



Queens, Assassins, and Zombies: The Valkyrie Reflex in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

Kristine Larsen

Central Connecticut State University

One of the often-discussed highlights of George R.R. Martin's ongoing fantasy saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* (the source material for the HBO hit series *Game of Thrones*) is its large number of strong female characters.ⁱ From Arya Stark to Daenerys Targaryen, Brienne to Ygritte, these women play pivotal roles in shaping the history of Westeros and the other continents of the series' largely Medieval world. It is, therefore, not surprising that a number of authors have studied Martin's use of common female archetypes, tropes, and stereotypes in his universe, a primary example being Valerie Estelle Frankel's 2014 volume *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance* (although it should be noted that this particular book focuses on the tv series).ⁱⁱ One of the most enduring (and curious) feminine archetypes found in Northern European/Germanic Medieval literature is that of the valkyrie. In her review of the valkyrie tradition, Helen Damico traces the roots of the ferocious female warrior (most widely known in modern culture through Wagner's *Ring* cycle) through numerous Indo-European cultures.ⁱⁱⁱ In opposition to this tradition of the valkyrie as a ferocious goddess of the



slaughter who roamed battlefields searching for victims, we find in Old Norse literature a valkyrie tradition (apparently more recent in origin) in which the female warriors are benevolent guardians who identified heroes and pledged their undying support to them. Damico argues that these two seemingly contradictory traditions actually reflect twin traditions in Oðin-worship and beliefs in the afterlife.^{iv}

In her seminal work, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," Leslie Donovan identifies a number of characteristics that are associated with the valkyrie tradition, which she then applies to an analysis of female characters in Tolkien's text. Four of these traits are common to multiple feminine archetypes:

- Divine or semi-divine origin;
- Nobility (high social status);
- Supreme beauty (including shining eyes);
- Superior reasoning skills, intelligence, and insight;^v
- while six traits are specific to the valkyrie reflex:
- "Otherworldly radiance," sometimes linked to "battle fires" or the gleam of armor;
- Masculine strength and physical prowess;
- The fulfillment of ritual and ceremonial functions, including the bestowing of gifts;
- The possession of prophetic insight and the utterance of prophetic remarks;
- Freely choosing to act of her own (strong) will; and
- The ultimate loss of an important and beloved object, person, or skill.^{vi}

Donovan also notes that in Germanic heroic poetry relationships between valkyries and heroes often "alter the course of events in the human world."^{vii} In addition, valkyries can be seen as the very embodiment of death, through their connection to warriors slain in battle.^{viii}

In her more general survey of valkyric traits and powers, Damico identifies several other characteristics common to this tradition, including:

- An erotic relationship between the "valkyrie-bride" and the hero;^{ix}
- Grief on the part of both parties resulting from such relationship;^x
- The ability of the valkyrie to both spur the hero into action and bring about his destruction through that action;^{xi} and
- Supernatural powers that result in the valkyrie not being limited in time and space.^{xii}

This extensive list of defining characteristics clearly demonstrates that the true valkyric character is more complex than the simple "woman warrior" trope, although there is certainly some overlap in characteristics (such as masculine strength and physical prowess).

In her analysis of the Middle-earth characters Galadriel, Shelob, Arwen, and Éowyn (and a subsequent expansion of this analysis to *Silmarillion* characters such as Lúthien, Melian, and Ungoliant)^{xiii} Donovan is clear to point out that, as is the case with other literary and mythological traditions he draws upon in his crafting of the legendarium, Tolkien does not simply incorporate the valkyrie reflex wholesale into his mythology, but rather purposefully adapts it, molding it to his "contemporary models of heroism and sacrifice."^{xiv} For example, in her analysis of Éowyn, Donovan emphasizes the character's psychological strength in addition to the strength of her sword arm.^{xv} Donovan also explains that Tolkien draws upon both of the

valkyrie traditions, with the monstrous arachnids Ungoliant and her spawn Shelob reflecting the earlier, ferocious goddess of the slaughter tradition, and Galadriel, Arwen, Melian, Lúthien, and Éowyn echoing the later benevolent guardians convention.^{xvi} In *The Mythological Dimensions of Doctor Who*, I applied Donovan's valkyrie reflex template to the character of Rose Tyler,^{xvii} while co-editor Jessica Burke analyzed Donna Noble, Martha Jones, and the Tennant-era version of River Song through the same lens.^{xviii} This paper will extend this analytical technique to a number of female characters in the universe of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, specifically the books rather than the associated television series, and will only take into account the five completed novels of the anticipated seven volume series (and none of the pre-published chapters of the forthcoming sixth novel). While winter is undoubtedly coming to Westeros, apparently it, like Martin, are in no rush, and we can only hope that the series will be completed at some point prior to the ultimate heat death of the universe. Since the series is still ongoing, it is understandably impossible to paint a complete picture of these women, their actions, and their influences on the other characters and the larger plotline. Therefore, this paper should be considered very much a work in progress.

For those of you who are not familiar with the series beyond what you might have heard about the Red Wedding, the Purple Wedding, and Lord Tywin's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day in the Toilet, the novels are told from the third person viewpoints of a rotating and ever-widening spiral of characters, 31 in total thus far (out of the over 1000 characters mentioned in the series). Of these, 9 are women: Daenerys Targaryen (aka the Mother of Dragons), the Red Priestess Melisandre, Queen Cersei Lannister, knight Brienne of Tarth, tomboy Arya Stark, widow Catelyn Stark, reluctant bride Sansa Stark, ship captain Asha Greyjoy, and princess Arianne Martell. These women, plus one additional character, Ygritte the Wildling, will be the

focus of this analysis. Although Ygritte was never given a chapter told from her point of view, she is one of the strongest female characters in the series, and is therefore a natural addition to this analysis. Those of you familiar with the series might look at the list of characteristics, and say "My favorite character is plainly the true valkyrie. Let's cut this short and go enjoy second breakfast." That tactic would be not only far too superficial and simplistic, but would also rob us of the main point of such an analysis. Rather than merely observing how Martin's characters slavishly match up to the rubric of the traditional valkyrie reflex, such an exercise more importantly sheds light on how Martin, like Tolkien, adapts the tradition itself in order to better fit it to his particular secondary world. For the sake of time, I will reveal the punchline, and posit that Martin makes the following transformations to the valkyrie reflex in his universe:

1. Their "battle fires" can be fueled by the flames of emotions rather than physical flames (e.g. fueled by intense feelings of love, jealousy, revenge, hatred, passion, loyalty, or some permutation thereof);
2. Definitions of traditionally masculine strength and physical prowess include emotional, sexual, and psychological strength, and the ability to claim and yield political power, however briefly, beyond the normal station afforded women in that society;
3. While the female character herself is initially valued by her society only to the extent that she, herself, fulfills the passive traditional duty as a ritual or ceremonial object (a commodity to be given to a man), she struggles to rise above this objectification and establish herself as the one who decides how, when, and to whom her gifts are to be given; and

4. Their actions are often shaped, for good or evil, by the prophetic insight and remarks of others (in addition to any prophecies they themselves directly perceive). It will be seen that this fourth characteristic is, at this point, not applicable to all of the characters, but since the series is currently ongoing, it is possible that these connections will be made in future volumes.

Again, this analysis is preliminary in nature, and is summarized in the enclosed table.^{xix}

Those of you familiar with the series are encouraged to consider additional examples that I have not included here, and to provide counterpoints to my argument. The remainder of this paper will summarize some of the high points of my analysis.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of these characters fulfill the baseline characteristics of having high social status and beauty. Even the two "ugly" characters, Brienne of Tarth and Arya Stark, are considered beautiful in some way by one or more of the other main characters. The concept of "divine" origins is relative in this series (as the gods are generally far more remote than those of the Norse or Greek pantheon, for example), and for the sake of this analysis will be equated to being descended from old Houses of nobility that have some "legendary" status. Of these, the Targaryens (and to a lesser extent the Starks) perhaps most closely approach relative divinity (given their seemingly magical connections with certain animals). Two of the characters, Asha Greyjoy and Arianne Martell, are relative newcomers to the series, and as such, less is known about them. At present they both show great potential as valkyries, but their analysis is, of necessity, the least complete. Ygritte is the only character of the ten who has been ostensibly written out of the series (as she was killed in the third novel). However, she continues to be mentioned in the 4th and 5th volumes, as she had an apparently indelible impact on her lover, Jon Snow. As can be seen from the table, Ygritte does arguably meet each of the criteria of

the extended valkyrie reflex (Donovan's 10 items plus the 6 additional characteristics). On the surface, the character who least well fits the definition of a valkyrie is, not surprisingly, Sansa Stark. However, I would argue that we should take care not to dismiss her at this point, not the least reason being the extent to which death seems to surround her. While she has, to date, not demonstrated great wisdom, strength (either physical or emotional), or personal agency, there has been a recent shift in her character (after the death of her Aunt Lysa Arryn), and we should, therefore, hold our comments until we see how she evolves in the two remaining volumes. Of course, she IS a Stark, so she may simply continue to be emotionally and physically tortured, and ultimately die a painful and pointless death.

The remaining six characters appear to clearly fulfill the role of valkyrie within the series, albeit each in different ways. It is also instructive to subdivide them into the two classes of valkyrie reflex. I would argue that Daenerys and Brienne at this point clearly represent the more benevolent class of valkyrie, demonstrating a morality that seeks justice rather than vengeance. Cersei and Arya clearly represent the opposite pole, the goddess of the slaughter. Vengeance will be theirs. As an aside, I do get a certain vicarious pleasure in mentioning Cersei Lannister and Shelob in the same breath. Of course, these divisions are based on the actions of these characters thus far, and much can (and undoubtedly will) change in the remainder of the series. The remaining two characters represent more ambiguous moralities and motivations. Melisandre is seen as cruel and vengeful by those who do not agree with her (for example, Davos Seaworth the Onion Knight), while in her own mind she is simply acting to save the world in the great battle between good and evil by supporting Stannis, whom she seems to earnestly believe is the reincarnation of the great hero Azor Ahai. Catelyn Stark was, without a doubt, a benevolent valkyrie before her death, but as Lady Stoneheart she is vengeance personified (hence her new

name). Mercy has no place in her world. She has, quite literally, become Death. Ironically, her younger daughter, Arya, has become a Stoneheart of her own, and also desires to become the hand of justice through meting out death to those she deems deserve it. How this will all play out remains to be seen.

In conclusion, I would argue that George R.R. Martin utilizes the valkyrie reflex in a creative and highly effective way in his series, and look forward to seeing the future evolution of these and other female characters (e.g. the "Sand Snakes") in the forthcoming 6th and 7th volumes in his series.

ⁱ. It should be noted that there is also a rather vigorous online debate as to whether the television series, in particular, is misogynist, and glorifies violence against women. Such discussions, while important, are far beyond the purview of this paper.

². Valerie Estelle Frankel, *Women in Game of Thrones* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2014).

³. Helen Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 41.

⁴. Ibid.

^v. Leslie A. Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (London, Routledge, 2003), 110-11.

^{vi}. Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," 111.

^{vii}. Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," 110.

^{viii}. Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," 111.

^{ix}. Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, 48.

^x. Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, 79.

^{xi}. Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, 42.

^{xii}. Ibid.

^{xiii}. Leslie A. Donovan, "Brightly Shining and Armed for Battle: The Valkyrie Legacy in Tolkien's Middle-earth Fiction," *Mythcon* 39, New Britain, CT, August 17, 2008.

^{xiv}. Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," 129.

^{xv}. Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," 122.

^{xvi}. Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," 118; Donovan, "Brightly Shining and Armed for Battle: The Valkyrie Legacy in Tolkien's Middle-earth Fiction."

^{xvii}. Kristine Larsen, "Doctor Who and the Valkyrie Tradition Part 1: The Valiant Child and the Bad Wolf," in *The Mythological Dimensions of Doctor Who*, eds. Anthony S. Budge, Jessica Burke, and Kristine Larsen (Crawfordsville, FL: Kitsune Books, 2010), 120-39.

^{xviii}. Jessica Burke, "Doctor Who and the Valkyrie Tradition, Part 2: Goddesses, Battle-demons, Witches, & Wives," in *The Mythological Dimensions of Doctor Who*, eds. Anthony S. Budge, Jessica Burke, and Kristine Larsen (Crawfordsville, FL: Kitsune Books, 2010), 140-83.

^{xix}. A separately posted file that was originally a handout for conference participants.