

Tweaking Things a Little: Essays on the Epic Fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien and George R.R. Martin

by Thomas Honegger

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Honegger frames his work as an exploration of Tolkien and Martin's fantasy worlds, 'their shared themes, their similarities, and their differences' (xiii). Emphasis needs to be placed on differences. The title appears not so much as homage to Tolkien's well-known obsession with 'niggling' with details of his legendarium over time, but, as Honegger explains, that Martin frequently "tweaks things" and subverts the clichés and tropes of the genre, thus consciously exploding the reader's expectation' (xiii). In addition, Honegger chooses to analyze 'the entire Martinverse' (including prequels) and the HBO adaptation *Game of Thrones*, while the Tolkienian analysis is mainly focused on *The Lord of the Rings* and ignores the Jackson films. Much of the material is adapted from previously published work, resulting in what Honegger describes as not so much a monograph but a collection of essays. The book is divided into five 'parts' (de facto chapters) of between 35 to 125 pages each, further subdivided into several sections which may not be directly connected to each other, and, in hindsight, should have been separated into individual chapters for ease of reading.

Part One, 'Worldbuilding, Icebergs, Depth, and Enchantment' contrasts the famous 'Beowulfian depth' of Tolkien's subcreated world with Martin's ability to produce an 'illusion' of such depth, especially by creating songs and poetry (xv). While Martin himself has contrasted the 'iceberg' of Tolkien's subcreation to the 'raft with some ice on top' of his own (p. 3), Honegger embraces the iceberg model to describe both authors as well as *Beowulf*, despite obvious differences in the part below the water-line (and his own admission that Tolkien's metaphor of the Cauldron of Story from 'On Fairy-stories' is 'much better suited to explain the fact that historical persons and events end up in the very same tales together with folk-tale heroes and archetypal figures' [p. 13]). An interesting and insightful analysis of the infamous song 'The Rains of Castamere' and the bawdy 'The Bear and the Maiden Fair' from Martin's world is followed by a discussion of the ancient city of Valyria and its Atlantean/Trojan fall, which leads to the expected (albeit brief) discussion of Númenor. The 'chapter' ends with a discussion of enchantment which could easily be (and probably was) a separate essay.

Part Two concentrates on the use of names, a more manageable 50-page section that holds together more

successfully as a very long essay. Besides the two main authors he brings in examples from Ursula K. Le Guin, Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft, Harry Potter, and Christopher Paolini's *Eragon*, among others. Relatively little is said about Martin's works until the very end, reaching the conclusion that while 'Tolkien's legendarium is arguably "primarily linguistic in inspiration", Martin's world has retained its strongly visual quality', as seen, for example, in the House sigils (p. 130).

The role of language in worldbuilding occupies the surprisingly brief Part Three, a mere 35 pages possibly because Martin's language-building is cursory at best (mainly a few words in Dothraki and Valyrian). Noting that, after Tolkien, fantasy readers came to expect the creation of original languages, Honegger turns his iceberg model to the various Elvish languages. Unfortunately, his illustrative table/linguistic family tree contains font too small to read comfortably. Honegger draws attention to similarities between the evolution of the Elvish languages with the primary world Proto-Indo-European, and Mannish to Germanic languages, including a review of Grimm's Law. This 'chapter' ends with a discussion of the work of conlanger David Peterson in developing Dothraki and Valyrian into workable languages for the HBO adaptation.

Part Four, on the chivalric tradition, occupies more than 120 pages, but again is not as much a coherent thesis as a series of essays on various marginally related aspects of the chivalric. Honegger uses the example of Prince Imrahil's reflective vambrace to explore Tolkien's 'intentional vagueness' in terms of describing the armor in Middle-earth, suggesting that the possibility of plate armor helps the reader 'establish the right cultural distance between the Rohirrim and the Gondorians' (p. 175). The discussion then takes a sharp turn to *The Battle of Malden* and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth' as a means to introduce larger issues of chivalry and courtly love and Tolkien's apparent avoidance in *The Lord of the Rings* proper (with the possible exceptions of Gimli's 'devotion to Galadriel' [p. 184] and the relegating of the tale of Aragorn and Arwen to the appendices). Honegger also argues that Tolkien's desire to avoid 'explicitly religious elements' within *LOTR* leads him to simultaneously reject the more religious classical type of chivalry in favor of a more simplistic and secular type of knight seen in Merry and Pippin (p. 188). After dividing Martin's knights into flawed, ideal, and new Honegger analyzes specific examples, with the section on Sandor 'The Hound' Clegane (based on a 2022 chapter in an edited collection on *Game of Thrones*) the most detailed. I found the close reading of the personal journey of the not-so-ideal ideal knight Barristan Selmy in the novels and the more concise discussion of new knight Davos Seaworth to be stronger and more convincing. Predictably, Brienne of Tarth is offered as another example of a new knight (specifically as a woman), although this section left me wanting to know more about his offhanded comment concerning Samwell Tarly as a 'feminine protagonist' (p. 281) as well as the rather terse discussion of Brienne's relationship with the women of the Stark family.

The fifth and final section addresses the thorny issue of ethics. Honegger acknowledges the well-worn quote from the letters acknowledging the religious and Catholic connections to *LOTR*, but admirably notes that he has no intention of joining the "*ad nauseum*" discussion as to the veracity of this statement (p. 293). Instead, he turns to examples of ethical decisions in the novel. A part of the analysis draws upon the work of Tom Shippey concerning the use of proverbs and proverb-like statements in *LOTR* (and *Beowulf*) before transitioning to Tolkien's use of parallel lives. Here Honegger focuses specifically on Denethor and Théoden (bookending a side discussion of Éomer) and their responses to the assault on Gondor. A side discussion concerns Verlyn Flieger's analysis of the influence of J.W. Dunne's pseudoscientific model of time and human consciousness as originally published in *An Experiment with Time* (1927). While the influence of Dunne on Tolkien's time travel tales (*The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers*) is, I believe, firmly established, Honegger's extension to Théoden stands on shakier theoretical ground. An examination of ethics in Martin's world observes that here questions are not cosmological but rather individualistic. Honegger creates a motivational taxonomy, ranging from Idealists and Loyalists to Power Players and Lost Souls. Much of the detailed analysis is spent on the Idealists: the High Sparrow (a religious idealist) and Varys (arguably a political idealist). Interesting parallels between Tolkien's and Martin's worlds, in the form of a comparison between Gandalf and Eddard Stark, are drawn. But most insightful is Honegger's criticism of the controversial final season of the HBO's *Game of Thrones*, drawing upon Tolkien's essay 'On Fairy-stories' and the concepts of Recovery and Consolation to demonstrate how the series ending was unfaithful to the overall ethos of Martin's novels.

The author's description of the book as reflecting his 'idiosyncratic views on the two authors' is an accurate summation (xvi). Taken in total, the work will be of most interest to those who are already fans of the two series who wish to learn more about them individually, and, perhaps, to Tolkien fans/scholars who are wondering what all the fuss is about concerning Westeros.

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