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REIMAGINING MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE IN GAME OF THRONES AND A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE (2022) BY TOBI EVANS

Review by Clair Hutchings-Budd

Evans, Tobi. *Reimagining Masculinity and Violence in Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire*. Liverpool University Press, 2022.

In this queer reading of violence and masculinity in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIAF, 1996-current) novels and their HBO television adaptation *Game of Thrones* (GoT, 2011-2019) Tobi Evans advances the thesis that violence offers more than one route to the performance of masculinity within the depicted secondary world. Taking key characters as case studies, Evans considers how the enactment of violence provides a means for self-definition, with hegemonic violence as a mechanism for negotiating power-relationships within Martin's pseudo-medieval society. Evans contextualises their use of the term hegemonic violence through "its personal and structural relation to masculine power, drawing on the concept from Raewyn Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity" (10). In this regard, Evans argues that their monograph breaks new critical ground, by considering how a character's motivation for the use of hegemonic violence operates either to destroy the perpetrator or promulgates their ideals and values via a form of queer reproduction.

Taking a queer feminist, poststructuralist, and psychoanalytic approach to their interpretation of violence in the texts, Evans draws upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and Barbara Creed's work on the monstrous feminine to formulate their own unified proposition that when characters within the texts use hegemonic violence to assert their dominance the narrative ensures this violence is ultimately turned against them in a way that renders the character abject, breaking down their bodily borders. This abjection through disintegration makes their bodies disgusting and thus unable to physically reproduce their bloodlines. Evans argues that the only characters who perform violence in such a way as to maintain their bodily integrity and thus pass on their own experience and values are those who use violence to care for others. This queer mode of reproduction is accomplished via networks of queer kinships that extend the notion of social inheritance beyond the patriarchal and biologically essentialist. Evans organises their book into five chapters, each focusing on case studies drawn from the texts. Viewing the books and screen adaptation holistically, Evans gives equal critical weight to the two narrative modes, deftly moving between close textual reading and analysis of cinematography as required.

Chapter One, "Some Knights are Dark and Full of Terror," introduces the concept of the queer monstrous feminine which Evans defines as "a monstrous mode in which a masculine body becomes discursively coded as feminine through monstrous feminine imagery" (27). Taking the

characters of Gregor Clegane and Ramsay Bolton as case studies – responsible for some of the texts' most horrifying acts of violence – Evans uses Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) as a framework for exploring the imagery that surrounds the characters' use of hegemonic masculine violence; specifically, the discursive codes of the monstrous birth, the bloody mouth, and *vagina dentata*. Providing numerous examples of how this monstrous feminine-coded imagery is present in the textual and televisual depictions of the sexual and bodily violations carried out by these two male characters, Evans discusses how Creed's development of Kristeva's theory of the abject provides a lens through which the hegemonic violence of Clegane and Bolton can be viewed. Evans' core argument that *ASOIAF* and *GoT* "reveals the inability of heteropatriarchal violence to produce anything but destruction," is supported by showing how the monstrous acts committed by both ultimately leads to them becoming abject through the physical disintegration of their own bodies, and – critically – before they can produce heirs (27). This is an impactful reading of the characters, which takes the audience beyond individual acts of violence and the misery of victims as Evans' critical approach to *ASOIAF/GoT* resists interpreting these acts of violence as gratuitous by providing a framework for examining hegemonic violence in terms of its social implications.

Chapter Two, "Undoing Sovereign Violence," moves to another aspect of hegemonic violence as variously expressed by the men and boys of House Stark (the lineage with sovereign authority over the North of Westeros), and as further navigated by Stark-adjacent characters, the hostage and ward Theon Greyjoy and (apparent) Stark bastard Jon Snow. Here Evans outlines how these characters position themselves in respect to acts of sovereign violence, a superficially legitimate enactment of violence (although defined and bounded by patriarchal and class inequities) which calls upon tradition and male role models to both justify itself and circumscribe 'correct' masculine performance. In the case of the Starks and Stark-adjacent characters Evans invites us to view their enactments of sovereign violence through Butler's theory of gender performativity, in the sense of repeated acts of sovereign violence becoming flawed copies of an idealised archetype and thus doomed to failure (85). This failure, Evans argues, is brought about by the character's abjection through contact with the bloodied victims of their acts of sovereign violence. In each character Evans examines how this abjection through bodily contamination means that they are unable to reproduce. Even though the texts demonstrate that "hegemonic sovereign violence is revealed as unable to support a coherent masculine identity" (85), an unanswered question here is why the (false) narrative that underpins it continues to be so pervasive. Some more detailed consideration of this point would have been helpful, perhaps linking it to later chapters where the author contrasts this mode of personal alignment (Evans uses the term "citationality") with alternative models for the expression of sovereign violence, such as Brienne of Tarth's identification with chivalric ideals. Evans' argument that Brienne's relationship with this ideal has a more positive outcome than the Stark's performance of sovereign violence as she enacts violence to care for others, but this does not satisfactorily explain why it continues to be an ostensibly valid model for so many of Martin's male-bodied characters if hegemonic sovereign violence always results in the destruction of the perpetrator.

In Chapter Three, "Vile, Scheming, Evil Bitches?," Evans continues their exploration of masculine violence through two of Martin's female characters – Cersei Lannister and Brienne – who Evans describes as "embodying female masculinity" (89). Whilst Evans does not feel either

of these two very different women are transgender *per se*, they see transgender theory as a useful lens through which to examine how both self-identify and perform masculine-coded behaviour. In Cersei's case, this is inextricably tied up in her political machinations and attempts to hold on to dynastic power, whilst Brienne seeks to align herself with the chivalric ideals of the true (masculine) knight as protector of the weak. In considering the performance of masculine violence by female characters, Evans further develops their proposal that the monstrous feminine is not bound by gender essentialism, but "can instead be understood as a monstrous mode" that can be performed by either men or women (105). I would agree that, using Evans' terminology, the "monstrous mode" need not be linked to biological sex and I would have been interested in seeing this language of the monstrous feminine explored further through the synergies between Ramsay Bolton's castrating Theon Greyjoy and Cersei's replacement of the King's prospective legitimate heirs with her own brother's children. Whilst, unlike Ramsay, she commits no physical assault on Robert, her reproductive choices weaponise her organs of reproduction – a *vagina dentata* in effect, if not actuality.

Moving on to Chapter Four, "Disabled Masculinities and the Potential and Limits of Queered Masculine Violence," Evans introduces another set of characters whose bodily differences require them to renegotiate their relationship with masculinity. Unlike Cersei and Brienne, who approach the masculine mode as female-bodied individuals, these characters are male-bodied but were either born with a disability or suffer an accident or injury that limits their ability to perform hegemonic or 'correct' sovereign violence (in accordance with the Westerosi paradigm). Evans here presents as case studies Brandon Stark, who is made paraplegic when he is thrown from a window by Jaime Lannister, and Hodor, the gentle giant with a learning disability who becomes Bran's means of enforcing hegemonic violence by being compelled to act as an extension of his immobilised body. Jaime in turn has his sword hand severed by enemies compelling him (like Bran) to review his relationship to hegemonic violence and his role models. The third character that Evans examines in detail is Tyrion Lannister, born with achondroplasia and rejected by his father at birth. Tyrion, like Bran and Jaime, is unable to access the archetype for sovereign violence that we see (as Evans discussed in Chapter Two) the able-bodied Stark and Stark-adjacent characters repeatedly perform and, in the repetition, fall apart. Instead, Evans argues, these three characters "undergo symbolic rebirths that signal their decision to relinquish their attachment to hegemonic violence and the structures that uphold it," choosing to follow alternative models of caring masculinity, where violence is enacted to protect others (171). It is these caring acts of violence that have fewer debilitating effects on the bodily borders of these disabled characters, enabling queer kinship networks to be established that enable the promulgation of the individuals' knowledge and values.

The final chapter of the book, "Queer Magical Violence and Gender Fluidity," explores two major characters, Daenerys Targaryen and Arya Stark, and another less central character, Varamyr Sixskins. Evans presents a queer reading of these characters, arguing that they typify archetypes in the Fantasy genre who "play with gender possibilities through magic" (173). This chapter is particularly compelling because in *ASOIAF* and *GoT*, although magic and the supernatural are clearly present in Martin's secondary world they play an unclear and socially ambiguous function. Many characters either do not believe in magic or having witnessed it (for example in the cases of Davos Seaworth and Jorah Mormont) want nothing to do with it. A queer reading that foregrounds how

these characters use magic as a medium for navigating their gender identities thus works particularly well in a Fantasy series that is so concerned with power relationships and how a masculine mode of violence is performed in this context. From my reading Daenerys' transgressing the strict gender prescriptions of Dothraki society (beginning with her attempted magical resurrection of Khal Drogo and culminating with her setting fire to the Dosh Khaleen) and Arya's mystical training with the Faceless Men to alter her bodily presentations (including crossing gender boundaries) are examples that support Evans' thesis.

Overall Evans presents a soundly constructed case for reading *ASOIAF* and *GoT* as a discourse on how power relationships are navigated through violence that is coded as monstrously feminine. Decoupling masculinity from biology, Evans' thesis is underpinned by the work of preeminent queer and transgender theorists which are clearly referenced throughout their argument. I would have liked to have seen further consideration of other significant characters who also manifest the monstrous feminine such as the enchantress Melisandre, who convinces Stannis Baratheon to murder his own child, and Sansa Stark, who moves from a young girl in love with the idea of courtly romances to a traumatised woman who enacts a version of sovereign violence by executing Ramsay with his own hunting dogs. Similarly, a study of the eunuch Varys – who does not use violence personally but gathers intelligence and advises as to its deployment – would have been an interesting addition to Evans' assemblage of the texts' queer characters. Particularly in the case of Varys and Sansa Stark, whose character arcs are central to Martin's narratives, I would like to have seen them given critical space within Evans' argument, either as consistent with their overarching thesis or as outliers.

BIONOTE

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