

**OF DEAD HEROES AND MUTABLE FACES:
A study of *A Song of Ice and Fire's* Rhaegar Targaryen**



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Abstract: This study's point of departure is centered on the material absence of Rhaegar Targaryen from the narrative of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, since, at the outset of the series, the death of the Prince of Dragonstone is already an event of the past. To the reader, therefore, Rhaegar is crafted not by description or diegetic events, but out of legend itself, carved by the memories and rumors of the people of Westeros and Essos—the major settings of the series. The present study will, hence, interpret Rhaegar as an amalgam of truth and imagination. It is noted how, frozen in this mire of divergent representations, the reader can never be in possession of an authentic idea of Rhaegar and is forced, instead, to collect and make sense of the scattered pieces of factual and fictional evidence provided by a plethora of accounts and second-hand reports of his life and deeds. It is the ultimate purpose of this paper to prove that, through the multiplicity of representations of the hero figure, George R. R. Martin is recreating the process of mythologization required to give birth to legend and myth. In other words, it is demonstrated how Rhaegar's legendary status is only achievable through a posthumous reevaluation of the character's past deeds, his death setting up a revisionist framework that is responsible for the rupture of the border separating man from hero. As a consequence of this reevaluation, the character is appropriated, rewritten, and

manipulated into a symbol to serve a specific purpose, be it to represent a beacon of hope, the countenance of the enemy, or the afterimage of an idyllic, albeit irretrievable, past. To clarify this reading of the character, I explore Joseph Campbell's ideas on the figure of the hero, and briefly consider other representations of traditional heroic figures such as Cú Chulainn and Achilles. I conclude that the character of Rhaegar not only fits the archetype of the hero but also subverts it, by interpreting its heroic role as an equivocal symbol, since profuse and impossible to fixate. A hero, therefore, perennially changing his face.

Keywords: *A Song of Ice and Fire*; George R. R. Martin; Rhaegar Targaryen; the hero's journey.

The Meandering Essence of the Hero

Heroes are not the most original of characters. Forged from a puissant alloy, compound of human and divine, the hero is cast from an exemplary model, brought to life as the mirror-image of a higher meaning, the diligent envoy of an absent god. By god, of course, it is meant only that the hero is the facsimile of an authorial or communal intention: the heroic figure is a fragment of a larger moral and ideological meaning. It is a reproduction, first, of itself, that is, the incarnation of a codified, time-eluding pattern, and second, of the pseudodivine significance that is unreachable and inaccessible to the mortal eye—divine only in the sense that it is the object of the author's, individual or communal, god-like and/or god-inspired manipulation. The heroic archetypal image is hence a proxy for the intangible, as well as the epitome of the tangible plane. It simultaneously exists as the greatest of its race, the most valiant fighter of its tribe, the most agile warrior in its army, the wittiest quester, the cheekiest banterer, and as the blessing-bestower, elixir-bearer minor deity which guards and protects its community.

The object of the present study¹ is a hero who due to a rather unfortunate circumstance – his death under the usurping weight of Ser Robert Baratheon’s Warhammer – was unable to fulfill his prophesied future: Rhaegar Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone, brother of Daenerys Stormborn, once thought to be the ‘prince that was promised.’ Rhaegar is a significant character in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, an eluding figure of mystery and erudition, made more so since the first of the five novels thus far published opens fifteen years after Rhaegar’s death. His presence, however absent his bodily frame, reverberates nonetheless through the five novels of the, as yet incomplete, heptalogy, as the present study will, one hopes, attest. In this short essay, I shall strive to sketch a portrait of the prince as a young man by taking into account the metamorphic conversion of Rhaegar the man to Rhaegar the hero. I shall focus on this heroic mythologization in order to unearth the mechanics lurking beneath the liminal matter of the text, and which are employed by the author of the series

¹ This article was written in the fall of 2014, a few years before the conclusion in 2019 of the eighth and final season of the *Game of Thrones* series adaptation of George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*. It, therefore, excludes any information, twist, or revelation contained in that season or, for that matter, in any of its preceding seasons, particularly those that might confirm or contradict anything written here (more specifically, regarding Daenerys’ fate and Jon Snow’s parentage). It is a well-known fact that the final seasons of the HBO adaptation would respect Martin’s plans for the ending of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, even though the overall adaptation greatly deviated, at times, from its source material (there is an argument to be made that Daenerys Targaryen’s unfortunate fate in the adaptation matches that of the yet unpublished, and perhaps unwritten, original, for instance). However, since the last published volume of the *Song of Ice and Fire* series is still its fifth entry, *A Dance with Dragons* (published in July 2011), the argument made in the present article remains unchanged. Further, since we, as readers of the original series, have no concrete understanding of the extent of the HBO series’s deviation from Martin’s endgame plan for *A Song of Ice and Fire*, I think it is wise to keep the degree of speculation limited solely to the published material. It is also prudent to mention that in the years that followed the writing of this article, two other *Song of Ice and Fire*-related books were published by Martin: *A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms* (2015), which collected three previously published novellas narrating the tales of Dunk and Egg, and *Fire & Blood* (2018), which is the first instalment of a *Silmarillion*-like ambitious project that charts the history of the Targaryen in Westeros. None of these books expand our knowledge of Rhaegar Targaryen much further than what was already known and established about the character.

to produce a determinate effect—that of presenting the fallibility of belief in the heroic figure, the credulous, atavistic superstition that perpetuates the ‘higher’ character of Rhaegar Targaryen whilst disrobing him of his more human characteristics. To this end, I shall begin by exploring the renowned American mythologist Joseph Campbell’s thoughts on the figure of the hero in world mythology and its indelible link to the unseen divinity. This will be followed by an anatomy of the deconstructive principle exercised by George R. R. Martin, that is, the elements in the text that allow for a redefinition of a particular character after his or her departure from the narrative stage. Rhaegar’s father, Aerys II, the Mad King, will be used as an example of this principle. From that perspective, I shall move on to an analysis of Rhaegar and the multiple ideas of the hero—or anti-hero—yielded by the mythologization of the silver-haired, peace-inspired, book-enamored character.

First, a word of caution. This paper shall not endeavor to study the yet undisclosed biographical details of Rhaegar Targaryen. It was not the fruit of fortuitous chance that made the Targaryen heir the source of speculation and rumor. The narrative of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, to be sure, is ridden with convincing red-herrings and possible hints at the identity of Eddard Stark’s bastard. Further, the unfinished state of the series does nothing to mitigate the proliferation of theories. Yet, whilst many enthusiasts of the series still argue relentlessly over the possibility that the Prince of Dragonstone might have been the fountainhead whence the Snow child originated, the present paper shall not attempt to visit these probable suggestions, for they are presently held to be nothing more than aimless speculation.

We turn our eyes now to the matter at hand. That the hero is an afterimage of its metaphysical progenitor (one need only peruse the New Testament for an elucidation of this concept) was proposed by Joseph Campbell in his seminal study of the hero figure, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). According to Campbell:

“the hero and his ultimate god, the seeker and the found—are . . . understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world. The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known” (CAMPBELL 2008: 31).

As the echo of an unseen howl, therefore, the allegorical spirit of the hero is contained in the visible and literal outline of the character. On the surface, the hero is already a suggestion of the neutral, all-encompassing divine. To contribute to this binomial existence, it is worth noting the perspectival variegation of Rhaegar Targaryen which, as we will see, comprehends a considerable range of heroic or anti-heroic conceptions, fluctuating between the roles of villain and martyr, traitor and savior, crown and claw. Campbell’s words on the heroic formal plasticity, and the pragmatic application of the heroic values, may further elucidate this point: “The hero is the conscious vehicle of the terrible, wonderful Law, whether his work be that of butcher, jockey, or king” (CAMPBELL 2008: 206).

The union of the two worlds, divine and human, entails the conscious partaking of the bread of the outcast. Whilst the hero may long be celebrated as savior of its community or as half-divine offspring, it is also known that there will never be an absolute locus for its feats and antics amongst either society, divine or human. Trapped between these two dimensions, the hero stands in what one may term a Foucauldian heterotopian zone, a place of inbetweenness, its innermost essence being neither here nor there, neither mortal nor immortal. The hero is crystallized, its human features lost, the pinnacle of full divinity never reached. In essence, to become like god is to part with the material vessel that lends it the heroic nature. We are forced toward a possible conclusion. Heroes are neither lowland nor summit, but the ladders that bind and unite both.

On the Poetics of Heroism in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

I shall now attempt to expose the basic principles of the abstract mythologized character in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, keeping in mind that the figure of Rhaegar Targaryen is but an example of such transformational process and, as such, not a singular categorial element of the series's mythological system. One should rather conceive Rhaegar as a symptomatic example of the textual mythological model. That is to say that the programmatic armature behind the elaboration of Rhaegar's character *in absentia* may be extrapolated to other figures in the text, such as the protofeminist Queen Nymeria or the tyrannical Aerys II, the Mad King. The latter, for example, evinces the characteristics of the supposedly totalitarian chieftain of the past establishment that is vilified by the succeeding ruling power, an act of false counterposition which memorizes less favorable aspects of the dead monarch in order to glorify the present establishment.² In this case, the political conceptual opposition is developed within the fallacious dialectic Targaryen/Baratheon or, rephrased in other terms, authoritarianism/populism. Whilst not being a direct representative of the people of Westeros, a populist rebel of sorts, it is hardly questionable that Robert Baratheon enacts the desire of a certain rebellious party dissatisfied with the monarchical despotic power by usurping the Targaryen throne and opening up the—until then remote—possibility of political renewal. The Targaryens, one should note here, had been in power for centuries and had also been responsible for the unification of the Seven Kingdoms that compose Westeros. In this sense, Robert Baratheon is the populist antic, beheading kings and emperors to prove the mortality of the political system. His later haphazard regal exercise, culminating with his, far from glorious, inebriated death, should not be regarded as a direct consequence of this earlier function, since his rebellion against the Targaryen crown was but the effect of an initially recalcitrant impulse to fight off a transgression of ethical conduct, namely the rape of Lyanna Stark. In other

² For an example of this manipulatory tendency, see the conclusion to the eleventh chapter (excluding prologue) of *A Storm of Swords*, written in the perspective of Jaime Lannister: George R. R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 158-60.

words, Baratheon the liberator should not be equated with Baratheon the king. If one position concerns itself with the dynamics of monarchical succession and injustice, the other leans toward the organization and ruling of a nation.

The strategies George R. R. Martin employs in the construction of a mythological model consciously reflect the desire to represent an amalgamation of seemingly contradictory versions of the same individual. Robert is rebel and lord, Aerys is tyrant and victim of his madness. In this world, and to these characters, the past is never the same. It is a flexible concept, adaptable to suit the needs, whether ideologically charged or not, of the one recalling it. The process of mythologization that allows for this flexibility manifests a set of characteristics worthy of note. We will focus on how this process of mythologization works in relation to Rhaegar and the books' poetics of heroism, but the same reasoning may be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to other characters (like Aerys) who are mythologized differently.

The first characteristic is the unconscious abnegation of the self. In Rhaegar's case, to become a hero the individual is called upon to undergo a trial of paradox: one must fade into inexistence and let one's identity become the vessel through which the ideology of a people (or an author) is communicated. The self is no longer the sum of attitude and philosophy, action and reflection, but the envoy of something else, located beyond the confining shell of the individual cosmos—what Philip K. Dick would call the *idios kosmos*; its conceptual counterpart is the *koinos kosmos*, or the shared world outside the self, a dichotomy derived from Heraclitus's fragment 89.³ A transformation is undergone, in which the hero strips off the skein of reason and passion entangled around their body and lets themselves be clothed by an external moral cocoon. The mythologization of the hero, yet human and palpable as such, requires thus a sublation of the self to the

³ Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem, ed., *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 925. The translation of the fragment provided in the aforementioned edition of Philip K. Dick's diaries, titled *Exegesis*, follows: "The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own."

anxieties and demands of the macrosystem within which such self interacts. Once the self is stripped away, the process of mythologization necessitates the confirmation of the heroic status through an absence of presence, which confirms, by virtue of its negation, the transformed heroic identity. In other words, once self-abnegation is validated, the hero must take a step back and withdraw from the stage. This withdrawal, what I above called 'absence', is what crystalizes the hero figure within its community. With the rejected and absent self-removed from the quotidian, the process of reinvention is set in motion, and the hero is absorbed into the *koinos kosmos*.⁴

An ontological understanding of the hero then entails a consideration of the inherent duality of the concept: the hero-within-itself, that is, the hero as it is, the ego; the hero-without-itself, that is to say, the hero externalized, whose identity is negated in order to be converted into a mythological vessel. The representation of Rhaegar Targaryen in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is chiefly based on the latter heroic conception, the hero-without-itself. The character is only introduced as a recollection, an ambivalent memory of the better days of yore or of the despotic times of tyranny and absolutism. This posthumous construction of the character has, in the reader of Martin's series, a palimpsestic effect: one is allowed a glimpse of the nature of Rhaegar as he once was but, owing to the corroding power of memory, that image is now impossible to differentiate from the scribbled personae rewritten by the remembrance of other characters. The effect produces a Rhaegar that is at once human and not-human: in other words, it allows for the manifestation of the identity of the heroic figure. Yet this manifestation, dependent as it is on the hero's simultaneous being and non-being, can also be the source of slander and hatred. The palimpsest, after all, can be besmirched by the fingers of enmity. Rhaegar may be transformed not into a messianic knight, but a fiendish behemoth of vice. An Ovidian shapeshifter, the mythologized hero is hence exposed to any sort of transformative action, given its retroactive and posterior composite character.

⁴ See also Lou Stathis, afterword to *Time Out of Joint* by Philip K. Dick (New York: Gollancz, 2003), 218-19.

The Hero in the World

A hero's beginnings are seldom uneventful. The words of Ser Barristan Selmy, renowned Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, if anything, point out the noteworthy, awe-inspiring childhood of the young Rhaegar:

As a young boy, the Prince of Dragonstone was bookish to a fault. He was reading so early that men said Queen Rhaella must have swallowed some books and a candle whilst he was in her womb. Rhaegar took no interest in the play of other children. The maesters were awed by his wits, but his father's knights would jest sourly that Baelor the Blessed had been born again (MARTIN 2005: 111).

One recalls the childhood deeds of the young Cú Chulainn, as recorded in the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Here, too, are the more experienced men brought to their knees by the arcane talents of the hero. Alienated from the older boys at King Conchobar's training camp at Emain Macha, the young Sétanta—Cú Chulainn's childhood name—performed an impressive feat to the eyes of his fellow men, dodging the countless javelins, hurling balls, and hurling sticks thrown at him, and then going into a war-spasm of sorts—the *ríastrad*—thus defeating fifty of the boys who were attempting to persuade him, by force, to submit to their protection.⁵

Another interesting point is the reference to Rhaegar as the reincarnation of Baelor the Blessed, underpinning the heroic claim of the Targaryen Prince by postulating a direct connection between the two Targaryen noblemen, i.e., the rebirth of one as the other. Baelor, one notes, was regarded as a “pious gentle septon-king who loved the smallfolk and the gods in equal parts, yet imprisoned

⁵ Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 77. Alternatively, see Ciaran Carson, *The Táin* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 37-38.

his own sisters” (MARTIN 2011: 854). Once more, the all-encompassing heroic archetype is associated with Rhaegar.

The mention of the Prince’s precocious erudition, the reference to a legend told by the common people of the young Targaryen’s gestation period, the clueless intellects of the wise: these elements, of a suprahuman and folkloric essence, help Rhaegar stand out, amongst his people, as a hybrid of mortal and supernal competences. There is already a teleological impulse conceived at the time of the child’s infancy, which is hinted at by the words of Ser Barristan Selmy. The child is capable, even before leaving the mother’s womb, of performing astonishing tasks, inconceivable to any other man, knight or commoner. The telling folkloric rendition of Queen Rhaella’s pregnancy foreshadows the child’s quasi-divine capabilities. The lack of common interest between ordinary infants and Prince Rhaegar is another confirmation of the character’s estrangement from the narrow reality that surrounds him. His nature demands more challenging occupations, and it is here that the heroic features of Rhaegar will come into play. His aptitude for the quill, the word, the harp, and the sword, will establish him as the beacon of salvation. He is the messianic figure that has come to redeem his people and challenge the enemies of virtue.

The Prince’s life relentlessly ascended to the bittersweet pinnacle of glory and hubris. A pivotal moment in the fate of Westerosi politics took place at the infamous tourney of Harrenhall, organized by Lord Whent. The event had been covertly organized by Prince Rhaegar, as the unified future of the Seven Kingdoms was perilously balancing on the tip of a fine needle:

The prince, it is said, had no interest in the tourney as a tourney; his intent was to gather the great lords of the realm together in what amounted to an informal Great Council, in order to discuss ways and means of dealing with the madness of his father, King Aerys II, possibly by means of a regency or a forced abdication (MARTIN, GARCÍA, ANTONSSON 2014: 124).

Again, the image of Rhaegar as the archetype of political stability surfaces. He was to take command of the troubled vessel and lead his people to safer shores. The tourney was marked by the appearance of a mysterious knight, deemed by the present audience 'The Knight of the Laughing Tree.' Despite King Aerys's efforts to uncover the identity of the knight—thinking that it was young Jaime Lannister, mocking his regal pomp—the mysterious figure disappeared during the night, never to be seen again. Interpretative murmurs, the weavers of countless tapestries of theories, suggest that the knight was none other than Lyanna Stark, under cover of the anonymous helm, avenging a bullied crannogman (MARTIN, GARCÍA, ANTONSSON 2014: 126).

It was Rhaegar who eventually won the competition. Although not a customary victor in the kingdom's tourneys, Rhaegar, so *The World of Ice and Fire* (a companion book to the series) records:

surprised all by donning his armor and defeating every foe he faced, including four knights of the Kingsguard. In the final tilt, he unhorsed Ser Barristan Selmy, generally regarded as the finest lance in all the Seven Kingdoms, to win the champion's laurels (MARTIN, GARCÍA, ANTONSSON 2014: 126).

And then, the act of wonder came to pass. As the victorious knight of Lord Whent's competition, it was incumbent on Prince Rhaegar to choose a fair lady of the audience and name her the 'queen of love and beauty.' Walking up to Lyanna of House Stark, sister of Benjen, Eddard, and Brandon Stark, the Prince placed on her lap a "simple garland of pale blue roses", consciously ignoring his own wife, Princess Elia Martell, and enraging his father's bannermen (MARTIN, GARCÍA, ANTONSSON 2014: 127). Indignant cries were suppressed by the eldest of the Stark heirs, Brandon, who saw Rhaegar's act as a dishonor to Lyanna, as she was betrothed to Robert Baratheon. Months later, the act of theft, initiated with the offering of the fateful garland, would be concluded. Like Lancelot and his catastrophic passion for Guinevere, a passion that led King

Arthur to a monumental tomb,⁶ Rhaegar kidnapped Lyanna Stark, finding her “[n]ot ten leagues from Harrenhal”, setting in motion a chain of events that would culminate with the fall of House Targaryen and Ser Robert Baratheon’s ascension to the Iron Throne (MARTIN, GARCÍA, ANTONSSON 2014: 127).

Nearly every major character of the series, be it Jaime Lannister, Eddard Stark, or Jon Connington, cherishes or entertains an old memory of Rhaegar. Robert Baratheon, for example, early in the first volume of the series, *A Game of Thrones*, confesses to Ned Stark that he frequently dreams of Rhaegar’s death, adding that he would have murdered the Prince of Dragonstone innumerable times more, as hammered judgement for the rape of Lyanna, with whom he was betrothed. The boisterous king declares, “A thousand deaths will still be less than he deserves” (MARTIN 2003: 44). But the usurping king is not the only character to suffer the presence of Rhaegar in his dreams. Ser Jaime Lannister too is haunted by the fallen Targaryen. The Prince is a central actor in the surreal theatre of one of Jaime’s fever-dream hallucinations, accompanied by his trusted men, “crowned in mist and grief with his long hair streaming behind him . . . the rightful heir to the Iron Throne” (MARTIN 2005: 612). As he faces Jaime, the Prince’s guard accuse Tywin’s son of not maintaining his vows and leaving Rhaegar and his children unsafe and unprotected. Chiming in with these accusations, Prince Rhaegar, who is “burn[ing] with a cold light, now white, now red, now dark” whispers despondently, disappointed by Jaime’s failure: “I left my wife and children in your hands” (MARTIN 2005: 612). This hallucinated reflection of Jaime’s guilt and inability to transcend the lack of integrity shown as a member of the Kingsguard, having chosen his father’s life over the king’s and his son’s, demonstrates the power of the hero figure as an effigy of multiple purposes. First, Rhaegar’s appearance in the dream denotes the sorrow and dismay of one abandoned by a trusted companion. Second, it draws attention to Jaime’s unethical behavior that caused the downfall of political and social stability: the

⁶ In some versions, at least. Tales of King Arthur’s death vary, of course, as legends often do. I am basing this comparison on Thomas Malory’s rendering of the Arthurian legends, *Le Morte Darthur*.

moral dilemma posed by King Aerys II minutes before his death by the sword still troubles the experienced knight. Third, the reference to the Prince's status as rightful heir to the Iron Throne points out the loss of hope both on a macro- and microsystemic way: the usurper that now occupies the throne—Jaime's own son, Joffrey—is despised as the unlawful ruler of a community, Westeros, by both the monarchical laws of said community and the personal morality of Jaime Lannister, the individual. Fourth, the Prince's mention of his children also evinces a loss of hope on the matter of lineage: now that Rhaegar's children are deceased, there is no hope of the prophecy of 'the prince that was promised' ever coming into being. Jaime does not appear to give much thought to the existence of Daenerys Stormborn, especially because the accepted view of the prophecy is concerned with the male Targaryen line. As Maester Aemon informs Samwell Tarly, "It was a prince that was promised, not a princess" (MARTIN 2006: 646-647).

I would like to introduce here a brief thought on Aegon, son of Rhaegar, who was thought by the Prince of Dragonstone to be 'the prince that was promised', but whose death at the hands of Ser Gregor Clegane did not allow for such hypothesis to come to fruition. When the child was born, Rhaegar composed a song for him as a commemoration of the birth of the prophesied prince. To his wife Elia, Rhaegar said, "He has a song . . . He is the prince that was promised, and his is the song of ice and fire" (MARTIN 2003: 512). However, as Maester Aemon later confesses to Samwell Tarly, this idea of Aegon as the prophesied prince might have been the product of wishful thinking, the consequence of mistranslation. The old Maester suggests that it is perhaps Daenerys, and not Rhaegar or Aegon, that may be called the true 'prince that was promised'. He says:

Rhaegar, I thought... the smoke was from the fire that devoured Summerhall on the day of his birth, the salt from the tears shed for those who died. He shared my belief when he was young, but later he became persuaded that it was his own son who fulfilled the prophecy, for a comet had been seen above King's Landing on the night Aegon was conceived, and Rhaegar was certain the bleeding star had to be a comet.

What fools we were, who thought ourselves so wise! The error crept in from the translation. Dragons are neither male nor female, Barth saw the truth of that, but now one and now the other, as changeable as flame. The language misled us all for a thousand years. *Daenerys* is the one, born amidst salt and smoke. The dragons prove it (MARTIN 2006: 647).

Recent developments in the series, namely in the fifth volume *A Dance with Dragons*, hint at the survival of Aegon, but the true identity of the child fostered by Ser Jon Connington has not yet been confirmed. As for Daenerys, one is yet to conclude whether the young Khaleesi will survive the long path toward the much-coveted throne forged out of swords.

The hero's formative period, composed, as we have seen, of preternatural circumstances, can act as a sort of moral enchiridion that codifies the character's ethos, replacing the departed figure with a surrogate handbook of the good practice of kingship. The hero's purpose is only finalized as text. That is to say, although Rhaegar is dead, his mythologized character might still be of some use.

The dead hero may have a purpose, for instance, in the education of Daenerys Stormborn, Rhaegar's sister, who is still in her formative years. One episode that demonstrates this point occurs when a portrait of Rhaegar is offered to the young Khaleesi by her most trusted counsellors, Ser Jorah Mormont and Ser Barristan Selmy. In a famous exchange between these two characters, Selmy evokes the Prince's virtues, whilst Mormont condemns Rhaegar's folly and his inability to see beyond his own strict moral code. Like Eddard Stark, so too was Rhaegar the victim of a moral beheading, so to speak, because his ethos was incompatible with that of the surrounding world. Mormont hints that it was Rhaegar's valiance, braveness, and honor that in the end condemned the Prince to an early grave (MARTIN 2005: 330).

Curtailing Heroism

Consider now the hero's death. Meeting Robert Baratheon at the ford of the Trident, Rhaegar sported a stately breastplate, ornamented with "the three-headed dragon of his House, wrought all in rubies that flashed like fire in the sunlight" (MARTIN 2003: 44). Like Achilles's shield — famously described by Homer in *The Iliad*, in an ekphrastic fashion so often quoted, as a mirror to the design of the universe — Rhaegar's armor appears to embody the elemental character of the world, the crimson jewels incrusting in it resembling fire itself. As Rhaegar falls in battle, the crafted breastplate bursts and its rubies are dispersed through the riverbed. Immediately, "men of both armies scrabble[] in the swirling waters for rubies knocked free of his armor," either desperately holding on to the hero's material nature or in vain pursuit of their own greed (MARTIN 2003: 44). Ripples of this event flowed, borne away from the center by the withering breath of time. After this incident, Rhaegar's place of death became known as Ruby Ford. This revealing geographical appropriation marks an important contribution to the mythologization of the hero, for even after the Prince's bodily departure from life, he is able to exact control over the local (and imaginary) landscape, through his influence on the practice of place-naming. One may see how Rhaegar, shortly after his demise, has already become an element of etiological significance.

It is pertinent to note how the mythologization of Rhaegar within the world of the series affects one's own reading of the character outside of it. Martin's mythological model works both outside the text, as structure, and inside the text, as culture, history and memory. Just as we, readers, experience Rhaegar in fragments, the characters of the series also experience and interpret Rhaegar through a broken prism. From his untimely defeat to the elaboration of a mythical status, Rhaegar underwent a mythologizing process that courted and performed the disintegration of the Targaryen Prince's factual and tangible existence, and led the way to the formation of a multitude of symbolic Rhaegars. Yet the proliferation of masks, and of Rhaegars, as it were, suggests that the Prince of Dragonstone, bearer of countless posthumous identities, is incapable of setting in motion any substantial social, political, ideological, metaphysical, or spiritual

change. While it is true that, as a heroic model, Rhaegar gives rise to events which play a relevant part in the relentless power struggles between the numberless political factions in the series, on the whole, the perennially shapeshifting hero is unable to evoke a unified and coherent idea of himself on his community.⁷ If anything, the inexorable movement of retroactive invention makes Rhaegar not the prince that was *promised*, but the prince that never *was*.

While admittedly, as we have seen, the heroic figure of Rhaegar in *A Song of Ice and Fire* possesses a broad spectrum of personalities, an integral part of a universal system of heroism, it is precisely the inconsistency between these various elements, as opposed to the union of opposing concepts, that renders the Targaryen Prince powerless to have any major significance on the social, political, and economic landscape of Westeros. As evidenced by the death of Rhaegar—and also Eddard Stark and Jon Arryn, among others—the Seven Kingdoms require a more material, down-to-earth leader, capable of putting in practice their governmental policies while concomitantly dodging the slithering movements of the fatal warhammer. The inexorable paradox is that Westeros demands a leader that can be and not be simultaneously, a leader who can maneuver the double-edged moral blade. This hypothetical leader must transcend the inherent and contradictory duality that the archetype of the hero and the process of its mythologization demand. In Rhaegar's case, his inadequacy as a leader figure owes itself to the incompatibility of his multiple significances. He is but one among many departed symbols, more powerful only because of the proximity of his death to the narrative's present. The Prince of Dragonstone may be the paragon of virtue and vice, the son of a God and a demon-lord, a skilled strategist and a harbinger of war, he may be the house of

⁷ Granted, these 'events' are yet to be confirmed as having any significant impact on the Westerosi political landscape. Consider, for example, Daenerys's abolitionist and liberal administrative strategies, with the Mother of Dragons' decision to remain in Slaver's Bay and strengthen her army, releasing the countless men and women still under the yoke of slavery, politically gravitating toward the ethical path of her older brother.

many faces, yet therein lies also the seed of his ideological dissolution. As a dialectical symbol, carrier of such powerful, yet antithetical, concepts, there is not in Rhaegar Targaryen the ideological fortitude to resist the burden of universal metaphor and the decay of kingship.

The hero must wither away into the legendary past, a Rhaegar no more tangible than a half-forgotten memory. Dead heroes, after all, do not make powerful politicians. The fragmented echo of the heroic Rhaegar, now incarnadine shards to be picked up at random by intrepid researchers, suggests a powerful truth. The hero, little else than a tower of mist, must be the means but never the end.

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