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Discerning the Future:
Prophecy in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and
Fire*

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Abstract

A Song of Ice and Fire (1996-Present) is a series of fantasy books written by George R.R. Martin. In this series, the concept of 'prophecy' plays a major role, as it does in many works of literature, both within the fantasy genre and in literary fiction in general. This essay defines prophecy in a literary context, looking at how prophecies are used to drive a narrative and what other purposes the inclusion of prophecies may serve in any given story. These definitions are then applied to *A Song of Ice and Fire* in order to analyze the ways in which George R.R. Martin both conforms to and breaks with literary conventions relating to the concept of prophecy. The conclusion is made that Martin weaves prophecy into the fabric of his story in a way that is all-encompassing: prophecy stands at the center of the narrative and affects it on nearly every level.

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Introduction

A Song of Ice and Fire (shortened to *Song* from here on out) is a series of novels (with five having currently been released out of a planned seven), written by George R. R. Martin. The novels are set in a fictional world, the name of which is never mentioned in the books themselves, and which has not been given a specific name by the author. The series deals mainly with the struggle for power between several would-be kings on the continent of Westeros, in the aftermath of the death of the previous regent. The landmass of Westeros is covered almost entirely by the ‘Seven Kingdoms’. This is a singular nation which is made up of smaller states which were at one time independent, but which is united and stable at the beginning of the story. The culture of the Seven Kingdoms is akin to that of medieval Europe.

Whilst war ravages the land, an ancient evil has awakened in the far north of Westeros to, yet again, threaten the realms of men. At the same time, to the east, on the continent of Essos, the children of a deposed former king of Westeros plot their return to that continent, and to the positions of power which they view as their birthright. In the chaos of war, religious movements thrive, and ancient prophecies telling of a ‘prince that was promised’ (*Storm/Blood* 307) and of ‘Azor Ahai’, who will stand against the darkness with a flaming sword (*Clash* 148), become entwined in the power struggle as political tools. Magical forces stir, and many characters find themselves as pawns of prophecy and religion, or the recipients of personal visions depicting past, present and future.

‘Prophecy’ is a concept which has its roots in religion and superstition. The origins and meaning of the very word itself are tied to, and partly defined as, the espousal of divinely and biblically inspired predictions of the future (“Prophecy”, *OED online*). The concept of predicting the future itself, through widely differing means, is not exclusively connected to any one religion or culture, however. In the western canon in particular, it has mainly, due to the influence of that religion upon the Western world, become entwined with Christianity, although the concept is also present in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, both of which have also had a strong impact on western culture.

As Christianity in general has had a great influence upon the English-speaking world and the literature produced in and by it, so the theological concept of prophecy has made its way into many a work of English literary fiction. The purpose which prophecy serves in any given work is, naturally, like any literary trope, something which varies greatly. It is, however, a

concept which plays an important, if differing, part in works ranging from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *Song*, prophecies abound, but they can very often apply to multiple characters, and exactly to whom they refer is often unclear. There are prophecies which have their roots in the fictional history of the world in which the books take place, being tied up in the religions of that world. These prophecies thus end up serving as a mirror to the theologically based, often apocalyptic, prophecies of our own world. There are also prophecies which work on a more personal level, being told to a single person in a way which is more similar to what one might call fortune-telling, and which draw strong parallels to the previously mentioned *Macbeth*. There are also those which appear to characters as visions, or dreams. All of these are methods, or ways, to relay some foreknowledge of the future of a single person, or of multiple people, and can all fall under the broad banner of 'prophecy', depending on how that concept is defined. The purpose, or purposes, which these prophecies serve in the story is generally not something which is immediately obvious; instead, they act as foreshadowing, hinting at what is to come.

This essay will examine the concept of prophecy such as it pertains to literature, looking at the different forms prophecy can take in a narrative, and the purpose, or purposes, behind the inclusion of prophecies in stories. Relevant terms and concepts will be defined, with the focus put mainly on the genre of fantasy, and these will then be specifically applied to *A Song of Ice and Fire* in order to answer the following questions: in what ways are prophecies actively used as narrative devices in the books? What forms do they take in the story? What purpose, or purposes, do the prophecies serve? How does Martin's use of prophecy differ from or conform with common conventions of fiction in general? How does his use differ from fantasy literature in particular?

The aim of this essay is not to argue the validity of specific prophecies in the story of *Song* itself. Since the series has yet to be concluded, there are no concrete answers to be found in the books themselves to questions regarding the fulfillment of many of the prophecies which are present in it. Instead, this essay will, as stated above, focus on prophecy as a narrative device. It will be argued that, in *Song*, George R.R. Martin draws on facets of real world theological and philosophical concepts relating to prophecy, and makes use of tropes of both the fantasy genre and literature in general which, in part, trace their roots to these same concepts. Martin does this in a way which ultimately both makes straightforward use of many of these tropes and subverts them; the value and validity of prophecy in *Song* is, even in a world where magic actually exists, highly questionable. The use of these tropes in the story thus

serves, at least in part, a different purpose than it does in many other works of fantasy, such as *the Lord of the Rings*, and in other works of English literature. Prophecies do not predict events, at least not in any straightforward sense, in *Song*. For both the reader and the characters, they cause confusion far more often than they provide clarity. They provide thematic depth, but complicate the narrative, and confuse the reader, rather than providing any sort of blueprint for what is yet to come.

Defining prophecy in a literary context

‘Prophecy’, attempting to predict the future through the channeling of some sort of higher power or magical force, often by an individual but sometimes by a group of people, in order to receive some sort of portent or glimpse of that future from said power or force, is something of a universal concept. Most, if not all, cultures around the world have their own versions of this concept, the art of prediction. The distinction between a term such as ‘Prophecy’ and similar practices, like divination and fortune-telling, is often somewhat difficult to make, however. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines prophecy as “1.a: That which is done or spoken by a prophet; the action or practice of revealing or expressing the will or thought of God or of a god; divinely inspired utterance or discourse”, but directly below this definition also notes that “The revelation or prediction of the future is often regarded as an essential element of prophecy; the more general sense is now largely confined to specialist contexts”. This latter interpretation of the terms is the one which will be used throughout this essay. Divination is defined as “1: The action or practice of divining; the foretelling of future events or discovery of what is hidden or obscure by supernatural or magical means; soothsaying, augury, prophecy”, and fortune-telling simply as “The practice of ‘telling fortunes’”. Originally, prophecy is thus the supposed direct word of God, given to humans to guide them, whilst divination is an art practiced by humans, in an attempt to channel a spirit, or something similar, in order to scry, or otherwise discern, the future. ‘Divination’ and ‘fortune-telling’ are in this sense more closely related, whilst ‘Prophecy’ stands somewhat apart, being more closely related to the theology of the Abrahamic religions. These definitions vary from culture to culture, and whilst Christianity, for example, is opposed to the former two concepts, other religions make other distinctions.

While the difference between these concepts is vital to understanding ‘prophecy’ as it exists in our world, such definitions are ultimately more relevant in a theological discussion

than in one pertaining to literature. The main purpose of this essay is to apply the term ‘prophecy’ in a broader sense; one which also includes the, theologically speaking, ‘lesser’ forms of future-prediction mentioned above, and ultimately covers all forms of insight into the future by a human being, regardless of source and/or method. Certainly, one could make the case that, in a fantasy universe with different rules than those of our own, the distinction between these very similar concepts and terms is meaningless. What ultimately matters is whether or not these concepts are used interchangeably in literature, and whether or not there is a reason to separate them outside of a real-world theological context.

The strictly theological definition of prophecy does undeniably function in a very different way when placed in a fantastical context, and some authors make use of the freedom of a fantastical, limitless world to examine the theological concept in that new context, i.e. exploring the ‘fantasy of religion’ (Sleight 249), allowing for discussion and dissection of complex theological questions. Not all authors who make use of the concept of prophecy do so for philosophically or theologically motivated reasons, however. Prophecy, and many other terms which originally stem from religion and/or superstition, have become tropes of literature, often serving purposes no higher than fulfilling a function in the story being told, or simply evoking those feelings and associations one might, as a reader, connect with the religious through the short-hand of these tropes. In so doing, the author makes both the story itself and the world in which it takes place seem deeper.

Defining ‘prophecy’ as a theological and philosophical concept is thus largely irrelevant in regards to this essay, the purpose of which is not to add to any theological discussion. Examining ‘prophecy’ as a literary device, however, is another matter altogether. A reader of a book is often privy to something akin to an objective ‘truth’ in regards to happenings within the universe of the book he or she is reading, at least up to a point. This holds especially true for novels which are set in worlds other than our own. In these novels, the reader knows only what they are told, having no outside information to draw on to contradict the happenings and the information in the novel, although they will often have certain expectations arising from previous encounters with the genre and its tropes. Whilst unreliable narrators and other such narrative choices on the part of the author can occasionally make things less clear, ‘prophecy’, as a part of the cultural, historical, religious and even political make-up of a fictional world, functions in a fundamentally different way as compared to the way it does in our world.

Applying the concept of ‘prophecy’ to the sub-genre of fantasy which is loosely defined as ‘portal-quest Fantasy’ by Mendehlon (1-58), but is also known as ‘high fantasy’, ‘epic

fantasy' etc., and which takes place in a world completely, or almost completely, separate from our own, allows for a separation from real-world theology and history. Whilst the authors of books in this genre are naturally going to be influenced by these fields of study, the very act of separating their stories from our universe allows for freedom to make use of and define concepts, which might have different meanings in the real world, on their own terms. What then becomes interesting is the way in which the author of a particular work makes use of certain ideas and terms as compared to previous, earlier writers, and the potential reasons which might lie behind the inclusion of those ideas and terms.

'Prophecy' is, as mentioned above, something of a universal concept. It has appeared in literature since some of the very earliest of human writings. *Oedipus* is a very early and widely known example of a story in which 'prophecy' plays an important role; more specifically, in this case, the 'self-fulfilling prophecy', which will be discussed more in-depth later on in this essay. The old testament of the Abrahamic religions is even older than *Oedipus*, of course, and also includes prophecies. Stepping forward a bit chronologically, one can see that Shakespeare, too, one of the most important writers in the English literary canon, made use of the concept in several of his plays, including *Macbeth* and *Richard III*. The titular character of the latter makes active use of prophecy in his evil machinations, and the former is driven to commit heinous acts due to prophetically promised glory and success (Farrell 18).

E.M. Forster also discusses the concepts of 'fantasy' and 'prophecy' in a series of lectures published in the 1920s, a time which predates the fantasy genre upon which this essay's main focus lies. Forster focuses mainly on the way it adds thematic depth and makes the mundane 'fantastical' (Kar-Man 18). The value and validity this view of prophecy possesses when placed in the context of the already 'fantastical' fantasy genre is, perhaps, not immediately apparent. Whilst the fantastical might already exist, however, adding a layer of the prophetic and mystical to a story, even one which already includes arcane, magical elements, undoubtedly adds depth to that story. This holds true even if that depth simply ends up being a few more threads in the religious and historical tapestry of the fictional world in which it is set. More interesting, in regard to the focus of this essay, than Forster's musings on the philosophical and thematic aspects of what he terms 'prophetic writing', is his constant driving home of the point that prophecy is a 'song', or an 'accent in the novelist's voice' (Forster 181). This echoes the very title of the book series which will be analyzed in this essay, and potentially discloses how very central prophecy is to the themes and the story of that series.

The entry on ‘Prophecy’ on *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* makes the claim that, in the fantasy genre in particular, a foretelling or prophecy must come true if it is introduced or mentioned in the story; a prophecy is never simply wrong, and it never applies to a character, time or place which is irrelevant to the story being told. This would of course hold true for self-fulfilling prophecies in particular; the prophecies which serve the narrative purpose of being both the driving force behind, and the ultimate goal of, the story. For other types of prophecy, this might still hold true generally, but it limits the possibility of subversion in the fantasy genre because it excludes the potential for a prophecy to be included in a given work in order to act as a red herring, or something similar. It is something which certainly holds true for many a work of fantasy, but one should be careful when making generalizations of this kind.

To analyze ‘prophecy’ as a trope and narrative tool in any meaningful way, one must, as a first step, define both different sub-categories of ‘prophecy’, i.e. ‘types of prophecies’, on the one hand, and different narrative uses of ‘prophecy’, i.e. ‘ways in which prophecy is used as a narrative device’, on the other. These two different factors, when viewed in tandem, reveal the true role of any particular prophecy when applied to it, both within the story and without, i.e. for the characters on the one hand, and for the readers on the other. Thus, for the purpose of creating the tools needed to analyze *Song*, certain terms will be defined, and a framework will be created, which can then be applied to the books. This framework will be based in part on existing sources, and in part invented specifically for this essay.

Firstly, the sub-categories of prophecy will be defined, in this essay, by looking at the roots from which they stem in the story, i.e. the form they take and the contexts in which they are introduced to the reader and to characters within the narrative. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* helpfully lists several different types of prophecies, which will here be divided into three broad categories. These three categories have been coined specifically for this essay. Firstly, there are, in literature, prophecies which correspond most closely to the real-world concept of prophecy found in major religions such as Christianity; this would be prophecy on a grand scale, meaning prophecy stemming from a holy book, or other ancient source; these prophecies are impersonal and often strongly bonded to theology. This first category of prophecy will be referred to as ‘Sacred Prophecy’ going forward.

Going down one level, from the grand to the less so, there are the ‘prophecies’ which can be put under the banner of ‘divination’; that is, more personal predictions uttered by an oracle, shaman etc. These divinations are not generally written down, and are not woven into the fabric of a religion, although they might still stem from, or at least be claimed to do so, from a divine

being, a god or other such spirit. This second type of prophecy includes, and can be said to be virtually indistinguishable from, fortune-telling. In this essay, this second category of prophecy will be called ‘Divinatory Prophecy’.

This leads us to the last category, the intensely personal kind of prophecy: the ‘prophetic dream’, or ‘prophetic vision’. In this third type of prophecy, a vision of the future is relayed to a character, commonly whilst they are sleeping. Personal visions of an otherwise nature, i.e. those which show things other than the future, are also included in what will be called ‘Personal Prophecy’ in this essay. The vision might be known by the character him-/herself to be of a revelatory/prophetic nature, or it might not. The reader, similarly, might be clued into the nature of the dream, or he/she might not, much like the character who receives it, realize until later, when the events previously hinted at in the dream take place, what the vision meant. These distinctions between known and unknown visions play a great part in determining the function of the prophecy in the text. What separates the prophetic vision/dream from the divination lies in whether or not a glimpse of the future is actively sought, or passively received, and in whether the vision relates directly to the recipient of that vision. The distinction between these two categories is sometimes difficult to make, and some prophecies can fall into both categories at the same time.

It is also worth emphasizing, as was touched upon very briefly above, that visions of events are not always of things yet to come. Characters can, of course, experience visions of both the present and the past as well; there is no inherent future connotation in the term ‘vision’. This essay’s main focus is on those which depict, or hint at, some future event, but the two other types are closely related to this first type of vision. The impact the other two types have on the story differs from the future-related one in the possible ways in which a character might react to them. If the visions are known by the character receiving them to be of things which have already happened, or are currently happening, then the vision cannot become a driving force in the same way as one of the future potentially could. That is not to say that these other types of visions never impact the story; if a character gains knowledge, and decides to act upon that knowledge, or act differently due to possessing it, then that knowledge has had a direct impact upon the story. Visions not showing future events can thus play roles in the narrative which are similar to that which, in this essay, falls under ‘prophecy’, i.e. prediction of the future through differing means, does. These visions are, however, more restricted in that they can, for obvious reasons, never become a goal, i.e. the ultimate motivation behind a character’s actions, in quite the same way as prophetic ones can. That is unless that character wrongly perceives

these visions as being of future events, in which case the distinction only matters in that, since the character is wrong, their motivation is based on a delusion. This will then ultimately lead to subverted expectations for the character, if not necessarily the reader, depending on how the narrative is presented.

Regardless, on the narrative level, a very clear distinction exists between a prophecy or vision which drives, or at the very least impacts, the story, and one which does not. The personal prophecies mentioned above might, if simply dismissed by the recipient character, immediately become almost completely inconsequential to the actual story. They then instead become meaningful only to the reader, and even then only potentially, depending in part upon the mental acuity of that same reader. The previously mentioned self-fulfilling prophecies, on the other hand, work, by necessity due to their inherent qualities, as active components of the story; characters in that story react to the prophecy, and this is what drives the narrative forwards, in part or exclusively. The prophecy is very often the very trigger behind that event which first sets the very story in motion. Another inherent quality of the self-fulfilling prophecy is, as the name implies, that it is always, ultimately, fulfilled; a self-fulfilling prophecy must, by its very nature, end up being true. The story of Oedipus, as mentioned previously, exemplifies this type of prophecy very well (“Self-fulfilling Prophecy”).

However, even a prophecy which does not end up coming true can drive the narrative forward. The only factor relevant to determining whether or not a prophecy plays such a role in a story is the matter of how, and if, characters react to it; if a character’s actions are driven by a reaction to a prophecy of any kind, then that prophecy falls into the category which one might call the ‘story-driving prophecy’, or ‘active prophecy’. These terms are ones which have been coined for this essay, in an attempt to create previously mentioned framework around the otherwise quite ill-defined and amorphous concept of prophecy. This framework can be applied to any work of literature which includes this concept. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel seemingly prophesizes to Aragorn that he is going to journey through the path of the dead to the sea, an undertaking on which he later sets out, heeding her words and fulfilling her prophecy (Tolkien 656).

Conversely, there are those prophecies which are dismissed, or ignored, by characters in the story. As the prophecies generally have to, by necessity, stem from an unknown and/or unreliable source in order to be thus dismissed, prophetic dreams and visions are the most likely types of prophecies to fall into this category. This will be shown later in this essay to be true in regard to *Song*, at the very least. These prophecies can end up being purely for the reader’s

benefit; an astute one such might end up guessing the meaning correctly, gaining satisfaction from what can be perceived as an added depth to the story. This was touched upon in regard to personal prophecy specifically above, but is something which can undoubtedly hold true for prophecy of any type. The validity of such prophecies might eventually become clear to characters in the story, but only in hindsight. This usage of prophecy thus only adds what might be called ‘thematic depth’, in that they do not actively influence events, or the actions of characters, in the story. To contrast with the ‘active prophecies’ mentioned above, these will be called ‘passive prophecies’. As they do not impact the story directly, passive prophecies can be said to be included in stories mainly for the benefit of the reader. Active ones, though they certainly also serve a similar purpose to the passive ones in this regard, serves other purposes as well, providing character motivations etc.

Both ‘active’ and ‘passive’ prophecies can, however, give structure to a story, creating links between different parts of the narrative. Kapelle writes, concerning prophecies in Mallory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, that “Predictions impose a structure of anticipation and completion that tells a reader what to expect and indicates when a piece of the story is over.” (59). This quote, which is about one specific work, is certainly also something which can be applied to many others. However, whilst this is something which is likely to be partly true for most stories which make use of prophecies, the direct opposite is of course possible as well; prophecies can serve to complicate and confuse just as they can clarify and structure, and if a prophecy does not come true, or comes true in an unexpected ways, the anticipation and expectations of the reader are subverted rather than fulfilled, ultimately having a very different effect than that which it would have in a narrative structured similarly to that of *Morte d’Arthur*.

To sum up: ‘Prophecies’, defined as predictions of the future, can be categorized by both the form they take in a story, be it ancient texts, divinations or highly personal visions, and by the role they play in the narrative, i.e. whether they impact the actions of characters or not. One single story can, if it includes several of these predictions, make use of prophecies in several different ways. The three different forms of prophecy defined in this essay can all be either ‘active’ or ‘passive’, meaning directly impactful in regards to the story and not, respectively. This way of dividing up the usage of prophecies is very broad, and both active and passive prophecies fulfil the same basic role in any and all stories: they add depth to the narrative, and the world in which that narrative plays out. Passive prophecies are generally included in a story solely for the benefit of the reader, whilst active ones are also beneficial, detrimental, or in some other way impactful to the characters in the story.

Prophecy in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

The world of a *Song* is one which, whilst certainly more ‘magical’ than our own, still seems fairly mundane at a glance, at least compared to Middle Earth in *The Lord of the Rings* or something wholly fantastical like Narnia. Whatever magic there is, is scarce, and seems to belong mainly to a distant past, echoing perhaps the feeling some people in our world might have reading ancient religious texts; the age of miracles and magic seemingly ended long ago. It does, however, appear to be returning to the world of *Song*. Throughout the five books which have been released so far, the different narrators of the story witness the awakening of dragons from stone eggs, the raising of the dead by creatures seemingly made of ice, and what is, undeniably, prophecy in action.

Due to the existence of a strong connection exists between prophecy and religion within the books, understanding the relevant religions becomes of vital importance if one wishes to understand prophecy. Three major religions are introduced, and play major parts, in the story. There is the primordial worship of the ‘old gods’, inherited, or adopted, by the people of northern Westeros from the long-gone race of people called the ‘children of the forest’ (O’Leary 6). There is also the worship of ‘the seven’, a type of polytheism which is most prevalent in southern Westeros (6). Lastly, there is the worship of the ‘Red God’, also known as ‘R’hllor’, which stems from the lands to the east of Westeros, but is gaining ground on that continent at the time of the events of *Song* (6).

Out of these the major religions of the world of *Song*, the one revolving around the worship of the ‘red god’ would seem to be that world’s closest analogue to Christianity, at the very least in the sense that it is monotheistic. It is thus not particularly surprising that it is this religion which has the closest ties to the ‘Sacred Prophecies’ of the story. The most prominent of these ancient, theologically based prophecies is that which concerns the coming of ‘Azor Ahai’, a Messianic figure of sorts, who will save the world from the forces of darkness during the ‘long night’. Melisandre, a priestess of this ‘red god’, believes that this prophecy refers to Stannis Baratheon, younger brother to the dead king Robert, and one of many would-be kings competing for the iron throne. The priestess champions this interpretation, actively helping

Stannis to fulfill the requirements of the prophecy, the oldest, and perhaps the original, source of which is ‘ancient books of Asshai’ (*Clash* 148).

The second form of prophecy, the ‘Divinatory Prophecy’, is also present in the story, with a very prevalent example being the prediction spoken by a seer to the then future queen Cersei Lannister regarding the future death of her children and her own demise at the hands of her brother. Another potential example of such a prophecy is spoken to the would-be queen and pretender to the throne Daenerys Targaryen, and concerns the terrible future which her husband faces. This latter example could, however, simply be meant as a spiteful, gloating statement made by the scornful character who pronounced it; its actual intent is unclear (*Game* 759). A prophecy which foretells that the son of Daenerys will be “the stallion who mounts the world” (*Game* 491) is another example, and is also one of the prophecies in the story which would seem to have been proven false with the death of that same son. Daenerys is also given vague prophecies by a seeress named Quaithe, to which she listens and considers acting upon (*Clash* 583). Daenerys also has visions in the ‘house of the undying’, which stem from an unknown source.

The priests of the Red God could also be said to practice divination when they ‘look into the flames’ to catch glimpses of the future, an act which is seemingly practiced by not only the above-mentioned Melisandre (*Storm/Steel*, 526), but by everyone in her order, as exemplified by ‘Thoros of Myr’, a priest of the Red God, who does that very same thing (*Storm/Blood* 21). This act of ‘looking into the flames’, i.e. inducing visions through the medium of fire, is closely related to the aforementioned god both as a concept and a physical phenomenon; these visions are presumed by the priests and priestesses to stem from the Red God himself, and to be absolutely true. It is worth noting, however, that Melisandre, very much in the same way she does the Azor Ahai-prophecy, actively tries to make her own visions truthful, ultimately casting their veracity, in a magical, future-scrying sense, into question. That veracity is, however, not strictly relevant to this essay. Instead, what is important to note is that these visions do have a direct impact upon the actions of at least one character in the story, as can be seen to be the case in the very first chapter to include Melisandre and Stannis Baratheon (*Clash* 148).

The conflict between hot and cold, between ice and fire, which is linked to two of the religions mentioned on the previous page, is a fundamental part of the series’ narrative; this fact is, of course, apparent if one looks at the overarching title of the series itself: *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The ‘red god’, and the prophecies and visions which are tied into the religion associated

with that god, would then seem to stand at the very center of the story, or at least on one side in the conflict which itself stands at this center.

On the other side of the conflict, one could make the argument that the ‘old gods’ stand. There are, as with the ‘red god’, several characters who receive visions which seem strongly connected to this more shamanistic, nature-worshipping religion, which used to be prevalent in the northern parts of Westeros, and thus receives an immediate connection to the ‘ice’ of the series’ title, simply due to the environment in which it is practiced. This religion is less structured and codified than the other two, having no ancient texts upon which to base its tenets, and thus providing no examples of sacred prophecy. This religion stems instead from the teachings and proto-religion of a humanoid, but non-human race called ‘the children of the forest’. A certain name, ‘greenseers’, exists within the story for people who receive visions through the magic of the ‘old gods’, and through the trees which are these same gods’ altars, totems and perhaps even vessels. One such greenseer is the character of Jojen Reed, a young boy of noble birth who receives visions of events which, to both the reader and characters, mainly make sense in hindsight, but which undeniably do come true. An example of this is his vision of water flowing over the walls of the castle of Winterfell, which comes true in a metaphorical sense when the castle falls to sea-based raiders from the iron islands (*Clash* 523).

There is a further example of prophecy stemming from this same source in the predictions spoken by an elderly dwarf woman known as the “Ghost of High Hearth”, which are also among those which have been fully confirmed as accurate in the story at this point, describing events yet to come in terms which are quite clear in hindsight, including the deaths of several major characters at an event known as the ‘red wedding’:

“If it’s the mother you want, seek her at the Twins. For there is to be a wedding.”
She cackled again. “Look in your fires, pink priest, and you will see. Not now, though, not here, you’ll see nothing here. This place belongs to the old gods still...
[...] (*Storm/Blood* 25)

This passage is especially interesting, as the Ghost of High Heart here addresses the previously mentioned red priest Thoros of Myr, and in doing so shows clearly the opposition which exists between the old gods and the Red God, with the former faction and the latter deity each representing one side in some sort of conflict. Whilst the Ghost’s prophecies could be said to be divinatory in nature, they apparently come to her in dreams, where ‘the weirwood whispers

to her' (*Storm/Blood* 32). The how and why of her prophetic dreaming is unclear, and thus so is the category these visions fall into; her prophecies seem to be both divinatory and personal, although possessing the attributes of the former more strongly. The Ghost of High Heart shares a lot of characteristics with the greenseer Jojen Reed; they seemingly possess a similar ability and channel visions from the same source: the magic of the old gods, who in turn represent ice and darkness. It would seem, then, that most visions in the story, whether of a personal or divinatory nature, are tied to either ice or fire, exemplified by the two diametrically opposed religions of the red god and the old gods/weirwood/children of the forest respectively.

Several other characters also receive seemingly prophetic dreams, which evoke familiar imagery and seem to relate to characters and places in the story, but which are generally too vague to be anything other than dismissed by both the reader and the characters who receive them. The list of characters who have dreams and visions of this type include many of the major players in the narrative, such as the bastard-born Jon Snow (*Game* 267) and Bran Stark (*Game* 163). It could be argued, and is certainly very possible, that these visions also connect with the religion of the 'old gods', as these two characters, at the very least, are worshippers of this religion, and are scions of a northern house, the house of Stark, which itself has strong ties to the old gods. These connections are less obvious than they are in many of the examples above, however, and the visions of Jon and Bran are thus the clearest examples of the third category, the 'Personal Prophecy', there is to be found in the text. The distinction between the personal and the divinatory is often blurry, however, and visions stemming from the same source might end up in different categories simply based on the level of awareness regarding this source which the recipient has, or thinks they have. If a prophetic vision is actively sought, or is at least wanted and/or expected, it can be said to be of a divinatory nature, especially if it concerns and/or is conveyed to other characters in the story. If the vision is passively received, in an unwelcome, unwanted and/or unexpected dream for example, it can be considered to be a personal prophecy. As stated previously, some characters, like Jojen Reed and the Ghost of High Heart, are recipients of prophecies which are both personal and divinatory, although generally skewing more strongly towards one category or the other.

Those prophecies which stem from the major religions, and are written down in ancient texts, have the strongest influence on the largest number of people, whilst prophecies of a more divinatory or vision-bound nature are tied to religions which more closely resemble the non-textual, pre-literate shamanistic religions of our own world. However, in a fantastical world, with rules other than those of our own universe, the line between the magical, the mundane,

and the divine becomes blurred in a way which it does not in our own. Thus, due to the presence of magical elements as an undeniably real facet of the world, the magical aspects of the world, strongly associated with particular religions, directly influence individual characters. This is done through the prophetic visions and dreams which are bestowed upon these characters by, or through, magical means which are themselves perceived as divine, or spiritual, in nature.

Worth noting too are the opinions given by characters within the story itself on the value and validity of prophecy. The previously mentioned priestess of the red god obviously puts a lot of stock in prophecy, but some other characters do not. For example, Tyrion Lannister, a dwarf who prides himself on his wit, and who seems, in part, to be Martin's self-insert into the story, is highly skeptical of the value in particular, stating that "Prophecy is like a half-trained mule. It looks as though it might be useful, but the moment you trust in it, it kicks you in the head." (*Dance* 534).

How Martin uses prophecy

Having looked at the forms the prophecies of *Song* take within the story, the next step is to attempt to discern the reason behind their inclusion in the narrative. Distinguishing between 'active' and 'passive' prophecies, for example, is interesting when analyzing *Song*, due to the fact that the series has not yet ended. This makes speculating on the actual validity of prophecies within the story difficult and ultimately fruitless, but does not impact these factors, which can apply to a prophecy regardless of it being, and ultimately coming, true or not. It is what the characters know, believe, and act upon which ultimately decides whether any given prophecy is categorized as being active or passive, in the absence of any confirmed fulfilment of that same prophecy in the story; where the prophecies lead is uncertain, but that they, in many cases, do have an impact is clear.

One thing that is clear is that Martin uses prophecy for many different purposes in *Song*. There is obviously a grand prophecy which touches upon the themes of ice and fire, at which the very title of the series so strongly hints, woven into the fabric of the story. This reinforcement of the title's theme through prophecy gives the readers certain expectations, whilst actively providing motivations for characters in the story and, in connecting to the religious and historical aspects of the world in which the story is set, lending thematic depth and imparting a sense of grandeur and scale; ancient and mysterious powers playing into the

narrative inevitably lends heft and weight to the happenings in the story. The ‘Sacred Prophecies’ of the story, i.e. the prophecies about ‘Azor Ahai’, and ‘the prince that was promised’, whether essentially the same prophecy or not, seem to fulfill essentially all the roles previously discussed in this essay. They are active within the narrative, whilst also lending thematic depth; they exist for the benefit of the reader, and for the benefit, or detriment, of the characters.

Martin does, however, in tying magic up in religion, blur the line between the past and the present. The lines between the sacred prophecies and the other forms of future-prediction are equally blurry; the character of Melisandre, whilst a big proponent of the ancient prophecies of her religion, is also continuously receives fresh visions, which she interprets as stemming from her god. The ancient, sacred prophecies are thus confirmed, and reinforced, through both personal visions and active scrying, or divinatory prophecy, throughout the story, providing continual guidance and drive for the priestess and her followers.

The divinatory prophecies made to Daenerys and Cersei are the least tied to organized religion within the story of *Song*, having no obvious connection to either the red god or the old gods, and standing somewhat apart because of this. They are thus not as strongly connected to the central struggle in the story, the thematic conflict between ice and fire, but instead serve only to influence specific characters, and their thoughts and actions, rather than the greater narrative. What separates these prophecies from those which are of a similarly divinatory nature, but which are also tied up with religion, lies primarily in the relevance in the story of the diviners themselves. Theologically based divinations are spoken/experienced by major characters, whilst non-theological ones are spoken to major characters by minor ones. Whilst not as strictly theologically bound, this latter kind of divination is still certainly magical and mystical; such is, of course, the nature of prophecy. These prophecies, in their non-theological nature, are the exceptions rather than the rule, however.

The many visions in the story, the ‘personal prophecies’, serve slightly different purposes depending on their respective contexts. There are those which are ultimately ignored by the character who receives them, and there are those which also, like the sacred and divinatory prophecies mentioned above, become character motivations. In a sprawling narrative, where characters may, at times, be hundreds, even thousands, of miles away from each other, and may never meet, or at least not meet for many hundreds of pages, visions given to certain characters which hint at events which involve and impact characters to which these characters have a connection, can serve to maintain and reinforce this connection for the reader. In this case,

prophecy, even if it is passively used, ties together what might otherwise have been a number of highly disparate and disconnected plot threads.

In general, however, as seen in most of the examples above, there is an abundance of active prophecies in the story of *Song*. Purely passive prophecies are slightly scarcer. However, the prophetic visions of Jon Snow, and the largely ignored prophetic statements made by the Ghost of High Heart, amongst others, tend more towards the passive. Whilst the characters might ponder these prophecies briefly, they are soon forgotten, and thus end up being mainly for the reader's benefit, and for maintaining the connections between characters as discussed above, rather than impacting the actions of any of those characters.

When analyzing a work of literature one should, of course, not ignore the views of the author himself, i.e. Martin's views on the subject of prophecy. Whilst what is actually in the books is what matters most in the end, Martin's utterances on the subject are also interesting. Martin has stated in interviews that prophecies "can add depth and interest to a book, but you don't want to be too literal or too easy" (Guxens), and that "Prophecy can be a tricky business" (Garcia); essentially reinforcing the impression that the main purpose, or one of the main purposes at the very least, of prophecy in *Song* is to add thematic depth, whilst giving the reader a mystery of sorts to ponder while, and after, reading the book(s). This seems to echo those statements made by characters in the books themselves which were mentioned in the previous part of this essay, which further reinforces Martin's conscious and deliberate use of prophecy to fulfill this particular role in the story.

In fact, based on both the use of prophecies in the books and upon Martin's own statements on the subject, it would seem that another of the main roles which prophecy plays in the books is to create certain expectations for the reader through the offering up of riddles, clues, and mysteries. These are presented in the form of vague prophecies for the reader to mentally savor and theorize about, before being ultimately either subverted or fulfilled. Martin thus plays with the reader's expectations, being careful not to strike up a predictable pattern in so doing. This, along with the thematic depth, and the tying together of the narrative, would seem to be the main purpose which prophecy serves in *Song*, aside from simply providing character motivations that is. And perhaps the titular 'song' is in itself a 'prophetic song', echoing E.M. Forster's view of prophecies and prophetic writing.

When it comes to drawing conclusions regarding the validity of any given prophecy within the text, the fact that the story is as of yet unfinished complicates things significantly. However, based on both the multitude of prophecies of different kinds in the story, and upon

the very words of the author himself, as mentioned above, the claims made in *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* do not necessarily hold true for *Song*: namely, that prophecies, once introduced in the text, must come true. Prophecies do not necessarily always come true in *Song*, as would, at the very least, seem to be the case with the prophecy spoken to Daenerys Targaryen, regarding her son being the “Stallion who mounts the world”. Those prophecies that do come true often do so in unexpected ways, and tend to end up being riddles which are only solvable in hindsight.

Conclusion

Compared to other works of literature, it would seem that Martin, whilst not necessarily using any singular prophecy in a way which is particularly groundbreaking, has woven the concept of prophecy into his narrative in an all-encompassing way. He has done this on a level which few other authors have done before, even within the fantasy genre where that concept is most prevalent. Prophecy in different forms is utilized in a multitude of ways, and allowed to play a part in nearly every aspect of the story. Prophecies on a grand scale drive the larger plot forward, being thematically related to the central struggle of the story, whilst more personal visions, divinations and the like do the same for individual characters. The titular ‘Song of Ice and Fire’ can be seen as representing a conflict between two different divine factions, and most prophecies within the story are also tied to these factions, with a few exceptions. All of these prophecies, however, are too vague and too uncertain for the reader ever to be completely sure of how a certain scenario will play out, based solely on prophecy. Any prediction of the future is just as likely to end up being largely without impact, if not necessarily proven to be untrue, as proving such a thing would require a level of clarity in the original prediction which Martin does not provide. Whilst playing with the expectations of both characters and readers, Martin also deepens the lore and history of his world by way of the obtuse and abstract ‘song’ of prophecy.

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