

## The Mockingbird and the Lion: Catalysts for Chaos in *Game of Thrones*

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Recibido: 18/05/2023

Aceptado: 04/09/2023

### ABSTRACT:

*The television series Game of Thrones (2011–2019) was a cultural phenomenon that aroused great interest among audiences worldwide. HBO's adaptation of George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire novel series can be deemed as a milestone for the fantasy genre, which has traditionally never been regarded as mainstream. Nevertheless, this level of success was only possible thanks to the brilliance in terms of storytelling with which palace intrigues were handled, most of them being orchestrated by the polarising characters of Petyr Baelish and Tywin Lannister: all of their spine-chilling schemes plunge Westeros into utter chaos, thus enabling plot development indirectly. Therefore, the aim of this article is to carry out a thorough comparative analysis of the aforementioned characters considering the notion of hegemonic masculinity, the understanding of subalternity by Gramsci, and the medieval social implications of hostageship in order to examine how the mayhem they cause inevitably triggers plot progression, thus subverting Propp's original conception of the helper while overlapping with the character type of the villain.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Game of Thrones; chaos theory; Vladimir Propp; subalternity; hostageship; hegemonic masculinity.*

## El sinsonte y el león: catalizadores del caos en *Juego de Tronos*

### RESUMEN:

*La serie de televisión Juego de tronos (2011–2019) fue un fenómeno cultural que despertó gran interés entre espectadores de todo el mundo. La adaptación de HBO de la saga de novelas Canción de hielo y fuego de George R. R. Martin es un hito para el género fantástico, dado que, tradicionalmente, este nunca ha sido concebido como un género de masas. No obstante, dicho nivel de popularidad fue única y exclusivamente posible gracias a la brillantez a nivel narrativo con la que se trataron las intrigas palaciegas, la mayoría de las cuales tienen como artífices a los personajes de Petyr Baelish y Tywin Lannister: todas sus escalofriantes maquinaciones sumen a Poniente en el caos más absoluto, provocando de esta manera que la historia avance de forma indirecta. Por tanto, el objetivo del presente artículo es llevar a cabo un análisis comparativo de dichos personajes teniendo en cuenta la noción de la masculinidad hegemónica, la interpretación de la subalternidad de Gramsci y las implicaciones sociales del vasallaje medieval para analizar cómo el caos que siembran hace que la historia progrese inevitablemente, subvirtiendo así la concepción original del ayudante de Propp y solapándose con el personaje tipo del villano.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Juego de tronos; teoría del caos; Vladimir Propp; subalternidad; vasallaje; masculinidad hegemónica.*

### 1. Introduction

It is undeniable that contemporary society is completely immersed in the era of television series. The arrival of streaming services in the early 2010s and their subsequent spread have made consuming shows ridiculously easy. Viewers are no longer subject to the strict timetables of television channels, as they can access their favourite productions whenever and wherever they desire. Similarly, the expansion of social media platforms has broadened the experience of consuming fiction, since dedicated audiences have now the possibility of engaging in fandom culture. Therefore, the aforementioned factors have inevitably led to the mass consumption of television series: many viewers easily succumb to the fear of missing out and start watching any show that is discussed online, thus consuming fiction in a compulsive

manner. Nevertheless, popularity and success are not synonymous with poor quality, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) being a perfect example.

Throughout most of its run, the HBO production based on the American author George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* incomplete novel series was critically acclaimed. Tragically, its rushed and bland finale almost annihilated the show's legacy, which is currently being revisited and celebrated again thanks to *House of the Dragon*, its prequel series. Thus, despite its contentious denouement, *Game of Thrones* is still a household name, for it was arguably the main pop culture phenomenon of the past decade, captivating audiences worldwide. Moreover, the series also contributed to change the way in which television was conceived and expand its limitations, as its budget and cinematography mirrored the ones of a film. Therefore, one of the most noticeable characteristics of the show is its exceptionally large and diverse cast, since the story consists of sundry plot lines occurring simultaneously in different and distant places. Hence, even for those who have not dived into the world of Westeros, the show's massive popularity and cultural impact make it practically impossible not to recognise the faces of some of its protagonists. However, for this study, I have turned to two characters that may be perceived as secondary to a limited extent but of paramount importance for the unfolding of the plot: Petyr Baelish and Tywin Lannister — played by Aidan Gillen and Charles Dance, respectively.

The two aforementioned participants in the game of thrones seem to fall into the Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp's character category of the helper, for both essentially are the current that moves the narrative watermill of the television series. However, the said current is not a calm one whatsoever. Instead, it is a treacherous flow of water that destroys everything in its path. Hence, this troublemaker tendency goes against the very basis of the original helper concept, a character type traditionally identified by its allegiance to the hero figure. Therefore, the central aim

of this study is to examine the many and devious ways in which Petyr Baelish and Tywin Lannister impact the main plot of *Game of Thrones* by putting chaos theory into practice, thus demonstrating that they have subverted Propp's original and stereotyped characterisation of the helper and taken it to far darker alleys than he could possibly have expected. Nonetheless, their characters cannot be properly understood without considering the principle of hegemonic masculinity, the medieval social implications of hostageship, the understanding of subalternity by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, and the manner in which these intertwined notions have shaped their personalities.

## 2. The roots of chaos in *Game of Thrones*

The world has traditionally been understood as a place in which everything happens for a reason. The said conception stems from theological determinism, a theory whose main creed is that the same almighty and omniscient deity who is responsible for the genesis of the universe has also predetermined the way in which our lives will irrevocably unfold. Conversely, despite clearly depriving the human race of agency, there has always existed a tendency to think of God as a benevolent figure who rewards worshippers' good actions and punishes heathens' misdeeds. Notwithstanding, this belief entails a second meaning:

For humans, of course, God is part of the reality that is external to them; but this is compensated by the "controllability" of God. God is controlled by our definition of God. [...] God is predictable. God may be omnipotent, but he is not free. (Brady, 1990, 75)

Nonetheless, desperate times call for desperate measures, and modernity as portrayed in *Game of Thrones* seems to have removed the divine servant from power in order to crown a new sovereign universal force: chaos. Formulated in the 60s, Brady

(1990, 65) explains that chaos theory is concerned with “(dis-)order, a mode or degree of (dis-)organization; it is about how or how much things are, or are not, organized”. It was the last in a list of three severe blows — the first two being relativity and quantum mechanics — to Newtonian physics, which, like religion in a sense, had been taken as absolute truth for centuries and highlighted the predictability of the universe. According to Brady (1990, 67), the pillars of chaos theory are “complexity, uncertainty, non-linearity [...], unpredictability”. Counterintuitively, chaos theory is a deterministic model strictly speaking in mathematical terms, as one can certainly predict the outcome of a system according to its initial conditions. We can see this easily in *Game of Thrones*. Prior to the events depicted in the HBO show, Westeros was governed by biological determinism. The social pyramid was based upon family names, the Targaryen dynasty always standing atop despite its major crises. In fact, birth determines characters’ lives to such an extent that it all starts getting out of control when an unexpected usurper steps into the scene and seizes power for himself and his descendants, thus sowing the seeds for never-ending dynastic conflicts.

One of the manners in which chaos theory manifests itself is the butterfly effect, whose main tenet is that a negligible change in one state may result in disproportionate changes in subsequent states, thus rendering the system unpredictable in the long term. Human interaction is significantly more imprecise than mathematics, and asymmetry between cause and effect is precisely the only law that governs the whole of Westeros through two extraordinarily powerful emissaries, steadily plunging the territory into utter chaos. In Martin’s world, every single action entails both short-term and long-term disastrous consequences that drive the plot forward and allow for in-depth characterisation. Therefore, within the frame of *Game of Thrones*, chaos can be defined as the common state of things affecting both the ruling elite and the common folk. Nevertheless, it is only those individuals belonging to the forenamed ruling elite who pull the strings

of chaos while playing the often dangerous and rarely gratifying game of thrones.

Although the HBO production has been praised for its complexity and innovativeness, it can be argued that there is no such thing as an original story, in the sense that all narratives are related to previous texts. In summary form, this is what the Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp defended in *Morphology of the Folktale*, a book first published in Russian in 1928 and translated into English in 1958 and 1968 — the latter edition being the one I have consulted. Furthermore, Propp also upheld that “folklore is an ideological science” (Levin, 1967, 41); namely, not only are folktales interrelated, but there also exists a clear connection between stories and history itself. This is tangible in the HBO show, for it clearly conveys a capitalist view of the world in medieval disguise.

Thus, after carrying out a comprehensive analysis of Russian folktales, Propp reached the conclusion that all of them could be reduced to thirty-one elemental functions and seven basic character types. Nevertheless, as *Game of Thrones* is a character-driven narrative rather than a plot-driven one, I will only focus on Propp’s *dramatis personae*. According to Propp, stories are starred by the hero, on a quest to defeat evil; the villain, deliberately wreaking havoc; the dispatcher, who calls for help and consequently sends the hero on his quest; the helper, who assists the hero; the donor, who provides the hero with an agent that will help him accomplish his mission; the princess, who needs to be rescued; and the false hero, who takes undue credit for the hero’s deeds. These character types can be easily spotted in black-and-white narratives like fairy tales or superhero films, but classifying the actors of a morally ambiguous story such as *Game of Thrones* is a far more complicated task. In fact, Petyr Baelish and Tywin Lannister are an amalgam of two functions: both characters act as ruthless villains by enabling chaos on purpose for personal benefit, but by doing so, they also enable plot progression, thus involuntarily assuming the role of the helper. In traditional

narratives, the hero would never be able to complete their quest without the helper's assistance, making the story inevitably come to a standstill, and without the aforementioned characters' (mis)deeds in the HBO production, there would be no song of ice and fire to recite. Conclusively, their ultimate narrative goal coincides with one of the basic identifying features of Propp's helper, as it is a character type that contributes to the evolution of the story. Nevertheless, the helper is also defined by their allegiance to the hero's quest, and it is this notion which is completely subverted in *Game of Thrones*, for both Littlefinger and the Lannister patriarch are responsible for most of the dreadful ordeals that the alleged heroes of story — the Starks — have to endure.

### 3. Chaos from subalterns: the mockingbird

It is impossible to explore how chaos operates in Westeros without examining the notorious and polarising figure of Petyr Baelish, also known as Littlefinger. He is introduced to the audience in "Lord Snow" (Season 1, Episode 3), in which two of his pivotal character traits are established: his unbeatable manipulation skills and his long-standing infatuation for Catelyn Tully, Ned Stark's wife. His disrespectful moniker makes reference to his short stature both in physical and social terms — as a member of a minor house — and his off-centre birthplace, a coastal region known as the Fingers, as it encompasses five narrow peninsulas. This is essential to understand Littlefinger's motivations as a character, for the derogatory meaning behind his nickname alludes to the way in which he was undermined all his life. A self-made man, as a result of a conflictive unrequited love affair, he is the clear embodiment of a jack-of-all-trades, a mockingbird, as stated by Cersei Lannister (Season 2, Episode 1):

Cersei: A mockingbird. You created your own sigil, didn't you?

Littlefinger: Yes.

Cersei: Appropriate... For a self-made man with so many songs to sing. (Benioff et al., 2012, 36:01)

Every feature mentioned seems to point at the fact that Lord Baelish's life will be that of a natural-born, despised, marginalised subaltern. Let's delve into the concept a bit further to better understand the complexity of the character at stake.

Nowadays, the concept of the subaltern owes its popularity to Gayatri Spivak's reinterpretation in her celebrated 1988 postcolonial article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She took the precarious situation of subordinate Indian women (i.e., the subaltern par excellence) as a starting point to criticise Western leftist scholars, whom she accused of committing epistemic violence; that is, of speaking on behalf of the subaltern without providing them with a distinctive voice. Nevertheless, for the purposes of the present study there are compelling reasons to believe that Spivak's take may be rather limiting, as stated by Galastri (2018): once a person that classifies as a subaltern speaks and subsequently assumes some agency, the said individual will not belong in that category any longer.

We will turn to a broader notion of subaltern as, despite having enormously contributed to the popularisation of the term, Spivak is not the original theoretician behind the concept. It was coined by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, a compilatory work written between 1929 and 1935 during his imprisonment under Mussolini's fascist regime. In fact, Gramsci's definition of the subaltern has traditionally been disregarded because of the same reason he was convicted: his ideology. Many scholars — influenced by Spivak's interpretation — consider that Gramsci exclusively employed the euphemism 'subaltern social groups' as a replacement for the word 'proletariat' to avoid censorship. However, the said claim has arguably no solid ground, for there are several instances in which he actually used the term 'proletariat' (Green, 2011), thus meaning that both concepts are not synonymous.

Furthermore, the Gramscian concept of the subaltern seems to be significantly more inclusive than Spivak's. Whereas the Indian scholar's definition centres on marginalised postcolonial

subjects with special emphasis on women, Gramsci identified it with any individual or social class that does not occupy a position of power, thus “suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class” (Louai, 2012, 5). The said elite is in control of the integral state, which can be defined as the reciprocal, dialogical, complementary relationship between political society and civil society. The first is the coercive apparatus employed by the hegemonic class to impose its rule; namely, the three traditional branches of government — executive, legislative, and judicial — law enforcement agencies, and the armed forces. For its part, civil society “contains the cultural element of conformity” (Green, 2002, 7), that is, the means used by the dominant elite to exalt, spread, and install their ideology and values as the norm. Therefore, although it is undeniable that — as a member of the Communist Party of Italy — Gramsci had primarily in mind the proletariat and peasants oppressed by Mussolini’s dictatorship when he created the notion of the subaltern (Louai, 2012), the scope of the Gramscian subaltern is broader than the Spivakian version. Thus, according to the currently widespread postcolonial definition, the powerful merchant class of Italy could never have been a subordinate class. Contrarily, Gramsci notes that the Italian bourgeoisie was in fact a subaltern group until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for its political, economic, and cultural influence was directly subject to papal power until the unification of Italy.

Moreover, as a Marxist, Gramsci conceived the subaltern as a group that could strive for autonomy and power, ultimately subverting the pre-established order and becoming the new ruling elite, as it was the case of the Italian bourgeoisie after the *Risorgimento*. Thus, the historical research of upward mobility encompasses the following six stages:

1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in

pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time; 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character; 5. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy, etc. (Gramsci, 1947/1971, 52)

All things considered, Littlefinger is one of those Gramscian subalterns that rebels against social determinism, strives for agency, and eventually succeeds in the task. This way, albeit the lack of political and monetary relevance of his ancestors, he starts the series in an opulent position of power, as he is the Master of Coin in King Robert Baratheon's Small Council. Although his post may seem incompatible with his proverbial chaos-bound scheming, for it brings him directly into the spotlight, he manages to have his own way thanks to his sharp intellect and cunning tactics.

The character of Littlefinger is usually analysed in comparison with Lord Varys, the Master of Whisperers (Barbagallo, 2018; Biehl, 2021; Pittà, 2023): they share a similar origin story, as they both are self-made men who have become preeminent political figures thanks to their intelligence, Varys being the embodiment of the rags-to-riches trope. Nonetheless, their fundamentally distinct and opposing views on power are locked together in constant conflict throughout the development of the television series: Varys claims that every decision he makes — however morally dubious it might seem — is for the welfare of the common folk, whereas Littlefinger exclusively acts in his best inter-

est. Thus, the mounting tension between their radically different and antagonistic philosophies reaches its peak in “The Climb” (Season 3, Episode 6). The scene between Varys and Littlefinger begins with the latter unblinkingly staring with openly covetous eyes at the Iron Throne, which symbolises his insatiable desire for ultimate power — in fact, he confesses to Varys that he has gone to the extent of actually counting the blades that the throne is made of. After a brief conversation during which they tease each other about each other’s recent wrongs, Littlefinger overtly expresses his principles for the first time in *Game of Thrones*:

Littlefinger: The realm? Do you know what the realm is? It’s the thousand blades of Aegon’s enemies. A story we agree to tell each other over and over till we forget that it’s a lie.

Varys: But what do we have left once we abandon the lie? Chaos. A gaping pit waiting to swallow us all.

Littlefinger: Chaos isn’t a pit. Chaos is a ladder. Many who try to climb it fail and never get to try again. The fall breaks them. And some are given a chance to climb, but they refuse. They cling to the realm or the gods or love. Illusions. Only the ladder is real. The climb is all there is. (Benioff et al., 2013, 46:10)

The abovementioned speech perfectly summarises the character’s egoistical, greedy, and narcissistic ideology. For him, catalysing chaos is synonymous with social upward mobility, so it is only natural that he will systematically wreak havoc in order to sit on the very throne he has stared at for years, completely disregarding how many people he hurts along the way, as he reveals to his prostitutes in “You Win or You Die” (Season 1, Episode 7):

I learned that I’ll never win, not that way. That’s their game, their rules. I’m not going to fight them. I’m going to fuck them. That’s what I know. That’s what I am. And only by admitting what we are can we get what we want. (Benioff et al., 2011, 13:23)

Now that Littlefinger's true motivations have been disclosed, it is time to cast light on the several instances in which the chaos he causes for his own personal benefit has terrible consequences for other characters, thus making the plot of *Game of Thrones* develop. His first onscreen concoction occurs in "Lord Snow" (Season 1, Episode 3): Catelyn arrives in the Westerosi capital to investigate to whom belongs the dagger that had been used in the assassination attempt on her son Bran in the previous episode, for she suspects that it had been planned by someone both powerful and affluent, as the weapon is made of enormously expensive materials. Littlefinger confesses that the dagger once belonged to him, but that he lost it to Tyrion Lannister. This revelation only aggravates the already existing and mounting tension between the two hegemonic rival families, Starks and Lannisters, for Catelyn sincerely believes that her son — who was a keen climber before becoming a cripple — was pushed from the tower for having witnessed what he was not supposed to. Furthermore, Littlefinger's adulterated confession leads to the wrongful imprisonment of Tyrion, which, as every minor event in Westeros, triggers a butterfly effect that leads to Jaime Lannister and a group of soldiers attacking Ned and his men in the streets of the capital, bringing the diplomatic relations between the two aforementioned Great Houses to a point of no return.

Littlefinger's next masterplan to plunge Westeros into chaos revolves around precipitating Ned's fall from grace, motivated by both his insatiable thirst for power and his jealousy. In "The Wolf and the Lion" (Season 1, Episode 5), Lord Baelish acts as a whistleblower to Ned revealing him that the former Hand of the King was in search of the king's bastards before being poisoned. After some investigation, Ned learns the truth about Queen Cersei's children's real parenthood and, consequently, devises a plan when King Robert dies to transfer royal power to his brother Stannis, the deceased monarch's rightful heir. Littlefinger's next step upwards in the ladder involves agreeing reluctantly to help Ned in this dangerous task, a proper mutiny, and finally be-

traying him. He had mastered the whole event and expected the outcome to happen since he considers the Starks gullible people, easy to manipulate or, in Littlefinger's own words (Season 1, Episode 3): "Ah, the Starks... Quick tempers, slow minds" (Benioff et al., 2011, 23:33).

In "You Win or You Die" (Season 1, Episode 7), the City Watch, under Lord Baelish's command, massacres Ned's men after he orders them to arrest both Cersei and Joffrey, while Littlefinger holds a dagger to his throat, stating: "I did warn you not to trust me" (Benioff et al., 2011, 54:16). Despite the villainy of Lord Baelish's betrayal, it is worth highlighting that, according to Propp (1928/1968, 83), "one of the most important attributes of a helper is his prophetic wisdom". Thus, Littlefinger had already hinted at his treacherous course of action while trying to win Ned's trust in "Bastards, Cripples, and Broken Things" (Season 1, Episode 4): "Distrusting me was the wisest thing you've done since you climbed off your horse" (Benioff et al., 2011, 28:08). This single line in isolation is not only the first time Littlefinger shows his true colours onscreen, but also arguably one of the rare occasions in the entire series on which he is being completely truthful, for he overtly expresses how much of an unreliable and untrustworthy ally he is. Ned's arrest ultimately results two episodes later in his public execution, triggering the immediate outbreak of the War of the Five Kings — namely, a military conflict of gargantuan proportions concerning all the Great Houses on which the first half of the show centres, the second focusing on its chaotic aftermath.

Throughout Season 2, after having created such a state of disarray, Littlefinger continues to sow mayhem in order to reap personal fulfilment later in time. Thus, he acts as a double agent for both the Starks and the Lannisters. Firstly, he persuades Catelyn into singlehandedly releasing Jaime — previously taken as a hostage by her son Robb — in exchange for her court-fostered daughters Sansa and Arya, allegedly in the Lannisters' custody, although he knows well that this will never be accomplished.

However, Catelyn's glaring error turns the tides against the Starks for the very first time in the armed conflict, eventually leading to the infamous Red Wedding, where the Stark army and family are slaughtered. Hence, even though Catelyn was supposedly the only person in the world Littlefinger cared for, he had no problem deceiving her and consequently causing his beloved's demise indirectly.

Furthermore, Littlefinger forges an alliance between the Lannisters and the second most affluent house in Westeros, the Tyrells, which results in the royalist victory in the War of the Five Kings in the long term. Moreover, it is also worth highlighting that despite every concoction previously mentioned, this is the first major step of the ladder of chaos that Littlefinger climbs, for he is appointed Lord of Harrenhal — the largest castle in Westeros — as a reward for forming the said victorious, triumphant, fruitful coalition. The said nomination triggers his resignation as Master of Coin, thus distancing himself from King's Landing in order to acquire more prestigious titles.

However, although Littlefinger allegedly brokered the alliance between the Lannisters and the Tyrells to bring stability to a realm engulfed in war, its inner workings turn out to be not so stable. King Joffrey is poisoned in his wedding feast in "The Lion and the Rose" (Season 4, Episode 2), and two episodes later, it is revealed that a member and the designer of the coalition are behind the regicide. Littlefinger confesses to Sansa that he orchestrated Joffrey's murder with Olenna — the savvy matriarch of the Tyrell family — and that they used her as a living prop. Whereas Olenna's intentions come across as apparent to the audience, for she did not want her granddaughter Margaery to marry such a sadistic tyrant, the only reason that drove Littlefinger to commit treason was — once again — his strong secret desire for power, even though he assures Sansa that he did it because Joffrey could not possibly be trusted.

Moreover, Joffrey's murder results in the coronation of his brother Tommen, a significantly more pliable monarch. During

Tommen's limp rule, a fundamentalist religious cult known as the Sparrows rises to power, thus aggravating the already general state of chaos that appears to be inherent to the Seven Kingdoms at this point of the story because of the peerlessly manipulative Lord Baelish.

It seems Littlefinger is about to make his wishes come true, but there are still some steps to take in the ladder. He becomes aware of the fact that he needs a marriage of convenience to acquire a more illustrious title and more power. Therefore, after his successful conspiracy with Olenna, he travels with Sansa Stark to the Vale in order to marry her aunt Lysa Tully and consequently become the consort ruler of one of the Seven Kingdoms. However, he purposefully deceives the mentally unstable Lysa into believing that their wedding is a celebration of their longstanding love story. In fact, a complicated and unrequited love triangle involving Littlefinger, Catelyn, and Lysa for life, ultimately forged by one of the most traditional medieval practices depicted in the show: hostageship to consolidate alliances.

Primarily, *Game of Thrones* is a story about power dynamics among noble families. To emphasise its cyclical nature, the show metaphorically presents power as a wheel with spokes that stand for the Great Houses of Westeros, which could not care less about whom they crash along the way as long as they get on top. In this respect, hostageship in any of its forms seems to have been quite a useful tool to ensure or preserve power. Nowadays, the term 'hostage' is usually associated with both exceptional and extreme situations involving some form of violence, such as individual kidnappings and large-scale terrorist actions. However, in the Middle Ages, "hostage situations were often a long-term social contract" (Bennett & Weikert, 2017, 2) of regular occurrence usually meant for alliances. This could occur in various ways, ranging from betrothals to wardships, but there was a common purpose that tied all forms of hostageship together: symbolism. Medieval hostages were, above all, a reminder of the power of their liege lord. Thus, despite the high incidence of hostageship, most hos-

tages had the sword of Damocles hanging over their head, for there was often a degree of latent violence that could be enacted at any given moment (Bennett & Weikert, 2017).

Although the most obvious and perfect example of a medieval hostage in *Game of Thrones* can be found in the character of Theon Greyjoy, hostageship also concerns the two characters around whom this article revolves. In the first place, Littlefinger's driving ambition derives from his widely known condition of fostered child under House Tully (Season 2, Episode 1):

Cersei: I heard a song once about a boy of modest means who found his way into the home of a very prominent family. He loved the eldest daughter. Sadly, she had eyes for another.

Littlefinger: When boys and girls live in the same home, awkward situations can arise. (Benioff et al., 2012, 36:22)

Living for years under the same roof nurtured Littlefinger's deep love for the eldest of the host sisters while simultaneously turning him into the object of the youngest's affection. Unfortunately for Littlefinger and Lysa, their love was unrequited from the beginning but could not be forgotten, eventually leading to Littlefinger's leaving the Tully household for court and both sisters marrying prominent and influential knights. As stated before, Lysa will only receive Lord Baelish's attentions after becoming a widow with a strategic territory under her rule: the second major landing in the ladder for him. More than enough to make him marry the youngest of the Tully sisters with Sansa, the eldest sister's daughter, as a privileged witness.

During their first conversation after his arrival from King's Landing, Lysa — who suspects that his soon-to-be husband has developed feelings for her niece due to her striking resemblance to Catelyn — tries to persuade Petyr of her solid loyalty and devotion to him, for she poisoned her husband and former Hand of the King, Jon Arryn, and wrote a letter to her sister accusing the Lannisters of the crime because her beloved told her to do so.

Thus, what merely seems to be a madwoman's candid confession out of spite is in fact the most shocking revelation in the entire show. Not only does it identify Littlefinger with true chaos, but it also establishes him as the ultimate responsible for thousands of pointless deaths.

Indeed, Jon Arryn's death triggers the initial event in the series: King Robert travels to the North with the intention to appoint Ned Stark as Jon's successor. Furthermore, Ned exclusively accepts because of Lysa's letter to Catelyn, for he considers that he is the only one who can protect the current monarch from undergoing the same fate as his former Hand. This intricately fabricated lie proves the absolute mastery of manipulation Littlefinger has acquired, since he created a perfectly feasible scenario. In Season 1, it is hinted that Jon Arryn had discovered that the king's presumed heirs were the incestuous bastards of Queen Cersei and her twin brother Jaime, which gave them a plausible and convincing reason to have Arryn murdered.

The scale of the aftermath of this particular deception also serves to demonstrate that Littlefinger is, in a certain sense, a helper because he undeniably enables plot progression, yet his character completely subverts Propp's original archetype. He does not help the supposed heroes nor the alleged villains of the story; instead, it is made clear that he helps none other than himself in his ceaseless way out of subalternity, even going to the extent of taking extremely risky bets involving third parties that may only pay off in the long term. Therefore, it can be concluded that Littlefinger is the only mastermind behind the War of the Five Kings, for he is not only capable of turning two noble families against each other, but also of orchestrating an armed conflict of continental scale in order to rise to power while the rest of the players are killing each other on the battlefield. In Lord Varys's words (Season 3, Episode 4): "He would see this country burn if he could be king of the ashes" (Benioff et al., 2013, 30:21).

Nevertheless, although I have just mentioned that Littlefinger does sometimes associate with third parties to carry out his

cunning schemes when necessary, in Season 4 it is demonstrated that he is not very fond of leaving loose ends whatsoever. When he realises that Lysa's mental instability and jealousy of Sansa might endanger his plans faster than he initially thought and bring to light the truth about the mastermind behind Jon Arryn's murder, he kills Lysa as well. As a result, Littlefinger effectively becomes the only ruler of one of the Seven Kingdoms until Lysa's son's coming of age. Not only does his new position entail advantageous personal consequences, but it also has repercussions for the main plot. In Season 6, it is thanks to Littlefinger's command of the Knights of the Vale that the Starks are able to retake Winterfell from their enemies.

Tragically, what goes up must come down, and Littlefinger's ultimate demise is brought about by Sansa, another fostered child in the story by way of her betrothal to Joffrey Baratheon, an experience which inevitably hardened her mind and temper. Throughout the series it is apparent that Littlefinger develops some kind of — seemingly more lustful than romantic — feelings for Catelyn's eldest daughter, for she reminds him of the younger version of the long-gone beloved that he never had. However, not only does he see her as a tempting beauty, but also as the unwary key to the North, the largest kingdom in Westeros and the next relevant step in the ladder. Moreover, Littlefinger's disturbing relationship with Sansa parallels the one he had with Catelyn in one significant aspect: he puts his machinations well over his feelings.

Therefore, he organises a wedding between Sansa and Ramsay, Roose Bolton's sadistic illegitimate son. Littlefinger arranges the said engagement to expand his influence and be able to somewhat control the North in the belief that his influence over Sansa is unmatched, which is an arguably correct assumption at this point in the show. Thus, he persuades an initially reluctant Sansa to agree to the convened marriage, which will result in dire consequences for the Stark girl, as her husband turns out to be the cruellest psychopath in Westeros. Although Sansa

is eventually able to escape from her spouse, her previous fragile trust in Lord Baelish is never restored. However, in “Winds of Winter” (Season 6, Episode 10), Littlefinger attempts to regain Sansa’s faith by finally revealing his ultimate goal:

Every time I’m faced with a decision, I close my eyes and see the same picture. Whenever I consider an action, I ask myself will this action help to make this picture a reality? Pull it out of my mind and into the world? And I only act if the answer is yes. A picture of me on the Iron Throne... and you by my side. (Benioff et al., 2016, 48:37)

This sudden burst of oversharing and sincerity is the key turning point in the story and the first step towards Littlefinger’s downfall, for unpredictability was one of the master of chaos’s defining traits hitherto. As the dramatic pause indicates, it can be argued that he simply wants to make amends with the eldest Stark girl because he only sees her as a means to an end, but she is still the only thing that he has contemplated with burning desire besides the Iron Throne. Nevertheless, it is his underestimation of Sansa’s courtly hostage experience and intellect what eventually triggers his debacle. Not only should he have trusted no one as he preached to Ned in Season 1, but he had better count on the impact on Sansa of her hostage experience in King’s Landing, constantly threatened by Joffrey and Cersei, estranged from her family and land. Thus, after spending seven seasons trying to understand the inner workings of Littlefinger’s mind and being his favourite victim, the apprentice ends up outsmarting her master: a cold-hearted Sansa finally orders Littlefinger’s trial for treason and his consequent execution.

However, Littlefinger still impacts the story after his death, for he indirectly contributes to the eradication of the supernatural menace of the story; namely, he unexpectedly assumes the role of another one of Propp’s *dramatis personae* and becomes an unwilling donor. After betraying Ned back in Season 1, Little-

finger retains possession of the dagger used in the previously mentioned assassination attempt on Bran, as his father had kept it with him in order to investigate the botched crime. In Season 7, Littlefinger presents it to Bran so as the crippled boy can defend himself once the Long Night comes, for the blade is made of a costly material that can kill White Walkers. This comes across as a joke in poor taste, since it is implied in this season that Littlefinger was the one who hired a sloppy assassin to finish him after the Stark boy survived his fall from the tower in the first episode. Conversely, the aforementioned fall ultimately breaks Lord Baelish. As Bran considers that he cannot fight for himself anymore, he gives the dagger to Arya, who ironically ends up using it against Littlefinger to execute him in what could be deemed as an episode of poetic justice. Nonetheless, this is not the most remarkable murder she commits with the dagger, as she uses the said weapon to unexpectedly stab the Night King to death in the nick of time in Season 8 — perhaps, the only event indirectly involving Littlefinger that temporarily puts an end to chaos instead of fostering it. All things considered, it can be concluded that the mockingbird flew high: Littlefinger's despicable actions enable plot progression even after his denouement, making him a true helper and arguably one of the best players in the game of thrones.

#### **4. Chaos from elites: the lion**

Notwithstanding, although Littlefinger is undeniably the main catalyst for chaos in *Game of Thrones*, there exists another character whose actions certainly have a decisive impact on the story: Tywin Lannister. In spite of their dissimilarities in subalternity terms, both Littlefinger and Tywin coincide in being unequivocally the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Coined by the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, the concept directly draws from Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony in order to examine men's dominance over women. Hence, it can be defined as the pattern of social practices that enables and justi-

fies patriarchy, legitimises unequal power dynamics among men and women, and establishes gender roles (Messerschmidt, 2019). Thus, men who represent hegemonic masculinity are generally perceived as an aspirational canon. However, it is worth noting that hegemonic masculinity is not rigid nor fixed, for it is dependent on the convergence between time and space. Furthermore, it must evolve so as to assimilate possible threats and maintain its privileged position (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Nonetheless, apart from constraining and subordinating women, the existence of hegemonic masculinity implies the subjugation and delegitimisation of divergent forms of masculinity. In fact, according to Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic is not synonymous with majoritarian; namely, most men do not embody nor enact hegemonic masculinity, “but they still benefit from [...] the subordination of women” (Yang, 2020, 320), making their masculinity complicit. The remaining — and significantly more oppressed — two categories are subordinate masculinities and marginalised masculinities, both of which are marked by the intersection of gender with sexual orientation, race, and class. Respectively, they are personified by homosexual men and black men, who suffer from political, legal, economic, social, and cultural discrimination, appropriation, and violence (Yang, 2020).

Despite the participation of strong female contenders, the game of thrones, like the real world, was designed by and for men, and the two players this study revolves around are undoubtedly the incarnation of hegemonic masculinity. Both are affluent, powerful, influential, scheming elite players who truly believe that the end justifies the means: Littlefinger’s personal fortune directly stems from his infamous brothel, whereas Tywin — among other practices of dubious morality — does not hesitate to use his daughter as exchangeable capital to secure alliances and extend his power over Westeros (Frankel, 2014; Johnston, 2021).

Throughout the series, it becomes apparent that the manner in which Cersei understands the game of thrones does not devi-

ate much from her father's. In fact, she is the child that resembles Tywin the most in pragmatic terms (Beaton, 2016), for Tyrion is a less cruel idealist and Jaime does not appear to care about political manoeuvres whatsoever. Thus, there exist several instances in which Cersei perpetrates terrible atrocities in order to maintain the Lannisters in power just like her father — even though it can be argued that she commits them to actually protect her loved ones and not just the family name. However, despite their similarities in mindset, Tywin continuously undermines Cersei's intellect, which he justifies in the following way (Season 3, Episode 4): "I don't distrust you because you're a woman. I distrust you because you're not as smart as you think you are" (Benioff et al., 2013, 26:18). Nevertheless, this utterance is riddled with prejudice and misogyny, for excessive pride is a distinctive Lannister trait. Furthermore, his male heirs arguably make more unwise decisions than Cersei, Jaime and Tyrion being held hostage by the Starks serving as a perfect example.

Contrastingly, the only scenes in which Tywin seems to act as a sort of sympathetic paternal figure are not with any of his children but with Arya Stark. In Season 2, the latter is a war prisoner at Harrenhal — the temporal headquarters of the Lannister army during the War of the Five Kings — where she ends up serving as the personal cupbearer to her family's biggest enemy under a false identity. Therefore, not only does the lord-vassal relationship that unfolds between the two give the audience a different and interesting outlook on the dynamic of hostageship under martial conditions, but it also allows for in-depth characterisation. Unlike the presence of his family and practically of every inhabitant of Westeros, Tywin seems to moderately enjoy the company of Ned Stark's youngest daughter. Although he is perfectly aware that she is not a mere commoner but a northern high-born lady, he lets her pretend, and it is with Arya that he arguably shares the only two vulnerable moments his character has in the series. In the first place, after discovering that she is not an illiterate plebeian, Tywin recounts her the story of how

he taught Jaime to read against all odds, since he had been diagnosed with what appears to be dyslexia in modern terms. Thus, what seems to be a minor anecdote is in fact a scene of immense value, for it is the only occasion on which he is portrayed as a father capable of actually caring for his offspring rather than as the almighty Lannister patriarch. Furthermore, Tywin lets his guard down a second time (Season 2, Episode 7):

Tywin: This will be my last war, win or lose.

Arya: Have you ever lost before?

Tywin: Do you think I'd be in my position if I had lost a war? But this is the one I'll be remembered for. The "War of Five Kings", they're calling it. My legacy will be determined in the coming months. Do you know what legacy means? It's what you pass down to your children and your children's children. It's what remains of you when you're gone. (Benioff et al., 2012, 10:32)

Although this conversational exchange does undoubtedly contribute to reinforce the image of Tywin as a man obsessed with the idea of cementing an everlasting dynasty, it also offers a deeper insight into his most personal self: an old man in the twilight of his life worried about his future reputation; namely, a "lion" that does "concern himself with the opinions of the sheep" (Benioff et al., 2011).

Notwithstanding, even though both Tywin and Littlefinger share some similarities and can be considered the greatest political minds in Westeros, they do differ in the values they represent and the pragmatic approaches they adopt. In the first place, they personify the dichotomy new money versus old money: whereas Littlefinger is a self-made man — for House Baelish was an irrelevant pawn in a chessboard full of kings until his appearance — Tywin is the patriarch of the most influential and fabulously wealthy noble family in Martin's fictional universe. Casterly Rock, the Lannister historic fortress, is located in the Westerlands over highly profitable goldmines. Thus, as the head

of House Lannister, Tywin embodies the mighty financial institution upon which the Seven Kingdoms rest, for the crown is in crippling debt to him. This monetary power only serves to bring these two characters even closer: Tywin is the treasure, whereas Littlefinger simply manages it.

Secondly, in the show it is apparent that Littlefinger and Tywin also differ in their motivations: the first comes across as an extremely ambitious and self-centred individual virtually capable of perpetrating appalling atrocities in order to seize power; whereas the second is depicted as a cold-blooded and family-driven man who was born into the establishment. Everything Tywin does, he does it allegedly for House Lannister, since, as noted previously, he appears to be consumed by the idea of establishing an eternal legacy. The said obsession is set up in a conversation with his son Jaime — the only child he seems to be somewhat proud of — in his very first appearance in “You Win or You Die” (Season 1, Episode 7):

Your mother’s dead. Before long I’ll be dead. And you and your brother and your sister and all of her children. All of us dead; all of us rotting in the ground. It’s the family name that lives on. It’s all that lives on. Not your personal glory, not your honour, but family. (Benioff et al., 2011, 4:30)

Finally, another facet in which Tywin does not coincide with Littlefinger is the type of power they represent. Lord Baelish was born as a subaltern, even though his journey as a character centres on challenging and overcoming his subordination. However, in spite of all his acquired titles, the only power Littlefinger actually holds is political, as he does not come from an exceptionally wealthy background and has no prestige as a warrior nor as a military leader. Notwithstanding, although Tywin is also a governmental figure of utmost importance — Ned Stark’s successor as Hand of the King under his grandsons’ rules and holder of the titles of Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Warden of

the West, among others — he embodies the optimum balance between political, military, and economic power: apart from being the official moneylender of the realm, he is also a renowned military strategist known for his determination and brutality. Thus, the Lannister patriarch is a clear symbol of Gramscian hegemonic power, a concept that refers to the way in which the elite is able to hold and exert the said hegemonic power through the perfect balance between political coercion and social consent.

The aforementioned fearsome reputation is well-earned, since he is responsible for two massacres that live on in Westerosi history, much in accordance with the Lannisters' iconic lion sigil. Although the official words of House Lannister are "Hear me roar", "A Lannister always pays his debts" is a common saying that surpasses them in popularity. The original meaning behind this phrase solely concerned the family capital, but thanks to Tywin it acquired a darker nuance. Prior to the events the series centres on, House Reyne of Castamere rebelled against Tywin's father's weak rule, and he responded by flooding their keep and slaughtering their members and soldiers. This carnage is immortalised in a song titled "The Rains of Castamere", which is mentioned, discussed, played, and sung on numerous occasions throughout the show. Similarly, the other bloodshed led by Tywin also happened before the events the series explores: once it became apparent that Robert's Rebellion against the Targaryen dynasty was going to triumph, Tywin — who had remained neutral hitherto — and his troops entered King's Landing, sacked the city, and obliterated the royal family. Thus, it can be concluded that, even though both characters engender chaos, the one Littlefinger creates, in total agreement with chaos theory, is unrestrained, erratic, and unpredictable: the more confusion, the more chances he has to rise to power. Conversely, the disarray provoked by Tywin is somewhat controlled and flawlessly calculated, as he has the economic and military means to enforce his will.

Therefore, even though Littlefinger does unquestionably cause more turmoil than Tywin — thus being the main catalyst for plot

progression — the one conspiracy Tywin orchestrates in Season 3 is arguably the most shocking and blood-curdling event with dire consequences in *Game of Thrones*. As its title suggests, “The Rains of Castamere” (Season 3, Episode 9) results in a butchery. The episode focuses on the arrival of the Stark army at Walder Frey’s strategically-located castle to make amends with him because of an unfulfilled marriage betrothal between Robb Stark and one of his daughters. A wedding is arranged and carried out with another member of the Tully family despite being apparent that Lord Frey has perceived Robb’s alternative offer as a major offence. The nuptial rite takes place smoothly and the newlyweds leave the banquet room to perform the bedding ceremony, but the ambience changes drastically once the doors are closed after their departure. The band starts playing “The Rains of Castamere” tune and the slaughter begins shortly after: all of the Stark army and family members present are put to the sword. Thus, despite never having lost a battle in the War of the Five Kings, Robb ends up losing the game of thrones just like his father.

Although the scene is riddled with utter confusion at first, all the pieces fall right into place when Roose Bolton, one of the Stark chieftains, approaches Robb to give him the final blow as he whispers into his ear: “The Lannisters send their regards” (Benioff et al., 2013, 46:43). This is the moment when the audience realises that they are witnesses to a masterplan devised by Tywin himself. He took advantage of Walder Frey’s wounded pride and Roose Bolton’s personal ambition, orchestrating along them the demise of the Stark forces. Hence, in compensation for their close collaboration, he appoints his new allies as the rulers of two of the Seven Kingdoms, thus bringing two treacherous minor houses to the forefront of the story.

Moreover, the Red Wedding can be considered as the event that lionises the figure of Joffrey and virtually puts an end to the War of the Five Kings. Robb is no longer a menace, one of the said contenders had already been killed in Season 2, and the remaining two are a minor threat. In terms of plot development, it

is also worth highlighting that the aforementioned fatal ceremony reinforces Lannister rule and drives the surviving Stark children to utter despair, both of which do not effectively end until the last season of the series. Nevertheless, in “Mhysa” (Season 3, Episode 10) the ruthlessness of the Red Wedding is questioned by Tywin himself, for he tells Tyrion while discussing what happened: “Explain to me why it is more noble to kill ten thousand men in battle than a dozen at dinner” (Benioff et al., 2013, 9:26). This particular utterance is of paramount importance to understand Tywin as a character, as it succinctly encapsulates what he truly is; namely, a utilitarian strategist. Moreover, it is curious that the aforementioned conversational exchange occurs in an episode entitled *mhysa*, since the said word means ‘mother’ in one of the many fictional languages of *Game of Thrones* and it is precisely the missing element that has kept father and son apart for life.

Furthermore, the orchestration of the Red Wedding also serves to depict Tywin as a man who thinks that he is above good and evil and basic social norms: in Westeros, there exists a deep-rooted tradition upheld by most religious cults known as guest right, according to which the guest and the host must not harm one another for the length of the guest’s stay. Therefore, even though Tywin does not directly violate the said tradition, he is the one who manipulates others into doing so, which shows that for Tywin there is only one true god: gold. Thus, it can be concluded that, although the Starks were the ones who started venturing into the Lannister lion’s den by taking unwise decisions, it was the leader of the pride who ultimately devoured them.

Nonetheless, despite all Tywin’s efforts to institute the Lannister family name as a symbol that commands respect and fear equally, his demise is ultimately brought about by his own blood, for the aforementioned strained relationship with his offspring collapses in “The Children” (Season 4, Episode 10). In the first place, a bitter argument between him and Cersei breaks out: after stating several times her negative to marry in order to consoli-

date another alliance, Tywin reasserts that he will force her into it regardless. Therefore, his daughter decides to counterattack by threatening him with revealing the truth about her incestuous relationship with Jaime and their children, thus burning the Lannister legacy and reputation to the ground. Notwithstanding, Cersei never gets to materialise her blackmail, for Tywin's life abruptly ends shortly after.

A great deal of Season 4 revolves around Tyrion, for he is the main suspect for King Joffrey's assassination — as he was his cupbearer during his ill-fated wedding feast — and consequently faces a court trial. The presiding judge is his own father, and, although it is not clear if he presumes him guilty or not, it becomes apparent that he regards the trial as an opportunity to get rid of his physically flawed son. With the help of Cersei, who despises her brother as much as her father and desperately wants to avenge her dead firstborn, Tywin manipulates and coerces several witnesses, including Tyrion's former lover. Thus, it can be easily perceived that the only possible outcome for the trial is Tyrion's death, as his father plans to execute him if found guilty or send him far from sight to the Wall if he confesses the regicide. In order to avoid such an unpleasant denouement and overcome with rage and impotence, Tyrion demands a trial by combat, which he ends up losing. Nevertheless, while awaiting execution, Tyrion is sneakily released at night by his brother Jaime and Lord Varys as they believe him innocent. But before leaving everything behind, he pays a last visit to his father just to find his former lover in Tywin's bed. This is the final straw for a much-aggrieved Tyrion and subsequently turns him into a patricide on the run, after confronting his father's sneering contempt for the last time.

Conclusively — like in Littlefinger's case — Tywin's delusions of grandeur are the catalyst for his rise and downfall, as focusing on foreign opponents while underestimating and dismissing the people he was the closest with but had systematically mistreated the most was what put the last nail in his coffin.

Furthermore, it is also worth highlighting that Tywin's death can be interpreted as the beginning stages of twilight at Casterly Rock, for, even though the Lannisters keep ruling Westeros until the penultimate episode of *Game of Thrones*, the golden lion that represents their house is no longer deemed as the almighty king of the jungle it once was. In fact, the said golden lion turns out to be gilded, since Tywin reveals shortly before being assassinated that the goldmines of Casterly Rock had run dry years ago. It seems that the Lannisters will no longer pay their debts, thus entering a phase of steady decline from their ivory tower.

## 5. Conclusions

All things considered, it has been proved that the schemes orchestrated by Petyr Baelish and Tywin Lannister are the fuel that keeps the narrative engine of *Game of Thrones* going. Therefore, the aforementioned characters can be considered helpers in the Proppian sense, as their acts unequivocally drive the plot of the series forward. Nonetheless, helpers are usually characterised by their good will, and — unlike the deeds of the rest of players — it is apparent that their actions are not simply morally grey. Instead, they are clearly a display of manipulative, evil, spine-chilling behaviour, thus subverting the original notion of the helper and getting dangerously close to another of the roles of Propp's *dramatis personae*: the villain.

Another characteristic that links Littlefinger and Tywin is the type of masculinity they embody. Both characters are representatives of hegemonic masculinity, since a great deal of their enormous political and economic power derives from the subjugation of other forms of masculinity and women — prostitutes in the case of Lord Baelish, his daughter in the case of the Lannister patriarch. Likewise, Tywin is also the incarnation of hegemonic power in Gramscian terms, for he was born into and is at the zenith of the Westerosi elite ruling class, governing the continent through fear and conformity. Conversely, Lord Baelish — who ends up transcending his initial position — was not

always hegemonic in this regard: his character arc is based on a never-ending quest for power, as he began his climb as a subaltern; namely, as a minor noble with no considerable wealth, social influence, nor military prestige. In fact, his subalternity is closely connected with his childhood as a hostage, another role that he ends up managing to subvert but that greatly contributes to form his shady character. On the contrary, Tywin never experiences hostageship directly, yet he suffers and benefits from its consequences through his offspring.

In spite of the previous similarities and differences, the most outstanding and distinctive feature that ties together the characters around which this article revolves is their talent for enabling chaos. All of Tywin's and Littlefinger's concoctions, deceits, schemes, conspiracies, and palace intrigues result in dreadful consequences that render the political scenario of Westeros both erratic and unpredictable. Nevertheless, chaos enablers end up inevitably reaping the poisonous seeds of the disarray they sowed. Going back to the most celebrated dialogue between Varys and Littlefinger in Season 3, the words uttered by the latter turn out to be prophetic once again: the climb is all there is, for chaos is a mortal ladder that eventually leads everyone into free fall, no matter how many steps they ascend.

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