The Posthuman Patriarchal Villain as Absolute Military Threat: Winston Duarte's Wars in *The Expanse* Novel Series

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The Expanse is a series of nine space opera novels—*Leviathan Wakes* (2011), *Caliban's War* (2012), *Abaddon's Gate* (2013), *Cibola Burn* (2014), *Nemesis Games* (2015), *Babylon's Ashes* (2016), *Persepolis Rising* (2017), *Tiamat's Wrath* (2019) and *Leviathan Falls* (2021)—accompanied by the short fiction collection *Memory's Legion* (2022), published by American author James S.A. Corey, the joint penname of Ty Franck and Daniel Abraham. The series—popularized by its Syfy/Amazon adaptation (2015-2022),[2] which covers the first six novels—narrates how Captain James Holden and his crew on board the civilian spaceship *Rocinante* avert the threat posed by a life-altering protomolecule engineered by an extinct alien civilization. This protomolecule, a sort of quasi-sentient techno-organism, escapes human control to build a series of ring gates linking the Solar system with 1300 planets beyond it. The protomolecule can also radically transform human bodies, an attribute which the main villain, Winston Duarte (a rebel Martian Fleet Admiral appearing in the last three novels), exploits to enhance his own body. Duarte starts his metamorphosis after winning the war against the rest of humankind for the control of the ring gates and establishing a seemingly invincible interstellar military dictatorship.

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[1] This text is the pre-print version of the chapter published on 11 December 2025 in the volume *Wars We Never Fought: Armed Conflict in Speculative Fiction*, edited by Matthew B. Hill and Leigha H. McReynolds. London: Bloomsbury, ISBN 9798765121535 (https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/wars-we-never-fought-9798765121535/). The text is uploaded in UAB's repository with Bloomsbury's permission. For any doubt, contact the author, Sara.Martin@uab.cat. Readers MAY NOT reproduce or circulate this text, which is protected by full copyright. The author invites readers to read and cite the original Bloomsbury volume.

[2] The series was cancelled apparently for two reasons: first, the episodes were too expensive to generate benefits and, second, the thirty-year time jump between the sixth and the seventh novels posed a "huge narrative hurdle" (Craig Elvi, "Why *The Expanse* Ended With Season 6 And Whether There Will Be More," *ScreenRant*, 13 April, 2013, https://screenrant.com/expanse-season-6-ending-cancelled-reason-explained/). This long gap would have required the use of CGI or prosthetics to age the actors in the three seasons still needed to cover the nine novels.

Following my own work in *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort*[3] and on masculinity and SF,[4] I examine here how posthumanism and transhumanism bolster warmongering patriarchal villainy. In my view, Corey's series is not so much a warning about hostile first contact with aliens but about the difficulties for humankind to progress for as long as large-scale aggressive villainy persists. Duarte's difficulties to remain human and his megalomaniac decision to transform humankind into a single hive entity—to defeat a second more powerful alien species—are the stuff of pulpish space opera. The popularity of Corey's highly entertaining series means that war is, clearly, a theme attractive for SF readers. *The Expanse*, nonetheless, "sings the anti-totalitarian refrain,"[5] which is also anti-patriarchal and anti-war, presumably to a readership with similar political inclinations.

Men, masculinity, and the wars of the future: *The Expanse* and the militaristic appeal of space opera

'Space opera' is a label first coined by Wilson Tucker, in 1941, by analogy with horse opera and soap opera, to deride "all bad SF hackwork."[6] Brian Aldiss's 1974 edited collection, *Space Opera: Science Fiction from the Golden Age*,[7] seemingly rescued the label from its patronizing status to simply mean SF adventure, of the kind that Lester del Rey's task as publisher (and George Lucas's *Star Wars*), popularized in the 1970s. Throughout the 1980s space opera gathered momentum, to become, Westfahl claims, "the most common, and least respected, form of science fiction," but also "arguably its most popular one."[8] By the 1990s, the sub-genre entered a postmodern phase, led, according to

[3] (Routledge, 2019).
[4] See "Decoding Masculinity in 21st Century Science Fiction by Men: Two Case Studies in Reconceptualizing Patriarchy," in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction*, edited by Lisa Yaszek, Sonja Fritzche, Keren Omry and Wendy Gay Pearson (New York and London: Routledge, 2023), 87-94.
[5] Horst Trenkwill-Eiser, "*The Expanse* or: How Holden Kept Worrying and Learned to Embrace Disunity," in *The Expanse Expanded: A Special Issue of Red Futures*, edited by James Woodcock, ed. (Internet: Red Futures, 2023), 43.
[6] David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, "Introduction: How Shit Became Shinola: Definition and Redefinition of Space Opera," in *The Space Opera Renaissance*, edited by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer. (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006), 10.
[7] Brian Aldiss, ed., *Space Opera: Science Fiction from the Golden Age* (London: Futura and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974).
[8] Gary Westfahl, "Space Opera," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 197.

Westfahl himself,[9] by Scottish author Iain M. Banks. Among the "heresies" of postmodern space opera, Westfahl names its "hard-edge cynicism (...) or even grave pessimism," and also "a universe where humans are not dominant, means of transportation other than starships, a rich texture of literary and cultural allusions and an overtly serious intent juxtaposed with a lingering aura of escapist adventure."[10] On his side, Jerome Winter, who prefers the label New Space Opera—grouping mostly British authors like Banks himself, Ken McLeod, Paul J. McAuley, Gwyneth Jones, Tobias Bucknell, M. John Harrison or Alastair Reynolds—similarly comments that "The buoyant optimism and vast immensity of traditional space operas have been deflated and downsized into a post-imperial melancholia, living in the shadow of its former boisterous glory."[11]

In the light of the genre's evolution, *The Expanse* appears to be a mixed type of space opera, perhaps of a 21st-century post-postmodern kind. Whereas *The Expanse* has no trace of cynicism and is, despite the dystopian elements attached to the Belters' exploitation, rather optimistic about humankind's future (or at least ends on a hopeful note once the villain is defeated), the series fulfills the other criteria noted by Westfahl and Winter. Humans discover that other far more powerful alien species had a significant impact on Earth's life, and that the actual rulers of the universe, the enigmatic Dark Gods, are their enemies. Starships are limited to the Solar system, until the alien protomolecule opens up the ring gates, which facilitate interstellar travel. On the other hand, Captain James Holden is not at all the cynic tough guy often found in post-modern space opera, but, as Frederick de Armas has argued,[12] a Quixotic character, with a manifestly vulnerable masculinity.

To offer some more detail, *The Expanse* narrates how the protomolecule, launched into space by an ancient alien species billions of years ago to build the network of ring gates—as beachheads for either travel or invasion —accidentally crashed and remained inert on Saturn's moon Phoebe. This protomolecule is found there in the 24th century by the Martian Government, who commissions private corporation Protogen, run by Terran

[9] Westfahl, 206.
[10] Westfahl, 207.
[11] Jerome Winter, *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism: Nostalgia for Infinity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), 6.
[12] Frederick De Armas, "Rocinante in Flight, Dulcinea Infected: Quixotic Moves in James S. A. Corey's *Leviathan Wakes*," *Cervantes: Journal of the Cervantes Society of America* 40, no. 2 (2020): 141-57.

tycoon Jules Mao, to exploit it. Protogen, however, soon develops its own plans under VP Anthony Dresden's direction, including experimentation with humans. Holden and his crew, originally humble ice transporters, stumble upon these terrible experiments in the first novel, *Leviathan Wakes*. Once Dresden and Mao are defeated with their help in *Caliban's War*, Holden's crew opposes the rebellion staged by the Free Navy of Belter leader Marco Inaros, a former key figure in the Outer Planets Alliance (OPA) and a man trying to safeguard the Belt asteroids in the long conflict between Earth and its first colony, Mars. Inaros' doomed uprising unfolds in *Nemesis Games* and *Babylon Ashes*, a novel in which he is defeated and revealed to have been all along Duarte's unwitting tool. The Admiral steals then the protomolecule, starts his own military empire on planet Laconia, and conquers the whole Solar system and the ring gates, only to eventually discover the second mighty alien species which had eliminated the original aliens. Duarte determines to defeat this other species by remaking himself as a transhuman being using the protomolecule and then transform all of humankind into a hive collectivity. Only Holden can stop him, or so it seems to both men.

In an interview given when *Leviathan Wakes*, the ninth and final novel was published, Franck and Abraham insisted that they were aiming from the beginning at the "world-altering ending,"[13] which closes the confrontation between villain and hero with the former's death and the latter's sacrifice. As Abraham explains, they wanted to lead Holden,

> "this very righteous guy with a very strong opinion and spiral him through more and more experiences, depth, uncertainty, and gray until we had him still very much himself, but at a place where he could make this impossible choice, this choice on behalf of everyone, when that's exactly what he didn't ever want to do."[14]

For Holden to anoint himself as humankind's savior, the authors needed a trigger, since heroes are characters who remain passive until they react to villainy. The protomolecule itself, though somehow sentient, is not actually the main villain in *The Expanse*, but the men whose thirst for power makes them use and abuse its metamorphic properties. Capitalist Jules Mao is the first formidable antagonist that Holden and the rest of the cast fight, but after his defeat Holden must respond to the violence of diverse military men,

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[13] Sadie Gennis, "The *Expanse* Authors Were Always Building Toward Leviathan Falls' World-altering Ending," *Polygon*, December 4, 2021, https://www.polygon.com/22816216/expanse-leviathan-falls-ending-james-sa-corey-interview.
[14] In Gennis, online.

each increasingly more powerful. The first one is the psychopathic Adolphus Murtry, a brutal enforcer who in *Cibola Burns* treats the colonists on Ilus—the first planet reached through a ring gate—as enemy squatters in the land claimed by his employer, the Royal Charter Energy (RCE). Next comes Inaros, who reignites the cold war between the Earth, Mars, and the Belt by presenting himself as a great Belter guerrilla leader that he ultimately fails to be. Finally, Holden faces a real military mastermind: Admiral and, later, High Consul Winston Duarte.

As Bellamy comments, the protomolecule "introduces radical uncertainty into an already shaky solarpolitical arrangement of interplanetary accumulation," prompting "a period of hegemonic unraveling and internecine conflict in the Solar worlds-system."[15] Before I consider Duarte in detail, in the second part of this essay, I'd like to comment on how, whereas this 'hegemonic unraveling' leads to a relatively easy defeat of capitalist masculinity, embodied by the paradoxically named Mao, military masculinity, embodied above all by Duarte, is much harder to defeat, to the point that the hero Holden needs to sacrifice himself to stop a galactic war. Leo Braudy, who has arguably written the most complete volume about war and men, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, stresses that "As the prime way of being a man, military masculinity thereby can assume the double aspect of both future goal and lost ideal, both for critics who are nostalgic for the past and for those who reject it entirely."[16] *The Expanse* is by no means nostalgic of military masculinity, but the series struggles to find a 'way of being a man,' which is radically opposed to it. Holden, a former naval officer who could be called a freedom fighter, takes pride in his title of Captain, while his civilian spaceship and crew are involved through the series in a variety of military skirmishes and battles. Raewyn Connell warns that "Violence on the largest possible scale is the purpose of the military; and no arena has been more important for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture."[17] As *The Expanse* shows and Jeff Hearn notes, "Military violence is more or less organized violence, so studying men and military

[15] Brent Ryan Bellamy, and Sean O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation: The Worlds-Systems Theory of *The Expanse*," *Science Fiction Studies* 45, no. 3 [136] (November 2018): 522.
[16] Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 7.
[17] R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005 (1995)), 213.

needs to attend to organizations, and organizational violence."[18] As such, Duarte's talent lies in the way in which he first organizes the mass defection of part of the Martian Fleet to planet Laconia, and then appropriates alien technology to enhance his own military organization, a powerful machinery which he builds along the thirty year gap between *Babylon's Ashes* and *Persepolis Rising*.

Hearn notes that "strangely, even very strangely, these two areas—of war and conflict, and men and masculinities—have generally not been put together,"[19] stressing that there is "not a wealth of books explicitly on men, masculinities and the military."[20] Braudy's volume still stands quite alone, though plenty of research on this topic is being carried out in social science articles, often by women. Kimberly Hutchings insists that "the attention being paid to hegemonic masculinity in the gender and war literature has opened up awareness of the importance of framing the world in this way for all those contributing to the sustenance of war as a social institution (military and civilian)."[21] Similarly, Maya Eichler calls attention to the fact that feminist international relations scholars are exploring how "the link between masculinity and the military is constructed and maintained for the purpose of waging war,"[22] on the grounds that, supposedly, men make better soldiers than women. On his side, Brian Ferguson notes that although the link between masculinity and war might seem to be homogeneous, there is "great room for exception and difference."[23] Since, as he observes, both war and gender are changing, "combat and birth sex may no longer attune with the conventional attributes of military masculinity"[24] in the wars of the future.

What SF has been saying about future war is varied, but, generally speaking, and as *The Expanse* demonstrates, although women are increasingly present as combatants and leaders in the large-scale conflicts that are a crucial staple of space opera, the military discourse still depends on conflicts connected with patriarchy, even though this is hardly ever mentioned explicitly, except in feminist SF. Tom Shippey believes that military SF

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[18] Jeff Hearn, "Men/Masculinities, War/Militarism—Searching (for) the Obvious Connections?," in *Making Gender, Making War: Violence, Military and Peacekeeping Practices*, edited by Annica Kronsell and Erika Svedberg. (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 45.
[19] Hearn, 45.
[20] Hearn, 48.
[21] Kimberley Hutchings, "Making Sense of Masculinity and War," *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 4 (2007): 402.
[22] Maya Eichler, "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21 (2014): 81-82.
[23] R. Brian Ferguson, "Masculinity and War," *Current Anthropology* 62, no. S23 (2021): 120.
[24] Ferguson, 122.

functions as a sort of allegory, projecting the anxieties caused by real-life wars onto its plots. Authors with open military inclinations, such as Robert Heinlein or Jerry Pournelle,

> can be seen as re-enacting, in their way, and mutatis mutandis, the kind of anxiety traumas that energized Chesney, Kipling or Wells: the Franco-Prussian War, the Boer War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, all generated fear, thought and fictional reassurance, combined in different proportions. The question remains whether these fictional responses are part of a cure or part of a disease.[25]

Darko Suvin, who also works on the same assumption that military SF is allegorical, describes a split in the 1960s between the "two souls" of US SF, "polarized" between the "warmongers" and the "war critics."[26] Robert Heinlein and his allies were exposed then as unbearably patriarchal writers by male authors like Joe Haldeman and women like Ursula K. Le Guin, in what Suvin calls the new 'Golden Age' of 1961-1974. This "culminated in the refusal of liner *time*, of technoscientific progress that led to vaster murdering, by opting out as in Haldeman's *Forever War* or by more heroic opposition in Le Guin's *The Word for World [is Forest]*."[27] Thus, discussing Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, Michael Pitts praises Le Guin for exposing in this novel "the necessary ties between socioeconomic, military, and governmental structures constituting a society and its hegemonic masculinity."[28]

Two problems, however, need to be considered. One is that, as Naomi R. Mercer discloses, the feminist utopian and dystopian novels often "depict" or "mention" war "between the utopian (or dystopian) community and some other entity that attacks the community on the basis of gender or gendered assumptions," with some novels and "the communities they depict" responding with literal warfare "to the ideological War on Women."[29] Feminism, in short, occasionally invoked (and still invokes) literal war as a solution to eliminate patriarchy, which seems contradictory because war is a patriarchal tool to regulate hegemony. The other problem is that since the 1980s, a group of now less respectable military SF authors, who mainly address a conservative male readership, have

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[25] Tom Shippey, *Hard Reading: Learning from Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 308.
[26] Darko Suvin, "Of Starship Troopers and Refuseniks: War and Militarism in U.S. Science Fiction, Part 2," *Extrapolation* 48, no. 1 (2007): 26.
[27] Suvin, 30, original emphasis.
[28] Michael Pitts, *Alternative Masculinities in Feminist Speculative Fiction: A New Man* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 64.
[29] Naomi R. Mercer, "Waging Metaphorical Warfare in Feminist Dystopian and Utopian Writing," in *Speculations of War: Essays on Conflict in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Utopian Literature*, edited by Annette M. Magid. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2021), 164.

been using Robert Heinlein's "implicit premise that scientific progress will not end war, although it may displace it in time or space" to be fought "on the Moon, on Mars, in the asteroid belt, or beyond the Solar System."[30] Since this is exactly what happens in *The Expanse*, its popularity raises the issue of where the (gender) politics of the authors lie. The thesis I defend is that, although Franck and Abraham appear to the assume that wars will not disappear, they do not attribute this pessimistic outlook to human nature but to the difficulties to stop (or prevent) radical patriarchal empowerment.

If Shippey and Suvin are correct in assuming that in SF war acts as an allegory of real wars and, I would add, as an index of whether the real-life hegemonic military masculinity is celebrated or criticized, then we need to identify the wars to which *The Expanse* allegorically refers, or connect the series to other conflicts. In the eleven years between 2011 and 2022, the USA has intervened in conflicts in Iraq (though the war ended officially in 2011, after eight years), Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Uganda, Niger and Syria, withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2021, after twenty years unsuccessfully attempting to prevent the Taliban from taking power.[31] In the case of *The Expanse*, however, Duarte's wars do not appear to be related to any specific real-life military conflict but to the changes in the US Presidency. Admiral Duarte was first imagined by the authors at the time of President Obama's first mandate (2009-2012)—during which terrorist archvillain Osama Bin Laden was eliminated, in 2011—whereas his basic characterization was most likely developed during his second mandate (2013-2017). However, Duarte became the main villain of *The Expanse* in the years of Donald Trump's presidency (2017-2021), in which US democracy has almost been destroyed through the creation of a sort of extreme right-wing hive mentality.

I am not arguing in any way that Duarte *is* an allegory of Trump (or, perhaps, of warmongering Vladmir Putin, the dictator who is dominating the early 2020s with his war on Ukraine, started in 2022). My argument is, rather, that *The Expanse* uses its mixture of military SF and space opera, with its melodramatic "world of clearly-identified good guys and bad guys,"[32] not only to showcase its anti-authoritarian, anti-patriarchal

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[30] Chris Hables Gray, "'There Will Be War!' Future War Fantasies and Militaristic Science Fiction in the 1980s," *Science Fiction Studies* 21, no. 3 (November 1994): 316.

[31] Check the Wikipedia page 'List of Wars Involving the United States' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_involving_the_United_States (accessed 15 September 2023).

[32] William H, III Hardesty, "Semiotics, Space Opera and *Babel-17*," *Mosaic* 13, no. 3-4 (1980): 64.

view of masculinity, but also to exhaust the pleasure of its readers in this type of story and help them reject entitled male fascists. Readers are supposed to hate Duarte, but, and this is quite a novelty, they are also invited to disrespect the exasperating, righteous hero and, all together, traditional masculinity.

Patriarchal villainy enhanced: Duarte, beyond human

A dominating feature of patriarchy is its being organized on the basis of power. Writing about *The Expanse* as a TV series, Ezekiel Crago notes that "The show is explicitly about power," with those controlling it using military masculinity as a useful tool "necessary for the governance of the system."[33] Commenting on the novels, Lisa Wenger Bro claims that *The Expanse* narrates "how individuals gain not just power, but sovereign power (…) thanks to the faith and devotion they garner"[34] with their promises of re-empowerment to the fighters they lead. Wenger argues that the villains in the series demonstrate "how easily political sovereignty can be abused and corrupted" and "how easily *men* can be corrupted."[35] In her view, there is a shift from "savior to oppressor,"[36] caused by corruption, which always threatens democracies.

In my own view, corruption is a fuzzy concept, which even suggests a sort of pseudo-Christian fall into temptation, when actually patriarchal villains are dominated by a sense of entitlement to power, often accompanied by moral obfuscation, by which they convince themselves that they are heroes. For the villains, power, which is always power for domination, is an instrument to ensure that their decisions are not opposed, so that they can act out on their sense of patriarchal entitlement as they wish.[37] In that sense, although Trenkwill-Eiser finds alarming parallelisms between hero and villain in *The Expanse*—"In Duarte, Holden faces the underbelly of his own political goals," he claims[38]—the two men are very different, since Holden is never attracted to power. In my own theorization of the patriarchal narrative, the villain is the center of a cautionary tale

[33] Ezekiel Crago, "Expanding the Possibilities of Manhood: Competing Masculinities in *The Expanse*," *SFRA Review* 52, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 79.
[34] Lisa Wenger Bro, "Anarchy in the OPA: Sovereignty, Capitalism, and Bare Life," in *The Expanse and Philosophy: So Far Out Into the Darkness*, edited by Jeffery L. Nicholas. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 120.
[35] Bro, 121, my italics.
[36] Bro, 121.
[37] This is the argumentation I have used in my work on villainy, already cited.
[38] Trenwill-Eiser, 43.

about the dangers of accumulating too much power, even in the context of hegemonic masculinity, while the hero is the figure who deprives the villain of that excessive power, and even destroys him, without truly altering the status quo. In this sense, the most interesting contribution to this classic patriarchal tale is the fact that Holden is neither thanked nor admired for his sacrifice, unlike other contemporary heroes such as Neo in *The Matrix* trilogy or Harry Potter. Holden is also useful to demonstrate the difference between masculinity and patriarchy, precisely because of his indifference to power. As Bob Pease notes,

> "To confront patriarchy, we must also move beyond the symbolic world of masculinity and masculinist subjectivity, which are the ontological foundations of patriarchy. (…) if patriarchy is to be overcome, it will need to address not only its socio-structural dimensions but also its source as representation through masculinity."[39]

Josephine Swarbrick has discussed in *The Monstrous Masculine: Male Metamorphosis in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* how "the male body under threat, undergoing constant change and fluctuation becomes an enduring image in popular cultural representations"[40] of a deconstructed masculine identity that clings to the posthuman to constantly redo itself. Male figures as diverse as Robocop or Darth Vader, who lose their humanity through a brutal transhuman transformation that others impose on them, tell the male spectator that the sense of entitlement he might feel as a man, if he feels it al all, is always subjected to the will of more powerful others. Admiral Duarte's own transhuman metamorphosis, in contrast, is a product of his own decisions to increase his power, once he is already the supreme dictator or High Consul of Laconia.[41] Like all patriarchal villains, Duarte must be necessarily defeated, but the authors subject him to such a radical mental and bodily degradation as he empowers himself that his death is both comeuppance and euthanasia.

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[39] Bob Pease, "Men Becoming Otherwise: Lines of Flight From 'Man' and Majoritarian Masculinity," in *Posthumanism and the Man Question: Beyond Anthropocentric Masculinities*, edited by Ulf Mellström and Bob Pease (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 232.
[40] PhD dissertation (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2021), 3.
[41] He is following a path already opened by real-life male billionaires to stay young and, their real aim, prolong their life towards immortality. An example often cited is US entrepreneur Bryan Johnston, who is reportedly investing $2 million a year in bodily treatments. See his own website, https://blueprint.bryanjohnson.co/.

Winston Duarte first appears as a nameless, shadowy figure.[42] In *Nemesis Games*, the fifth novel, he masterminds the bold robbery of the only remaining sample of the protomolecule. In the sixth novel, *Babylon's Ashes*, while Inaros decimates Earth Duarte absconds with one fifth of the Martian military fleet to an extra-Solar planet only accessible through the ring gates. The seventh novel, *Persepolis Rising*, set thirty years later, reveals that Duarte has been hiding on Laconia, named after the Greek Spartan capital, where he has built a formidable fleet incorporating protomolecule-based alien technology, with which he conquers all the ring gates and the planets to which they give access. His war is no war, given the immense superiority of his spaceships over human technology, though his devastating attacks cause countless victims. Lacking basic human empathy, Duarte blames the massacres on the stubbornness of his 'enemies' rather than on his own cruelty.

In the context of *The Expanse*, it makes perfect sense for Duarte to hail from Mars, the planet named after the Roman god of war. As Bobbie—a former Martian soldier in Holden's crew—reflects, "The only thing that prevented Earth from reconquering her wayward colony was a constant demonstration of Mars' willingness and ability to hit back hard."[43] According to a report by another main character, UN Secretary Chrisjen Avasarala, Duarte spends decades biding his time on Mars, having possibly decided in his early twenties that he would redesign human history (and physiology) with the protomolecule. One of Duarte's loyal lieutenants, Singh, reflects that after the ring gates materialize when the protomolecule escapes human control, "All humanity had seen the opportunity of new lands, of new worlds to inhabit, but alone of them all Winston Duarte had recognized the terrible danger that expansion would bring. (…) And he alone had the will to solve the problem."[44] Having secured the total loyalty of his Martian troops, who do not see his rule as a dictatorship but as an extension of his military charisma, middle-aged Duarte decides to become an emperor. Singh praises him for his ability to prevail over irrational "tribalism and jingoism," avoiding argument: "instead of presenting a logical plan for why humanity needed to give up the old national and cultural divides and become a single unified species, the High Consul obeyed the old forms that everyone

[42] The series does not openly declare whether Duarte is of Latino ethnic background, but his Spanish surname and the name of his daughter (Teresa) indicate that he might be. In the TV series he is played by white Canadian actor Dylan Taylor.
[43] James S.A. Corey, *Persepolis Rising*. (London: Orbit, 2018 (2017)), 160.
[44] *Persepolis Rising*, 398.

would understand, and went to war. Thankfully, a brief one."[45] What Duarte's followers do not fully understand, is that, as he explains, conquering all humans is just a step towards a much larger conflict, for "As soon as we knew that there was something out there, we knew that we would come in conflict with it. The war was inevitable from the second we had an opponent."[46] Duarte's empowerment, as he knows well, is limited by how long the alien Dark Gods tolerate his Laconian Empire.

For this reason, in *Persepolis Rising* Paolo Cortázar, Duarte's head nanoengineer and a devious man previously involved in Protogen's appalling experiments, starts turning the villain into an immortal posthuman, using protomolecule-modified human stem cells. In a conversation with Cortázar, Duarte comments on the irony of his own position for "I've always rejected the great-man idea (…) And yet here I am."[47] When Holden first meets Duarte on Laconia as his prisoner, he is almost seduced by the 'great man' despite understanding well what he truly is:

> Duarte was a thoughtful, educated, civilized man and a murderer. He was charming and funny and a little melancholy and, as far as Holden could tell, completely unaware of his own monstrous ambition. Like a religious fanatic, the man really believed that everything he'd done was justified by his goal in doing it. (…) As Holden grew to respect the man, even to like him, he was careful never to lose sight of the fact that Duarte was a monster.[48]

Holden warns the villain that he will fail because "You're not picking a fight with the things that made the protomolecule. You're picking a fight with whatever killed *them*."[49] Nonchalantly, Duarte replies that humanity was bound to use the alien technologies regardless of their origin and possible dangers, above all for war. Mistakenly believing they share common aims, he proposes to Holden that they become allies, "To take the shards of the protomolecule's broken sword and reforge it," turning humankind into "a single community" to "storm heaven."[50]

As part of his deeply patriarchal personality, in *Tiamat's Wrath* Duarte announces to fourteen-year-old Teresa, his only child, that he wishes her to be his successor as High Consul. The girl resists the idea, arguing that she might lack the leadership qualities her father possesses. Duarte respects her prudence, knowing that many powerful individuals

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[45] *Persepolis Rising*, 310.
[46] James S.A. Corey, *Tiamat's Wrath*. (London: Orbit, 2020 (2019), 208.
[47] *Persepolis Rising*, 11.
[48] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 252-253.
[49] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 548, original italics.
[50] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 549.

wrongly persuaded themselves that they could found a dynasty without instructing their heirs in the skills for ruling. He offers to Teresa, therefore, privileged political schooling: "Come sit in the briefings and the meetings. Listen. Watch. Talk to me afterward. This is the next phase of your education. So that if you need to step in, you'll actually be the leader they need you to be."[51] Teresa accepts reluctantly, only when her father confirms that she would take up his position only "In case something happens to me."[52] In fact, as a later scene conveys, Duarte dreams of a future in which he and his daughter will reign as immortal supreme beings, a perhaps incestuous vision. When his transformation begins to take root, Duarte argues that they both need to rule together and be "ruthless" for "The stakes are too high for anything else."[53] Teresa is at first receptive, having assumed "It's the only way we can win,"[54] though her father is less sure about a final victory. Their conversation, however, takes an ominous turn when Duarte announces that in order to be "the kind of leader that I've taught myself to be"[55] Teresa needs to begin her own metamorphosis under Cortázar's supervision. The encounter concludes with Duarte's declaration that "There's so much that I see now that I never saw before. You'll see it too,"[56] though in fact Teresa's transformation never begins. Being uninterested in power and too afraid of Duarte's dehumanization to accept the same fate for herself, Teresa stages her own anti-patriarchal rebellion. This is ultimately triggered by Duarte's ill-treatment of her secret friend Tim (actually the *Rocinante*'s dour mechanic Amos Burton, hiding in Laconia to free his imprisoned captain) and of Holden, deprived of his relative freedom and tortured by Duarte's henchmen with extreme cruelty on the wrong assumption that he knew about Amos's presence. Teresa helps both men and eventually escapes when Holden's crew rescues him. Duarte is so immersed by then into his posthuman path of degradation that he hardly understands his daughter's betrayal.

This inability to understand betrayal seems to be Duarte's main weakness. Previous to Teresa's rebellion, Duarte fails to notice that Cortázar is using him as a guinea pig for his own posthuman transformation, a situation Holden perceives early on. In fact, the captain plays the dangerous game of persuading Cortázar to kill Teresa in order to get rid of a major obstacle in his full access to Duarte. Unaware that Holden is manipulating

[51] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 50-51.
[52] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 51.
[53] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 208.
[54] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 208.
[55] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 209.
[56] *Tiamat's Wrath*, 209.

the scientist but guessing this man's murderous intentions, the girl communicates her fears to her already deeply transformed father, who eliminates Cortázar. Without the scientist, however, Duarte's metamorphosis soon spirals out of control, so that his physical monstrosity grows to the same level as his moral monstrosity.

By the time the series reaches its end in *Leviathan Falls* Duarte is a monstrous posthuman (or, rather transhuman) entity that can no longer be called a (hu)man. Even before he actually dies, Holden pronounces his epitaph: "He was grandiose. He was ruthless. He was a genius at a couple of things and under the misapprehension that it meant he was smart about everything. But in his mind, he was doing the right thing."[57] Duarte's death follows then in two stages. He abandons Laconia to control the central Ring Station and start building there the human hive mind which he needs to defeat the Dark Gods. However, when Teresa and Holden finally find him, Duarte is being destroyed by the station, by then infested by the aliens. Holden, who has started injecting the protomolecule into his body after deciding he needs to play the game by Duarte's rules, destroys the villain's mind when the monster tries to murder Teresa, while the girl frantically tries to save what remains of her father. Aliana Tanaka, a tough Martian Fleet officer and one of Duarte's most loyal servants, sacrifices then her life to destroy his body, acting out of the deep anger she feels seeing what her hero has become.

Admiral Winston Duarte is, most transparently, a patriarchal villain interested in accumulating multi-planetary power who is punished for his transgression, as he rises far beyond what other members of the hegemonic circles of his universe tolerate. Although the hero Holden uses the mechanisms of legal justice to control other lesser villains, he reaches the conclusion that Duarte is far too empowered to be arrested and judged. This is why he decides to become himself posthuman at a level that makes him even more powerful mentally and bodily than Duarte ever is. Holden does stop the Dark Gods, at the cost of dying himself and destroying the ring gate network, thus isolating the 1300 colonized planets from each other for a long time. In the end, then, Duarte and Holden come across as reckless men guilty of taking irresponsible decisions, whereas Holden's perceptive girlfriend and fellow combatant Naomi Nagata and, secondarily, Amos, are revealed to be the authorial delegates in the series.[58] They defend collective action instead

[57] James S.A. Corey*, Leviathan Falls*. (London: Orbit, 2021), 40.
[58] Mary B. Smith, argues in "Heroism in *The Expanse*" (in *The Expanse Expanded: A Special Issue of Red Futures*, edited by James Woodcock, Internet: Red Futures, 2023, 30) that gruff, former street tough and murderer Amos Burton, who is also immortal, "becomes the new

of traditional individual male heroism in the face of rampant patriarchal villainy, and criticize Holden for having taken alone decisions that affect billions. The series, likewise, condemns Duarte's misuse of the protomolecule, though the root of the evil he commits lies ultimately in Jules Mao's decision to exploit the extremely dangerous alien element to empower himself as the main capitalist in the Solar system (it must be recalled that the Martian Government asks Mao to explore the properties of the protomolecule seeking to weaponize it in its war against Earth). The message is simple but effective: surviving the dangers of the universe is difficult enough for humankind, and the last thing humans need are power-hungry patriarchal men eliciting for selfish reasons the wrath of whatever Dark Gods the galaxy may harbor.

Conclusion

In *The Expanse* novels war is most directly represented in the segment about Marco Inaros' rebellion, a product ultimately of the triangular cold war between Earth, Mars and the Belter Outer Planet Alliance which occupies the first three novels. Yet, Admiral and later High Consul Winston Duarte is the main figure in the galaxy-spanning conflict between humankind and the alien Dark Gods. Duarte understands at an early age that humans can only survive if he first conquers the Solar system and the 1300 planets accessible through the ring gates, and if next he defeats the alien Dark Gods by forming a human hive mind of even greater power. This process, however, passes through his use of alien technology to make his fleet invincible to the attack of other humans, and through his own posthuman metamorphosis using the protomolecule. The dilemma Duarte faces is that he knows that humans can only defeat the aliens by ceasing to be human, to become not just transhuman individuals but a radically new communal form in which individuality will no longer exist, except ostensibly that of Duarte himself and his daughter Teresa. This plan backfires when the aliens manage to infect Duarte's mind and body, as they were bound to do being more powerful than he is. Holden, who understands from the beginning that Duarte's method to win the conflict cannot work, assumes the burden of, if not defeating the Dark Gods, at least isolating them from humankind by destroying the ring gates, even at the cost of interrupting all contact among the human

touchstone for humanity" as the epilogue hints, becoming a "most unlikely hero." I remain skeptical about this claim.

colonies scattered all over the galaxy. The difference between Duarte and Holden lies, ultimately, in the fact that the High Consul determines to sacrifice all of humankind to save it, whereas Holden chooses to sacrifice himself to preserve the individuality that makes human beings unique. The conflict with the Dark Gods is not, then, a war in the conventional sense of involving direct confrontation in battles, but a contest of wills between Duarte and the Dark Gods. Ultimately, Duarte must be considered a villain rather than a hero because although he does intend to save humankind, he sees his own empowerment at all costs as a priority to achieving that end. He also sees the Dark Gods' defeat as a chance to establish himself as the uncontested emperor of the galaxy, a fascist aspiration that, as *The Expanse* asserts and the hero's sacrifice confirms, should never be accepted.[59]

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[59] Holden's characterization and his relationship with the persons in his closest circle are the object of chapter 7 "The Quixotic Space Captain: James S.A. Corey's *Expanse* Series," in my book *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men: No Plans for the Future* (Liverpool UP, 2025, https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/book/10.3828/9781836245704). This was published after the process of writing this chapter had been completed, hence its absence from the bibliography.

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