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CONTENTS

FOREWORD by Elio M. Garcia and Linda Antonsson ix

A RAVEN FROM HOUSE WILEY: Editor's Note on Spoilers xiii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: How I Was Spared from Having to Take the Black xv

Introduction: So What if Winter Is Coming? 1
Henry Jacoby

PART ONE “YOU WIN OR YOU DIE”

1 Maester Hobbes Goes to King’s Landing 5
Greg Littmann

2 It Is a Great Crime to Lie to a King 19
Don Fallis

3 Playing the Game of Thrones: Some Lessons from Machiavelli 33
Marcus Schulzke

4 The War in Westeros and Just War Theory 49
Richard H. Corrigan
PART TWO

“THE THINGS I DO FOR LOVE”

5 Winter Is Coming!: The Bleak Quest for Happiness in Westeros Eric J. Silverman 63

6 The Death of Lord Stark: The Perils of Idealism David Hahn 75

7 Lord Eddard Stark, Queen Cersei Lannister: Moral Judgments from Different Perspectives Albert J. J. Anglberger and Alexander Hieke 87

8 It Would Be a Mercy: Choosing Life or Death in Westeros and Beyond the Narrow Sea Matthew Tedesco 99

PART THREE

“WINTER IS COMING”

9 Wargs, Wights, and Wolves That Are Dire: Mind and Metaphysics, Westeros Style Henry Jacoby 115

10 Magic, Science, and Metaphysics in A Game of Thrones Edward Cox 129

11 “You Know Nothing, Jon Snow”: Epistemic Humility Beyond the Wall Abraham P. Schwab 142

12 “Why Is the World So Full of Injustice?”: Gods and the Problem of Evil Jaron Daniël Schoone 154
PART FOUR

“THE MAN WHO PASSES THE SENTENCE
SHOULD SWING THE SWORD”

13 Why Should Joffrey Be Moral If He Has
Already Won the Game of Thrones? 169
Daniel Haas

14 The Moral Luck of Tyrion Lannister
Christopher Robichaud 183

15 Dany’s Encounter with the Wild:
Cultural Relativism in A Game of Thrones
Katherine Tullman 194

16 “There Are No True Knights”:
The Injustice of Chivalry 205
Stacey Goguen

PART FIVE

“STICK THEM WITH THE POINTY END”

17 Fate, Freedom, and Authenticity in
A Game of Thrones 223
Michael J. Sigrist

18 No One Dances the Water Dance
Henry Jacoby 236

19 The Things I Do For Love: Sex,
Lies, and Game Theory 250
R. Shannon Duval

20 Stop the Madness!: Knowledge, Power, and
Insanity in A Song of Ice and Fire 264
Chad William Timm

CONTRIBUTORS: The Learned Lords and Ladies
from beyond the Seven Kingdoms 279

INDEX: From the Archives at Oldtown 287
FOREWORD

Elio M. Garcia and Linda Antonsson

“The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword.”

“Love is the bane of honor, the death of duty.”

“When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die.”

With phrases like these, George R. R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* reveals not only a powerful sense of drama, a rich setting, and complex characters, but an understanding that at the heart of his story—of any great story—lies conflict. Martin often cites William Faulkner’s statement that the only story worth telling is that of “the human heart in conflict with itself,” and that conflict appears again and again throughout the Song of Ice and Fire series in a way that seemed unprecedented in the epic fantasy genre back in 1996 when the first novel was published. Whether the conflict entailed one lonely, misshapen dwarf’s efforts to survive in a society that looks down on him, a friend’s struggle to keep an irresponsible king on his throne, or a mother’s choice between her family and her duty, Martin presented the moral complexity of people and societies that breathed reality. Though inspired by the likes of J. R. R. Tolkien—father of the epic fantasy—Martin took a

ix
different path, and opened the door for a wave of new writers who explore characters and settings with an eye toward the darker side of human nature and society.

When it was announced that George R. R. Martin’s series of fantasy novels, A Song of Ice and Fire, would be adapted by HBO in *Game of Thrones*, it caused a great deal of excitement and speculation among fans who had been following the saga for a decade. Casting, budgets, shooting locations, special effects—these subjects and more were up for discussion. Yet at the heart of all of these questions was a single, overriding concern for most fans: How much fidelity would the show maintain to Martin’s novel, not only in terms of plot and characters, but in tone and themes? The first season came and went, and now we know that the producers largely stayed faithful on all levels, weaving together a drama that combined elements of the heroic epic with a moral scale that covered the range from the saintly to the monstrous.

Readers often cite the moral complexity of the novels as being a key part of their enjoyment, alluding to characters painted in “shades of gray.” Previous works of epic fantasy tended to operate with a straightforward moral compass where the antagonist was some variety of evil “Dark Lord” and the protagonists were defined by their opposition to this evil character based on their obvious moral goodness. In contrast, Martin’s series has been written with no dark lord to speak of, instead focusing the narrative on the dynastic conflicts that rend the Seven Kingdoms apart beneath the shadow of a looming catastrophe. That catastrophe may be created by nefarious creatures and it may be the ultimate end point of the narrative, but Martin’s choice to keep his eyes on the very human characters, with their very human flaws, was done well enough to win him legions of fans who appreciated the so-called “gritty realism” of the narrative.

Some of the post-Martin fantasists seem to pursue “grittiness” for the sake of grittiness—and that certainly is one
approach among many. But it’s hard to find in some of these works the human core of the story. In contrast, Martin keeps a sharp focus on his characters, and though they suffer greatly at times, it tastes all the sweeter when they triumph. When they struggle, we struggle with them: Eddard Stark’s struggle with questions of honor and honesty, Jon Snow’s struggle to choose between vows and love, Tyrion Lannister’s effort to win his father’s approval because he has so little else. The inner conflict is absolutely integral to the weight of the story, to making A Song of Ice and Fire—and now *Game of Thrones*—such popular works. These and other questions—of ethics, political philosophy, and more—are the fulcrum on which the entire story turns. Despite the fact that many of the problems presented in the novel and on the screen are couched in the quasi-medieval context of lords and castles and personal honor, there’s a relevance to the way the characters wrestle with choices that do not seem so dissimilar to choices that we are faced with on a daily basis.

George R. R. Martin’s writing is ripe for introspection and consideration, not merely as examples of masterfully told popular literature, but as a genuine exploration of human nature in uncertain times. To provide some avenues for illumination, *Game of Thrones and Philosophy* presents essays on topics that run the gamut of philosophical topics, from ethics to metaphysics to political philosophy. Eric Silverman interrogates Plato’s views on virtue and happiness, seen through the lense of Ned Stark’s and Cersei Lannister’s very different life strategies. Henry Jacoby explores the topic of consciousness in a series where magically created wights and supernatural direwolves exist. Richard Littman imagines Hobbes as a maester, looking on Westeros and considering the question of who should rule. These essays are just a few examples, of course; as Martin might write, there are “many and more” to engage with.
And all this, thanks to the sudden image Martin received one day back in 1991, while trying to write a science fiction novel: a huge wolf, found dead amidst summer snow. From such small beginnings, something great came, something worth reading, worth enjoying, worth examining.
Many of the philosophical quandaries of this series cannot be discussed without looking at events across the five books of the Song of Ice and Fire series that have been published at the time of this writing. However, we understand that some readers are fans of the HBO series and don’t want to be spoiled for events beyond the first season. Therefore, with that in mind, you may wish to delay reading chapters 3, 11, 12, 14, 18, and 20 until you’ve read further into the series; the rest are safe and relatively spoiler-free.

All citations for the first four books are from the Bantam Dell mass market paperback editions, and, of course, the citations for the fifth book are from the 2011 hardcover edition.

Episodes from the television series are referenced by their titles in the text.