Original Article

# The maiden fair: Nineteenth-century medievalist art and the gendered aesthetics of whiteness in HBO's *Game of Thrones*

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**Abstract**   This essay explores diachronic processes of gendered white racial formation, taking HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2007-) as a central example of the persistence of the nineteenth century's aesthetic vision of women in contemporary medievalist television. The series portrays the essential medievalist female body as a white body – clothed or unclothed – reproducing an aesthetic gaze that draws heavily on pre-Raphaelite forms, while orientalism provides the dominant model for a female body coded racially 'Other.' Whiteness and medievalist nostalgia coalesce to prioritise white female bodies at the same time as they are made the objects of violent desire, while non-white female bodies are repeatedly displaced or marginalized even as they are stripped bare. Reading the visual program of the HBO series alongside examples from nineteenth-century art, the article shows that the racial coding of women in *Game of Thrones* reproduces an aesthetic treatment of women's bodies popularized during the Victorian era.

In late August 2017, *Vanity Fair* asked a question that had preoccupied fans of HBO's *Game of Thrones* – then in its seventh season – for some time: 'Why is Cersei's Hair Still so Short?' (Robinson, 2017). Cersei Lannister's famously flowing tresses were shorn as part of her public humiliation in Season 5, Episode 10's 'walk of shame.' Bald, bruised, and caked with mud and blood, Cersei was forced to walk naked through King's Landing in a scene which show-runners claimed was based on medieval precedents – specifically the public shaming of Edward IV's mistress Jane Shore, in London in 1483 (Hibberd, 2015). Two seasons later, audiences debated why Cersei's hair had failed to grow back since her corporal abuse. According to the author of *Vanity Fair*'s piece:

> Hot takes on the regal pixie have ranged from the ponderous ('we need to be reminded that she is Permanently Scarred By What Happened') to the facetious ('Cersei is stuck in some kind of head-related time warp, and while everyone else is allowed to change, her hair is stuck in time'). (Robinson, 2017)

Like numerous other contemporary popular culture productions, both HBO's *Game of Thrones* and the series of books on which it is based, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire,* purport to represent the violence, sex, and dirt of the 'real Middle Ages.' The abuse Cersei suffers in Season 5 is part of this perceived historical reality, especially as it applied to the experience of women during the medieval period. For many viewers of the show, the failure of Cersei's hair to grow back after her public humiliation undercuts this pretended realism, marking a disjointed temporality which is out-of-sync with the established aesthetic norms attached to white, heterosexual femininity in the western Middle Ages. Cersei's short(er) hair captured attention in part because audience expectations of medievalist worlds – gritty or not – remain rooted in postmedieval visual histories, especially as they were shaped by pre-Raphaelites during the nineteenth century.

Taking HBO's *Game of Thrones* as our central example, in this essay we explore the persistence of nineteenth-century medievalist aesthetics in representations of white femininity in the contemporary televisual landscape. Joe Feagin's theorisation of the 'white racial frame' offers a useful structure for understanding the significance of this persistence and why casting choices and a few storylines from a TV show – however popular – are worth more than passing attention from anyone but fans, and how they are connected much more broadly to society and culture. Feagin describes the 'white racial frame' as

> a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, interlinked interpretations and narratives and visual images. It also includes racialized emotions and racialized reactions to language accents and imbeds inclinations to discriminate. (Feagin, 2013, xi)

Popular culture narratives and the visual imagery through which they are told typically orient audiences towards hegemonic ideological positions. In this case, the aesthetics of white femininity that dominate western medievalist screen culture in the 21st century are part of a cross-temporal framing of the Middle Ages as white space and the originary source of white cultural and racial identity.

Critical histories of whiteness recognize the role and significance of visual culture in creating standards of beauty which imagine white femininity as the pinnacle of humanity, and which both engender and perpetuate white supremacist ideologies.[1] The race theorist and anatomist Robert Knox wrote in his highly influential *The Races of Man* (first published in 1791 and reprinted throughout the nineteenth century):

> in woman's form I see the perfection of Nature's works: the absolute perfect, the beautiful, the highest manifestation of abstract life, clothed in physical form, adapted to the corresponding minds of her race and species (Knox, 1850, 35).

Knox seems to suggest here that beauty is both relative – a man of a particular race would, in his view, see women of his own race as more beautiful than others – and hierarchical. As John Kang demonstrates, 'conceptions of racial beauty would come to justify an ideology of White supremacy' and the legal and physical exclusion and exploitation of people of colour and indigenous peoples (Kang, 1997, 300).

The roles of classicist and orientalist art in constructing ideals of white female beauty in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are well recognized; the significance of medievalist art, however, is not.[2] Given that the medieval period has been imagined as the source of 'pure' white racial identities since at least the late eighteenth century,[3] this gap is striking. Medievalism and orientalism are, with classicism, the most significant paradigms for identity formation in the modern western world (not exclusively for formations of whiteness); both are deeply concerned with origins and are not entirely separate.[4] The medievalism of HBO's *Game of Thrones* and the pre-Raphaelite movement alike has drawn more scholarly attention than the orientalism of either, but nineteenth-century medievalism and orientalism often co-operate in the production of white femininity in the popular imagination.

HBO's *Game of Thrones* portrays the essential medievalist female body as a white body, reproducing a gaze which draws heavily on pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, while the orientalism that shapes Westeros provides the dominant model for a female body coded racially 'Other.'[5] The pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in 1848 by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais, was a major force in nineteenth-century British art. The pre-Raphaelites were fascinated by pre-modern techniques and aesthetics, finding in these a sense of authenticity and integrity which they sought to

1 See Painter (2010, chapters 4 and 5).

2 See Painter (2010) and Dyer (1997).

3 See, e.g., Geary (2002).

4 See Ganim (2005).

5 See Hardy (2015).

recreate in their own artistic representations, drawing frequently on both genres and themes from medieval literature and art. Like all medievalisms, pre-Raphaelite re-imaginings and representations of the Middle Ages and its artefacts reflected the pre-occupations of the culture in which they were created. During the nineteenth century when the pre-Raphaelites were painting, nostalgic medievalism across Europe and the United States linked gender and race, seeking pure origins for both in the past.[6] During the same period, aesthetic ideals about what the Middle Ages 'looked like' were established in Western popular culture, not least through pre-Raphaelite work. While the influence of pre-Raphaelite aesthetics on medievalist representations of women in modern film and television has been noted,[7] their racializing effects have not been discussed in depth. This essay attempts to bridge that gap in its reading of HBO's phenomenally popular show.

Martin and HBO's show-runners, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, have asserted on numerous occasions that their 'real' medievalist worlds (textual and on-screen) are fundamentally different to the romanticized, idealized, and infantilized, 'Disney Middle Ages' – as Martin often puts it – found in other popular cultural imaginings of the medieval past.[8] This divide, however, is not nearly as wide as Martin and Benioff and Weiss claim – to the extent that it does not exist at all when it comes to the construction of the European Middle Ages as 'white' space (H. Young, 2013, 2015b). The pre-Raphaelites, who saw themselves as a kind of new brotherhood of the Round Table and viewed the Arthurian court as 'a model of chivalry, courage, [and] loyalty' (Faxton, 1992, 55), played a substantial role in creating the idealized and aestheticized Middle Ages that Martin and others claim to reject. And yet the visual forms of medievalism first popularized by the pre-Raphaelite artists during the Victorian era established aesthetic patterns which are still prominent in contemporary visual medievalism – however 'real' or romanticized those patterns may be – which tend to concentrate the viewer's gaze on the white, female subject.

In their own time, the pre-Raphaelites and their imitators famously, controversially, and openly depicted female sensuality. They actively refused to follow the dictates of the art establishment and its norms of 'Ideal Beauty'; their approach engaged directly with contemporary scientific theories which suggested that social categories such as class and race were physically encoded in facial features (Casteras, 1992, 14–5). Pre-Raphaelite connections with scientists of their era – including those interested in race – were close: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and Thomas Woolner all had friendships or professional connections to Sir Norman Lockyer, the founding editor of the prominent scientific journal *Nature* (Meadows, 2008, 210). Rejection of the modern 'civilizing' impulse in favour of authenticity, and looking to the medieval past for that authenticity, are impulses common to both the pre-Raphaelite movement and contemporary 'gritty' medievalism. Although the pre-Raphaelites did not standardize beauty in the way of eighteenth-century art,

6 See Kaufman (2014).

7 See, e.g., Carretero-Gonzalez (2015, 49–50); Carroll (2018, 9).

8 See, e.g., Poniewozik (2011).

preferring instead to represent their models' features relatively faithfully, they did idealize the Middle Ages as noted above, and a particular type of white female beauty common to their work and that of their followers can be discerned. Pre-Raphaelite women have long hair (variously bound up or unbound) and wear long dresses with a tight-fitting bodice and flowing sleeves and skirts that loosely resemble the *cotehardie* (or *cotte simple*) or the *houppelande* of the late medieval period. Sometimes they are only partially clothed or naked, revealing glimpses or expanses of luminous pale white skin. Like the odalisques of eighteenth-century orientalist art, these women are simultaneously exotic and familiar: they come from a different time if not a different place, are often highly sexualized, and are invariably subject to the masculine gaze of the (assumed) white heterosexual male public.

The pre-Raphaelite artists and their circle were working in a context where the Middle Ages were already established as the source of white racial identity, which, in England, meant Anglo-Saxonism.[9] A key tenet was that chivalry and reverence for women were racial traits of Germanic peoples – the English in particular – a theory expounded by such influential medievalists as Richard Hurd, Thomas Percy, and Thomas Warton in his *The History of English Poetry* (1774–1781). Although the pre-Raphaelites were not especially interested in Anglo-Saxonism *per se*, the cultural and social context in which they produced and circulated their art was deeply steeped in it. In the case of pre-Raphaelite art, with its intense concentration on the bodies of white women and standards of white beauty, 'medievalness' is noticeably gendered and racialized. Iconic works like William Morris's *La Belle Iseult* (1858) and John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851–1852) are today held by the Tate Britain, where they represent not only the aesthetic revival of the Middle Ages in nineteenth-century English art, but where they are safeguarded as icons of English national identity in their own right.

Millais' painting, *The Knight Errant* (1870) – chosen as the cover image for David Matthews' *Medievalism: A Critical History* (2015) – exemplifies the nineteenth century's particular pastiche of violence, chivalry, and whiteness in its visual reconstruction of the medieval past (Figure 1).

Matthews categorizes Millais' painting as a manifestation of the 'romantic' Middle Ages, which, while it 'concedes that […] violence against women exists, […] also proposed that help is at hand in the form of knights, shining armour, and chivalry' (Matthews, 2015, 15). Part of the aesthetic appeal of Millais' work, Matthews' summation suggests, lies beyond its representation of either heroic masculinity or of the naked female form, but is bound up in the message of chivalry itself. A nineteenth-century reviewer offers a more despondent reading of the scene, with places less emphasis on romance and nostalgia, insisting instead on the casual vulnerability of the female victim and the striking modernity of her rescuer:
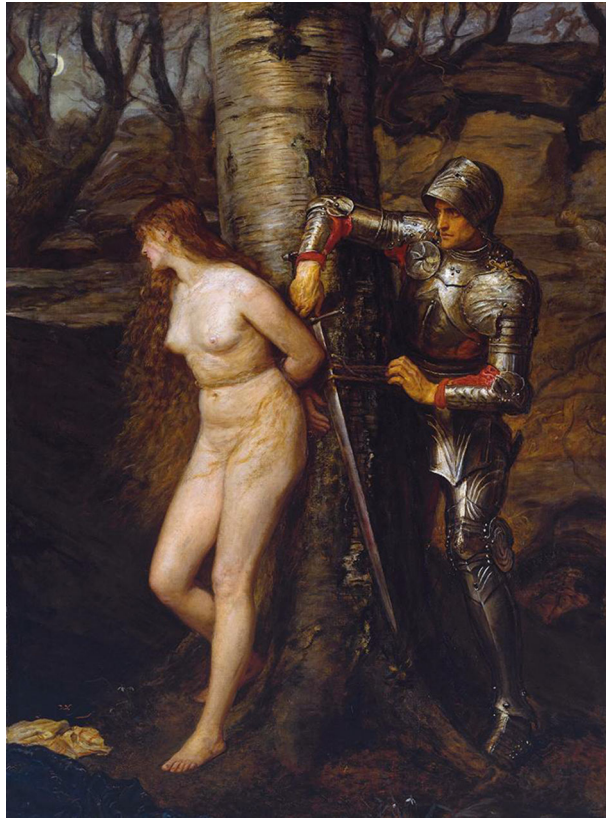
9 See Young (2008).

**Figure 1:** John Everett Millais, *The Knight Errant* (1870). Tate Britain, Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported). https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-the-knight-errant-n01508.

> no attempt has been made to clothe her in the glamour of heroic times. She is simply a lady who has imprudently tried to move from castle to castle with an insufficient escort, who has been robbed and stripped, and only saved from further mistreatment by the advent of a man in iron. (Armstrong, 1893, 22)

Even though her purity has already been compromised – the white woman has brought misfortune on herself by failing to secure an adequate escort – she may still be redeemed by a modern romantic hero. Looking again at the painting, one may notice the insistent whiteness of the chivalric scene. Turned away from the viewer, the woman's strawberry-blonde hair fans out around her white skin. Her cheeks and nipples are tinged pale pink, and several free-flowing strands sweep across her thigh, drawing attention to her nakedness rather than concealing it. The knight himself emerges from the shadows to rescue her, but the silver glints on his armour – especially across the breast plate, shoulder, and down his left leg – echo her own luminescence. Frank Dicksee's *Chivalry* (1885) (Figure 2) drew
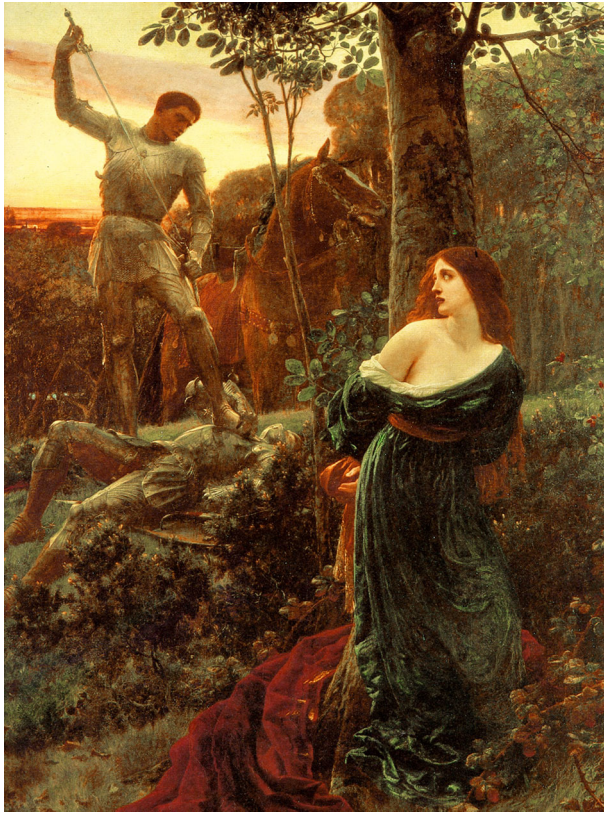
**Figure 2:** Frank Dickee, *Chivalry* (1865). Art Gallery of New South Wales. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

inspiration from Millais' work. Dicksee's female victim is partially clothed, her gown falling away from her shoulder to reveal an expanse of glowing, white skin. The knight triumphantly sheathes his sword in the shadows behind her, its length drawing the viewer's gaze back towards the lady to insist on her place at the aesthetic centre of the work.

The construction of the Middle Ages as white by the pre-Raphaelites was an active process shaped by artists' choices. A number of women of color modeled for pre-Raphaelite artists, but none was ever included in a medievalist painting. Fanny Eaton, born in Jamaica in 1835, is the best known of these women. Eaton began modelling for the pre-Raphaelite circle around 1859, when Frederick Sandys made several preparatory sketches of her face in preparation for his *Morgan le Fay* (c. 1863–1864). Two sketches that remain from this period – one, in the Art Gallery of NSW – 'Study of a Young Mulatto Girl,' (Sandys, c. 1859), and the other in the V&A collection – Study for the Head of Morgan le Fay,' (Sandys, c. 1862). That Sandys may have considered Eaton for the work is

**Figure 3:** Frederick Sandys, *Morgan le Fay* (1863–1864). Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

in itself worth noting. His sketches, which focus on his model's facial features and hair, demonstrate the artist's interest in somatic features which marked Eaton's racial otherness in nineteenth-century Britain. For the oil painting itself, however, Sandys used a Romanian woman known only as 'Keomi' as the model for his Morgan le Fay, preferring her to Eaton as part of his imagined Middle Ages – even as the abject outsider of Arthurian legend. The painting shows a fair-skinned woman, with curling auburn hair, her exoticism suggested instead by the orientalist style of her dress and the objects which are gathered around her (Figure 3).

Having been rejected as a model for exotic 'otherness' in the British Middle Ages, Eaton's modelling career took off in the service of the pre-Raphaelites' particularly orientalist-take on 'realism,' and her image featured especially in the margins of canvases illustrating biblical narratives. Eaton's portrait first went on

**Figure 4:** Simeon Soloman, *The Mother of Moses* (c. 1860). Delaware Art Museum. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

public display in Simeon Solomon's painting *Mother of Moses* (1860) (Figure 4), but she also modelled for Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais.

In Rosetti's *The Beloved* (1865-6), Eaton appears as a bridesmaid, her face mostly obscured by the auburn-haired, fair-skinned bride at the centre of the image (Figure 5). Eaton also sat for Millais's 1867 painting, *Jephthah*, in which she appears on the far right-hand side of the scene, her hair partly veiled by a yellow hood. Yet even in this image, white women dominate the canvas, with women of color appearing only in marginal, scene-setting spaces (Figure 6).

The pre-Raphaelite's biblical scenes followed patterns of eighteenth-century orientalist art which constructed and centred white womanhood as the pinnacle of human beauty (Dyer, 1997, 72–3). Where the emphasis of the pre-Raphaelite circle on a kind of historical 'authenticity' saw women of color included, albeit marginally, in paintings on eastern and biblical narratives, it precluded them from medievalist works entirely.

In nineteenth-century England, public showings of art by the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and mass reproduction of themed engravings produced – for the first time – a popular conception of medievalist aesthetics. Over the latter half of
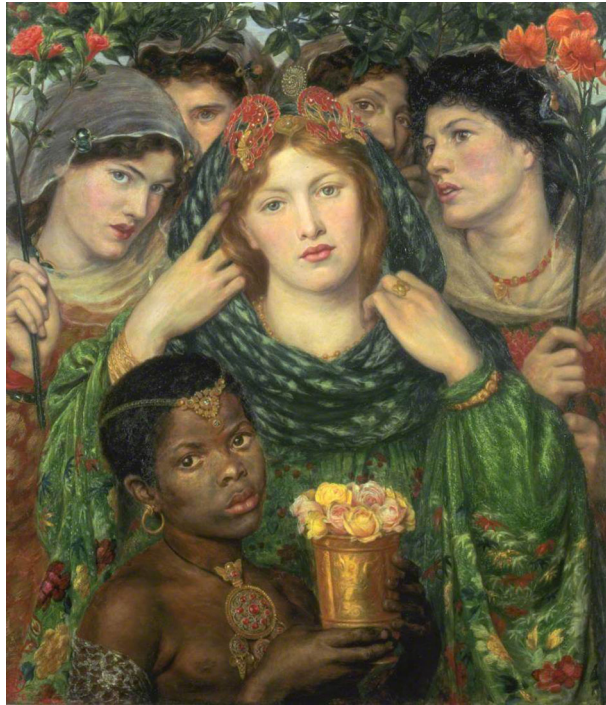
**Figure 5:** Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Beloved ('The Bride')*, (1865-6). Tate Britain, Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported). https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-the-beloved-the-bride-n03053.



**Figure 6:** John Everett Millais, *Jephthah* (1867). National Museum Wales. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

the century, these contributed to the creation of an instantly recognisable and highly commercial visual program of the Middle Ages in which narrative works from both past and present were strongly implicated. The 1857 edition of the collected works of the first English poet laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, for example, published by Edward Moxon, was accompanied with a series of pre-Raphaelite engravings. Both the collection and the engravings proved highly popular, pairing textual and visual representations of 'medievalness,' and making them available on a still larger scale of production and consumption than public displays of art alone. The mass reproduction and consumption of pre-Raphaelite medievalist imagery of white womanhood rendered their aesthetics and the ideological positioning encoded in them foundational to the contemporary popular imagination.

Although HBO's *Game of Thrones* claims to represent the 'real' Middle Ages, it is a profoundly neomedievalist text,[10] its 'reality' filtered by centuries of accreted representation. Like much contemporary cinematic and televisual media, we can trace its familiar aesthetic models for medieval women back to the nineteenth century, and to pre-Raphaelite art in particular. In popular televisual cultures, medieval women tend to have long hair, which may be free-flowing or only partially bound; they are either richly costumed in dresses with tight bodices and flowing skirts, or naked; and they are often – as in Millais' painting – luminously white. Catelyn and Sansa Stark, Margery Tyrell, and (at least in the earlier seasons 1 through 5) Cersei Lannister are all examples of this. It may also be worth observing that, like Guinevere, Iseult, Ophelia, and other pre-Raphaelite subjects, these women are all aristocratic. When women of color are present on the contemporary medievalist screen they tend – with few exceptions – to be narratively marginal, supporting characters who are at best peripheral in pseudo-European realms such as Westeros: Missandei in *Game of Thrones* is a case in point (H. Young, 2017).

As an exception to this pattern, the women of Dorne serve to highlight the repetitive nature of the HBO's series' racialized design. They are represented through a profoundly orientalized aesthetic, typically dressed in either flowing diaphanous robes or 'sexy' leather warrior's garb; have much shorter, darker hair than their northern Westerosi counterparts; and have olive skin. Dorne is one of the seven kingdoms of Westeros and was, like the rest of the continent, settled by the First Men who were later conquered by the Andals. The history of Dorne, however, includes the coming of a third people: the Essossi, followers of the warrior queen Nymeria, who 'led a fleet of ten thousand ships across the Narrow Sea' and burned them behind her, making Dorne not only her home but that of her numerous followers ('Dorne,' 2015). The women of Dorne are aesthetically different onscreen because they are racially different in Martin, Benioff, and Weiss's fiction.

10 See Carroll (2018); Young 2015a (chapter 3).

The ancient history that Martin created for Westeros draws on the history and historiography of Europe, and of England in particular, with its multiple waves of migration (Carroll 2017); both are strongly racialized. In the waves of conquest of Westeros we can discern Celts, Saxons, and Normans. But it is worth noting that by the time the pre-Raphaelites were painting, those 'intra-white' peoples were considered by some, including and influentially Sir Walter Scott (at least when it was politically convenient), to have been welded together into one 'English' ethnicity by about the fourteenth century (Scott, 1823) – just prior to the Wars of the Roses, which Martin cites as the inspiration for Westerosi wars of his novels and *Game of Thrones*. In the 'history' and medievalist modernity of contemporary Dorne we see crystallized on screen, in the bodies of its exoticized women, the popular legacies of eighteenth-century race theory and nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxonism. The Germanic peoples of north-western Europe – particularly Scandinavia and England – were believed to be more racially pure (and therefore also more culturally pure) than their southern and eastern counterparts who were more closely in contact with non-white races (R. J. C. Young, 2008, 57). It is just plausible to read Nymeria's invasion and settlement of Dorne in the light of the Moorish conquest of Spain: Martin has variously stated that 'Dorne was inspired by Moorish Spain, Palestine, and Wales' – all of which were either marginally white or orientalized spaces in nineteenth-century thought, including that of the pre-Raphaelites. *Game of Thrones*' racial geography mirrors that which had been theorized in the nineteenth century: the show's 'north' is more racially pure and white than its 'south.'

Medievalist expectations of white female beauty are applied only to female characters coded as white women in Westeros and are particularly marked in the visual medium of *Game of Thrones*. Both popular and academic criticism has highlighted the dramatic and pronounced whiteness of show's most popular heroine, Daenerys Targaryan. Daenerys is played by British actress Emilia Clarke, whose costuming includes a long, platinum-coloured wig. At an earlier narrative point in Martin's books – which the television series has now passed – Daenerys' signature hair is burnt off; not so the heroine of the screen. Cersei's short hair requires commentary from the show's audience precisely *because* it previously conformed to standards of beauty established by both medievalist aesthetics and by the white racial frame. For Brienne, Arya, and Yara, short or shorter hair is less troubling than it would be on more familiar, aristocratic medievalist women, like Cersei and Daenaerys. In combination with 'masculine' attire, their hairstyles are readily understood by 21st-century viewers from the outset as markers of each character's deviation from heterosexual and gendered norms of more traditional medievalism.

These characters bring depth and complexity to the representation of women in *Game of Thrones* because they are departures from the conventions of medievalist fantasy (Carroll, 2018, 64); their short hair is a sign of that

difference. Similarly, the chin-length bob worn consistently by Missandei (Nathalie Emmanuel) and the cropped, curly styles favoured by Ellaria Sand (Indira Varma) are not justified by the narrative yet attract no commentary at all from audiences; both women are exoticized and racially othered so are not required (or permitted) to conform to medievalist white standards of beauty. In other words, while for the show's white women, shorter or shortened hair is a marker of motive, signalling their deviation from a pattern of normative female behaviour, for women of color, it is only a marker of racial difference. The visual aesthetic established by the show for women of color allows them to sport different (arguably more 'exotic') hairstyles without any sense of narrative codification or need for commentary – presumably because they are perceived as existing outside the cultural and aesthetic norms of Westeros already. On these female characters, short hair represents exoticism itself.

Endogamous reproduction and heterosexual desire are fundamental to formations of whiteness because racial 'purity' depends on them. Knox's comment, quoted above, that women are most beautiful to the 'corresponding minds of her race' illustrates this. Depiction of sexual desire is so notable a feature of pre-Raphaelite art and *Game of Thrones* alike that it might be said – alongside whiteness – to define the medievalism of both. *Game of Thrones* has represented male-male and female-female desire only passingly, while heterosexual desire is a driving narrative force as well as a regular feature on screens. Richard Dyer shows, in his reading of modern representations of white heterosexual couples – 'the bearers of race' as he puts it – that in twentieth-century film 'there is a persistent differentiation between men and women in terms of light [.…] [H]is clothes are more sombre, his fair body is more covered, what is visible of his flesh is darker, light falls less fully on him' (Dyer, 1997, 131). The lighting 'constructs the relationship between them,' while the male partner 'yearns towards the pure light of desirability' (Dyer, 1997, 134–5). The white male desires the white female, who is both symbolic of and the keeper of racial purity in a visual representation of Knox's endogamous desire. Although he does not mention the pre-Raphaelites in particular, Dyer suggests that this pattern of representation owes much nineteenth-century art from northern Europe, and to Victorian ideas about white female purity (Dyer, 1997, 117–30).[11]

Millais' *The Knight Errant* offers a striking example of how pre-Raphaelite production typically depicts heterosexual couples in ways which conform to the pattern Dyer identifies. Although the woman is fully clothed, her face, hands and feet 'glow' white and are fully lit from above, while the man's face is almost completely in shadow as he leans down to her and his hands are a distinctly darker shade (Dyer, 1997, 122). Other examples include but are far from limited to Rossetti's *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (1855) and drawings *la Belle Dame sans Merci* (1848) and *Lancelot in the Queen's Chamber* (1857); John William Waterhouse's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1893) demonstrates the persistence of

11 It is worth noting that this pattern of lighting cannot be discerned in images of heterosexual couples from the eighteenth century. These are relatively rare outside the realms of family portraiture and do not tend to represent sexual desire openly, even if the offspring born of endogamous reproduction are typically included.

lighting the female heterosexual subject in this way. Locating heterosexual desire in the Middle Ages through the encounters of white men and women as 'bearers of race' taps into nineteenth-century ethnonational medievalism by gesturing to motherhood and origins.

The screen habit of lighting white heterosexual couples identified by Dyer can be discerned in numerous scenes and pairings in *Game of Thrones* but is nowhere more visible than for the recent coupling of Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen. His dark hair and the black of the Night's Watch – which he does not shed even in the semi-tropical climes of Dragonstone – contrast vividly with her pale skin and white hair. Given that the pairing of the last two surviving Targaryens (even if one is unaware of his ancestry) is currently touted by critics and fans alike as that which is most likely to save Westeros – and the world – from the coming Winter, the visual construction of their mutual desire as specifically white and endogamous is significant. When they stand together in the great hall of Dragonstone, the sun falls directly on her face from the hall's high windows while his remains in shadow. This is a typical example of the lightening and brightening of the white screen heroine in contrast with that of her (white) male love-interest.

The lighting of Cersei Lannister in sex scenes with her twin brother, Jaime, however, has shifted away from Dyer's model in more recent seasons of the series. In 'The Queen's Justice,' Season 7, Episode 3, for example, a short sex scene is filmed almost entirely in darkness, with only a brief flash of light on Jaime's pale skin. By this point in the narrative of the show Cersei and Jaime are no longer the 'bearers of race' – all their children are dead and their union has no future; four episodes later Jaime abandons his sister and rides north. With her close-cropped hair Cersei no longer conforms to the pre-Raphaelite beauty standard, and in this scene his skin glows much more brightly than her own. The closing off of political and personal futures is signalled by the literal descent of their union into shadows, which shifts their relationship finally and completely out of the lineage of visual-coded white racial medievalisms.

The most recent seasons of *Game of Thrones* sparked something of an online obsession with the ways in which the appearances of various other characters – mostly female – have evolved. As season 7 went to air, *Harper's Bazaar* published a spread of the '45 most stunning looks from Game of Thrones' (Gonzales, 2017). These overwhelmingly portray images of white women with long, flowing hair: the exceptions are two portraits of Daenerys's handmaiden Missandei (in one image she accompanies Daenerys), and one each of mother and daughter Ellaria and Tyene Sand in Season 5 (Ellaria is shown giving a kiss of death to Cersei's daughter, Marcella Baratheon – contrastingly blond and long-haired). Of the show's short-haired white women, there are portraits of Cersei from Season 6, and one of Brienne in Season 5. It is perhaps no surprise that of the remaining portraits in the *Harper's* spread, nearly half depict Daenerys. It seems that the more the HBO series seeks to demonstrate

aesthetically the distance its characters have travelled, the more it continues to insist on the cultural primacy – and the potential triumph – of the white medievalist maiden and her pre-Raphaelite ancestors.

*Game of Thrones* presents a simulacrum of white heterosexual femininity which, like all neomedievalisms, has no historical referent in the Middle Ages itself. Like whiteness, the signifier is without a signified, but is no less powerful for it (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000, 8). Orientalism, reified in the bodies of the not-quite-white (and now dead) Sand Snakes, produces the borders of the conventionally white medieval space of Westeros. The representation of white heterosexual women on contemporary screens is both a legacy of nineteenth-century medievalism and pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, and a symbol of the logic of whiteness which is endemic to it. Whiteness insists on its own continuity, refusing to engage with its own cultural contingency; race 'is not malleable' (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000, 5). The presence of pre-Raphaelite 'types' in the gritty world of Westeros frames the medieval past as both literally and symbolically white and reinforces the concept of racial continuity by making it visible. The claim that HBO's *Game of Thrones* represents the 'real' or authentic Middle Ages and rejects the idealized chivalric medievalism of the Victorian era – for which Disney is metonymic in Martin's parlance – bolsters this by constructing its particular formation of Pre-Raphaelite-inflected white heterosexual woman-hood so as to appear natural and unchanging, making nineteenth-century medievalism itself as a measure of the 'real' Middle Ages in modern visual forms.

*Game of Thrones* builds on centuries of western culture that constructs the European Middle Ages as 'white' territory centred on the north and west of the continent. As Feagin points out, white racial frames are built and rebuilt over centuries. It is neither a coincidence nor a reflection of neutral historical fact that in the contemporary popular historical imagination the European Middle Ages are by and large represented as 'white space.' They are understood that way because we have been taught to understand them that way in the postmedieval era, allowing them both to produce and reproduce idealized but fictitious 'sources' of white supremacy in global racial hierarchies. Mass reproduction of pre-Raphaelite art, and the influence of their aesthetics on visual forms of popular culture medievalisms in the post-Victorian era, played a significant role in that process of visually white-washing the Middle Ages.

## About the Authors

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