



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 40
Number 2

Article 5

4-2022

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Recommended Citation

Shaham, Inbar (2022) "The Wheel of Power in HBO's *Game of Thrones*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/5>

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Abstract

Maps the familial power struggles and patterns of inheritance of Westeros as depicted in the television adaptation of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series by using A.J. Greimas's semiotic square. Applying this framework to the title logo of the series also supports this interpretation.

Additional Keywords

Game of Thrones (television series); Greimas, A.J.—Theory of the semiotic square; Semiotics



THE WHEEL OF POWER IN HBO'S *GAME OF THRONES*

INBAR SHAHACD

THE LAST EPISODE OF THE TELEVISION SERIES *GAME OF THRONES* aired in May 2019, and with its conclusion, the much-anticipated question has been answered: Bran Stark is the (current) winner of the game of thrones, as he becomes the new King of the Six Kingdoms. However, other questions remain, chief among them: why did Bran, of all characters, win?

Bran's accession disappointed many viewers. Avid fans of *Game of Thrones* expressed their grievances on internet sites and blogs and in social media. YouTube videos such as "*Game of Thrones—How to Ruin a Great Show,*" "*GoT Season 8 But It's Devoid of Logic,*" and many similar ones garnered millions of views. A petition was even sent to HBO to "remake *Game of Thrones* season 8 with competent writers" (D. Dylan). By January 2022, more than 1,850,000 people had signed the petition, which claimed that "David Benioff and D.B. Weiss have proven themselves to be woefully incompetent writers when they have no source material (i.e. the books) to fall back on." Social media is also abundant with suggestions of alternative endings (Emanuel).

In the following pages, I will explain why the series ending is sound, both structurally and thematically, even though it pales by comparison with the plots of the early seasons, and has failed to please many viewers.

Firstly, we should note that Benioff and Weiss had proven themselves as excellent adapters of a literary source into television, for at least five seasons. Their main challenge during the first seasons was to select which characters and events to retain from the very rich tale Martin had woven. Readers of Martin's books complained about certain omissions, but what made it to the screen was generally considered to be a faithful rendering of impressive characters and events in the source material.

Benioff and Weiss had an opposite challenge in seasons 6–8 of their TV series: to expand the schematic information Martin gave them into a complex and gripping story. Having written five out of the seven installments he promised, Martin could supply them with no more than an outline of the missing last two books. These new creative conditions led to a change of pace in the final seasons of the TV series. Worse, the dialogue in their "independent" seasons became less and less memorable, characters began to behave inconsistently, plot holes increased, and the suspension of disbelief was

fundamentally damaged. In season eight, especially the finale, the feeling intensified that Martin had supplied the showrunners with only the bare bones of the story he had in mind, without the “meat” that had made the show so absorbing until then.

I do not intend to defend arbitrary happenings or the change of pace in the final seasons. Instead, I would like to explain the ending in terms of what preceded it. Both Martin’s *A Song of Fire and Ice* book series and its television adaptation foreshadow Bran’s coronation (see Roget). Therefore, even if Martin eventually chooses a different path from the one depicted in the TV series for his forthcoming novels, the show in itself does justice to its initial planting with an appropriate payoff. The execution of this payoff is indeed rushed, but the foreshadowing is there. For instance, in the first pages of the first book (and the exposition of the first episode of the TV series), the Stark children adopt six pups of a direwolf, their family sigil. As alert viewers noticed once the show was over, each child gives his pup a name foreshadowing his faith (Vargas). Bran calls his direwolf “Summer,” thus foreshadowing the role he will play in defeating the winter, which the Night King had threatened to bring.

In addition to foreshadowing, the ending is generically motivated. In terms of the genre of historical fiction, Bran’s rule reorganizes political power in a way reminiscent of the somewhat less conflict-ridden order that came about with the historical signing of the Magna Carta. That actual historical event resulted in a restriction of the King’s power, which, as I will show, is also the case with Bran. This similarity stems from Martin’s initial intention to write the series as historical fiction, but one of a made-up history of a fictional world. European history was his primary source of inspiration for that purpose, according to an interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine (Gilmore).

As in the original novels, fantasy is also an important ingredient in the series as a whole, and in its conclusion. The show ends with the new rule of “Bran the Broken,” who is not only a cripple, but also the current embodiment of the Three-Eyed Raven, a mighty supernatural force. However, the treatment of the many fantastical beings and forces in the TV series is especially rushed in its last seasons. They are all there—the Old Gods and the New Gods, the Lord of Light and his red priestess, the Many-Faced God, the Night King, the white walkers, greenseers, dragons, giants, etc.—but their plot lines are underdeveloped. The fact that supernatural forces are enigmatic by nature allowed the showrunners to sidestep having to delve into great detail in their presentation: the origins of their mystical powers are left vague, along with their agendas and their relationships with one another and with humans. Thus, the victory of the Three-Eyed Raven over other supernatural entities is even less explicated than the victory of Bran over his human rivals. This article will

therefore focus on pseudo-historical reasons to explain the crowning of “Bran the Broken” as the new ruler of Westeros.

Our first clue in deciphering the overall meaning of the series is in its title. “Game of Thrones” points toward the two central themes of the show — violence and family.¹ The ‘game’ is a euphemism for war, which costs the lives of thousands. The ongoing war for the throne of the king of all other kings involves several families or “houses,” each of which has local authority over minor houses sworn to them, much like in the feudal system of medieval Europe.

The narratives of violence and family are reflected in wheel imagery, among others. For instance, during her conversation with Tyrion Lannister at “Hardhome” (0508), Daenerys Targaryen employs wheel and spokes imagery in order to describe the wars among the feuding noble families:

“Lannister, Targaryen, Baratheon, Stark, Tyrell, they’re all just spokes on a wheel. This one’s on top, then that one’s on top, and on and on it spins, crushing the people on the ground. [...] I’m not going to stop the wheel. I’m going to break the wheel.” (“Hardhome”)

Daenerys adheres to her goal of “breaking the wheel” until her death at the end of the series. Other ambitious characters try to stop the “wheel,” or at least to suspend its movement, while they are on top.²

¹ Both violence and family shape the events in all plotlines, as stated by Haastrup (131). The two themes are also noticeable in the episode titles. Of the 73 episodes in the series, 28 (about 38%) have titles with violent overtones, be it personal, political, or arbitrary. Examples include titles such as “You Win or You Die” (0107), “Two Swords” (0401), “The Wars to Come” (0501), “Kill the Boy” (0505), and “The Spoils of War” (0704). Sixteen episode titles (about 22%) refer to the semantic field of family, among them: “Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things” (0104), “The Prince of Winterfell” (0208), “Second Sons” (0308), “First of His Name” (0405), and “The Last of the Starks” (0804).

² The political structure is actually more complex, more like a system of cog wheels moving together (such as the ones appearing in the title sequence), for events occurring simultaneously move individuals or specific families up the wheel of power, while moving down, or even destroying, others. For instance, House Frey, a minor house, under House Tully, is annihilated in a personal act of vengeance by Arya Stark. Walder Frey, the head of House Frey, murders Anya’s mother and brother during the “Red Wedding” (in the episode “The Rains of Castamere,” 0309). Inspired by a gruesome tale about breaking the laws of hospitality and its consequent punishment, Arya serves Walder a pie made out of his two sons, and then kills him and the rest of his family. It seems that the tale and Arya’s revenge are both inspired by a tale in Greek mythology, which also concerns rivalry and family ties: Atreus takes revenge on his brother Thyestes for tempting his wife, inviting him to a feast, and serving him a stew made of Thyestes’s sons. In Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1594), a similar revenge is executed.

By the end of the series' eighth and final season, we can try to trace the showrunners' implicit arguments *vis à vis* questions relating to themes of violence and family: What is the meaning of the wars and rivalries between and within the noble families? What is the moral value of the defeat or victory, the survival or death of certain characters? What is the vision exemplified by the complex plot, and especially by its concluding power relations? Does the wheel of power eventually break? Does it stop? Or is it perhaps replaced by another image?

The election and crowning of "Bran the Broken" not only transforms the political system of Westeros from a hereditary to elective monarchy, but also seems to lead the "wheel" metaphor to an ironic conclusion. At the conclusion, the iron throne of the King of Kings is melted by a grieving dragon, to be replaced by the wheelchair of a crippled king. Thus, the wheel of power now has, at its top, a king with two physical wheels instead of two functioning legs. Bran himself has long ago learned a bitter lesson about the dangers of ascension, after being pushed from a tower as a child while pursuing his love of climbing. Although he is now paralyzed, Bran, as the Three-Eyed Raven, has gained the ability to fly by entering the minds of animals (warging), which is even more wondrous than the aviation skills of another contender—Daenerys, mother of dragons. Bran also has an all-knowing view of time, ancient past and future events included. Nevertheless, his real power lies in his collaboration with the new members of his small council. At long last they will hopefully work with each other and with the king, rather than against one another. If that order lasts, the reorganization of political power will solidify.

This reading of the ending is obviously a modern, reflexive one, from a perspective familiar with the advantages of democracy, enlightenment, and constitutionalism over brute force. The fictional society in the series grapples with an ancient, monarchist power, leaving contemporary viewers to ponder the rise or fall of certain characters, in terms of plot and theme, and the ever-changing power relations within and between episodes. Within these dynamics, modern viewers are also invited to contemplate the meaning of various family ties.

In *Game of Thrones*, as in pre-modern societies in the real world, families shape their members' destinies. First, the family shapes one's relation to power. According to Westeros and Essos laws and customs, the heir to a family's status and properties (lands and manor) is the eldest son, as was the case in the real pre-modern world. Second and later sons and daughters follow in a hierarchic order. They are by no means redundant, since "natural" heirs face many risks, including assassinations, wars, accidents, and other calamities. The more important and desirable the property, the more the risk of dying young. Because

of the short life span of inheritors in the series, their siblings are inevitably promoted to function as heirs.

When heirs perish with no successors, or when their children are too young to hold an actual position of power, or when an heir's legitimacy is questioned, the issue of lineage may deteriorate to a dispute among several contenders.³ Disputes regarding the most important role—the king of the seven kingdoms—might start bloody and lengthy wars. Thus, the complicated hierarchy in the right to rule results in a fragile political structure, one that tends to be dismantled and reorganized too often.

This is how the war of the five kings starts, after the death of King Robert Baratheon in a hunting accident (caused, in part, by his estranged wife, the queen consort Cersei Lannister, who has preferred to elevate her own children above her husband). After Robert's demise, his eldest son, Joffrey Baratheon, should have been his rightful successor. However, rumors of him being a bastard—born of an incestuous relationship between Cersei and her twin, Jaime Lannister—prompt Robert's brothers to claim the throne. Robert's brother, Stannis Baratheon, must fight his younger brother, Renly, who claims he should rule based on his personality and political and military prowess, rather than random order of birth.⁴ Intricate bonds, self-interests, and various revenge plots add at least two other kings to the ensuing civil war.

Thus, various factors complicate what should be a simple and undisputed order of ascendance to the throne. A ruler must be the eldest son of a former ruler, or the one overthrowing a former ruler, usually by force. That is the case of Robert Baratheon, who, in rebelling against Aerys Targaryen, takes his role, and starts his own dynasty.⁵ Or so he thinks. In reality, his three namesakes are the illegitimate children of another man.

As various factors justify the thirst for power for many characters, it is useful to outline a hierarchical scale of legitimacy of challengers and their claims. Four groups of characters set their goals high and it seems that two major factors, their status in the family and order of birth, determine their place in the order of legitimacy:

³ See Dan Selcka's discussion about the similarity in the laws of inheritance in Westeros and in medieval European society.

⁴ House Baratheon's family tree is described in detail on Game of Thrones Wiki. A thread in Quora offers explanations as to why Renly Baratheon was convinced he had the right to succeed his brother, King Robert, although he was a third son, and younger than Stannis Baratheon.

⁵ See "Robert's Rebellion" on Game of Thrones Wiki for details of the causes and aftermath of Robert Baratheon's rebellion against the Mad King, Aerys Targaryen II.

I. A LEGITIMACY SCALE OF CHALLENGERS CLAIMING THE THRONE, ACCORDING TO FAMILY STATUS AND ORDER OF BIRTH

	Challengers claiming the throne	Belonging to a noble family	Place in order of birth
1	Firstborns	yes—biologically and legally	First
2	second sons, daughters, ailing children	yes—biologically and legally	may advance to being first
3	wives, husbands, daughters in law, sons in law	no blood relation, legally—through marriage	Based on their spouses
4	illegitimate children	biologically—partially, no legal standing	are not counted

The cells in the above table are not all mutually exclusive. In addition, as previously mentioned, the positions of the characters are not fixed. For instance, Robb Stark and Joffrey Baratheon are both firstborns and rightful heirs; however they die shortly after becoming kings, so their siblings move up the hierarchy of legitimacy. Loras Tyrell and Edmure Tully are not firstborns, yet each is heir to his house rather than the older sisters. Robin Arryn is unwell, both physically and emotionally, yet he is an only child and therefore becomes Lord of the Eyrie, Head of House Arryn, Warden of the East, and Defender of the Vale. Luckily, Robin's health improves as he gets older. Daenerys's mental health deteriorates, and consequently her legitimacy as ruler is questioned and then nullified. Bran's infirmity can never improve, yet he ascends the throne.

Several interesting conclusions emerge from this hierarchy. The first concerns gender. Despite the evident male chauvinism of the series' fictional world, women (as was customary in pre-modern Europe), may succeed their father's or even their husband's rule when no legal male heir exists. For instance, Daenerys Targaryen becomes (among many other roles) Queen of the Andals and the First Men after the death of her brother. Cersei Lannister becomes Queen Consort when she marries Robert Baratheon, then Queen Regent when her boys, Joffrey and Tommen, inherit the throne in succession. After the death of her sons, she becomes the queen of the seven kingdoms of Westeros. Yara Greyjoy becomes Queen of the Iron Islands once she forms an alliance with Daenerys Targaryen, before her opponent (her uncle Euron), does the same, and after her younger brother, Theon Greyjoy, endorses her election. At the very end of the series, Sansa Stark becomes Queen of the North, for she has defended the relative autonomy of the North from the capitol—where her younger brother,

Bran Stark, will rule from now on. The deaths of their eldest and youngest brothers have deprived the North of a king. Sansa's younger sister, who has also survived, is not interested in a governmental role. Thus, by default, or by clever political maneuvers, women also can become rulers in their own right.

Another conclusion concerns a less formal, but no less important, factor in the division of power: the personality and character traits of the candidates. As in real life, the potential heirs in the fictional world of *Game of Thrones* differ from one another in their levels of charisma, management skill, political instinct, and desire for power. For instance, Robert Baratheon is not much of a manager, being a warrior rather than a politician. His counselors make up for his ineptitude as an administrator. Jon Arryn, Tywin Lannister, Petyr Baelish (Littlefinger), Varys, and Ned Stark manage the daily state affairs and consequently, gain power. To his ambitious father's chagrin, Jaime Lannister, like Robert, has no passion for civil leadership, and neither does Jon Snow, who reluctantly accepts the crown in the north at some point. Aemon Targaryen also belongs to this group, choosing to become a maester and stay in the secluded Castle Black, far away from any real power. Though he is offered the throne once his elder brother has died, he passes it on to his younger brother, who becomes King Aegon V.

Furthermore, a ruler may lose his authority if his traits or deeds jeopardize the seven kingdoms or the bonds maintaining the fragile peace among the noble families. For example, when madness overcomes King Aerys Targaryen, and later his daughter Daenerys, they are both killed by allies-turned-traitors. King-slayer Jaime Lannister and Queen-slayer Jon Snow get rid of these unworthy rulers for the greater good.

In Westeros society, the illegitimate are at the bottom of the ladder of acceptability, and they fare badly, whether they are born of love outside marriage, or from connections with ignoble women. These bastards are not given their father's name but go by a generic surname, according to the region of their birth. They do not inherit land and they seldom marry legitimate offspring of noble families. The bastards in George R.R. Martin's world have a variety of personality traits and differing social status. Some are evil, as in Shakespeare's oeuvre (Meservey 56-58). The great villains of the series—King Joffrey and Ramsay Snow—are both illegitimate, and are psychotic and sadistic. Others—Gendry, Myrcella, and Tommen—are good. Jon Snow is considered a bastard even though he is a legitimate son (and an heir to the throne). Joffrey, on the other hand, is presumed to be a legitimate son, while he is, in fact, his uncle's bastard. Two characters are officially freed from bastardy: Ramsay, by King Tommen, and Gendry by Queen Daenerys.

The shift from bastardy to legitimacy is by no means bidirectional, but some parents disavow their legal children emotionally. For instance, Tywin

Lannister believes, or hopes, that his dwarf son, Tyrion, is illegitimate, and he says so to his face. He is not able to verify it with his wife, who has died while giving birth to the very son whose legitimacy he questions. Another example is Randyll Tarly, Sam's father, who despises his son for preferring to read books than to fight. He sends him off to the Night Watch, away from his land and lineage, as if he were an illegitimate son.

The rapid modifications in family structures and the division of roles depicted in the series ensure that the suspense-generating questions—who is going to win the throne and be able to keep it—will have ever-changing answers. The storyline develops according to the moves of the “players” in the political arena, unfolding one episode after the next, much like a chess game played by numerous opponents, or like a wheel with spokes moving continuously around and around. For instance, Petyr Baelish, the master of coin under both King Robert and his son Joffrey, is not satisfied with his unofficial power in the capitol, and marries Lysa Arryn from the Vale, after she murders her husband Jon Arryn. Once in the Vale, Baelish murders his new wife and becomes guardian of Lysa's sickly son, Robin. Further political scheming ends in Baelish's death, just before his desire for power in the North is also fulfilled via another calculated marriage.

Climbing the social ladder through marital alliance is a fairly common tactic in Westeros. For instance, the marriages of Margaery Tyrell, who longs to be the queen, are meant to provide her with upward mobility. She marries Renly Baratheon, and when he is murdered, she marries Joffrey Baratheon. When he too is killed, she marries his younger brother, Tommen. She has little time as Queen Consort, for her mother-in-law, Cersei, kills her, along with hundreds of the city's elite, by exploding the Great Sept of Baelor. Ramsay Snow, the bastard son of Roose Bolton, tries the same tactic, despite his very low social standing as an illegitimate offspring. He marries Sansa Stark to gain her family's power. When his father fulfils his wish and accepts him as a legitimate son, Ramsay kills him, his baby half-brother, and the mother of his half-brother, in order to become Warden of the North and Lord of Winterfell, the ancestral castle of House Stark. Ramsay is defeated and killed in the Battle of the Bastards. His actions lead to the desolation of House Bolton and his own death. Viserys Targaryen, who has attempted to gain power by marrying off his sister to Khal Drogo, also meets an untimely death. Another major villain is Euron Greyjoy, who attempts to better his political status through calculated murders and marriage. He murders his brother, Balon, in order to become king of the Iron Islands. Later on, he proposes to Queen Cersei, promising her the support of his fleet in her war against Queen Daenerys. He too, never accomplishes his goal since he is killed in a duel with Jaime, Cersei's brother and lover.

These ambitious characters and their use of marriage as a political tool accentuate the built-in tension existing in every family, including those of the series' modern viewers. The Family is the central institution for the creation and maintenance of intimate relations, and for a sense of identity and belonging, yet it must admit strangers in order to endure. Strangers enter families while harboring ties and previous loyalties to other families. For instance, according to the rules of Westeros society, married women move from their family to that of their husbands; however, their children have ties to both families. The tension between closeness and estrangement, security and suspicion, and alliance and hostility complicates every relationship. Incest, which some of the characters engage in, presents a possible bypass for conflicting familial obligations, but it naturally creates other problems, such as insanity and bastardy.

In addition to using marriage and political murder as a means of social mobility, the series depicts other methods of altering relationships and dividing power and roles. These methods involve several variations of adoption or kidnapping. Some children are raised by families other than the ones they were born into, and are veritable hostages, as also happened in the real pre-modern world. For instance, Theon Greyjoy, the third son of Balon, Lord of the Iron Islands, is taken hostage following the death of his two older brothers during the failed rebellion of Balon against Ned Stark. Theon is taken hostage by the Stark family and grows up as an equal alongside Ned's children. Later, Theon's conflicting loyalties to his family in the Iron Islands and to the family who raised him cause him confusion, an identity crisis, and lead to treachery. He dies sacrificing himself for his adoptive family, and thus identifies with them at last. On the other hand, adult warriors who are captured during battles (for example, Jaime Lannister), naturally do not go through a reshaping of beliefs and loyalties, despite their distance from their families.

Like Theon, Arya Stark is taken hostage; captured by Sandor Clegane, a.k.a. "The Hound." First, she hates him, although he treats her well. Gradually, she adapts, and the trust they share along their journey makes them partners, or perhaps father and daughter, rather than captor and captive. Brienne of Tarth tries to bring Arya back to her family, as she has promised Catelyn (Arya's mother) that she will do. Arya runs away from both Sandor and Brienne, and decides to belong only to herself (a decision she sticks with until the end of the series). The fierce fight between Sandor and Brienne looks like an ugly custody battle between divorced parents, even though Arya is not the biological child of either. The extended fight between these two superb warriors, who both have good intentions toward Arya, bears symbolic meanings easily relatable to our modern world about the deep feelings parents have towards their adopted children, over and above genetics. Even though there is no legitimate, official adoption (at least, not as we know it) in the world depicted in the series, the

fictional characters nevertheless display behaviors similar to those dealing with the realities of modern-day adoption and its consequences. Characters struggle with issues such as unconventional families, intimacy among strangers, and identity confusion. One of the main attractions of the series is the similarity between its world, which roughly corresponds to medieval/early modern Europe, and the early twenty-first century world of the viewers. Despite obvious differences and antiquated elements such as widespread illiteracy, primitive medicine, and primitive means of communication, the series addresses timeless issues such as families and politics.

Interestingly, the process of adoption is beautifully represented in the very first episode, in which six Stark children adopt six orphaned direwolf cubs. Their father tells them that each will bear complete responsibility for one cub: "You will train them yourselves. You will feed them yourselves. And if they die, you will bury them yourselves" ("Winter is Coming").

On the other hand, the series also depicts gruesome adoptions; for instance, the process by which Craster's male babies are handed to the white walkers and become zombies.

In light of the dynamic aspect of the relationships among characters, families, and other social groups,⁶ the question remains as to why the showrunners decided to end the series with the crowning of Bran the Broken, the paraplegic fourth child of Ned and Catelyn Stark, ruler of the six kingdoms.

The series ends with hope for a longer period of peace under the rule of King Bran I. This expectation is based on a novel change in the system of government that ensures that the king is now chosen by a council made up of representatives of the most important noble families surviving the last wars. Bran is also the first to rise to power without his family name. The separation from his family, the Starks, should guarantee his equal obligation to all residents of the six kingdoms. The fact that he is crippled and probably cannot have

⁶ Aside from depicting family as the main social institution, the series presents additional social organizations joined by characters, willingly or not. For instance, unwanted men or felons are sent to the Night's Watch, a military order requiring recruits to sever their ties to their families. Intellectuals can join the Order of Maesters in the Citadel. Deserters from various armies can join the Brotherhood without Banners. Northerner Craster delivers his male offspring to the White Walkers, a group of zombies that multiply by infecting their victims with their ghost-like existence. Some religious fanatics enter the Faith Militant, headed by the High Sparrow. Those worshiping the god of light share a religious belief and some of them become its priests and priestesses. The Army of the Unsullied consists of eunuchs. Arya joins a cult of assassins that worship the Many-Faced God. Thus, the power relations in the series are quite complex: influential military, intellectual, religious, and mystical units operate alongside political-familial power centers, much like Europe of the Middle Ages and early modern period.

children promises, even more than his new name, that his successor will be chosen for his or her merits. Political power, therefore, will not be the sole purview of only one family over many generations. His paraplegia is, therefore, an advantage in the new system which cuts off the king in the capitol from his previous, familial connections. Before Bran, crippled or ill rulers were rare, because of their lack of military capacity, a basic condition of ruling.⁷ Bran, however, is not only handicapped, but is also the Three-Eyed Raven, whose superpowers include vision of the past and the future; a huge advantage for any leader.

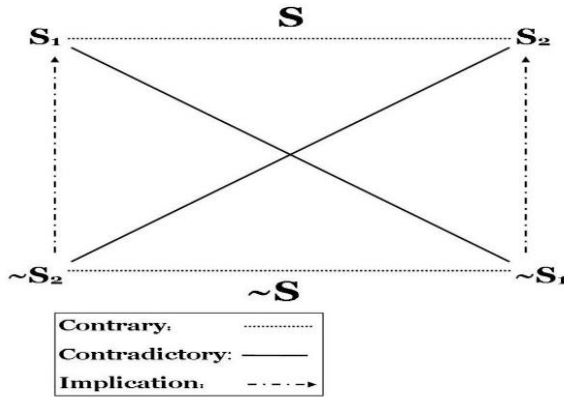
SEMIOTIC SQUARE ANALYSIS

Understanding the underlying argument of *Game of Thrones* is difficult, due to its abundance of characters and plot lines. We will therefore use Greimas's semiotic square for analyses requiring a high level of abstraction and generalization. The semiotic square was introduced in the book *Semantique Structurale* by Lithuanian linguist and semiotician, A.J Greimas. Two years later, he and François Rastier published an article in English titled "The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints," in which he further developed his analysis (Corso 73). The semiotic square is a graphic representation of the deep structure of a sign system. It is a tool to analyze contrary and contradictory relationships among signs in a system of meaning (Greimas and Rastier 87-88).

The smallest unit of meaning is the seme. The seme S_1 is the positive term, located at the top left corner of the square. This stands in contrast to the negative seme S_2 , which is located horizontally at the top right corner of the square. The term at the bottom left of the square, $\sim S_2$, is the negation of the negative and is contradictory to S_2 (a diagonal line is stretched between these two corners). The same diagonal relation of contradiction exists between S_1 and $\sim S_1$, the negation of the positive. The vertical lines denote relations of implication, thus the left side of the square includes positive terms (the positive and the negation of the negative) and the right side of the square consists of negative terms (the negative and the negation of the positive).

⁷ At least one ruler is depicted as being dependent on a wheelchair in Westeros. Like healthy rulers, Prince Doran Martell of Dorne is ultimately assassinated, even though he is heavily guarded. Prince Doran is one of many characters with disabilities depicted in the series, all adding realism to the presentation of a pre-modern era, and its typical primitive medicine. They include Tyrion Lannister (a dwarf), Bran Stark (a paraplegic), Varys, Theon Greyjoy, and the unsullied (eunuchs), Jaime Lannister (an amputee), Jorah Mormont and Shireen Baratheon (both have greyscale, a disease similar to leprosy), Hodor (a simpleton), Aerys Targaryen and his daughter Daenerys (mental illness), Sandor Clegane (PTSD), Arya Stark (temporary blindness), Aemon Targaryen (blindness due to old age).

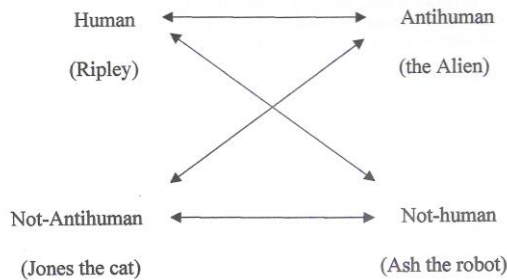
II. GREIMAS'S SEMIOTIC SQUARE



Here are two examples of studies in popular culture which use the semiotic square in order to clarify the relations among terms:

Louis Hebert (41-48) shows how the basic binary, Life = S_1 and Death = S_2 can be refined into four terms. The negation of the negative, $\sim S_2$, that is, the undead, consists of zombies, vampires, and ghosts. The negation of the positive, $\sim S_1$, the unliving, consists of angels.

III. KAVANAUGH'S USE OF THE SEMIOTIC SQUARE IN HIS ANALYSIS OF ALIEN (SCOTT, 1979)

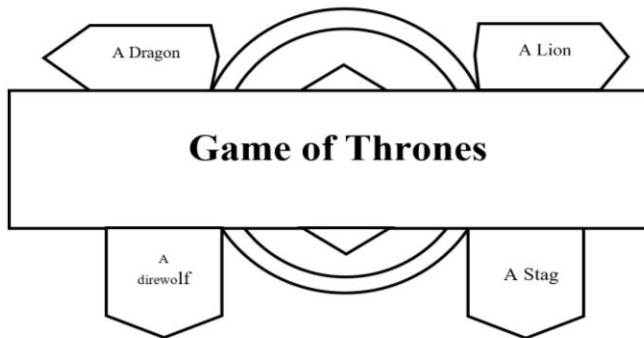


In a semiotic analysis of Ridley Scott's Sci-Fi Thriller *Alien* (1979), James Kavanagh (98) defined the positive term in the film as "human." It is represented by Ripley, who stands alone in her fight against the "anti-human" – that is, the alien. Diagonal to Ripley is the android Ash, who is "not-human," and diagonal to the alien we find Jones the cat, which is "not anti-human." Thus, Ripley and the cat, the only survivors of spaceship Nostromo, are situated at the left, positive side of the square, while the two major threats to the crew and to

humanity in general, the alien and the humanoid Ash, the company “man,” are positioned as antagonists.

Interestingly, the semiotic square can be seen in the title sequence of *Game of Thrones*. The title logo depicts four families of the Westeros elite—those with the most screen time—occupying the four corners of the logo.⁸ The logo appears at the end of the title sequence. A sun-like astrolabe's rotation ends with a horizontal band crossing a circle. Four animals are located at the edge of the circle, making it look squarish in shape.

IV. A SCHEMATIC OF THE GAME OF THRONES LOGO, APPEARING AT THE END OF EACH EPISODE'S TITLE SEQUENCE



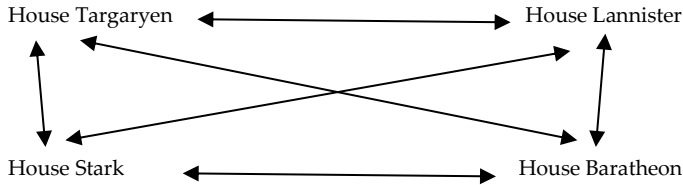
If we translate this wheel of power, with animals representing the four families' sigils, to Greimas's semiotic square, it will look like Figure V on the next page

Four sigils of the feuding families are placed in the four corners of the square. House Targaryen's dragon is at top left (S_1), having a positive value. The lion of House Lannister is opposite, at top right (S_2), with a negative value. At the bottom left, (the negation of the negative $\sim S_2$), a grey direwolf stands for House Stark. House Baratheon's black stag closes the square at bottom right, as the negation of the positive ($\sim S_1$). House Baratheon is in power at the beginning of the series—after a long period of *Targaryen* rule (diagonally opposed). At the center of the circle are two horizontal pairs of kissing birds, perhaps a symbol

⁸ In interviews, Creative Director Angus Wall, Animator Kirk Shintani and Designer Hameed Shaukat explain why they chose a three-dimensional map and medieval tools and instruments for the title sequence in order to present the various regions of Westeros and Essos. They also describe the three images on the bands encircling the astrolabe—all visually summarizing key events in the history that preceded the beginning of the series. The creative team does not address the design of the series' logo, which is presented at the end of the title sequence (Taylor 14-15).

of the much-awaited peace. The birds are separated from each other by triangular structures. The sigils are also separated from each other—each animal’s head faces a different direction from the others. Graphic detachment here implies that all bonds between the noble families are temporary and fragile. They are all prone to betrayal and therefore the social structure lacks stability.

V. *FOUR PROMINENT GAME OF THRONES FAMILIES AND GREIMAS’S SEMIOTIC SQUARE*



What is the meaning behind the positioning of each house in the semiotic square? Their placement has nothing to do with geography, despite the appearance of the logo after a virtual journey along a map of Westeros and Essos. The noble families reside in areas that do not match their position in the semiotic square. For instance, the Starks live in the North, “above” the capitol city, King’s Landing, and north of Casterly Rock, the Lannister’s stronghold, yet they are positioned beneath them in the logo. The placement of the four families’ sigils can be better understood via the values they hold and the viewers’ feelings towards them. Although each family consists of many individuals that are liked or disliked by different viewers, each family has common attributes.

In what sense are the Targaryens worthy of the positive value S_1 ? From a conservative, royalist viewpoint, the fact that they have held the throne for centuries—until Robert Baratheon’s rebellion—justifies their rule. The sympathy for the last surviving heiress to this ancient family, Daenerys, both in the fictional world of the series and outside of it, testifies to their rightful claim to the throne.

A conservative viewpoint also explains the negative value attached to House Lannister. First, they breach fundamental rules of the feudal system in which they live. Noble society is based on unions and alliances among equivalent families, yet Cersei’s children are her brother’s and not her husband’s, which, despite their surname, means that biologically, they belong to just one family: Lannister.⁹ The Lannisters’s wealth, treachery and arrogance

⁹ Greimas and Rastier (93-98) demonstrate the semiotic square via four types of sexual relations. Like Claude Lévi-Strauss, they present the contrast between nature and culture by the values attached to various sexual relations in French traditional society. The top left of the semiotic square represents matrimonial relations, which are permitted and

(befitting a lion pride) prompt resentment and jealousy toward them, rather than sympathy.

Insanity and incest (two phenomena which appear to be connected) characterize the two houses occupying the top of the square, and are conspicuous in Aerys Targaryen, the Mad King; his daughter Daenerys Targaryen; and Joffrey Baratheon. Due to this biological-mental problem, it seems governance should be handed to the houses at the bottom of the square.

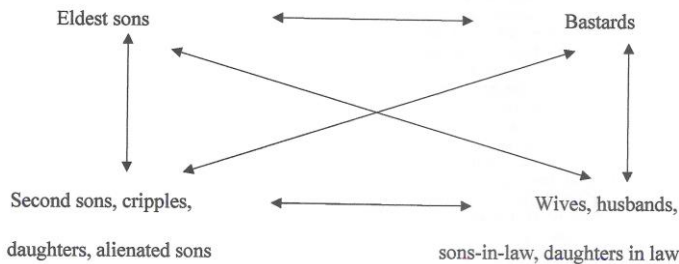
These houses, the Starks and the Baratheons, are allies, since Ned Stark is King Robert's vassal. The Starks, at the negation of the negative (bottom left), are all good natured, loyal, and honorable. In terms of the conventions of adventure genre, they are the most likely to be the sympathetic protagonists; the ones the viewers root for. Their complicated relationship to the positive value—the negation of the negative—symbolizes the North's separation from the rest of the realms. They are traditionally uninterested in conquering the capitol and the throne. A nice symmetry exists between Bran Stark's separation from his family (he ascends the throne as King Bran I, without his surname) and his family's separation from the rest of the realms. House Baratheon's position at the negation of the positive corner of the square is symbolically linked to the destructive deeds of this family's members. The three Baratheon brothers fight among themselves for the throne, and the youngest, Renly, is killed by Stannis, the second son. Stannis kills his daughter, Shireen, in a deal he makes with the God of Light—a kingdom for a human sacrifice. The deal fails and Stannis dies soon after. The eldest brother, Robert, also dies with no successors, since the three children bearing his name are not his biological offspring, and anyway, they all die young.

In the end, a member of the only family who has yet to govern ascends to the throne—thus beginning a new phase in Westeros political history. The three other families have a checkered past as sovereigns: the Targaryens are prone to madness, and the Lannisters and Baratheons tend to kill their own family members. The Starks, at least, stick together.

Within each family presented on *Game of Thrones*, it would appear that the various kinds of aspirants can also be grouped into the four corners of a semiotic square.

prescribed (S_1); the top right represents relations which are unacceptable and forbidden, such as homosexuality or incest (S_2); the bottom left is adultery by the man, which is considered non-harmful and therefore not forbidden ($\sim S_2$); and the bottom right is adultery by the woman, which is not prescribed ($\sim S_1$). Unfaithfulness of wives is deemed more negative than that of husbands in *Game of Thrones*, much like in traditional French culture.

VI. FOUR TYPES OF CHALLENGERS TO THE THRONE, ACCORDING TO GREIMAS'S SEMIOTIC SQUARE



As mentioned above, death, special circumstances, and figures with exceptional characteristics can blur these categoral positions. For instance, we tend to forget that Ned Stark became the head of House Stark only because his older brother, Brandon, was killed. Ned's capabilities legitimize his leadership in the eyes of his bannermen and the viewers, despite being a second son (in the $\sim S_2$ corner of the square). Jon Snow is the only bastard in the series to be crowned. Reaching the high position of King in the North is the result of very special circumstances (in addition to an endorsement speech by the charismatic Lady Mormont) for someone occupying the negative S_2 . Even in liberal Dorne, legally-born children outrank their bastard siblings ("Bastardy"). Of course, Jon's unprecedented upward mobility reinforces his status as a favorite main character.

Usually, norms are upheld, and even inept rulers retain their stations on the basis of birthright. For instance, Lysa Arryn is clearly insane, yet she becomes Lady Regent of the Vale after her husband's death and maintains the loyalty of her bannermen. Lysa is a *negation* of the positive in terms of command (or even self-command), but at least her status is temporary, until her son Robin comes of age.

Bran, the chosen king, belongs to the positive, left side of the square, at the bottom—a negation of the negative, rather than a positive at the top. This is because, like his father before him, he is not an eldest son. He is also crippled and a warg—two characteristics that cancel each other out. In any case, his ascendance to the throne is somewhat surprising, since he is not considered to be the most likely of candidates to win the throne, nor is he depicted as hungry for power. His marginal status in the complicated plot up until the end strengthens the feeling that the wheel of power sometimes rolls randomly. On the other hand, Bran admits he knew the outcome of the election in advance, thanks to his recently acquired "knowledge of all times," so, perhaps, the contest was rigged from the very beginning?

Bran's status as a crippled human king, as well as a mystic warg and greenseer, is intriguing.¹⁰ In fantasy fiction, wizards usually prefer to assist human endeavor as mentors or Proppian helpers or dispatchers. They seldom rule over the mundane reality created by the happy ending. Benevolent wizards, such as Merlin, Gandalf of *Lord of the Rings*, or Obi-Wan Kenobi of *Star Wars* demonstrate this convention. Perhaps Bran, as the Three-Eyed Raven, is more like Aslan of *Narnia*, in terms of his function as a governor. Sadly, both the show and the books published thus far provide too little information in order to fully examine these speculations.¹¹

As mentioned above, the new division of power between the monarch and the nobility from which he arose is compatible with historical realism (like many other events in the series, it mirrors an actual historical event—the Magna Carta given to the barons by King John in 1215).

Thus, the overall structure of the story maintains an inherent logic, even though it lacks nuanced motivation and an even pace. We can now add an advantageous position in Greimas's semiotic square to the other details which have signalled, from the outset, the primacy of the Starks and of Bran. Bran's coronation stops the wheel of power, for the time being, in an improved and hopeful new state. The tension between central rule and regional, feudal, familial rule has been resolved, at least for now.

¹⁰ For instance, see Sharland's analysis of Bran's ambiguity.

¹¹ The major battle is between the Three-Eyed Raven (summer) and the Night King (winter). The Three-Eyed Raven is a positive force, functioning as Westeros's memory. The Night King is Westeros's most fearsome villain. Created by the Children of the Forest, his mandate was to stop humans who invaded their territory. The Night King and his army became enemies of all other creatures, with a potential to realize the threat that "winter is coming," so humans and fantastic beings combined forces in order to vanquish them. The positive forces triumphed. Whether we can translate this opposition into a semiotic square is yet to be discovered. Major questions about fantastic forces remain open in the TV series that has ended and in the novels which have not yet been completed. For instance, do the Old Gods and the New Gods intervene in the happenings? And what about the influence of other gods, like the God of Light or the Many-Faced God, on the chain of events? A comprehensive analysis of the supernatural aspect of the show should wait for Martin to finish his oeuvre.

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