

Game of Thrones

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue



In my years in academia I observed that the difference between elite and ordinary schools is this: at ordinary institutions, conversations among faculty, administrations and staff might cover politics, or what's on television, or even, wonder of wonders, God; at elite institutions, all anyone wants to talk about is power. Who has the power, or how will X use power, or how will Y development affect the ones who have power, and what is the person in charge going to do about Z? Power is a source of fascination.

The best show on television about who is in charge is the enormously popular *Game of Thrones*, based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice*. The HBO series has just concluded its second season, with a third season scheduled to begin in the fall. This otherworldly, quasi-medieval and decidedly non-Christian story depicts the interaction of several powerful families, each vying for the iron throne—a cathedra built from the melted down swords of past enemies. From this throne, the ruler will have power over seven kingdoms.

King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), a sort of parody of Henry VIII with his boundless appetite for game, women and blood, dies the death that Henry deserved—he is

gored by a boar in a hunting accident. A crisis of succession ensues as members of several families with claims to the throne converge on the capital city of King's Landing.

The show is the latest in a string of medieval sword and scabbard fests, inspired perhaps by Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. (Who knew that the audiences that loved Tolkien wished the *Rings* films had more blood and skin?) Both HBO with *Rome* and Showtime with *The Tudors* and *The Borgias* have hit on lucrative formulas involving mytho-history, British-accented actors and lots of violence and bawdiness. Each show is impressively godless. Though some are set in periods in which the church mattered a great deal in political life, not one character in any of them displays an ounce of piety—or grace.

At times *Thrones* hints at a vague, polytheist religiosity, but it contains no characters equivalent to the hobbits, whose virtue, courage and friendship triumph over violence and hate in *Rings*. (There is a dwarf, Tyrion Lannister, played by the great Peter Dinklage, who is as devoted to his sexual appetites as Frodo is to the Shire.) Nor is there a good and wise wizard like Gandalf. This world has only fierce, unrelenting, violent grabs for power.

My favorite murder scene—and one that haunts my dreams—of the many that are shown is that of Viserys Targaryen (Harry Lloyd). Viserys had given his sister in marriage to a barbarian warlord in exchange for an army that Viserys plans to use to capture the iron throne. His sister, Daenerys (Emilia Clarke), actually falls in love with Khal Drogo (Jason Momoa), her unchosen husband, and resists her brother's plans to use this new alliance. Viserys bullies them until Drogo promises to give him a gold crown so glorious that all who see it will tremble. Drogo melts down a pot of gold jewelry and proceeds to pour it over Viserys's head. Just before the execution, Drogo utters his first words in English, "Crown for king." The message is clear: be careful what you wish for when you seek power.

Thrones does have a hint of the supernatural that promises to blossom in season three: a mysterious plague of "white walkers" is rising, zombielike, from the frozen tundra of the north. As swords head south to contend for King's Landing, one captured slave warns, "All of these swords should be heading north, *north!*" (What swords can accomplish against medieval pagan zombies is unclear.) Another hint of the supernatural comes when Daenerys, now called Khaleesi, queen of the Dothraki, throws herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. She emerges unscathed with

three dragon hatchlings surrounding her, ready to do their queenly mother's will.

Interestingly, for an intentionally un-Christian story, *Thrones* nearly always presents magic as dark magic. In the more intentionally anti-Christian trilogy *His Dark Materials*, by contrast, author Phillip Pullman depicts magic as something delightful. In *Thrones*, spells and supernatural critters are as frightening and malicious as they are in any tale from Christendom.

Thrones works in part because all humans have to interact with power. People either want power themselves or worry about how those who have it will use it. The congregations, denominations, seminaries, universities, boards and agencies that we care about all have leaders that wield power. They set budgets, create visions, hire and fire, invest or decide when to close the doors. Leaders use power wisely, poorly or desperately.

In *Thrones*, Eddard "Ned" Stark (Sean Bean), the "hand of the king," is ordered to murder Khaleesi, lest the child she carries be born and claim the throne one day. A look of resignation crosses Ned's face as he removes his insignia and drops it on the king's desk: "I thought you were a better man," he says. His replacement, Tyrion Lannister, tries in vain to convince the murderous new king not to kill for sport or starve his people as a matter of policy.

We are all familiar with the story of the heroic lone individual who stands up to a corrupt tyrant. But what does a good king, a good wielder of power, look like? *Thrones* is not going to answer that question. It shows the grimness of the rotating wheel of power politics. It is almost the perfect shadow cast by the light of Jesus' kingdom.