



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

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Othering, Power, and Leadership; Insights from the Game of Thrones Book Series

Abstract:

This work examines the book series “A Song of Ice and Fire” written by George R. R. Martin and illustrates its significance in terms of the insights it may provide to organisational phenomena. We limit the investigation to the organisational phenomena of othering, power and leadership to illustrate that firstly, these phenomena are interconnected and secondly that George R. R. Martin subverts the relevant tropes in literature (both literary literature but also academic literature) when considering othering, power and leadership to enable us, the reader, to question and reflect on our own assumptions of the links among these three organisational phenomena. Martin does so by continuously manipulating the reader’s understanding of the phenomena via his 3rd person unreliable narrators while continuously exposing and ironically appropriating the internal mechanics of othering, power, and leadership.

Key words: Power, Leadership, Othering, Organization, third person unreliable narrator

Introduction

The “Game of Thrones” TV series (hereinafter GoT) has been one of the most commercially successful TV series of all times (Armstrong 2016). During its seven years’ run it experienced an ever increasing viewership in the HBO TV channel reaching approximately 9 million in US alone in 2017 (Berg 2017); a commercial achievement that is made even more admirable by the fact that the HBO is a subscription- based TV channel, i.e. these 12 million viewers had to pay to access the GoT series. Beyond material success, it boasts numerous Emmys and other critical acclaims (Armstrong 2016). The TV series is based on a book series titled: “A Song of Ice and Fire” (hereinafter ASOIAF) of which only the first book carries the title “Game of Thrones”. The books have been written by George R.R. Martin or GRRM as he is often called in the vast online fandom forums that have sprouted since the TV series began in 2012 (Armstrong 2016), focusing on both the series and the book.

And yet, while it was the TV series that undoubtedly made the story and the books immensely popular much of the book fandom has at large slated the TV series as unworthy, sexist, and poorly constructed; one of the oldest and more organised ASOIAF online blogs called ASOIAFUNIVERSITY (<http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/>) having regular posts that critique and compare favourably the book series to the TV series. In general, the fandom has praised the books as having a range of attributes: good writing style, sharp witty dialogues, and a gamut of interesting fully-developed female and male characters. And some of the formal literary critics claim that GRRM is the most influential fantasy author since Tolkien, a hefty claim indeed (Grossman 2011).

Some credit for the literary success of the book series is attributed to the fact that ASOIAF is written utilising a relatively rare type of narration: the unreliable narrator (Grossman 2011, Jordison 2009). Each chapter in ASOIAF is written from the perspective of a particular character, and portrays the character’s thoughts, feelings, ideas and impression of the events and phenomena around him/her (Jordison 2009). In many cases the same event is shown from different perspectives, in some cases the narrators’ perspectives are so different that the same event can feel totally different. This of

course is a powerful application in literature of a constructivist perspective of knowledge generation where the understanding of the world is constructed by the way the viewer meshes the external inputs to the viewer's perspectives, biases, and history (Hansen 2007). A social constructivist perspective does not render the various understandings of the same event necessarily incorrect, only impartial, incomplete (Hansen 2007).

Through the careful and deliberate use of the third person unreliable narrator, ASOIAF allows the reader to meditate on the relevance of each narrator's perspective when forming impressions and judgements on any event that takes place in the story. GRRM takes advantage of this structure when developing surprises in the plot and like Jane Austen decades before him (Nelles 2006) he implants clues and indications that make the events that transpire surprising and yet in retrospect sensible. The surprise comes because of the reader's implicit trust of the unreliable narrator, a trust that leads the reader to adopt the character's perspective forgetting it is the narrator's version of the reality (Zerweck 2001, Olson 2003, Piirto 2002). Once a twist occurs then the reader realises that the surprises sprung onto a particular character only occurred because of other characters' evolution and personal trajectories, to which the reader is often not privy (Olson 2003, Zerweck 2001). This process relies on the reader's natural tendency to sympathise with the narrator and align their feelings to the narrators' feelings when a careful detached look at the events that are unfolding in front of the narrators' eyes would reveal that the reality may often be in conflict with the narrators' perspective. This process can be experienced in other books that rely on an unreliable narrator such as "The Turn of the Screw" (James 1995) and nearly everything written by Jane Austen (Nelles 2006) as well as feature films such as "Sixth Sense" (Shyamalan 1999) and "The Usual Suspects" (Singer 1995). However, what makes GRRM unique is that he does not rely on a single third person unreliable narrator but multiple point-of-view narrators thus bringing a new level of complexity in the ASOIAF saga that is unusual with hundreds of characters, multiple storylines and over 40 point-of-view characters.

While this article is not particularly concerned with the TV series, the commercial success, and/or the fandom (for both books and the TV series) it is, however, quite interested about the book series literary success. We hold the belief that GRRM's books are justifiably successful because they, as GRRM has put it, focus on "the human heart at conflict with itself" (Martin 2003b, p. 354) and because of this focus they hold some very interesting insights for business practitioners and organisational academics. There are a number of relevant themes we could have explored in relation to ASOIAF that could be relevant to management practitioners and academics but we will focus on only three inter-related themes: Othering, Power and Leadership; a triumvirate that (if one felt adventurous) would generate the following uninspiring acronym: OPL. Rest assured that the latter acronym we will refrain from using throughout this article.

Keeping in tune with the focus of this special issue, we would like to focus on instances where ASOIAF touches upon the three themes as highlighted above, thus enabling practitioners and academics of organisational contexts to reflect on their own personal and professional knowledge, beliefs and attitudes. we will use examples from the book to reflect on each theme as follows:

1. Othering; "the Others" are the main antagonists in ASOIAF; they are an existential threat to all humankind and yet, they are ignored by all until (if the show is anything to go by) humanity reaches the brink of extinction. Othering as a phenomenon is a continuous commentary by GRRM of the human condition and its fixation on everyday strife for power and its by-product: leadership. The influence of power is contingent of continuous othering and yet all such struggles are temporary insignificant in the cosmic scheme of things; externalised here by the Others.

2. The paradox of power; a riddle first presented by a character in the books: Lord Varys in his conversation with the Hand of the King Tyrion Lannister. The riddle is Lord Varys' attempt to elucidate the fleeting nature of power, a theme that is further explored in various threads of the book series plot.
3. The different perceptions of leadership as first exemplified by the meeting between Sam Tarly (nominally a follower) and Jon Snow (nominally a leader). These differences in perception of leader and led are present throughout the books but will be mostly exemplified in this article by examining the rise of Jon Snow as commander of the night watch and the perceptions among his followers and other observers.

The next three sections of this article examine each theme in depth demonstrating their relevance to organisational theory, context, and practice. The last section concludes by bringing the themes together in a coherent suggestive framework.

The Existential Threat of the Others

The ultimate antagonist in the book series is "the Others" (capitalised by the author throughout the book series) also known as the White Walkers in-universe. They are magical creatures that come from beyond the north of Westeros, a fictional continent where a medieval human civilisation has evolved. The Others have the necromancer's power of animating the dead and they are not us, inhuman, the Enemy. This label has been used before, most famously in the popular TV series "Lost" (Abrams, Lieber, and Lindelof 2004). However, whereas in "Lost" the others were really us (i.e. human beings effectively in the same situation with the protagonists) in ASOIAF the others are truly... Others; according to GRRM the Others are not exactly dead, they may be strange but also beautiful, elegant and dangerous (Abraham and Martin 2012).

The concept of the "Other" (though not necessarily the label) has a long literary history. Albert Camus in his influential novel "The Stranger" (Camus 1993), alluded to that feeling of alienation, of abjection experienced by his protagonist who felt the Other in every single social interaction. Lord of the Flies (Golding 1983) is another literary example where the identity of the Other keeps shifting from the dead parachutist to the unnameable shadow in the island to nature as represented by the pigs to the much more real and imminent threat of Jack and his hunters who occupy the Other's existential vacuum; a metaphysical and continuously evolving othering that both Ralph and Piggy failed to comprehend. The near-mystical power of the Other, is the driver behind the aesthetic of the sublime of the Kantian/Burkean variation (Kofinas 2017) and the main focus of the abjection theorists (Rizq 2013). The Other, this unnameable existential threat to us is indeed a powerful emotion, an evocative and powerful driver of behaviour. In ASOIAF, the Other is tangible, unshakeably real. As an influential ASOIAF blogger argued these Others are part of the Unseelie Court; the dark faeries of the legends: inhuman, eldritch slavers who aim to enslave and extinguish all life (Booth 2016).

The concept of othering, was first systematised by Spivak (1985), but philosophically it has drawn from a range of roots, such as Heidegger (Spivak 1985) and Hegel (Jensen 2011). Spivak (1985) wrote of the processes by which colonial powers constituted themselves as sovereign, and native peoples as other. The contrast of self and other has been used to examine discourse in the Israeli-Palestine conflict (Friedman 2016), the social construction of women in academia (Bleijenbergh, van Engen, and Vinkenburg 2012) in sport (Ezzell 2009) and in constructions of old age (van Dyk 2016), amongst other topics. The othering process can serve to identify the 'others' as pathologic in some way (Jensen 2011) or as an atypical departure from the norm (Vinkenburg 2014).

The contrast between self and other is similar to the contrast between in-group and out-group which is the focus of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), which grew out of work exploring the roots of prejudice (Tajfel 1974). In social identity theory, individuals are seen as seeking positive meaning through group memberships. There is a long-standing body of evidence showing that people are better disposed towards those they perceive as sharing a group membership with them, and worse disposed towards those seen as belonging to a different category (Bettencourt et al. 2001).

This concept of the Other as a subterranean threat lurking in the background is a recurring theme in ASOIAF. This preternatural threat and its connotations, extensions and nuances have profound implications in the organisational context. It is a reminder to management practitioners in particular that human nature and social dynamics have severe limitations when faced with a tangible, real, and existential threat. That latter point is driven further by the titular difference in the TV series and the book series. The TV series was labelled by the directors as the Game of Thrones and focused on human dynamics thus indicating a preference towards the importance of political machinations and military strife. The book series was labelled A Song of Ice and Fire with only the first book labelled Game of Thrones, suggesting that the human economic and political games are only the starting point, rendered insignificant when, subsequently, humanity faces off the primal powers of Ice and Fire. And thus in the book series while the various human factions are fighting their petty little wars about who is the King, who is right and wrong, who is prettier, smarter, stronger or (choose your own descriptor) the Others in the North are growing stronger, more menacing, a near unstoppable force determined to bring annihilation to all life. It is ironic, it is tragic, it is painfully human, and somehow fascinating that while the human race is busy with their petty, short-term human struggles, the Armageddon is around the corner.

There is a powerful moment in the film "Agora" (Amenábar 2009) where during a major riot on the streets of ancient Alexandria, suddenly, smoothly, slowly the director's camera deliberately pans out and on top of this conflict. Upward, forward, and onward the camera is moving, away from the streets until the people become dots, then Alexandria the city becomes a dot, Egypt, then Africa, and finally we the viewers can only see the blue planet, Earth, moving away from us. Amidst the, now, deafening silence the viewer is left with the realisation of how small the human conflicts are, how insignificant when compared to the vast cosmos around us. In a similar manner, GRRM gently yet continuously reminds the reader via the skilful use of the othering process that beyond a particular conflict, setting, or social interaction there is this whole cosmos out there which does not care about the in-groups and the out-groups...

Therein lays the importance of the Others in an organisational context. The powerful threat that the Other constitutes, is present in Michael Porter's popular 5-forces framework as the power of substitutes, those technologies and products/services that can substitute what a company offers (Porter 1985). Thus the mistake of ignoring the Others, due to their incomprehensible and terrifying nature, is akin to the mistake that Nokia made when Apple brought to market the I-phone (Laamanen, Lamberg, and Vaara 2016, Aspara et al. 2011); or the mistake that Barnes & Nobles made in failing to understand the existential threat that Amazon presented to their business model when it first started expanding (McCray, Gonzalez, and Darling 2012, Filson 2004)... It is the underestimation by all music record companies of what Napster truly represented (being the proto-social media platform), an existential threat that nearly drove the record companies to extinction (Anonymous 2006, Goolsby 2010). This inability to comprehend the truly existential threats in the environment is aptly exemplified in the academic literature by the concept of the strategic drift (Handy 1989). Management theorists have argued that organisations drift away from the external

realities that surround them (Handy 1989) lost in their reflexive, self-referential and introspective mythological structures and institutions (Philipson, Johansson, and Schley 2016, Fogarty and Fogarty 2015, Alvesson 1993, Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Thus in “the Others” lies the first major insight that a manager and corporate leader can gain from dwelling into the ASOIAF text. Oft-times an organisation can engage in its own Westeros-like Game of Thrones and may neglect the external environment which inexorably moves forward. And while everybody in the organization is involved in these internal or parochial external conflicts and intrigues an existential threat of an-other may rise that can drive the organisation to extinction.

Where does Power reside? Varys’ paradox

The Others are the kind of existential force that if successful would extinguish holistically the pre-existing order, an order that Daenerys eloquently described in the GoT TV series as:

“Lannister, Baratheon, Stark, Tyrell, they're all just spokes on a wheel. This one is on top and that one's on top and on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground. We're not going to stop the wheel. I'm going to break the wheel.” (Sapochnik 2015)

And yet ASOIAF dedicates considerable amounts of writing reflecting on the complexities of that wheel; the shifting fortunes of power and leadership amongst the main families. And that should be expected; ASOIAF describes a world on the edge of chaos and the academic literature would advise that during crisis what would be required to overcome external turbulence would be good leadership. ASOIAF presents us with various models of power and leadership, and then proceeds to analyze the weaknesses and strengths of each in a dynamic manner. We experience variations of the autocratic, feudal leadership model as represented by the Starks, Lannisters and the other great houses; each a very distinct, yet critical evaluation of the autocratic, feudal model of leadership. That would include the Starks, nominally presented as the protagonists. ASOIAF then investigates the democratic societies of the free cities, seemingly inspired in turns by Ancient Greece, Rome and the great cities of the Middle Ages (Venice and Florence readily come to mind). Then the focus shifts on the slaver societies such as the Ironborn in Westeros, and the cities of the Slaver Bay. As the story evolves the pros and cons of each system are mercilessly exposed, critiqued, and demystified. Starks may be good rulers but they are naïve and lose, eventually, ground to Lannisters. Lannisters may be intelligent and conniving but they do not instil loyalty thus they lose ground to the Tyrells. The Tyrells may be intelligent, popular, and paternal but they are losing ground to Lannisters and Aegon. The wheel of power keeps turning and turning, and turning...

Daenerys may have noble intentions to free all slaves and break the wheel of power but eventually she fails to govern and rule a single city, Meereen. In exasperation at the end she resorts to the decision that she will sow blood and fire instead, the true representative of the primal Force of Fire. Jon has all the good intentions to lead the humans against “the Others” and for his good intentions he gets murdered. His resurrection will denote the rise of the other primal power: Ice. The Free Cities may be Free but Pentos has slavery by another name, Braavos has a culture of perpetual violence, and Lys is the one city that provides trained concubines to the rest of the fictional world. This continuous commentary by GRRM about the fluidity of power, the weaknesses and strengths of each leadership and political system is a devastating critique of the tropes of leadership and power, highlighting how fleeting any purported victory is.

The conundrum of power is probably best epitomised in ASOIAF by the spymaster’s riddle. The spymaster, a shady eunuch titled Lord Varys, has a conversation with Tyrion Lannister, who at that

point is the Hand of the King, and nominally the second most powerful man of Westeros, although Varys' riddle should lead us to question this assumption. Varys is reflecting in that discussion about the precarious nature of power and offers Tyrion this riddle:

In a room sit three great men, a king, a priest, and a rich man with his gold. Between them stands a sellsword, a little man of common birth and no great mind. Each of the great ones bids him slay the other two. 'Do it,' says the king, 'for I am your lawful ruler.' 'Do it,' says the priest, 'for I command you in the names of the gods.' 'Do it,' says the rich man, 'and all this gold shall be yours.' So tell me- who lives and who dies? (Martin 2003a, p. 49-50)

Tyrion's response to the riddle is offered later in the book:

"The king, the priest, the rich man—who lives and who dies? Who will the swordsman obey? It's a riddle without an answer, or rather, too many answers. All depends on the man with the sword." (Martin 2003a, p. 97)

To which Varys' response was:

"Then these other swordsmen have the true power. Or do they?" Varys smiled. "Some say knowledge is power. Some tell us that all power comes from the gods. Others say it derives from law. Yet that day on the steps of Baelor's Sept, our godly High Septon and the lawful Queen Regent and your ever-so-knowledgeable servant were as powerless as any cobbler or cooper in the crowd. Who truly killed Eddard Stark, do you think? Joffrey, who gave the command? Ser Ilyn Payne, who swung the sword? Or... another?" (Martin 2003a, p. 97)

The point GRRM's Varys seems to make here is that there may be multiple sources of power. In some cases even the powers that are wielded via the formal illusions of political standing, religious position, and/or wealth are not enough to explain certain phenomena. Power, and its derived authority seems to depend on the context.... That thought is swiftly challenged by Tyrion:

"So power is a mummer's trick?" (Martin 2003a, p. 97)

Varys corrects Tyrion by clarifying his line of thought further:

"Here, then. Power resides where men believe it resides. No more and no less.".... "A shadow on the wall," Varys murmured, "yet shadows can kill. (Martin 2003a, p. 97)

Foucault would probably be proud; power, according to Varys, seems to be expressed via symbols and social interaction rather than solely by brutal strength; power resides in the mind of people and in the social discourse amongst people. The reflections and ramifications of this cautionary tale of power dynamics are pervasive throughout the book series as the loci of power keep shifting and their attributes evolve. Many of the ASOIAF point-of-view characters are close to or in positions of power and leadership. Thus we experience intimately this temporary nature of power as it waxes and wanes depending on the context, perceptions and involvement of the various actor networks and the particular combination of power sources which are present at any given moment.

For example, in the second book of ASOIAF an arch-bishop (a high septon in-universe) is torn to pieces by a hungry, angry crowd (a moment denoting a stark waning in the power of Westeros' main religion) (Martin 2003a) only to be followed, two books later, by the rise of the poor (the swordsmen

of the riddle) who elect in a “storming of the Bastille” moment a new leader, called the High Sparrow, as the new High Septon (Martin 2006). Thus, in a very short period of time, the same religious power goes from nadir to zenith mostly due to the waning of the political and economic powers and the momentum of the poor and the forsaken who are now putting their faith and hopes in religion.

This fall and rise of power parallels to some extent, in the UK political context, the way Ed Miliband and the Labour Party lost much ground in the UK general elections in 2015; an event followed by the labour grassroots storming the Labour party and electing a leader who was clearly not the preferred choice amongst the Labour establishment, Jeremy Corbyn (Scott-Samuel and Bambra 2016, Quinn 2016). 2 years later, and after a lengthy period of internal fights and consternation, in the June 2017 snap election, Labour made surprising gains across the country; an outcome that could not have been predicted in 2015 (Guardian 2017). It was seen as a great success for the Labour party which before had been viewed as adrift from the political realities.

Varys’ cautionary tale of the illusory nature of power plays out in modern organisations as well where we can observe this complexity of power interactions and the way various sources of power may vie for control. The organisational context often becomes the battlefield for these various forms of power. Examples abound such as Cary Fiorina who was hired as the CEO of Hewlett Packard (HP) in 1999 (Burgelman and McKinney 2006). Being the CEO put her in a position of power and yet she soon entered into a lurid and controversial conflict with the established norms and culture of the company (Johnson 2008). She faced conflict with the employees, the managers, and the Hewlett family. She was booed in stakeholder meetings, vilified among employees and received bad press in the media (Paroutis, Mckeown, and Collinson 2013, Norander 2008). The implementation of her change programme was only partial, stymied at every turn by internal and external stakeholders and the verdict is still out 10 years later whether it was an ill-conceived and poorly executed attempt of change or a heroic (partial) success against all odds in exerting power to facilitate change (Karaevli and Zajac 2013, Paroutis, Mckeown, and Collinson 2013, Johnson 2008).

Perceptions of Leadership

It is the unreliable third narrator that gives credence to the third insight gained from ASOIAF; an insight related to leadership as a phenomenon, as an act. In the first three books we have no access to leaders’ thoughts. None of the leaders features as a point-of-view character and the best we have is second person accounts from advisors to Kings/Queens or relatives to various Kings/Queens. And then by the end of book 3 the old order is swept away. In the war of the five Kings all five either die (Robb Stark, Balon Greyjoy, Joffrey Baratheon, Renly Baratheon) or retreat in defeat (Stannis Baratheon); as a result a new generation of leaders takes over and with them comes a plethora of point-of-view Kings: Jon Snow, rising to commander of the Night Watch, Daenerys Stormborn, rising to ruler of Meereen, and Cersei Lannister, becoming the de facto ruler of King’s Landing. By elevating point-of-view characters to leadership position, GRRM moves the focus from the followers’ perspectives on leadership in the first three books to the actual leaders’ perspectives of their role in the last two books. Suddenly we can read leaders’ thoughts, biases and fears as they deal with various contexts and rival-bases.

We will focus in this vignette on one point-of-view leader Jon Snow. And we will start the analysis with an early decision Jon Snow takes as the newly elected leader of the Night Watch: sending his closest friend Samwell Tarly to the Citadel (the closest equivalent to a university). The Night Watch is a black-clothed military order akin to the Byzantine Akritai that is guarding the Ice Wall on the utmost North from whatever lies beyond (which by now means “the Others”). Samwell Tarly is now

Jon's subordinate; has seen and fought the Others and he is one of the few remaining men in the Night Watch who is literate. In this meeting, Jon Snow orders Samwell to go to the Citadel in order to gain knowledge that he can bring back to help the Night's Watch in its struggle against the Others. The meeting is detailed in two different chapters, the first chapter is from Samwell's perspective (Martin 2006) and the second chapter is from Jon's perspective (Martin 2011). The two chapters, and therefore perspectives, diverge in one important moment during that meeting, even though what is communicated is effectively the same. This moment of divergence occurs when Jon issues the order for Samwell to go to Citadel, overriding the latter's objections. The perception of that moment by the two narrators and old friends is markedly different. Whereas Samwell feels that his friend suddenly changed; he has become a cold detached figure, the leader of the Night Watch:

Jon, he'd said, but Jon was gone. It was Lord Snow who faced him now, gray eyes as hard as ice. "You have no father," said Lord Snow. "Only brothers. Only us."
(Martin 2006, p. 102)

That is not the way Jon perceives the incident however. He feels unhappy, tired, irritated by Samwell's objections:

Jon was tired. I need sleep. He had been up half the night poring over maps, writing letters, and making plans with Maester Aemon. Even after stumbling into his narrow bed, rest had not come easily. (Martin 2011, p. 103)

Jon is trying to conquer his own fears and hesitations, he is trying to grow as a leader and a man:

Kill the boy, Jon thought. The boy in you, and the one in him. Kill the both of them, you bloody bastard. "You have no father. Only brothers. Only us." (Martin 2011, p. 102)

This 'kill the boy be a man' mantra is persistent throughout the fifth book as Jon meanders from mistake to mistake during his novice command of the Night Watch. In this instance he is a man who is trying to come in terms with the weight of leadership and yet he is perceived by his closest friend as a de-humanised symbol, Lord Snow of the Night Watch.

And this is probably one of the most important lessons derived from ASOIAF; leadership as an act and often an act of mummery and trickery. Melisandre, another ASOIAF character, while looking thoughtfully at the fire in her little room on the Wall reflects on Jon's leadership style. She has an interesting perspective on leadership and the sources of its power but also the extent to which Jon is able to yield those symbols of power and leadership:

That was his mistake, the false humility of youth that is itself a sort of pride. It was never wise for a ruler to eschew the trappings of power, for power itself flows in no small measure from such trappings. The boy was not entirely naive, however. He knew better than to come to Melisandre's chambers like a supplicant, insisting she come to him instead should she have need of words with him. And oft as not, when she did come, he would keep her waiting or refuse to see her. That much, at least, was shrewd. (Martin 2011, p. 411)

Thus in Melisandre's view power, influence, leadership flows from impression management and little acts that symbolise and emanate power. If leaders are not careful in using such symbols of power then they lose legitimacy and like Jon Snow end up being "stabbed in the back" by their own people. Melisandre's shrewd observation that Jon Snow is not always aware of these sources of

power provides a powerful foreshadowing of his eventual fall at the end of the Night Watch's knives (Martin 2011).

That fleeting and fluid nature of power and leadership has often been touched upon in the academic literature on leadership. As a starter there is much literature on the imposter syndrome that people in leadership roles suffer from when feeling overwhelmed by the role (Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, and Leonhardt 2016), inadequately equipped to make decisions for their organisation even in the cases where the entire organisation may embrace their leadership and worship their every move (de Vries 1994).

Our favourite depiction of the imposter syndrome can be found in the slow descent to madness experienced and written by Nick Leeson (1996). In his recount of the real life Barrings debacle of the 1990s REFs Nick had a starring role as leader of the Barrings trading team in the Singapore stock exchange where while he was leading the bank to higher and higher levels of debt he was able to hide them and declare profit. At the same time, the bank's superiors naively hailed him as a leading trader in their ranks and an organisational phenomenon and praised him at every opportunity. The following quotes from the book encapsulate the imposter feeling as well as the kind of hysteria Nick was increasingly feeling in his inexorable journey to prison:

"I hadn't enjoyed myself for about two years. I'd been fighting the most horrible secret and I hadn't stopped to ask myself whether it was enjoyable – in fact I knew it was horrible. It was like fighting a cancer without telling anybody. And why was enjoyment such a key part of working?" (Leeson 1996, p. 189)

"Of course it doesn't add up! I felt like shouting. A three-year-old could tell you that! I've conjured it out of nowhere!" (Leeson 1996, p. 241)

To the outsider I looked like Nick Leeson, the trading superstar who moved the Nikkei this way and that, the gambler with the biggest balls in town. The other dealers would see me and wonder what I was planning: was I working out some sort of eight-dimensional option hedge, which would derive profits off the back of the Nigerian copper price when put against the tomato price in Chicago? What a joke! I couldn't even get the straight Nikkei market right – it had bust me. No, I was sitting hunched over the Teletext screens looking at the football games for Saturday, trying to forget that I had lost hundreds of millions of pounds and had run out of rope. (Leeson 1996, p. 293)

The stress, the hysteria, the isolation caused by the imposter syndrome felt by a leader in a stressful position is akin to the feelings accompanying the person who is othered, whose humanity is abjected during the othering process. The scrutiny of a leader's every tiny gesture and affectation of power and leadership are scrutinised and interpreted and their interpretations of such gestures become bigger than life; the innate tendency of people to create a myth out of their leader REFs, whether in politics, religion or business. Indeed, Wray-Bliss (2012) noted that in recent decades the CEO has become the subject of discourse which draws upon religious imagery. Leaders are often described as possessing a vision, which their followers are expected to fulfil. Indeed a sizeable literature has grown up about the impact of transformational leadership, which entails motivating followers through the deployment of a compelling vision and engaging with their values (Judge and Piccolo 2004). Conversely, Wray-Bliss (2012) notes that when leaders' organisations fail, or are caught engaging in unethical or illegal behaviour, the religious language becomes condemnatory; leaders 'fall from grace,' and may be described in stark demonic terms. Both, Wray-Bliss (2012) argues,

serve to reinforce the image of leaders as omnipotent – whether ‘good’ or ‘evil’ – and robs followers of moral agency, rather than casting organisational behaviour as a collective product. That maybe is part of the reason why leaders often are the types of people who exhibit the dark triad characteristics (Furnham et al. 2014) which render them to a great extent immune to the devastating othering process the followers intentionally or unintentionally impose upon them.

The ‘Dark Triad’ was coined by Paulhus and Williams (2002) who identified three personality traits that had acquired particular attention from the literature on socially destructive personality traits, namely: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. While the latter two can exist as clinical diagnoses, the Dark Triad literature focuses on sub-clinical expressions. Machiavellianism is associated with a tendency towards cold and calculating styles, a willingness to manipulate others. Narcissism is associated with a sense of superiority to others, with a sense of one’s entitlement to being treated better than others. Finally, psychopathy is associated with a tendency towards impulsive behaviour, low perception of risk, and low levels of empathy towards others. While initially these constructs were researched separately, a growing body of literature identified the tendency for two or more of these traits to co-exist in individuals, hence the term ‘Dark Triad’ (Furnham et al. 2014). Although these traits are not desirable from a societal perspective, they may still enable individuals to rise to positions of power. Dark triad traits have been identified as occurring more frequently in leadership positions (Boddy 2015, Nevicka et al. 2011). Psychopaths, for example, have been found to be more prevalent in financial institutions (Boddy 2010). Individuals higher in Dark triad traits may be able to rise precisely because of their disregard for others and willing to manipulate, which benefits the individual with these ‘toxic’ traits. For example, narcissistic CEOs appear to better compensated than their peers (O’Reilly et al. 2014). Yet once achieving their positions, individuals higher in Dark Triad traits can do considerable damage. The Dark Triad traits predict deceitful behaviour (Jones and Paulhus 2017) and counterproductive work behaviours (Forsyth, Banks, and McDaniel 2012). Further, when Machiavellians rise to power, they are more likely to be identified as engaging in abusive leadership behaviours (Kiazad et al. 2010). Psychopathy and narcissism have been associated with gambling with others’ money (Jones 2013). Narcissists engage in more risk following ego-threat, in an effort to restore their sense of self (Crysel, Crosier, and Webster 2013). The impulsivity of psychopaths and their willingness to engage in risk that threatens others have sometimes been suggested as a contributing factor in the financial crisis of 2008 (Boddy 2015).

And there you have it... a full circle: “The Others” create a crisis that to be resolved needs strong leadership which in turn is determined by the influence and power leadership figures may be able to exert. However, once power is exerted the followers and recipients of the leader’s power, a power they allowed the leader to exert at first place, experience a change in their perceptions of the leader, the leader himself undergoes a perceived transformation in front of their eyes, becomes “other”. This is an evolutionary trajectory that is only exacerbated by the efforts of the leader to distance himself from the followers in order to be able to do what s/he perceives needs to be done; Jon Snow’s ‘kill the boy’ mantra. Of course, those most comfortable with the trappings and uses of power may not be those we would wish to be leaders: Joffrey and Cersei Lannister, the Boltons, and many others in the series.

Conclusions

The three ASOIAF vignettes present a limited sample of the potential managerial insights that can be gained by engaging with the ASOIAF book series. . GRRM created a fictional, complex world to act as

the backdrop to an existential threat “the Others” and a clear aim to expose to the readers the limitations of the human characters of the story and the dilemmas and paradoxes they face. In this article we purposefully focused on the concepts of power and leadership, primarily because they are central in the organisational literature but also because GRRM spends much of his work examining the complexities, the weaknesses and strengths of his human leaders and the manner by which they exert power and they experience conflict.

GRRM’s perspective on power and leadership is situational and broadly social constructivist. By showing the ebb and flow of power he successfully and convincingly demonstrates how leadership and the power it emanates from are fleeting, temporary phenomena often constrained by circumstances and the actors involved. When combining the three vignettes discussed in this article we gain an invaluable insight on organisational literature on power and leadership: the Others rise representing a tangible, existential threat to the status quo. Leadership is required to tackle this threat, however power is fleeting, elusive and contingent to context while the leaders that could leverage power to face off the threat are fallible, mummies of power dynamics, and only temporarily able to counter the threat, often incapable of perceiving their own limitations. And yet their followers may perceive them otherwise, the mummy’s trick works to some extent and power, at least temporarily, may be bestowed upon them.

In the end, when the ASOIAF book series will be finally completed it is more than likely that it is not the leaders who will stop the Others. It will be the collective efforts of thousands of people working sometimes in collaboration with each other and sometimes in conflict with each other, sometimes towards the common goal and sometimes spinning away from the common goal, that may just about save the world (or at least Westeros) from a zombie apocalypse. Similarly in the case of an organisation when facing a crisis it would be its thousands of employees and other concerned organisational stakeholders that may work together and against each other in order to overcome the external “Other” in order to remain competitive so that they may just about save their organisation from the possible apocalypse of organisational irrelevance.

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