Capstone Prospectus

Introduction

My ultimate project will centralize around my research object, *Game of Thrones*. The televised fantasy-drama series employs modern and relevant social issues and moral trajectories in order to instill a sense of familiarity and topical relatability within its audience. Throughout my final project, I will argue how the fantasy genre as a whole does this effectively, decisively, and deliberately. However, I also intend on narrowing in on how *Game of Thrones* in particular manages to incorporate a wide spectrum of these themes throughout its on-screen narrative. While I will argue how other book-to-film series such as *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* willfully address areas of social and cultural contention by rooting such topics in allegorical fantasy, I will provide evidence from the television series to demonstrate how *Game of Thrones* thoroughly remarks upon a broader range of subjects. Controversial or exceptionally topical issues such as feminism, immigration policy, disability-based discrimination, nepotism, and primogeniture will permeate my analysis of this phenomenon. I will argue that this wide spectrum of social controversies by virtue addresses a broader audience with variously specific, yet similar concerns. Ultimately, these topics being able to resonate with a vast viewership allows for and calls for intensive engagement in both the show *and* the aforementioned areas of concern.
As I research how these topics are demonstrated and interwoven throughout the show, several questions arise as pertinent considerations. For instance, in order to thoroughly present and discuss how these issues are presented in the show, how much backstory, plot, or development of certain character arcs should I deem relevant in my presentation? Beyond a brief descriptions of secondary characters, how much of their identities (if any) is either relevant and/or important? Secondly, I will study how my hypotheses surrounding *Game of Thrones* have developed over the course of this project, and why that might be significant. For instance, initially, I surmised that the fantasy genre in general was particularly adept in reflecting prominent social issues to its modern audiences. However, while I do still find this to be both true and considerably relevant to my article, I believe *Game of Thrones* actually offers both a wider range of topical controversies as well as a more thorough expression of them throughout the show, as demonstrated through several characters and secondary plotlines. How can I use this evolution in my analysis as evidence (or perhaps just support) to my theories and ultimate research question? Additionally, does the relative modernity of the show (though adapted from a book written nearly concurrently with J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series) give way to this seemingly politically-inclined subgenre of fantasy? Is this tendency to remark on prominent social issues actually a characteristic of a subgenre of fantasy, or is this, as I initially hypothesized, a trademark or accessibility of all [or the majority of] fantasy works in general? Lastly, when choosing specific scenes that demonstrate this phenomenon, should I choose one scene for each aforementioned topic, or should certain scenes overlap in the topics they address? Should I choose scenes based on the relevancy of the issues portrayed within them, or should I choose scenes based on their ability to reflect such issues clearly? While I anticipate choosing
several of the scenes based off the amount of scholarship that could pertain to them, I do look forward to selecting one or two that may require new, unprecedented analysis.

**Literature Review**

Cathleen Cerny’s article, “Television’s ‘Crazy Lady’ Trope: Female Psychopathic Traits, teaching, and Influence of Popular Culture,” studies and demonstrates how young women view female characters on-screen as virtual role models, teachers, and mentors. This study also clarifies how men perceive male characters much less acutely, as they tend to view digital narratives as entertainment-based stories, rather than instructional or guiding anecdotes. While the article’s main focus is pointed more toward identifying the potentially detrimental “psychotic female” trope in modern media, Cerny’s work will provide evidence regarding [at least] female viewership’s intrinsic dedication to seeking out relatability and perspective in televised narratives.

More specifically, several scholars have sought out to analyze what makes the fantasy genre so informative in gauging and comprehending real world problems. In their article, “Lessons from Westeros: Gender and Power in Game of Thrones,” William Clapton and Laura Shepherd assess how televised fantasy in particular teaches memorable and applicable real-world lessons. Throughout their article, the authors highlight metaphors or fables presented as moral-building narratives, as they consider how these lessons could be considered meritable, real-world political and social strategies. Conversely, in her chapter, “I’m Not Going to Fight Them: Sexist Liberalism and Gender (A)Politics in Game of Thrones.” Elin Sandqvist asks how *Game of Thrones* is regarded so highly when it broadcasts a great deal violence and sex. Sandqvist ultimately attributes the show’s success to the virtue of fantasy to make its viewers
reconsider the world they live in. She writes, “[George R. R.] Martin’s fantasy *speaks to us* because it is a poignant social commentary grounded in sexual/sexist, economic, cultural, and political conditions” (Sandqvist, 1196). John Timmerman affirms this in his own book, *Other Worlds: the Fantasy Genre*, as he describes the purpose of fantasy. He writes, “It permits us a certain distance from pragmatic affairs and offers us a far clearer insight into them” (Timmerman, 1). These three sources will allow me to characterize fantasy as a unique genre through its capability to both isolate and attract audiences into an environment of critical and cultural understanding.

Sara Day’s review of a study conducted by Veronica L. Schanoes entitled, “Fairy Tales, Myth, and Psychoanalytic Theory: Feminism and Retelling the Tale by Veronica L. Schanoes” illustrates how fantasy, fairy tales, and myths similarly construct worlds that are distinctly similar to our own. A quote in Chapter 5, “Double Vision: Women and Fantasy,” states, “...fantasy’s illusion of another world, identical and yet opposite to ours, creates a space for expressing lived experiences of women and envisioning the feminist change necessary to improve those experiences” (Day, 114). This phenomenon, which Schanoes dubs as “narrative doubling,” is an integral component of my topic, and a recurring aspect of *Game of Thrones* (Day, 115). This text’s analysis of feminism in the fantasy and supernatural fictional genres will allow me to build off of Cerny’s feminism-in-film perspective, while studying how feminists seek out problematic or contentious aspects of media in order to analyze their own environments. I will build my argument that the fantasy genre enables and encourages this based off of several of these findings in this article.
Colleen Donnelly’s article, “Re-Visioning Negative Archetypes of Disability and Deformity in Fantasy: Wicked, Maleficent, and Game of Thrones” speaks to two different arguments within my project. First, Donnelly supports the claim I made in my Context/Description paper that Game of Thrones offers a unique alteration of traditional fantasy by providing a great deal of perspective surrounding its villainous and most formidable characters. In order to tie this into the greater argument within my paper, I could argue that this additional perspective affords a more realistic lens through which audiences view the show. Additionally, Donnelly touches on the traditional archetypes within the fantasy genre revolving around disability and handicapped characters. This also ties into my argument about the show making strong efforts to touch upon modern politics and social concerns. Throughout Game of Thrones, for instance, Tyrion, a dwarf, consistently acknowledges and jokes about his own “shortcomings,” as he refers to it. Through allowing this character to break the fourth wall in this way, or at least shatter the traditional stereotypes that the disabled are miserly, naive, or simply unintelligent, the show is remarking upon controversial social norms by destroying and deconstructing them.

Following topics surrounding disability, religion plays a grand role in several of the major controversies over the course of the Game of Thrones plot, particularly throughout its later seasons. In his article, “Coexistence and Conflict in the Religions of Game of Thrones,” Daniel Clasby describes the importance of the apparent cross-religious contact amongst the fictitious country of Westeros within the television series. He notes that, opposed to a traditionally dueling duo of mainstream religions (such as Christianity vs. Judaism), the wide range of diversity and origin amongst the people of Westeros has apparently led to a state of religious coexistence,
more or less. While several scandals do occur in the show revolving around variations of religion, Clasby’s more optimistic observation regarding the topic demonstrates how the fantasy genre serves as somewhat of a virtual escape from notably contentious social topics.

The topic is feminism is another social concern addressed frequently throughout the show. In fact, the majority of surrounding Game of Thrones either touches on or centers this subject as its forefront. Debra Ferreday’s article, “Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom” argues that the show actually employs anti-feminist themes throughout some of its episodes, particularly in scenes containing rape or violence against women. Similarly, Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik’s introduction to their book, Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements, views Game of Thrones, “...as feminist and anti-feminist, as subversive and repressive...[utilizing women] as tools for ‘sexploitation’” (Schubart, Gjelsvik, 1955).

Valerie Franken’s book, Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance, however, asserts that there are actually more strong-willed, capable female characters than male, and that seemingly helpless, damsel-in-distress kinds of characters can be written off as “products of their historical era,” referring to the medieval period upon which the show is seemingly based (Franken, 1). Elyce Helford’s book, Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television seeks to explain how feminism in fantasy came about, describing the earliest cases of such phenomena, such as Bewitched and I Dream of Jeannie. Seeking to appeal to a wider demographic than suburban housewives without losing viewership, broadcasters in the 1960s and ‘70s created independent female protagonists who worked outside the home, yet could be “read as symbolic articulations of women’s aspirations for respects in
roles other than wife and mother” (Helford, 2). This background is incredible pertinent to my project, as it describes the introduction of feminism to fantasy as an escape from modern life, yet a simultaneous reflection of potential.

Several scholars have also centralized their work around the feminist aspects (or lack thereof) in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and the eight adapted films. In her article, "J.K. Rowling's Ambivalence Towards Feminism: House Elves--Women in Disguise--in the 'Harry Potter' Books," Rivka Kellner asserts that the fantastical, magical world of Harry Potter was likely modeled after, or at least highly resembles, Western capitalist society. Kellner argues that the lack of a feminist message in this kind of setting - however fictional or fantastical- proves Rowling’s ambivalence toward such social issues. The chapter, “From Sexist to (Sort-of) Feminist: Representations of Gender in the Harry Potter Series” in Elizabeth Heilman’s book, *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter* seems to argue a similar point. Heilman asserts that Harry Potter reaffirms gender stereotypes rather than challenging them, perhaps due to its target audience of children and young adults. While I intend on dedicating a portion of my presentation to describing how other works of fantasy do cover important social concerns, I will also use these articles to prove my hypothesis that contemporaries of *Game of Thrones* fail to cover as many important matters as extensively as the series does.

However, the *Harry Potter* series does serve as an excellent example of transmedia storytelling and the ways in which the fantasy genre enables its narratives to transcend their original form. Katherine Peterlin’s article, “*Harry Potter and the Expanding Narrative: Transmedia Storytelling, Participatory Culture, and the Harry Potter Universe*” explains how this genre is ideal for world-building scenarios, where affiliates of the story can market virtual
escape through different kinds of media. Kristin Thompson explains this further in her article, “Fantasy, Franchises, and Frodo Baggins: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood,” as she analyzes why fantasy stories draw such large fanbases, particularly those willing to engage in the same story on a different platform, or via a different medium. She writes, “Moreover, fantasies lend themselves to a broad range of merchandising, and fantasy fans tend to collect things” (Thompson, 2). This practice is an important part of my argument because it demonstrates fantasy as both a means of escape and a realm that fans desire to combine with their own. In his book, “Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, From A Game of Thrones to A Dance with Drago” James Lowder discusses the process of adapting the original books upon which Game of Thrones is based, into graphic novels, video games, and, of course, the television show.

Beyond Harry Potter, Tolkien's Lord of the Rings novels are also pertinent examples of a base for a widely transmediated text. Helen Young’s book, Fantasy and Science-Fiction Medievalisms: from Isaac Asimov to "A Game of Thrones" explores the backstory of both Tolkien (who is largely thought to be the father of fantasy by other writers within the genre) and fantasy as a whole. Young explores the general plot of Lord of the Rings for those unfamiliar with the novels, which will aid me in exploring the series’ main points of interest and overarching themes. Young has also published an article, “Race in Online Fantasy Fandom: Whiteness On Westeros.org,” which explores the lack of diversity in the Game of Thrones fandom, as well as in Tolkien literature and the later film adaptations. She seeks to make connections between race and fantasy, while also touching upon the importance of transmedia in both Lord of the Rings and Game of Thrones.
Furthermore, while transmedia storytelling is one virtue of the *Game of Thrones*’ success, several scholars still dedicate work to analyzing what made *Game of Thrones* so undeniably popular to begin with. Martin Bleisteiner’s article, “Perils of Generation: Incest, Romance, and the Proliferation of Narrative in Game of Thrones” lays out the general plot the show, while also trying to pinpoint the most attractive elements of the show to its mass audience. Bleisteiner attributes scandal, drama, and taboo romances to its massive success. Henry Jacoby’s book, *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper than Swords* also touches on the background of both the show’s plot and development, while providing insight into the process of adapting the novels in the television series. These sources will allow me to provide my audience with any crucial context they may require before I delve into my analysis about the show’s thematic structure.

**Methodology**

In starting my project, I will seek to define both “genre” and “fantasy” independently. I will create a brief list of contemporaries of George R. R. Martin who have written sizable or considerably popular works of fantasy. This list (and the listed authors’ respective works) will serve as my references of other works of fantasy I intend on analyzing throughout my final paper. The works mentioned in this list will be compared and/or contrasted with *Game of Thrones* in order to demonstrate the novels’ and show’s deviance from and loyalty to its own genre.

I will then compartmentalize the topics which I hypothesize *Game of Thrones* thoroughly addresses throughout its theme and various subplots. These may include but are not limited to religion (as mentioned in the Clasby article), feminism and/or “antifeminism,” disability-related
discrimination (most relevant in the Donnelly article), immigration policies and prejudices, nepotism, and/or primogeniture (which can be related directly to feminism and sexism). I will then find clips or scenes demonstrating each of these themes throughout the show and analyze how these scenes accurately depict modern social concerns while also conveying a sense of escape from such real-world issues through the show’s fantastical nature. I will then assert how the fantasy genre is possibly capable of portraying this unique dualism in a way that historical fiction might not be able to. I will dedicate a portion of my project to describing how fantasy allows for modification of both the past and the potential future, while also providing means or favorable themes for transmediation and adaptation.
Works Cited


Schubart, Rikke, and Anne Gjelsvik. “Introduction.” *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements*, 2016,


