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FICTIONAL FOLKLORE: ON THE PAREMIOLOGY OF *A GAME OF THRONES*

Luis J. Tosina Fernández
Universidad de Extremadura, Spain
luistosina@gmail.com

Abstract: In this article, the first work in the fantasy literature series, titled *A Song of Ice and Fire: A Game of Thrones*, by George R. R. Martin will be analyzed in relation to the author's use of proverbs, in order to determine the role that these play in the narration and what their features are. This choice seems appropriate for the analysis of folklore elements, such as proverbs, given the popularity of the series and its presumed contribution to the spread of phraseology.

In the analysis of this text, a rather interesting approach to proverbs emerges, one in which the author makes use of proverbs existing in the real world, as well as creates his own, *ad hoc*, for this literary composition. These occurrences seem particularly interesting and will be analyzed in detail to determine whether they produce the desired effect and whether they follow the expected use of proverbs in real life.

Keywords: *A Game of Thrones*, fiction, fictional folklore, paremiological creativity, paremiology, proverbs

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are ancient pieces of wisdom that have traditionally been handed down orally from generation to generation. This is unquestionably the primary way in which proverbial knowledge has spread for the better part of history. However, in the last few centuries, particularly from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, with the appearance of new modes of communication and media, the diffusion of, and access to, human knowledge has been greatly impacted. This phenomenon has affected all sorts of cultural elements but possibly even more those belonging to folklore as they are no longer reduced to a certain social group or geographical area but, in some cases, have acquired a much larger reach than ever before, contributing to an unprecedented cultural globalization. This applies to multiple cultural manifestations, and paroemias are a clear example of this occurrence. Therefore, the existence of well-known proverbs across different linguistic realities, a well-documented and acknowledged phenomenon that

has been studied by multiple scholars particularly in the context of European languages (see Morvay 1996; Paczolay 2002 [1997]), may lead us to sharing a global set of values that manifest in proverbs of universal application. This affirmation, in spite of its boldness, seems plausible as communication among peoples of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds is more common now than it has ever been. Consequently, whereas for most of our history we could only rely on oral transmission, and later on written texts for the spread of knowledge, nowadays we have a myriad of audiovisual means for the sharing and attainment of knowledge. Some of them, for example literature, films, TV, social media, videogames, etc., have even made a global impact and have contributed to the spread of ideas, supporting Matti Kuusi's thesis that folklore "has become poplore" (1994: 105).

Even though, as stated above, the amount of media nowadays is unprecedented, this study focuses on the most traditional one: literature. However, the popularization of this particular literary piece, *A Game of Thrones* (Martin 2011 [1996]), could have hardly reached the heights it has without the HBO hit series. An example of this is the fact that such relevant personalities as former US President Barack Obama are among the self-proclaimed fans of the series (Simmons 2015). Another piece of evidence of the popularity of the show is the fact that on the day the series finale aired, Sunday May 19, 2019, 19.3 million people watched it on the platforms provided by HBO (Pallotta2019), which is indicative of how influential the series has become over the years. Yet, the book saga is not necessarily overshadowed by the popularity of the TV adaptation, as the over 90 million copies sold as of 2019 demonstrates (Barnett 2019).

In this paper, the use of proverbs in the first book of the series will be analyzed in order to determine the purpose they fulfill and how they contribute to making the narrative more solid, as well as creating such a well-thought-out universe of fantasy. Furthermore, the reason for the choice of this particular work lies in the realization of the clever use that the author makes of phraseology in general, often adapting existing idiomatic expressions to the reality of Westeros, the imaginary land where the action takes place, and paremiology in particular. In reading this work, one often comes across phrases that have a proverbial sound to them but which are not recognized as such by any authoritative reference work. Yet, it must be pointed out that this is not intended to be a collection of all the proverbs used in the book. Examples that are particularly enlightening will be analyzed in relation to the scope of the present work.

This creativity, together with its unprecedented popularity that causes fans to use expressions or vocabulary from the saga and even name their children after some of the most popular characters, makes the series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as it is often referred to, possibly one of the most culturally influential

works in the last few decades and one that might have an impact on the proverbial lore of the English language and, by extension, on other languages in the world.

DETERMINING WHETHER SOMETHING IS A PROVERB

Throughout George R. R. Martin's books, even though I will focus exclusively on the first book for the sake of concision, many of the contributions of several of the hundreds of characters presented in each volume have a certain proverbial tone to them, which often sets off the radar of those who may approach any text with a certain degree of paremiological sensitivity. However, determining whether a certain expression is indeed a proverb is no easy task, as any paremiologist or paremiographer knows. The definition of proverb has quite blurry boundaries, which often become blurrier when comparing items across different phraseological categories. This is worsened by the fact that every scholar that has dealt with the issue has provided his or her own definition, all of which may agree on the main defining aspects but which also present diverging features that prevent a consensus for a universally agreed – upon definition of the proverb. Some of the most frequently cited defining characteristics of proverbs are their brevity, anonymous origin, syntactical independence, fixed and memorizable structure, dogmatism, aesthetical inclination, or figurative use, among others.[1] Yet, not every scholar cites the same ones and there may be discrepancies among their definitions. Moreover, the common practice of including items in a dictionary of proverbs that are not strictly paroemias and should be considered a different phraseological category also makes matters worse, often misleading the reader into believing that something is a proverb when, strictly speaking, it is not.

Bearing all of this in mind, different measures have been taken to isolate items that can be unquestionably considered proverbs. This has meant the omission of items that may come across as proverbs, but which do not meet all the requirements. As the intention of this paper is not to reevaluate the definition of a proverb or present a new one, only those items that meet all the requirements will be presented.

The easiest cases are those in which the narrator or the different characters identify their utterance as a proverb. These cases are not numerous, but there are some instances in which this happens, like the following:

1. "You know the saying, about the king and his Hand?" Ned knew the saying. "What the king dreams," he said, "the Hand builds." (Martin 2011 [1996]: 47)
2. "Dark wings, dark words," Ned murmured. It was a proverb Old Nan had taught him as a boy. (ibid.: 254)
3. *Dark wings, dark words*, Old Nan always said, and of late the messenger ravens had been proving the truth of the proverb. (ibid.: 399)

These are the three cases in which the author identifies an expression as a proverb and, remarkably, two of those cases correspond to the same proverb, "Dark wings, dark words".[2] Unsurprisingly, though, when one resorts to a dictionary to check whether those are indeed proverbs, there is no mention of either of them in any of the most relevant reference works in the matter. This means, therefore, that they are a creation of the author, who by doing so reaches a further level of linguistic complexity. The creator has taken into consideration even seemingly minor aspects of the text, in order to present a believable universe.

It is also true that quite often the person who uses a proverb includes a sort of introduction to it, which, on the one hand, helps identify it as a proverb and, on the other, reinforces the sententiousness associated with them. In the words of Wolfgang Mieder (2004: 132), "proverbs often are quoted with such introductory formulas as 'my grandfather used to say,' 'it is true that,' 'everybody knows that,' and even more directly 'the proverb says'." An example of this is when Lord Varys states,

4. And yet, it is truly said that blood runs truer than oaths. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 549)

Once a phrase has been identified as a proverb, we can see how it presents characteristics that are commonly attributed to paroemias. In this regard, all proverbs do not follow a pre-established structure. However, there are indeed structures that have a certain proverbial resonance to them or which manifest in multiple proverbs. An example of this is the preference for an impersonal construction introduced by a clause with 'it' as the subject. The reason for this preference might be to make the scope of application of a proverb wider, thus making it more general and reinforcing its figurative aspect and sententiousness. Examples of such proverbs found in the book are:

5. It is no good hammering your sword into a plowshare if you must forge it again on the morrow. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 591)
6. It's a poor wine merchant who drinks up his own wares. (ibid.: 795)

As stated in the introduction to this paper, and as the items of folklore they are, proverbs are expected to spread by word of mouth. Thus, we may learn a proverb that someone utters in conversation and add it to our own collection, thereby furthering our own paremiological competence (Sevilla Muñoz & Díaz 1997). This is indeed observed in the book in a number of significant instances. On the one hand, the proverb "Dark wings, dark words", as seen at the beginning of this section, is used by various characters throughout the book. The first character to use it is Eddard Stark on page 254, repeating it later on page 480. Additionally, the narrator uses it on page 399 and Maester Aemon, an intellectual and healer, on page 664. Therefore, the fact that different characters express the same idea in the exact same terms is indicative of a fossilized item and, hence, susceptible to being a proverb or other type of phraseological unit.

Another remarkable example of such an occurrence has to do with an item that includes the very title of the book under analysis: "If you play the game of thrones, you win or you die" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 488, 509, 629). This item, unlike the previous one, is not identified as a proverb anywhere in the book, but several reasons justify its inclusion here. If we take a look at the definition of the proverb provided by the most relevant paremiologist in the world, Wolfgang Mieder (1996: 597), we learn that proverbs are "concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk. More elaborately stated, proverbs are short, generally known sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorizable form and that are handed down from generation to generation".

According to this definition, nothing seems to prevent its inclusion in the catalogue of Westerosi proverbs. Moreover, the fact that it is repeated several times in the book by different characters literally, or by allusion to it, alluded to directly (Cersei, pp. 488, 629; Narrator, p. 509) or indirectly (Ser Stevron Frey, p. 794), seems to justify its consideration as a proverb here. All the other conditions proposed by Mieder, i.e., apparent truth, currency, elaborateness, shortness, wisdom/truth/morals/traditional views, fixed and memorizable form, are met by the utterance.

However, there is another characteristic of proverbs that is not included in Mieder's definition: the possibility of them being modified at different levels, despite their fixed character. Continuing with the previous example, this modification of proverbs appears in Maester Aemons' use of it, when he states, "My ravens would bring the news from the south, words darker than their wings" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 664), in clear allusion to the paroemia mentioned above.

Another occurrence of this phenomenon is to be found earlier in the book, when, on page 47, King Robert Baratheon is visiting Winterfell with all his entourage and at a dinner he asks Eddard Stark, who Robert wants to become

his main advisor or "Hand", if he knows "the saying, about the king and his Hand". To which Eddard, or Ned, replies that he indeed does, the proverb being "What the king dreams, the Hand builds". The conversation goes on and Robert explains how he once met a fishmaid who knew a different wording for the proverb: "The king eats, and the Hand takes the shit," which is accompanied in Robert's account of the episode by one of those introductory formulae mentioned earlier, "they say".[3] Thus, despite the difficulties that arise when assessing whether an utterance is a proverb, it is possible to find certain clues, like the addition of an introductory formula, which point towards it indeed being a proverb.

Apart from proverbs, G. R. R. Martin shows great craftsmanship when including other sorts of phraseologisms, many of which are the fruit of his imagination, creating an item that makes perfect sense in the context in which the action takes place. He achieves this by including references to entities that only exist in that world, such as animals, e.g., "to be stubborn as an auroch" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 352); occupations or pastimes, e.g., "to take the black" (ibid.: 66, 91, 262, 268, 561, 635, 726); or addressing beliefs and values of the peoples that inhabit Westeros, e.g., "seven hells" (ibid.: 156, 188, 258, 307, 342, 412, 555, 689).[4] Martin is equally detailed in the proverbs he includes. This is perfectly consistent with the notions of Matti Kuusi, one of the fathers of modern paremiology and one of the most remarkable folklorists of the last century, about the creation of proverbs, explaining how "[t]he composer of a proverbial saying naturally derives his symbolic images in part from his close everyday surroundings. But almost as important a source is the imagery of earlier proverbs; one could almost say that the folk aphorist saw his everyday surroundings through the window of traditional symbology" (Kuusi 1994: 142).

Among the proverbs found in this book, three distinctions can be made: first, we find real life proverbs that can be found in any well-known dictionary of proverbs; then there is a second group – that of real life proverbs that have been modified and adapted to the reality of Westeros; and finally, there are new proverbs that have been created by the author expressly to endow his fantasy world with a richer linguistic reality and what is referred to as 'fictional folklore' in the title of this paper. It is this last group that provides the most interesting insight into the author's creative process.

REAL LIFE PROVERBS FOUND IN *A GAME OF THRONES*

Finding proverbs in any work of literature would hardly surprise anyone. Depending on the author's fondness of proverbs and his or her paremiological competence, one might find them in varying amounts, depending on the piece under scrutiny. As might be expected at this point, G. R. R. Martin seems to indeed be quite fond of proverbs and uses them quite profusely. In this regard, even though the main point of this work is to analyze the new and creative uses of proverbs, we cannot overlook those everyday paroemias which exist in real life and which we would expect to find in any reference book.

The number of proverbs found in the book is vast. This is so not only due to Martin's supposed liking of proverbs, but also because the book itself is quite long, at around 800 pages. Consequently, listing all the proverbs included in the book would be tedious and would hardly make a contribution to paremiology. Nevertheless, completely omitting them is also not practical and, for this reason, a handful of examples will be provided to illustrate the kinds of proverbs that may be apt for use both in our universe and in the fantasy world created and portrayed by Martin:

7. Wisdom oft comes from the mouths of babes. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 626; Speake 2008 [1982]: 218)[5]
8. They taught me that each man has a role to play, in life as well as mummery. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 633; Wilson 1970: 918)
9. For fifteen years I protected him from his enemies, but I could not protect him from his friends. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 634; Wilson 1970: 176)
10. Expect nothing of Walder Frey, and you will never be surprised. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 639; Wilson 1970: 66)
11. Four eyes might see better than two. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 764; Speake 2008 [1982]: 123)

The first example is a canonical use of the well-known proverb "out of the mouths of babes", which means that children oftentimes provide insight into a matter despite their presumed lack of knowledge or boldness.

In the second example, Lord Varys, the Master of Whisperers in Kings Landing, makes an allusion to the proverb, "This world is a stage and every man plays his part". The same character makes another allusion to yet another fairly well-known proverb on page 634 in allusion to the proverb, "God defend me from my friends; from my enemies I can defend myself".

Catelyn Stark, Eddard's wife, advises her son Robb on page 639: "Expect nothing of Walder Frey and you will never be surprised", in clear allusion to the

proverb "Blessed is he who expects nothing for he shall never be disappointed". In this case the first part of the proverb as included in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* has been omitted. Yet, this does not prevent the inclusion of this passage in this section for two reasons. On the one hand, it is widely accepted that any item of folklore may manifest in slightly different ways, given their primarily oral inclination, which often causes them to be misreproduced or transmitted with small differences. According to Alan Dundes (2007: 58), one of the most relevant folklorists of the last few decades, "[f]olklore is passed on by means of person-to-person contact. And an item of folklore may be changed by different individuals in accordance with their own individual needs, the demands of a particular social context – the make-up of the audience – is it boys and girls, just boys, children and grown-ups, etc. or the requirements of a new age. So it is that each item of folklore is passed on through time, sometimes remaining the same, sometimes changing".

Thus, it is to be expected to find the same item of folklore with slight differences. These should not be considered completely different items, but as variants of the same. This can be observed in dictionaries of proverbs where the author includes different alternatives, usually in brackets, for some of the headwords under which the proverb has been sorted.

Another reason why this particular use of the proverb is interesting in the context it is being employed is the omission of the first half that says "blessed is he who". The reason why the author may have chosen to do this is the inevitable association of the wording used in the proverb with the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is completely alien to the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Thus, Martin succeeds in presenting a work that avoids nearly all obvious references that might hinder his portrayal of a world with its own folklore, including its own mythology, religions, beliefs, and traditions.[6] So much so that the author uses the expression "the apple of his neck" on two occasions (Martin 2011 [1996]: 436, 534) to refer to what is commonly known as "Adam's apple", in order to avoid making a reference to Christian mythology. Nevertheless, the omission of part of a proverb is a generally accepted characteristic of proverbs that does not affect their phraseological categorization.

Finally, the last example of a proverb existing in reality, included in the book, is that of "Four eyes see more than two", a proverb that due to the general character of the idea expressed in it and its overt simplicity, would not seem far-fetched to find it in equivalent terms in multiple languages, apart from the fact that it seems more suitable for use with a literal meaning, contrary to the general belief that "most [proverbs] are figurative" (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen 2005: 52).

Thus, as has been seen, it is not rare to find proverbs in this text that we would use in our daily communication, though they are sometimes subjected to subtle modifications that allow them to be coherent with the world portrayed in the book. These proverbs make up a significant percentage of the proverbs found in the book, clearly demonstrating the author's attention to detail and the care with which he creates his fictional folklore.

Apart from including real, verified proverbs in his work, Martin resorts to another clever technique: adapting proverbs to the language, context, and reality depicted in the book. In normal circumstances, this phenomenon often takes place within a culture and, as Kuusi (1994: 142) puts it, "the great majority of proverbs and sayings originate as analogical forms of earlier proverbs". However, Martin takes advantage of this acknowledged practice and implements it in his creative process. A few examples of this proceeding are the following:

12. The old courtesies die hard. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 285)
13. Listen to the crow call the raven black. (ibid.: 445–446)
14. And yet, it is truly said that blood runs truer than oaths. (ibid.: 549)
15. They knew times may change, but men do not. (ibid.: 663)
16. The hard truths are the ones to hold tight. (ibid.: 781)

In the first of the examples presented, we encounter a proverb quite similar to the well-known paroemia, "Old habits die hard" (Wilson 1970: 236). It must be pointed out, though, that the idea between the two versions is quite close and in some cases it may be interpreted in the same manner. Consequently, it may be adduced that what is happening here is a character, Ser Rodrik Cassel, making a modification on an already existing proverb. In order to prove this, other uses of the proverb in its canonical form in the book would be needed, which have not been found. Therefore, and knowing that it is a fairly common practice by the author, it would be a fair assumption to state that this is the usual wording for that proverb in Westeros.

The second example is possibly one of the funniest and cleverest adaptations commented here. Here, Pyp, a steward in the Night's Watch and therefore one of the few characters that uses proverbs and is not of a notable lineage, uses a proverb that sounds similar to a widespread saying found in several European languages, "The kettle calls the pot black" (Wilson 1970: 421). References are also made to "crows" as metaphors in other languages, such as Chinese or Mongolian (Paczolay 2002 [1997]: 321–322). It seems clear that Martin is knowledgeable of a wide variety of cultural and linguistic traditions and incorporates the components that serve his purpose. It is also interesting to note how proverbs from different linguistic origins may share some elements. Kuusi

(1994: 143) describes this phenomenon as such: "It is a question of a *formula*, a form, into which can be poured as many aphorisms that stress the shared fates of opposities [sic] as one wishes." Here the author manages to keep the main idea and part of the picture represented by the proverb, substituting the cooking utensils that are most readily used in the proverb for "crow" and "raven", black birds that play a major role in the society of Westeros, both as mail carriers and as a nickname for the members of the Night's Watch, who are often referred to as "crows" due to the black cloak they wear as their uniform. This is a clear example of the author's dedication to creating a realistic, credible, and linguistically salient world for his characters.

In the third example we find another proverb that seems to be inspired in a real-life counterpart, in this case, "Blood is thicker than water" (Wilson 1970: 69). This proverb teaches the importance of family ties over other types of relationships that we may have with people who are not our kin. In *A Game of Thrones*, however, Lord Varys, one of the most paremiologically prolific characters in the book, employs the formula, "It is truly said that blood runs truer than oaths". Here we come across two pieces of evidence that point towards it being a proverb that is either based on an existing one or expresses the same idea in similar terms. To begin with, the introductory phrase "it is truly said" is one of those items added to proverbs to heighten their sententiousness and authoritative character. Additionally, both paroemias use a comparison around the noun "blood", which is a symbol for kinship. Furthermore, what the modification over the original wording does is make the phraseme more apt for the values that we see represented in the society being portrayed, which is a feudal one in which allegiance to the right lord may prove to be capital, and where treason and plotting revenge are a common practice.

On page 663, we find a different kind of adaptation. Here, the author seems to have chosen the proverb, "Times change and we with them" (Wilson 1970: 825), and has modified it so that it actually means the exact opposite of the original paroemia. Here, Maester Aemon, who has already been quoted earlier, states, "They knew times may change, but men do not" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 663). Again, as happens with the first example in this section, it cannot be determined whether this is the proverb in its presumed canonical form or whether the character is manipulating a proverb that corresponds to one with which we are familiar. Be that as it may, there are notable differences between modern society and the society presented in the book, as well as the passing of time and its perception by the inhabitants of Westeros, reasons that may suffice to explain the appearance of a proverb that contradicts an existing one. This is a generally accepted characteristic of proverbs, as Wolfgang Mieder (1997: 410) observes, "it should not be surprising that there are such contradictory proverb

pairs … After all, proverbs are not universal truths but rather limited pieces of folk wisdom which are valid only in certain situations."

In the last example that will be commented here, we observe a case in which the author does not modify an existing proverb to adapt it to his narrative needs but, rather, uses the proverbial idea expressed in paroemias such as "All truths are not to be told" (Wilson 1970: 11) to embellish a rather bland saying, making it more literary. This happens when Jeor Mormont, Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, affirms that "the hard truths are the ones to hold tight" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 781), a sentence that due to the choice of words and the effect produced by the alliteration of /h/ and /t/ sounds make it come across not as something impromptu, but rather something corresponding to a fossilized use of language. This, together with the textual independence and the teaching purpose associated with proverbs, seems to justify its treatment as such.

As has been shown, G. R. R. Martin seems to have a liking for proverbs and uses them quite frequently. Yet, he does not limit the use of proverbs to widely accepted ones, or even to modifying them to the reality of his narrative and the necessities of the characters partaking in its development. As can be seen in the following section, he goes as far as to create his own original proverbs, unique to Westeros.

WESTEROSI PROVERBS

Even though some interesting uses of proverbs in the novel have been pointed out in the previous section, this is where the author surprises the reader, at least the reader with a paremiological interest, with the inclusion of original proverbs that do not exist in real life, or have any close connection to, or inspiration in, existing ones. I have chosen to name them 'Westerosi' proverbs after the demonym of the people of Westeros, the imaginary land where the action develops. Another reason for this choice is that it seems an inclusive enough term to encompass all the different nations represented in the book, from the northerners of Winterfell to the southerners of King's Landing and beyond. With a careful approach and through the analysis of clues, such as the origin of the characters using the proverbs, we might be able to draw some conclusions as to the alleged region where the proverb originated. However, it would be just mere speculation, impossible to prove, and may simply not be a relevant enough subdivision worth encumbering our analysis with such unfounded assumptions. Therefore, the analysis remains focused on the general use of proverbs by the different characters in the book, regardless of their origin or upbringing.

Regarding the linguistic items that appear in the book, which seem to be creations of the author, and which allow for classification as proverbs, we find the following:

17. The king dies … and the Hand is buried. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 628)
18. The king eats and the Hand takes the shit. (ibid.: 47, 628)
19. You're asking a lame man to teach a cripple how to dance. (ibid.: 213)
20. Dark wings, dark words. (ibid.: 254, 399, 480, 664)
21. When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. (ibid.: 488, 509, 629, 794)

The first two examples presented are two variations of the same proverb, the original wording of which corresponds to the first of the two alternatives mentioned, which is originally uttered in the book by Eddard Stark. The coarser version, though, is actually recited by the king himself when he recounts how he "bedded a fishmaid once who told [him] the lowborn have a choicer way to put it" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 47). In spite of the inappropriateness of the anecdote told by the king, it serves to clearly establish one of the defining features of proverbs and folklore, which has also been mentioned at the beginning of the present paper: the possibility for them to appear in multiple variants with slight modifications. In relation to the meaning of the proverb, it seems to indicate the symbolic role that kings in Westeros actually play, whereas their representative, the "Hand", is in fact the person who deals with most of the governing issues. Later on in the book, Petyr Baelish, more frequently referred to as "Littlefinger", king Robert Baratheon's Master of Coin, strings together several such proverbs that depict the relationship between the King and his Hand when he states, "They say the Hand dreams the king's dreams, speaks with the king's voice, and rules with the king's sword", going as far as to ask, "Does that also mean you fuck with the king's–" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 378–379). These examples show the different ways in which proverbs are used in real life, where we may find multiple variants as well as conscious modifications of a certain paroemia.

The third example, "You're asking a lame man to teach a cripple how to dance", is uttered by one of the most popular and likeable characters in the saga: Tyrion Lannister, son of Tywin and brother of Cersei, Robert Baratheon's wife and queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Even though there are no apparent existing equivalents in English, the phrase has a certain proverbial sound to it, and the fact that it seems more apt for figurative use, another characteristic of proverbs, seems to justify its inclusion here, even if it is not directly identified as such in the text. The saying used by Tyrion seems to be reminiscent of

proverbs like "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Wilson 1970: 67), and "In the kingdom of blind men, the one-eyed is king" (ibid.: 428); however, expressed in somewhat more festive terms. Yet, the idea behind all the three seems to be similar: the prospects of relegating a certain task to a person who seems unsuited for it. It may be argued here, though, that the proverb under analysis is indeed based on the two to which it has been compared, or maybe other existing ones. However, the elements that make it up, their arrangement, and the ideas portrayed do not seem close enough as to be able to assert that they are indeed connected. Yet, it is also common to find that some ideas or beliefs manifest in multiple proverbs, both within a language as well as cross-linguistically, and that might be the case here.

The next proverb, "Dark wings, dark words" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 254, 399, 480, 664), is among the most repeated ones in the book, and is used twice by Eddard Stark (pp. 254, 480), as well as by the narrator (p. 399), and Maester Aemon (p. 664). The proverb is indeed identified as such in the book in the first use by Eddard and by the Narrator, both stating that "it was a proverb that Old Nan had taught [Ned] as a boy" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 254). Moreover, the phrase presents the bimembral structure often associated with proverbs as well as a certain rhetorical inclination by the use of an anaphora, with the repetition of "dark", and alliteration with the repetition of the /w/ sound in "wings" and "words", as well as the synecdoche according to which "wings" is actually used to name crows, the birds used in Westeros to transmit messages across the different settlements, crows being more resilient than pigeons. According to this proverb, the appearance of such a bird on the horizon was associated with bad news or, as we would say in the real world, "no news is good news" (Wilson 1970: 572). Nonetheless, the effort by the author to create proverbs that represent a fairly widespread idea but which are expressed in such a way as to include important items of the society and the culture he is portraying, is quite remarkable.

The last paroemia that shall be commented on in this section also appears multiple times and is used by different characters, i.e., twice by Queen Cersei as well as by the Narrator and Ser Stevron Frey, and, incidentally, is the phrase used as the title for the first book in the series, as well as the TV series that came later. Accordingly, the proverb goes, "When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die" (Martin 2011 [1996]: 488, 509, 629, 794). The proverb seems straightforward enough but is illustrative of the tensions and power struggles that act as the motivation for the plot of the book. Indicative of how the author left little, if anything, to improvisation and chance, is that the character of Cersei, the one portrayed as the most cunning and power-thirsty

in the story, is the one that uses it twice, which may have something to say about her paremiological competence.

As has been seen in this section, G. R. R. Martin not only manipulates existing proverbs to adapt them to his narration, as seen in the previous subsection, but he goes the extra mile and creates paroemias that seem to make perfect sense in context and come across as perfectly natural to the reader. This gives the narrative more depth and shows the lengths that he went to produce a linguistically sound piece of literature, as well as demonstrates a presumed proverbial inclination by the author, who, in order to avoid speculation and obscurity, goes as far as making his characters or the narrator identify certain phrases as proverbs, which may otherwise be misunderstood by readers, or pass to them unnoticed as such.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE USE OF PROVERBS IN *A GAME OF THRONES*

An aspect of the use of proverbs in *A Game of Thrones* that turned out to be quite interesting, apart from the author's creativity, is how proverbs are used by the different characters. To begin with, it must be pointed out that in this first book of the series, over 200 different characters speak at some point, of which a remarkable 23 different characters utter at least one proverb, either one that exists in real life or one invented by the author. There are cases, though, in which the same character uses multiple proverbs, something that may have been done deliberately by the author to present said characters in a certain way.

To some, the use of proverbs may be undesirable as they are often "associated with lower cultural levels and social inferiority" (Corpas Pastor 1996: 166).[7] Luis Martínez Kleiser, undoubtedly the most relevant Spanish paremiographer of the past century, affirmed in the preface to his *Refranero General Ideológico Español*, the most ambitious and thorough work published in Spanish to date:

> *Proverbs do not enjoy the esteem they deserve. To some, they are intellectual cheap ware; to others, a trivial pastime; to the latter, plebeian erudition; to the eyes of the former, literary stew from a greasy spoon. … Such contemptuous concepts are born from the scarce credit given to the people, their author.* (Martínez Kleiser 1989 [1953]: XIII)[8]

Jennifer Speake, another paremiographer, states that proverbs "came into disrepute … and are still sometimes frowned upon by the polished stylist"

(Speake 2008 [1982]: X). Finally, Wolfgang Mieder often quotes the fourth Earl of Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope, as an example of this attitude against the use of proverbs in the higher ranks of society. The nobleman, in private correspondence with his son, stated that "a man of fashion never has recourse to proverbs and vulgar aphorisms" (Mieder 1993: 28). Despite this being a dated occurrence, and society having changed a great deal ever since, it may be indicative of a certain bias towards proverbs as being "an awkwardness of expression and words, most carefully to be avoided; … which are so many proofs of having kept bad or low company" (Mieder 2004: 163, quoting the aforementioned epistle).

This belief is readily discarded by numerous solid arguments from scholarship, the most obvious of which may be the emergence of a subdiscipline of linguistics devoted to the study of proverbs. Another argument that challenges the classist conception that only a high degree of cultivation can allow one to reach the expected degree of refinement is the fact that the most relevant author in the English language, William Shakespeare, had "little or no learning but took his knowledge of the classics and modern languages from English books" (Wilson 1994: 181–182), which, obviously, did not prevent him from reaching the zenith of English literature.

In *A Game of Thrones* this judgment is constantly discredited as it is indeed characters from the highest ranks of society who use proverbs most frequently. This may be indicative of the author being unaware of the aforementioned bias towards proverbs or his willingness to challenge it, presenting a world in which proverbs are a sign of sophistication. Evidence of this is the fact that out of the 23 characters that have been found to use a proverb at some point in the book, only five come, presumably, from backgrounds in which an academic education was not pursued: Will, a ranger in the Night's Watch; Pyp, a steward in the Night's Watch; a wine-seller; Jhogo, a Dothraki warrior; Mirri Maz Duur, a healer and midwife; and Cohollo, another Dothraki warrior. These characters use the following presumed proverbs respectively:

22. My mother told me that dead men sing no songs. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 1)
23. Listen to the crow call the raven black. (ibid.: 445–446)
24. It's a poor wine merchant who drinks up his own wares. (ibid.: 591)
25. You are your brother's sister, in truth. (ibid.: 668)
26. All men are one flock, or so we are taught. (ibid.: 672)
27. We are blood of his blood. (ibid.: 673)
28. A khal who cannot ride is no khal. (ibid.: 678)

Here, except in the cases of Pyp, who is addressing a builder, and Cohollo, who is addressing Mirri Maz Duur, the majority of the uses of proverbs are made in conversations with characters of a presumed education, which supports the thesis of proverbs being a sign of cultivation in the book. Additionally, it must be pointed out that Jhogo makes two proverbial references (#25 and #28), something that may have been done intentionally by the author in order to present him as having a considerable paremiological minimum.[9]

Another feature that is given attention, in relation to the formation of proverbs, is the political and social organization of the different settlements scattered throughout the land. Above, we dealt with one of the most frequently repeated proverbs in the book, "If you play the game of thrones, you win or you die", and the different paroemias portraying the relationship between the king and his "Hand". In this regard, it can be said that the society depicted in the book is a warring one, in which an individual's fighting ability and dexterity with a sword takes precedence over intellect. This is also represented in the following proverbs:

29. Minds are like swords, I do fear. The old ones go to rust. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 251)
30. The man who trusts in spells is dueling with a glass sword. (ibid.: 736)

But the attention to proverbial detail in the book does not stop there and, apart from keeping a careful distinction between the phraseologies used by the characters with different affiliations, Martin also makes Westerosi wildlife the protagonist of different paroemias. Particularly relevant is the symbolism attributed to crows in the book, which are also featured in the following proverbs:

31. Listen to the crow call the raven black. (Martin 2011 [1996]: 445–446)
32. The crow is the raven's poor cousin. (ibid.: 662)

This is another feature of phraseology and paremiology that the author has succeeded in incorporating into his work, making the world around his characters shape the way they speak by the inclusion of phrasemes motivated by the Westerosi reality and which come across as perfectly natural and credible to the reader.

As can been seen, proverbs in *A Game of Thrones* play an important role in the portrayal of the people as the author intends to present them. Thus, apart from including proverbs that we may use on a daily basis, the author has come up with an interesting proverbial lore that contributes to providing its work with a phraseological and paremiological depth that most works of similar characteristics lack, articulating some paroemias around realities and beliefs

that are of major relevance to understanding the idiosyncrasies of the fantasy land where the action takes place. Moreover, and contrary to what seems to be a fairly widespread belief in our society, namely the association of proverbs with lower levels of culture and education, it is primarily characters on the higher rungs of the Westerosi social ladder that use them, which lead us to believe that in their context, the use of proverbs is seen as a sign of culture and refinement.

Finally, the use of proverbs in *A Game of Thrones*, their frequency of appearance and the careful craftsmanship by the author when coming up with them, together with the popularity of the saga and the television series that it inspired, may propitiate some sayings of those found in the book to be given "such currency that many a user forgets the original and assumes it to be proverbial" (Wilson 1994: 184). Going back to the parallelism with Shakespeare, with all due caution, if there was no writer "richer in proverbs than Shakespeare" (ibid.: 176), given his contribution to the expansion of English paremiology, G. R. R. Martin has made a contribution that can only be assessed with the passing of time. This can be seen in the degree of elaboration that the author has put into including proverbs in his narrative composition, going as far as including references to cultural elements that are particularly relevant to the different societies or nationalities that populate Westeros, such as horse riding for the Dothraki, a nomadic tribe inhabiting the Essos continent, which can be seen in example 28 and is repeated on pages 705 and 758. The fact that the same sentence is repeated almost word for word by the omniscient narrator as well as a character and the fact that proverbs, as the "smallest verbal folklore genre" (Mieder 1993: 3) they are, can manifest in various forms with slight differences among them seem to justify the treatment of this sentence as a Dothraki proverb.

CONCLUSIONS

As has been shown, *A Game of Thrones* is a piece of literature that is packed with proverbs and proverbial references, as well as many other elements that shape Westerosi folklore. It was chosen for this particular analysis for its present cultural relevance and widespread consumption, which make it one of the most popular contemporary literary sagas. This is paramount and may be instrumental in the popularization of some of the folklore present in it, which appeared to endow the work with a richer linguistic and cultural deepness, but which may eventually permeate into real life with the popularization of some of the items presented here, something that only happens in a handful of notable cases with literature or TV fiction. In the book we find proverbs that exist in real

life and which can be found in most proverb collections, as well as paroemias that have been devised by the author expressly for his literary composition. In both cases, the use of proverbs enriches the narration and plays an important role in providing the book with an elaborate linguistic and cultural framework.

Importantly, in the cases of existing proverbs, modified proverbs, and even original proverbs in this work, their use mimics the various uses we make of proverbs in our daily lives: from uttering a proverb in its canonical form, to repeating it with certain modifications, or even alluding to a well-known piece of proverbial wisdom. Furthermore, in relation to the characters featured in the book, a certain paremiological evolution can be observed in some of them as they use items that a different character has said to them previously, thus improving their paremiological competence.

Finally, one of the most relevant features noted in relation to the use of proverbs by the author and the characters in the book is the fact that they seem to be used chiefly by "upper-class" characters, thus clashing with the traditional and widespread perception of proverbs as the knowledge of the uncultured that some people have and overlooking their popular and folkloristic side. This paper has dealt with the first book in a series of seven books. An analysis of the following books in the series will provide us with an even deeper insight into the use of proverbs in the world of Westeros.

NOTES

[1] Cf. A. Taylor (1931: 3), B. J. Whiting (1932: 302), S. A. Gallacher (1949: 47), M. Kuusi (1957: 52), A. Dundes (1994 [1981]: 44), Corpas Pastor (1996: 148), W. Mieder (1996: 597), R. P. Honeck (1997: 11–12), or D. Dobrovol'skij and E. Piirainen (2005: 49–50).

[2] This proverb is used as the title for the second episode of season three of the TV series.

[3] This alternative for the proverb is reproduced in thought by Ned on page 628, again providing an instance of a character who has improved his paremiological competence by using a proverb that he learned recently.

[4] Note that different types of PUs have been quoted in this paragraph in order to provide a hint of the phraseological complexity and elaboration of this literary composition. Thus we have, respectively, a stereotyped comparison, a collocation, and a routine formula.

[5] In Matthew 21: 15–16 we read: "Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?"

[6] Here we may have to obviate the fact that one of the proverbs just mentioned, "Out of the mouths of babes", is indeed a biblical quotation from Psalms 7: 2 and Matthew 11: 16 (Speake 2008: 219).

[7] The original in Spanish reads, "*gran parte de las paremias (no así las citas y algunos tipos de enunciados de valor específico) se asocian con niveles culturales bajos y con inferioridad social*". The quote in the body of the text is my translation.

[8] The original reads: "*Los refranes no gozan de la estimación que merecen. Para unos, son mercadería intelectual de baratillo; para otros, pasatiempo banal; según éstos [sic], erudición plebeya; a los ojos de aquéllos [sic], guisote literario de figón. […] Nacen tan despectivos conceptos del escaso crédito concedido al pueblo, su autor.*" The quote in the body of the text is my translation.

[9] See Mieder (1993: 41–57), Tarnovska (2005), or Zurdo Ruiz-Ayúcar & Sevilla Muñoz (2016).

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Luis J. Tosina Fernández is a professor at Universidad de Extremadura, Spain, where he obtained his PhD in 2016 with a proposal for a universal system for the classification of proverbs. His research interest lies within the fields of paremiology and folklore, particularly in relation to the use of proverbs in present-day media and how these contribute to the spread of paremiology. He has published several papers on this topic as well as in relation to some socio-political uses of paremiology. He has also presented his research at various international conferences, particularly at the Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs, organized by the International Association of Paremiology, of which he is an associate and the secretary of the International Council.

luistosina@gmail.com