Abjection, Masculinity, and Sacrifice: The Reek of Death in Game of Thrones

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Abstract
The masculinities of HBO’s Game of Thrones (2011–2019) are marked not just by violence and exploitation, but by contingency, fragility, and abjection. This article draws on theories of abjection to read the abject masculinity of Sandor Clegane, Samwell Tarly, and Theon Greyjoy in the context of theories of hegemonic and hypermasculinity, and, through Greyjoy in particular, tracks his movement from hypermasculinity, through abjection and torture, to a custodial and sacrificial and thus life-giving masculinity, which stands in profound opposition to the hegemonic masculinity of power and domination.

Keywords
violence, bodies, hegemonic masculinity, culture, identity, abjection, hypermasculinity, Game of Thrones

The end of Season Three of HBO’s Game of Thrones, when the abused, unmanned Theon Greyjoy is hailed as “Reek” by his tormentor (Benioff and Weiss 2013, 3:10), marks the gross dissolution of identity that has been threatening since his capture by Ramsay Bolton. Theon’s renaming contrasts starkly with the hailing of Daenerys Targaryen as “Mhysa”—Mother—by the slaves she liberated. For Dany, a new name signals the reclamation of a specifically feminine identity she lost when death magic

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took her unborn son (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:10). For Theon, it is part of the breaking down of masculine subjectivity marked, in his appearance as Ramsay’s plaything, by seduction, torture, and castration. Theon’s vulnerability as a prisoner amplifies the isolation he experienced throughout his life in Winterfell, seat of his captor and foster-father, Eddard Stark, when he was caught between the kinship webs that define identity in the medievalist world of Game of Thrones. (This world is popularly termed “the Martinverse” [Evans 2019] after George R.R. Martin, whose bestselling book series A Song of Ice and Fire was adapted for HBO by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss.) As Ned Stark’s hostage, Theon was neither Greyjoy nor Stark, but his ambivalent position nonetheless spoke to his social world and his role in it; as Ramsay’s hostage, he is outside that world altogether. These moments denaturalize the hierarchies of masculine gender norms by outlining their dependence on and investment in existing power relations, deployed in and as privilege and coercion. They also destabilize such hierarchies by imagining that power relinquished in and as sacrifice on behalf of the vulnerable. Examining this dynamic of power and sacrifice in Game of Thrones through a phenomenology of abjection enables ways of thinking about hegemony and subordination that acknowledge the complexity of what Connell (1995/2005) terms complicit and protest masculinities.

This account links Theon Greyjoy to two quite different figures, Sandor Clegane and Samwell Tarly, each of whom instantiates this dynamic of abjection and power, albeit in divergent ways. Sandor, called “The Hound,” is man-at-arms to Prince Joffrey Baratheon. Hideously scarred as a child when his vicious brother, Gregor, thrust him face-first into an open fire, Sandor is himself notoriously violent, a killer whose contempt for chivalry and its ideals is linked to his brother’s knighthood, which makes a mockery of such ideals. Both Sandor and Theon differ from Sam, whose initial physical cowardice and incapacity for violence, which his father sees as unfit for heirship, have led to exile to the Night’s Watch, “a midden heap for all the misfits of the realm” (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:04). Indeed, the Night’s Watch and the icy frontier beyond the Wall they guard, home to the outlaw “wildling” clans and such supernatural horrors as wights and the White Walkers who control them, are themselves a limit-case for the hegemonic norms of Westeros. In what follows, I first outline the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity. In the first section, I deal with the character of Theon through the lens of hypermasculinity, and introduce abject masculinity to explain the breaking down of Theon’s hypermasculinity in ways that challenge hegemony. The second section treats the hypermasculine character of Sandor Clegane as one both abjectified by the powerful and using that power to abjectify others. Finally, the third section presents the already-abject figure of Samwell Tarly as one who embraces abjection in service and love, and in so doing overcomes forcible abjection to challenge hegemonic power. I conclude that abject masculinity is both the limit against which hypermasculinity defines itself, and that the incorporation of abject masculinity can serve to recuperate subordinate and marginalized masculinities.
Shown in North America on HBO and its international partners, and globally through subscription or premium channels such as Sky Atlantic (UK), Canal+ (France), and Orbit Showtime Network in the Middle East and North Africa (Alhayek 2017, 3), HBO’s original series *Game of Thrones* premiered in 2011. By its Season 8 finale in 2019, it had achieved record-breaking viewership, averaging over 44 million when continued streaming, on-demand viewing, and additional replays were factored into episode numbers (Porter 2019). Its cultural impact was magnified by social media, web forums, blogs, and fan-generated YouTube videos (Pérez and Reisenzein 2020, 385), which both extended fan engagement with the series beyond initial viewing and contributed to its high degree of transcultural “spreadability” (Garcia-Rapp 2021, 9–12). Thus, both the hegemonic norms on display in the series and their critique are highly and globally relevant.

Such norms are complicated, of course, by the show’s medievalist fantasy, which colludes both with late modernity’s critique of heterosexual masculinity and with the emasculation of that critique through its displacement onto the anachronistic hypermasculinity of King Robert or Gregor Clegane. It is not Ser Gregor, but the ruthless Tywin Lannister and Petyr Baelish, who exemplify the real hegemonic masculinity of the Martinverse. The latter stand in for the transnational business masculinity Connell and Wood (2005) identified as one global form of hegemonic masculinity, and whose representation in this medievalist world insists on the ideological and real violence that undergirds such masculinity’s discursive constructions. Baelish, the financial advisor to the king, whose fortune is founded on sexual trafficking, and Lannister, the patriarch who disposes of his daughter Cersei in marriage to King Robert in order to extend his own influence, remind us that hegemonic masculinity is built on the bodies of women as well as men. Though a fuller examination of Lannister and Baelish must wait on another occasion, they too form part of the reproduction of a constellation of gendered identities through what Butler (1993, 232) terms “the forcible citation of a norm...indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment.” The imagined medieval world of *Game of Thrones* makes the violence of these regimens literal, rendering it legible to modern audiences for whom the commonplace discursive violence of hegemony has been effectively naturalized.

While there is already a robust body of work on gender in *Game of Thrones* (Gjelsvik and Schubart 2016; Mantoan and Brady 2018; Patel 2014), treatments of masculinity in the series are thinner on the ground. Ward (2018) has examined young men who both resist and adopt archetypes of hegemonic masculinity in bringing forth a more “malleable” heroism. Evans (2018, 2019) has treated monstrosity in relation to male and female violence, while Rosenberg (2012), Spector (2012), and Ferreday (2015) have addressed masculine sexual violence in the series. Chivalry and its critique have also been taken up (Goguen 2012; Hackney 2015). Various subordinated masculinities have been explored in relation to same-sex desire (Nel 2015), eunuchs (Askey 2018), and disability (Ellis 2014). This project builds on those accounts by examining social abjection as a hegemonic strategy for
delegitimizing subordinate and marginalized masculinities, including the hypermasculinity of Theon Greyjoy and Sandor Clegane, and argues that this abjection can become a weapon against patriarchal violence as well as a weapon of it. The menace of abject masculinity, in other words, is threatening to and threatened by the bodies of men. Thus, I examine both the abjected and the abjector in the context of a hypermasculinity that negotiates and asserts its own privilege partly through this action of abjection. In Theon Greyjoy’s abjection, we see the spectacle of hypermasculinity unmade. Sandor Clegane responds to his own abjection with the cynical embrace of a stoicism that may serve hegemonic power, but which refuses its chivalric lies. Samwell Tarly’s abjection derives from the cowardice that places him on a scale of sexual difference, so that he is “Lady Piggy,” not-man. In each case, we see how masculine gender norms in *Game of Thrones* involve the complex deployment and concealment of hegemonic power. That is, the series works to abjectify hypermasculinity and to set it outside the norm.

The idea of hegemonic masculinity as “the culturally exalted form of masculinity” (Carrigan et al. 1985, 592) derives from R.W. Connell’s original work. Though the characteristics of this honored mode differ from place to place and time to time, it is “always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women” (Connell 1987, 183). Later work understood hegemonic masculinity as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that legitimates unequal gender relations (Connell 1995/2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2018), which can occur through the discursive delegitimation of other masculinities as well as femininities. The shifting ground of hegemonic masculinity is a consequence of the fact that it is always under construction, “doing whatever is necessary to remain hegemonic, even if this reconceptualization entails incorporating more traditional feminine characteristics” (Fleras and Dixon 2011, 581).

Hegemonic masculinity, which might be enacted by a small minority of men, differs from merely dominant or dominating masculinities because of its legitimating role, which forges ideological consent to structural domination rather than simply practicing such domination (Messerschmidt 2018). Thus, “[h]egemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). Hegemonic masculinity, then, is a way of thinking through the masculinities of local cultures, as well as through the larger cultural field to which those may be subordinated (Cheng 1999).

In considering relations of domination and subordination among men, Connell (1995/2005) has proposed four types of nonhegemonic masculinities. Subordinate masculinities, such as queer ones, are those at the bottom of the gender hierarchy, while complicit masculinities, though not actively practicing the ideological work of hegemonic masculinity, nonetheless realize the benefits of the structural inequities they work to sustain. Marginalized masculinities, by contrast, are those subordinated by virtue of race and class, and protest masculinities capture a variety of responses
to an experience of male powerlessness, including an exaggerated performance of
costituent characteristics seen as conventionally masculine (109–14). Coston and Kimmel
(2012, 98) have similarly explored intersectional masculinities, asking what it might
mean “to be privileged by gender and simultaneously marginalized by class, sexuality,
or bodily status” in a world where “the dynamics of removing privilege involve
assumptions of emasculation.” Because gender is deployed as the most essential tool
of marginalization, “their masculinity”—the masculinity of disabled, gay, or
working-class men, which locally might be the locus of privilege in relation to
women—”is specifically targeted as the grounds for exclusion from privilege”: they
become “‘not-men’ in the popular discourse.” Even its early formulations, hegemo-
nic masculinity partly meant “the ability to impose a particular definition on other
kinds of masculinity” (Carrigan et al. 592). This, for example, is the context in which
we must understand the troubled masculinity of working-class men, which simul-
taneously celebrates them as “strong, stoic, hard-workers” and imagines them as
“dumb brutes” (Coston and Kimmel 2012, 107). In the knowledge economy, the
working-class White man may invoke privilege, but he does not benefit from it; he
is, as Coston and Kimmel remind us, expendable.

Contemporary masculinity studies has sought to uncover the ideological work
of hegemonic and other masculinities by examining representations thereof in
popular culture, from men’s lifestyle magazines (Benwell 2003) to rap music
(White 2011) to fashion (Geczy and Karaminas 2019). Television is particularly
fertile ground for this work, and since Hanke’s (1998a, 1998b) foundational anal-
yses of situation comedies and other television genres, several important studies
have demonstrated the complexity of the discursive construction of masculinities
(Feasey 2008). Fleras and Dixon (2011), for instance, have examined the strategies
through which hegemonic masculinity shores up its own structural dominance,
reading the ways that “docu-soaps” like *Ax Men* (2008–2019) and *Ice Road Truck-
ers* (2007–2017) reconstruct working-class masculinities as stoic and heroic in the
face of growing representations of contemporary working-class men as ignorant
and unmotivated compared to the dignified laborers of the past. Such shows char-
acteristically associate toughness, resilience, ingenuity, and independence with
manhood, dismissing other forms of work as effete, tedious, and dependent, even
while the blue-collar jobs they honor are disappearing. In so doing, they exalt a
local hegemonic masculinity while obscuring global hegemonies of corporate
masculinity and knowledge work. For such men, the navigation of privilege may
well involve insisting on a more authentic masculinity that is, in fact, a hypermas-
culinity, already anachronistic in some contexts, over performed in the face of an
emasculating culture as a way of staking its claim.

In one of the earliest studies of hypermasculinity, psychologists Mosher and
Sirkin (1984, 151–2) identified a battery of macho personality traits:

The macho personality constellation is posited to consist of three related components:
(a) calloused sex attitudes toward women, (b) a conception of violence as manly, and
(c) a view of danger as exciting. These components reflect the macho man’s desire to appear powerful and to be dominant in interactions with other men, women, and the environment. Violence as Manly refers to the attitude among some men that violent aggression, either verbal or physical, is an acceptable, even preferable, masculine expression of power and dominance toward other men. Calloused sex attitudes embody some men’s attitudes that sexual intercourse with women establishes masculine power and female submission, and is to be achieved without empathic concern for the female’s subjective experience. Danger as Exciting reflects the attitude that survival in dangerous situations, including “tempting fate,” is a manly display of masculine power over the dangerous environment.

This macho constellation is not that version of hegemonic masculinity Corprew et al. (2014, 105) call “traditional masculine ideology”: the avoidance of activities seen as feminine; a desire for wealth, fame, and status; a calm or phlegmatic disposition; and a predilection for aggression and risk-taking. Rather, hypermasculinity imitates and exaggerates that ideology. More recent studies have extended Mosher and Sirkin’s early work on hypermasculinity to include such elements as interpersonal dominance, hostility toward women, self-reliance, aggressive activity, the over-prizing of status, and the underrating of emotion and cooperation (Burk et al. 2004, 5–6; Corprew et al. 2014, 106).

**Hypermasculinity and the Unmaking of Theon Greyjoy**

The hypermasculinity that dominates the local culture of the Iron Islands, seat of the Greyjoys, and other subcultures in Westeros and Essos is nonetheless recognizably a subjugated one, akin to the “loser masculinity”³ offered in contemporary North America to the disenfranchised working class, the displaced African American, or the dispossessed Indigenous man. Theon’s father Balon Greyjoy rules in Pyke through the sufferance of Ned Stark, who quashed his rebellion, put his grown sons to the sword, and took the young Theon as a ward and hostage. Similarly, Sandor’s brother, the monstrous Gregor Clegane, who was so outraged by his defeat in the Tournament of the Hand that he beheaded his own warhorse, is Tywin Lannister’s mad dog, and hunts at his bidding. Such violent and overwrought masculinities may seem to reflect a dominant ideal, but *Game of Thrones* juxtaposes these extremes with the hegemonic masculinity of Lannister and Baelish, who deploy Ser Gregor and his ilk to shore up their own power. Despite its medievalism, the series understands itself and its audience as situated in the hegemonies of postindustrial capitalism. Its archaisms simply enable the vivid articulation of the violence central to the discursive work of modernity. What is more, the series’ construction of the rational, competitive, self-controlled man, the very model of a contemporary hegemonic masculinity, operates through its capacity to distinguish itself from the brutish men it both requires and despises.⁴
It is clear from our introduction to Theon, who displays casual indifference to the execution of the deserter and the direwolf pups alike (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:01), and still more casual contempt for the prostitute Ros (1:05), that he performs hypermasculinity as a means of exerting dominance over the women and children he sees as weaker than himself. Later, when Theon’s arrow saves the child Bran from the wildling who holds him at knifepoint, his foster brother Robb Stark is horrified by Theon’s willingness to risk Bran’s life. This rescue seems motivated by Theon’s desire to assert his own manhood; just after Bran is waylaid, he brags that “you’re only considered a real man in the Iron Islands once you’ve killed your first enemy” (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:06). And when word of Ned Stark’s capture by the Lannisters reaches Winterfell, it is Theon who urges Robb most vocally to call the banners and ride south to war (1:07). Some context for these displays is given when Theon returns to his home in the Iron Islands seeking his father’s support for Robb’s war. Balon Greyjoy is far from welcoming of the son he sees as a pampered thing, bedecked with a “bauble” bought with gold rather than the “iron price” of blood-stained metal: “I’ll not have my son dressed as a whore” (Benioff and Weiss 2012, 2:02). Mosher and Sirkin (1984, 151) associate hypermasculinity with the use of parental contempt and humiliation, particularly in childhood, to inhibit fear and distress in favor of displays of courage and stoicism. Because, as they note, “this view of masculinity as heroic is joined with a conception of women as dominion and as sexual object[s] who exist as reward for the conquering hero,” Greyjoy’s rejection of his son as a whore underscores the powerful link between the domination of women and the violent reaving immortalized in the Greyjoy house words, “We Do Not Sow.”

Theon attempts to redress these humiliations at his father’s hands by proving his manhood in the language of the Iron Islands. Like his countrymen, he becomes a reaver, taking the seat of the Starks from the skeleton force that Robb Stark left behind, and shoring up his rule with the iron fist of his forefathers. When the youngest Stark boys escape and Theon is unable to find them, he has two orphan boys murdered and the bodies burned so that he may display them as Bran and Rickon Stark (Benioff and Weiss 2012, 2:08). It is when the castle is retaken by Ramsay Bolton that we see the regulation of hypermasculinity through abjection at work. Theon’s torture at Ramsay’s hands is part of the latter’s own “citation” of norms of patriarchal dominance felt literally in blood and bone: Ramsay is the bastard fruit of his mother’s rape by Roose Bolton. This torture is also a spectacle in which Ramsay fulfills the viewer’s fantasies of justice, exacting his pound of flesh for the taking of Winterfell and the ruined bodies of the boys. Deformed by torture, Theon is not so much unmasked as unmade, no longer Theon but “Reek,” his partially flayed body neither an authentic and original self-prior to sociality nor an emasculated remnant of his former whoring braggadocio. Instead, he is reduced, quite differently, to what Patricia Horton (2001, 220) calls “the sign of abjection,” threatening and threatened by “the defilement of the material body.” Broken down, he becomes what Hanson
Men and Masculinities 25(3) (1991, 324) terms “a spectacular image of the abject, the dead who dare to speak and sin and walk abroad.”

In Powers of Horror (1980; trans. 1982, 1), Kristeva frames “the abject” as having “only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I” and thus being a threat to the self. Understanding the abject not as a signifier of death but a promise of its inevitability, Kristeva (1982, 3) recognizes it as the limit-case of human identity, “what I permanently thrust aside in order to live”; it is the “Not me. Not that” that “does not cease challenging its master” (Kristeva 1982, 2). For her, the maternal body is the earliest and most universal experience of abjection, since our desire for union with the mother poses the primordial threat to the fragile boundaries of the self. Through that body—corporeal, permeable, threatening—the abject comes to be associated with a grotesque femininity against which the boundaries of the proper body, and indeed the social body, may be mapped (Covino 2004; Creed 1993; Russo 1994). Against this backdrop we see the abjectification of subordinate masculinities, which, in working to delegitimize them as “not men” (Coston and Kimmel 2012, 98), aligns them with the feminine grotesque (Craig 2017; Walsh 2010). But as Foster (1996, 114) reminds us, Kristeva elides a fundamental distinction in her thought, between “the operation to abject and the condition to be abject.”

The first is what we “thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 1982, 3), what maintains both society and subjectivity by maintaining their boundaries, while the second is “subversive of both formations” (Foster 1996, 114). Yet merely being abject lacks the weight to counter the powerful operations of forcible abjection. Such abjection works to expel an individual from the body social or political, which polices its boundaries in order to survive its awareness of its own fragility. The connection here is not psychoanalytic but political—to hegemony, which operates by naturalizing consent to its own hierarchies. Thus, may the abject be said to participate in its own abjection, to be sickened by itself as the body social and political is sickened by it.

This ideological consent to one’s own abjection must be seen as distinct from the embrace of abjection that Kristeva and others (Arya 2017; Foster 1996; Ross 2003) argue allows a creative transgression. Modern art’s embrace of the feminine grotesque has been predicated on its power to disrupt corporeal and social boundaries (Ross 2003; Russo 1994), but, as Tyler (2013) has argued, understanding abjection as social rather than psychoanalytical can allow both a focus on disgust as a mechanism of control and a capacity to revolt against the symbolic and real violence that forcible abjection entails.

Theon, then, may be read in two ways. First, he is the exemplar of an abject masculinity become spectacle. In marking what Walsh (2010, 3) terms “male trouble,” or masculinity in crisis, abject masculinity makes legible both the operations and fragility of hegemonic masculinity. In this case, the crisis is not simply a matter of Theon’s castration, though it is related, for the castration emblematizes the breakdown of the boundaries of his embodied self, and it is this breakdown that is on display. Walsh (2010, 9–10) contends that “overlapping positions of abjection, emasculation, masochism, sacrifice, victimization, and corporeal im/penetrability
work to articulate and negotiate trouble”; here, it is specifically a gender trouble or “endurance of subjection” that “works to secure identity.” Stretched on the saltire cross, flayed until he consents to his own dismembering, Theon expresses a dissolution of identity and selfhood just shy of the corpse. The body and the self are not identical, though as Améry (1986, 33) said, “only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete. Frail in the face of violence, yelling out in pain, awaiting no help, capable of no resistance, the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that.”

For Theon, emasculation is literal; it is the end, in fact, of the forcible seduction ordered by Ramsay Bolton as part of Theon’s torture (Benioff and Weiss 2013, 3:07). Much has been made, and rightly so, of the rape of Sansa Stark by Bolton on their wedding night (Benioff and Weiss 2015, 5:06; see Bundel 2015; Robinson 2015), but as Rosenberg (2015) remarks, “[w]omen aren’t the only people who are subject to sexual control in Westeros and Essos.” Indeed, because Ramsay forces Theon to watch Sansa’s rape happening offscreen, both are repeatedly violated. Ramsay has already dominated Theon physically and sexually, and now does so psychologically, assaulting Theon’s chivalric masculinity by emphasizing his failure to protect Sansa and making him the unwilling voyeur of, and thus participant in, her rape. Ramsay’s sadism is directed toward breaking both Theon’s will and his hypermasculine sense of himself. Neither Theon’s failure nor Sansa’s abuse is here eroticized, but Theon’s brokenness is nonetheless presented in close-up. He is an object, but one “unmarked,” as Neale (1983, 14) might remark, “[by] erotic display.” Theon is thus emasculated without being feminized. The spectacle he shows us as he looks upon the horror we can’t see is of masculinity tested (Neale 1983), masculinity that fails either to win the contest for power or to protect the powerless.

Chivalry, Trauma, and Abjection: Sandor Clegane as Dark Knight

Sandor Clegane, called “The Hound” both for the dogs on his heraldic crest and his servile place in the royal household, exemplifies a masculinity situated both at the seat of power, as a towering armed man in a world of terrorized smallfolk, and abjected by it, as the abused brother of Gregor and the bestialized lackey of Prince, then King, Joffrey Baratheon. In Sandor, we see hypermasculinity deployed by the hegemony to abjectify its subjects in order to police its own boundaries (Tyler 2013, 46), a hypermasculinity which is itself “traumatized and traumatic” (Walsh 2010, 11).

Moreover, the site of hypermasculinity’s own destruction in Game of Thrones is the failure of chivalry, as shown through its treatment of the Hound. Unlike his older brother, Sandor Clegane rejects knighthood. His disdain for a chivalry he sees as the
lie of power comes from his recognition of that brother’s nature: He tells Arya, “You say your brother gave you that sword? My brother gave me this [points to his scars]. It was just like you said a while back. He pressed me to the fire like I was a nice, juicy mutton chop . . . the worst thing was that it was my brother who did it. And my father who protected him, told everyone my bedding caught fire” (Benioff and Weiss 2014, 4:08). Thus is hypermasculinity haunted by the abject. Bearing the pain of this primal scene in which the ideals of family and honor are unmasked as “bullshit,” Sandor understands that the patriarchal hegemony sustains its power only through its subjugation and sacrifice of the weak and vulnerable. “Honor. Glory. Lies to make idiot boys want knighthood, and idiot girls spread their legs for it. Let me tell you what makes a knight: killing. Either enough men, or the right man. House Clegane should know . . . we’re very good at both” (House Clegane).

The scarred, charred face of Sandor Clegane, in other words, insistently reminds us of the mailed fist and the awful “fragility of the law” (Kristeva 1982, 4); that is why Sansa, whom he calls “little bird,” initially cannot bear to look on him. In her horror and disgust, she mistakes the one who is abjected for the terror that lurks in those who abjectify—who grin and laugh and walk, like death, abroad. But in “The Last of the Starks,” (Benioff and Weiss 2019, 8:04) the Hound, meeting Sansa again, growls “[u]sed to be you couldn’t look at me,” and she responds “[t]hat was a long time ago. I’ve seen much worse than you since then.” Saraiya (2019) expresses an important concern when she notes this scene seems to say that “being raped made [Sansa] stronger” (np), a troubling view; for my purposes, however, it is worth noting that Sansa has learned to distinguish between the disruptive power of the abject and the threat of “the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior” (Kristeva 1982, 4).

The long-awaited confrontation between the Sandor and his brother foregrounds the work of power. Brought to the point of death in a duel, then reanimated by a renegade healer, Ser Gregor is literally a rotting corpse. He descends into the ultimate abject end of hypermasculinity without ever rejecting hegemonic power. Fittingly, this conflict ends with the death of both brothers, for Sandor is ultimately too traumatized to choose otherwise. Despite moments of redemption, such as his care for young Arya Stark after her escape from the Lannisters and his fraternal service to a motley community of war-ravaged refugees, he is motivated by hate. The closest he comes is in warning Arya away from her own revenge as the two search the flaming ruins of the capital for their nemeses: “Do you want to end up like me?” (Benioff and Weiss 2019, 8:05). Struggling to defeat the ensorcelled, reanimated Ser Gregor, Sandor realizes that he cannot do so and live. The end comes when Sandor reaches out to clutch his Frankenbrother and step with him into the inferno the dragons have made of King’s Landing (8:05). Only in facing his fear can Sandor Clegane vanquish his brother, become death itself.
Abjection and the Redemption of Samwell Tarly

The overweight, craven Samwell Tarly differs dramatically from Sandor Clegane. From the moment of his introduction (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:04) to the Night’s Watch, he exemplifies an abjection rooted both in physicality and in sexual difference. “What in seven hells is that?!” says the recruit Grenn, gazing in disbelief at the fat and affable Sam, and when Sam naively admits to his own cowardice, Grenn is, for the first time, himself afraid: “A bloody coward. People saw us talking to him. Now they’ll think we’re cowards too” (1:04). Dubbing Sam “Ser Piggy” and “Lady Piggy,” the Master-at-Arms Ser Alliser Thorne sees him as a threat to the brothers of the Watch (1:04). For both Ser Alliser and Grenn, Sam’s failure of physical courage renders him not merely an unincorporable outsider, but a kind of filth that threatens the purity of purpose defining the Night’s Watch. Because the normative masculinity of the Watch is a stoic version of the violent and inviolate masculinity of feudalist Westeros, we may see Sam’s abject cowardice as what Walsh (2010, 58) terms “the disruptive element [that] must be rejected or incorporated for (the) order to be restored.” Reading the Night’s Watch in hypermasculine terms, we can also see the abjection of Samwell Tarly as enacting the dominance and aggression marking these borderlands. Samwell, once heir to House Tarly, has already been rejected (abjected) once; we learn in “Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things” that he has been cast out in favor of his younger brother (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:04).

A threat to and therefore threatened by both the fraternity of the Watch and the patriarchy of Horn Hill, Sam is already emasculated and dehumanized, and we need not subscribe to Kristeva’s psychoanalytic account of the prerational origins of abjection to recognize the displacement of Alliser and Grenn’s own fragility onto femininity. Yet the mechanism of this rejection, which mingles fear and disgust, reminds us of the menacing otherness of such counter-masculinity, however heterosexual it may be. It is only under the protection of fellow recruit Jon Snow, Ned Stark’s adopted son, that Sam becomes part of this fraternity, and able to find the courage to defend those he loves.

Significantly, this incorporation of Sam’s abject masculinity, which seems initially to be dangerously unassimilable, begins with Jon’s recognition that they are brothers rather than others: “Sam’s no different from the rest of us. There was no place for him in the world, so he’s come here . . . . He’s our brother now and we’re going to protect him” (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:04). Jon himself is only able to negotiate the complicated masculine sociality of The Wall through the advice of Tyrion Lannister. When Jon thinks of his new brothers “they hate me because I’m better than them” and complains that the Starks have abandoned him, Tyrion remarks that Grenn, too, was abandoned, outside a farmhouse at the age of 3 (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:03). All are outsiders, the refuse of the south. Tyrion knows himself despised because of his dwarfism, though not abandoned: he tells Jon that “all dwarfs are bastards in their father’s eyes” (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:01), and, later, that “[h]ad I been born a peasant, they might have left me out to die in the
woods. Alas, I was born a Lannister of Casterly Rock” (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:02). Only Tywin Lannister’s insistence on what is due to the Lannister name—on the impermeability of the family, its centrality, its dominance—saved the wretched child from this forcible abjection, as that same hegemonic power in the hands of Randyll Tarly condemned Sam to it: both lords have the power to police the borderlands of identity in ways which remind us that in the Martinverse, hegemonic masculinity dwells south of The Wall.

Although the boundaries of masculine identity are established by the southern lords, they are enforced by the already-marginalized Night’s Watch, the black brothers themselves consigned to a no-man’s-land where they “take no wife, hold no lands, father no children... wear no crowns and win no glory” (Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1:07). Abstracted from the avenues of power, they nonetheless adopt the norms of the hegemonic south, the “kneelers,” so that their fraternity is forged not in liberty and equality, but in bondage.

South of the Wall, masculinity is too often indistinguishable from mastery, as service is indistinguishable from servitude. Yet for Sam, mastery is entwined with service: he saves the wildling Gilly and her newborn son from the mutinous rampage of the Night’s Watch at her family’s fortress in the north (Benioff and Weiss 2013, 3:04) and takes her south to the Wall. While protecting the vulnerable pair, he becomes the first man in thousands of years to kill a White Walker (Benioff and Weiss 3:08). Thus does “Ser Piggy” pass beyond abjection to become “Sam the Slayer,” from the drive, not to dominance, but to service in the name of love. He petitions Jon to go to Oldtown to become a maester because it is what “[he is] meant to do” and he will be “more use” (Benioff and Weiss 2015, 5:10). Once apprenticed to the Citadel, he again pledges his life to service, even when this means embracing abjection: scooping pottage, scraping chamber pots (Benioff and Weiss 2017, 7:01). He also finds the courage to stand up to the humiliations inflicted by his father when these are directed at Gilly (Benioff and Weiss 2016, 6:06). Having overcome the forcible abjection which thrust him outside kin and gender as not-man, Samwell Tarly learns to embrace it as part of the sacrificial attitude which, in the end, aligns him with his chosen brothers and the oath of the Watch. Sam’s desire for a life of service offers a powerful counter-vision to the surveillance state of tyranny’s body politic, losing itself in abjection and humiliation only to find itself in humility. Such a view locates identity in a community premised on sacrifice and love, and offers the embrace of abjection in service as a way to overcome forcible abjection without dissolving identity.

Abjection and the Limits of (Hyper) Masculinity

We have seen that abject masculinity stands as the limit against which hypermasculinity defines itself, writing its own power on the bodies it abjectifies. But the incorporation of such abject masculinity is also the means by which subordinate and marginalized masculinities are recuperated in Game of Thrones. “Ser Piggy”
becomes Sam the Slayer to protect Gilly and her son, and battles wights in the final struggle against the undead at Winterfell (Benioff and Weiss 2019, 8:03). He is raised to the post of Grand Maester and Councillor to the King—honor in service—following the defeat of the Lannisters and the assassination of Daenerys Targaryen (Benioff and Weiss 2019, 8:06). Sandor is moved by the resurgence of violence against the vulnerable to temporarily assume a reformed warrior masculinity, harnessed not against the weak but in their service. And Theon, pledged to protect Bran Stark from the Night King, revenant overlord of the undead army, ultimately dies to save his foster-brother.

For Theon it is the memory of torture, written on the body, which eventually allows him to make himself new. He leaps with Sansa from the walls of Winterfell into the snow, into what may be death and must be freedom, allowing her to escape the sadistic Ramsay Bolton. Later still, fighting to win the last of the Ironborn loyalists to his side so that he can rescue his sister, Theon is terribly beaten, and only rallies when his foe, unaware of his castration, kicks him—harmlessly—in the groin (Benioff and Weiss 2017, 7:07). “What is ‘remembered’ in the body is well remembered,” Elaine Scarry has remarked (1985, 109); in the words of House Greyjoy, what is dead may never die.

Scarry (1985, 27) has argued that torture “converts…absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power,” saying that it “goes on to deny, to falsify, the reality of the very thing it has itself objectified [pain] by a perceptual shift which converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power.” Pain is the instrument through which the hypermasculine asserts its power over other masculinities and other subjectivities, but it may also be the means by which these abject figures come to reject such power, and embrace instead the heroic masculinity of the sacrifice.9 Game of Thrones propounds a critique, not of hegemonic masculinity, but of its anachronistic shadow, hypermasculinity. Yet it may be that the substance of this critique, turning as it does on the incorporation and recuperation of abject masculinity through the act of service, ultimately offers an opposing vision to the icy calculation and self-absorption of the Lannister and Baelish hegemony. And that is as much the spectacle of Theon Greyjoy, lumbering through the snow to lay down his life for Sansa, as it is Jon Snow, charging toward the Bolton line as he leads an army to retake Winterfell. It is the masculinity that does not sacrifice the other, but sacrifices itself for others, broken and bled that they might live.

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Notes

1. John Ruskin (1854/1902, 186) uses “Medievalism” to identify the period from the fall of the Roman Empire and the end of “classicalism” to the end of the 15th century and the beginning of “modernism”; the modern study of medievalism has been shaped by Workman’s (1996, 1) notion of the field as “the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages.” Workman, founder and longtime editor of Studies in Medievalism, promulgated what Emery and Utz (2014, 2) have called “the foundational notion of medievalism as the ongoing process of recreating, reinventing, and reenacting medieval culture in postmedieval times.”

2. In other words, marginalized masculinities are marginalized by virtue of their association with marginalized men, rather than particular performances of masculinity. Hearn (2004) is instructive on this point.

3. I am indebted to D. Marcel DeCoste for the term.

4. I am indebted to the reviewers for reminding me of this key point.

5. These abject, whom Horton (2001, 220) calls “harbingers of death” in her treatment of Trainspotting, are AIDS-infected junkies whose damaged identities are unmade, estranged from their own humanity. I am indebted to Horton for drawing my attention to Hanson’s reflection on AIDS and abjection.

6. Here I am indebted to Covino’s (2004, 14–5) account of aesthetic surgery, Amending the Abject Body, which takes abjectification as “the objectification of the repulsive body prompted by the conditioned desire for society.”

7. Note, for example, the ways in which Grey Worm and Varys both rigidly control their own performances: to be a eunuch is not necessarily to be abject.

8. I am indebted to Stephen Burwood for this example (2012, 119).

9. But note that such humiliation, for women in particular on Game of Thrones, seems rather to urge them on to tyranny. See, for example, Cersei (Len Headey), following her walk of punishment (Benioff and Weiss 2015, 5:10), and indeed Daenerys’ decision to “let it be fear” (Benioff and Weiss 2019, 8:05) may be read in the context of her earlier traumas and humiliations.

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