

Fear Cuts Deeper Than Swords: Arya's Journey from the Page to the Screen

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Abstract:

This essay examines the adaptation of Arya Stark from George R. R. Martin's novel sequence *A Song of Ice and Fire* to HBO's *Game of Thrones*, setting aside the criteria of fidelity in favour of an account grounded in medium specificity and seriality. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation as creative reinterpretation, George Bluestone's and Sarah Cardwell's arguments concerning the distinct semiotic resources of prose and the screen, and Jason Mittell's poetics of serial television, the discussion analyses six narrative moments in which Arya's characterisation is reconstituted as it crosses media. Close reading of both the literary and the televisual text suggests that the adaptation's most consequential transformations cluster along a single axis: the management of interiority and narrative knowledge. Where the novels derive their force from a restricted, first-person focalisation that binds the reader to a child's partial understanding, the series — unable to inhabit that interiority directly — externalises Arya's inner states and redistributes the knowledge they contain, granting the audience a vantage that outruns the character's own. The Arya case thus specifies a mechanism only gestured at in general adaptation theory: the conversion of focalised interiority into externalised dramatic structure. What appears, under a fidelity optic, as omission or simplification is more precisely understood as a redistribution of knowledge demanded by the move from page to screen.

Keywords: adaptation studies; medium specificity; seriality; focalisation; narrative interiority; televisual performance; *Game of Thrones*.

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Introduction

HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) occupies a singular place in the recent history of popular narrative. Adapted from a then-unfinished sequence of fantasy novels with a devoted but specialised readership, it became a global phenomenon and, in the process, reshaped industry and critical assumptions about what serialised television could attempt. Across eight seasons and some seventy hours of screen time, the series sustained an ensemble of intersecting plotlines on a scale more often associated with the nineteenth-century novel than with weekly television, and it did so while remaining, at every turn, an adaptation — a rendering of one medium's materials in the resources of another. That dual condition makes the series an unusually rich site for the study of how narrative is transformed when it migrates between forms.

Scholarship on adaptation long laboured under what has come to be called the fidelity paradigm: the assumption that an adaptation succeeds or fails according to its faithfulness to a source. Robert Stam traces this assumption to entrenched cultural hierarchies that privilege the literary over the visual and the word over the image, hierarchies that consign adaptation in advance to a derivative and subordinate role (Stam). The difficulty with such evaluation is not merely that it is ungenerous but that it mistakes its object. A novel makes meaning through prose rhythm, narrative voice, and the rendering of consciousness; a television series makes meaning through performance, framing, editing, and sound. These are not interchangeable instruments for executing a single task but, as George Bluestone argued more than half a century ago, fundamentally different systems of signification, each with its own powers and its own limits (Bluestone). To ask whether the screen has been “faithful” to the page is to ask the wrong question of two media that do not, and cannot, do the same thing.

Contemporary adaptation theory has accordingly shifted its ground. Rather than measuring proximity to an origin, it asks how narrative content is reconfigured as the conditions of its telling change. On this view, adaptation is not reproduction but reinterpretation — a creative act that, in the very labour of translation, remakes its material. Linda Hutcheon captures the doubleness of the result in her description of adaptations as “palimpsestuous,” haunted by their sources yet possessed of their own authority, experienced by audiences who hold original and adaptation in simultaneous view (Hutcheon). The question is no longer what an adaptation loses, but what, working under different constraints, it makes anew.

Within Martin’s vast cast, Arya Stark is an especially demanding case for any theory of cross-media translation. The third child and younger daughter of Lord Eddard Stark, she is a recurrent point-of-view character whose chapters are organised around her refusal of the roles prescribed for a noble daughter of Westeros. Her elder sister Sansa embodies the sanctioned ideal — obedient, decorous, oriented toward marriage and motherhood — against which Arya defines herself; she prefers the sword to the needle and rejects the domestic future her rank would ordinarily compel. Even the name of her direwolf, Nymeria, drawn from a legendary warrior-queen, signals from the outset that her story will not follow the conventional paths laid out for women. Crucially for what follows, much of Arya’s power on the page is a power of interiority: her chapters give the reader privileged, intimate access to a child’s partial — and often mistaken — understanding of an adult world of violence and intrigue.

This essay therefore asks: how does the televisual medium reconstitute Arya’s characterisation, and what do those changes reveal about the affordances and limits of visual, serial storytelling? The aim is not to catalogue what the adaptation forfeits but to specify what it does differently — and, beyond that, to identify the principle that organises its choices. Through close

comparison of six narrative moments, the discussion argues that the series' transformations are not scattered concessions to the small screen but coordinated responses to a single problem: the impossibility of transferring directly the restricted interior focalisation on which the novels depend. Where the prose makes meaning from what Arya does not know and cannot articulate, the series, denied access to her inner life, redistributes that knowledge to the audience and re-externalises her interiority as dramatic structure. Read in this light, the adaptation of Arya becomes a case study not merely in creative reinterpretation — a principle by now well established — but in the specific mechanism by which interiority is negotiated as narrative crosses from page to screen.

Theoretical Framework

To understand cross-media adaptation, one must move beyond models that treat the source as definitive and the adaptation as its imperfect approximation. The foundational statement of medium specificity remains George Bluestone's *Novels into Film* (1957), which insists that the novel and the film, superficially compatible, are at root antithetical: the novel is a conceptual and discursive form whose proper domain is the inner life — memory, reflection, the movement of thought — while the film is a perceptual and presentational form whose domain is the externally visible (Bluestone). Bluestone's account is sometimes read as merely cataloguing what film cannot do; read more carefully, it identifies the precise faculty that resists transfer between media, namely the rendering of consciousness. That diagnosis, made of cinema, applies with equal and arguably greater force to the problem this essay examines.

Where Bluestone's framework can tend toward a comparative ledger of gains and losses, later theorists reconceive the relationship itself. Robert Stam, drawing on Bakhtinian dialogism, reframes adaptation as one moment in an unending intertextual process — texts generating texts through transformation and recirculation, with no pure or recoverable origin to which fidelity

might be owed (Stam). Linda Hutcheon consolidates this turn into a general theory. Refusing both the autonomy and the subordination of the adapted text, she describes adaptation as “palimpsestuous,” a layered form in which the prior work remains legible beneath the new one without dictating its meaning; adaptation, in her well-known formulation, is repetition without replication, a process as much as a product, governed by the adapter’s interpretation and by the affordances of the target medium (Hutcheon). For Hutcheon, every decision an adaptation makes — to retain, to omit, to amplify, to invent — is a legible interpretive act, answerable not to the source but to the new work’s own logic.

Two refinements of this general theory are essential to the present argument. The first concerns television specifically. Most adaptation theory takes cinema as its implicit model, yet the screen to which *Game of Thrones* translates Martin’s novels is not the two-hour film but the multi-season serial, with its own grammar and its own temporality. Sarah Cardwell’s *Adaptation Revisited* (2002) is the first sustained attempt to theorise this difference, arguing that television adaptation must be understood in terms of the particularly televisual — its seriality, its domestic mode of reception, its accretive rather than concentrated form (Cardwell). To adapt a novel to television is not simply to adapt it to “the screen” in general; it is to adapt it to a medium whose unit is the episode and whose horizon is the season.

The second refinement concerns the poetics of that serial form, for which Jason Mittell’s *Complex TV* (2015) supplies the vocabulary. Mittell argues that contemporary serial television has developed storytelling techniques irreducible to either literary or cinematic theory (Mittell 10), proposing “narrative complexity” as a distinct narrational mode and giving particular weight to seriality itself — the telling of a single story across many discrete, temporally separated episodes (17). Three of his concepts bear directly on Arya’s case. The first is the operational aesthetic,

whereby serial narration invites audiences to attend not only to what happens but to the mechanics of its telling, taking pleasure in the management of revelation and delay. The second is his account of character change, the means by which serial form tracks transformation across a duration no single film could sustain. The third is his insistence that, in serial television, endings and the eventual disclosure of long-withheld information carry disproportionate weight, since the long arc both rewards and demands the discharge of what it has held in suspense. Taken together, Cardwell and Mittell allow us to specify what adaptation theory too often leaves vague: that the medium to which *Arya* is translated is a serial televisual medium, with characteristic ways of distributing knowledge across time.

These commitments converge on the axis along which this essay reads the *Arya* adaptation. If, as Bluestone maintains, the novel's distinctive resource is the rendering of interiority, and if, as the analysis below will show, *Arya*'s literary power is founded on a restricted, first-person focalisation — a narration confined to a child's limited and frequently erroneous grasp of events — then the central problem of adapting her is not the loss of any single scene but the impossibility of transferring that focalisation directly to a medium that cannot, except by clumsy contrivance, show a mind from within. The series' response, traced across the moments that follow, is twofold and consistent: it externalises *Arya*'s interior states, converting feeling and thought into gesture, action, and plot; and it redistributes the knowledge that her restricted focalisation withholds, granting the audience a vantage that frequently exceeds *Arya*'s own. The chapters of Martin's novels make meaning from confinement to a single, partial consciousness; the series makes meaning by escaping it. The pages that follow read six narrative moments as variations on this single transformation, interpreting each adaptive decision not as fidelity kept or broken but as a determinate response to the focalisation problem that any adaptation of *Arya Stark* must solve.

Methodology

This study proceeds by close comparative reading of the literary and televisual texts. The primary corpus comprises the first three novels of *A Song of Ice and Fire — A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), and *A Storm of Swords* (2000) — together with the first two seasons of *Game of Thrones*, the span across which the foundations of Arya's characterisation are laid in both media; selected later episodes are adduced where Arya's arc reaches a point prepared earlier. Because the pagination of Martin's novels varies substantially across their many print and digital editions, references are given by point-of-view chapter, following the designation (for example, "Arya IV") standard in scholarship on the series; this practice locates each passage more stably than an edition-bound page number. Television episodes are cited by title and by season and episode number.

The six narrative moments examined below were not selected for their prominence in popular memory but according to three criteria. First, each is a moment of characterisation rather than of plot mechanics: each turns on who Arya is or is becoming — her relation to gender, to knowledge, to violence, to authority — rather than on the advancement of the wider dynastic war. Second, each exhibits a substantive and analysable divergence between the two media, whether of compression, relocation, invention, or omission, such that the comparison yields more than the observation that a scene was shortened. Third, and most importantly, the six were chosen because, taken together, they recur upon a single problem — the translation of Arya's restricted interior focalisation — and so permit an argument rather than a list. Moments that merely abbreviate without altering the distribution of knowledge, however memorable, fall outside this remit.

The six moments are: Arya's refusal of the feminine script in her exchange with her father; her accidental overhearing of a political conspiracy beneath the Red Keep; the unresolved fate of

her sword-master, Syrio Forel; her first killing, the death of a stable boy during her flight from King's Landing; her captivity at Harrenhal and its presiding authority; and her bargain with the assassin Jaqen H'ghar. The first four concern the events of *A Game of Thrones* and the first season; the last two concern *A Clash of Kings* and the second. An earlier version of this analysis treated the Harrenhal material across several short and uneven sections; because those passages turn on the same adaptive logic, they are here consolidated into two fully developed discussions.

The analysis attends throughout to both story and discourse — to what occurs and to how it is narrated — examining shifts in characterisation, focalisation, pacing, and thematic emphasis. Following Hutcheon, it treats omission, compression, and substitution not as deficiencies to be deplored but as interpretive decisions to be read. Secondary scholarship furnishes the theoretical frame; it cannot substitute for direct engagement with the texts themselves, to which the discussion now turns.

Comparative Analysis

1. Interiority and Performance: Gender Rebellion across Media

Arya's resistance to the roles prescribed for a highborn daughter is established early and, in the novel, through a scene of unexpected tenderness rather than confrontation. The instrument of that resistance is itself pointedly chosen. Before the Stark household disperses, Jon Snow gives Arya a slender Braavosi blade and a single piece of advice — “Stick them with the pointy end” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, “Jon II”) — and she names the sword Needle, a deliberate retort to the needlework at which her sister excels and she does not. The weapon that will come to define her is, etymologically and symbolically, the domestic feminine implement turned to another use; her rebellion does not so much reject the materials of a noblewoman's life as repurpose them.

The confrontation a reader might expect — a father’s discovery of a daughter’s forbidden sword — does not arrive. When Eddard learns that Arya has kept the blade, his response is not patriarchal alarm but a melancholy recognition. “You have a wildness in you, child,” he tells her; “the wolf blood, my father used to call it. Lyanna had a touch of it, and my brother Brandon more than a touch. It brought them both to an early grave” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, “Arya II”). He sees in Arya his dead sister, and the comparison carries foreboding rather than reproach. The conventional future is voiced, but gently, as he kisses her brow: “You will marry a king and rule his castle, and your sons will be knights and princes and lords.” Arya’s refusal takes the form not of defiance but of displacement: “No,” she says, “that’s Sansa” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, “Arya II”). She does not reject the script so much as assign it to the sister it fits, locating her own identity in the negative space her sister leaves. Tellingly, Eddard’s answer to her wildness is not suppression but accommodation: he engages the Braavosi master Syrio Forel to train her. The patriarchal order is here bent rather than enforced, and the scene’s power lies in the reader’s intimate access to the sadness beneath Eddard’s indulgence — a knowledge of Lyanna’s fate that Arya does not share.

The series reconstitutes this material with precision and economy. The exchange is relocated to the fourth episode of the first season, and Eddard’s words are subtly altered: “You will marry a high lord and rule his castle, and your sons shall be knights and princes and lords” (“Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things”). The change from “king” to “high lord” is minor; the change to Arya’s reply is not. Where the novel’s Arya deflects the destiny onto Sansa, the televisual Arya internalises her refusal as a statement of selfhood: “No,” she says, “that’s not me.” The difference is instructive. The prose, working through a relational and comparative self-definition consonant with the sisters’ structural opposition, has Arya know herself by what she is

not — by not being Sansa; the series, which cannot render that interior comparison directly, externalises the refusal as a declarative assertion of identity. “That’s not me” is, moreover, a line the series will plant and later harvest: Arya repeats its grammar to a lost direwolf (“that’s not you”) and to a marriage proposal of her own, so that a phrase invented for the screen becomes a through-line of her televisual characterisation. What the novel accomplishes through focalised interiority — the reader is positioned inside Arya’s knowing refusal — the series accomplishes through Maisie Williams’s performance and a portable, repeatable line.

This first divergence already exhibits the pattern the essay will trace. Bluestone’s claim that the novel’s province is consciousness and the film’s the visible is borne out, but with a televisual inflection: the series does not merely show what the novel tells; it converts an interior, relational self-knowledge into an externalised, performable assertion. It is worth adding that the move to performance brings with it the apparatus of the look. As Cristina Trejo Morales argues in a feminist reading of the series, Arya’s nonconformity, however sympathetically drawn, is realised on screen within a visual economy that the prose escapes — her body becomes an object of the camera’s and the audience’s regard in a way a point-of-view chapter does not permit (Trejo Morales). The page can grant Arya an interiority insulated from the gaze; the screen, in granting her visibility, subjects her to it. The transposition of Arya’s gender rebellion is thus not a loss of complexity but a relocation of it — from the inwardness of focalised prose to the externality, and the visibility, of performance.

2. The Distribution of Knowledge: Overheard Conspiracy and Restricted Focalisation

In one of the novel’s most carefully constructed sequences, Arya, chasing a cat through the bowels of the Red Keep as part of Syrio’s training, loses her way and stumbles into a vault of dragon skulls, where she overhears two men in conspiratorial conference (Martin, *A Game of*

Thrones, “Arya III”). She catches only fragments: that the wolf and the lion will soon be at each other’s throats, that a war is coming but coming too soon, that one of the speakers counsels the killing of the Hand and the other refuses. She cannot identify the men — the reader, with more context, recognises the eunuch Varys and the Pentoshi magister Illyrio — and she misreads the cavernous dark and the looming skulls as the stuff of nightmare. When she carries her report to her father, it emerges garbled: she has understood, by her own admission, scarcely half of what she heard, knows none of the names, and cannot supply the frame that would make the fragments legible (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, “Arya III”). The scene’s power is inseparable from its focalisation. The reader is confined to a child’s partial apprehension, and the dramatic irony — our sense that something grave is afoot — arises precisely from the gap between what Arya perceives and what she can understand, a gap the prose holds open and does not close.

It is sometimes said that the series removes Arya from this episode. It does not. The fifth episode of the first season stages the sequence with notable fidelity to its outline: Arya pursues the cat, descends to the dragon skulls, and overhears Varys and Illyrio plotting before hurrying — twice mistaken for a boy — to a father who cannot make sense of her account (“The Wolf and the Lion”). What changes is not Arya’s presence but the distribution of knowledge around her. On the page, the reader knows little more than Arya does; the conspirators are as shadowy to us as to her, and our understanding is rationed by hers. On screen, the camera shows us Varys and Illyrio plainly; we recognise them, hear their exchange in the clear, and grasp the design that eludes the child crouched in the dark. The series then does something the novel’s focalisation forbids: it cuts away from Arya entirely, following Varys to a subsequent confrontation with Littlefinger in the throne room — a scene Arya never witnesses and could not narrate. The episode supplements her restricted vantage with an omniscience that is the audience’s alone.

Here the focalisation problem is met not by excision but by redistribution. Where the novel generates irony from shared limitation — we are nearly as much in the dark as Arya — the series generates it from audience privilege: we see and understand what Arya cannot, and we are admitted to scenes beyond her horizon. This is close to the operational aesthetic Mittell describes, the serial form's invitation to the viewer to assemble a design from across episodes and locations, taking in more than any single character commands (Mittell). The novel keeps us inside Arya's incomprehension; the series lifts us out of it. Neither is the more accomplished handling of intrigue; they are differently structured intrigues — the one founded on the confinement of knowledge to a single consciousness, the other on its dispersal across an omniscient field. The change is, once again, a function of the move from focalised prose to a medium that cannot easily withhold what its camera must show.

3. Open Wounds and Serial Memory: The Fate of Syrio Forel

Syrio Forel, the Braavosi water-dancer engaged to train Arya, is the vehicle for one of Martin's characteristic effects: the suspended fate. When Lannister men come to seize Arya during the fall of House Stark, Syrio faces an armoured knight, Ser Meryn Trant, with only a wooden practice sword, and bids his pupil run. The novel does not show his death. We last glimpse him through Arya's fleeing eyes as Trant's blade shatters the wooden one, and the chapter carries her away before any resolution (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, "Arya IV"). Long after, a stray remark from Cersei confirms only that the "dancing master interfered" and that Arya escaped; of Syrio's end it says nothing (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*). His fate remains genuinely open — one strand among the many the novels hold unresolved across thousands of pages — and its openness is bound to Arya's own not-knowing. She does not learn what became of him; neither do we.

His mantra survives the parting and threads through her flight: “Swift as a deer. Quiet as a shadow ... Fear cuts deeper than swords ... The man who fears losing has already lost” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, “Arya IV”). The litany is itself a teaching about interiority — that the decisive battle is the internal one, against fear — and the novel can render it as interior speech, a voice in Arya’s head whose source she cannot, in her terror, even securely identify.

It is frequently asserted that the series resolves what the novel leaves open — that it confirms Syrio’s death at Trant’s hand. It does no such thing. The series, too, withholds the death: Syrio tells Arya that the first sword of Braavos does not run, sends her away, and is not shown to fall (“The Pointy End”); Trant reappears, unmarked, at Joffrey’s side, but Syrio’s end is never depicted or stated. What the series does is different, and revealing. Across later seasons it folds the unconfirmed loss into the structure that organises Arya’s arc — the list of those she means to kill. By her own account she comes to believe Syrio dead, and in the fifth season she executes Meryn Trant in Braavos, declaring as she does so that she acts for his killing of her teacher (“Mother’s Mercy”). The death is never narratively verified; Arya kills on the strength of a belief. The adaptation, that is, does not close the open question — it instrumentalises it, converting an unverified loss into a motivating grievance with an eventual, satisfying payoff.

This is precisely the difference Mittell’s account of seriality would lead us to expect. Serial television manages memory and motive across a duration no novel chapter occupies in the same way, and it tends to convert suspended questions into momentum, since the long arc rewards the eventual discharge of what has been withheld (Mittell). The novel can sustain Syrio’s fate as productive indeterminacy, an open wound that need never be dressed; the series, oriented toward the resolution of its long arcs, recruits the same indeterminacy into Arya’s revenge economy, where it becomes not a mystery to be tolerated but a debt to be paid. Once more the adaptation’s

choice answers to medium: the prose can keep the wound open within a single uncertain consciousness, while the series, unable to dwell in that uncertainty, gives it an external object and a future tense.

4. First Blood: The Muting of a Moral Rupture

Arya's passage from rebellious child to killer occurs, in the novel, with brutal suddenness and at close range. Fleeing the Red Keep in the same chapter as Syrio's stand, she reaches the stables to find the Stark men dead and her sword in her abandoned chest; when a stable boy seizes her, intending to deliver her to the queen for reward, she kills him. The prose renders the act from within and refuses to hurry past it:

Everything Syrio Forel had ever taught her vanished in a heartbeat. In that instant of sudden terror, the only lesson Arya could remember was the one Jon Snow had given her, the very first. She stuck him with the pointy end, driving the blade upward with a wild, hysterical strength. Needle went through his leather jerkin and the white flesh of his belly and came out between his shoulder blades ... "Take it out," he moaned ... When she took it out, he died. (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, "Arya IV")

Several features of the passage repay notice. The killing is interior throughout: we are inside Arya's panic, and we register, with her, that the water-dancer's art has deserted her and that she has fallen back on Jon's crudest instruction — a detail that marks the act as reflex rather than mastery. The boy is granted a pitiable humanity in his final plea, and the prose insists on the irreversibility of what she has done in its flat last clause. The moral rupture is immediate, fully felt, and placed in the same chapter as her flight, so that escape and first killing are made inseparable.

The series stages the same beat — the episode is even titled for Jon’s lesson — but mutes it. In “The Pointy End,” the stable boy grips Arya’s wrist; her free hand finds Needle; she runs him through and flees, horrified. The death is quick and almost incidental; she kills, the episode’s framing stresses, by accident and in self-defence. There is no interior monologue, only Williams’s stricken face, and the camera does not linger: the boy’s pitiable last words are cut. The series’ own makers have acknowledged the diminution; Martin, who wrote the episode, has expressed regret that the stable boy’s pathetic plea — and with it much of the scene’s weight — was lost. The transformation is not, as is sometimes claimed, a postponement of Arya’s first kill to a later season; the killing occurs on schedule. What the series defers is something else: the legible, deliberate assumption of the identity of a killer. That arrives later and elsewhere, most pointedly when Arya reclaims Needle from the soldier Polliver in the fourth season, consciously turning his own remembered words against him as she executes him (“Two Swords”). The reflexive, glossed killing of the stable boy protects the audience’s sympathy not by delaying Arya’s violence but by stripping the first instance of deliberation and interiority, reserving the morally weighted, willed kill until she has been firmly established as a figure to be pitied.

Here the focalisation problem produces a muting rather than a redistribution. The novel can make a child’s first killing harrowing because it can place us inside her as she does it; the series, denied that interior vantage and wary of alienating a weekly audience from a child protagonist, externalises the act into a brief, almost accidental gesture and relocates the legible moral threshold to a later, more controlled occasion. Bluestone’s intuition that consciousness is the novel’s peculiar resource is nowhere clearer: what the prose renders as an interior catastrophe the screen can only render as a fleeting external event, and it adjusts the moral architecture of Arya’s arc accordingly.

5. Invention as Adaptation: From Weese and Roose Bolton to Tywin Lannister

If the moments examined so far show the series compressing, redistributing, or muting what the novels render from within, the Harrenhal sequence shows it doing something adaptation theory too rarely credits: inventing. In *A Clash of Kings*, Arya's captivity at the ruined castle of Harrenhal is a study in degradation and endurance. Disguised as a lowborn child and known as "Weasel," she labours under a brutal under-steward named Weese, a petty tyrant who rules the servants by threat and blow — the very image of small power exercised cruelly (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*). When northern forces take the castle, she is raised from drudge to cupbearer — not to a Lannister but to Lord Roose Bolton, the cold and calculating northman who holds Harrenhal for her brother's cause, and whom she serves while remaining unrecognised and unsafe (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*). Tywin Lannister, in the novel, she scarcely encounters at all; she observes the Lannister host from below, and her sharpest political education is the retrospective wish that she had named Tywin, rather than lesser men, for death.

The series rebuilds this material around an invention. It makes Arya the cupbearer of Tywin Lannister himself, and stages between them a sequence of intimate, two-handed scenes that have no source in the novels (*Game of Thrones*, season 2). Tywin takes the disguised girl into his service at Harrenhal, half-perceives the highborn intelligence beneath the servant's manner, remarks her literacy, and engages her in a guarded, mutually wary exchange across the table of a man who is, unknown to him, an enemy's daughter. Their encounters convert Arya's captivity from a contest of the body — survival under Weese, peril under Bolton — into a contest of the mind. Where the novel's Harrenhal asks how Arya endures degrading labour, the series' Harrenhal asks how she matches wits with one of Westeros's most formidable political intelligences while wholly in his power.

The invention serves several ends at once, and reading them clarifies the logic of the adaptation. Pragmatically, it places a celebrated actor opposite the child protagonist in extended scenes, a pairing widely judged among the series' finest. Structurally, it consolidates: the novel's sequence of presiding figures — Weese, then Tywin glimpsed at a distance, then Bolton — is concentrated into a single, fully developed relationship, in keeping with the economy a serial of many plotlines demands. Roose Bolton is not thereby discarded; the series preserves him for the major office the novel also assigns him, the orchestration of the Red Wedding, while transferring his Arya-facing role to a dramatically richer counterpart. The adaptation reassigns narrative functions rather than simply cutting them, husbanding its attention by giving Arya one deep antagonist in place of three shallow ones.

That this is invention, not translation, is the point. Hutcheon's theory makes room for the adapter's additions, but the Tywin sequence is a particularly pure instance: the series does not render an existing scene in a new medium but composes a new one, and it is this composed material — rather than anything carried over from the page — that most enriches Arya's televisual characterisation. The case is a useful corrective to any account of adaptation as a process of loss. At Harrenhal the series gains a relationship the novel never had, and uses it to externalise, in dialogue and performance, a political acuity the novel locates largely in Arya's unspoken thought. Even here the underlying logic holds: denied access to Arya's interior education in power, the series invents an interlocutor through whom that education can be made audible and visible.

6. Moral Calculus and Serial Pacing: The Bargain with Jaqen H'ghar

The final moment returns to Harrenhal, to the bargain that most fully exposes Arya's moral interior in the novel and most clearly illustrates the series' different pacing. Having saved three men — Jaqen H'ghar among them — from a burning wagon, Arya is told by the mysterious Jaqen

that, because she stole three deaths from the Red God, she is owed three in return: she need only name them. In *A Clash of Kings*, the bargain unfolds slowly and weighs on her. Her first two names are men whose cruelty she has witnessed — Chiswyck, a soldier in the Mountain’s service, and then Weese, her tormentor — and the novel dwells on the moral texture of the choosing: the unease of naming a man in anger, the strange arithmetic of selecting who shall die, the dawning recognition of the power she holds (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*). Her third death she does not spend on an enemy at all but converts into leverage: she names Jaqen himself, then releases him from the price in exchange for his help freeing the northern prisoners and turning Harrenhal to her brother’s side (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*). The sequence is, in effect, an extended study of a child reasoning her way toward agency, and the novel’s capacity to inhabit that reasoning across chapters is the source of its force.

The series compresses the bargain and reweights it. The three deaths are dispatched more swiftly, the targets altered — the series substitutes the torturer known as the Tickler and Ser Amory Lorch for the novel’s Chiswyck and Weese — and the same culminating gambit, the naming of Jaqen to compel his aid, is retained (“Garden of Bones”; “A Man Without Honor”). What contracts is the interior deliberation. The emphasis shifts from Arya’s moral process to the plot work the deaths perform: they advance the action, generate suspense around the investigation of mysterious killings under Tywin’s nose, and propel Arya toward her escape. The series is not careless here; it is differently constrained. Episodic television must keep its many stories moving within a fixed allotment of screen time, and it cannot give over to a single character’s deliberation the kind of room a novel can lavish on interior debate.

The consequence for characterisation is a subtle acceleration. In the novel, Arya’s slow, documented weighing of each death lets the reader watch a sensibility change degree by degree —

from fear toward calculation, from impulse toward design — her hardening gradual because the prose records each step. The series, working faster, presents a transformation that is necessarily more abrupt: Arya accommodates herself to killing more quickly, and her scruples are less fully explored, because the form cannot pause to explore them. This is not a failure of nerve but a property of serial pacing, which must balance the development of character against the advancement of plot under constraints the novel does not feel. Mittell's observation that serial television tracks character change across its long arc is borne out, but with a corollary: the grain of that change is coarser than prose can achieve, because the medium parcels its time among many claimants (Mittell). The bargain with Jaqen thus reprises, in the register of pacing, the essay's recurring finding — that what the novel renders as interior process the series must render as external event, and that the difference is not deficiency but the signature of a different storytelling form.

Conclusion

Read together, the six moments resist being summarised as a list of things the adaptation altered. They describe a pattern. In every case, the series' transformation answers to a single underlying difficulty — the difficulty of carrying across to the screen a characterisation founded, in the novels, on restricted interior focalisation. Arya's chapters make meaning from confinement to a child's partial, often mistaken consciousness: from what she does not know (the identity of the conspirators, the fate of Syrio), from what she cannot articulate (her muddled report to her father), from the interior catastrophe of her first killing, from the unspoken political education of her captivity, from the moral reasoning of her bargain with Jaqen. The series cannot reproduce that focalisation directly, because television has no ready equivalent for a mind shown from within. Its response, consistent across every moment examined, is twofold. It externalises Arya's interior

states, converting thought and feeling into gesture, performance, dialogue, and action; and it redistributes the knowledge her focalisation withholds, granting the audience a vantage that exceeds the character's own — showing us the conspirators she cannot name, the scenes she does not witness, the antagonist the novel kept at a distance.

This is the specific contribution the Arya case makes to the theory of adaptation, and it is one that goes beyond the principle the analysis took as its premise. That adaptation is creative reinterpretation rather than derivative copying is, after Hutcheon, no longer in dispute; to restate it would be to belabour the settled. What the Arya case adds is a mechanism. It shows that when a literary character's power is founded on restricted focalisation — on the disciplined confinement of the narrative to a single, limited consciousness — the work of adaptation is not principally the transposition of scenes but the management of knowledge: the adapter must decide what to do with everything the source withholds by virtue of staying inside one mind. Television's characteristic solution, as the Arya case reveals it, is to convert focalised interiority into externalised dramatic structure — to turn an open question into a list, an interior deliberation into a plot of suspense, a relational self-knowledge into a repeatable line, a political education into an invented antagonist. The general theory tells us that adaptation reinterprets through the affordances of its medium; the Arya case specifies which affordance does the decisive work — the medium's distinct way of distributing narrative knowledge — and it identifies focalisation as the hinge on which the cross-media translation of an interior character turns.

The point can be put more sharply, and the essay's title supplies the means. "Fear cuts deeper than swords" is Syrio's teaching, and it is, at bottom, a proposition about interiority: that the most consequential wound is the internal one, that the decisive contest is waged within. The novels can render that proposition in its own idiom, because they can render fear from the inside

— Arya’s terror as the stable boy seizes her, the lessons fleeing her mind in panic, the voice she cannot place. The screen can render fear only from without: through Williams’s body and face and breath, through what the camera can be made to show. The central difficulty of adapting Arya Stark is, in miniature, the difficulty the title names — the difficulty of moving an internal cut onto a surface that can display only the exterior. The series does not fail at this; it succeeds by a different route, finding external forms for internal states and external structures for withheld knowledge. But the recurrence, across six unrelated moments, of this single negotiation suggests that the translation of Arya is governed less by the general fact of creative reinterpretation than by a specific and recoverable tendency: the more a character’s literary force depends on interior focalisation, the more its adaptation must externalise that interiority into structure, performance, and the redistribution of knowledge.

If this is right, it carries beyond Arya, and beyond Westeros. It proposes a question to put to any adaptation of an interior character: not whether the screen has been faithful to the page — Bluestone, Stam, and Hutcheon have together retired that question — but how it has redistributed what the page kept inside one mind. To read adaptation in these terms is to move past the accounting of loss toward an analysis of transformation, and to recognise, in the apparent omissions and simplifications of a series like *Game of Thrones*, the disciplined work of a medium solving, scene by scene, the problem of the inner life.

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