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ESSAYS FEATURE

How Game of Thrones Will End

Spoilers from the fifteenth century

Jeffrey R. Wilson — April 24, 2019

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I'm not a particularly vigorous fan of *Game of Thrones*, the kind who dissects all things Westeros on Internet forums. I haven't seen any secret scripts or decoded some hidden message from the books. But I'm a scholar of Renaissance literature who's taught a class on how the series takes its storyline from Shakespeare's account of the Wars of the Roses, a bloody fifteenth-century civil war among noble families in England. The House of Lancaster (whose emblem was the red rose) battled the House of York (the white) for the English crown amidst competing claims to the proper line of hereditary succession; the Yorks unseated the Lancasters only to be dethroned by the upstart House of Tudor, inaugurating a period of peace and prosperity in England including the reigns of Henry VIII and his daughter, Elizabeth I.

Jeffrey R. Wilson

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Game of Thrones gives the Starks as the Yorks, the Lannisters as the Lancasters, and the Targaryens as the Tudors, but that name game is also a bait-and-switch scandalized by the biggest twist in the series – Jon Snow’s hidden lineage – which both shatters and reorders the parallel between the Wars of the Roses and *Game of Thrones*.

I.

Most themes of medieval English royal history pop up in *Game of Thrones*: internal civil war and external foreign war, women in politics, church versus state, royal authority versus people’s rights, counsellor infighting, the line of succession, the child king, and monarchy versus meritocracy, among others. The series doesn’t adapt an objective history of the Wars of the Roses. It draws from the politicized version in Shakespeare’s history plays, dubbed “the Tudor myth” by Shakespeare scholar E.M.W. Tillyard.

Ep 185: Podcasters discuss the passing of political historian Alan Brinkley and socialite fashion designer Gloria Vanderbilt, and the historical significance of a viral BuzzFeed essay about attending a lesbian cruise

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Emily Rutherford

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My review of Naomi Wolf's 'Outrages' is now up at @PublicSeminar!

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Come for the moment I threw the book across the room, stay for the serious critical engagement from an expert in the field who read it carefully cover to cover.

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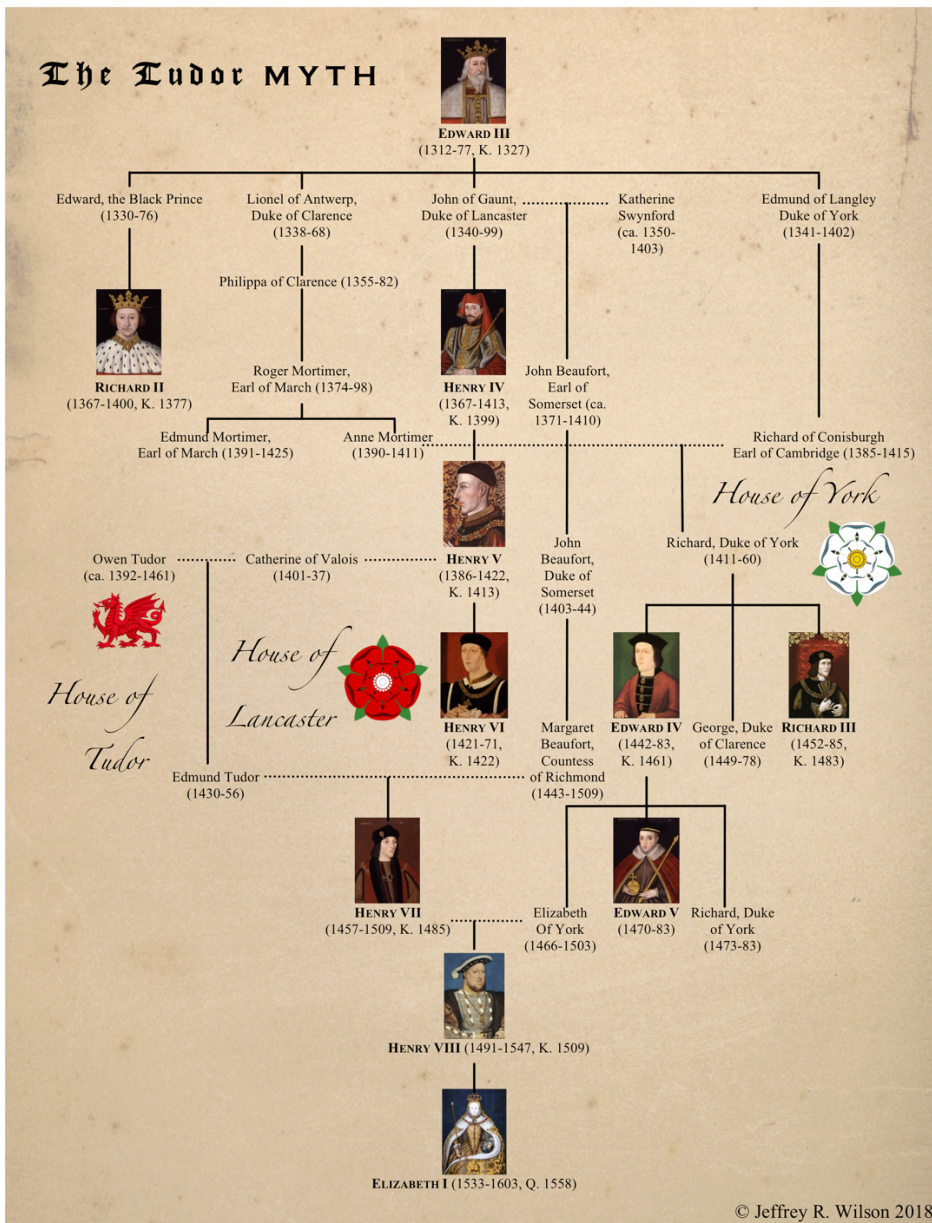
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Episode 185 of the Past Present podcast is now Live!

Alan Brinkley, Gloria Vanderbilt, and Lesbian Cruises

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The Tudor myth began when Edward III's eldest son and heir, Edward the Black Prince, died one year before his father. The line of succession passed to the eldest son's eldest son, the Black Prince's 10-year-old child, Richard II. Petulant, entitled, impulsive, weak, Joffrey-like, Richard's inefficiency as a governor raised the tension between traditionalists arguing for hereditary monarchy and innovators sympathetic to meritocracy: the child king always creates counsellor in-fighting. Richard's uncle, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, another of Edward III's sons, believing his family could run the country better than Richard, organized a rebellion to depose Richard and place Gaunt's son, Henry IV, on the throne. Then Henry's son, Henry V, became king, his reign shifting attention from civil to foreign war. He retook lands in Northern France, becoming a national hero, though those lands were lost by his son, Henry VI, as Shakespeare captured in the "fatal prophecy ... That 'Henry born at Monmouth should win all, / And Henry born at Windsor should lose all'."

In this episode, Niki, Neil, and Natalia discuss the recent passing of two major figures: political historian Alan Brinkley and socialite fashion designer Gloria Vanderbilt, and the historical significance of a viral BuzzFeed essay about attending a lesbian cruise. Here are some links and refer

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As Britain's LGBTQ+ heritage has become a product for mainstream cultural consumption, many accounts have been destructive precisely to the aspects of this heritage that make it meaningful to queer people today.

What's Missing In Naomi Wolf's 'Outrages: Sex, Censorship, and the Criminalization of Love'

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In 2013, when I heard Naomi Wolf give a talk about the Ph.D. research she was then pursuing at Oxford, my first reaction was panic. Twenty-three years old, I had recently completed what is still the most intense, all-consuming experience of my life: researching and writing a 75,000-word undergraduat

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The 19th-century activist tactic that queers should reclaim (again).

Henry VI was an infant when crowned. Again, the child king; again, counsellor in-fighting, though war against France unified the English houses for a time. After that war ended, attention turned back to civil war. Henry’s French queen, Margaret of Anjou, came with no dowry, causing discord among advisors. Factions emerged; the tension between monarchy and meritocracy resurfaced. Henry, Margaret, their son Prince Edward, and the House of Lancaster (descendants of John of Gaunt) argued for monarchy and a hereditary line of succession. They were opposed by the House of York (descendants of Edmund of Langley, Duke of York, the younger brother of Edward the Black Prince and John of Gaunt). Richard, Duke of York claimed the throne, arguing the entire Lancastrian line was illegitimate due to the illegal rebellion of Henry IV against Richard II, but the York case was really based in meritocracy: they only seriously advanced the Duke of York’s claim when it became obvious the weak Henry VI was running the nation into the ground. “This brawl,” in Shakespeare’s words, “Shall send between the red rose and the white / A thousand souls to death and deadly night.”

Pressured by the Yorks, Henry VI named Richard of York his successor, disinheriting Prince Edward and really pissing off Queen Margaret. As the Wars of the Roses erupted, Henry became the subordinate member of his marriage, Margaret a political power-broker (think Cersei) and Lancastrian military leader (think Daenerys). She defeated Richard of York — his head Eddarded on a spike — but York’s children took up the cause, eventually unseating Henry VI. The eldest York brother became King Edward IV, but further civil war ensued. There was internal tension within the York family because Edward pulled a Robb Stark and reneged on a politically advantageous marriage, following his heart to marry Elizabeth Woodville, a landless English widow. That internal York feud spilled over into the external fight against the Lancasters. Edward’s younger brother George, Duke of Clarence, defected to the Lancastrian side; he later came back. The Earl of Warwick, another powerful Yorkist, also defected, marrying his daughter, Anne Neville, to Henry VI’s son Prince Edward, earning Warwick the title of “kingmaker.” Henry VI won back the crown but, like Aerys Targaryen, deteriorated into madness.

According to Shakespeare, if you’re Edward IV’s youngest brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and you want to be king, there’s only one option: kill everyone. That’s the man who becomes Shakespeare’s Richard III. stabbing

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physical deformity symbolized an evil soul and the generations of political chaos plaguing England since Henry IV broke the hereditary line of succession in his rebellion against a divinely placed Richard II, was defeated at the Battle of Bosworth by Henry Tudor — a young Welsh earl who, on his father’s side, was the grandson of Owen Tudor (who secretly married

Coming Out of the World

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June 28th marks the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, when a group of patrons at a dive bar on Christopher St. in lower Manhattan — known then to be a hangout for homosexuals, transvestites, and other deviants — fought back against the police who routinely harassed them. The resistance kick

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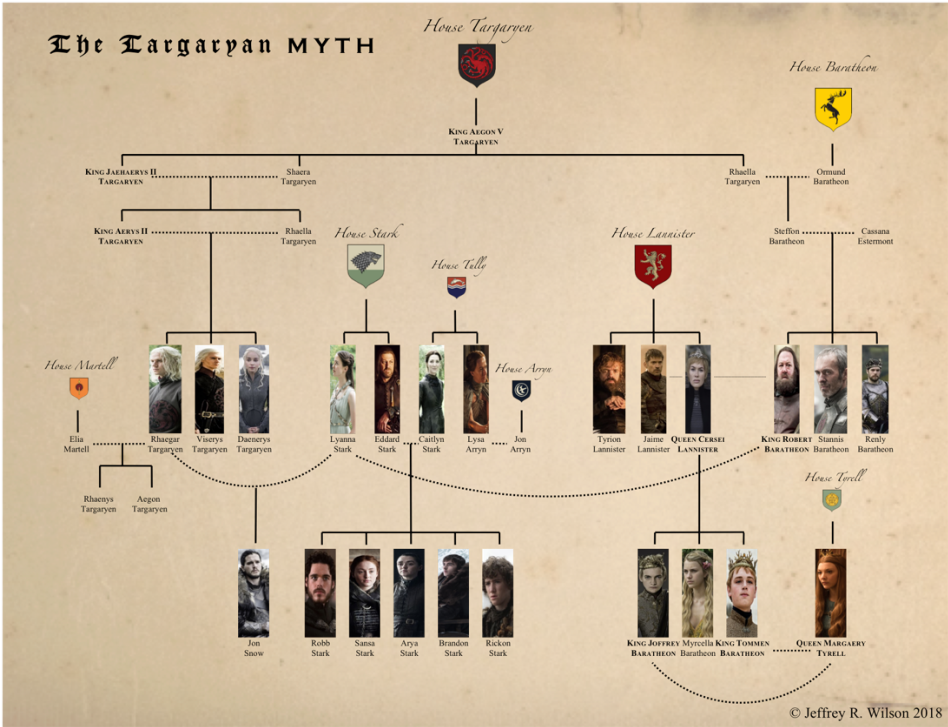


Catherine of Valois, the widow of Henry V) and, on his mother's side, was the great-great-grandson of John of Gaunt and his mistress (whose illegitimate children, born out of wedlock, were legitimized during the reign of Richard II), giving the young Henry Tudor a tenuous claim, shrouded in secret marriages and bastard births, to be the last surviving Lancaster.

Riding under the Welsh symbol of the red dragon, Henry Tudor defeated Richard III to become King Henry VII, ending the war between Lancasters and Yorks by marrying Edward IV's daughter, Princess Elizabeth. That's how Shakespeare ends the story, a mythologized Henry Tudor claiming a divinely sanctioned return to order in the House of Tudor: "We will unite the white rose and the red. / Smile heaven, upon this fair conjunction, / That long have frowned upon their enmity." Presented as God's lieutenant on earth, Henry VII established the Tudor dynasty carried on by his son, Henry VIII, and his daughter, Elizabeth I, Queen of England when Shakespeare wrote his plays depicting the Tudor myth.

II.

The Tudor myth inspired the central analogy between *Game of Thrones* and the Wars of the Roses: Starks as Yorks, Lannisters as Lancasters, and Targaryens as Tudors.



In both cases, noble houses feud for a crown put up for grabs during civil war, decimating the Lan- family. Peace only returns when civil war is ended by the union of warring houses through the marriage of someone from the –

rk family and someone from the T- family.

At first, I thought the series would end with the youngest Stark, Jon Snow (as a Richard III figure), stigmatized and barred from power by his bastard birth, turning against his own family, killing them off, rising through the ranks of the Starks, and becoming King of Westeros before being conquered by the long-lost claimant to the throne hidden away in a far-off land, Daenerys Targaryen (as a Henry Tudor figure), who would then marry one of the Starks (*Hey there, Arya*), unifying the families and ushering in an age of peace and prosperity in Westeros. But this analogy was disrupted by two developments.

First, it wasn't Jon Snow but Tyrion Lannister who, like Richard III, turned against his family and sliced through its ranks. We like Tyrion in the same way we like Richard: he's an irreverent clown we sympathize with because of his congenital deformity, and we admire him for his perseverance. We like Jon for a completely different reason: he's noble, down-to-earth, and heroic in battle.

Second, Jon Snow was revealed to be not the youngest of the Starks, but the eldest of the Targaryens. Jon's father isn't Eddard Stark; it's Rhaegar Targaryen. Jon's mother is Lyanna Stark, Eddard's sister, betrothed to Robert Baratheon but secretly married to Daenerys's oldest brother, meaning Jon is really Aegon Targaryen, the rightful heir to the throne in the Targaryen line of succession. This revelation, made in the show's seventh season, opens three possibilities for the resolution of the analogy to the Tudor myth.

First, Jon could be a Henry VIII, the child whose birth unites the T- family and the -rk family. Here Rhaegar Targaryen, Jon's father, would be Henry Tudor (the last legitimate heir of the ruling dynasty), and Lyanna Stark would be Elizabeth of York (though Lyanna works here more like Elizabeth's mother, Queen Elizabeth Woodville, a widow marrying into royalty). But many of the parallels don't hold: Henry VIII came after the Wars of the Roses, while Jon lives in the midst of the War of the Five Kings.

So, second, Jon could be Elizabeth of York, the last surviving member of the -rk family. Here Daenerys is Henry VII, descendant of the T- family. Though their families have been opposed, they marry. Their baby would be a Henry VIII whose blood brings together the T- and -rk families, ending civil war, inaugurating a period of unity and peace. The problem here is the Starks, unlike the Yorks, have no royal claim or aspirations.

So, third, it makes the most sense to see Jon rather than Daenerys as the *Game of Thrones* stand-in for Henry VII, whose grandfather, Owen Tudor, himself had a secret marriage to Queen Catherine of Valois, widow of Henry V. Jon is the last living descendant of the T- family. Depending on how

the narrative plays out, Daenerys could become a Richard III, an aspiring claimant to the throne cutting through her own family, then the Lan- family, but eventually bested by another. But it's more likely Daenerys will become an Elizabeth of York, whose marriage to the warrior king from the T- family, Jon, ends the war. The problem here is Daenerys is herself already a member of the T- family.

But it's possible the name game has been misdirection all along. Totally reconfiguring the family parallels, we can see the Targaryens as the Lancasters (the formally ruling family whose power was usurped by a rival house but whose last living descendant comes out of the dark to reclaim the throne, but under a new family name). The Lannisters are not the Lancasters but the Yorks (the usurping noble household which then experiences inner turmoil and self-consumption, including two key figures for Richard III, Cersei and Tyrion, turning against their own family, but eventually defeated and dispelled). And the Starks are the Tudors (the noble though not royal family on the fringe who conquers the ruling family, then marries into it, producing a legitimate heir, starting a new dynasty).

If the revised analogy were perfect, Jon would kill Dani then marry Cersei's baby (eww), but all signs point to Jon marrying his aunt, Daenerys (*still eww*), unifying the families, and defeating the White Walkers, who are, of course, the French: the external threat looming over the internal squabbles among noble houses. Combatting the outside enemy unites the feuding factions. The marriage of Jon and Daenerys ushering in an age of peace and prosperity in Westeros under the Stark dynasty is the ultimate instance of *Game of Thrones* being, generically, fantasy or even fairy tale rather than history or tragedy: both rags-to-riches characters, Jon is a King Arthur pulling the sword from the stone to reveal his hidden royalty, and Daenerys a Cinderella marrying the prince and — despite all the bloodshed in the show, and all the signs suggesting this simply isn't possible in the world of *Game of Thrones* — they will live happily ever after.

Jeffrey R. Wilson is a faculty member in the Writing Program at Harvard University, where he teaches the Why Shakespeare? section of the University's first-year writing course. His first book, Shakespeare and Trump, is forthcoming from Temple University Press. Focused on intersections of Renaissance literature and modern sociology, his work has appeared in academic as well as in public venues like National Public Radio, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Academe, The Smart Set, and CounterPunch. He is on Twitter @DrJeffreyWilson.

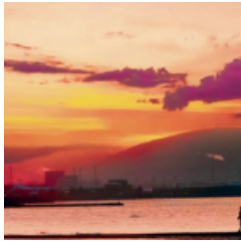
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Jeffrey R. Wilson · a month ago

Two quick notes from me, the author:

(1) I did slip up and call Jon the youngest Stark when I meant the furthest in the line of succession.

(2) After the series ended, I posted some updates here:

<https://mobile.twitter.com/...>

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Szűcs Zoltán Gábor · 2 months ago

I liked this piece a lot. But it should be read with some caveat. First, it contains some disturbingly imprecise information about the storyline of the series (Jon is not "the youngest of the Starks" in any sense, for instance). Second, it overstretches the analogy between the War of the Roses and Martin's novels. The Targaryens

had been the legitimate dynasty and they were replaced by the Baratheons who had a weak, but not unsubstantiated claim for the Iron Throne. Neither the Lannisters nor the Starks were aspiring to the Iron Throne, just powerful feudal houses. It is very probable that Martin actually used extensively other examples of French 14th century and The Anarchy, the history of the ascendance, not the fall of the Plantagenet dynasty as his raw material,

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