protection of Petyr Baelish. Across the Narrow Sea, Arya begins her rigorous training in the House of Black and White, while Samwell Tarly, in the company of the wildling girl Gilly and Maester Aemon, spends some time in Braavos, following which Sam sees the old man die at the age of 102. Before he passes away, however, Aemon reveals to him that "Daenerys is [now the] only hope" (*A Feast for Crows*, 589). On a more global level, then, the war might be over, but that does not mean that the situation in Westeros should now be considered permanently to have stabilised. The blood upon the combatants' swords has not yet dried, when the rumours of far more serious and consequence-laden conflicts, the White Walkers growing in strength in the north and the forces of the Dragon Queen in the south, begin to occupy the minds of the survivors.

It is hard to tell whether the crows of the title and their feasting were directly inspired by the analogous motifs recurrent in various fields of early Germanic

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<sup>26</sup> By that time, *A Song of Ice and Fire* was intended to be a pentalogy, with *A Feast for Crows* and *The Winds of Winter* as the last novels in the series, the fourth and fifth respectively.

<sup>27</sup> The division is not so rigid with some characters, such as Cersei Lannister, appearing in both books.

culture (literary, decorative, onomastic).<sup>28</sup> After all, a number of references to wolves, ravens (or other Corvidae), and eagles, animals commonly associated with the grim reality of warfare and its immediate aftermath, may be encountered in as thematically varied and temporally distant works as Homer’s *Iliad* (believed to have been recorded around the eighth century BC)<sup>29</sup> and Stanisław Żeromski’s naturalistic short story titled *Ravens and Crows Will Peck Us to Pieces* (2013 [1895]).<sup>30</sup> It is, however, above all else, in the works of Anglo-Saxon and, somewhat indirectly, Norse poets that the sinister trio takes the form of a conventionalised trope for which, in 1955, Francis P. Magoun Jr. coined the term “beasts of battle” (1955). In Old English poetry the said creatures are regularly seen, in a variety of numbers and combinations, prior to and during all manner of military confrontations (e.g., *Exodus*, ll. 162–167, 101–102; *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ll. 61–65, or *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 106–107), as well as in those passages whose foremost objective appears to have been the creation of “strong associative ties with death and destruction” (Honegger 1998: 298). In the works of the Norse skalds, the wolf, the raven, and the eagle might likewise be spotted prowling around and flying over the many theatres of war, yet they could also be found, in fact, in far greater numbers than elsewhere, as the base words in various war-related kennings. A triumphant warrior could hence be referred to as *inn víða frægi vargteitir* (Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Magnússdrápa*, st. 12, 221) ‘the renowned wolf-cheerer’ or, more explicitly, *vargnistir* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 29, 200) ‘wolf-feeder’, while the corpses of the fallen are quite regularly depicted as *beitu ulfs* (Óttarr svartí, *Knútsdrápa*, st. 11, 781), *barri ara* (Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Sexstefja*, st. 29, 144), or *verðar hrafnis* (Kolli inn prúði, *Ingadrápa*, st. 1, 528), each time alluding to the not always unequivocally specified ingredients of the three animals’ dietary habits: respectively, ‘the wolf’s bait’, ‘the eagle’s barley’, and ‘the raven’s food’.

Despite the fact that neither of the last three kennings may be described as a direct equivalent of George R. R. Martin’s *Feast for Crows*, it is quite reasonable to assert that, in a broader sense, they all belong to the same category of

<sup>28</sup> See, however, my earlier publication on the medieval imagery in Martin’s series, “‘Dark wings’ and ‘grey furs’: The Old Germanic roots of carrion-eating beasts in *A Song of Ice and Fire*”, in which I argue that its indebtedness to the “beasts of battle” trope is at least highly probable (Neubauer 2014: 181–209).

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, the opening lines of book I, “Achilles ... made their [i.e., the Achaeans’] bodies carrion, feast for the dogs and birds” (Homer, *The Iliad*, ll. 1–5).

<sup>30</sup> Literally, the title refers to a Polish insurgent by the name of Szymon Winrych, whose dead body comes to be badly mutilated by a murder of crows. More symbolically, however, the carrion birds were in all likelihood meant to represent the three partitioning powers: the Russian Empire and the Kingdoms of Austria and Prussia, which, in the second half of the eighteenth century, gradually annexed the entire territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

phraseological units, in which the bodies of the dead, which may be encountered at practically every step in Westeros and beyond, are likened to the food on which the 'beasts of battle' (in this case 'crows', the raven's closest relatives) tend to gorge in time of war. The 'feast' of the title, however, seems more than just a superficial reference to early medieval iconography and symbolism. Now that the bloody War of the Five Kings has entered its third year and the political discord that once set much of Westeros ablaze appears to be easing, the administrative void in some of its realms is instantly being filled by the human 'crows' of evidently covetous disposition; people such as Petyr Baelish, Euron Greyjoy, or Ramsey Bolton, who cannot wait to carve out for themselves a piece of land that might constitute the cornerstones of their own private dominions, small but vigorous realms almost literally founded upon the corpses of those of the defeated for whom the aforesaid 'game of thrones' proved brutally to have "no middle ground" (*A Game of Thrones*, 471).<sup>31</sup> "This is a time for beasts", reflects the knight Jaime Lannister, a time "for lions and wolves and angry dogs, for ravens and carrion crows" (*A Feast for Crows*, 512), both animal and human.

#### 6. *A Dance with Dragons*

The last of the five novels published so far, *A Dance with Dragons*, came out in 2011, six years after *A Feast for Crows* (2011a, 2011b). This means that, some of the characters last seen on the pages of *A Storm of Swords*, highly likeable figures such as Jon Snow, Bran Stark, and Daenerys Targaryen, made their triumphant returns after an eleven-year absence.<sup>32</sup> This, however, does not mean that the readers had actually missed any vital aspects of the plotline, as the fourth volume of *A Song of Ice and Fire* runs well-nigh simultaneously with the fifth, the former being more concerned with the final stages of the War of the Five Kings, the latter focusing predominantly on the events in Slaver's Bay, as well as on and beyond the Wall. *A Dance with Dragons* is also unique in that, for the first time, it features the eponymous beasts in their (near) prime, as Drogon, Rhaegal, and Viserion, the three dragons hatched from the eggs which Daenerys earlier received from Illyrio Mopatis as a wedding gift (*A Game of Thrones*, 99), have now become a formidable (albeit not always well-disciplined) force in the hands of the "Mother of Dragons" (*A Dance with Dragons* vol. I, 42). At this point, the role they are to play in the series' looming conflicts, the conquest of

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<sup>31</sup> The Littlefinger, Petyr Baelish, one of the series' most notorious fraudsters, even admits that the post-combat reality of Westeros is indeed his natural habitat, as he seems to "thrive on chaos" (*A Feast for Crows*, 708).

<sup>32</sup> The first of them only appears briefly in *A Feast for Crows*, in the chapter narrated from the perspective of Samwell Tarly.

Westeros and the war with the Others, is still unknown (barring to the audience of the last two seasons of HBO's *Game of Thrones*), but, given the somewhat exaggerated reports that may sometimes be heard on the continent of Westeros, one may safely assume that it must be crucial or at least significant.

While both dancing and dragons feature quite profusely in medieval literature, they are not, it seems, normally found in any kind of union, narrative, lexical, and/or tropological. There are few references to dancing or any such activity prior to the development of the courtly literature of the High Middle Ages,<sup>33</sup> when such frolics took their place among the very few means of any direct social interaction available to those star-crossed lovers who, like Iseult and Guinevere, happened to be unhappily married to somebody else. Being thus of a rather late date, what we today understand as dancing, the act of moving the body and feet, usually in tandem, to the sound of music, is not to be found in the otherwise lavish and highly inventive word-hoards of the Anglo-Saxon scop and Norse skald. Unlike dancing, however, dragons are not in the least a rare occurrence in early medieval culture, whether North-West Germanic or other. There are, in fact, innumerable instances of their commanding presence in the world of literature, *Beowulf* and the *Völsunga saga* being but two examples, but they may also be found in abundance in many other fields of creative expression, from all manner of products of medieval craftsmanship (jewellery, ornaments, architecture, etc.) to onomastics (personal names, place-names, and ship names). Dragons (usually denoting a variety of beasts with serpent-like features) clearly also constituted often-used elements in the metaphor-laden language of early Germanic poetics, featuring, mainly figuratively, as metaphors for ships (e.g., *dýrr dreki* 'precious dragon' in Gísl Illugason's poem in celebration of King Magnus Barefoot, *Erfikvæði about Magnús berfættr*, st. 15, 427), spears (e.g., *flugdreki sára* 'flying-dragon of wounds' in the anonymous *Krákumál*, st. 21, 760), and gold (e.g., *dreka ból* 'dragon's dwelling' in Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli*, st. 41, 41). It is, however, unlikely, given the thematic range of Anglo-Saxon and Norse verse, that any combinations involving both 'dancing' and 'dragons' (at least in the sense that Martin may have intended for the fifth volume in his series) were ever used in the poetic works of the Early or even High Middle Ages.

There is, it seems, little doubt that, of all the five novels so far published, the title of the fifth is the least obvious. Much as with the other four, though, it appears highly symbolic, operating on at least two levels of meaning. Part of the problem, however, is that *A Dance with Dragons* was originally intended to be used as the title of the second volume of what Martin at first envisaged as a

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<sup>33</sup> There are, however, numerous clues, such as, for instance, the horned figures with spears on the Sutton Hoo helmet, that some forms of ritual dancing were not unknown to the peoples of the Early Middle Ages (Bruce-Mitford 1968: 27–28).



trilogy.<sup>34</sup> At that time its central story was to be the Dothraki invasion which is not quite ready in the novel of the same title that came out in 2011. As it stands, the semantic scope of the title should incorporate both the three dragons that came to be adopted by Daenerys and, on a more figurative level, much as with the lupine Starks and leonine Lannisters, all the surviving members of the House Targaryen, including, at least according to the HBO series, Jon Snow, a.k.a. Aegon Targaryen, the son of Daenerys's older brother Rhaegar Targaryen and Eddard Stark's younger sister Lyanna.

As for the word that modifies their interaction with the other characters in the novel, the dragons' 'dance' could perhaps be seen as denoting the looming conquest of Westeros, the mighty beasts, in a sense, 'playing' with their helpless opponents, for whom dragons may so far have seemed no more than long-forgotten legends of old,<sup>35</sup> sufficiently formidable to scare faint-hearted simpletons who believe in fairy tales. Given what is known from the last two seasons of *Game of Thrones*, we might even venture to say that the title of the fifth volume alludes to the flourishing romance between Daenerys and her fellow Targaryen, Jon Snow. This, however, would be to ignore two significant issues. First of all, it is a 'dance with', rather than 'of dragons',<sup>36</sup> and so the assumed agent, i.e., the one who is actually dancing with the beasts, is perhaps the "Mother of Dragons" herself, the said *Dance* possibly meaning the complex, and possibly problematic, relationship she has with her three dragon-children: Drogon, Rhaegal, and Viserion. Another difficulty is that the two would-be lovers do not yet know one another,<sup>37</sup> Jon still appearing to be very much in mourning over the death of the Wildling spearwife Ygritte, with whom he previously had an affair (*A Dance with Dragons* vol. I, 442).

Were we to read the title of the fifth novel in the series as a metaphor for the escalating political tensions and an allusion to the forthcoming invasion and war for Westeros, the dance leader must be Daenerys Targaryen. It is she who has the means, both military and non-military (her indisputable charisma and unwavering faith in the righteousness of her cause), to conquer the Seven Kingdoms. Given that, she may indeed be able to compel the dragons to dance with (or, perhaps,

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<sup>34</sup> Martin says so in 1993 in a letter to his agent Ralph [Vicinanza]. The said correspondence may be read at <https://www.insider.com/game-of-thrones-original-story-2017-8>; date of access 19 July 2019.

<sup>35</sup> In Westeros dragons are thought to have been extinct for almost one hundred and fifty years (*A Game of Thrones*, 116).

<sup>36</sup> The Dance of the Dragons was a war of succession fought amongst the Targaryens about 170 years between the events related in *A Song of Ice and Fire* (Martin, García Jr. & Antonsson 2014: 66, 73–81).

<sup>37</sup> They meet for the first time in the third episode of the seventh series, when Jon arrives at Dragonstone in order to discuss the possibility of closing ranks against the White Walkers.



for) her, playing, in a sense, the ‘game of thrones’ in which she might have the advantage of dispatching mostly high-value figures to face the opponents’ pawns. Despite the lack of any tangible analogies in the otherwise affluent word-hoards of early Germanic poets,<sup>38</sup> the ‘dance’ of the title could have roughly the same confrontational connotations (military and political), lurking behind the superficially innocent mask of a game, as the above-listed ‘play’ kennings: Old English *wigplega* (*The Battle of Maldon*, l. 268, 65 and l. 316, 67) ‘battle-play’ and Old Norse *herleikr* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 16, 192) ‘army-play’.

### 7. *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*

Since *The Winds of Winter* is still being written (as of the second half of 2022), not much may be said here with any certainty about the remaining two volumes of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Nonetheless, given the fact that certain elements fundamental to its narrative backbone have already been revealed or hinted at in seasons 5–8 of HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2015–2019), even at this point some, albeit naturally very general, assumptions may be made about the last two titles in the series. In each case, despite its discernible figurative dimensions, the title’s semantic content is rather plain. On the more literal level, *The Winds of Winter* evidently alludes to the imminent climatic changes on the continent of Westeros, which, for the first time in millennia,<sup>39</sup> concur with the coming of the demonic Others, the literal and symbolic ‘winter’ in the sixth novel’s title. It does not, however, have any phraseological analogies, direct or indirect, in Old Germanic poetry, both ‘wind’ and ‘winter’ sometimes being the answers to the poets’ lexical riddles rather than their descriptive elements.<sup>40</sup>

*A Dream of Spring*, the seventh title in the series, likewise appears to operate on two levels of meaning, the literal and the figurative. Literally, the eponymous ‘spring’ quite clearly refers to the much-awaited change of seasons. On the more figurative side, it also alludes to what the peoples of Westeros have been in desperate need of ever since the death of Robert Baratheon halfway through the

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<sup>38</sup> It does, however, follow roughly the same pattern as the other titles in the series, with invariably two content words, the basic word and the modifier, and a preposition describing their relatedness.

<sup>39</sup> According to the ‘historical’ information provided in the series’ companion volume *The World of Ice and Fire* (Martin, García Jr. & Antonsson 2014), having been defeated at the Battle for the Dawn, “the last battle that broke the endless winter”, the Others were not seen in Westeros for six thousand or eight thousand years, depending on the source (2014: 12).

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, *morð viðar* (Óttarr svarti, *Óláfsdrápa sænska*, st. 3, 337) ‘destruction of the tree’, meaning ‘wind’, or *stríð snáka* (*Nóregs konungatal*, st. 32, 781) ‘strife of the snake’, which, somewhat obscurely to the modern reader, stands for ‘winter’.

first volume; that is to say the end of all the many conflicts, both current and looming, in the Seven Kingdoms and beyond.<sup>41</sup> It should perhaps always be seen in connection with some vital changes in the world of Martin's novels, so longed-for and so, at least initially, improbable that they seem to be no more than just a dream.

Here, again, there are no corresponding kennings in the surviving corpus of early medieval poetry, be it English, Norse or broader Germanic. This is unsurprising, though, as the somewhat oneiric and enigmatic title of the final volume in the series (despite all that has been revealed in the eighth season of *Game of Thrones*) is far less tangible than the more concrete titles of the first five novels, in particular its three central volumes, i.e., *A Clash of Kings*, *A Storm of Swords*, and *A Feast for Crows*. As a consequence, despite Martin's deployment of the above-mentioned "X of Y" structure, the last two titles are noticeably less kenning-like. In fact, with the rather emblematic seasonal allusions, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring* might have more in common with Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind", quite famously culminating with the hopeful question "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (Shelley 2009 [1820], l. 70).

#### 8. *A Time for Wolves*

It should, however, be borne in mind that *A Dream of Spring* was not Martin's original idea for the title of the ultimate volume in *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. In 1993, in the aforementioned letter to Ralph Vicinanza (cf. fn. 34), he refers to the last volume as *The Winds of Winter*. As the narrative began to expand, however, *The Winds of Winter* became the title of the sixth book and in the early years of the twenty-first century the final instalment was for some time publicised as *A Time for Wolves*, another kenning-like expression, almost certainly<sup>42</sup> inspired by the words of the eddic poem *Völuspá*, where the cataclysmic onset of Ragnarök is quite unequivocally referred to as *vindöld*, *vargöld* (*Völuspá* st. 45, 314) 'wind-time, wolf-time'.<sup>43</sup> In addition to the allusions to the monstrous wolf

<sup>41</sup> Some analogous terms in the history of our world include the so-called 'Spring of Nations' or, alternatively, the 'Springtime of the Peoples', a series of political upheavals in Western and Central Europe in 1848 and 1849, and, more recently, the series of protests or even outright rebellions in North Africa and the Middle East which came to be known as the "Arab Spring" (2010–2012).

<sup>42</sup> Another possible source (not, however, to exclude the first one) is the title of the last two episodes in the third season of the 1984–1986 ITV series *Robin of Sherwood*, "The Time of the Wolf" (2021 [1984–1986], originally aired on 21 and 28 June 1986).

<sup>43</sup> Apart from its primary sense of 'wolf', the Old Norse noun *vargr* can also mean 'thief' or 'outlaw'. It was reintroduced into English by J. R. R. Tolkien in the form of *warg* (from Old English *wearh*, pl. *weargas*), meaning an evil breed of wild wolves. Martin's own *wargs*,

Fenrir, the poem also refers to the wolves that have taken a more human form, the *menn meinsvara ok morðvarga* (*Völuspá*, st. 39, 311) ‘treacherous men and murderers’ (lit. ‘murder-wolves’). Besides, as has been observed, in the post-combat reality of the early English and Norse verse, the wolf is frequently spotted, along with its corvid and aquiline companions, prowling the battlefields in search of some gory feast.

It looks as though all the three meanings could, in some way, be applied to the eponymous *Wolves* in what in due course came to be announced as *A Dream of Spring*. First of all, in its figurative sense, the mythical Fenrir may be connected with the direwolves that not only appear on the heraldic crest of the House of Stark, but also, following the discovery of a dead she-wolf with her five pups in the first chapter of *A Game of Thrones* (15–17), serve as a kind of premonition, a forewarning which resonates, often tragically, in the subsequent events of the series.<sup>44</sup> The said beasts might also have been thought by Martin to have a more universal application, denoting the numerous rulers of Westeros and beyond (or, at least, those who survived this prolonged bloodbath) that would like to carve out their own piece of the pie in the War of the Five Kings. As seems to be the case with the fourth novel in the series, the ‘wolves’ may also have been intended to build upon the ‘beasts of battle’ trope, almost certainly alluding to the aftermath of the principal military conflict in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Finally, a development that many Stark fans would surely like to see in the final volume, *A Time for Wolves* might also herald the ultimate triumph of arguably the most congenial of all the competing families in Westeros. Once again, however, until the time the last two novels have been published, any such interpretation will have to remain in the sphere of mere speculation. They seem to be at least partly confirmed by what has been revealed in the final season of *Game of Thrones*, but Martin has already warned his fans that not all of what one sees (on the screen) is actually what one gets (on the page).<sup>45</sup>

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in the sense of (not necessarily lupine) skin-changers are evidently derived from the beasts first referred to in *The Hobbit* by Tolkien’s werebear Beorn (Tolkien 2007 [1937]: 125).

<sup>44</sup> It was, it seems, also commonly acknowledged in the North Germanic world that Fenrir would one day slay Odin during the battle of Ragnarøk. The motif persists in Norse art (Jäger 2010: 310; Krause 2015: 61).

<sup>45</sup> The uncertainty over the series finale was quite famously fuelled by the author’s remarks on his blog, following the last episode of the HBO series: “How will it all end? I hear people asking. The same ending as the show? Different? Well... yes. And no. And yes. And no. And yes. And no. And yes” (<http://georgerrmartin.com/notablog/2019/05/20/an-ending/>; accessed 19 July 2019). It may be that Martin, who back in the early 2000s was not particularly happy with the title (<http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intgrm.htm>; accessed 19 July 2019), decided to abandon *A Time for Wolves* in favour of the less illuminating title *A Dream of Spring*.

### 9. *A Song of Ice and Fire*

In the context of what has been said above the title of Martin's entire series, sometimes inaccurately referred to as *Game of Thrones*, is also noteworthy. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is not a versified composition to be performed with musical accompaniment. It is a long tale of distinctly medieval character (or, at least, what we usually deem to be medieval), conjuring up, if only by dint of the title's base-word, some of the most famous works of the Middle Ages: *La Chanson de Roland*, *Das Nibelungenlied* and *El Cantar de mio Cid*. Unsurprisingly, apart from George R. R. Martin's series, the word 'song' is also used in quite a number of modern works, mostly novels, which in some ways draw upon the rich heritage of the *Medium Aevum*. These include, amongst others, Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword Song* (2013 [1997], published posthumously) and Zilpha Keatley Snyder's *The Song of the Gargoyle* (1991), the former being evidently modelled upon the poetic imagery of the Viking Age,<sup>46</sup> the latter featuring a teenage boy, son of a court jester, who gradually becomes aware of his talent for music. In this way, they seem to acquire a more distinctly antiquarian air (if only on account of the popular semantic associations), much as some of the modern book or film titles containing words such as 'legend', 'tale', 'lay', 'ballad', and 'saga'.<sup>47</sup>

Figuratively, Martin's novels might be likened to a song, a song of multiple fits and stanzas with an implied refrain verbalised a number of times in the cycle's first volume, the near-proverbial "game of thrones", which, as has been observed, was adopted as the main title of the HBO series and, on the strength of its popularity, almost replaced *A Song of Ice and Fire* as the general title of the eventual heptalogy. Moreover, much as the bulk of all manner of longer narratives or cycles of poems of indisputably (early) medieval provenance, the stories of Sigurd the Völsung and his kin<sup>48</sup> and, quite possibly, the poem that came to be known as *Beowulf*<sup>49</sup>, to name but two illustrative instances, the multi-volume tale of enduring dynastic disputes

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<sup>46</sup> Rosemary Sutcliff was always very careful in her selection of words. See, for instance, an examination of her lexical choices in *Beowulf: Dragonslayer* (Neubauer 2013: 120–123).

<sup>47</sup> Some of the best examples of such titles in the world of literature include Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (2001 [1820]), J. K. Rowling's *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (2017), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* (2016), Shichiro Fukazawa's *The Ballad of Narayama* (2013 [1983]), and John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (2008 [1906–1921]).

<sup>48</sup> The story of the rise and fall of the Völsung family, as related in, particularly, the heroic lays of the *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsunga saga*, consists of multiple threads relating the storylines of various characters, from Sigi, an alleged son of Odin and the ancestor of the entire lineage, down to Sigurd's wife Gudrun and her ill-fated progeny.

<sup>49</sup> Opinions may vary here, but some, especially early critics argue (not always convincingly) that what we now know as a single poem may, in fact, incorporate a number of originally independent threads (Shippey 1997: 149–174).

and other hostilities in Westeros and beyond the Narrow Sea consists of numerous threads (the point-of-view chapters), which, apart from offering the reader a chance to see the world through the eyes of different characters, might call to mind a multi-vocal musical composition performed by a number of singers,<sup>50</sup> taking their turns to entertain the reader.

As for the lexical properties of the series' collective title, there are no 'ice and fire' kennings in the works of early Germanic poets, although the two referents abound in the verse compositions of, particularly, Icelandic skalds (e.g., *randa iss* [Einarr Skúlason, *Óxarflokkr*, st. 9, 149] 'ice of shields', and thus 'sword', or *eldr himna* [Sturla Þórðarson, *Hrynhenda*, st. 17, 694] 'fire of heavens', meaning 'the sun'). Curiously, however, and, it seems, totally independently of the development of Martin's book series, a similar expression was used as the title of the opening track on Sequentia's album *Edda. Myths from Medieval Iceland* (1999).<sup>51</sup> The short (2 minutes, 15 seconds) instrumental piece, performed by Elizabeth Gaver on a five-string fiddle, preceding a selection of mythological lays from the *Poetic Edda*, was titled *Leikr elds ok ísa* "The Song of Fire and Ice", an intriguing coincidence, given the fact that the programme was recorded between 5–9 November 1996 in Skálholt, three months after the publication of *A Game of Thrones* (1 August), the first instalment of Martin's series, at the time envisioned as a trilogy.<sup>52</sup> It is unknown whether the then Cologne-based musicians could have been in any way influenced by the collective title of what, at that time, was yet to become a series of highly popular novels,<sup>53</sup> but the sheer fact that it is to be found amongst the opening lines (rather than titles) of the eddic poems seems to demonstrate that, notwithstanding their order, such a combination of words would not probably have been completely unthinkable in medieval Iceland.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> There are, in the first five volumes, as many as twenty-four characters (in addition to those who make their appearance almost exclusively in the prologues and epilogues of individual instalments) who, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Marc Antony, lend the readers their eyes.

<sup>51</sup> Sequentia is an early music ensemble founded in 1977 by Barbara Thornton and Benjamin Bagby, perhaps best known for their recordings and performances of the music of Hildegard of Bingen. Their twenty-third album, *Edda. Myths from Medieval Iceland*, contains creative reconstructions of the performances of five eddic poems: *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Þrymskviða*, *Grottasöngur*, and *Baldur's draumar*, as well as three instrumental pieces.

<sup>52</sup> The CD was released by the Deutsche Harmonia Mundi recording label three years later, in 1999.

<sup>53</sup> In the original 1996 HarperCollins paperback edition, the words "A Song of Ice and Fire. Book One. A Game of Thrones" may be seen on the book's spine.

<sup>54</sup> In all likelihood, the title refers to the north Atlantic island itself, well-known for being the land of ice (hence its name, *Ísland*) and fire (an allusion to Iceland's many volcanos).

## 10. Conclusions

Be it a novel, a play, a film, or some other medium of narrative expression, a good title should comply with a number of, mostly unwritten, conditions. As has been seen, one of the major issues is its informative function (informative, that is, within certain conventionalised limits).<sup>55</sup> The reader must thus have at least a passing understanding of what a given book may be about, particularly today, when the selection of novels available on the market amounts to hundreds of thousands. In order to be commercially successful, a good title must also be rather concise, preferably consisting of no more than two content words (along with the required articles and/or conjunctions). This seems even more important now, in the age of visual communication, than ever before, although it does not mean that the titles of such highly esteemed classics as *Pride and Prejudice*, *War and Peace*, or *Great Expectations* are in any way more successful now, in the twenty-first century, than they were in the nineteenth. It is even more significant that the two/three substantives should somehow be striking in their semantic anatomy, hence the authors' deployment of such attention-grabbing nouns as 'pride', 'prejudice', 'war', 'peace', or 'expectations' (the last further enhanced by means of the descriptive adjective 'great'), each of which promises either a captivating plot (*War and Peace*), in-depth character portrayals (*Pride and Prejudice*), or some kind of legacy to come (*Great Expectations*).

The titles of Martin's individual novels in the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* all clearly comply with most, if not all, of these features. They are not only concise, invariably consisting of two content words,<sup>56</sup> but they also feature combinations of nouns that, even to an uninformed browser of library bookshelves, would spark notions of adventure, suspense, and intrigue, features that have always been in great demand amongst readers over the centuries. Of course, the enormous success of Martin's novels, artistic as well as commercial, is not determined by the writer's titular preferences. Given the right marketing strategies, its serialisation on HBO and its series-related merchandise, the books would

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<sup>55</sup> In the early days of the novel, extremely long titles were not unusual. Cf., for instance, Daniel Defoe's most famous book, whose title page bears the following words: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates.* It seems highly unlikely, though, that, back in the eighteenth century, people would actually refer to it other than simply *Robinson Crusoe*.

<sup>56</sup> It may be that it was at least partly for the sake of this conciseness that the management of HBO decided to switch from the original title of the series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, to the more succinct *Game of Thrones*. The other possible reason may have been a more informative character of the latter.

probably sell just as well (or nearly just as well) if their titles were less catchy. It seems fairly certain, though, that regardless of whether the last two volumes are eventually published, the series will go down in history as one of the most successful stories in the high fantasy genre, along with the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and Ursula K. Le Guin, or even, as *Game of Thrones*, one of the best-recognised titles in the history of literature.<sup>57</sup>

Being able only to provide necessarily concise (not to say laconic) comments upon the subject matter of each novel, the titles examined above should never be treated as particularly accurate outlines of the events covered in the five instalments published so far. Some of them, it appears, could also be used in connection with practically any volume in the series (e.g., *A Storm of Swords*, *A Feast for Crows*, and, most importantly, *A Game of Thrones*, the title which, as has been seen, was ultimately adapted for the entire HBO series).<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that, at least to a certain degree, they do reflect the contents of the first five books, at the same time cleverly fostering the readers' imagination by confronting them with idiomatic expressions whose meaning might easily be inferred from the context, expressions implying both action ('game', 'clash', 'storm', 'feast', 'dance') and interaction ('of thrones', 'of kings', 'of swords', 'for crows', 'with dragons').

Given the extent of Martin's indebtedness to medieval history and culture, factual (Larrington 2016: 2) as well as fictional (Johnston & Battis 2015: 5–6), it seems almost certain (or at least highly plausible) that some of the titles in *A Song of Ice and Fire* series may have been modelled, directly or indirectly,<sup>59</sup> upon the figurative compounds frequently used by the poets in North-Western Europe in the early Middle Ages.<sup>60</sup> Naturally and evidently, they are not as byzantine as some of the kennings that may be encountered in the works of some Icelandic skalds,<sup>61</sup> but the verbal imagery they deploy, particularly with regard to

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<sup>57</sup> Given the fast-changing tastes of today's readers, in a not-too-distant future, the title (*A*) *Game of Thrones* may be as popular as those of *Pride and Prejudice*, *War and Peace*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. It is already a cultural icon, but whether it will remain so is yet to be seen.

<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, some of the novel titles (with minor alterations) came to be used as the titles of individual episodes in the *Game of Thrones* series. These include "The Dance of Dragons" (S05E09) and "The Winds of Winter" (S06E10).

<sup>59</sup> It may be that in his choice of the first title (as well as the subsequent ones) in the series, Martin was in some way inspired by those of other novels, most notably, perhaps, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which he often credits for being a major source of his inspiration.

<sup>60</sup> By the Late Middle Ages, kennings seem to have been abandoned as a poetic device in Germanic Europe. The only notable exception is Iceland, where the poets continued to employ kenning-like circumlocutions well into modern times.

<sup>61</sup> Some of the most complex, multiple-word kennings could consist of as many as five (or more) components. One such instance is *bragðvíss frá beiðir bjartglóða flóðs* (*Plácitusdrápa*, st. 53, 215), "cunning, nimble demander of the flood's bright embers [i.e., gold]", meaning 'man'.



the first four titles in the series, appears to be a well-balanced mediation between what would probably have been quite readily recognisable (barring the language barrier) to the early medieval audiences and, most importantly, the modern readers with only a superficial knowledge of the medieval world with its colourful traditions and often merciless practices. Like *The Lord of the Rings*, they are, therefore, seamless combinations of some literary conventions from the past and modern titular practices, practices whose principal objectives are to provide the readers with some fundamental knowledge concerning the novels' contents, whet their reading appetites, and thus ensure that they will make successful, marketable titles.

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