

Cruor omnia rupit vincula: Imagined Warfare in Lucan and Game of Thrones

HBO's *Game of Thrones*, based on George R.R. Martin's series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, took popular culture by storm in the 2010's with its complex fantasy world and exhibition of extreme, if not excessive, sexual and violent content. Its popular reception relied in large part on the so-called 'realism' that Martin and his fans have insisted lies in uncertain outcomes for his characters: as in real life, so they claim, no amount of character development or moral rectitude keeps characters safe from sudden, gruesome deaths (Spanò 2021). By the final season of the show, audiences across the internet vocalized their expectations that the looming battle between armies of the living and (un)dead – a battle foreshadowed from the start of the series – would involve spectacular, important, and shocking deaths. While many vocal fans suggested that the episode was disappointing, it nonetheless represented careful, artistic, deeply disturbing battle effects which I found aesthetically comparable to battles in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. In this paper, I will explore and compare narrative techniques in *Game of Thrones* S08 E03, "The Long Night," (Benioff and Weiss) and Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. This ancient epic has recently been revived from its less-than-Vergilian reputation of the early 1900s (see e.g. Summers 1920), but is still considered excessive, obsessive, even cartoonish, in its depictions of gore and death (Johnson 1987, McClellan 2019). Rather than viewing the narrative techniques as natural outcomes of imagining warfare with a specific set of weapons and technologies, I will demonstrate that the shared techniques (and responses to them) can allow us to pinpoint some shared values and anxieties between Neronian Rome and the contemporary United States.

First and foremost, both sources feature obscure action and viscerally violent imagery. This limits the audience's ability to construct specific individuals as straightforwardly heroic,

and, as many Lucan scholars have pointed out, disrupt the very concept of celebrating heroism (Sklenář 2003, Hömke 2010, Dinter 2012). As in Lucan, in *Game of Thrones*, incredible feats of individual warriors are cast as nearly illegible, both in terms of difficulty of viewing their feats and in terms of attempting moral evaluations. I will also consider pacing: Lucan's conspicuous use of delay which gives way to overcrowded action, finds general parallel in this particular episode of *Game of Thrones*, which, once in motion, continues to build narrative speed and tension throughout. Both narratives imagine battle as happening in fits and spurts, with great suspense building in the meantime. Additionally, the use of sounds adds to the sense of chaos. While in *Game of Thrones*, extreme differentials between loud and quiet add to the sense of impending doom, in the *Bellum Civile*, the noises of war mark scenes of extreme destruction.

Using both theories of reception and narratology, I will ask: based on *how* these stories are told, what is interesting about battle? Whose perspective is most compelling? Why does it matter that modern American television seems to reverberate with the epic techniques of Lucan? Both sources emerge from cultures haunted by discourses of impending systemic collapse, and the aesthetics suggest some discursive parallels. I suggest that despite the different contexts of production for each source, that the similar narrative effects point to similar reimaginings of war as an existential crisis: individual heroism is useless and obscurity plentiful.

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