

“I DON’T NEED SAVING”:
AN EXPLORATION INTO HOW ARYA STARK IS HER OWN EPIC HERO

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis strives to prove how Arya Stark from HBO's *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) is an epic hero. In order to work through how Arya is an epic hero, the researcher first establishes the definition of "epic" through *A Glossary of Literary Terms* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. While *GoT* is not an epic poem, this fantasy television show has much in common with old stories and oral tales. After establishing what creates an epic, this thesis works through the evolution of the epic hero to further understand the purpose and exigence behind studying literary characters and how these characters represent the cultural values of their home nations. In order to fully examine Arya's journey, the researcher compares her to Gregory Nagy's analysis of the epic hero, aligning Arya with the heroes of old and establishing how she fits the mold of the epic hero despite the genre differences. The researcher found that Arya is, indeed, a modern-day epic hero, acting as a merger between those heroes who established the genre and newer generations who have revolutionized it. Despite the limitations in research, reception, and genre, Arya's journey holds importance not only in literary study, but also within cultural studies of the present and future.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

“WINTER IS COMING”: AN INTRODUCTION TO ARYA’S JOURNEY

HBO’s hit television series, *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*), holds the record for the highest viewers in HBO’s history, with 19.3 million viewers tuning in for the series finale in May of 2019 (Otterson). Based on George R.R. Martin’s book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*SIF*), *GoT* has drawn both critical acclaim and harsh evaluation throughout its 8-season run on HBO. Set primarily in the medieval country of Westeros, *GoT* explores the upheaval caused by the War of Five Kings, a series-long conflict to settle who will sit on the Iron Throne of Westeros. Throughout the show, there is a heavy focus on four major houses: House Targaryen, House Baratheon, House Lannister, and House Stark. While *GoT* and *SIF* have both been the subjects of many articles, books, and scholarly criticism, most of that criticism centers on a handful of major characters, such as Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen, and Cersei Lannister, and comparisons with medieval concepts, such as religion, chivalry, and liege lords. As fascinating and valuable as these angles are in terms of criticism, there is a lack of focus on characters who propel both the plot and the underlying themes throughout the series’ run, including Sansa Stark, Missandei of Naath, Samwell Tarly, and the focus of this thesis, Arya Stark. In order to fill the gap that exists in scholarship on Arya, this thesis intends to show how Arya Stark is an epic hero constructed through a synthesis of the heroes of old and modern epic heroes. This introduction will outline the beginning of Arya’s journey, briefly discuss the

major plot points of Arya's story, and explore the definition of an epic hero that will be used in this thesis.

In order to understand the primary argument of this thesis, one needs to recognize the overall lack of scholarship regarding Arya and her journey. In an interview with Charlie Jane in 2013 for *Observation Deck*, Martin states that while his story has changed over time, and he has added and erased characters, his plans for Jon Snow, Tyrion Lannister, and Arya Stark have always been planned. This seemingly small comment is vitally important because it shows how much care he put into planning out his characters in general, but Arya more specifically. As one of three characters named in the interview, it is hard to believe that Arya's journey is both ignored by scholars and so poorly received by some general audiences. There was an outcry following "The Long Night," which contains the Battle of Winterfell, as many believed that Arya's assassination of the Night King took the honor from Jon Snow or Daenerys Targaryen, both of whom many stated deserved the kill. According to Dan Selcke from *Fansided*, there were 7.8 million tweets about *GoT* during "The Long Night," and many of them focused on Arya's destruction of the Night King. One of the greatest hurdles this thesis faces is that not everyone, especially out of those 7.8 million, believes that Arya could be the hero of the battle. This moment cements her place as a hero of Westeros, even after being forced to wander for 6 seasons, both across the country and beyond, as she was hunted by the Lannisters. Pushback from those who read the *SIF* series will include Martin's exit from the show and its ending preceding that of the books, which allows them to make the argument that Arya should not have killed him. However, Martin's inclusion of Arya in the three characters he names during the 2013 interview, specifically mentioning her

training as an assassin, gives way for the interpretation that he intended Arya to be the hero of the day. This very battle should send scholars and viewers alike into a deeper understanding of Arya's role within the show.

Background

Arya's journey throughout *GoT* takes her all over the country and beyond. Her adventures throughout the series show the side of Westeros and Braavos that royals would not see. Arya's journey is extraordinarily important because she experiences what it is like to be the common man in her country. While the show is called *Game of Thrones*, one has to consider how these games play out for the rest of the country—and the world—beyond the aristocracy. From the halls of Winterfell or King's Landing to the wilds of Westeros and the streets of Braavos, Arya's journey from seasons 1-8 are vitally important to both the story and to criticism. This section gives background into Arya's journey in order to help readers understand how the mantle of the epic hero rests on her shoulders.

Arya Stark is the youngest daughter of Eddard (Ned) and Catelyn Stark, and she spends the first 11 years of her life at her family home of Winterfell, in the north of Westeros. Ned Stark is the Warden of the North, so Arya is a highborn lady. In the first season, viewers see Arya as a defiant young girl who has no desire to act like a lady, much preferring archery and sword fighting to needle work and dancing. Before Arya leaves with her father and sister, Sansa, to the capital, King's Landing, she is given her very own sword by her half-brother, Jon Snow; she calls this sword Needle. Early on the road to King's Landing, Arya finds herself at odds with both the crown prince, Joffrey Baratheon, and his mother and queen, Cersei Lannister. As the first season unfolds, Arya

begins training with a sword with Syrio Forel, and Ned finds himself at odds with Cersei. Robert Baratheon, king of Westeros and husband of Cersei, dies in a hunting accident and names Ned protector of the realm in his stead, but Cersei pronounces that a lie and places her son on the throne. Ned finds himself imprisoned, and Arya manages to escape capture by the guards while Sansa finds herself in the hands of Cersei. In her escape, Arya kills a young boy, which marks her first kill. Arya wanders through King's Landing, lost, until she finds herself at the execution of her father. She is taken by a guard of the Night's Watch, who intends to help her get back to her family. This is the true beginning to Arya Stark's hero's journey.

Season 2 opens with Arya posing as a boy and traveling north with the Night's Watch. In this season, there is a raid on the travelling party by the Lannister soldiers, and Arya finds herself in the position to save three men as their cage burns. Because she saves them, one of the men she saves tells her that he now owes her a debt for three lives. Arya is then captured by Lannister men and found out as a young girl rather than a young boy, and Tywin Lannister—Cersei's father, general of the Lannister armies and ruler of House Lannister—takes Arya on as a cup bearer, unaware that she is the young lady that escaped his daughter's machinations. Arya spends time in Tywin's service, but she eventually escapes with the help of the man who owed her the debt, as he kills two men that she names and then clears the way for her and her friends to leave Harrenhal. This season shows Arya learning the dangers of the world outside protection and a castle.

Both seasons 3 and 4 include the same lessons for Arya. In season 3, Arya and her companions, Hot Pie and Gendry, travel on their own until they are found by the Brotherhood without Banners. This group takes the children into their fold, and Beric

Dondarrion teaches Arya that the trick to learning to deal with his own anger stems from repeating the name of the man who killed his brother every night before he goes to bed, and this is the beginning of Arya's kill list. The children travel with the Brotherhood until Hot Pie decides to stay and cook at an inn, the men sell Gendry to a Lord of Light priestess, Melisandre, and Arya ends up in the hands of the Hound, or Sandor Clegane, as he plans to ransom her to her brother and King in the North, Robb Stark. However, when the Hound and Arya arrive to the Twins, they find that they barely missed the slaughter of Arya's brother, mother, and entire company at the hands of Walder Frey. The anger that Arya feels at hearing someone brag about the incident incites her rage and triggers her to kill someone purposely for the first time. Moving into season 4, Arya travels with the Hound as he tries to deliver her to her Aunt Lysa Arryn across the country. Throughout their time together, Arya and the Hound learn each other's weaknesses and habits, and the Hound gives Arya further instruction on sword fighting. When they arrive to the Vale to find Lysa dead, they turn to leave and are approached by Brienne of Tarth, who swore to Catelyn Stark to keep Arya safe. Brienne and the Hound fight brutally, and Arya hides from Brienne as the woman strikes the Hound down. After Brienne cannot find Arya and departs, the young girl approaches the Hound, steals his silver, and leaves him for dead. She then travels to the shore and books passage to Braavos on a ship. The majority of these 2 seasons shows Arya the ruthless world that exists in the wild and allows her to slowly grow into that spirit as well.

Arya's journey takes a dramatic turn throughout seasons 5 and 6. Up until this point on *GoT*, Arya was a misfit and a child on the run in her own country. When she finally leaves Westeros for Braavos, Arya leaves much of her past behind. In season 5,

Arya finds herself on the doorstep of the House of Black and White, who accept her as an apprentice when she is able to convince a sick young girl to drink poison in order to ease her suffering. Arya trains with the Faceless Men throughout the season, but she must give up her identity as Arya Stark and become No One in order to truly become a servant for the Many-Faced God. In season 5, she is given her first assignment: assassinate the corrupt insurance salesman on the docks. Arya sets to her task, but she finds herself distracted by the arrival of Sir Meryn Trant of Westeros, the man who kills Syrio Forel in season 1. Arya follows Sir Meryn for a few days and learns his schedule and preferences, then finds herself the opportunity to kill him, thus eliminating the first person on her list. However, Arya's opportunistic spirit leads to punishment from the Faceless Men, and she has her sight taken away from her and is set on the streets to fend for herself. In the beginning of season 6, Arya finds herself constantly attacked by her rival at the House of Black and White, the Waif. This daily occurrence leads to Arya learning to fight without her sight, and the Faceless Men eventually accept her back into the fold once they decide that Arya has learned from her mistakes. Her first assignment when she comes back is to assassinate an actress who plays Cersei Lannister in a play about the upheaval in Westeros. Arya sits through a play about her own life and family for days before she sets to killing the actress, but she finds herself unable to follow through with the assignment. Arya's change of heart leads to the Faceless Men sending the Waif after Arya. Their multiple fights across Braavos lead to an injured Arya and a dead Waif. When Arya returns to the House of Black and White, she tells the Faceless Man that she *is* Arya Stark, and she is returning home. The closing of Arya's story for this season consists of her, back in Westeros, serving Walder Frey his dead sons in a pie and then killing him in

retribution for her family's assassination. Seasons 5 and 6 are all about Arya perfecting the skills of an assassin and finding her true self once again. After 5 seasons of pretending to be anyone but a Stark, Arya returns home.

The premier of season 7 finds Arya with Walder Frey's face, having a banquet with all of his men. She poisons the entire family and eliminates the House of Frey. Arya then begins her journey to King's Landing in order to assassinate Cersei, but she learns that her family, Sansa and Jon, have retaken Winterfell. Arya changes directions and returns to Winterfell for the first time since she left in season 1. Arya finds her brother, Bran, and sister, Sansa back home, but Jon has left in order to find resources for a coming battle against the army of the dead, and this is when Arya learns of the wights and the White Walkers for the first time. Bran gives Arya the Valyrian steel dagger that was used in an attempted assassination on him, adding to her weapons. Sansa's mentor, Littlefinger, tries to drive a wedge between Sansa and Arya, giving them bits and pieces of each other's stories and sowing doubt between them, but his attempt proves unsuccessful, and Sansa sentences Littlefinger to death for the crimes of treason and murder, with Arya as the executioner. The Starks find themselves as a united front once again. This season is the beginning of Arya's final leg of her journey. Her return home and reunion with her family show how much Arya has changed from the beginning of season 1, and they also show just how hardened she has become as a warrior.

The eighth and final season of *GoT* has fewer episodes, but Arya plays one of the biggest roles throughout the season. She finally reunites with Jon, Gendry, and the Hound. As the occupants of Winterfell prepare for battle against the White Walkers and the dead, Arya spends time with each of the people who have affected her life over the

last few years. The night before the battle, Arya finally leaves her childhood behind, symbolically, when she chooses to have sex with Gendry. Moving into the Battle of Winterfell, Arya fights against the dead all night, and then ends up surrounded by them. The Hound and Beric Dondarrion save her, and they all run through Winterfell. Arya finds herself face-to-face with Melisandre for the first time since the priestess bought Gendry from the Brotherhood, and Melisandre reminds Arya of her true purpose: to close brown, green, and *blue* eyes forever. Arya then takes off through the battle. The next time viewers see her, she is launching herself at the Night King with her staff in hand. However, the Night King senses her, and he stops her before she can kill him. In the next moment, Arya uses the dagger that Bran gave her to kill the Night King and end the battle against the dead once and for all. This moment is the one in which Arya solidifies herself as the epic hero. As the season continues on, Arya rejects Gendry's proposal for marriage and travels to King's Landing with the Hound to finish off her kill list with Cersei. When Daenerys Targaryen decides to attack King's Landing with her dragon, the Hound tells Arya to give up on her revenge and find safety, to save herself. Arya takes his advice and attempts to flee the city during its destruction. She eventually escapes on a white horse after the destruction ends, and she warns Jon that Daenerys is a killer. At the very end of the season, when Jon has killed Daenerys and the Starks have all found themselves at crossroads, Arya explains to her family that she plans to sail west of Westeros in an attempt to discover something new. This is her final farewell and journey onwards, and it is the end of her hero's journey.

The Epic Hero

In order to understand how Arya Stark is an epic hero, first this thesis must establish the parameters of an epic hero according to scholarly research and criticism. For the analysis of Arya, this thesis will apply a combination of multiple definitions of the epic hero, including Northrop Frye's definition of an epic hero, M.H. Abram's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*' definition of an epic and an exploration into the most popular epic heroes over the years, as well as Gregory Nagy's chapter "The Epic Hero" in *A Companion to the Ancient Epic*.

Frye's book, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, explores the different aspects of literary criticism. In "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes," Frye explains the five different kinds of protagonists. His definition of the third type is as follows:

If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the high mimetic mode, of most epic and tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero that Aristotle had in mind (Frye 33-4).

This definition lays the groundwork for the rest of this analysis because it is the most clear and basic definition of an epic hero that stands on its own. The idea that the epic hero can be and is criticized is important in Arya's case because her own moral code leaves others to judge her in critical lights. In her assassination of the Night King and culmination of her eight years of training, Arya also proves that she stands separate in both her authority and power over death.

Abrams' definition of an epic appears in his dictionary of literary terms. Three of the main instances that are required for a story to be an epic, according to Abrams, are that the hero of the story is of national importance, there are superhuman deeds in battle, and gods and supernatural forces interfere with the story or help in some way. Arya fits within each of these ideas clearly, as her major moment in the series is finally killing the Night King, and she is a Stark, which places her as one of the most important characters in Westeros and the story in general. She performs a superhuman deed when she kills the Night King—who can raise the dead with a wave of his hand—and when she eliminates the entirety of House Frey using the face of Walder Frey. Finally, Arya interacts directly with supernatural forces in the House of Black and White, and she receives the help of both the Many-Faced God and the Lord of Light throughout the series. Overall, *GoT* fits into some of the major qualifications of an epic, and Arya does embody the qualities of Abrams' idea of an epic hero.

In the chapter describing the definition of the epic, this thesis also covers the evolution of the most popular epic heroes throughout history. In order to understand *why* it matters that Arya is an epic hero, one must understand what these major heroes have represented in their own times. Gilgamesh's confidence and loyalty bolster his abilities as a king, and the fallout from losing Enkidu, who he was most loyal to, leads to his eventual undoing. These outstanding aspects of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* show just how much Mesopotamian society valued confidence and loyalty. In contrast, the cunning of Odysseus and Achilles show how the Greeks' understanding of strength came primarily from the mind. One does not have to look far to find any number of examples that show the value of intellectual pursuits in Greek culture. Moving further in time, this thesis then

covers Beowulf and how his actions display the value of physical strength and abilities within Anglo-Saxon culture. Finally, the evolution of the epic finishes with an explanation of Jennifer Cain's *Birth of an Archetype: War and the Emergence of the Epic Child Hero*, which discusses the modern phenomenon of the Epic Child Hero. Cain's analysis of modern media and how children are presented as the primary heroes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This evolution of the hero greatly helps show how Arya acts as a combination of older and newer epic heroes.

The third chapter of this thesis then explores Nagy's qualities of an epic hero that occur throughout his analysis of what an epic hero is. He explores the idea of an epic hero through typological, genealogical, and historical lenses. Through his analysis, Nagy explains the different qualities that appear in epic heroes: they are centered on a theme, such as Achilles' wrath; there is some sort of homecoming, like Odysseus' return to Ithaca; they are immortalized, either during their life or after death; and they have three characteristics that are important to their personalities—unseasonal habits, extreme abilities, and antagonism towards the gods who help them. In comparison to Achilles' theme of wrath, Arya's entire story is centered around her revenge, beginning with the death of both her father and her instructor in season 1. Arya's story of homecoming is interesting because she could fit into more than one of Nagy's versions of that type of story, depending on how one wants to look at it. Arya is not necessarily immortalized within *GoT*, but she is declared the hero of the Battle of Winterfell and a hero of a very important and prominent house. Finally, Arya fits into Nagy's three characteristics quite well: she is certainly unseasonal, as she refuses to act like a lady and goes about things in her own way; she learns to be extreme during her adventures, through survival and

vengeance; and she is defiant in the face of the Many-Faced God multiple times, flouting all of her assignments on her own terms. Overall, Arya fits Nagy's definition quite well, especially in comparison to the other heroes he discusses.

The two major chapters of this thesis explore the definition of the epic, the evolution of the epic heroes, and a more focused idea of what, exactly, makes an epic hero. Establishing how *GoT* acts as an epic furthers the argument that Martin purposefully created Arya in the image of heroes of old. Then following how heroes have changed and represented their own cultures shows just how important it is to study such a prominent character of modern culture. Finally, one must understand a succinct concept of the epic hero to fit Arya into the definition. The goal of this thesis is to prove that Arya's qualities are of epic-hero quality and to explore what her status as an epic hero says about modern American culture.

Conclusion

Throughout Arya Stark's story, she encounters obstacles, enemies, changes, and the supernatural. With her talent, hard work, and need for revenge, Arya is able overcome these issues and figure out who exactly she is. Arya fits into many different molds throughout her story, yet the most important role that she fills is that of the epic hero. She is a combination of the old heroes and the new, allowing for fault and imperfection while still a child through most of her story. The main goal of this thesis is to show how Arya stands out as a character, even if scholarship surrounding her deeds has not yet taken off to the same extent as other characters within *GoT*. Further, this thesis will work to show how women, especially young women, can break stereotypes and have the same importance in scholarship as their male counterparts.

CHAPTER II

“THERE IS NOTHING MORE POWERFUL IN THE WORLD THAN A GOOD STORY”: DELVING DEEPER INTO THE DEFINITION OF THE EPIC

Over the course of the last century, literature and storytelling have expanded and evolved many times. With the progression from radios to movies to television to streaming, humans have continually found ways to tell and retell stories. As people continue to find new ways to express themselves, discourse around storytelling must evolve as well. Scholars must recognize the shift in media and entertainment and work to recognize what these massive changes say about current societal beliefs and standards. The entire purpose of studying literature and storytelling is to better understand both the past and the present: what is the author or creator trying to say with their work? In an attempt to answer that question, this chapter focuses on the definition and conventions of the epic genre and how HBO's *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) might fit into an aspect of that definition, and it follows the evolution of the epic hero from ancient Mesopotamia through modern stories. Further, this chapter begins delving into how Arya Stark from *GoT* is an epic hero in her own right.

In order to understand how Arya could be considered an epic hero, one first has to delve into what, exactly, an epic is. Typically, the first stories that come to mind when someone thinks of an epic are poems such as the *Odyssey*, *Paradise Lost*, or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. While there is a widely accepted definition of the epic poem as a genre, there are multiple competing and evolving definitions of the epic hero. According to M.H.

Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in their book, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, “the term epic...is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or...the human race” (109). This chapter will explore the complexities that go beyond such a simple definition for the widespread, diverse use and implementation of the epic genre.

Divisions within the Genre

Within the genre of the epic, Abrams and Harpham explain that “there is a standard distinction between traditional and literary epics” (109). Traditional epics, which are also called “folk epics” or “primary epics,” “were written versions of what had originally been oral poems about a tribal or national hero during a warlike age” (Abrams and Harpham 109). Poems such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were Greek; *Beowulf*, which was Anglo-Saxon; and *Chanson de Roland*, which was French, all fall under the traditional epic classification. As the term *traditional* suggests, oral poetry was the origination of the epic style. When one thinks back to his/her first introduction to epic studies and oral tradition, it should be quite easy to think about the imagery that instructors used to catch the students’ attention: a bard singing the tale of an ancient hero, a campfire with people gathered to hear their histories, or a great hall engrossed in an action-packed story. The nostalgic connotation that follows the term *epic* seems to play a huge part in the longevity and the continual use of the genre—even when reworked. However, the traditional epic is only one part of the conversation and exploration into the genre.

Literary epics originated from traditional epics, but they “were composed by individual poetic craftsman in deliberate imitation of the traditional form” (Abrams and Harpham 109). Poems that fall under the literary epic are John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, William Blake’s *The Four Zoas*, and John Keats’ *Hyperion* (Abrams and Harpham 110). The purposeful imitation of the traditional style elevates the overall tone and themes throughout the literary epics; the authors, or “craftsmen,” place an air of importance around their works by using the templates of the ancient style. While the overall social aspect of storytelling has evolved over the last 2,000 years, people hold on to the powerful tales of heroes who rise above all odds. The literary epic hinges on society’s fascination with traditional style applied to newer stories. In contrast to the literary epic and the traditional epic, there stands the modernization of the ancient art of storytelling.

According to Abrams and Harpham, “the term ‘epic’ is often applied to narratives which differ in many respects from this model but manifest the epic spirit and grandeur in the scale, the scope, and the profound human importance of their subjects” (111). Some of these more modern stories include Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Abrams and Harpham 111). While the exact style of the traditional and literary epics have been less popular over the last few centuries, the ever-evolving exploration into the subject matter and purpose of the epics hold people’s attention and focus. Additionally, it is important to note that the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, there are different definitions of an epic: “a poem, typically derived from ancient oral tradition, which celebrates in the form of a continuous narrative the achievements of one or more heroic characters of history or legend;” “a book, film, or other creative work resembling or likened to a traditional epic,

esp. in portraying heroic deeds and adventures or covering an extended period of time;” and “an event or series of events likened to those in an epic, esp. in being grand in scale or lengthy and arduous” (*OED Online*). In order to explore *GoT* within epic conventions, and Arya as an epic hero in turn, the next step within the definition of the epic will be to explore the features that occur within the stories themselves while acknowledging that *GoT* is not an epic *poem* so much as a fantasy series that takes on specific conventions of the epic.

Features within the Epic

Abrams and Harpham explore the different features that occur within an epic, “derived by way of the *Aeneid* from the traditional epic of Homer” (110). These features are included here because they are the most important aspects of the epic when applying the definition to modern works, and more specifically, *GoT*. While Abrams and Harpham follow the literary epic style with these features and many modern works do not use these features perfectly, they can be used to help identify the beginnings of an epic story. Each of these features will be applied to *GoT* and Arya specifically so that readers can begin to see how the television show and book series follow the epic structure enough for the format to seem intentional, much like the literary epic rather than an epic poem.

The first, and arguably most important, feature of the epic is that “the hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance” (Abrams and Harpham 110). The examples that Abrams and Harpham use within this section include Achilles, the Greek warrior and son of Thetis; Aeneas, the son of Aphrodite; and Adam and Eve, the “progenitors of the entire human race” (110). In the first season of *GoT*, the audience only sees the importance of Arya as the second daughter of Eddard Stark, Warden of the

North in Westeros. As she is the child of an extremely powerful man, Arya is important, but not nearly at the national level in the beginning of the show. However, over the course of her story, Arya grows to be one of the most indispensable people in Westeros by the end of the final season. From escaping the hands of the Lannisters to traveling the world on her own, from finding purpose and training to returning to slaughter an entire house and become the hero of the Battle of Winterfell, Arya grows into the characteristics of an epic hero by becoming known for her actions both across Westeros and in the world beyond. Her final actions to sail and discover “what’s west of Westeros” can easily help the audience to infer that Arya will become a legend much like the ones she grew up reading and hearing about (“The Iron Throne”). While Arya was not the child of a god or the beginning of an entire race, she is the hero of the battle that would have signaled the end of the living across Westeros. Her journey to becoming a hero and an assassin begins long before the first episode of *GoT* and continues after the last episode ends.

The second feature that Abrams and Harpham explain is that “the setting of the poem is ample in scale and may be worldwide or even larger” (110). To explain this characteristic, Abrams and Harpham use Odysseus’ journey across the Mediterranean basin, which is his entire world, and the setting of *Paradise Lost*, which includes Heaven, Hell, Earth, and the cosmic space between (110). Within the first episode of *GoT*, viewers are able to see beyond the Wall, Winterfell, King’s Landing, and Essos. As the show progresses, the audience gets an in-depth look into the world of Westeros and beyond. Further, Arya’s own journey takes her across Westeros both as a lady and a peasant; her journey allows viewers to see the less-than-savory portions of the nation as well as the domiciles of the nobility. She then travels to Braavos to join the House of Black and

White. Upon Arya's return to Westeros, she again travels the length of the country, and her final journey is to sail to an unknown place within her world. Martin's worldbuilding in *A Song of Ice and Fire (SIF)* is brought to life with *GoT*, and Arya's personal journey exhibits Martin's world better than almost any other character's experiences.

According to Abrams and Harpham, in an epic, "the action involves extraordinary deeds in battle" (110). The examples here include "Achilles' feats in the Trojan war...the wanderings of Odysseus on his way back to his homeland in the face of opposition by some of the gods," and Satan's revolt in heaven as well as his journey into the new world and his attempt to corrupt mankind (Abrams and Harpham 110). One of the main images that comes to mind when people think of the epic is the great battle(s) that occurs within the story. In *GoT*, there is no shortage of great battles across Westeros and beyond. From the moment that the War of the Five Kings begins, the show has battle after battle that displays the feats of the greatest soldiers. Even Arya, who only experiences two major battles in the last season, has her moment: she kills the greatest threat to humanity and life itself. Her training from the beginning of the first season through the final one allows Arya to perform extraordinary deeds in battle, holding her own against the ancient heroes who inspired her creation.

Also in the epic, "in these great actions the gods and other supernatural beings take an interest or an active part" (Abrams and Harpham 110). The explanation includes the Olympian gods in Homer's work and Jehovah, Christ, and the angels in *Paradise Lost*. Further, Abrams and Harpham explain that the "supernatural agents were in the *Neoclassic Age* called the machinery, in the sense that they were part of the literary contrivances of the epic" (110). In *GoT*, supernatural elements play an important role

throughout the series. Daenerys' dragons, the White Walkers, the Three-Eyed Raven, and the Lord of Light's servants all converge as the series progresses, and their presence guides the action and purpose of the entire show. More specifically to Arya's story, the Many-Faced God and the Faceless Men interact with Arya directly. Arya trains in the House of Black and White as a servant to the Many-Faced God through seasons 5 and 6, and she becomes an assassin as well as gains the ability to take faces. Arya's direct connection to the supernatural continues through the Battle of Winterfell, where she kills many wights and the Night King himself. If the supernatural play a direct "part of the literary contrivances of the epic," then there is more than enough activity throughout *GoT* to support epic machinations (Abrams and Harpham 110).

Finally, Abrams and Harpham state that "an epic poem is a ceremonial performance and is narrated in a ceremonial style, which is deliberately distanced from ordinary speech and proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject and architecture" (110). This element is the greatest deviance from the typical features of an epic poem in *GoT*. As *GoT* is a television show without a narration over the storyline, there is no grandeur or formality added into the performance of the work. Even Martin's *SIF* series is narrated in a limited omniscient point of view, so there is no formality or ceremonial style. While this is one of the main features that Abrams and Harpham identify, one could argue that the overall change in writing styles over the centuries can allow for a less formal or ceremonial style if the story itself focuses on the heroic subject matter and follows the other features more closely. Further, keeping in mind that *GoT* is an fantasy television show, lacking a few qualities of the epic poem prominently displays

that Martin made creative choices when writing *SIF* to adapt certain aspects that carry over into *GoT* while avoiding conventions that do not fit as easily into modern media.

Epic Conventions

According to Abrams and Harpham, there are three major conventions of the epic. While these conventions are specific to books or written works, they can be applied to the television show, *GoT*, in a loose manner. Abrams and Harpham pull each of their examples for the conventions to *Paradise Lost*, so each of these conventions will be compared with different aspects of the *GoT* television show or the *SIF* book series. As the show is based upon the books, the showrunners' decisions to include and work with these conventions is hugely important to how *GoT* follows the epic style.

The first convention is that “the narrator begins by stating that his argument, or epic theme, invokes a muse or guiding spirit to inspire him in his great undertaking, then addresses to the muse the epic question, the answer to which inaugurates the narrative proper” (Abrams and Harpham 111). There is no narrator who states the epic theme or invokes a muse in *GoT*, as this is a fantasy television show rather than an epic poem. However, if one focuses on Arya as an epic hero, and House Stark as the center of the show, the motto, “Winter is Coming,” could be considered the epic theme. Within *GoT*, “Winter is Coming” implies that danger, darkness, and hard times lie ahead. Throughout all eight seasons of the show, peace is but a hope or dream of summer, and winter moves in slowly but forcefully. Additionally, there is no specific or stated epic question. The lack of an epic question, invocation of a muse, and specific argument all stand as barriers to proving Arya as an epic hero, but with consideration of the Stark motto as the epic theme, one can move forward and examine how Arya fits into the qualities beyond these

conventions, especially when one keeps in mind that *GoT* is not an epic *poem*. Further, the major issues that occur between the definition and explanation of the epic and its comparisons to *GoT* all lie within the lack of narration and writing style. As media and consumption of stories has evolved so much since the *Odyssey* was written, the smaller aspects of writing style may be considered secondary to the plot elements, characterizations, and actions that parallel the works of Homer.

The second convention is that “the narrative starts in medias res (‘in the middle of things’), at a critical point in the action” (Abrams and Harpham 111). In the *Odyssey*, the story begins with Odysseus suffering on Ogygia with the goddess Calypso, ten years after the end of the Trojan War. In *Paradise Lost*, the story begins with Satan’s fall from Heaven, and he awakes in the deep pits of Hell. In *GoT*, the opening scene of the show focuses on a group of the Night’s Watch beyond the wall, and one man encounters a group of dead Wildlings. When he brings the others to show them the bodies, the men cannot find the bodies. Then, the men of the Night’s Watch are attacked by the dead bodies, reanimated by the White Walkers. The opening scene of the show drops viewers into the darkness and fear that accompanies the most dangerous threat to mankind, and then it cuts to a simple scene of House Stark going about their daily routines. This abrupt and critical moment within the show becomes overshadowed by the important arrival of the King of Westeros and his entourage and the focus on the less fantastic elements of *GoT*. The audience learns much about how Westeros’ nobility functions, and they gain a greater understanding of the world. The first scene of the show hints at many dangerous battles ahead for the Night’s Watch and the world beyond the wall.

The third and final convention that Abrams and Harpham explain is that “there are catalogues of some of the principle characters, introduced in formal detail...these characters are often given set speeches that reveal their diverse temperaments and moral attitudes” (111). While there is no introduction or formal speeches to explain characterizations within *GoT*, one has to look no further than the first episode of the show to see how each character has their own introduction that shows their temperaments and attitudes. In his first scene, Jon Snow is working with Bran to help the boy with his archery, and Jon exhibits leadership, patience, encouragement, and the beginnings of a strong leader. Ned observes the instruction of Bran, scolds the boys when they act out of place, and immediately changes his plans for the day when he is informed that there is a deserter from the Night’s Watch nearby; Ned’s honor, leadership, and duty are prominently displayed in this first scene, and the characteristics stand out even more in the next. In addition, Arya’s own introduction to the audience stands as an important show of her character; she is first scene attempting to work on needlepoint and having issues, but she hears the boys outside laughing and working with Bran. She sneaks out of the castle and fires an arrow into the bullseye of the target before Bran can hit the target himself, then curtsies when her brothers see her. Overall, Arya’s actions show her inability to conform to the expectations of a noblewoman and her proficiency with weapons—as well her trouble-making tendencies. Each major character in *GoT* has a moment where their characterizations stand on display.

Though *GoT* is a television show, it contains many of the conventions of the epic. The motto of House Stark, which stands at the center of the show, is “Winter is Coming;” this motto encapsulates the theme of the entire show: suffering, hardships, and trials

ahead. The show also starts in medias res; the audience is continually attempting to put together the details the war that put Robert Baratheon on the throne, why Daenerys and Viserys Targaryen are in exile, what is going on in the North, and who the main characters are. Finally, the principle characters of the show have their motivations laid out within the first few episodes quite clearly. While *GoT* may not be an epic *poem*, the show acts as a new form of epic. Moving forward, this chapter will focus on the evolution of the epic hero now that the “what” and “how” of the epic have been established.

The Evolution of the Epic Heroes

Throughout watching *GoT*, the audience experiences the modern version of the epic. By examining the features of the epic and comparing them with *GoT*, one can see that the show, and Arya Stark specifically, fall into these definitions quite well. As this definition of the epic comes from *A Glossary of Literary Terms* and, briefly, the *OED*, it stands a reliable source to begin the interpretation of Arya as an epic hero. With a greater understanding of what exactly makes up an epic poem or story, readers can move into the qualities and history of the epic hero. The next section will explore the evolution and history of the epic hero itself, beginning with Gilgamesh and moving all the way into the 21st century.

Gilgamesh is widely considered to be the first epic hero. Gilgamesh represents the Mesopotamian culture and values through his most prominent qualities: loyalty and confidence. Throughout the entirety of the epic, Gilgamesh truly believes that he is the greatest man and king. Enkidu’s addition to the story was a direct result of Gilgamesh taking advantage of his position as king too far; however, Enkidu tames Gilgamesh by introducing friendship and love in a way that Gilgamesh had not experienced prior to

Enkidu. The relationship between the two warriors displays just how important loyalty was to the Mesopotamians, as the friendship between the two men allows them to defeat Humbaba and the Bull of the Heavens together. When one of the warriors falters in confidence, the other lifts his spirits and confirms their greatness. Further, Gilgamesh's drive to conquer death is a direct result of Enkidu's death. When Gilgamesh realizes he is mortal, he leaves his kingdom behind in an attempt to find a way to defeat his mortality. His confidence carries him all the way to Utnapishtim's land, but it does act as his undoing when he fails Utnapishtim's challenge of staying awake for seven days. Gilgamesh's journey after losing the loyalty of his friendship with Enkidu is filled with hardship and failure; even his confidence cannot quite carry him to success. One can argue that the combination of loyalty and confidence is what the Mesopotamians truly valued, with loyalty acting as the more important of the two. Of course, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are strong warriors, capable of taking on even the guardians of the gods, but their actions together are even more important than their fighting prowess.

Homer's epic heroes, Achilles and Odysseus, represent the wit and cunning of Grecian heroes. While the Greek heroes are powerful and can fight exceptionally well, they also are able to reason their way out of trouble as often as fighting. Greeks valued intelligence and reason more highly than other qualities, such as pure strength and a firm hand of leadership. The Greeks' values did not greatly differ from the Mesopotamians in that they understood the value of strength and force, but the use of cunning holds more importance to the Greeks than it did to the Mesopotamians. Odysseus' outwitting of the Cyclops Polyphemus stands out as one of his greatest achievements; it acted as a way of showing that monsters, though they may be scary, powerful, and predators, can be

defeated by those who use their wit. His consistent ability to think his way through a difficult situation leads to him eventually returning home. On the other hand, Achilles stands as a war hero and leader. He does not lose battles. While Achilles leads by the might of his sword, he also uses cunning and intelligence to win his battles. In his refusal to fight for Agamemnon's forces, he even allows Patroclus to use his armor in battle in order to incite fear into their enemies, who believed Achilles was on the killing field. Achilles' reckless pursuit of revenge against Hector for Patroclus' death leads to his downfall, as he abandons his focus and strength of mind; even his death stands as a moment of suspended thought, rather than a well-laid plan. Through Odysseus' and Achilles' journeys, one can see the values held in ancient Greece. The evolution of the epic hero through cultures helps one to understand two very important things as students of history and humanity: the highest held values of a society and their counterparts.

Much like Odysseus and Gilgamesh, Beowulf acts as a strong, arrogant, and mighty warrior. However, Beowulf does not also possess the intelligence of his predecessors. First and foremost, the Anglo-Saxons valued strength. They wanted their heroes to be able to vanquish the large and frightening monsters, not outwit or trick their adversaries. Beowulf specifically travels from a distant land to kill Grendel, as Grendel's victims did not have the strength to kill him themselves. However, Beowulf does not approach his battles with a detailed plan in mind—he goes out to kill the monster. Additionally, the feudal society that created the legend of Beowulf was specifically set up to award warriors who defeat their monsters of whatever form. Strength in the leaders protected the people under them—further demonstrated by Hrothgar's failure to kill Grendel and the slaughter of his people. Even in Beowulf's later battles, he steps up to

defeat Grendel's mother and the dragon on his own, going into the monsters' lairs. He abandons plans and backup, and he defeats the monsters with his power and arrogance. Altogether, the Anglo-Saxons display the importance of safety given by leaders in their society, which is a departure from the Greek and Mesopotamian cultures, who were more concerned with the prosperity of the authorities than the prosperity of the people.

Modern heroes hold some of the same qualities as the heroes of old, but they have evolved with our time. According to Jennifer Cain in "Birthing an Archetype: War and the Emergence of the Epic Child Hero," there is an entirely new genre of epic heroes in modern literature: the Epic Child Hero. From the childlike Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee in the mid-twentieth century to actual children such as Harry Potter and Katniss Everdeen moving into the twenty-first century, society's outlook on heroes has changed drastically. Children represent the future; they see injustices adults are blind to or even ignore. According to Cain, "Epic Child Heroes...accomplish great feats of strength, courage, or intellect. Unlike the classical archetypal heroes, however, they are not especially gifted in those areas. Instead, their youth is what equips and qualifies them as heroes above any other ability or quality" (11). Cain has a list of requirements for an epic child hero: "each must be physically different (i.e., age, size, scars) in some way from his or her peers;" "each is a minor child who is independent from parental oversight;" each "form[s] surrogate families or otherwise binding relationships with two or more peers that keep them in touch with normalcy and drive them forward in their quests;" each has "particular yet emotionally distant adult mentors who serve as inspirations to them" as well as "require[s] several specialized adult teachers or guides who help them along their paths;" "each must possess an innate desire to do what they perceive to be right,

honorable, and just in the face of overwhelming adversity; each must be inherently *good* and innocent, for each must fight against a violent, overwhelming, and supernatural *adult* enemy” beyond their ability to vanquish, but they “must overcome it, preferably by using a virtue such as love which the evil entity cannot understand;” “each must be able to master his or her own fears and bring salvation to the human race *while still a child*,” and finally, each has a “willingness to sacrifice themselves for the beliefs they hold dear and possibly for the lives of their friends and (usually surrogate) families” (14). Cain’s list of qualities, while seemingly quite exclusive, fits the majority of heroes in young adult literature from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first. Her work in identifying this new yet prevalent archetype is hugely important to modern-day literary scholars because she takes a very old, very well-known type of hero and shows just how much our societies have changed over the last two-thousand-odd-years.

The evolution of the epic hero is extremely important because the changes show the values different societies place on important qualities. Arya is an interesting character because she blends some of the more classic epic hero traits by way of a more modern avenue. She holds the loyalty, cunning, and skill of the early epic heroes, but physically, she is the opposite of the big, strong, and burly men who preceded her. Arya’s inability to give in to the countless situations that nearly break or even kill her show just how much modern society values strength and determination in the face of struggle.

Conclusion

This chapter covers the basics of the epic genre as well as a short exploration into the changes in epic heroes over the last four-thousand years. Understanding what, exactly, comprises an epic and how it can apply to *GoT* helps when applying the mantle

of the epic hero to Arya. While the *GoT* television show does not represent the traditional epic *poem*, one can draw comparisons between the two and see how the show does follow similar conventions to an epic. Additionally, it is important to focus on the changes of epic heroes since their conception because those changes represent what each culture valued heavily: Gilgamesh's loyalty, Odysseus' cunning, Beowulf's strength, and the Epic Child Hero's ultimate salvation in the spite of their evil adult counterparts. Following this thought process, the next chapter will apply the conventions of the epic hero to Arya specifically, and it will also focus on Martin's own literary background and how it influenced his writing.

CHAPTER III

“I HAVE ALWAYS FOUND REVENGE TO BE THE PUREST OF MOTIVATIONS”: ASSESSING ARYA STARK’S ASPIRATIONS TO AVENGE ALL WRONGS

As the qualities of an epic and the background of the epic hero have been established, it is important to look into how Arya Stark fits into the mold of the epic hero. This chapter will delve into Gregory Nagy’s exploration into the epic hero and use that definition as a framework for establishing Arya as an epic hero in her own right. Nagy based his exploration into what makes an epic hero on three approaches: typological, genealogical, and historical. The typological approach uses “comparisons of parallels between structures that are not necessarily related” (Nagy 71). He uses works across different cultures—such as the ancient Greek epic and the South Slavic “heroic song”—to look into similarities in their structures and plot points to establish the “heroes” within an epic (Nagy 73). The genealogical application uses both a synchronic approach—looking at a work in a snapshot of the moment without using its history to color interpretation or understanding—and a diachronic approach—using the evolution of language and background in a work to gain a greater understanding—to examine the meaning of both an “epic” and “hero” while comparing cognate (related) structures (Nagy 74). With the genealogical application, Nagy examines the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in comparison to Indic “epics,” the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Nagy 74). The historical method uses “comparative methodology [that] involves synchronic analysis of structures in intercultural contact with each other” (Nagy 75). With this method, Nagy

looks at the epic of Gilgamesh in comparison to Achilles and how the cross-culture contact connects the two heroes. Combining these three different approaches to the study of the epic and what it might mean to be an epic hero, Nagy creates the most concise list of qualifications for an epic hero. This chapter uses his qualifications to show how Arya both fits and changes the mold of a modern epic hero.

The most important connection to make prior to looking into how Nagy identifies the qualities of an epic hero is relating Martin's writing style and inspiration to Nagy's methodology. While it is not possible to definitively say that Martin consciously chose to make Arya an epic hero without speaking to him directly, one important aspect to consider is Martin's own background with literature. In an interview with *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)* regarding his series' placement on "The Great American Read" list, Martin explains that he spent most of his childhood reading, especially during the summer when other kids' families went on vacation; his family did not travel, so he read in order to experience other worlds. The most basic common denominator between Nagy and Martin is that they both read any and everything that they could get their hands on. Throughout "The Epic Hero," Nagy demonstrates just how many different epics he read in order to come to his conclusions, from Greek and Indic to Old Norse and Old Irish tales. The widespread knowledge gained from their reading can be seen in both Martin's and Nagy's works. While one could argue that Nagy's scholarly approach is quite different from Martin's less technical application of what he has read, this chapter observes how Nagy's work can easily parallel with *GoT* due to the similar nature of both men's reading.

Theme

The first quality of comparison will be that the story of the epic hero centers on a theme, such as Achilles's wrath and Odysseus' homecoming. Arya's personal history leads her on a path of vengeance for her family, beginning in season 1 with the death of her father, Eddard Stark. The creation of Arya's famed "list" happens in season 2, and that list becomes her mantra every night as she lays down to sleep: "Joffrey, Cersei, Walder Frey, Meryn Trant, Tywin Lannister, the Red Woman, Beric Dondarrion, Thoros of Myr, Ilyn Payne, the Mountain...[and] the Hound" ("First of His Name"). This all-consuming need for revenge on those who have hurt her and the people she loves drives her storyline and displays one of *GoT*'s most important motifs. As Nagy explains in a video where he's discussing different heroes and their qualities and purpose, "vendettas never end" (Kosmos Society). Each season contains a moment of Arya's vengeance that drives her own theme. Furthermore, Carolyne Larrington states that "the call for vengeance when a family member is killed is endemic in honour societies like Westeros, a culture which remembers, through stories passed down through generations" in *Winter is Coming* (42). Larrington adds that "Arya too holds in mind the long list of those against whom she will take revenge sooner or later" (42). Even as Arya's vengeance drives her entire story arc, Larrington only mentions the youngest Stark daughter in the one paragraph regarding the importance of justice and vengeance. This lack of scholarship regarding Arya is persistent throughout the works written on *GoT* and *ASIF*. This chapter attempts to delve deeper into Arya's character, motivation, and comparison with epic heroes of old in a way that lacks in most academic works regarding her.

Season 1 builds Arya's need for vengeance. Arya has a feud with her sister, Sansa, due to their clashing personalities; this feud leads to a distance between the two, and that distance furthers when Sansa does not tell the truth about the incident between Joffrey and Arya on the King's Road. The death of the boy who plays with Arya leads to her hatred of the Hound and loss of her direwolf, Nymeria. The relationship between the sisters deteriorates throughout season 1, and this deterioration displays Arya's ability to hold a grudge. As the season progresses, the main trigger for Arya's journey occurs: the death of her sword instructor, Syrio Forel, and the imprisonment and eventual execution of her father, Eddard Stark. While Arya manages to escape the hands of the king's men who try to capture her, her hatred, borne from her survival, begins to become her driving force. Further, she makes her first kill in season 1 when she is accosted by a stable boy as she runs from the castle. All of these events eventually compound in Arya's vengeance list of those she plans on killing.

Arya's journey of vengeance truly begins in season 2 of *GoT*. As she travels north with the Night's Watch recruits, she begins to make friends and enemies. It is on this excursion that Arya learns the trick of making a list of those she plans on killing from Yoren. When the group is attacked by Lannister soldiers, Arya saves Jaqen H'gar from the fire burning his cage; in return, Jaqen agrees to honor Arya's actions by taking the three lives she saved in order to honor the god of death. The names of the men Arya names play into her need for vengeance, as they are all soldiers who are holding Arya and her companions hostage. Additionally, one of the most important moments in her journey occurs in season 2, when Jaqen invites Arya to travel to Braavos with him; this invitation

eventually leads Arya to sail to Braavos at the end of season 4 and begin a new training regime.

Season 3 holds much heartache and anger for Arya, driving her further down her path for vengeance. Arya finds herself traveling with the Brotherhood without Banners in season 3, and not as a willing companion. When her identity is revealed to the men by the Hound, the Brotherhood decides to take her to her family at Riverrun in order to ransom her for gold. Further, when Beric Dondarrion fails to defeat the Hound in the Hound's trial by combat for the murder of the boy in season 1, Arya's disgust for the group grows. Her final breaking point with the Brotherhood is when they gave Gendry to the Red Woman, finally earning their leaders' names on her nightly list. Arya's escape from the Brotherhood only ends in her being kidnapped by the Hound, which leads her into further instruction on killing and vengeance. The final moment that seals Arya's fate and path to vengeance occurs at the end of season 3: the Red Wedding. Season 3 presents Arya's breaking point with the loss of everyone she believed she had left, from her chosen family to her blood.

Season 4 hold Arya in a sort of stasis in her revenge. She kills the first person off of her list, Polliver, who landed his place there by killing one of her friends with Needle after he stole it from her. Arya is able to regain her sword and kill Polliver with it in the same manner he killed her friend, stabbing him through the throat. While Arya travels with the Hound to the Eyrie, where he intends to ransom her to her aunt, Lysa Arryn, she learns many things from the Hound, including some sword fighting and a greater ability to be ruthless. Arya and the Hound encounter multiple people who try to kill them or turn them in for a ransom, ending each encounter with the deaths of their attackers. When the

pair finally reaches the Eyrie, they learn that Lysa has died just before they arrived, and they are left once again with no real path for the future. When they encounter Brienne of Tarth and Podrick Payne on the road, Brienne tries to take Arya from the Hound, but the Hound refuses to hand her over, as Brienne is carrying a Lannister sword. Brienne and the Hound fight over who should watch over Arya, but Arya escapes both as they are distracted. When Brienne finally defeats the Hound, she and Podrick leave in search of Arya, and Arya returns to the Hound. She refuses to kill him, even when he tries to goad her into it with taunts about her list, her family, and her friends. When Arya leaves the Hound to survive on his own or bleed out with no one around, she shows that her sense of revenge does not skew towards easy deaths and putting her subjects out of their misery; Arya believes that those who have inflicted pain and death on her people should *suffer*, which becomes a running theme in her methods to kill those on her list. Arya's story in season 4 ends with her taking a boat to Braavos in order to join Jaqen H'gar, as he invited her previously.

Season 5 shows Arya beginning to hone her skills to complete her vengeance. She spends time training at the House of Black and White in Braavos, which starts a rivalry between Arya and the Waif. One of the most important aspects of Arya's training for the Faceless Men is that she must give up her identity and become No One. This distinction between Arya Stark of Winterfell and an acolyte of the Many-Faced God leads viewers to believe Arya may be willing to give up her revenge list and move on with her life in a new direction. Arya trains and works in the House of Black and White until she earns the right to become "someone else" ("Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken"). However, Arya shows just how much vengeance controls her life when she catches sight of Meryn Trant at the

docks of Braavos and abandons her mission for the Faceless Men in order to focus on Trant and his movements. Her inability to release her need for vengeance leads Arya to become blinded by the Faceless Men in punishment for stealing from the Many-Faced God. More than any moment prior in *GoT*, Arya's assassination of Trant, and her words to him,

You were the first person on my list, you know, for killing Syrio Forel.

Remember him? Probably not. I've gotten a few of the others. The Many-Faced God stole a few more from me, but I'm glad he left me you. Do you know who I am? I can't hear you. You know who I am. I'm Arya Stark. Do you know who you are? You're no one. You're nothing ("Mother's Mercy"),

show just how deep her need for revenge sits within her. Arya does not just kill Trant; she stabs him multiple times, incapacitates him, taunts him, then finally slits his throat. Arya is completely aware that abandoning her mission will end in punishment, yet she cannot stop herself from taking her revenge. Anyone who may have believed that she had changed her path prior to this episode was abruptly reminded of what drives Arya Stark.

Season 6 begins with Arya suffering through her punishment without her sight, continuously mocked by the Waif as Arya learns to function blindly. When Arya finally passes the test set out by the Waif, she is allowed to return to the House of Black and White and resume her training. Her first task acts as both a test of her spirit and a reminder of who she is to abandon: Arya must assassinate Lady Crane, who plays Cersei Lannister in a satire about the events occurring in Westeros. As Arya is reminded through the play—multiple times—of what she had sworn to avenge, she finds herself acting against the Faceless Men and preventing the assassination of Lady Crane. When the Waif

sets out to hunt Arya down and nearly kills her, Arya enacts her revenge over her continual mistreatment at the hands of the Waif. To further show Arya's training and ability to hold a grudge, Arya returns to the House of Black and White with the face of the Waif, and she asserts to her former master that "a girl is Arya Stark of Winterfell, and I'm going home" ("No One"). The penultimate moment of Arya's journey in season 6 occurs in the last moments of the episode, however. Arya's actions throughout *GoT* up to this point show that she has no qualms about repaying her debts of death and torture, but her revenge against Walder Frey stands as her most important act of vengeance: killing and cooking Frey's sons into a pie, feeding it to him, then murdering Frey while stating, "my name is Arya Stark. I want you to know that. The last thing you're ever going to see is a Stark smiling down at you as you die" ("The Winds of Winter"). The coldness in Arya's voice and the pure ruthlessness of Frey's final moments display exactly what Arya values more than anything else: vengeance. In addition to Arya's character arc, this moment where Arya feeds Frey's sons to him in the meat pie is a parallel to Tereus, Atreus, and Titus from Greek mythology. In *You Win or you Die*, Ayelet Haimson Lushkov explores the importance of Frey's actions during the Red Wedding and displays how Arya's retaliation is a call-back to the ancient Greek tales. However, even when showing the comparison between Arya and the old stories, Lushkov fails to expand on Arya's actions more than stating what she did; instead, Lushkov focuses wholly on Frey's actions and how he compares with the villains in the Greek myths. This is extremely important because arguably one of Arya's most important moments in the entire show is left as an afterthought to one of the lesser characters in the show.

The opening of season 7 is a continuation of the finale of season 6. The episode begins with Walder Frey throwing a feast for all of the men of his family. As he leads them all in a toast over the Red Wedding, he begins to slowly start leading into Arya's true feelings:

Brave men, all of you. Butchered a woman pregnant with her baby. Cut the throat of a mother of five. Slaughtered your guests after inviting them into your home. But you didn't slaughter every one of the Starks. No, no. That was your mistake. You should have ripped them all out, root and stem. Leave one wolf alive, and the sheep are never safe ("Dragonstone").

The scene ends with all of the Frey men dead from poisoning and Arya telling the serving girl, "When people ask what happened here, tell them the North remembers. Tell them that Winter came for House Frey" ("Dragonstone"). This opening scene shows viewers that Arya's satisfaction with her death list is not as simple as killing those who have harmed her family the most; no, she will wipe every person who was involved out of existence if she gets the chance. In episode two, Arya learns that Jon Snow is still alive and has been named King in the North, so she changes her path from King's Landing—on her way to kill Cersei—to Winterfell. As before, the audience is lulled into believing Arya has every intention to go home and find peace with her family after enacting her greatest revenge, yet Arya's distrust towards Sansa and the opposition between the two slowly grows as season 7 progress. Littlefinger's ability to play the sisters against each other seems to work quite well, even going so far as to make Arya believe that Sansa supported Joffrey against their own brother, Robb, early in the War of the Five Kings. As the distance between the sisters seems to get even larger, their hostility comes to a head

when Sansa seems to put Arya on trial, but the ultimate twist occurs when Sansa names Littlefinger as the defendant in the trial for murder and treason. The trial shows the three living Stark siblings acting as a unit to show the extent of Littlefinger's betrayal of their family, time and time again. When Sansa finishes explaining Littlefinger's guilt, Arya acts as Sansa's sword and executes Littlefinger. While the lord never made it onto Arya's personal kill list, the Starks make a public example of him to display what will happen when one betrays them. Arya may have returned home, but she has not given up what has driven her for the better part of her life.

The final season of *GoT* calls back to much of the first season, especially at Winterfell. Arya is reunited with the final living member of her family, Jon, as well as some of her past chosen family, Gendry and the Hound. In the Battle of Winterfell, Arya fights alongside the other soldiers in order to protect her home and her family. Throughout the battle, Arya shows just how much her training over the years has benefitted her. In the final moments of the battle, when all hope seems to be lost, Arya manages to kill the Night King and save both her family and all of humanity from the army of the dead. Arya's actions in this episode show that she can stand with heroes like Achilles, with her training, abilities, and ruthlessness against those who have wronged her. However, Arya's journey does not end with her act of heroism; when the armies march out to King's Landing in order to dethrone Cersei, Arya also leaves to finish her list. Arya's inability to stay home in peace with her brother and sister show that vengeance drives her more than any other emotion. Her entire world revolves around righting her perceived wrongs. As she travels with the Hound one final time, they both realize that their stories might end while gaining their revenge. When the moment comes

and Arya sneaks into King's Landing ahead of the armies, she is faced with the decision that will ultimately decide her fate: continue on through a castle in the midst of being destroyed by a dragon or leave her vengeance behind and finally *live* for herself for the first time since her sword instructor died while saving her from the King's Guard. When Arya chooses life, she is finally able to map out a future for herself. After the family is reunited, Jon tells Arya she can come visit him at Castle Black, but she explains that she cannot. Arya asks, "What's west of Westeros?" then explains that she is going to find out ("The Iron Throne"). While Arya's list has been completed and she has unleashed her last bits of revenge, she is unable to return to the girl she was at the start of the series, unable to go home.

Homecoming

Another quality that Nagy explores in an epic her is that there is some sort of homecoming. Arya mimics Odysseus, whose return home has created its own category within the epic, in some ways. Nagy explores six different types of homecomings in his essay: the returning king reclaiming his throne, the pilot lost at sea finally returning home, the soldier of fortune who returns home and reclaims his wife, the seer or shaman returning home from a vision quest, the trickster retracing his misleading steps all the way back home, and the son who goes off after his father in order to find his own heroic identity. Within Nagy's six categories of homecoming, Arya could fall easily into two different paths, depending on how one perceives her story.

The first category is that of the trickster: "The trickster retraces his incorrect and misleading steps, returning all the way back home, where he had started, and thus showing the correct steps for all to take" (Nagy 80). In an open house discussion with

Nagy, he explains his concept of the trickster and how it can relate back to Greek mythology and heroes in a way that is similar and connected to the classical definition, but it does not quite fit the specifications in the same way. Nagy explains that he relates the trickster to a character who consistently “violates” the societal norms of his/her people, then shows how he/she made the right decisions and becomes the hero (Kosmos Society). In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus consistently violates the norms of naming, actions as a guest, and even in fighting, so Nagy connects Odysseus to a sort of trickster by showing how he violates the norms and becomes the hero because of it. When thinking of the trickster in this way, Arya fits the idea of the trickster in different ways, one of the most important being her training as a Faceless Man. She leaves behind the life of a lady—the life she was supposed to lead—and even leaves her homeland to train as an assassin for a god that none of her family ever worshipped. This journey and her constant violation of societal norms for women while she trains allows her to become an assassin so skilled and dangerous that she is able to kill the Night King and save all of humanity. She also journeys across the world only to end up back at Winterfell in season 8, then back in King’s Landing, where her path to vengeance truly began. Her abandonment of revenge and hope to live in “The Bells” shows how her entire life centered around revenge for her family was not the best path, even if she was able to win in the end; she ends up reuniting with her pack of Starks until she must travel once again, unable to return to the life that expects her to follow certain norms.

The second type of homecoming Arya might fit into is when “the son goes off on a quest to find his father in order to find his own heroic identity” (Nagy 80). Rather than a quest for her father, Arya’s own journey from King’s Landing is her quest to find the

rest of her family. Each leg of her journey changes due to her family's movements and deaths, and she reroutes with whatever companion she has to find the next person. Her entire identity becomes centered on revenge for those deaths as each one piles onto the next, culminating in her abandoning hope in season 4 and leaving Westeros for Braavos. When Arya is reminded of her purpose while watching a satire play out the murder of her family, she finally acquiesces to her true identity and returns to enact her vengeance on those who have wronged her family. Arya's heroic identity relies on the basis that she will protect her family, if not literally, then in name. Her most heroic action, killing the Night King and saving Bran, shows that her life's journey has led her down that path from the moment she escaped the King's Guard. When Arya realizes that her journey has rendered her unable to fit into her family's new dynamic, she chooses to continue on with her path of adventure and exploration and sail west of Westeros.

Immortalization

In Nagy's work, he explores the concept of immortalization with the epic heroes in different lights. Succinctly put, "the hero can be *immortalized*, but the fundamental, painful fact remains: the hero is not by nature *immortal*" (Nagy 85). Nagy explores how ancient heroes were lifted to immortal lives after their deaths, rebirthed to immortality by the gods, and made immortal only through their remembrance. One can explore the immortalization of Arya in different ways. If one looks into the culture of *GoT*, the value placed on stories is higher than almost anything; the people even choose their king in season 8 because he has the best story ("The Iron Throne"). Arya's deeds—both good and bad—will be remembered in the stories of their culture as the Hero of the Battle of Winterfell and as the wolf left alive in a herd of sheep. It can be easily inferred that she

will be immortalized in the stories of her world. However, if one looks outside of the show and into the real world, Arya does not stand on equal footing with the other heroes within the show, such as Jon or Daenerys. Prior to her spectacular actions in season 8, Arya only had one Funko Pop! action figure despite her prominent story lines throughout the show, and that action figure was released in 2017 (“Vinyl Figure”). While this fact may seem irrelevant, the reception of Arya’s character *outside* the world of the show matters with how she is perceived as an epic hero. It can even stand as the greatest difference between Arya and the heroes of old, like Odysseus and Achilles. There were even fans who disagreed with the idea of Arya, who trained as a fighter turned assassin for seven of the 8 seasons, being able to kill the Night King where other, bigger characters failed. An important question that each viewer and scholar must ask themselves within this discussion is whether a character who may achieve glory within their story, but does not live on as highly in the world outside their journey, is truly immortalized. The interpretation of immortalization differs even within Ancient Greek culture, so there is not a simple or easy answer as to whether Arya is truly immortalized.

Qualities of Greek Heroes

Finally, Nagy asserts that within the Greek heroes, there are three major qualities that “[integrate] the concept of the cult hero with the concept of the epic hero—as well as the tragic hero—in classical Greek traditions” (Nagy 87). He explores how both Herakles and Achilles have each of these qualities within their own journeys, even with Herakles being a cult hero and Achilles being an epic hero. This concept is the conclusion to Nagy’s chapter, and it is preceded by an entire essay of research to show how Nagy came up with these three qualities to define the Greek heroes, epic or not.

The first quality is that the hero is unseasonal (unusual). Quite obviously, from the beginning of the show, Arya is set apart from both her brothers and her sister. Arya has a tenuous relationship with Sansa that consists of back and forth and fighting because they cannot understand one another. Arya stands apart from her brothers because while she trains and hopes to be like them, her world does not like young women trained as warriors. Her training continues to be unseasonal as time goes on because first she trains with the sword instructor from Braavos in King's Landing, then she spends time learning less acceptable habits while on the run with the Night's Watch recruits, then she spends time as Tywin's cup-bearer, which makes her more adept at tactics and spying, all within the first 3 seasons. Her time on the road with the Hound helps her develop more sword training and a different level of ruthlessness. Her training with the Faceless Men is the pinnacle of her unseasonal training, as it gives her a supernatural ability as well as skills that enable her to kill the Night King eventually. Even Arya's eventual departure from Westeros at the end of the show displays just how different she is from those around her; she cannot even stay with her family because it is not where she fits. Additionally, Lushkov further points out how Arya is unseasonal in an off-hand comment about Sansa's dislike for "her sister Arya's rebellious streak because it disrupts what [Sansa] thinks to be right: for women to sew and for boys to run around with swords" (70). While Lushkov neglects Arya in most ways, the author makes it clear that Arya stands apart from many of the other characters in the show.

The second quality that Nagy names is that the hero is extreme, either positively or negatively. Again, one of Arya's major personality traits is that she is extreme. Her loyalty to her family and those she cares about drives her to hold grudges, and those

grudges drive her to create a revenge list, which drives her for the majority of the show. Her need to avenge the wrongs committed against her and her loved ones is her single, extreme driving force. She never does anything by halves; she takes it as far as she can, then sometimes just a bit further than necessary; as an example, she murders the entire Frey male family line because they helped in the slaughter of Robb, Catelyn, and the Stark soldiers. Arya does not allow for easy deaths for those on her list, either. She purposefully lets each member she kills know exactly why they are dying and who is killing them before doing so slowly and painfully. In addition, her skills as a killer are also extreme; she is the only person capable of sneaking up on the Night King and killing him. Even the end of her story, sailing west, shows that she has an extreme personality in that she cannot bear the thought of going back to her old life. Once again pulling in Lushkov, it is important to note that the author only mentions Arya's fighting abilities in contrast to Brienne of Tarth acting as a more stereotypically-male character rather than Arya's and Daenerys' smaller statures and indirect battle strategies (136).

Nagy's third and final quality that defines a Greek hero is that the hero is antagonistic towards the gods who help him/her. In the face of every creature and human that Arya meets from the time her father dies, she acts antagonistically. She fights with every person who tries to "save" her, be it Yoren of the Night's Watch, the Brotherhood without Banners, the Hound, or Brienne of Tarth. Even as she trains with at the House of Black and White, she does not hold their customs and traditions in the same esteem as the Braavosi she encounters. She constantly questions everything she is taught, and she argues to be in higher standing throughout her training. When she makes it to the next level, she then argues against and defies the orders she is given. Even her dramatic exit

from the House of Black and White is antagonistic, as she holds Needle to her master's throat as she explains that she is leaving and going home. Further, in *Winter is Coming*, written in 2016 before the release of season 6 of *GoT*, Larrington briefly questions Arya's dedication to the House of Black and White, stating that the surrender of one's identity to become "No One" "is hard for Arya with her strong and stubborn individuality, and it's not clear that she will necessarily be accepted into the Guild, though she is certainly learning some useful skills in her apprenticeship to the God of Death" (158). The doubt that revealed itself prior to Arya's dramatic end to her apprenticeship shows just how antagonistic Arya can be regarding the gods. Finally, her famous phrase is the most important and obvious antagonistic act: "What do we say to the god of Death?" "Not today" ("The Long Night").

Conclusion

While Arya has many differences from what one would consider the classic epic heroes like Odysseus and Achilles on the surface, she can certainly hold her own in a discussion surrounding the different qualities and actions of the epic hero. Arya does not fit into the muscled, arrogant male hero that was so greatly valued in ancient Greece, but she represents much of what society today values: courage, conviction, survival, and sass. Arya consistently fights for what she believes is right, and she does not allow others to get away with what she considers to be wrong. As an epic hero, Arya Stark shows the importance of will, determination, and skill over sex, brawn, and fame. Martin's own plans and purpose for Arya was mapped out very early on in the writing process; he stated in an interview in 2013 that "some major characters—yes, I always had plans...what Arya's arc was gonna be through this" (Anders). This comment is hugely

important when considering Arya as an epic hero because it shows that from the beginning of the series, Martin had plans regarding Arya's plot.

However, even as research into *GoT* has gained popularity in the decade since it first premiered, further study into Arya is lacking. In many of the books on *GoT*, Arya is mentioned in passing regarding how she relates to whatever other characters that the authors choose to study. In both *Winter is Coming* and *You Win or You Die*, Larrington and Lushkov treat Arya as a side character who lacks an overall purpose in the show. This lack of attention to Arya is problematic because it quickly cuts some of the largest motifs out of the show by excluding her own abilities, and it ignores the hard, grueling work of a teenage girl who fights from the first episode to be who she wants to be. One could easily draw parallels between the treatment of Arya in academic scholarship and the treatment of teenage girls within society, showing both lack the respect and mockery towards the subjects. Entire ad campaigns have been launched in order to change the perception of girls in the last decade, such as Always' "#LikeAGirl" campaign. It is absolutely vital to examine how Arya's understated role in *GoT* scholarship reflects the values that society holds in teenage girls. As Martin states in his *PBS* interview, "your books, your stories, should reflect what you see in the real world around you. Even a fantasy that has dragons should reflect the truth" (3:12). Arya's role within the show itself pushes the story forward and shows a different side to Westeros and the rest of Martin's world—less nobility and more normalcy. Martin uses Arya's experiences to reflect the truth of the world and society's values. Arya is cast aside, traded for ransom, mistaken for a boy throughout the first few seasons, forgotten about, and ignored by some of the major figures in the show. However, even with everything poised to see her fail,

Arya continues to fight, train, and learn in order to fulfill her family's debt for revenge.

Arya, like many teenage girls, pushes back against societal expectations and makes herself an epic hero.

CHAPTER IV

“NOT TODAY”: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This thesis explores how Arya Stark from HBO's *Game of Thrones* acts as a modern-day epic hero. Her journey across the show's 8-season run allows viewers to see beyond the palaces and keeps of Westeros, and Arya plays an integral role in saving her home country and the world beyond. In order to fully understand how Arya acts in the role of the epic hero, this thesis uses M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham's definition of the term "epic" in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as well as the definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary* to establish how *GoT* mimics aspects of the epic poem and literary epics though it is a fantasy television show. Further, the evolution of the epic hero from ancient Mesopotamia through modern-day works shows how each of these heroes have embodied certain aspects that their cultures valued; exploring these qualities and how they represent the people that produced them allows for a deeper understanding of Arya's own representation within American culture. Finally, this thesis explores how Arya mirrors many of the qualities in Gregory Nagy's "The Epic Hero" in *A Companion to the Ancient Epic*. Because there is no concise or simple definition of what makes an epic hero, Nagy's work helps guide one through the most common or important qualities that stand out across the many cultures and people that have used the epic format to tell their stories. By establishing how Arya Stark can act as an epic hero, one can catch a glimpse of how future scholars and laymen alike might view modern cultural values.

To establish *GoT* as a modern rendition of an epic poem or literary epic, this analysis details what comprises the epic poem and literary epic. Traditional epic poems began as oral poems about national or tribal heroes “during a warlike age,” and the poems were eventually written down (Abrams and Harpham 109). Literary epics differ from traditional epics in that they were written by individual poets in attempts to mimic the traditional form, rather than occurring as a sum of many different storytellers’ and bards’ renditions of an old tale or hero. While *GoT* is not a poem, nor was it written to exactly imitate the traditional style of the epic poem, author George R.R. Martin demonstrably draws specific motifs from traditional epics and makes observable allusions to those works. In an interview with *PBS*, Martin explains that books were his primary form of travel and adventure as a child, and he would read whatever he could get his hands on (“The Great American Read”). Further, *GoT* is an adaptation of Martin’s series, *A Song of Ice and Fire (SIF)*, so the show stands apart from the traditional and literary epics in that way. However, *GoT* does possess enough aspects of an epic that one can make the argument that Arya acts as an epic hero: the motto of House Stark, “Winter is Coming;” starting in medias res; the audience needing to gather all of the information of the wars and background of the characters based on current events; and the motivations of the principle characters laid out clearly in the beginning. While one cannot line *GoT* up against *The Odyssey* or *Beowulf* perfectly in terms of structure or style, the television show does allow for obvious and important comparisons.

This project also uses the evolution of the epic hero, with a primary focus on the main attributes of these heroes and how those attributes represent the culture where they originate, to explore the role that the hero plays over time. While skill in battle is

prominent across all traditional epic heroes, the other qualities these heroes possess allow scholars to find a deeper understanding of values within these heroes' homelands.

Gilgamesh possess confidence and loyalty to Enkidu beyond all other qualities within his story; his greatest strengths and feats come from Enkidu fighting by his side and truly believing they were the greatest warriors of all. Further, the confidence of Gilgamesh contributes to his downfall without the steadying presence of Enkidu in his life. These very prominent qualities of Mesopotamia's most celebrated hero allow readers to understand what Mesopotamians valued most. Next, Odysseus and Achilles both possess a level of cunning and critical thinking that surpasses all of their other qualities; Achilles eventual downfall can even be linked to his drive for revenge against Hector and abandonment of focus to his task—his recklessness allows him to be felled by Paris.

Additionally, philosophy, mathematics, and rhetoric all find their roots within ancient Greek society. It is no secret that Greece valued intelligence, and the greatest heroes from their culture possess that intelligence in spades. Another great hero that comes to mind when one considers the epic is Beowulf, who primarily acts as a warrior with strength and power beyond any of his contemporaries. Beowulf's entire purpose and his claim to becoming king is his ability to defeat monsters that have decimated the warriors who came before him; Beowulf did not value intelligence nor battle plans, loyalty nor support; he dove into the depths of the lake to defeat Grendel's mother and died killing the dragon who terrorized his people. His arrogance and strength allowed him to protect his people and all of the people he helped. Beowulf's story and its prominence exhibits the value that Anglo-Saxons put on community and strength. The importance of these qualities must also come with a caveat that these ideas are much larger generalizations of stories

that went through many interpretations over the course of their history; not every member of these heroes' nations believed in the ideals put forth in their greatest stories.

Finally, the evolution of the epic hero ends with Jennifer Cain's exploration into the Epic Child Hero, which, she posits, came about in the mid-twentieth century with J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series and continues on through modern-day pop culture. The Epic Child Hero is vital to the survival of his/her own world, and the child *always* wins in the face of the adult who attempts to control him/her. The relatively new convention of foisting off responsibility onto the shoulders of the next generation has become quite prevalent in modern American society, with slogans such as "children are the future," which has become so cliché that it has lost its poignancy. Overall, each of these epic heroes have stood as extremely important embodiments of their nations' highest values. Understanding the importance each hero represents helps further the impetus behind studying pop culture, which is created by those who are living in modern times.

This thesis also explores the qualities of the epic hero as presented by Nagy and compares those qualities to Arya. First, the theme of Arya's entire journey from the first season and onwards centers on revenge; Arya's infamous list of names that she recites before sleep drives her forward. Next, Arya's homecoming could manifest in one of two ways: the trickster who realizes her own missteps and violations of societal norms and attempts to rectify those mistakes in order to become the hero, or the lost child who goes off to find her family or her own heroic identity in protecting her family. In contrast to much of the qualities previously, Arya's immortalization is left up to viewers' interpretation; while she is lauded as the hero of the Battle of Winterfell, the story and

show ends within months of the battle, and her heroic moment is overshadowed by the downfall of Daenerys Targaryen in the latter half of the season. Lastly, Nagy's qualities of the Greek hero very easily apply to Arya: the *unseasonal* hero who trains with weapons and eventually as an assassin, though she was of noble birth; the *extreme* measures she takes as she works to avenge her family, both biological and chosen; and the *antagonism towards the gods* that Arya consistently displays throughout the show—as witnessed in her rejection of the Many-Faced God. Each of these aspects of the epic hero can be applied to Arya and given life in *GoT*.

Limitations

I admit that there are limitations to this approach: *GoT* is a fantasy television show based on a fantasy book series; it is not an epic, traditional or literary. While Martin may have borrowed aspects from epics to help craft his story, he definitively did not write an epic poem. The adaptation of the book series into a television show further separates *GoT* from the epic, as it lacks the divine question and invocation of the muse, which are both much easier to do in writing or narration than on screen. My methodology and approach assumes that while the medium of the epic and many of its most recognizable features have changed and adapted in their course from ancient oral songs to written literary epics to epic-like novels to movies and television series; however, I also insist that there are important continuities that persist in that evolution and those continuities are either consciously or subconsciously evident in the Game of Thrones and especially in the character of Arya Stark. However, one must realize that storytelling is ever-changing as technology and access to stories evolve. In order to move forward with scholarly criticism and remain contemporary, researchers need to focus on new media

and how it changes and plays with older ideas, structures, and archetypes. Modern adaptations allow for older stories to be seen in a new and exciting light. Even the most rigid definitions of 'epic' literature recognize that the form evolves from culture to culture and from epoch to epoch, but it is certainly possible that some scholars will object to my application of the term here. If a scholar wishes to insist that some of the features of the ancient epic which are not present in this television series are resolutely necessary to qualify for that definition, then they will disagree with my approach and argument here.

This thesis also seeks to rectify an important gap in scholarship regarding *GoT*: the lack of attention to the character that I argue is central to its plot and themes. In most essays and analyses, authors focus on a few particular aspects of *GoT*: medieval customs, a few specific characters, weaponry, and the general treatment of women. Arya's storyline diverging from the main story in season 1 allows for her to be pushed from the more prominent plots and focus. The major points of any of Arya's presence in scholarship are her family name or her dedication to revenge; this focus on only two facets of her character allows readers to miss the nuances of what Arya represents throughout the series. There does not seem to be any concern for how Arya experiences the world as a commoner in contrast to the majority of the characters, who spend their time in keeps, palaces, and on the warfront. As a result of this lack of scholarly attention to Arya, my thesis has relied on comparative models of approach and original readings of the character. Without further scholarship regarding Arya, this theory will have to rely on other sources and apply them to her.

Future Research

My argument and analysis here is intended as a meaningful beginning to a conversation about the GoT and epic literature, not as the summative conclusion on the topic. First, something that needs focus and attention moving forward is the reception of young women and their capabilities in media. While *GoT* has had its fair share of criticism involving its portrayal of women since the premier of the first season, this thesis does not focus on the sexualization of the women within the show. There are many different women within the show, and it is important to acknowledge that Arya's success as a warrior does not diminish or contradict the roles of her counterparts; viewers must decide which portrayals should be celebrated. A current popular trope within young adult literature is that of the teenage heroine who has the ability to save the world. There seems to be a growing demand for female representation in books, movies, and television shows beyond that of side characters. As scholarship has begun to encompass pop culture works, there needs to be a focus on the power of the young-woman main character. Using Arya Stark as an example, the main storyline of *GoT* focuses on the games and manipulations of rulers, but Arya's journey plays a vital role in understanding the world of Westeros at large. She has interactions with royalty, commoners, soldiers, and criminals. Her importance to *GoT* goes far beyond her assassination of the Night King or annihilation of House Frey, yet those are the focus to the majority of the scholarship surrounding her. An important step forward in literary theory regarding pop culture would be a specific focus on young women and how they see the world around them.

Another, yet related, subject for future research would be how exactly teenage girls control market research and media in many ways, even while they are mocked for

their interests. While one could ask most grown women the question, “were you made to feel silly about the things you liked as a teenage girl?” and the answer would commonly be “yes” in at least one aspect, there is a hidden power in the interests and focus of teenage girls. Entire marketing campaigns, such as the “Like a Girl” campaign mentioned earlier in this thesis, have been created around trying to catch the attention of young women. Following the thread of the influence that teenage girls have on pop culture will help scholarship in many ways, including understanding many common marketing ploys, exploring new avenues of research, and comprehending where, exactly, this power and mockery originate. Why do adults feel the need to belittle young women’s hobbies, passions, or values? Arya Stark’s role in *GoT*, as well as the reception surrounding her accomplishments, stands out as an important indicator of these questions and conclusions; not only is she a strong character who refuses to be put into a box, she also stands as a very prominent stepping stone for future research.

Conclusion

Book adaptations into movies and television as well as evolving media have allowed a larger audience than ever before to experience modern storytelling in a way that feels reminiscent of people gathered around a bard in a feast hall or by a campfire, holding on to every moment of the story. As mentioned in the introduction, the finale of season 8 of *GoT* had 19.3 million viewers in May of 2019 (Otterson). As technology continues to advance, the accessibility of storytelling will continue to grow. Further, when trying to determine what stories might be representative of modern American culture for future generations, the sheer amount of attention and viewership of *GoT* would be a good indication that this show will be studied for a long time to come, much

like *Harry Potter* or *Star Wars*. This thesis works to explore how Arya Stark represents the modern epic hero in HBO's *Game of Thrones*. Understanding the role that Arya plays within the show will allow scholars to see the values modern American culture places upon younger generations while simultaneously creating the issues that need to be fixed by those generations. Arya's drive for revenge, protective instincts, and dedication to training force viewers and scholars alike to understand the motivations of those that have been ignored or pushed to the side. Finally, Arya's journey shows the world that the young damsel does not always need saving, nor does she want it.

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