# Medieval Women & Modern Politics:

A Cultural Analysis of Female Political Ambition, Agency, and Power in HBO's *Game of Thrones* and the American Political System

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## Introduction

HBO's *Game of Thrones*, one of the largest cultural phenomena of the past decade, is a critically-acclaimed, fantasy-drama television series that has found an unprecedented international following in the eight years and eight seasons that it has been available for viewing. The gritty realism and political complexity of its storyline have often been cited (by reviewers and critics alike) as basis for its popularity, but the cultural impact of its expansive cast of three-dimension female characters cannot be overlooked. In introducing greater gender diversity into epic fantasy—previously an almost exclusively male genre—the show has undoubtedly made history, achieving extraordinary popularity on a global scale. Yet *Game of Thrones* didn't do it alone: the show, created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, stands on the shoulders of George R.R. Martin's wildly successful (yet presently unfinished) novel series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The first book of the series was published in 1996, and the most recent in 2011—season one of *Game of Thrones* premiered that same year, with the final episode airing in May 2019.

So, to begin, I must address what I imagine is the primary question of my readership: why bother writing about the television show at all, especially when so much of it stems from other (more literary) source material? There are a number of answers to this, the simplest being that *both* George R. R. Martin's novel series and the HBO adaptation are worth serious academic discussion due to the significant cultural work that each performs, but that the innate and fundamental differences of these two objects means that an analysis of either might result in a very distinct conclusion than might be garnered from the other. For one, the books and the show were produced in undeniably separate temporal moments—much has changed since the 1990s and 2000s, both in our world and in our fiction. The last decade, over which the eight seasons of *Game of Thrones* have steadily unfurled, has marked numerous cultural changes in both our

social and political reality, especially in regards to racial and gender relationships; thus, the pressures of representation faced by our works of popular media have been greatly heightened. There's also an undeniable difference in *Game of Thrones'* added visual element, perhaps at the expense of the incredible level of detail provided by the novels but to the definite benefit of the numerous cinematic modes of storytelling made available, and viewers have flocked to the extraordinary visuals rendered in big-budget CGI. The show has thus garnered a much wider and more international audience than a fantasy novel series, and the HBO viewership no doubt reaches a somewhat different (and likely more diverse) demographic than Martin's dedicated readership. This international demographic has spurred the show's immense cultural uptake, resulting in a huge amount of fan discourse surrounding the show across various media platforms and making it a highly compelling object for multi-cultural examination. Unlike the books, the show was also—to some extent—able to respond to viewer comments even as it was being produced, for the particular production cycle of television allows for the active incorporation of feedback, and in this case even resulted in a few humorous nods towards the dialogue within internet fan communities.[1] This provides two levels of cultural engagement, greatly complicating and enriching the relationship between the creative object and its viewership. Ultimately, the show and the books are both fascinating sources of analysis, but as a completed work the show does offer itself to a more exhaustive evaluation of its ultimate messaging, whereas much remains to be seen regarding the thematic direction of Martin's series.

These differences in the temporal, visual, and cultural context of both works have also spurred differences in the material—most notable being the 'aging up' of the central child

[1] Alaina Urquhart-White, "'Game Of Thrones' Made A Gendry Rowing Joke, Breaking The Fourth Wall In A Big Way" (Bustle, August 14, 2017), https://www.bustle.com/p/game-of-thrones-made-a-gendry-rowing-joke-breaking-the-fourth-wall-in-a-big-way-76319.

characters. Take, for instance, the three female characters of Sansa Stark, Daenerys Targaryen, and Margaery Tyrell. In the first books, Sansa is eleven, Daenerys is thirteen, and Margaery is sixteen—but in season one and two, the show portrays them at around the ages of thirteen, sixteen, and twenty-one respectively, and this age-gap is further enhanced by the fact that the actors who played these characters were typically several years older themselves.[2] These differences are small yet significant, especially considering the blatant sexual content in both the show and book revolving around these child characters. Daenerys' marriage to the warlord Drogo, for example, is evidently more disturbing when imaging her as a thirteen-year-old girl than the twenty-four-year-old Emilia Clarke, though the show somewhat tries to compensate for this reduction of disturbance through an enhancement in other aspects of the tragedy; in the novels, Daenerys is seduced by Drogo on her wedding night—with at least some suggestion of consent, despite the horrifying pedophilic connotations—but in the show, she is blatantly and repeatedly raped. Similarly, television-Sansa may be older when she is exposed to repeated psychological traumas, but in the book it is a side character (her friend Jeyne Poole) who is married off to the psychotic and abusive Ramsey Bolton, while in the show it is Sansa herself. This culminates in an on-screen rape which greatly shapes the remainder of her character arc.

Thus, in aging up so many of its central characters, the show diminishes some of the horrors of the narrative while purposefully amplifying others. And, notably, it's through these sexual traumas in which the most political aspects of these female characters often spring—in a *Beauty and the Beast*-esque narrative, Daenerys must flip the power dynamics of her relationship by turning rape into feminine seduction, acquiring skills which eventually allow her to challenge

[2] No doubt largely due to filming constraints when working with child actors, but also because of the public outrage some of Martin's more dubious narrative decisions might've provoked when rendered fully on-screen.

the power dynamics of entire societies. And in the final season, Sansa reflects back on her own troubled past with the highly controversial comment, "Without [my abusers], I'd have stayed a little bird all my life," essentially crediting her years of mistreatment for her eventual development into a formidable political force.[3] These changes, subtle as they sometimes are, greatly impact the overall messaging of the storyline (for better or for worse), and perhaps also indicate the differing cultural moments to which these two texts are consciously or unconsciously responding. Martin's female characters are little girls forced to grow up all too soon, while Benioff's and Weiss's (especially in latter seasons) are young women actively grappling for bodily autonomy within unbearable circumstances.

In this thesis, I investigate the ways in which HBO's *Game of Thrones*, with its early-modern "medievalist" setting and roots in epic fantasy, provides the resources for thinking about progressive feminist politics in our modern age. Although the way *Game of Thrones* handles it female characters has been heavily critiqued—both lauded and decried—over the eight seasons of its run, little existing criticism explores the wider implications of these narrative choices, nor their reflection in our modern society and especially within contemporary American politics. I seek to contribute to the existing scholarly conversation by evaluating the specific handling of female agency and ambition within the show and the ways this handling reflects and refines our cultural dialogue surrounding female political figures. Throughout my thesis, I explore *Game of Thrones* as a product of American culture in our contemporary moment, examine its female characters and narrative arcs in regards to feminist theories of power, and consider why viewers

[3] *Game of Thrones,* season 7, episode 4, "The Spoils of War," created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired August 6th, 2017, on HBO.

and critics alike might come away feeling ambivalent about its depictions of political womanhood.

In my first chapter, I examine the historic and fantasy setting of the show, and the way in which this narrative context defines the roles of gender and sexuality within the fictional society of Westeros. In doing so, I analyze the ways in which *Game of Thrones* breaks from the traditional tropes of medieval fantasy and consider the implications of the show's historical roots within the modern genre of political dramas. In examining its decision to portray sexism, racism, and homophobia as culturally and institutionally ingrained, I also utilize Svetlana Boym's conception of restorative vs. reflective nostalgia—as detailed in her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*—to explore the progressive and revolutionary potentials of its utilization of what we might call modern medievalism, which is so often shaped to fit a conservative agenda. From there, I attend to the fantasy elements of the show using Marcel Mauss's *A General Theory of Magic* and Bronislaw Malinowski's *Magic, Science and Religion*, detailing the ways in which the show might challenge the conceptual boundaries between magic, science, religion, and historical womanhood. I focus specifically on the obvert gendering of an array of differing magical elements, exploring the relationship between these elements and the representations of femininity and female power within the show.

My second chapter analyzes the limiting effect of the kinship system on female agency within Westeros. To do so, I begin with a detailed analysis of the infamous 'Red Wedding' scene and the origins and explanations of its tragedy, which exemplifies how kinship serves as the social and political foundation of Westeros. From there, I begin to examine the story arcs of some of the show's most prominent female characters—Arya, Sansa, Margaery, Brienne, Cersei, and Daenerys, among others—through the analytic lens of Gayle Rubin's feminist essay "The

Traffic in Women." I explore the ways in which these women are simultaneously oppressed and empowered by the kinship system, and the individual consequences of the choices made by each woman within and outside of it. Honing in the southernmost kingdom of Dorne as a reflection of modernity, I invoke Michel Foucault's analysis of the "deployment of sexuality" in his *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* to explore what these consequences reveal about our modern gender roles and the restrictions they place on female agency in both historical and contemporary times.

My final chapter explores the show's representations of female political ambition. To do so, I delve deeper into the storylines and conclusions of three of the most politically powerful female characters of the show—namely, Sansa, Circe, and Daenerys—to develop a taxonomy of the differing forms of female ambition represented in *Game of Thrones* and their social and political outcomes. Emphasizing the show's intrinsic sense of Americanization despite its European narrative roots, I attempt to historicize it within our contemporary American moment, bringing these central characters into comparison with our cultural perceptions of modern female political figures—like Hillary Rodham Clinton, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Kamala Harris—and assessing the ways in which the show might prefigure political scenes happening today. In doing so, I particularly utilize Kathleen Jamieson's definition of the "double bind" in *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* and Wendy Brown's conception of the "masculinism of the state" in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, while making use of numerous sociological studies surrounding the treatment of women in power. I also examine the intense public backlash to the show's ending, the ways in which it attempts to address and resolve the cultural contradictions of political femininity, and the real-world implications of *Game of Thrones'* overarching 'feminist' messaging.

In conclusion, this thesis aims to bring the pre-modern world of *Game of Thrones* into conversation with our contemporary society, first by examining the modern potentials of its fantasy-medieval setting, then by exploring its historical social structures as representative of the patriarchal limitations placed on present-day women, and finally through revealing the underlying cultural hurdles faced by political female figures individually and systematically, as both represented by and further enforced within this piece of popular media. Ultimately, I hope to deepen our understanding of modern female agency within the American social and political reality through an analysis of one of the largest cultural phenomena of the past decade.

## Chapter One: Fantastically Medieval

*"I've always considered women to be people." – George R.R. Martin.*

### I. Breaking the Genre

It's no secret that high fantasy—a genre revolving around alternative historical worlds with fantastical elements—has a problem very much rooted in our contemporary and everyday reality: a woman problem. It doesn't take a lot of familiarity with the genre to pick up on this phenomenon; one read-through of the archetypal *Lord of the Rings* (1937-1949) trilogy by lauded writer J.R.R. Tolkien, and it's clear to see how Tolkien's story largely confines its female characters—of which there are barely more than three with any real narrative significance—to stereotypically feminine roles: that of passive housewives, simplistic helpers, or one-dimensional love interests, largely serving to aid or inspire the male characters who carry the driving action of the story. For this reason, fantasy in all its many forms—high or low, literary or popular, in literature or on screen—has often been considered a genre by and *for* men, and it's only recently in which this general viewpoint has begun to shift. Of course, much of this shifting has occurred in the context of a rising number of female fantasy writers—despite much of their works being misclassified as young adult fiction—but even male authors and directors have begun to make an effort to be more inclusive (and more discerning of questionable gender norms) within their works.[4] All it takes is one seventy-hour binge of *Game of Thrones* to get to know more than a dozen complex, centrally-focused, and (more often than not) gender-nonconforming female characters, with a narrative that—above all, and from the very first episodes—treats them as

[4] Mya Nunnally, "There's a Weird, Sexist Problem in Fantasy That We Need to Talk About," Book Riot, January 20, 2019, https://bookriot.com/sexist-problem-in-fantasy/.

*people*, as was clearly Martin's original intention. In doing so, the show dramatically breaks from this aforementioned tendency of the genre, setting it distinctly apart from many of the texts which inspired it. But why, and why now?

To answer those questions, we might look into another more recent phenomenon in twenty-first century media, one seen particularly within the genre of political dramas: the detailed depiction of women in high-profile political roles that are central rather than periphery to the dramatic narrative. Shows like *Vice, The Politician, Madam Secretary, House of Cards, Scandal, The Good Wife, State of Affairs, 24, Commander in Chief,* and *Prison Break*, among others, all exemplify this such tendency, and all take place within the United States despite its poor track record for women in leadership. As of April 2021, the U.S. ranks #66 worldwide in terms of the number of women within its national legislature, and yet many of these works attempt to reimagine an America in which this might not be the case.[5] In some ways, *Game of Thrones* is very much linked to the newly imagined political drama—with dozens of diverse female characters, many of whom either express political ambition or hold positions of political power. Yet even as *Game of Thrones* goes along with this tendency, it also very much breaks from it. Just as with fantasy, the show can't stick within the bounds of its genre, and in fact attempts to bring together two genres with vastly opposing narrative elements (specifically, the empowerment vs. the oppression of womanhood, and contemporary vs. historical themes). Every other example of these feminist political dramas takes place in a modern, realist setting, so why doesn't *Game of Thrones*?

[5] "Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments," Parline: the IPU's Open Data Platform, accessed May 14, 2021, https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=4&year=2021%C2%A0.

The show, in many ways, has its own woman problem, though a very different one from the majority of its high (literary) fantasy counterparts. While *Lord of the Rings* is well known for blatantly idealizing its female characters—holding them to standards of perfection which are simply unrealistic and unattainable, representing historical ideals of passive womanhood alongside the more modern (yet still harmful) architype of the flawlessly 'empowered' woman—*Game of Thrones* does quite the opposite. It often villainizes and sexualizes its female characters, on top of traumatizing them with horrific instances of rape and female-oriented violence. Much of this treatment stems from the original source material of Martin's novels, though certainly not all; the adaptation goes out of its way to lean into some of these more controversial aspects of the texts, and its added visual element undeniably contributes to that effect. Critic Miles McNutt even coined the term 'sexposition' to describe *Game of Thrones'* distinctive tendency to utilize graphic sex and (female) nudity as a backdrop for many of its expository or plot-driven scenes, which succeeds largely in objectifying the female body.[6] Of course, much of the show's focus on sexual violence is excused under the guise of historical realism, with the suggestion that life 'really was like that' for women who lived during the Middle Ages, upon which the show—despite its inclusion of medieval-inspired fantasy elements—is loosely based. Yet, if that's the case, why does *Game of Thrones* simultaneously function as a political drama, in which these very same women, oppressed by these supposedly 'realistic' historical circumstances, also end up in positions of nearly unbelievable power? Why bring this modern feminist sensibility into a genre with some of the least feminist tropes?

[6] Miles McNutt, "Game of Thrones – 'You Win or You Die,'" Cultural Learnings, April 9, 2012, https://cultural-learnings.com/2011/05/29/game-of-thrones-you-win-or-you-die/.

There's no question that the creators of *Game of Thrones* faced numerous pressures by the show's audience—pressures to stay faithful to George R. R. Martin's original source texts, to realistically represent a diverse cast of characters, and to stay consistently engaging as a work of entertainment—and the innate medievalism of the story only adds greater tension between two opposing impulses: to respond to contemporary viewers and their diverging interests, but also to represent (and explore the implications of) an inherently problematic past. *Game of Thrones* navigates this tension in a myriad of ways, but perhaps most fascinating is how it utilizes gender in order to do so. Thus, we have to ask: if the show *is* ultimately trying to participate in a progressive feminist message, doesn't its setting undercut everything that it's trying to accomplish because of its disconnect from the present and its innate lack of realism? And in consideration of the immense amount of sexism, racism, and homophobia rooted in the medieval setting which *Game of Thrones* chooses to set its story, doesn't that just oppress the characters rather than empower them? How could something like that even be feminist?

## II. Making Medieval

In exploring the medieval qualities of *Game of Thrones*, it's first worth noting that the show is not actually 'medievalist' at all, but a prime example of what might be called 'medievalism.' In the simplest terms, what is medievalist examines the history and the culture of what *actually* occurred during the approximately thousand-year European period referred to as the Middle Ages, from the 5$^{th}$ to the 15$^{th}$ century. Medievalism, conversely, refers to the ways in which this period is utilized and represented in our modern media and culture—as critic Charles Beem puts it, it's a "genre which mines medieval history for content, which is reflected through the lens of the author's own contemporary prejudices and understandings," and *Game of Thrones*

is a major contribution to this literary and cinematic mode.[7] Medievalism, in short, is not an accurate historical depiction of the way the world once was so much as a look at our contemporary culture through a stylized lens. Thus, the recognizable elements of the Middle Ages—the castles, the nobles, the clothing, the social and political structures, etc.—are distorted in order to imitate (usually unconsciously, though not always) the cultural obsessions of our modern era. "George R.R. Martin's fantasy has grown to enormous popularity in part because of its modernity, not its 'medieviality,'" writes critic Benjamin Breen, and he's certainly correct—*Game of Thrones* is not an 'accurate' representation of the Middle Ages because it does not have to be.[8] Its viewers don't watch for historical accuracy so much as for contemporary entertainment, rooted in the drama of the storyline, the complexity of the characters, and the undeniably applicable themes.[9] Though all of this still begs the question: if the point is to reflect our modern world, why bother delving into medievalism at all?

The cultural obsession with the medieval is nothing new—'the medieval impulse,' as literary critic Kim Ileen Moreland deems it, was a cultural period within mid-nineteenth to twentieth century America, in which a sense of overwhelming medieval nostalgia found its way into numerous elements of American culture, particularly its literature but also its architecture, art, and national values. Moreland links this impulse with existing anxieties at the time, anxieties which revolved around an unstoppable cultural progress which threatened the traditional social

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[7] Charles E. Beem, "The Royal Minorities of *Game of Thrones*," in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire"* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 190.
[8] Benjamin Breen, "Why 'Game of Thrones' Isn't Medieval-and Why That Matters" (Pacific Standard, June 12, 2014), https://psmag.com/social-justice/game-thrones-isnt-medieval-matters-83288.
[9] Many critics, for instance, have compared the show's central White Walker crisis to that of our current struggle with global climate change, with petty political conflict serving as a barrier in the remediation of either.

order. "The medievalist impulse expresses the desire for a golden past—an age of order, stability, beauty, and faith—at a time of radical change in what seemed to many an all too gilded present,"[10] writes Morrison, and it's no surprise that in the aftermath of the American Civil War, and with the rise of the Second Industrial Revolution, Americans found some solace in their imaginings of an unchanging medieval world. Yet all the nineteenth century writers whom Morrison examines in her book on the medieval impulse are distinctly *men*, and it's worth noting that medievalism at this time was not uniformly utilized by all subsets of people. In her book, Clare Broom Saunders explores nineteenth-century medievalism solely through the lens of female writers, and in doing so reveals how the subversive ways in which these women employed medievalism in their works allowed them to provide "an acute socio-political perspective in response to events and expectations of women's role in their present day society," such as with the legendary (and paradoxical) figure of French medieval heroine Joan of Arc.[11] From these female contributors of this otherwise male-dominated genre, it's clear that medievalism *can* be isolated from its misogynistic elements, and perhaps even utilized for feminist purposes—not a haven against progress so much as an invocation of it. In revealing underlying issues within modern society, medievalism provokes discussion which has the potential to lead to eventual change.

The particular medieval impulse which Moreland defines may not have stretched into the twenty-first century, but there's no question that medievalism continues to be highly prevalent within our current cultural reality—in media, in aesthetics, in community festivals, and even in

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[10] Kim Ileen Moreland, *The Medievalist Impulse in American Literature: Twain, Adams, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 12.
[11] Clare Broome Saunders, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5.

chains of dinner theaters. As scholar Renée R. Trilling argues, in both the nineteenth century and today "the medieval [has functioned] as a space for the projection of fantasies of unity and excess, a space safely distant in its historical alterity, but comfortingly familiar and always accessible through its affective hold on a reader's imagination."[12] But one function of contemporary medievalism which stands apart from its past utilization is that of its place within the dialogue of the twenty-first century alt-right movement and its role in the construction of historical alt-right fantasies. In his essay on contemporary medievalism, Thomas Blake details the way that modern white nationalists utilize medieval imagery, weaponry, and language in perpetuation of "the myth of a monolithically white Christian European past," establishing a false nostalgia from which they draw much of the inspiration for their continued bigotry.[13] Perhaps this was never clearer than during the infamous white-nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where the cries of "*Deus vult"*—Latin for "God wills it"—eluded towards the medieval bloodshed of the Crusades while further pushing the rally's anti-Semitic rhetoric, enhanced by burning torches and medieval-inspired shields.[14] Or, alternatively, during the recent storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2020 by alt-right protesters, who leaned into "Viking-oriented medievalism" with costumes and Nordic-inspired tattoos to legitimize their violence.[15]

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[12] Renée R Trilling, "Medievalism and Its Discontents," *Postmedieval: a Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 219, https://doi.org/10.1057/pmed.2011.7.
[13] Valencia-García Louie Dean and Thomas Blake, "Getting Medieval Post-Charlottesville ," in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2020), 179.
[14] Lawrence Goodman, "Jousting With the Alt-Right," Brandeis Magazine, accessed May 14, 2021, https://www.brandeis.edu/magazine/2019/winter/featured-stories/alt-right.html.
[15] Richard Fahey, "Marauders in the US Capitol: Alt-Right Viking Wannabes & Weaponized Medievalism," Medieval Studies Research Blog: Meet us at the Crossroads of Everything (University of Notre Dame, April 29, 2021), https://sites.nd.edu/manuscript-studies/2021/01/15/marauders-in-the-capitol-alt-right-viking-wannabes-weaponized-medievalism-in-american-white-nationalism/.

These instances may seem shocking, but this political recuperation of historical imagery is no surprise to those engrossed in the academic study of nostalgia. As scholar Svetlana Boym puts it, "The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters"—and neo-Nazis are no doubt the truest representation of this such process, chasing after a vision of the world which has never existed, but of which medievalism easily invites projection.[16] "The Middle Ages have been misappropriated and deployed politically over and across time" (189) writes Blake, but while he goes into great detail regarding how medievalism can be used to perpetuate racial myths, he fails to account for how it might simultaneously propagate gender myths in its construction of a time in which gender roles were strict, unchallenged, and even romanticized (especially with gendered concepts such as chivalry). All the same, it's worth considering: is medievalism truly conservative in nature, and if not, what are its possibilities for progressive politics? Why might a story attempt to go into the past and produce something like that, when medievalism feels so antithetical to her modern, forward-thinking world? And, more specifically, does *Game of Thrones'* depiction of women differentiate its medievalism from the version utilized harmfully by the alt-right, and if yes, how so?

Ironically, the possible revolutionary aspects of medievalism might be best located in the same place in which its most conservative interpretations are rooted: that of nostalgia. In her book, Boym explores nostalgia as a sensation of longing that challenges the notion of time itself, and embedded as much in imagination as in reality (if not even more so). The powers of nostalgia, therefore, might be said to exist within its temporal rebellion, thinning the conceptual

[16] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), XVI.

distance between what we might deem the past and the present. But the complications of time which nostalgia invokes don't arise from nowhere; in fact, there is a long academic history to questioning the way we as human beings have come to view and represent the passage of time. French philosopher Bruno Latour delves into this concept in his book by exploring the possibilities of asynchronous temporality, and thus reframing time's inherent structure. As he describes it, "Let us suppose… that we are going to regroup the contemporary elements along a spiral rather than a line. We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled… every cohort of contemporary elements may bring together elements from all times," ultimately concluding that "*it is the sorting that makes the times, not the times that make the sorting.*"[17] In other words, there is a sense of an arbitrary or even illusory separation between the era that we define as the Middle Ages and that which we refer to as contemporary times, and thus a suggestion that many elements which once defined these times are by no means absent from our own. The present and the past can never be truly isolated from one another, for its only our linear conceptualization of time which keeps them apart; when that conception breaks down, it's clear that the past has existed within the present all along. What is medieval is therefore very much alive within the modern.

But what does this matter? Well, as Boym argues, in nostalgia's ability to challenge our notions of time it not only brings together the past and the present, but the present and the future. "Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future," she writes. "Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic

[17] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 75-76.

tales" (XVI). Because nostalgia centers on feelings of loss, it reveals an absence in our present reality which can become revolutionary when this absence is addressed and potentially mitigated—if nostalgia can be aimed towards the future rather than the past, it might then be utilized as an agent of change. As Boym suggests, "[The dreams of imagined homelands] can have a more important impact on improving social and political conditions in the present as ideals, not as fairy tales come true" (355), for this capacity for change is limited and easily misused, especially when nostalgia is falsely misinterpreted as historical reality. Boym distinguishes between these differing forms of nostalgia with the terms 'reflective' and 'restorative,' with restorative nostalgia longing to rebuild a nonexistent past while reflective nostalgia looks at that past more as a resource for dealing with a fractured present. Restorative nostalgia can be seen in the utilization of medievalism for white nationalist agendas, but in practicing reflective nostalgia instead, revolutionary aspects can also be found. In offering a knowingly alternative past, for instance, there exists the opportunity in which to utilize medievalism 'correctively'—as *Game of Thrones* arguably does by its latter seasons, in which its world is populated by women at nearly every significant seat of power (as would have been very unlikely during the true Middle Ages). There's something undeniably feminist in re-writing history to empower the very people whom society once profoundly oppressed.

Yet this corrective process is certainly not a required element of contemporary medievalism, for not every problematic aspect of this era need be glossed over or entirely amended in order for it to function progressively. For instance, if medievalism serves as a reflection of our modern society—as many scholars previously cited suggest—then it innately provokes discussion regarding how the sexism, racism, and homophobia which it presents might also function as commentary on these issues within our present world. As feminist scholar Sara

Ahmed argues, “A feminist movement depends on our ability to keep insisting on something: the ongoing existence of the very things we wish to bring to an end.”[18] In making the sexism of a medieval-themed world so blatant, rather than simply erasing it in pursuit of some imaginary gendered utopia, its existence can’t be put into question like it so often is in our modern reality. Thus, reflective nostalgia can allow medievalism to function like a magnifying glass, enlarging what already exists and bringing into focus what’s been widely overlooked.

Except, of course, this is not always the case—for instance, with racism. *Game of Thrones* never actually addresses racism in-universe, though time and again critics have called out the show for the clear racial biases which underlie much of its narrative devices. For example, the only non-white communities in the show include the savage Dothraki, the enslaved Unsullied, and the exoticized (and eroticized) Dornish. Critic Mikayla Hunter even points out how the white heroines of the show (Daenerys and Arya specifically) function as figures of Western colonialist powers, describing how Daenerys—fulfilling the problematic persona of the ‘white savior’—“attempts to plunder Essos [the non-white East], to take its cultural ideas and resources (armies, ships) and bring them back to Westeros [the white West] for the furtherance of her own agenda.”[19] By not addressing the inherent racism of its world, yet clearly exhibiting it through the poor implications of its writing choices, *Game of Thrones* only further exacerbates the problems inherent within the medievalism framework—and its fans notice, as is evident by the online #demthrones movement started by black viewers in order to make the show “blacker

[18] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2019), 6.
[19] Mikayla Hunter, “‘All Men Must Die, but We Are Not Men’: Eastern Faith and Feminine Power in A Song of Ice and Fire and HBO’s Game of Thrones,” in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire"* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 159.

by necessity," and thus more palatable to minority audiences.[20] However, the show clearly *is* attempting to address sexism in-universe, as is made clear by its focus on multiple female main characters who must constantly deal with the repercussions of being women in an inherently misogynistic society. Thus, it's fairly easy to deduce that the show might be attempting to use this exploration of in-universe sexism to comment on modern sexism, and if this is the case, it's worth delving into what it might be trying to say. Yet, in the same way that racism is ingrained within the structure of the show as a whole, *Game of Thrones* is not immune from making sexist narrative choices that exemplify the modern sexism it's trying to combat, even as it actively disapproves of the sexist acts and attitudes of the world it represents.

### III. Fantasy vs. Faith

If this is all true, however, that brings up yet another question: what does fantasy have to do with any of this? Fantasy as a genre is typically defined by one of two essential elements, though typically both: the existence of magic, and the presence of some 'otherwordly component'—like nonexistent creatures or objects—which set its fictional universes distinctly apart from our own.[21] It's these elements which distinguish fantasy from other genres,[22] and often what separates a work of medievalism from a work of historical fiction—a genre defined by its greater attention to realism, at least attempting to craft the past as it 'really was'. A work of medievalism does not necessarily have to have fantasy elements in order to be distinguished

[20] Zaron Burnett III, "Why Black 'Game of Thrones' Fans Need #DemThrones," MEL Magazine, May 13, 2019, https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/why-black-game-of-thrones-fans-need-demthrones.
[21] Austin Carmody, "Does Fantasy Need Magic? (The Answer May Surprise You)," Fantasy Book Fanatic, January 4, 2021, https://fantasybookfanatic.com/does-fantasy-need-magic-the-answer-may-surprise-you/.
[22] Though perhaps not from science fiction, of which the boundary is much fuzzier.

from the stricter confines of historical fiction—the oft-told story of Robin Hood is one primary example, rooted as it is in heroic mythos—yet it so often does. Why's that? Within the genre of fantasy, perhaps the tendency towards medievalism is because magic becomes an even fiercer force in a world without the miracles of modern technology to compete with. But within the genre of medievalism, why throw fantasy into the mix? Why does *Game of Thrones* deviate from the medievalist historical setting and the concept of realism by including fantasy elements, and in doing so, what might it gain?

To answers this question, we first need to delve into the question of magic itself, both what exactly it refers to and the function that it performs in our culture as a whole. At its most simplistic, magic refers to actions taken or rituals performed in order to manipulate natural or supernatural forces, and there is a long history to both its development within human society and of its corresponding study in academic circles. French sociologist Marcell Mauss was one such academic, and in his work he explores both the individual nature of magic as well as its particular association with the socially depowered. As he writes, "All these individuals—the disabled and the ecstatic, the pedlars, hawkers, jugglers and neurotics—actually form kinds of social classes. They possess magical powers not through their individual peculiarities but as a consequence of society's attitude towards them and their kind."[23] And of course, of these "social classes," women are an obvious addition, and thus there exists a historical association between women and magic. The writings of British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowki expand on this by detailing the relationship between magic and feelings of passion, desire, and hope, and the ways that it allows emotional beliefs to take on physical forms. As he describes it, "To most types of magical ritual… there corresponds a spontaneous ritual of emotional expression or of a

[23] Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (London: Routledge, 2008), 34-35.

forecast of the desired end," for magic at its core is an experience rooted in emotion, and especially in want.[24] Thus, magic seems to function as a tool for social outsiders, who—lacking power in other ways, and oftentimes isolated from wider communities—harness supernatural power using their very desire for change and social betterment, whatever this 'betterment' might entail in their individual perspectives.

Historically, magic has also been negatively associated with villainized womanhood, especially in late-medieval Europe in the form of witchcraft. *Game of Thrones* clearly plays into that association, especially with the controversial figures of Mirri Maz Duur, Maggy the Frog, and Melisandre the Red Witch. In this villainization, however, it's especially notable that witchcraft has traditionally been tied to female weakness rather than strength. "Women are particularly disposed to hysteria, and their nervous crises make them susceptible to superhuman forces, which endow them with special powers" (35), writes Mauss, and Michael Bailey further describes how witchcraft "represented a more feminized form of demonic magic than did elite, learned necromancy [which was often associated with masculinity]," and "could be seen as more suited to women than to men, because the power of witches rested on their submission to the devil and their susceptibility to his seductions."[25] *Game of Thrones*, in making magic and witchcraft such a legitimate part of its universe and a major source of female strength and power, somewhat reframes history in a way that actually allows women to attain the power they were accused of having. Though, in the clear dangers magic comes to pose, it also somewhat validates the fears of those who accused them. In making witches like Mirri and Melisandre such morally-

[24] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2015), 82.
[25] Michael David Bailey, "The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19, no. 1 (2002): pp. 128, https://doi.org/10.1353/ems.2003.0002.

gray (at best) characters—Mirri uses her powers to kill Daenerys' husband and unborn child in vengeance, whereas Melisandre convinces Stannis Baratheon to burn his young daughter Shireen at the stake[26]—the show seems to suggest that even as magic empowers women, it also contains a unique ability to corrupt them. If power itself corrupts (and this is a theme which *Game of Thrones* continually pushes, with the accruement of political and military power often resulting in a gradual moral decline), then magical power corrupts even more so, and it's along the lines of female weakness—particularly hysteria, though also sexuality—in which it does. This is not limited to just the witches of *Game of Thrones*, but instead expands to nearly all the female characters who dabble in some form of magical arts.

Magic in *Game of Thrones* is also notable in the way that it interacts with and compares to organized religion, reflective of a historical relationship which many cultural critics have also noted on. In his work, Mauss puts emphasis on what distinguishes religion from magic; namely, religion's communal aspect, in comparison to magic's individualized nature. Malinowski further elaborates that, unlike magic, the unity of religion "can be seen neither in the form of its acts nor even in the uniformity of its subject matter, but rather in the function which it fulfills and in the value of its belief and ritual" (88)—thus, religion is larger than merely its rituals, but is defined by the role it plays within the larger participating community. As much as women have been associated with magic, men have been associated with religion, and these historical associations are intrinsically related. Mauss explains how "since women are excluded from most religious cults— or if admitted, reduced to a passive role—the only practices left to them on their own

[26] A disturbing twist of the historical notion of burning witches at the stake, in which the accused witches go from victims of their patriarchal society to perpetrators of patriarchal violence themselves. Yet Melisandre is not using the patriarchy merely for her own ends, as some (like Cersei Lannister) are inclined to, but in the name of the male figure of her God.

initiative are magical ones" (35), and later elaborates: "From [female attributes, rooted in sex and childbirth] stems their different— inferior— legal status and particularly their different religious status. It is precisely these factors which determine their [opposite] role in magic" (147-148). Exactly what makes women suited for magic makes them ill-suited for religion, which seems fitting considering the historical contrast between the ways in which women have been empowered by magic and oppressed by religious institutions.

Notably, the world of *Game of Thrones* is comprised of three central religions: the Old Gods, the New Gods (or the Faith of the Seven), and the Lord of Light (or R'hllor the Red God).[27] The Old Gods refers to countless nature spirits worshiped by those in the North, and the oldest faith in the western continent of Westeros. The New Gods refers to a singular deity with seven faces; it is the dominant religion within the west and is much more institutional, with a considerably more rigid belief system that carries numerous parallels to medieval Catholicism. The Lord of Light refers to a God of a rising faith that is new to Westeros, for it originates in the foreign east, Essos. It is similarly strict as the faith of the New Gods, though its rules are vastly different, but what makes it stand out from its predecessors is its indisputable link with magic. Melisandre is but one of a number of Red Priests and Priestesses who wield a variety of supernatural abilities in the name of their God. By representing the most prevalent and powerful form of magic in the show as a specific byproduct of religion—whereas witchcraft has been traditionally viewed and represented as anti-religion—*Game of Thrones* challenges this seemingly innate divide between the two, and this challenge is perhaps rooted in its religious gendering.

[27] Though there are some minor and more localized alternatives, like the Drowned God of the Iron Islands, the Many-Faced God of the Faceless Men, and the Great Stallion of the Dothraki.

The Old Gods are arguably the most equal, least gendered of the three central faiths, not surprising considering its similarities with ancient polytheistic religious traditions which predated the institutionalized misogyny of organized religions. For these reasons, it might also be the faith most suspected to have ties to magic—and in some ways it does, for it was first practiced by the magical race called the Children of the Forest—but within the scope of the show these ties are limited. The Faith of the Seven, by contrast, is extremely and undeniable patriarchal, no doubt due to its Catholic parallels. Its headed by the High Septon, the last of which being the High Sparrow, who within two seasons locks up and punishes Loras Tyrell for his queerness, Margaery Tyrell for her vanity, and Cersei Lannister for her unconstrained sexuality. The latter even attempts to utilize the religious institution for her own political benefit before it swiftly turns on her, and she is forced to walk naked down the streets to repent, for this faith is ultimately defined by its harsh reinforcement of the status quo (much of which is undeniably gendered) under the guise of morality.[28] The Faith of the Seven has both male and female clergy, the septons and septas respectively, but the septons clearly dominate, functioning as figures of active enforcement whereas the septas function as figures of passive servitude. And even though the seven faces of their God are equally male and female, these faces clearly serve to reinforce existing gender roles. The faith following the Lord of Light thus stands in even sharper contrast, for even though both men and women are able to act as members of the clergy, the show vastly emphasizes the female figures—including Melisandre and the High Priestess Kinvara, one of the highest-ranking leaders of the faith. Of the characters we see on screen

[28] Notably, the High Sparrow differs from previous High Septons in that he *does* challenge the economic status quo in his emphasis on the impoverished, but he also violently reinforces the existent patriarchal and heteronormative pressures of the world, and does not desire equality so much as a restructuring of the social hierarchy such that the institution of his faith reigns dominate.

wearing the archetypal red robes of the faith, almost all are women, even and especially the background figures. The priestesses also come to view Daenerys Targaryen as a female messiah of sorts, preaching in the streets that "[her] dragons will purify non-believers by the thousands" (S6, E5). In its association with primarily womanhood, there's no question why it's this faith which challenges the divide between religion and magic, for in doing so it simultaneously challenges that between religion and womanhood. If women are tied to magic, and magic is not so distinct from religion, then why can't women also function as religious leaders?

Critic Makayla Hunter suggests that women in Essos seek religion because it is "one of the only culturally accepted mechanisms for acquiring female agency" (146-47), as they have fewer options for empowerment than their Westosi counterparts. However, this fails to acknowledge the innate differences between the eastern and western religions in the show. Melisandre's faith originates in the exotic Essos not by chance but by necessity, as it conflicts too sharply with the social norms of Westeros to have ever developed within it. And not only does this faith challenge the preconceived Westerosi notions of womanhood, but it seems even to conflict with the definition of magic itself. "Magic is an institution only in the most weak sense," Mauss writes. "It is a kind of totality of actions and beliefs, poorly defined, poorly organized even as far as those who practise it and believe in it are concerned" (13)—but *Game of Thrones* turns that interpretation on its head, essentially transforming magic into its own organized religion, with widely established rules and regulations across a connected network of the practicing. Yet, this transformation has its definite drawbacks. "These religious organisations strain as they empower" (155), emphasizes Hunter, for Melisandre—as a servant bound to the unreliable whims of her Lord—ultimately cannot use magic for her own gain. In conflating magic and religion, *Game of Thrones* collectivizes a usually individualized practice and

institutionalizes what typically belongs to outsiders, thereby stripping magic of some of its more revolutionary properties.

All the same, the Red Priestesses are just one way in which women utilize magic within the context of the show, and there's no doubt that even for them it continues to serve as an undeniable source of power. In consideration of some of Mauss' and Malinowski's theories, it might be said that magic within *Game of Thrones* functions as a specific expression of female ambition and desire for agency. *These* are the emotions which their magic is rooted in, and more often than not, it proves fruitful. Magic gives the female characters a way to 'even the playing fields,' so to speak, providing them with a power advantage that allows them to achieve political heights that would've been difficult or even impossible to obtain in true medieval Europe (or at least in our skewed modern perceptions of it), and thereby assisting in modernizing the story with representations of contemporary political feminism in a world that is otherwise so utterly unequal. However, in doing so, it also fosters a lingering distrust of the way women utilize their power and their underlying motives, to an extent not attributed to (non-magical) men. For these reasons, it's no surprise that more naturally masculine women like Brienne of Tarth and Yara Greyjoy don't seem to have any use for magic, as they obtain power in the same way that men do: through physical violence.[29] Notably, unlike magic, this form of purely physical power is in and of itself *not* corruptive, as demonstrated by Brienne's role as one of the most physically powerful and morally upstanding characters on the show. Yet, many feminine women who desire power (typically in the political realm) do end up dabbling in some form of magical arts: Daenerys has her dragons, Cersei has wildfire and a reanimated corpse, Olenna and the Dornish

[29] Though perhaps there is an opposite explanation: only women who wield the power of their femininity can wield the power of magic.

women have poisons, and so on. Sansa Stark is one exception to this pattern, suggesting that her way of rule is more trustworthy than her counterparts.

But all this aside, it's difficult to continue this discussion without recognition of the fact that magic within *Game of Thrones* does not act as a singular unified force. The fantasy aspects of the setting are numerous and variable, and not all hold the same thematic meaning or serve the same narrative purpose as the next. Thus, it becomes somewhat necessary to break down that magic into its smaller parts and thereby determine the different ways in which it might function within the narrative.

## IV. Magical Gendering: Men

The most obvious deviation between the various forms of magic in *Game of Thrones* lies in its gendering, in that there exists a distinct split between fantasy elements which are associated with women and those that are associated with men. In most cases, this gendering is not explicitly stated or even entirely exclusive, but instead reflects the wider trends and subtler associations which appear throughout the seasons, especially in consideration of the ultimate narrative focus. In examining the way that *Game of Thrones* utilizes its fantasy elements, it's particularly interesting to consider what this gendered split might tell us about the differing experiences of each gender within the wider fictional world.

Because of the overarching connection between women and magic, the links between men and magic are much less prevalent, but all the same there are a few patterns which can be determined over the course of the show. From what we see of that world, only men function as wargs (humans who can enter the minds of animals) and serve as the all-knowing 'Three-eyed Raven'—though it's notable that these men are outsiders in and of themselves, the disabled Bran

Stark and the men who live among the bands of societal outcasts called the wildings. Additionally, the primary fantasy antagonist of the show is the Night King and his army of White Walkers, dead bodies brought back to life through some form of magical necromancy. The Night King and the majority of the White Walkers are (or were once) men, and though true resurrection occurs multiple times throughout the narrative, the only time we see this occur is with men as the resurrected figures[30]—perhaps not surprising, considering that, "although never explicitly described in terms of gender, the practice of necromancy as clerical authorities conceived it [in our historical world] seems to have been a decidedly masculine act" (Bailey). A woman, Melisandre, is once the figure performing the necromancy, but her singular act is vastly outnumbered by the Brotherhood without Banners, in which one man, Thorus, resurrects another, Beric, six times.[31]

The linkage between men and necromancy may have to do with the fact that necromancy appears to straddle the line between magic and science. Its historical association with masculinity had to do with its conception as a practice that "involved skill, training, preparation, and above all education" (Bailey 126), which distinguished it from its simplistic and uneducated alternative, feminine witchcraft. Education of all forms has been systematically denied to women for centuries, and in *Game of Thrones* this denial holds firm: the Citadel, the headquarters to a class of scholars referred to as Maesters, is strictly exclusive to men. Technology, linked with science, is also time and again held up as a weapon against magic. For instance, one of the primary methods of fighting dragons in the show is with the newly developed ballistas, and the White

[30] In the books, Catelyn Stark is resurrected as the undead figure of Lady Stoneheart, but the show chooses not to include this storyline.
[31] Also notable is that the female-coded species called the Children of the Forest are the first to create a Night Walker from a human being; however, this is not framed as an act of necromancy in itself, as the man is alive and screaming during the transformation.

Walkers are partially defeated by knowledge gained by Samwell Tarly while he's researching in the Citadel.[32] The historical split between science and magic is no surprise, considering their innate conceptual differences: "Science is founded on the conviction that experience, effort, and reason are valid; magic on the belief that hope cannot fail nor desire deceive. The theories of knowledge are dictated by logic, those of magic by the association of ideas under the influence of desire" (Malinowski 87). These conceptual disparities also explain their distinctive gendering, considering the existing association between women and emotions and men and logic, with emotions (and thereby women) being deemed 'primitive' in comparison to the superiority of male rationality. It's no surprise that one of the few magical roles of the show attributed to men is the Three-Eyed Raven, considering the access it provides to (and symbolic association with) all the world's available knowledge. One of the only female characters on the show with a significant tie to science and technology is Cersei Lannister, due to her connection with the former Maester Qyburn. With his assistance, she uses a ballista to destroy a dragon skull (and eventually kill a dragon), has Gregor Clegane's corpse scientifically reanimated as her bodyguard,[33] and uses an explosive substance called wildfire—a napalm-like weapon, perhaps indicative of Martin's anti-war stance[34]—to blow up the Sept of Baelor. This connection, however, largely signifies her disconnection from female power as she embraces a more masculine attitude, with Gregor in particular functioning as her pseudo-male body.

[32] Samwell, the most academically-minded character on the show, is also constantly contrasted with his un-educated female love interest, Gilly.
[33] Notably also a masculine act of necromancy.
[34] Emily VanDerWerff, "How Game of Thrones Sneakily Reflects George R.R. Martin's Hatred of War" (Vox, September 1, 2017), https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/1/16223630/game-of-thrones-war.

Yet, outside of science, there are also some fantasy elements within *Game of Thrones* which men appear to connect to more than their female counterparts. Giants are an obvious one, given their utilization as strictly objects of warfare, but their role in the show is otherwise quite limited.[35] A more fruitful example might then be the direwolves, of which the Stark children find a motherless litter in episode one of the series.[36] Given that the Direwolf is the sigil of House Stark, the direwolves themselves become representations of the children's connections to their House and their family—such that Jon, the bastard half-brother, receives the runt of the litter as an indication of his weaker connection and lesser significance in the family. The eldest brother and heir to the House, Robb, unsurprisingly has the strongest connection with his direwolf, Grey Wind, such that there are rampant rumors that he can turn into a wolf himself. When Robb and his direwolf are both murdered, Grey Wind's head is sewn on Robb's decapitated body as a symbolic end to the Stark's most promising heir. Bran, as the second oldest trueborn son, afterwards demonstrates the closest connection to his direwolf Summer in his ability (as a warg) to literally enter Summer's mind and control his body. Summer dies not when Bran dies, however, but during the battle that marks Bran's rise as the Three-Eyed Raven. By becoming the Raven, Bran loses his entire personal identity, and therefore his connection to his house—as demonstrated by the loss of his direwolf. Rickon, the youngest brother, loses his direwolf Shaggydog the moment he is kidnapped by Ramsey Bolton, an enemy to his house. Ramsey throwing Shaggydog's head onto the battlefield foreshadows Rickon's death not long afterward.

[35] And when a female character does interact with one, in the form of the child Lyanna Mormont, it's to kill it—something clearly set up as an empowering feminist moment.
[36] Direwolves are non-magical creatures within *Game of Thrones* likely based on the prehistoric, long-extinct canines called dire wolf. For all intents and purposes, however, they are just one of many fantastical elements within the show which separate it from our reality and situate it firmly within the fantasy genre.

By contrast, Jon—while sometimes separated from his direwolf, Ghost—is one of the only Stark children never to lose his own, despite the fact that he was never a true Stark child to begin with. He remains connected to, if distant from, the Starks all his life.

However, while all of the Stark brothers spend part or all of the rest of their lives with their animal companions, as soon as episode two, both Stark daughters lose their direwolves permanently. Arya sends hers, Nymeria, into the forest to spare her life, and Sansa's direwolf, Lady, is executed on Nymeria's behalf. The loss of these direwolves acts as symbolic foreshadowing: by the end of the season, Sansa will be a hostage in King's Landing, completely cut off from the rest of her family, while Arya will be in hiding under a new identity, entirely lost to hers. The daughters' disconnection to their own direwolves represents the common plight of women throughout Western history; a disconnection from one's family home upon their marriage, as represented by the loss of their last name. Just days after their direwolves' death, both girls are removed from their family home, and even after they return many years later their connection with it can never fully be salvaged. Sansa spends the majority of her character arc either engaged or married to various men, and back at Winterfell her relationship to her birth family is questioned and diminished because of it. Arya avoids that fate, but in order to do so must reject her female identity and status as a highborn lady—her connection to her family is still there, as her direwolf is still alive, but to maintain the freedom she desires she must leave her family behind, in the same way that Nymeria must return to the wild. In this way, direwolves become an emblem of male genealogy, of which women experience an innate disconnection symbolic of their lesser familial status.

Yet it matters that direwolves are *not* magic, for when it comes to men actually participating in or performing magical activities themselves, the show continuously undermines

them[37]—this can be seen especially in an arc where Daenerys faces off against the House of the Undying,[38] a home for the (male) warlocks of Qarth. Pyat Pree, the leader of the warlocks, is a threat to Daenerys in that he manages to steal her baby dragons, but as she's hunting them down Daenerys makes it clear how little she fears or respects what he can do. "Are you trying to frighten me with magic tricks?" (S2, E10) she goads him, and earlier one man tells her, "They actually believe their parlor tricks are magic" (S2, E5), suggesting that this attitude of disparagement is not an uncommon one to have. Daenerys' viewpoint is later validated when Pyat Pree is burned alive by her dragons on her command, for his supernatural powers are ultimately no match for Daenerys'. On a similar note, in one scene the eunuch Varys tells the story of how, as a young boy, a sorcerer paralyzed him with a potion, before castrating him and throwing his genitals into a fire in the performance of a spell. On one level, this story clarifies the dislike that many men like Varys have for the magical arts, for magic in this world always entails the threat of castration. In Varys' case, however, magic is also clearly being misused: rather than being practiced by the powerless against the powerful, the powerful (a man) practice it against the powerless (a helpless child), almost twisting it into a form of sexualized violation or rape. When Varys later meets with the Red Priestess Kinvara, she calls his mutilator "a second-rate sorcerer" (S6, E5). In using magic so perversely, this sorcerer can't stand up next to the female witches who utilize their powers rightfully (in the case of the Priestesses, this means in the name of their religion, though also as women in a misogynistic world). Even the Brotherhood Without Banners, who express some magical ability outside reincarnation as former Red Priests

[37] The only notable exceptions being the disabled Bran and his friend Jojen Reed, who experiences seizures and—in his helplessness—seems to have swapped gender roles with his masculine sister Meera.
[38] A name which, interestingly, also connotes necromancy and/or reincarnation.

themselves, appear to undermine themselves uniquely in their lack of religious acuity: "I've always been a terrible priest" (S3, E6), says Thorus, and Beric himself reveals a lack of belief when he claims, "I don't think it's our purpose to understand" (S7, E6). In their failure of faith, they can wield the magic but not understand or utilize it the way that women do, and the little they can do wilts in comparison to Melisandre's expansive abilities.

## V. Magical Gendering: Women

Women themselves are associated with a much wider breadth of magic than their male counterparts: from spells, to potions, to poisons,[39] to even an all-female, pre-human magical race deemed the Children of the Forest. This is represented in a variety of ways, one being the clear association between magic and birth (and its reflective counterpart, death). This can be seen first with the figure of Mirri, who tricks Daenerys by magically disfiguring and killing her child during labor. Afterwards, Daenerys brings Mirri with her into a burning pyre, "the symbolic meaning being to assume the witch's magical powers into herself,"[40] and thus emerges with a magic rooted in motherhood: three newborn dragons which she claims as her children. Melisandre herself has a memorable moment in which she seduces Stannis Baratheon and gives birth on screen to a monstrous shadow child who murders Stannis' brother, and Catelyn Stark serves as a more innocent illustration of maternal magic when she constructs a protection charm

[39] "A witch's words are poison" (S1, E8) says a Dothraki, suggesting the inherent link between poison and magic in their world, despite the separation in ours. The overwhelming potency, speed, and effectiveness of poison in *Game of Thrones* gives it a fantastical quality and allows it to function like its own form of magic, and the words of the Dothraki suggest that magic can also function like poison (as in, just as lethally).

[40] Rikke Schubart. "Woman with Dragons: Daenerys, Pride, and Postfeminist Possibilities," in *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones and Multiple Media Engagements.* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 119.

for her injured son, effective only when made by a mother for her child. In being associated with birth, magic is also linked with women's reproductive bodies and therefore their sexualities, and this is most clear with the seductress nature of Melisandre's character.[41] Because of its ties to female power, however, magic is also very often despised by many characters in the show—this is most notable with the Dothraki. As the most masculinized culture, defined by rape and violence, magic is continuously treated with disgust and mistrust, likely for its association with empowered womanhood that threatens the Dothraki's hyper-masculine way of life.

One of the most prominent forms that magic takes in this world is that of fire—as demonstrated by the way the Children of the Forest fight by throwing fireballs, Cersei through the explosive wildfire, and Melisandre especially by using fire (considered sacred in her religion) to burn her enemies alive or set weapons alight. "The Lord's fire lives within me" (S5, E1), she says to explain the ever-present warmth of her skin, and can even use fire to perform complex spells or look into the future. Conversely, Cersei utilizes wildfire—a volatile liquid which produces green flames—solely as a weapon, most remarkably when she blows up the Great Sept in order to kill her enemies, including the High Sparrow. What's notable here is that she uses her power *against* religion, rather than in its name, though it's a patriarchal faith rather than Melisandre's matriarchal faith which she targets. The wildfire may seem more science than magic, but it's a fantasy element along the same lines, and it's particularly interesting given its association with Cersei.[42] Critic Curtis Runstedler writes how Cersei and wildfire share significant defining aspects, such as their "volatility and instability," and how her use of wildfire

[41] Though, interestingly, her sexuality is also dependent on her magic, for Melisandre is only able to act as the seductress because of an enchanted necklace which de-ages and beautifies her ancient body.

[42] And there's an element of science vs. faith within the conflict between Cersei and the Sparrow, with science firmly on the winning side.

serves as an expression of her anti-patriarchal feelings.[43] Similarly, Daenerys herself has a magical form of fire which she utilizes against male powers: her dragons. “Dragons are fire made flesh. And fire is power” (S6, E5), says a masked, faceless woman to Jorah, Daenerys’ second-in-command, and her anonymity makes her appear almost to stand for womanhood itself. The implication is that fire is not *just* power, but female power, and the different forms of fire which each woman has access to represents the different ways in which they utilize this power. Melisandre is tied to magical flame not just because of its dangers, but because of its enticing nature. Just as flame provides light and sight, Melisandre is a master at manipulating perspectives. As Runstedler argues, Cersei is associated with wildfire because of its uncontrollable nature and capacity for unconstrained destruction, and its scientific aspects also represent her tendency towards masculine expressions of power. Daenerys has her dragons, because—even though she remains as dangerous as her counterparts—she is better able to wield and utilize her power, the ‘flesh’ that contains the fire allowing some level of control over the damage. All the same, this control is still limited, as exhibited in one scene in which her dragons burn alive a child, and Daenerys’ struggle to manage them is demonstrative of her struggle to contain her own dangerous impulses. By the end of the story, as she begins to allow her dragons to burn her enemies alive with increasing prevalence, there’s the clear indication that she’s losing this internal battle. And if, ultimately, fire is associated with womanhood, then it’s easy to make the parallel assumption that ice is association with manhood, considering the male-coded Night Walkers who bring an encroaching eternal winter. This not only pits male and female power

[43] Curtis Runstedler, “Cersei Lannister, Regal Commissions, and the Alchemists in *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fir*,” in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire"* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 135.

against one another as total opposites, but puts patriarchal power on the side of death and destruction, suggesting matriarchal power as a possible solution to this coming doom—so long as it's not taken too far.

More than any of its fiery counterparts, the archetypal fantasy creature of the dragon holds a unique level of prevalence in the central storyline of *Game of Thrones*, and thus seems worth further analysis. In a similar way to how the Starks are linked to direwolves, so is Daenerys Targaryen with dragons: a three-headed dragon acts as a sigil to her house, and her ancestors once conquered and ruled Westeros with their assistance. Over the course of the show, and more than any other form of fire, dragons become a symbol of female power and, especially, female ambition, but this was not always the case. In season one, Daenerys' sexist and abusive brother, Viserys, refers to himself as 'The Dragon,' using his sister's body to win himself an army and fight for the throne he feels belongs to him. It was their ancestor Aegon who first fought with dragons at all, and in that case there was nothing particularly feminine about their associations—dragons meant power, and under the rule of a man, this power could be largely perceived as a masculine one. However, though viewers often hear about Aegon's conquest, they don't ever actually get to see it, and it appears that common Westerosi history may be biased in the favor of masculinity. In one scene, Arya Stark, posing as a lowborn girl, talks with Tywin Lannister, arguably the most powerful political figure in the first several seasons of the show. When Tywin tells Arya, "Aegon changed the rules, which is why every child alive still knows his name," Arya is quick to correct him: "Aegon and his sisters. It wasn't just Aegon riding his dragon. It was Rhaenys and Visenya, too" (S2, E7). By reframing the history that is told to her, Arya brings into question the male-centered narrative that's been fed to the characters and the viewers alike about the true political forces responsible for the formation of Westeros, one that

Viserys in particular utilizes in his own narrative regarding his right to the throne. However, unlike Aegon who worked *with* his sisters in his quest for domination, Viserys works against his own, and in this generation it's more than clear where the true power resides. "He was no dragon," Daenerys says as she watches the Dothraki kill him with the melted gold of the crown he desires. "Fire cannot kill a dragon" (S1, E6)—and fire, as she proves at the end of the season, cannot kill her.

The association of dragons with femininity in *Game of Thrones* begins not with the fire-breathing creature itself, but with the egg, a symbol that is feminine in nature. Daenerys is gifted three upon her marriage to Drogo, and for all of season one they function as symbols of her ambition and the untapped potentials of her agency, as often seen by the lingering of Daenerys' gaze, and henceforth of the camera. In one scene, as Daenerys is being raped from behind by Drogo, her expression goes from one of numb sorrow to one of fierceness and determination as she looks upon her eggs, and later the scene is repeated as she prepares to seduce him (S1, E2). For Daenerys, the eggs serve as a visual reminder to use whatever small agency she does have to achieve the power she desires, and she succeeds by winning the love of Drogo through sexual prowess. Male characters see only the monetary value of the eggs, such as when Viserys attempts to steal them in order to exchange them for an army, but Daenerys alone understands their potential as she understands her own. She also demonstrates some practical interest in the eggs, as in one scene when she probes her female servants as they dress her. Her servant Doreah tells her, "A trader from Karth said that dragons come from the moon. He told me the moon was an egg, Khaleesi. That once there were two moons in the sky, but one wandered too close to the sun and it cracked from the heat. Out of it poured a thousand, thousand dragons, and they drank the sun's fire"; however, the other corrects this story, saying, "Moon is no egg. Moon is

Goddess, wife of Sun. It is known" (S1, E2). In these two contradicting cultural interpretations of the moon, much can be gathered regarding the cultural perception of womanhood. In the second—likely more traditionally Dothraki—belief, the Moon is associated with womanhood, as the wife, and the Sun with manhood, as the husband. However, in the first, the moon is an egg of dragons which consume the sun's power. The battle here is that of the moon as a wife figure, one which passively exists, vs. that of a mother figure, one that actively creates life. Interestingly, Drogon refers to Daenerys as, "Moon of my life," likely in reference to the Goddess, and Daenerys refers to him as, "My Sun and Stars" (S1, E7). But if Daenerys is the moon, the moment Drogo dies, she hatches. Underneath the veneer of a perfect wife is a bellyful of ambition, ready to take the power that once belong to her husband, the Sun, and make it her own. This symbolic process is literally represented by Daenerys' stillborn child taking on the appearance of a dragon, "monstrous, twisted, scaled like a lizard, blind, with leather wings like the wings of a bat" (S1, E10), followed shortly by the hatching of the three dragon eggs in the fire of Drogo's pyre. On the ashes of her husband, Daenerys' true power finally hatches.

There's also something to be said about how the history and reality of dragons—whether through artifacts, books, or spoken stories—seem to time and again catch the interest and spark the imaginations of female characters in particular, from little girls to prostitutes. Princess Shireen is one notable example, as a girl often locked away in her room due to a facial deformity: scarring that, notably, resembles the gray scales of a dragon. Reading seems to be one way in which Shireen handles her imprisonment, and her utter lack of agency as a child under the thumb of her resentful mother, and every time it's about one topic in particular: Aegon and his dragons. She's obsessed with their monstrous features, and even laughs at the failed attempt of a

"a dumb man" to kill one (S5, E9); from their freedom, she seems to foster a sense of her own.[44] Similarly, prostitutes—typically young women themselves—also express a particular interest in the species. In one sex scene between Viserys and Doreah, a former child-prostitute, the topic of dragons functions as their sexual foreplay. As Doreah explains her fascination with them, "They can fly. Wherever they are, just a few flaps of their wings and they are far away. And they can kill anything or anyone that tries to hurt them" (S1, E4)—here it's clear that this fascination stems from her admiration of the particular type of agency which dragons represent. She even flirts with Viserys for more information on them, and they end up having sex to the names of the dragons, Doreah aroused by the power they represent. Yet, as soon as she expresses sadness at the prospect of the smashed dragon skulls, she loses her particular power in the situation. Viserys is disturbed and threatened by her interest in them, and scolds her for not focusing merely on his pleasure.[45] In considering the amount of agency most women have in Westeros, it's no wonder they tend to take a greater interest in dragons, as a way to counter their feelings of helplessness or else project their own repressed ambition—and it's no wonder that men consider this interest a threat.

One particularly interesting quality of the dragons is that, before Daenerys, they were thought to have been extinct—all that was left of them being a collection of deformed skulls in the basement of the Red Keep. "They were [King] Robert's trophies," his wife Cersei laments. "He couldn't keep them around; they would've made him look small. Sometimes he would come down to look at them. He would bring his whores on occasion" (S7, E2). Here, there's a clear

[44] Which makes it all the more tragic when it is fire which brings her doom.
[45] A parallel scene occurs much later in the narrative, where the character Bronn tries to brag about his battle with a dragon to impress three prostitutes, before snapping, "Can we stop talking about the fucking dragon?" (S8, E1) when this ends up distracting them.

sense that the dragon skulls function simultaneously as a threat (like their living counterparts) *and* as a prize; the existence of dragons is itself emasculating for men, but the control and ownership of them—even or especially of their corpses—is controversially a power symbol. This is not especially surprising, given the history of dragons within media; Rikke Schubart calls *Game of Thrones* (or else the novels it is based on) "the first text to establish a positive relationship between a heroine and dragons" (120), for typically dragons have solely been connected to male power. Yet, while this male power tends to revolve around the slaying of the dragons, therefore about reducing their threat, in Daenerys' case this is the opposite: she is the mother, or the maker, of the dragons. Thereby, her journey is about harnessing and nourishing their power. It's perhaps no surprise, then, why dragons in *Game of Thrones* went extinct to begin with: "When Daenerys' ancestors started chaining up dragons in pens, a few generations later they were the size of cats. They must be free or else they waste away" (S6, E2). In chaining up the dragons, Daenerys' (male) ancestors have successfully controlled the species and thus reduced their threat, but in the process also restricted their power.[46] In this way, dragons again become a symbol of female ambition and power, but this time, power restrained. The chaining up of the dragons functions analogously to the trapping of women in marriage, the generations of domestication resulting in a gradual deterioration of female power and a deformation of their ambition. Since magic as a whole functions as an expression of the female desire for agency, as well as a tool for achieving such, the near-extinction of dragons (one of the most powerful and promising forms of magic in the show) represents a lost hope that Daenerys herself reignites.

[46] For a time, Daenerys herself even keeps her dragons chained up in a dungeon in fear of their volatility, but this arc ends with her setting them free with a newfound understanding of the value of that freedom. Yet, her fear is not unfounded: her failure to control them foreshadows her eventual inability to control herself.

Notably, only when the dragons are reborn to Daenerys at the end of season one do women from all corners of the continents begin to rise from the ashes of their oppression—after all losing the male figures of authority in their lives, Daenerys becomes the leader of a small cluster of the Dothraki, Cersei settles into her role as Queen Regent, Arya begins to live a new life disguised as a boy, and Sansa finally overcomes her romantic naivety, learning to subtly undermine her abusers at every turn. There are also several powerful female characters who only make an appearance in the show after season one: the swordswoman Brienne, the pirate Yara, the lover Ellaria, and so one. And as the seasons progress, the powers of each grow exponentially. "A dragon is not a slave" (S7, E7), Daenerys tells the misogynistic slave master who attempts to buy one from her, and shortly thereafter she burns him alive, for she understands that their power cannot flourish unless they are free (and, for women, this freedom often comes in the form of freedom from men). Yet *Game of Throne's* female storylines are not all rooted in inspirational feminist moments; the dragons also reflect the darker side of this world. In season seven, Jaime and Tyrion Lannister meet in the dungeon of the Red Keep among the dragon skulls, both whispering of the upcoming conflict between the two dangerously ambitious women who they support: Cersei and Daenerys respectively. The fact that this conversation takes place among the skulls is notable, for they represent the threat of these women's power to the wider masculinity of the world (which these two male characters clearly fear, despite everything). More than that, however, the deformity of the skulls is indicative of the way the psychological trauma of ingrained social misogyny has twisted the ambitions of both these women and will result, inevitably, in their moral and mental decay.

Ultimately, it's clear that the fantasy elements within the show serve both as tools of empowerment for female characters and as symbolic elements in which this empowerment

comes to be represented. The gendering of magic is vital, for in doing so *Game of Thrones* almost develops a taxonomy of the different forms of power available to each gender, which emphasizes the inherent power imbalances of its world and underlines the feminist themes of its narrative. By overlaying these elements over the existing aspects of medievalism, the show succeeds in both representing gender inequities that relate to and reflect the sexism in our modern world, and overturning these inequities (to an extent) by granting many of its oppressed female characters supernatural powers to compensate and challenge their lack of social and political power. Thus, *Game of Thrones* becomes not just a medieval fantasy but a high-stakes political drama with women at the helm. It's a fantastical rewrite of a semi-historic past, which alongside modernizing the narrative also revolutionizes the genre by telling women's stories with as much heroic grandeur and moral complexity as that of their male counterparts.

## Chapter Two: Winning Kinship

### I. *'Til Death Do Us Part*: Introduction

On June 2nd, 20l3, more than five million *Game of Thrones* fans in the United States alone tuned in to watch quasi-protagonist Robb Stark—the epitome of male fantasy heroism—gruesomely murdered alongside his wife, mother, and unborn child.[47] This unexpected massacre occurred at the marital union of Robb's maternal uncle to the daughter of the man responsible, the reprehensible Walder Frey. The Red Wedding, as it came to be called, left its unforgettable mark in the penultimate episode of season three, sparking just as much chaos outside the narrative realm of *Game of Thrones* as it did within. Many viewers, shocked as they were by the deaths of three characters who'd previously received much of the narrative attention, applauded the show for its subversion of traditional storytelling tropes (within both the medieval fantasy and political drama genres), calling the scene "brilliant [for destroying] what most people thought conventional TV should be" and "a masterpiece of gore."[48] Other fans, who had not already received warning of the bloodbath by the corresponding scene in the books, "went black with rage" at the brutal loss of these fan-favorite characters and even swore off the show for good—not all for insignificance reason.[49] Much of the audience pushback resulted not just from distaste towards this shocking narrative subversion but in its racial implications: Robb's wife, Talisa, being one of the only prominent women of color in the show at the time, and receiving

[47] "List of *Game of Thrones* episodes." Wikipedia, last modified February 02, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Game_of_Thrones_episodes#cite_note-49
[48] Tony Wong. "A year of memorable TV moments: Game of Throne readers weren't caught off guard by the Red Wedding." *Toronto Star,* (Dec 28, 2013).
[49] Tim Goodman. "The Gore - and Glory - of Game of Thrones' Bloodbath." *Hollywood Reporter* 419, (Jun 21, 2013): 24.

one of the most gruesome (and, some say, sexualized) deaths on screen with a volley of stabs to her pregnant belly. As critic Valerie Frankel writes, "Robb and Talisa are punished by the patriarchy and the old order, Walder Frey, for their interracial marriage between a lord and an independent foreign woman. The twist here is truly disturbing."[50]

Frankel's emphasis on the patriarchal motive of punishment is, of course, in reference to the situation responsible for the tragic incident: Robb's agreement to marry Frey's daughter in exchange for Frey's political and financial support in his rebellion against House Lannister, which currently resides in power over the entire continent of Westeros. However, after falling in love with the healer Talisa—a highborn lady from the foreign city of Volantis, who gave up her status to pursue medical training—Robb breaks his oath to Frey by wedding Talisa instead. He does so against the wishes of his mother Catelyn, who arranged Robb's engagement much as her father arranged her own, and understands better than most the social significance of such an agreement. In order to salvage the situation, Robb convinces Catelyn's brother Edmure to marry Frey's daughter in his stead, and Frey uses the subsequent celebration to ambush Robb and his loyal bannermen while they are defenseless in his home. The question here isn't whether the punishment fits the crime—it clearly does not, at least from the audience's modern perspective—but the ultimate significance of such a punishment, and what it tells us about the gravity of Robb's mistake.

To some critics, the motivations of the massacre are largely political. As Dan Ward argues, "The chance to punish the Starks for their 'betrayal' is a secondary incentive beyond the greater rewards offered as part of his new alliance… his festering enmity towards Robb Stark is

[50] Valerie Estelle Frankel, *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 64.

rooted in insult to personal vanity and thwarted ambition rather than any deeply felt sense of duty."[51] This argument can be supported by the fact that, in punishing Robb for breaking his oath, Frey breaks one himself: that of guest rights, an ancient Westerosi tradition in which a host swears no harm upon those he invites under his roof, and which is arguably far more culturally sacred than a simple promise to wed. Frey even admits that, were he in Robb's position, he'd have "broken fifty oaths… without a second thought" (S3, E9). Yet, from context, it's clear to see that 'breaking an oath' is only a fraction of Robb's true crime, and thus Ward's argument requires some reconsideration. After all, this marriage is an offense of such an absurd degree in this pre-modern society that some critics deny its plausibility altogether, noting: "A king, or even the heir to Winterfell, would not expect to wed a foreign healer, however enticing, and would certainly not break his royal word and alliance for such a whim—marrying for love rather than family alliance is a modern notion in the western world" (Frankel 63). In marrying Talisa at all, Robb has not only betrayed Frey on a personal level but has rebelled against a patriarchal system which Frey himself relies on, and which makes up the very social and political foundation of Westeros: that of kinship.

The kinship system refers to the process of women being transferred via marriage as a way to strengthen the social links between families and within communities. The political system in *Game of Thrones* is built on the foundation of nine Great Houses which rule sections of the land and people of Westeros, and it is through these kinship systems that these houses create ties with one another, using the exchange of women as wives to end conflicts, pay for favors, or consolidate power. When Catelyn first goes to Frey in search of political support, his

[51] Dan Ward. "Kill the boy, and let the man be born," in *Vying for the Iron Throne: Essays on Power, Gender, Death and Performance in HBO's Game of Thrones*, ed. L. Mantoan & S. Brady (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2018), 172.

unwillingness to help stems from her father's refusal to marry any of his children to Frey's own, thus failing to manufacture these vital connections. As Frey claims, with nearly thirty legitimate children begat by seven consecutive wives over his lifetime: "I needed to get rid of sons and daughters. You see how they pile up" (S1, E9). Though the topic of kinship has dominated the anthropological conversation for more than a century, French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss revolutionized the field when he introduced the alliance theory in the mid-twentieth century, in which he emphasized the significance of exchange within human culture—a fertile woman being the "supreme gift" that a man could offer, and thus requiring reciprocity in the only other gift of equal value: another woman. His model stood in contrast with the pre-extant descent theory, which stressed inheritance *within* a family over alliance *between* families, thus ignoring the communal ties of exchange upon which our modern society has been built.[52]

Despite the academic significance of Lévi-Strauss's theories, they have earned rightful criticism for the ways in which he overlooks or outright trivializes the central perspective of the woman herself, thus participating in the cultural objectification of the wives being exchanged by failing to acknowledge the innate disadvantages of such a framework. Naturally, feminist critique of the kinship exchange arose to combat Lévi-Strauss's portrayal, foregrounding the experiences of women as the objects of this exchange in all its social complications—none more acclaimed than Gayle Rubin's feminist essay, "The Traffic in Women."[53] Aiming to determine the root of female oppression, Rubin pinpoints the kinship system as the basis for the patriarchy in human society, further emphasizing its cultural significance in the process. As she writes, "Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical

[52] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
[53] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

statuses, lineage names and ancestors, right and people—men, women, and children—in concrete systems of social relationships" (38). No wonder, then, that so many took such personal affront to Robb's choice to marry outside this network. In consideration of Rubin's feminist critique of kinship, Robb's experiences are brought into sharp contrast with those of the many female characters who surround him, evoking the central question: how does *Game of Thrones* highlight the varied experiences of women within these patriarchal exchange networks even as it continually reinforces the norms of kinship exchange?

Catelyn Stark, Robb's mother, is the first to suggest to Robb that he marry the Frey daughter, and initially the most vocal opponent to his love marriage with Talisa. As Catelyn tells him, "Your father didn't love me when we married. He hardly knew me, nor I him. Love didn't just happen to us. We built it slowly over the years, stone by stone. For you. For your brothers and sisters. For all of us" (S2, E10). In kinship, love is more than a feeling; it's a moral duty. Now that she's completed her own duty, it's Catelyn's responsibility to ensure that her children do the same. There's something to be said regarding the complexity of Catelyn's role here, once a subject of exchange and now an active exchanger of another. Critic Kris Swank describes the ways that Catelyn fills the historical role of the "peaceweaver," a woman who fosters a bond of peace between two hostile tribes.[54] The key to this role is not the act of marriage alone, but an active and continuous engagement in the maintaining of the peace once established, which—for Catelyn—requires a deft hand in negotiating the possible unions of her children. A family is safest when armored by the bonds of kinship, so in order to protect her own, Catelyn must take a step beyond being a mere subject of exchange to become kinship's staunchest defender. Thus, of

[54] Kris Swank. "The Peaceweavers of Winterfell," in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire"* eds. Z. Rohr & L. Benz (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 175.

anyone, it might be argued that Catelyn is the greatest victim of the Red Wedding's massacre, for she is the last to die, every previous casualty marking her ultimate failure as peaceweaver and protector of her kin.[55]

All the same, Robb carries his share of blame through his resistance of Catelyn's pressures, and the woman he chooses to love is deemed socially unfit for a number of reasons. For starters, "she's an independent woman of no house, one who gave up her birthright to follow her chosen path" (Frankel 63), and in that way exists in utter opposition to the kinship system, with no 'kin' to speak of. Therefore, any union with her is socially and politically useless. Talisa's lack of kinship connections is also exemplified by her foreignness[56] and, in extension, her race. Though racism is never introduced as a factor of oppression throughout all of *Game of Thrones*, Talisa is one of the only major characters of color who is not depicted as either a slave or a savage.[57] Though highborn herself, Talisa is referred to as "foreign bitch" and "foreign whore" by various Northern men, and it's notable that only outside of Westeros (and within the exoticized Essos) can women of color be noble ladies and potentially function as queens. Her race, therefore, is the most obvious physical marking of her 'otherness,' thus serving as an indication of her social unsuitability as a wife in Westeros' majority-white kinship networks. Talisa, as a foreigner, even seems to take a direct stance against kinship when—during the wedding, just moments before her death—she expresses distaste at the Westerosi tradition of a bedding ceremony. The ceremony further enforces the social significance of a marriage by

[55] This is further demonstrated in the books, in which the undead Catelyn becomes the monstrous Lady Stoneheart, wreaking vengeance on those who participated in the slaughter of her family.
[56] Talisa has no family background at all within Westeros, as demonstrated with her first conversation with Catelyn, in which Catelyn comments on her unrecognizable last name.
[57] Withstanding the women of Dorne—a kingdom set apart from the rest of Westeros by its almost modern sense of progressiveness.

bringing together both families to carry the bride and groom off to bed, where they are publicly 'joined' by the act of consummation. *Game of Thrones*' interpretation also entails an interesting gender separation (the men carry the bride, the women the groom) and an ultimate merger, which serves as a reminder of kinship's importance in the enforcement of gender roles as much as in communal binding. Talisa's aversion towards this practice suggests her own interpretation of sex and marriage as a private affair between two people, rather than a social and political function as necessitated by the kinship system.

Yet Robb's marriage to Talisa is far from a statement of anti-kinship sentiment, as he demonstrates when he defends the bedding ceremony or when he talks Edmure into taking his place as the groom. Rather, as critic Carolyne Larrington writes, "Robb's proposed strategic marriage… requires him to subordinate his own ideas of himself as subject. Women generally cannot reject this role as Robb does… just as Robb undervalues his sisters' rights to be rescued from the Lannister clutches, so too he overvalues his own right to self-determination in the face of the political maneuvering that his status as King in the North demands."[58] It's not kinship as a whole that Robb contests, just the expectations of his own compliance with it, and it's this folly above all others which results in the death of himself and his family. There are many critics who recognize the role that kinship has played in this tragedy, for as Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik write: when it comes down to it, in *Game of Thrones* "men too… are sold like horses, and Robb pays with his life."[59] But of course this begs the question: in this situation, is Robb

[58] Carolyne Larrington. [Foreword]. In Z. Rohr & L. Benz, *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire."* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), xi.
[59]Anna Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart. Introduction. *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones and Multiple Media Engagements.* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 8.

truly the horse, or is he the buyer? Robb may be ultimately helpless to the social demands of the all-powerful kinship system, but does that mean he is commodified by it?

## II. *The Ol' Ball and Chain*: The Ways Women Suffer

While Ward's prior suggestion that politics is the massacre's sole motivating factor may be misguided, Larrington, Schubart, and Gjelsvik's analyses—though rightfully inclusive of kinship's role—are incomplete in their assumption of Robb's necessary objectification in conjunction with female subjects of exchange. In their focus on Robb's victimhood (as a man who must forfeit his own self-agency, and dies because of his stubborn refusal) they fail to recognize that Robb is ultimately *not* the object in this scenario; that's the role of his hypothetical wife, Frey's daughter, as part of the earlier agreement with Frey to allow the Stark army to pass through his lands and over his bridge. In the very conversation in which Catelyn tells Robb he must marry, he doesn't bat an eye as she informs him that his youngest sister, Arya, is to be wed to Frey's son when she comes of age. That marital exchange is one that Catelyn is asking Robb alone to agree to, with the absent Arya lacking not only a voice but any awareness at all of the active bartering of her future. Robb, meanwhile, is explicitly asked his consent—Catelyn has organized the betrothal, but does not have the power to enforce it—and he is even permitted to choose which of Frey's many daughters to marry, a privilege that the daughters themselves certainly lack. Most significantly, his marriage is intended to further consolidate his own power, rather than that of another—he, not his father or brother, is the one who gains a valuable political ally in this transaction, for he is the head of his own family. As Rubin explains, "If it is women who are being transacted, then it is men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being the conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it… the relations of such a system are

such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation" (37). Because Robb is undoubtedly a *partner* of this exchange, rather than merely a conduit, he is liable to receive these social benefits in a way that none of his female counterparts ever could. One of Robb's largest concerns regarding the marriage, in fact, is that the Frey daughters have a reputation of being particularly unattractive—he fears being eternally bound to a wife whom he does not find physically appealing. Yet this worry is remarkably trivial in comparison to the risks fared by Robb's younger sisters Sansa and Arya, victims of the kinship system themselves. For them, marriage means more than just a sexual partner; rather, it defines nearly every aspect of their social and financial futures.

From the beginning, *Game of Thrones* establishes these sisters as opposing forces, each dealing with the institutional enforcement of gender roles in a separate and dissimilar way. Just as Robb is the eldest son of the Stark family, Sansa is the eldest daughter, their family positions significant not only in the scope of inheritance (for Robb) but in their shared responsibility to set an example of behavior for the brothers and sisters who come after them. Therefore, just as Robb embraces his role as a man (a figure of agency), Sansa embraces her role as a woman (a figure of passivity), and even the trafficking that this role suggests. As early as episode one, she expresses excitement at the prospect of leaving her family home to marry Prince Joffrey, begging Catelyn, "Please make father say yes… It's the only thing I ever wanted" (S1, E1). Unlike her tomboyish sister, Arya, she is the picture of adolescent femininity, perfecting her stitches and practicing the manners of a lady while scoffing at Arya's failure to do the same. Essentially, Sansa has fallen for the ideological fallacy of gender, or at least of distinct and innate gender roles. As Rubin explains it, "Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes. It is a product of the social relations of sexuality. Kinship systems rest upon marriage. They therefore transform males and

females into ‘men’ and ‘women,’ each an incomplete half which can only find wholeness when united with the other” (40). Sansa desires kinship, under the guise of romance, because she believes that she is incomplete without it, and that it is a husband and children who will bring her purpose and happiness in life. This is an understandable assumption, given that her mother is one of the only female characters who has a beneficial kinship experience: marrying a man she learns to love and who learns to love her back as an equal. Sansa, however, is not quite so lucky as her mother; just as Swank names Catelyn a “peaceweaver,” he describes how Sansa fills the role of the “tragic bride whose [marriage fails] to secure peace” (112). Through this failure, all the agency Catelyn garners through her marriage proves unattainable for Sansa, and she becomes less a wife and more a political hostage by the day. In this way, the show punishes Sansa for her blatant romanticism of kinship, unable to see the warning signs that the audience has picked up long ago and thus, ironically, a figure of selfish and short-sighted naivety in our world as much as she’s a figure of ideological feminine perfection in her own.

It is only when Sansa leaves home that the true ramifications of the kinship system finally hit her—her fiancé is a psychopath who she fears rather than loves, and upon his rejection of her she is trafficked from man to man: Tyrion Lannister, Petyr “Littlefinger” Baelish, and Ramsay Bolton. Though Sansa once desired the role of a wife and mother, it quickly becomes clear to her that the system of marriage is not designed for her benefit; in fact, it treats her as a political prize and sexual commodity to be passed around, desired, and ultimately raped. In opposition to Rubin’s analysis, however, Sansa has stopped being a “conduit of relationships” long ago, with no family left for her spouses to be connected to; rather, as one of the few remaining heirs to Winterfell, she is a conduit to power itself. Whoever owns her, owns her family name and all the political benefits that come with it, and Sansa watches helplessly as men use her status time and

again to lay claim to power that should rightfully be her own. Conversely, Arya—who has objections to the concept of kinship from the start, expressing distaste at the prospect of marriage and preferring sword-fighting to all feminine pursuits—only avoids leading Sansa's life by cutting her hair and taking on the identity of a boy named Ari. Though Arya only dislikes her gender role and not her gender in itself, often belligerently correcting those who misgender her, she cannot escape the trafficking of women without losing her gender identity in the process. Thus, Arya's longing for self-agency excludes her female identification, and vice versa—she must inevitably choose between them. In choosing agency, any political claim Arya might have is also forfeited, as alongside the loss of her name is the loss of her social prestige.[60]

Though Arya is often foiled against Sansa, she is paralleled by Brienne of Tarth, a skilled swordswoman sworn to protect the Stark daughters who demonstrates yet another way in which women are oppressed through their gendered negotiations with the kinship system. Like Arya rejects her status as a woman, Brienne tells Catelyn upon their first introduction, "I'm no lady" (S2, E3)—referring both to the gendered and class connotations of the title—and is even introduced to the audience as a man, her face and body obscured by her armor as she defeats another knight in a duel. [61] Upon first glance, Brienne might seem to be simply a version of who

[60] Later in her arc, Arya uses her long-developed battle skills to commit a number of murders in pursuit of personal vengeance, two of which stand out for the victim's role in the sexual exploitation of underage girls: Meryn Trent, who she kills in a brothel as he picks between female children to beat and rape, and Walder Frey, who marries and impregnates a long string of child-brides. Though neither of these murders occurs specifically because of the abuse itself, it's notable that Arya—the central female child-figure of the show, who miraculously avoids all sexual violence—acts also as the punisher and executioner of those who seek to exploit girls such as herself and her sister, both within and outside the bounds of the kinship system.

[61] Like Arya, Brienne too takes on a role as a protector and avenger of women, demonstrated largely through her undying loyalty towards Catelyn and her daughters. In one scene, she also attempts to bury three women hung from a tree, violently killing the men who raped and murdered them in the process.

Arya will one day become, but as seasons progress the differences between them grow clearer. In one scene, Brienne tells the story of being fought over by romantic pursuers in her girlhood, explaining, "They whispered in my ear how they wanted to marry me and take me back to their castles… I'd never been so happy" (S5, E3). Like Sansa, Brienne is overjoyed at the prospect of her own trafficking; however, unlike her, Brienne is not conventionally beautiful, and is devastated to discover that the interest of these boys is a cruel joke. From this perspective, Brienne isn't so much like Arya—a girl who rejects her womanhood—so much as a woman who has been rejected *by* womanhood, and the traditionally male role she takes on as a swordswoman is partially the result of being deprived the opportunity to take on a traditionally female role. Even so, Brienne is constantly punished for straying from the gender binary, often mocked for her appearance, physically underestimated, and even referred to as a 'beast' by others, particularly by men. Interestingly, in the final season, both Arya and Brienne actually take a few steps closer to traditional femininity, particularly in regards to the kinship system. After passing as a boy, and becoming a nameless and, thereby, arguably genderless assassin for several seasons—often literally wearing the faces of men—Arya reclaims her identity, returns to her family home, and loses her virginity to a man, Gendry. Similarly, Brienne suddenly finds herself the figure of desire in a love triangle, before losing her virginity to Jaime Lannister. In neither situation, however, does this romance last. In Arya's case, she is proposed to, but turns him down, telling Gendry, "Any lady would be lucky to have you. But I'm not a lady… That's not me" (S8, E4). In Brienne's, Jaime leaves her crying and begging for him to stay, to return to his traditionally beautiful former lover, Cersei. Therefore, their stories end as they begin: Arya rejecting her femininity, and Brienne being rejected by it. There's something to be said in the inability in this fictional universe for womanhood to exist outside the realms of one's romantic

and sexual connections with men, as if in a world dominated by kinship there is no separating a woman from her reproductive potential.

Robb, of course, is never forced to contend with any such gender dilemmas. Unlike his sisters or even Brienne, he is raised to be an agent in his own life, and it's his very sense of agency which causes him to underestimate the cultural power of the kinship system that Sansa has been groomed to believe in and obey, and which Arya can only escape once her father and elder brother—the male influences in her life who will one day exchange her—are dead. His character foil is therefore not a sibling who interacts differently with his masculinity so much as one who is aware of the ultimately authority of kinship in all the ways that Robb is not: the bastard Jon Snow. Jon would have nearly everything that Robb has if not for his social inferiority as determined by his illegitimacy, stemming from his birth outside the framework of a traditional kinship unit. He so dreads the powers of kinship, in fact, that he refuses to sleep with a woman in fear of producing another illegitimate child,[62] joining the Nights' Watch in which he swears off marriage and children for the remainder of his life. Robb, as a trueborn son, is therefore marked not by any outright hostility towards kinship, but by a mistaken irreverence as garnered by his position of lifelong privilege. When he is killed, it's not a punishment at all, but simply a reinforcement of the status quo: Robb cannot be unmarried to the unacceptable woman, and his unacceptable child cannot be un-conceived, so instead they all must die in order to reinstate the powers-that-be. As Frankel emphasizes, Frey is a figure symbolic of "patriarchy and the old order" (64). Though he has no trouble blatantly sexualizing Talisa, and mentions guiltlessly breaking oaths if it would allow him to seduce her, Frey's sentiment is still largely in conjunction

[62] When he eventually does, it's with a wilding woman outside the bounds of kinship, and then the infertile Daenerys—thus, it's not a discomfort that he ever truly confronts.

with female objectification as supported by kinship. It's Robb's thoroughly 'modern notion' of romantic love which is the true threat, and which Frey gleefully squashes out; he's more than willing to sacrifice his newest wife to a vengeful Catelyn in the name of perpetuating this endless cycle of abuse, thus maintaining his coveted position in the strict social hierarchy of Westeros. But, as always, it's on the blood of women on which this hierarchy stands, and a female perspective is utterly necessary in comprehending the true scope of kinship's power.

"It wasn't me you spurned. It was my daughters," Lord Frey tells Robb when he comes to apologize, "One of them was supposed to be queen, now none of them are" (S3, E9). Except, as he lines up the available girls—silent and sullen, some hardly more than children, and that's not even counting Frey's own fifteen-year-old wife—their misery and helplessness within a dehumanizing system is made excruciatingly evident. Any suffering Robb might experience in his dealings with kinship, theirs is magnified tenfold. If anything, the closest approximation that a man might have to the female experience of trafficking is Edmund Tully, Robb's maternal uncle who is taken as a political hostage after his marriage to the Frey daughter. As Swank writes, "In a gender-bending twist, Edmure becomes a tragic bride, trapped between the feuding Starks and Freys, belonging to both, yet completely to neither, and unable to stop the fires of kin-strife" (113), a situation remarkably similar to Sansa's when she becomes a captive of the Lannisters while still engaged to Joffrey. The incident is even more subversive under the lens of Claude Lévi-Strauss's work; he redefines the basic unit of kinship from the parents and their children to that of the husband, the wife, the son, and the wife's brother, in consideration of the fact that a marriage is primarily an exchange between men. The maternal uncle, Lévi-Strauss emphasizes, is "a necessary precondition for the structure to exist" (46), and typically one who is empowered by its existence. Catelyn, Rob, and Edmure (alongside the already-deceased

patriarch, Ned) exist as one unit upon which the current Stark family has been built, and it's this very same unit upon which it is torn apart.

Lévi-Strauss points to the uncle's role in the kinship unit as being a "direct result of the universal presence of an incest taboo" (46). In his argument, that very taboo is an essential condition upon which kinship systems rest, and upon which human culture does, for the only reason men must exchange sisters as wives is because they cannot marry their own. For a show that takes place in a world so heavily entrenched in the kinship system, perhaps it's no surprise that incest is such a prevalent trope within *Game of Thrones*, as—like Robb's love-marriage—it exists as a constant underlying threat to the social and political structure of Westeros. This is demonstrated especially with the figure of Craster, a man who lives just off the edge of what is considered civilization: above the wall which divides the Westerosi people from the political and cultural outsiders referred to as the wildings. Unlike the other wildings, who seem to exist in communal tribes without strong distinctions between family units, Craster's Keep exists in isolation, housing only Craster, his wives, and his daughters. What separates him from the Westerosi people, however, is that in Craster's case, his wives and his daughters are one in the same. It's a complete bastardization of kinship—as one man explains it, "He marries his daughters, and they give him more daughters, and on and on it goes" (S2, E1) in a never-ending cycle of accumulating incest. Of course, even one son might throw a wrench into his plans by generating competitors for his daughters' reproductive bodies, so Craster solves this problem by sacrificing every male heir—typically the most valued child within the kinship system—to the monstrous Night Walkers, essentially leaving them for dead. In many ways, Frey and Craster are very similar figures: both take a number of young wives and produce countless children, but Frey does so in a socially acceptable way through the practice of monogamy and exogamy, whereas

Craster—outside the bounds of society—is under no such requirements. Frey, in fact, takes the kinship system to its logical extreme, whereas Craster completely inverts it, and in both cases, women suffer.[63]

Craster's situation is one of particular interest in consideration of Sigmund Freud's theory on the origin of the incest taboo itself. Freud, in his essay *Totem and Taboo*, suggests that totems—symbols, usually plants or animals, made to represent a group of people, and which function as their "tutelary spirit and protector"—came to being as a way to prevent incest, as individuals under the same totem are typically not permitted to marry or reproduce.[64] These totems themselves arose in the situation of the primal horde, which Freud suggests to be the earliest formation of human society, in which one elder male—acting as the father—maintains a sexual monopoly over all the females in a group, forcing the other in-group males to mate only with out-group women; that is, until this "band of brothers" rises up against their father and takes the women, including their mothers and sisters, for themselves. With this action, they both "[satisfy] their hate" and "[carry] out their wish for identification with him" (177), as symbolized by their consumption of his body. Their guilt over their act of patricide is displaced onto the totem and emerges as a taboo against mating with in-group women, eventually evolving into the incest-averse culture we have today.

Craster undoubtedly fits this figure of the incestuous father rather well, and the 'band of brothers' can be seen in the group of men called the Crows (brothers of the Night's Watch, like

[63] Notably, in the pre-kinship civilization of the wildings, women appear to suffer considerably less. Powerful wilding women like Ygritte and Karsi are much less bound by gender roles and thus exhibit a significantly greater amount of personal freedom and (in Ygritte's case) sexual liberation, such that Karsi has even garnered enough power to represent her clan as their leader.
[64] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), 5.

Jon)[65] who Craster allows to stay with him, though continuously threatens against so much as looking at his daughters. “Doesn’t it make you jealous?” Craster asks them. “Me with all my young wives, and you on a path with nothing but boys on it” (S2, E1). The Crows—representing Craster’s murdered sons[66]—rise up and kill both Craster and their other symbolic father, Lord Commander Jeor Mormont (who is himself responsible for insuring their celibacy), effectively combining them into one figure. The Crows thereafter take control of Craster’s Keep, raping his daughters and even drinking wine from Mormont’s skull much like the band of brothers consumes their father. What’s particularly interesting is that Craster’s Keep lies on the border between the ‘civilized’ people of Westeros and the ‘savage’ wildings, as if itself a physical representation of the birth of human culture.[67] This can be further supported by the detail that each of Westeros’ Houses is represented by a distinct sigil, oftentimes an animal like the Stark’s Direwolves or the Targaryen’s Dragons, functioning much the way totems do and suggesting that Westeros has already undergone this gruesome ‘rite of passage’ towards the development of their patriarchal culture.

Of course, the problem with such a Freudian suggestion is that it depicts women as entirely passive forces in the construction of civilization—which, from the audience’s perspective, does not appear to be the case. The female characters we come to know in Westeros may start out as passive reactors to the patriarchal expectations of kinship, but as the show goes

[65] The Night’s Watch is notoriously made up of criminals, bastards, or otherwise exiled men deemed unfit to engage in kinship due to their lowly social statuses, and thus separated from the rest of Westerosi society and forced into celibacy.
[66] Interestingly, Craster’s actual sons become Night Walkers, who eventually participate in the Night King’s crusade to destroy human culture/history as represented by The Three-Eyed Raven.
[67] Freud also theorized that the primal horde marked the formation of religion—and, notably, the wildings practice the ancient paganism of the Old Gods, whereas (most of) Westeros subscribes to the more Catholic-coded religion of the New Gods.

on they gradually shift into becoming the most active political forces in all of Westeros, their choices utterly shaping the world as they know it. Women may suffer within the bounds of kinship, but sometimes instead they manage to utilize its frameworks to their ultimate social and political advantage—though not necessarily to the advantage of one another.

### III. *Happy Wife, Happy Life*: The Ways Women Thrive

Cersei Lannister is one of the most obvious examples of such; from the beginning, she is foiled against the traditionally motherly Catelyn in her parallel position as house matriarch, miserable in all the ways in which Catelyn is content. Though Cersei begins the show as its most politically powerful female character, even she is a victim of the kinship system, married to a man she despises for the sake of a political alliance for her family. The detrimental effects that this has had on Cersei, and on many others like her, are demonstrated most clearly in the conversations that she has with the underage Sansa, subtly advising her on how to survive a society that deems her more of a commodity than a human being. For Sansa, Cersei and her mother represent two opposing reactions to and interpretations of the female experience within kinship which she must pick between or find a way to consolidate, abandoning her own romanticized notions in the process. As Cersei tells Sansa, "Love no one but your children. On that front a mother has no choice." When Sansa responds, "But shouldn't I love Joffrey, your grace?" Cersei replies, "You can try" (S2, E7). In this interaction, so opposite to Catelyn's view, Cersei admits to the way in which kinship systems trap individuals in unhappy relationships, creating marriages that exist solely for the sake of social ties and women so lacking in self-agency that even to love another person becomes a terrible risk. Even so, the children that come from these marriages are no less a woman's children than had they resulted from a love-

marriage. As Cersei tells Tyrion, Sansa's first husband, "You want to make things better for Sansa? Give her a child… so she can have some happiness in her life… if it weren't for my children, I'd have thrown myself from the highest window in the Red Keep" (S3, E10). The psychological damage that kinship systems have on women is exemplified with Cersei—in being stripped from their homes and families, deprived of any semblance of personal agency, their only emotional refuge is in motherhood.

Cersei is also the only female character in *Game of Thrones* who directly laments her own sex and gender, rather than just her gender role. As she tells Sansa, "I should've been born a man. I'd rather face a thousand swords than be shut up inside with this flock of frightened hens" (S2, E9). It is notable that Cersei never claims that it is wrong that woman have to fill certain positions, for she places the blame of her oppression less in the kinship system than in her own biological sex. In fact, she actively looks down upon other women, seeing herself as innately superior and a lone exception to the patriarchal rules. In the above scene, she is also visibly drunk, and continuously commands Sansa to drink with her, using alcohol as a tool to the dull the psychological pain and internalized shame inherent in womanhood. As Rubin writes, "The psychoanalytic theory of femininity is one that sees female development based largely on pain and humiliation" (50)—in this case, the humiliation of being exchanged—and characters like Cersei seem to suggest this to be the truth. Whether a woman chooses to accept her shameful inferiority, or chooses to futilely rebel against it, she shall suffer regardless. However, as *Game of Thrones* gradually reveals over the scope of several seasons, this rebellion may not be so futile after all.

With Cersei, another oppressive structure developed by Freud and further discussed by Rubin comes into play: that of the phallus. Though the phallus is often thought to be

synonymous to the penis, in this argument it is not; rather, it is the symbolic power and privileges that having a penis brings in a patriarchal and misogynistic society. As Rubin explains it, "[The phallus] is an expression of the transmission of male dominance. It passes through women and settles upon men" (47). Cersei's journey in *Game of Thrones* can be interpreted as her continual attempts to hold and retain this symbolic phallus, which she was deprived of due to the sex she was assigned at birth. The passage of the crown from Cersei's husband to her two sons represents the phallus literally passing through her—and, in fact, having these sons is the closest Cersei ever gets to it, which partially explains the strength of her attachments to her children. Unlike Catelyn, who acts as a figure counter to political ambition and thus indifferent to the phallus outside its capacity to protect her children—for instance, she begs her husband Ned not to leave for King's Landing and take their daughters with him, desperate to keep the family together even at the prospect of increasing social power—Cersei is a figure utterly defined by her ambitions, though at first she can only frame them in relation to her familial ties (and never does entirely escape them).

Notably, Cersei is also engaged in an incestuous love affair with her twin brother, Jaime, which somewhat falls in line with Freud's notorious Oedipus Complex. In this complex, a young child desires to have sex with their mother and, if the child is female, this desire inevitably transfers over to the father. As Rubin explains it, "She turns from the mother because she does not have the phallus to give her… then turns to the father because only he can 'give her the phallus,' and it is only through him that she can enter into the symbolic exchange system in which the phallus circulates" (49). Cersei's desire for her brother can be read as a displacement of her desire for her father—in fact, it can almost be read as a reflection of her desire to *become* him, the powerful man she could've been had she been born with a penis. As she explains,

"When we were young, Jaime and I, we looked so much alike even our father couldn't tell us apart. I could never understand why they treated us differently… He was heir to Casterly Rock and I was sold to some stranger like a horse to be ridden whenever he desired" (S2, E9). Cersei, therefore, is more aware than most that it's her sex which makes all the difference, with her male doppelgänger receiving easy access to power on a political scope, while she can barely retain any agency over herself. In this way, *Game of Thrones* equates personal and global power, such that every action Cersei takes to increase her political influence over Westeros (and there are many of them) can be read as merely a desperate grasp for any semblance of control over her own life.

If—as Lévi-Strauss suggests—incest exists as a force in total opposition to kinship, Cersei's relationship to Jaime appears to function as an act of personal rebellion against the kinship system itself, producing inbred children whose very existence threatens the system in their refusal to foster the connections it dearly relies on.[68] Furthermore, through engaging in intercourse with her twin, Cersei is given access to the phallus she so desires, retaining manipulative power over her brother as well as over the sons he impregnates her with—for, just as Craster uses incestuous relationships in order to further subdue women, Cersei uses them in order to further empower herself. It is because of Cersei's romantic persuading, for instance, that Jaime agrees to join the Kingsguard, relinquishing his rights as the firstborn son to the throne of Casterly Rock and preventing him from marrying or fathering any legitimate children. This has the dual benefit of making Cersei the most powerful Lannister child in her marriage to King Robert Baratheon and her subsequent rise to Queenship, and of keeping Jaime under her sole

[68] While this incest is a tightly kept secret in season one, Cersei later uses the information to blackmail her father into letting her remain unmarried, and by season seven is determined that her love for Jaime and the true identity of their unborn child be public knowledge once she secures the throne—thus, her secret kinship rebellion gradually becomes a political statement.

sexual influence. As Cersei tells Sansa, "Tears aren't a woman's only weapon. The best one's between your legs" (S2, E9), describing the ways in which female sexuality and fertility—often weaponized against women in the way they're used to justify the kinship system—can be reclaimed and repurposed as tools for personal agency. Rubin goes on to explain, "When the child leaves the Oedipal phase, its libido and gender identity have been organized in conformity with the rules of the culture which is domesticating it" (46). However, because Cersei has never left the Oedipal phase, she still desires to be a man and 'have the phallus', and therefore lives this desire through her children. The dislike Cersei has for Margaery Tyrell, the woman who marries both her sons (Joffrey and Tommen), can be seen as her 'castration anxiety,' or her fear that another woman will strip her of her symbolic phallus—her manipulative power over her sons—by winning their favor in the one way that Cersei cannot: through her sexuality.

Margaery herself is an example of a woman who, like Sansa, fully embraces her femininity, yet unlike her, does so from a much more pragmatist perspective, not falling for the fallacy of romance so much as using kinship systems to the highest advantage of herself and her family unit. From the beginning, Margaery plays a more active role than any of her family in her own trafficking,[69] first by offering herself to Joffrey as a wife, and then by seducing Tommen after Joffrey's death. The only possible exception is her grandmother Olenna, who manipulates behind the scenes while offering Margaery advice on how to do the same. She, too, took control of her own trafficking in her youth, telling Margaery: "I wasn't originally engaged to your grandfather. He was engaged to my sister, I was engaged to a Targaryen. But the moment I saw him, I knew he wouldn't do. So the evening before [your grandfather] was supposed to propose,

[69] As further emphasized by *Game of Throne's* depiction of Margaery's father as, essentially, comic relief—his foolishness called out by a number of characters, particularly his mother.

I got lost and happened upon his chamber… I was good, but you are even better" (S4, E4). By all appearances, Margaery, like her grandmother, has full control over where she goes and who she marries. She simply makes her choices in a way that ensures they'll be of the largest benefit to her people and which fulfils her own ambition to—in her words—be not 'a queen,' but "the queen" (S2, E5). She's one of three women on the show to accomplish such a goal or even to openly desire it,[70] but unlike Cersei and the dragon-mother Daenerys, she uses absolutely no force in order to do so, merely cunning and charisma. However, there are downsides to this strategy: she does not manage to sit on the throne alone, as they do, but must sit beside her husband, powerful only so long as she can succeed in manipulating him. Though Margaery is one of the most successful female characters at utilizing and weaponizing her femininity, it's Cersei who hastens her demise when she substitutes her 'women's weapons' of tears and sexuality for very literal ones: explosives made of wildfire. Margaery's weaponized femininity, though incredibly effective in itself, is ultimately no match for the brute force of unconstrained female ambition as wielded by Cersei and Daenerys, and often represented by flame. By pitting these characters against one another, *Game of Thrones* suggests that—more than the patriarchy itself—women who attempt to utilize the patriarchal structures of their society to their utmost personal benefit are each other's greatest threats, with female power within kinship functioning as a limited resource and thus necessitating that it is achieved in isolation. This theme is later repeated on a grander scale with the ideological (and literal) conflict which occurs between Cersei and Daenerys themselves.

Like Cersei, Daenerys is a female character who begins the show as but another unwillingly trafficked woman, but quickly evolves into the ideal wife-figure as she learns to love

[70] Notwithstanding Sansa, whose desire for the Iron Throne doesn't survive past season one.

her husband, Drogon, and completely immerses herself in his family and community. In one scene, she eats a raw animal heart in order to be accepted by his people through the performance of their rituals—an example of successful trafficking not just on a physical scale, but on a cultural one. In season one, Daenerys is much like Cersei in the attachment she has to her unborn son, who she imagines will one day take the Iron Throne—the seat and symbol of power in the Westerosi realm. In holding a possible future king within her, Daenerys goes from an insignificant commodity to such a political threat that the current king attempts to assassinate her, her fetus a physical representation of the phallus passing through her. However, the moment Daenerys loses both her husband and her unborn child, her story begins to shift. Like Cersei, Daenerys may still be in her Oedipal phase, reenacting it with her brother, Viserys. Yet, rather than desiring to have sex with the masculine power-figure in her life,[71] she desires to kill him and take his phallus—his claim to the throne—for herself. By never leaving her Oedipal phase, Daenerys' desires were therefore never "organized in conformity" (46), which might explain the following growth of her character.

Though she escapes kinship through no will of her own, Daenerys makes the choice to grip onto a sudden chance of self-empowerment—claiming the phallus as her own rather than stepping aside for a new male ruler—and throughout the seasons she becomes known as the 'breaker of chains' due to her dedication to freeing slaves. On a surface level, this speaks to her empathy as a ruler, but metaphorically it relates to Daenerys herself being sold by her brother as, essentially, a sex slave. As Viserys tells her before her marriage, "I give [Drogon] a queen and he

[71] Though Viserys certainly desires her, if the opening scene of him caressing Daenerys' naked body is anything to go by. This is not unusual in the Targaryen family, which has historically ruled through brother-sister married pairs—another rare combination of incest with kinship which further draws Daenerys and Cersei as reflections of one another.

gives me an army… I would let his whole tribe fuck you, all 40,000 men and their horses too, if that's what it took" (S1, E1). When Daenerys first speaks out against slavery, as the Dothraki are raiding a nearby village, it's the sight of her soldiers preparing to rape the wailing women which causes her to speak up against the violence, and it's the women first who she attempts to save from sexual enslavement. As she tells Drogo, "I have claimed many daughters this day, so they cannot be mounted" (S1, E8)—the term 'daughters' suggesting a new, female-oriented version of kinship which disregards the usual focus on genetic or marital ties, and which Daenerys continues to utilizes as she takes on the mantle of the 'mother of slaves.' Her decision to end slavery, and her innate revulsion of the practice, seems to be the manifestation of her inner desire to end inequality between the sexes, in which women are commodified and wives are treated as little more than slaves to their husbands. Furthermore, one of the other central goals of Daenerys' rule is to 'break the wheel' of the seven kingdoms, referring to the endless cycling of the houses in power. This cycling, when not the product of war or rebellion, is often the direct result of the intermarriage that occurs between these houses and the children that they produce—for example, Cersei of House Lannister's marriage to King Robert of House Baratheon, resulting in a bastard Lannister child on the throne. In desiring to end this cycle, Daenerys seems to be taking a direct stance against the kinship system itself, one of the major outlets of gendered oppression in her life.

Next to these political female figures, one character who stands out is Yara Greyjoy—unique not only because she is spared the trafficking of the kinship system despite being a highborn woman, but that she is able to do so while still retaining the political power of her birth right. She is able to do so because of a very specific circumstance in which all but one of her brothers is killed during a rebellion, and the remaining one, Theon, is 'trafficked' in her place.

Though Theon is taken away from their family at a young age to live with the Starks, it is not marriage which sparks this transfer so much as war. All the same, the implications are similar. Theon is taken as a hostage and kept as a ward as a symbol of his father's fealty to the king following the Greyjoys' failed rebellion—his trafficking is an act of repair on the damaged social relationship between these feuding Houses. Unlike marriage, however, the exchange of a son isn't merely about strengthening connections; it also reestablishes the power hierarchy of the Houses by weakening the offending House through the removal of its sole remaining heir. Theon, as the future of his house, is turned into a symbol of its shame as he spends the remainder of his childhood acting as a ward of the Stark family, forced to practice the obedience and loyalty that his House failed to during the rebellion. For this reason, Theon is unique in that—even as a man—he too feels the need to reclaim his symbolic phallus when his father, Balon, rejects him. "Was it Ned Stark's pleasure to make you his daughter?" Balon asks, and after ripping off Theon's necklace, he laments, "I will not have my son dressed as a whore" (S2, E2). The focus of Balon's insults on Theon's masculinity reveals that, in being trafficked, Theon has been feminized: depowered and disconnected from his familial roots in the same way that women are upon marriage. Theon therefore betrays the Starks, performing acts of hyper-masculinity—specifically, violence—in order to reverse his own symbolic castration.[72] This failure of manhood is marked by a very literal castration, however, and much of Theon's remaining arc focuses instead on his sister Yara.

With all her brothers dead or taken, Yara is put in the unique position of filling their role herself. This means that, like Brienne and Arya, Yara takes on many more masculine traits and

[72] But he even fails to properly do this, requiring several swings to take off the head of a dissenter, an act which correlates with honorable masculinity within the Stark household.

habits. However, she hasn't rejected or been rejected by femininity so much as been given the opportunity to take on masculinity instead—and because she's filling a role required by her House and her family, she's not punished for straying from the gender binary.[73] Rather, she's respected and nearly accepted as one of the men, allowing her to take on a role of direct political power without the marriage, manipulation, or numerous sacrifices required by other female characters. Even her queerness is painted as a way that she has masculinized herself. In one scene at a crowded brothel, the newly-castrated Theon sits stiffly as Yara drinks and kisses a female prostitute. She speaks and behaves identically to many of the men around her, slapping the woman on the rear and making crude comments about her body to Theon, notably: "Nothing in the Iron Islands has an ass like that" and "I'm gonna go fuck the tits off this one" (S6, E7). In taking up the role of a man, Yara seems to have adopted the sexual attitude of one, complete with the objectification. As Rubin writes regarding Freud's psychoanalytical theories, there are "alternate routes out of the Oedipal catastrophe… [a girl] may protest, cling to her narcissism and desire, and become either 'masculine' or homosexual. Or she may accept the situation, sign the social contract, and attain 'normality'" (Rubin 23). There's a clear association here between masculinity and homosexuality in a woman, both qualities being set into opposition to 'normalcy,' and from this perspective it might be argued that it was the outside expectations for Yara to take on the role of her brothers from early childhood which led her to take this particular 'route.'

[73] She also shares many similarities with ten-year-old Lyanna Mormont, who has been made to prematurely fill the role of an adult man because she is the last of her line, her uncle having been exiled with no other living male figures to replace him. Lyanna, too, exhibits all the masculine traits of a traditional leader and warrior, which earn her the respect of others but ultimately result in her fighting and dying in the war against the Night King as an untrained child.

In many ways, Yara and Theon have switched places: she avoids the trafficking of marriage because Theon experiences the trafficking of war, she is masculinized while he is feminized, and all this comes to fruition when Theon promises to support her bid for the throne—a position that would traditionally belong to him, and which others of their house bring up time and again. Despite all of this, Yara is still a woman, and her society's sexism plays a role in her loss of the throne to her murderous uncle, Euron; however similar she may be to men, she cannot escape the innate facets of her sex with connect her to her fellow women. Though Yara is like Brienne and Arya in her masculinity, she's more like Cersei, Margaery, Daenerys, and (eventually) Sansa in that she has real political ambition, though its more akin to Sansa's in the fact that she does not desire to rule all seven kingdoms so much as the kingdom of her family and community. Still, like Daenerys, she strives for this power directly—something that acts as bonding-point between them when they meet. However, when Daenerys agrees to support Yara's political ambitions under the condition of "no more reeving, groving, raiding, or raping" by the Iron Island pirates, Yara counters, "That's our way of life!" (S6, E9). Like Cersei, Yara has no active desire to improve the conditions of other women, merely of herself and the men she surrounds herself with. All the same, she proves remarkably successful in her endeavors.

In these ways, Cersei, Margaery, Daenerys, and Yara—who all manage to achieve agency within (or in Yara's case, just outside of) the kinship system, albeit in different ways—appear to stand in sharp contrast with the figures of Frey's and Craster's wives and daughters, who only achieve any semblance of freedom when the deaths of their father, husband, and brother figures rips them entirely apart from anything remotely resembling kinship. In the case of Craster's daughters, they burn down Craster's Keep after Jon Snow and his men defeat the rebelling Crows, and thereafter insist on finding their "own way" rather than relying on the

protection of yet another group of untrustworthy men (S4, E5). In the case of Frey's daughters, Arya Stark returns to take revenge on her brother's killer, tricking Frey into consuming his murdered sons—an act of insurrection aimed directly against kinship, and a noteworthy twist on the 'band of brothers' willingly consuming their father[74]—before poisoning all the rest of the Frey men, notably sparing the women. In both cases, there is the formation of an all-female community, though how these communities fare afterwards is left entirely unexplored. Taken in comparison to the female protagonists we as an audience are given most narrative access to, it's interesting to note how women who suffer remain bonded, whereas those who thrive often end up isolated, if not directly pitted against one another.[75] There may be ways to twist the kinship system to one's benefit, but that doesn't mean nothing is lost along the way.

## IV. *A Woman Scorned*: Choices & their Consequences

As demonstrated through the sheer variety of female protagonists within *Game of Thrones* (not excluding the many diverse side-characters), women in Westeros are not a homogenous group in either internal or external qualities, and the ways they choose to respond to the oppressive circumstances they have found themselves in are as diverse and individual as can be expected. All the same, their choices do not exist within a vacuum, but proceed to actively shape their individual character arcs throughout the stretch of the show. It's the conclusions to these arcs, in fact, which may be the most telling in regards to what *Game of Thrones* has to say about the effectiveness (and perhaps even morality) of each of these character's strategies for survival—especially considering how few of these characters do, ultimately, survive. In a show

[74] Reflectively symbolic, perhaps, of the death of patriarchal civilization.
[75] Even Daenerys comes to regret her expression of female kinship when one of the women she saves ends up causing the deaths of Drogo and her child, resulting in Daenerys burning her alive.

known for its frequent and indiscriminating character deaths—where even an event as innocuous as a wedding can take out three protagonists at once—those who make it to the story's conclusion are worth talking about. With women making up such a large portion of the fatalities within *Game of Thrones*, we have to ask ourselves: of those that survive, how so? And of those that don't, why not?

In season eight of *Game of Thrones*, the stories of several major female protagonists—Sansa, Arya, Brienne, Yara, Cersei, and Daenerys—come to a head. For the latter two, their character arcs end in the conquest of the most powerful throne in Westeros, followed shortly by death. In Cersei's case, the castration anxiety she faced with Margaery becomes reality with Daenerys, who strips her of her phallus by destroying her kingdom and castle. Cersei, the most politically powerful female character for eight seasons, ends the show crying in the arms of her former lover, begging for the life of her unborn child. Finally castrated, she falls back into the role of a traditional woman: powerless, emotional, and defined by her romantic and familial ties. Daenerys, meanwhile, wins the throne only to be killed by her lover in the midst of an embrace. It is her quest for power and liberation—taken to the extreme—which proves her moral downfall, but her physical death results directly from her romantic life. In a sense, it results from her inability to entirely escape kinship. Of the other characters, Arya is last seen sailing out of Westeros, having resorted to physically leaving the continent in order to escape the demands of the patriarchy while still retaining her identity. Brienne, however, becomes not just the first female knight but the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, fully embracing a masculine role yet also forced to entirely leave behind the feminine one she once desired. Of them all, Sansa is perhaps the most successful: she becomes queen of the independent North, bowed to by dozens of soldiers who hold out their swords to her as if presenting her with the symbolic phallus. Yara

is the only other possibility, finally becoming Lady of the Iron Islands after the deaths of Euron and Theon, and thus offering an alternative model of female ambition through an external masculinization (as opposed to Sansa's blatant femininity). Interestingly, none of these four surviving characters end up with romantic interests or familial ties, and all are completely isolated from others of their gender: Arya on a ship with an all-male crew, Brienne the only woman at a table full of powerful men, Yara ruling over the otherwise male-dominated Iron Islands, and Sansa crowned by male soldiers. In lacking romance and family, it can be said that all four women have escaped kinship, and therefore escaped oppression—in fact, the stress *Game of Thrones* puts on ending kinship can be seen in the election of an infertile king, who cannot have sons in which to pass his phallus or daughters to marry off. As Tyrion puts it, "That is the wheel our queen wanted to break" (S8, E6). However, the isolation these characters experience from other women suggests that escaping gender oppression necessitates a kind of separation from one's own gender. Sansa may not have sacrificed her femininity like Arya, Brienne, and Yara, but she is an outlier among others of her sex, and must inevitably leave them behind in order to achieve the agency she longs for.

Sansa is unlike the other surviving female characters of *Game of Thrones* in that she has much more in common with the women who die—Cersei and Daenerys—than those who live—Arya, Brienne, and Yara. Yet she not only survives the kinship system, but learns to thrive through it. Daenerys and Sansa's differing fates are more easily reconcilable, considering that the distinctions between their character arcs are more pronounced. When they meet, Daenerys tells Sansa, "We both know what it means to lead people who aren't inclined to accept a woman's rule" (S8, E2), which is true to an extent, but fails to encapsulate just how differently these characters approach leadership. Daenerys, in desiring to overthrow the kinship system, demands

total authority over—and at the expense of—men. Daenerys' madness and death portray this as an unsuccessful and even disastrous reaction to the kinship system, propagating the message that women who attempt to overturn the system will inevitably fail. In fact, the very people that Daenerys once wanted to protect—innocent women and children—wind up being the ones she hurts and kills in the process.[76] Conversely, Cersei and Sansa have much more in common in regards to the directions of their character arcs. Both use their manipulative abilities to fight for power, less for themselves than for the men in their lives—in Cersei's case, her children, and in Sansa's, her brother Jon. However, after Cersei's husband and sons have all died, she makes the same choice that Daenerys once did when she lost her husband and child in season one: Cersei decides to claim the phallus, taking the Iron Throne for herself. The beginning of this ambitious streak is even marked by the cutting of her hair, forcibly masculinizing her. In this case, Cersei isn't trying to overturn the kinship system for all women so much as personally defy it, but the result is the same: Cersei cannot win this battle, and her death—along with the deaths of her unborn child and her lover—is inevitable. As the Red Wedding demonstrated all the way back in season two, outwardly defying kinship can have long-reaching and catastrophic consequences.

Conversely, when Sansa escapes her second husband and returns to her home—escaping the romantic entanglements of kinship but not the familial ones—she regularly speaks out against the decisions that her brother Jon makes, but never argues that he is the one to be making them. Privately, Sansa and Jon quarrel over his political choices and Sansa's desire for a greater

[76] This is especially evident in the camera focus during her attack on King's Landing. From the perspective of Arya—still practically a girl herself—we watch a barrage of women and little girls sobbing, running, hiding, and brutally dying; Jon even saves a woman about to be raped by one of Daenerys' soldiers. When the destruction is over, it's the charred corpses of the mother and daughter that Arya tried to save that the camera zones in on. The message is clear: Daenerys' unchecked ambition has led to a complete violation of her own moral and political values.

role, expressed in scathing questions such as, "Did it ever occur to you that I might have some insight?"[77] (S6, E9) and "Would [listening to me] be so terrible?" (S7, E1). Yet when one man says to her: "We did not choose you to rule us, my lady. But perhaps we should have," she replies, "You are very kind, my lords. But Jon is our king" (S7, E5). In fact, Sansa manipulates situations in order to ensure that Jon retains and even increases his power, spreading the information that he is the rightful heir to the Iron Throne against his wishes. Unlike Cersei and Daenerys, she does not claim power for herself, but garners the loyalty and admiration of her people—mostly men—through sheer intelligence and manipulative ability. Unlike Margaery, she fails to ever manipulate a man romantically or sexually, but she more than makes up for it on a political scale. While Elena Woodacre argues that "Sansa's political potential increased as the male members of House Stark are gradually eliminated,"[78] she fails to recognize that Sansa, too, was 'eliminated' as a viable member of House Stark when she was married off. Her choice to return and reclaim her maiden name is an act of political savviness which powerfully challenges 'exchange' aspect of kinship (as seen in Lévi-Strauss's alliance theory) while leaning into the 'inheritance' aspect (as seen in the earlier descent theory). However, this decision is clearly considered socially problematic, as demonstrated by the multiple individuals who question her family loyalty by directly questioning her name. When Sansa and Jon ask the unmarried Lyanna Mormont for her political support, she goads: "Lady Sansa's a Bolton. Or is she a Lannister? I've

[77] An interesting bit of parallel dialogue to Cersei's speech to her father, Tywin: "*Did it ever occur to you* that I am the one that deserves your confidence and your trust? Not your sons… but me" (S3, E4), indicating just how much Sansa may have learned from her over the years.
[78] Elena Woodacre, "Afterword: Playing, Winning, and Losing the Game of Thrones—Reflections on Female Succession in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* in Comparison to the Premodern Era," in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire"* eds. Z. Rohr & L. Benz (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 242.

heard conflicting reports," and as Sansa replies, "I'm a Stark. I will always be a Stark" (S6, E7). Sansa later manages to reinstate her original identity by playing a vital role in defeating her 'new' family, the Boltons, in battle. However, part of proving her family loyalty is also expressing personal loyalty to her brother Jon, who she believes to be her father's sole remaining male heir—thus, that is exactly what she does.

Woodacre also emphasizes Sansa's adherence to "the concept of male primogeniture" in contrast with the other female political figures, and thus calls her success in comparison with their failures "ironic" (244). Yet, there's nothing ironic about this—it is not despite but because of this adherence that Sansa can succeed at all. By the time Jon leaves Winterfell, Sansa has earned his respect enough for him to leave her in charge, and when he is exiled for killing Daenerys, Sansa has earned the respect of her men enough for them to crown her in his stead, and this respect is largely earned through the proof of her family loyalty above all else. This is shown particularly with her open distrust of the foreign queen Daenerys, where even Jon's loyalty fails. Thus, Sansa wins agency where other characters fail by seldom asking for it. When she *does* ask, in the form of demanding independence for the North, she makes sure she asks the right person (her brother Bran) in the right moment (the political restructuring of Westeros) and frames it as if she's asking for power not for herself but for her family and her house, therefore appearing to strengthen kinship rather than defy it. Yet even her position as a Northern separatist is an example of her attempt to disengage from the kinship system, as it's the intermingling of the Seven Kingdoms which instigates the majority of these arranged marriages to begin with. By pulling away entirely, she's insuring that neither she nor any of her house will be trafficked to another kingdom again. There's no dismantling kinship and no taking full control, but as Sansa shows, there are ways to maneuver around it.

Sansa, Arya, Brienne, being the three major female characters who not only survive the show but escape the kinship system in the process, manage to do so not out of luck or chance but due to the specific ways in which each responds to her oppression.[79] Arya rejects and escapes from it, Brienne is rejected by it, Sansa submits and manipulates. Daenerys fails because she makes the mistake of trying to tear down kinship, whereas Cersei does by attempting to overtly take control. In considering all these diverging storylines under the lens of kinship, it can be argued that there are only three ways for a woman to react to, and still survive, female oppression: first, like Arya, to reject gender altogether—though this is not without sacrifice, sometimes of one's entire society. Second, like Brienne or Yara, to claim a masculine role instead—though, because of social norms, this can be incredibly difficult to do, and does not come without scorn. Third, like Sansa, to submit to one's oppression physically but not mentally, and to use all opportunities to attain further agency without too directly or aggressively claiming it. In all situations, the woman is left empowered but isolated from all others of her gender, all family, and any romantic entanglements with men; therefore, this 'empowerment' comes at a serious social cost.

Of course, it's worth noting that of all the aforementioned female characters, not one of them varies from the white, straight (excluding Yara), upper-class picture of womanhood most valued and privileged within the society of Westeros, and therefore within the system of kinship upon which it has been built. In a show focused largely on the political clashes between ruling dynasties, it's perhaps inevitable that the majority of the characters come from upper-class backgrounds. All the same, the world they fight to rule is one populated by the lowborn, and

[79] Excluding Yara, who is lucky in the particular case of having outlived all competing male heirs, though she does earn her authority through skill and valor as well.

their significance in the narrative is undeniable, though often overlooked. When it comes to kinship, lowborn women have significantly fewer choices available to them as do their highborn counterparts, for they lack the prestigious familial connections which serve to make them desirable wives of exchange. However, they have choices all the same; take, for instance, the show's depiction of prostitutes. It's no coincidence that prostitution plays such a significant role in a story otherwise fraught with highborn women, and from the beginning there's an interesting foiling which occurs between the transfer of women as brides and the traffic of women as sex workers. The most obvious difference between them seems to be class—women with poor parentage, low social-standing, and therefore few marriage prospects often find prostitution their only viable financial alternative.

In many ways, prostitution appears to subvert the trafficking inherent in kinship systems in that these women are the ones responsible for their own transfer, and the ones who directly reap the benefits. The sex they offer men is, for the most part, consensual, and as Cersei puts it, "You don't buy [whores], you only rent them" (S2, E8). Prostitutes, like wives, are still objectified, but the difference is that they are largely in control of the objectification of their own bodies, and because they are 'rented,' they're not owned by the men they sleep with in the same way that wives are. Rather, it seems they own themselves. The allure of such a career can be seen in the legend of Irogenia of Lys, told to Daenerys by a former child prostitute, Doreah: "Kings traveled across the world for a night with Irogenia. Magisters sold their palaces. Khals burned her enemies just to have her for a few hours. They say a thousand men proposed to her and she refused them all" (S1, E2). Clearly, Irogenia possesses an undeniable power in her sexual prowess, and the agency this affords her is akin to and perhaps even greater than that of a queen, as suggested by her coveted position among kings. Doreah's mention of the rejected

proposals is vital in its implication that Irogenia has actively chosen to continue her prostitution even when afforded the opportunity to marry into power—ultimately, she finds more agency in being 'rented' than 'owned.' In these ways, it might be argued that in some ways prostitutes have *more* agency than the average woman within the kinship system.

However, as the female protagonists of *Game of Thrones* have already demonstrated, every choice has its pitfalls, within and outside the bounds of kinship. The drawbacks in this circumstance are represented by two prostitutes of particular note, Shae and Ros, both of whom end the show brutally murdered by powerful Lannister men. In Shae's case, her exclusive position as Tyrion Lannister's prostitute shifts into an outright romance. While this proves empowering in her greater emotional sway over Tyrion's choices, it soon falls apart when Tyrion is instructed to marry the highborn Sansa. Though he promises to continue their emotional engagement and provide for her financially, Shae tells him, "I am not your lady… I am your whore. And when you're tired of fucking me, I will be nothing" (S3, E7). Unlike wives within the kinship system, who draw their agency from the stability of a legal marriage and trueborn children regardless of how their husbands come to view them, prostitutes rely on the inevitably unstable feelings of the men they make love to. As they age and become less beautiful, or as the interest of their suitors fade, they lose every scrap of agency they might once have had. Their power, however strong, is fleeting—and it's this knowledge which leads to Shae's betrayal of Tyrion and eventually results in her death.

Ros' situation, conversely, revolves around the financial aspect of prostitution. Though she beings the show as merely another sex worker, she rises in rank until she's the right hand of the brothel owner, Littlefinger, and a figure of authority in the social sphere which she inhabits. That is, until she breaks down into tears in front of a customer after witnessing the murder of a

coworkers' baby. "You remind me of another [unhappy] girl," Littlefinger tells her, "This one wasn't making me any money. I hate bad investments. They haunt me. I had no idea how to make her happy, mitigate my losses. A very wealthy patron offered a lot of money to transform this sad girl, to use her in ways that would never occur to most men. I would not say he succeeded in making her happy, but my losses were definitely mitigated" (S2, E2). Despite all Ros' well-earned authority, Littlefinger makes it clear that she's nothing but a monetary investment on his part. As Varys puts it, "a collection of profitable holes" (S2, E10). Ros may not have a husband who owns her, but Littlefinger certainly comes closest, and he's quick to remind her that her failure to play the part—as in, remain perfectly sexual and fulfil the erotic needs of men at all costs—will result in far worse than a loss of power: a complete destruction of any and all personal and sexual agency. Unlike a husband, he's under no obligation to protect or provide for her if she proves herself unworthy or otherwise unprofitable, and thus Ros has neither the freedom promised by a life outside of kinship nor the protection ensured by a life within it. It's no surprise when Littlefinger does exactly as he's promised, and Ros ends up dead because of it. As Tyrion sarcastically remarks regarding his own murder of Shae, "I don't imagine you revoke your nobility if you kill a whore. It must happen all the time" (S5, E1), and that speaks both to a wider view of women as property and the devaluation of the lives of sex workers in particular.

It's clear that prostitutes do benefit in some ways from their ability to exist outside the kinship system and 'unlinked' to men via marriage, but these benefits are too often overshadowed by the gravity of the risks. Despite their unarguable significance and necessity in Westerosi society, prostitutes have incredibly low social standing, being widely stigmatized and otherwise deemed inferior to all other breeds of women. In one scene, Daenerys scornfully

laments, “He offered me a single ship on the condition that I lie with him for the night. Does he think I will whore myself?” (S2, E6). Though she’s happily manipulated men with sex before, even utilizing the seduction advice of the prostitute Doreah, this was within marriage—or, elsewards, within the kinship system. Daenerys’ indignation at the thought of prostitution is telling: for women within Westerosi society, sexual manipulation for the purposes of control within a marriage is acceptable, while sex in exchange for goods of monetary value is not. In the end, it’s lower-class women—without powerful families whose connections would make them desirable wives—who often find prostitution their only feasible method of social and financial security, thus avoiding the kinship system entirely but at the expense of the protection and prestige that it can offer.

Ultimately, what *Game of Thrones* adds to the feminist critique of kinship exchange is an acknowledgement of the choices that women have available to them, even within a pre-modern system which commodifies their sexual bodies. It’s through these exemplifications, however, that we see how limited these options really were (and are), and how kinship systems—coupled with the psychological conditioning of gender roles in early childhood—inevitably doom women to a dilemma that men never have to face: deciding between a life without agency**,** a life without stability, or a life of social isolation, all of which entail serious loss.

## V. *The Baby in the Bathwater*: The Question of Modernity

So what, if anything, does any of this have to do with the experiences of modern women within the Western world? Freud and Lévi-Strauss both notably attribute kinship systems to early or ‘primitive’ societies, and it’s undeniable that our contemporary notion of marriage is one far more similar to Robb and Talisa’s forbidden love-union than that of the arranged, political

matches we see with Edmure and Frey's daughter. Of course, numerous remnants of our previous social system can still be found in our contemporary rituals—take, for instance, the 'giving away' of a bride by her father at a wedding, or the bride's adoption of the groom's family name—but they hardly seem significant in this modern world where women commonly work, receive higher educations, run for office, marry other women (or no one at all), and publicly embrace their sexualities. All the same, there's no question that the quest for total female liberation has many miles to go; sexuality remains heavily policed, sex workers blatantly stigmatized, queer women and women of color devalued, young girls exploited, and working and/or single mothers left to struggle significantly more than their male counterparts, all of which affects the treatment of women in positions of power (of which there are still relatively few). And while the kinship system as exemplified by the literal exchange of women is arguably no more, kinship itself has not gone anywhere—our communities are still organized by largely self-contained nuclear families with the same internal kin relationships as have marked human society for centuries, and which are similarly connected to one another through marital unions and new generations of offspring. As discussed in chapter one, what is medieval very much exists within our present world, and this is no exception. The strict social rules which once governed how these marriages came to be may no longer be blatantly visible, but as French philosopher Michel Foucault has suggested, they have not gone away; rather, they've simply transformed themselves to fit our modern needs.

In his work, Foucault refers to kinship systems as the *deployment of alliance*, and emphasizes its relation to what he refers to as *deployment of sexuality,* the way our innate sexual impulses are shaped by and utilized within society at any historical moment. As deployment of alliance has faded with the growing irrelevance of the kinship system, deployment of sexuality

has risen in its place; yet, as Foucault suggests, this is no coincidence. Deployment of sexuality "has neither obliterated the latter nor rendered it useless… it was around and on the basis of the deployment of alliance that the deployment of sexuality was constructed."[80] In other words, the same rules which once governed kinship—monogamy, heterosexuality, legitimacy of children, distinct gender roles, etc.—now govern our sexualities, having transitioned from the emphasis on social relations to the emphasis on the body and its intimate sensations. This shift, according to Foucault, took place largely within the realm of the family, which "conveys the law and the juridical dimension of the deployment of sexuality; and… the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance" (99). In this way, while the deployment of alliance still works in enforcement of the incest taboo, sexuality is "incestuous from the start" (99) in its root within the parent-child relationship—a suggestion rather reminiscent of Freud's Oedipus Complex, but Foucault refers not to blatant attraction between these two parties so much as the way children inherent an understanding of their own sexuality through the frameworks offered up by their (typically heteronormative) family networks.

The question of the role kinship plays in our modern values can be explored within *Game of Thrones* in the specific context of the kingdom of Dorne, the southernmost portion of Westeros known for its radically progressive culture. One scene which best demonstrates this culture is, interestingly enough, a political coup, which somewhat parallels the massacre of the Red Wedding. The coup is staged by Ellaria Sand, the bisexual, bastard lover of Prince Oberyn, and three of Oberyn's bastard daughters—all of whom, together, have significant political sway to begin with, and with this coup manage to take complete control over the kingdom, facing much less resistance than many other ambitious female characters throughout Westeros. Like the

[80] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 97.

Red Wedding masked a coming bloodbath with a family affair, Ellaria disguises her planned murder of Prince Doran by first bonding over their shared love for the deceased Oberyn. However, unlike the Red Wedding, this is an event made possible specifically because of the absence of a strict kinship system within their surrounding society. Ellaria, perhaps because of her bastard-status, never married Oberyn, but as his life-partner and mother of his daughters she still carries influence, such that Doran treats her much like a sister-in-law even after his death. In this way, Ellaria has escaped all the worst aspects of the kinship system—the commodification and subordination—while still reaping all its benefits of status and power. It's this status that allows her and her daughter to get close enough to stab Doran and his bodyguard, while Oberyn's other two daughters face off against Prince Trystane and win. Ellaria punctuates the murders with the announcement: "Weak men will never rule Dorne again" (S6, E1), implying that it is 'strong women' who shall instead. Even the fact that four of these such women accomplish the coup together is significant, as it breaks with previous trends of women suffering as a unit and achieving power alone, suggesting that the patriarchal structures which limit female agency do not function within Dornish society.

Long before the audience is introduced to Dorne as a narrative setting, it's clear that it's a kingdom culturally distinct from the rest of Westeros. Dorne is devoid of many of the prejudices that run rampant throughout Westerosi society, as signified by its physically disabled king, its openly bisexual prince, its significantly looser gender roles, and its acceptance of non-marital sex and the resulting illegitimate children. In consideration of Foucault's argument, it's a fascinating place, for its deployment of sexuality is quite distinct from what we've seen before—its "economy of pleasure" is one in which pleasure is allowed to exist in its own right and take whatever forms it requires, regardless of the social order. It's many of Dorne's unique cultural

qualities, in fact, which allow the coup to take place, for not only would Ellaria and the daughters not have the proximity to power necessary for such an act were their bastard statuses the social death-sentences that they would be in other kingdoms, but Dorne's very flexibility regarding gender roles is what allows Oberyn's unmarried daughters to gain the combat skills necessary to kill the men in power. It's clear that Dorne does indeed participate in kinship systems, as seen by the trafficking of Myrcella Lannister from King's Landing in order to marry her to Trystane. Yet without the stigmatization of sexual women and children borne outside of wedlock, there's much less incentive for women like Ellaria and her daughters to participate, as they have the opportunity to create a good life for themselves and their children without ever marrying. Most notably, Dorne has equal inheritance laws for daughters and sons, essentially erasing the significance of gender within its unique form of kinship and encouraging the disintegration of gender roles as seen with Oberyn's daughters. However, unlike Arya, Brienne, and Yara who break from traditionally feminine gender roles by fulfilling traditionally masculine gender roles, Oberyn's daughters are able to balance both feminine and masculine qualities at their own discretion—demonstrative of how this systematic breakdown of gender roles, rather than an individual disobedience, offers significantly greater flexibility and freedom. This can be seen even more so in the contrast between Ellaria and Yara, the only two significant bisexual women on the show. When women having sex for pleasure is normalized, as it is in Dorne, queerness—with no ability to result in children, legitimate or otherwise—becomes much less of a threat to the dominant heteronormative powers. Thus, while Yara's queerness is framed solely through her masculinity, Ellaria is allowed to retain her femininity alongside her attraction towards other women.

On a geographic scope, it's also interesting to note the placement of Dorne in consideration with other kingdoms within and outside of Westeros, and what this placement might indicate regarding its role in the overarching fictional setting. The most northern portion of the map is home to the pre-civilized wildings,[81] yet shifting southwards one encounters Craster's Keep (representative of the birth of civilization), the rest of Westeros (representative of pre-modern civilization),[82] and finally Dorne—representative, perhaps, of modern or even post-modern civilization, as seen by its remarkably progressive culture. In other words, *Game of Thrones* seems to represent the cultural evolution of civilization in a geographic sequence from north to south. Unlike the overwhelming whiteness of the rest of Westeros, Dorne is also racially and ethnically distinct due to its cultural history of intermarriage between the white Westeros and the non-white Essos,[83] suggesting itself as an integrated future for both. Though Dorne is clearly exoticized, and thereby coded as non-Western, there's no ignoring its relation to the medieval Westeros as its modernized counterpart.

All the same, Dorne is no utopia. Princess Myrcella does not make it out of her kinship arrangement alive, though only because of the vindictive Ellaria seeking revenge on Cersei for the death of Oberyn. Oberyn himself is killed in the process of wreaking vengeance on the Lannister soldier who, during an international war between the Seven Kingdoms, brutally raped and murdered his sister while still soaked with the blood of her children. Despite its progressive values, Dorne has clearly failed time and again to keep women safe. In each case, this can be

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[81] Or, even more northern than that, the pre-human species of the Children of the Forest.
[82] Even within the rest of Westeros, the southernmost Highgarden seems to exhibit more modern qualities than kingdoms to the north—for instance, Loras Tyrell's queerness is more culturally acceptable than it is within King's Landing. As Lady Olenna puts it, "It's a natural thing, two boys having a go at each other beneath the sheets… we [at Highgarden] don't tie each other in knots at a discrete bit of buggery" (S3, E6).
[83] Itself representing a parallel track of Eastern civilization.

attributed to the fact that, while Dorne is culturally distinct from the rest of Westeros, it is not politically isolated, remaining under the rule of the Iron Throne to the same general extent as every other kingdom. Thus, participation in Westerosi politics is unavoidable, and Ellaria in particular is more than happy to join forces with Daenerys' campaign against Cersei's rule. Yet Euron Greyjoy—a man so overtly sexist he becomes rather symbolic of Westerosi patriarchal and misogynistic influence—marks the end of her reign when he murders two of Oberyn's daughters with their own weapons, and delivers Ellaria and her daughter to be tortured and murdered by Cersei.[84] Taken in isolation, Dorne may function as a modern paradise, but it cannot escape it ties to the hostile patriarchal world which surrounds and corrupts it. As Oberyn tells Cersei, "We don't hurt little girls in Dorne," and as Cersei replies, "Everywhere in the world they hurt little girls" (S4, E5), for in the overarching scope of *Game of Thrones,* that hurt is unavoidable. In the same way that the modern Dorne is complicated by its necessary collaboration with the rest of the kingdoms in pre-modern Westeros, our modern society continues to be actively shaped by our pre-modern past. Harmful and limiting gender norms rooted in the kinship system persist in their world, as they do in ours—the only difference is that in *Game of Thrones,* cultures evolve in a linear geographic sequence, whereas ours accumulate through the passage of time. As reflected by Foucault's argument, in which modern sexuality springs from ancient kinship, our contemporary world is merely superimposed onto our historical past. Its values, while shrouded, are as alive as ever.

Thus, *Game of Thrones'* depiction of kinship systems is more 'presentist' than it may originally appears, for what it shows about the limitations of the kinship system on the agency,

[84] Euron proudly displays their mutilated bodies on the front of his ship, as if in direct punishment of their gender norm deviations.

stability, and community of its female characters is more than applicable to modern women, who must continue to abide by these pre-modern standards or else risk a kind of social scorn or even societal ostracization. And if these women wish to obtain some kind of social, professional, or political power, any chance of success hinges on their ability to perfectly navigate these numerous unspoken guidelines of behavior. Of course, Foucault's work was published in the late 1970s, and the rules of traditional kinship have only further degraded over the last half-century in favor of greater queer and feminist liberation. All the same, gender roles stubbornly persist, and public stigma against those who fail to properly deploy their sexuality is as rampant as ever. The kinship system may be rooted in pre-modernity, but in the process of modernization it has continued to shape our social values, and has thus sustained its vital role in the oppression and objectification of women in much subtler, more insidious ways. The remnants of the premodern kinship system remain especially pertinent in regards to the figure of the political woman, whose personal life is held to close public scrutiny—and, in fact, often vital in the formation of their public perception—by her supporters and her opponents alike.

## Chapter Three: A Woman's Place (in the Oval Office and on the Iron Throne)

### I. The Americanization of European History

As per its title, the thematic center of *Game of Thrones* lies in its depiction of the bloody battle for the Iron Throne, and by the final season many of its top contenders are none other than the female characters whose arcs we've watched unfold over the previous sixty episodes. In a sense, there's nothing obscure about this, for each of these characters has followed a narratively realistic pathway to bring them to this political precipice. All the same, there's no question that what *Game of Thrones* has managed to accomplish here is startlingly uncommon; but why is that so? As classicist Mary Beard writes, "As far back as we can see in Western history there is a radical separation – real, cultural and imaginary – between women and power," and, in this separation, there is revealed an unresolved cultural contradiction that has marred our past, our present, and even our fictional worlds.[85] *Game of Thrones* is unique in its ability to imagine a past in which this historical separation isn't quite so well-defined, even within a society based in medievalism, with stricter gender roles and far more blatant displays of misogyny. In doing so, it imagines a world in which power might be born from oppression as well as from privilege, employing a feminist framework to draw into question our modern assumptions on power's very nature. To perform a feminist reading of *Game of Thrones*, therefore, requires not just an understanding of the ways women are treated in-text, but of how this treatment reflects wider cultural attitudes and ideologies in the society in which it was created. Moreover, it necessitates an analysis of *Game of Thrones'* intentions in representing women in positions of power at all,

[85] Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 69.

and what it might have to say regarding the culturally controversial figure of the politically powerful woman. As Beard puts it, "If women are not perceived to be fully within the structures of power, surely it is power that we need to redefine rather than women?" (83)—and that's the major question. Is *Game of Thrones* really attempting to redefine power itself, or simply working to reexamine our modern cultural repertoire of the women we believe can acceptably (or not-so-acceptably) yield it?

The problems of monarchy and kinship as often depicted in *Game of Thrones* may seem far removed from our contemporary moment, but it's never quite so far as we think. Nothing serves as a better reminder than the lingering existence of the British royal family, with modern scandals that demonstrate the ways the prejudices inherent within these systems have lingered just as well. When the Duke of Sussex, Prince Harry, married the American actress, Meghan Markle, in 2018, it took only two years for the two to step down from their positions as senior members of the family and move to Canada with their infant son. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey on March 8th 2021, Meghan opened up to the public for the first time about her struggles as a biracial woman within the royal family, which resulted in her ultimate withdrawal. The issues particularly revolved around her unborn child, Archie, upon whom the family was reluctant to bestow a royal title, and even expressed concerns regarding the color of his skin once he was born.[86] Though horrific in and of itself, the situation is remarkable reminiscent of another—the noble Robb Stark marrying and impregnating the racial and cultural outsider, Talisa, to the dismay of a powerful family. Of course, in the case of Harry and Meghan, the results were thankfully not quite so tragic, though they could've been: Meghan opened up to

[86] Constance Grady, "Meghan Markle Says the Royal Family Was 'Concerned' about Her Future Child's Skin Color" (Vox, March 8, 2021), https://www.vox.com/culture/22318918/meghan-markle-oprah-race-archie-harry-british-royal-family.

Oprah about her suicidal ideations provoked by her prolonged racialized mistreatment by the royal family. In this case, the only solution for the couple was to disengage themselves entirely from the white colonialist system which deemed their match unacceptable and their child unfit.

Meghan could perhaps not stand in sharper contrast with any figure than her own sister-in-law, Kate Middleton, married to Prince Harry's brother William and thus a member of the British royal family herself. Kate, as a white woman native to the English county of Berkshire, has come to perfectly embody the role she's been expected to play, known for her philanthropy, her immeasurable impact on British and American fashion, and her three (white) children all closely in line for the throne. Many media outlets have expressed fascination by, what they've alleged, is a tense and oftentimes antagonistic relationship between these two women—and it's no surprise that Meghan and Kate have been pitted against each other in this way, considering the two vastly distinct (and almost ideologically opposite) configurations of royal womanhood each has to offer. With Kate depicted as a nearly idealized figure of white royal femininity, and Meghan as the un-belonging racial outsider, the precarious nature of simply existing as a woman in a public sphere is more than evident, as are the very limited array of possibilities offered to women in these esteemed roles. Yet Kate and Meghan are undeniably linked, not just by their familial ties but by the unique power inherent in their positions—a power rooted uniquely in their privilege. They may not have the direct power of enacting laws, like other female political figures within the United Kingdom, but like the rest of the royal family they maintain an access to the public sphere which grants them significant cultural influence. In its indirectness and passivity, this access is almost a feminized form of power, and yet the cultural expectations are high: these royal figures, and especially these royal women, are meant to stand for those in charge. There's something undeniably performative about the role, for Kate and Meghan must

play the part of politicians without the legitimate capacity to act as such. Yet with their privilege comes responsibility, and the praises and criticisms heaped upon them both are only reflections of the judgements and expectations faced by their corresponding female figures in places of legitimate political power.

Of course, the similarities of Meghan's and Talisa's situations are of a limited scope, as the royal family acts no longer as a political force in the United Kingdom so much as a social symbol with little to no direct influence on the governing bodies of the nations. As we know, however, *Game of Thrones* as a cultural work displays interest in feminine power specifically in regards to the political sphere. The books themselves were inspired by European historical events, particularly the disputes between various powerful monarchies, but it's worth keeping in mind that the show is by no means solely European in nature. Though *Game of Thrones* was filmed entirely outside of the United States, and with a vast majority of European actors, it was created by two American directors and based on a series of novels by an American writer, largely intended for the American audience of HBO. Thus, there's no separating the show from its deeply Americanized roots. It might be easy to compare the story to the modern remnants of monarchies that spatter the European continent, but its most pressing cultural entanglements lie elsewhere, and while the contemporary political system of the United States appears, on first glance, widely dispirit from the clashes of kingdoms we see in Westeros, there's an undercurrent of American political dialogue within the scope of the narrative which cannot be overlooked. Consider this, for instance: a few months after the conclusion of *Game of Thrones'* sixth season—capped by the crowning of the infamous Cersei Lannister as the queen of Westeros—another woman in our modern, Western world was preparing herself for a position of similar esteem. The event was one projected to make history, and it did, though not in the way anybody

expected. The 2016 election marked Donald Trump as the rising president of the United States, and the final two seasons of *Game of Thrones* thusly unfolded under his reign, its amalgamation of surplus female power existing in jarring contrast to the utter male domination seen within America's highest office.

## II. Historicizing the Present

We can understand *Game of Throne's* driving narrative logic, the battle over the Iron Throne, as performing what Jane Tompkins refers to as cultural work. Tompkins sees "plots and characters as providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions."[87] While Tompkins offers readings of sentimental literature and *Game of Thrones* is a historical fantasy adapted as a filmed drama, her sense of the way in which fictional narratives take up social and cultural conflicts allows us to understand the stakes of the gendered fight for the Iron Throne as a statement about the present possibilities of power for women. Fredric Jameson shares with Tompkins this sense of how fictional narratives do not operate in an isolated sphere of culture but instead respond to and think about important conflicts appearing contemporary with these narratives. In Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) he argues that "the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction."[88] In dramatic fashion, *Game of Thrones* is entirely

[87] Jane P. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: the Cultural Work of American Fiction: 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 200.
[88] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 77.

organized around offering up a resolution to a conflict, a conflict that is intrinsically linked to gender and power and contemporary perceptions of women as viable politicians.

Critics frequently compare the female protagonists of *Game of Thrones* to real life historical queens throughout the world; for instance, Cersei Lannister has been brought into comparison with Empress Dowager Cixi of China from the late 1800s. However, as Elena Woodacre argues, "[this] is not a direct reflection of the premodern past but a distorted mirror—we cannot simply and easily equate one to the other. Cersei and Daenerys are like all of the many examples of premodern female regents and monarchs, but their paths to the Iron Throne are not exactly analogous to any of these historical women."[89] All the same, many critics manage to find many valuable takeaways regarding female power in the medieval era through their comparisons.[90] Yet if *Game of Thrones* is utilizing medievalism to comment on our contemporary world as I discussed in chapter one, wouldn't it be just as apt (or even more so) to compare these characters to our modern female political figures instead, especially considering that it was in our modern age in which these characters were crafted and brought to life, and modern viewers who responded so powerfully to their stories?

Of course, there are complications in these comparisons which do not exist (or else take on different forms) when one compares *Game of Thrones* women to medieval women. For one, modern women publicly run for and are democratically elected to positions of power, whereas in *Game of Thrones* power is garnered not through public vote so much as war, birth, or complicated political maneuverings. Additionally, sexism nowadays tends to reveal itself in

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[89] Elena Woodacre. "Afterword: Playing, Winning, and Losing the Game of Thrones—Reflections on Female Succession in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* in Comparison to the Premodern Era," 244-45.

[90] For some of these arguments, see the other essays in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire."*

much subtler ways, whereas the women of Westeros struggle to obtain power overtly because of their gender. There's also more racial diversity in our modern political figures than in the show, which introduces another complicated factor in terms of how these figures are publicly perceived and the social hurdles they must jump through. All the same, *Game of Thrones* is doubtlessly a show with one of the largest and most diverse array of female political figures as has been seen on television, and the placement of women in politics is one of our most pressing modern questions. The House elections of 2018 had the year deemed the 'Year of the Woman,' with a record number of women elected to office (likely as a direct response to Trump's election), and more female candidates than ever before ran for president in the 2020 American presidential primaries. Perhaps most significantly, this past January Kamala Harris became the first woman and the first person of color to be elected Vice President of the United States after Hillary Clinton's failure to break the barrier as the first female president in 2016. *Game of Thrones* reached such unprecedented popularity during this past decade for a reason, and its cast of ambitious female characters in a genre so utterly lacking in them is an element of this that cannot be overlooked. The political woman, in whatever form she takes, is a figure on the forefront of the American conscious.

If there is any American political woman who has existed most blatantly in the public eye, it's Hillary Clinton herself, who even before her presidential bid had perhaps one of the most impressive political backgrounds of any American politician. She served as the United States' First Lady for eight years, a senator of New York for another eight, and the Secretary of State for four, only to drop almost entirely out of the political sphere following her defeat to Trump. Thus, just as Queen Cersei was rising to power—after spending many years in Westeros' political circles herself, as King Robert's queen consort and her sons' queen regent—Hillary

Clinton was falling from her own. The parallels may have been all the more apparent had Clinton won the presidency as nearly every poll predicted, but even as things are, Cersei and Clinton have striking (if unintentional) similarities in regards to their public perception as women of ambition. For one, Hillary Clinton was undoubtedly one of the most passionately hated political candidates in living memory, rivaled only by her opponent. In a Gallup poll on the eve of Trump's election, Trump and Clinton had the worst and second-worst score in presidential polling history, with 52% of people polled viewing Clinton unfavorably and 39% highly unfavorably (as compared to 61% and 42% for Trump).[91] This public hatred of Clinton, while it may have reached fruition during the 2016 election, was many decades in the making, and while it's certainly not entirely the result of misogyny—she, like Cersei, has her own share of scandals and controversy behind her—there's no question that sexism has dogged Clinton's political career since its onset, both within the media and throughout public discourse. As studies suggest, one of the primary tactics used against Clinton, particularly during the 2016 campaign, was the process of 'bitchification,'or the invoking of the sexist 'bitch' stereotype in order to foster an image of Clinton which emphasizes her unlikability, untrustworthiness, and otherwise manipulative and controlling nature—a form of vilification not unlike that which Cersei contends with within the narrative of *Game of Thrones*.[92] On top of the sexism faced by Clinton in more traditional media, widespread memes—many suspected as part of a targeted Russian social media campaign in favor of Trump's election—influenced the cultural conversation using humor

[91] Lydia Saad, "Trump and Clinton Finish With Historically Poor Images," Gallup.com (Gallup, March 23, 2021), https://news.gallup.com/poll/197231/trump-clinton-finish-historically-poor-images.aspx.
[92] Kristen Erichsen et al., "Bitchifying Hillary: Trump Supporters' Vilification of Clinton during the 2016 Presidential Election," *Social Currents* 7, no. 6 (2020): pp. 526-542, https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496520941022.

and exaggerated imagery to paint Clinton as "crooked, evil, and dangerous for America."[93] Even the popular sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* played a role in its many humorous (and, typically, unflattering) depictions of Clinton throughout the decades. In one sketch from 2013, the fuming Hillary Clinton, as played by Amy Poehler, stands on a podium and announces furiously: "I didn't want a woman to be president. *I* wanted to be president, and I just happened to be a woman!" (3:36)—a remarkably similar attitude as often expressed by Cersei throughout the show, as discussed in the previous chapter.[94] In these ways, Clinton and Cersei, despite being uniquely powerful women, are both culturally deprived of the opportunity to function as feminist symbols by the narratives that surround and define them, as discourse suggests that they don't fight for women's rights, merely their own. What the narrative framing of *Game of Thrones* did for Cersei, media accomplished for Hillary Clinton.

Clinton's electoral loss may have been considered by many a 'feminist defeat' to the all-consuming power of public misogyny, but Cersei's crowning was by no means a 'feminist victory' within or outside the confines of the show. For one, Cersei as a character is almost universally despised—in *Game of Thrones*, nearly every politically powerful female character takes a direct stance against her (not to mention the vast majority of the unnamed civilians), and among the viewership she doesn't fare much better. In a poll of *Game of Thrones* fans by Huffpost, more than 40% voted Cersei Lannister their most hated character following the death of her psychotic son Joffrey in season four, and as the seasons progress Cersei only further

[93] Rebecca Coates Nee and Mariana De Maio, "A 'Presidential Look'? An Analysis of Gender Framing in 2016 Persuasive Memes of Hillary Clinton," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 63, no. 2 (March 2019): pp. 304-321, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2019.1620561.
[94] *Sarah Palin and Hillary Address the Nation*, *YouTube* (Saturday Night Live, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSOLz1YBFG0.

solidifies herself as the show's central villain.[95] Of course, this hate is not for no good reason; Cersei's goals often directly oppose those of our more popular protagonists, and in her quest for power she commits atrocity after atrocity with little remorse. As some critics point out, however, she's hardly the only one. "Most of the show's fan-favorite characters have resorted to murder and brutality at one time or another," writes Laura Hudson. "Yet these characters remain beloved and largely perceived as heroic, because we see their motivations and situations as complicated and sympathetic."[96] When Arya feeds a man his own murdered sons, the viewers cheer her on, but Cersei's acts of increasing desperation to seize and hold onto power (violent as they often are) garner her little support and, more often than not, outright vitriol.

Unlike the numerous psychopathic characters *Game of Thrones* introduces (Joffrey Lannister, Ramsey Bolton, and Euron Greyjoy, among numerous others), there's no doubt that Cersei *does* have motivation that spans beyond the purely evil. In fact, much of it is rooted in her gendered suffering within an unapologetically patriarchal society. As Lindsey Mantoan explains, "Cersei's thirst for power has always been wrapped up in her quest for autonomy and the ability to make decisions about her own body," and this ultimately culminates in Cersei attempting to take control of the social structures which have diminished and objectified her all her life.[97] From a feminist perspective, Cersei may not be a hero but she's certainly a victim, one whose immoral actions serve as a furious expression of the suffering experienced by not just Cersei but every

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[95] Erin Whitney, "Cersei Is Officially The Most Hated Character On 'Game Of Thrones,'" HuffPost, December 7, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/game-of-thrones-cersei_n_5280773.
[96] Laura Hudson, "In Defense of Cersei Lannister" (Vulture, July 14, 2017), https://www.vulture.com/2017/07/cersei-lannister-a-defense-game-of-thrones.html.
[97] Lindsey Mantoan, "Raven: Cersei," in *Vying for the Iron Throne: Essays on Power, Gender, Death and Performance in HBO's Game of Thrones* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland et Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018), 141.

woman like her. "Viewers can condemn Cersei, if they like," writes Alyssa Rosenberg, "But their moralizing seems hollow if they don't also condemn the people and the systems that made her who she is"—for it's these systems that have stripped Cersei of the bodily agency which, Mantoan argues, she has dedicated her entire political career to earning back, sacrificing her moral sensibilities in the process.[98] It's interesting to note that Cersei's narrative end is marked not by maniacal laughter or a bout of vengeful fury, but tears of helplessness and terror—feelings that have functioned as the bedrock to her villainy from the beginning. Ultimately, unlikable or otherwise, Cersei is a tragic figure indicative of the damaging psychological effects of gender-based oppression. Even her claim to authority is yet another aspect of that tragedy, in that it comes at the expense of the three children she once lived for, and serves as a turning point in Cersei's descent into paranoia and total madness—marked by the abandonment of even her beloved twin. She's no feminist idol, but her story certainly has anti-patriarchal undertones all the same. Perhaps the same could be said for Clinton?

The hatred of women in politics is by no means limited to these two figures. In fact, pretty much every political or professional woman is subject to the limitations of what is commonly referred to as the 'double bind.' As Kathleen Hall Jamieson defines it: "Women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent, unfeminine," with unfemininity being firmly linked to unlikeability.[99] Jamieson's explanation of the double bind enables us to understand why women in politics are punished both for fitting into

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[98] Alyssa Rosenberg, "What Would a Feminist Ending for 'Game of Thrones' Actually Look like?," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, May 10, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/10/what-would-feminist-ending-game-thrones-actually-look-like/.

[99] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16.

the standards of womanhood and for failing to, trapped by expectations which damn them either way. This dilemma can be further understood through the analysis of gender-based stereotypes which follow political women throughout their careers and otherwise pervade modern life. One study compared the stereotypes of women in general with the stereotypes of female politicians, only to discover that they don't overlap much at all. As it explains, "female politicians are defined more by their deficits than their strengths. In addition to failing to possess the strengths associated with being women (e.g., sensitive or compassionate), female politicians lack leadership, competence, and masculine traits in comparison to male politicians. They are, however, associated with several negative traits (e.g., uptight, dictatorial, ambitious)… in short, female politicians seem to be 'losing' on male stereotypical qualities while also not having any advantage on qualities typical of women."[100] Thus, the double bind becomes even more damning; any women who engages in politics is at risk for being labeled both incompetent *and* unlikeable, failing on both ends of the spectrum. As we can see, the conversation is less about how women in politics are in reality than how they are perceived to be—which, as studies suggest, is considerably more negatively than their male and non-political counterparts. Furthermore, how women are perceived both affects and is affected by how they are represented. It's therefore worth delving into the ways that *Game of Thrones,* as such a huge cultural phenomenon in the United States in particular, decides to represent women in power, and how this might correlate with the ways our modern female political figures are publicly viewed and discussed.

[100] Monica C. Schneider and Angela L. Bos, "Measuring Stereotypes of Female Politicians," *Political Psychology* 35, no. 2 (June 2013): pp. 245-266, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12040, 260-261.

Take, for instance, one study on how the media portrays women in politics—portrayals which just as easily apply to female political figures in *Game of Thrones*. In her book, Rosabeth Moss Kanter identifies four stereotypes—seductress or sex object, mother, pet or child, and iron maiden[101]—specifically associated with professional women, and Diane Carlin and Kelly Winfrey bring these stereotypes into a political setting by exploring how they each might apply to two female candidates during the 2008 U.S. presidential election: Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. Though, in terms of media coverage, both candidates could be matched to each stereotype to some degree, there was a clear difference in the overall extent. For instance, while both dealt with unfair scrutiny as mothers, Palin was highly sexualized, whereas Clinton was an 'antiseductress'; and whereas Palin was often painted as childlike, in need of protection and with questionable competence, Clinton was ridiculed and/or despised for her masculine traits, as typical of the 'iron maiden.'[102] Both women clearly dealt with sexism in the ways they were discussed and perceived, though—because of their obvious personal differences—this sexism itself took on differing forms within the cultural dialogue.

As Carlin and Winfrey write, "some [stereotypes], such as mother or sex object, do provide some positives that can offset the more negative iron maiden image. However, achieving the delicate balance is difficult for any woman" (338), and that's exemplified in a corresponding pair of female political rivals in *Game of Thrones*: Cersei and Margaery. Like Clinton, Cersei largely suffers from these stereotypes due to her correlation with the iron maiden; like Palin, Margaery tends to somewhat benefit because of her associations with the sex object, the child,

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[101] Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 233-236.
[102] Diana B. Carlin and Kelly L. Winfrey, "Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 4 (2009): pp. 326-343, https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970903109904.

and even the mother.[103] What distinguishes Margaery from Palin is that in *Game of Thrones* we see that the depicted society is not applying these stereotypes to her; rather, Margaery utilizes them for her own benefit. This can be best seen in her seduction and manipulation of her child-husbands Joffrey and Tommen, in which she alternatively utilizes the child, the mother, and the sex object stereotypes depending on which best suits her needs. For Joffrey, Margaery often feigns the ignorance and helplessness of the child, in one scene telling him, "The subtleties of politics are often lost on me" (S3, E2) and coaxing him to teach her how to use his crossbow. For Tommen, conversely, she allures him through more gentle, childlike behaviors, leaning into the façade of innocence: sneaking into his room at night, sharing secrets, and delighting in his kitten. Later on in their marriage, she also behaves more motherly or seductively as she attempts to groom him for her benefit. Thus, Margaery demonstrates the ways in which these harmful, sexist stereotypes might be twisted to one's political advantage—though it's questionable at best whether these strategies might ever be utilized by real political women in ways that benefit their campaigns, for they are tasked with winning over educated voters rather than clueless husbands.

It's no surprise that the iron maiden is placed in opposition to the sex object, pet, and mother in that they represent opposite extremes of the double bind—the iron maiden favoring competency over femininity, and the others favoring femininity over competency. Margaery, as the vastly more feminine of the two characters, is viewed favorably by both the general populace of King's Landing and the viewers, whereas Cersei's increasing vilification seems to correlate with the gradual shedding of her femininity in favor of political esteem over the course of several

[103] Though childless herself, she manages to fulfil the positive, nurturing aspect of the mother through her sweet interactions with impoverished children on the street, whereas Cersei only fulfils the negative stereotypes of the 'overbearing mother.'

seasons.[104] Yet, even as *Game of Thrones* falls into these stereotypes, it also subverts them: Margaery actually demonstrates her competence *through* her femininity, which she uses to manipulate the people and situations around her, whereas the farther Cersei strays from traditional femininity the clearer it becomes that she's not as competent as her demeanor would suggest. "I don't mistrust you because you're a woman," her father Tywin tells her, "I mistrust you because you're not as clever as you think" (S3, E4), and he's later proven right by the narrative when Cersei develops into merely "a short-sighted tyrant in skirts," making choices that all but doom her reign to failure.[105] Margaery's ability to demonstrate both femininity and competence while using these stereotypes to her ultimate advantage might suggest that she has somehow achieved the "delicate balance" suggested by Carlin and Winfrey, yet it's worth noting how her story comes to fruition—with a violent murder, as Cersei finally steps fully into the role of iron maiden. Margaery ultimately does not solve the paradox of woman and power, for her strategic likeability cannot, in the end, compensate for a lack of genuine political respect. The audience knows what she is capable of, but the general populace of *Game of Thrones* certainly does not. "Knowledge is power," the manipulative Littlefinger tells Cersei, and after terrifying him with his near execution upon her command, Cersei replies, "Power is power" (S2, E1). Margaery, for all her cunning, lacks a very necessary quality as found in some of her counterparts more akin to the iron maiden, and which ultimately leads to her inability to defend herself against Cersei's explosive display of authority. As Lady Olenna sums it up, "I can't

[104] Climaxing with her sitting on the Iron Throne with short hair, in gowns that look increasingly like armor.

[105] Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun. "Westerosi Queens: Medievalist Portrayal of Female Power and Authority in *A Song of Ice and Fire*." In Z. Rohr & L. Benz, *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire."* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 57.

remember a queen who was better loved than my granddaughter… And what is left of her now? Ashes... They won't obey you unless they fear you" (S7, E2). This respect—which Olenna suggests is rooted in fear but not in love—is a crucial element of successful female rule.

In many ways, the cultural contradictions inherent within political femininity can be said to originate with the historical association with men and government, to the ultimate (and purposeful) exclusion of women, as elucidated by modern state theory. In Wendy Brown's *States of Injury,* Brown makes a strong claim for the "masculinism of the state," or else the features of government which "signify, enact, sustain, and represent masculine power as a form of dominance."[106] If Freud's tale of the 'band of brothers' as discussed in chapter two marked the birth of human civilization, then it also represented the beginnings of the political bodies which govern these societies, and thus, as Brown argues, "the state is an insignia of the extent to which politics between men are always already the politics of exchanging, violating, protecting, and regulating women; the one constitutes the imperatives of the other" (188). In this way, female power appears to stand in sharp contrast to the government as an institution, and even women who attempt to engage in the government as figures of power are still ultimately working within a system designed to oppress and control them. Thus, there is an argument that in order to truly end the political patriarchy, simply electing women isn't enough—the structures themselves must be challenged, toppled, and perhaps built anew. The world we have is simply too entrenched within patriarchal systems of power to exist outside of them, and 'starting from scratch' seems the best assurance that no patriarchal impulses remain. This is a highly ambitious goal, however, and one that certainly has no chance at coming to fruition if men retain all seats

[106] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 167.

of power and women themselves remain civically voiceless; therefore, electing women is still one of the best tools we have at our disposal to challenge such institutional masculinism, if only it weren't so difficult. Because the government is so tied to masculinity, politics themselves are often associated with men and manhood, and this association grows only stronger the higher the office.[107] Thus, women face a greater barrier in being elected, government remains a male-dominated space, and the issue becomes a self-fueling cycle. Clinton and Cersei, in both desiring the highest positions of power available to them—the American presidency and the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, respectively—are particularly vulnerable to scrutiny, and their double bind is twice as tight.

One major difference between these female figures of power is that, while Clinton's major opponent in 2016 was a man infamous for his sexism (including numerous allegations of sexual assault), Cersei's was another woman, and a feminist figure at that: Daenerys Targaryen. Thus, Cersei's eventual loss to Daenerys need not be considered the feminist defeat that Clinton's was—or, at least, not until one considers that Daenerys did not end up on the throne either. Rather, she concluded her arc as a villain analogous to Cersei, such that both women died and Bran Stark took on the mantle of leadership in their stead. Bran, of course, is no Donald Trump, and there's much to be said regarding the significance of a physically disabled leader—and a man with dwarfism, Tyrion, as his second-in-command—in a world as blatantly ableist as Westeros. In fact, there's a lot of hope nestled into his kingship, for as a man in a wheelchair he strongly fosters a resemblance to Prince Doran of Dorne, suggesting that the pre-modern Westeros might be moving in the direction of social advancement, towards Dorne's modern

[107] Karrin Vasby Anderson, "Presidential Pioneer or Campaign Queen?: Hillary Clinton and the First-Timer/Frontrunner Double Bind," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 20, no. 3 (2017): p. 525–529, https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.20.3.0525.

utopia as discussed in chapter two. As Brown writes in her reflection on gender in society, "The powerful are… discursively normalized, naturalized, while the dominated [including women] appear as mutants, disabled" (167). In this way, women are linked to the eunuchs, the bastards, the physically or mentally handicapped, and any of the 'othered' groups in Westerosi society which *Game of Thrones* devotes significant attention to. Thus, the increased rights of one of these groups might be counted as a win for them all.[108]

*Game of Thrones* itself makes these connections; "I've heard it said that poison is a women's weapon," says Ser Rodrik over the poisoning of the current Hand of the King, John Arryn. "Women, cravens, and eunuchs" (S1, E4), he adds, while also indicating the dwarf Tyrion as a possible suspect. Here, the kind of power utilized by women and the othered groups is not only differentiated from the normative but specifically indicated as lesser, the inclusion of 'cravens' suggesting it a more cowardly, less honorable, and therefore more vilified approach. There's a suggestion of untrustworthiness inherent in these groups and the way they accumulate power which make them less deserving of it. Bran and Tyrion eventually achieving power through fair election somewhat challenges this perception, though not in all cases—it's worth noting that poison remains continually associated with womanhood throughout the show, particularly in regards to the women of Dorne (who themselves prove unforgivably duplicitous). Thus, the experiences and representations of each of these othered groups within Westeros is still vastly distinct, and there's so much nuance lost in lumping them together solely for their shared persecution. So, we must ask ourselves: in a show where so many women have fought the

[108] It's worth noting that despite a wide array of disabled male characters, there are significantly fewer disabled female characters—limited mainly to the tragic Princess Shireen, despised by her own mother due to a facial deformity, and a temporary blindness experienced by Arya which only serves to increase her other senses. Though *Game of Thrones* represents individuals in these othered categories, it fails to explore the ways these othering identities might intersect.

bounds of their oppression to the point where they make up the majority of the contenders for the throne, what does it mean that these female figures get so close to that ultimate power only to lose out? And perhaps more significantly: what does it say (intentionally or otherwise) that our two main female political figures end the show as villainous reflections of one another?

Ultimately, any discussion of Cersei and Daenerys is incomplete without the consideration of what has always bound them together, and which further connects them to female figures in our reality: their political ambition. Daenerys may have gone from a hero to a villain over the course of a single season, but this transformation isn't unique; in fact, even Clinton herself was once largely positively-received by the public. After four years acting as Secretary of State in 2013, she had a remarkable approval rating of 69%, making her the most popular politician in the country—yet, considering how hated she was during the 2016 election, how could this possibly be? [109] As Sady Doyle explains, the pattern is simple: Clinton is most popular when she's working in politics, and least popular when she's campaigning to be, and this has remained true across the decades of her political career. As Doyle further elucidates: "It's not her success that seems to arouse ire, but the act of campaigning itself… We can accept women in power, but not women's desire for more of it."[110] This might partially explain the hatred of Cersei's character, who has been looking for ways to increase her own authority since the beginning of the narrative. "Instead of recognizing the trauma Cersei has endured as inextricably linked to her drive for power," writes Lindsey Mantoan, "Fans find Cersei's grasping as off-

[109] Patrick O'Connor, "Hillary Clinton Exits With 69% Approval Rating," The Wall Street Journal (Dow Jones & Company, January 17, 2013), https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-WB-37467.
[110] Sady Doyle, "America Loves Women like Hillary Clinton–as Long as They're Not Asking for a Promotion," Quartz (Quartz), accessed April 21, 2021, https://qz.com/624346/america-loves-women-like-hillary-clinton-as-long-as-theyre-not-asking-for-a-promotion/.

putting—because ambition remains outside the realm of acceptable female behavior" (141). There's something particularly damning about Cersei's situation, in which her villainy seems to spring directly from her victimhood, thus redirecting much of the blame owed to her abusers to Cersei herself. Conversely, Daenerys spends multiple seasons acting as a leader in Meereen, and her choices—while often difficult—are largely framed as sympathetic. Her villain arc doesn't begin to kick into action until she leaves Meereen behind in order to fulfil her ultimate ambition of ruling Westeros. One study from 2009 found that power-seeking women were seen as less competent and less communal than other women, whereas power-seeking men were seen as more competent and not any less communal than other men. In this case, communality refers to key traits such as supportiveness, sensitivity, and caring; because power-seeking women were seen as lacking in these traits, they provoked stronger feelings of 'moral outrage' in both men and women than their male or non-power-seeking counterparts. As the study further hypothesizes, "The presence of moral-emotional and avoidant reactions (moral outrage reactions of contempt, disdain, anger, irritation, disapproval, disgust, and revulsion) suggest that the power-seeking aspirations of the female politician were not just unexpected but also 'wrong.'"[111] Thus, there appears to be a clear tendency for the public to villainize women who express ambition, particularly of the political variety, and to perceive the act of having ambition as a woman as immoral in and of itself.

And these feelings do have an unignorable historical basis. As Mary Beard writes regarding the culture of Ancient Greece, from which much of our modern democracy stems: "For the most part, [women] are portrayed as abusers rather than users of power. They take it

[111] Victoria L. Brescoll and Tyler Okimoto, "The Price of Power: Power-Seeking and Backlash Against Female Politicians," *PsycEXTRA Dataset,* 2010, https://doi.org/10.1037/e506052012-245.

illegitimately, in a way that leads to chaos, to the fracture of the state, to death and destruction. They are monstrous hybrids, who are not, in the Greek sense, women at all" (57). Because of the innate separation between women and power, women who chase power risk abandoning their womanhood, which is often considered a moral failing in a society so innately gendered as our own. As discussed in chapter two, our modern society is ruled by the deployment of sexuality to a similar extant as medieval society was ruled by the deployment of alliance, and there's an undeniable moral value tied to one's ability to follow these unspoken social guidelines, which includes maintaining the distinct gendered split once enforced by kinship. The sense of moral failing in one's inability to do so is thus reflected in the stories we tell about political women (Medea, Clytemnestra, and Antigone in Ancient Greece, Cersei and Daenerys in contemporary America) who utilize their powers so wrongly.

However, this isn't necessarily always the case, especially not within our modern world. One study on the perception of female managers found that, while their success typically causes them to be negatively perceived as selfish, deceitful, and cold, these feelings could be counteracted if the woman in question demonstrated clear signs of communality.[112] This is an explanation for why Cersei and Daenerys were perceived so differently throughout the majority of *Game of Thrones*, despite both being obvious examples of ambitious women. It's also clearly an intentional decision by the writers, for Cersei is, by-design, a character to be despised, and Daenerys one to be empathized with and rooted for. While Cersei's choices have only ever benefitted herself or her family, Daenerys has always ruled from an obvious place of empathy, liberating slaves and fighting for the common people to the point where her communality seemed

[112] Madeline E. Heilman and Tyler G. Okimoto, "Why Are Women Penalized for Success at Male Tasks?: The Implied Communality Deficit.," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92, no. 1 (2007): pp. 81-92, https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.1.81.

to override her personal ambition. As Tyrion describes it, "Daenerys could have sailed for Westeros long ago. But she didn't. Instead she stayed where she was and saved many people from horrible fates" (S7, E3)—and that's a large part of her appeal as a leader. However, the farther the story progresses along Daenerys' arc, the more people she ends up killing in her quest for dominance, and the more the audience begins to doubt her communality, despite the fact that her self-proclaimed motives never waver. In making this so, the writers seem to ask their viewers to question their own complicity in their previous condoning of her ambition, re-examining what ever made her a more acceptable figure of female power than her more distrusted counterparts. When Daenerys finally burns down King's Landing, murdering hundreds of innocents, all chances of her communality are gone, and she becomes no different than the selfishly ambitious Cersei. And what, exactly, happened to get her to this point? Hundreds of thousands of *Game of Thrones* fans are still asking that question to this day.

### III. Political Femininity Gone Mad

It's no secret that the long-awaited finale to the critically-acclaimed television series that was *Game of Thrones* was not well-received by the majority of its international audiences—to the overwhelming extent that a petition for HBO to remake the final season has received nearly two million signatures and counting.[113] Since the last episode aired, a number of competing factors have been blamed for this unfortunate outcome: the shortened season, disengaged directors, sloppy writing, filming mistakes, and—perhaps more than anything—unsatisfying conclusions to the arcs of numerous fan-favorite characters, none more controversial that that of

[113] "Remake Game of Thrones Season 8 with Competent Writers.," Change.org, accessed April 21, 2021, https://www.change.org/p/hbo-remake-game-of-thrones-season-8-with-competent-writers.

Daenerys. After beginning her arc as an unwilling bride and an adolescent rape victim, audiences watch as Daenerys manages to transform herself from a figure of helplessness and passivity to one of agency and power—and that's just in the first season. Over the course of several more, Daenerys becomes a fiercer and fiercer political force, time and again overcoming figures of patriarchal oppression and distributing feminist justice. As critic Elizabeth Beaton writes, "The triumphs and bold maneuvers of exceptional women within a ruthless, patriarchal world provide a kind of feminist pleasure,"[114] and in no case is this more evident than with Daenerys, who almost seems designed to elicit this exact reaction. To many viewers, particularly women who have been subject to gender-based abuse themselves, Daenerys' journey is one of extreme catharsis, and many expected that emotional satisfaction to reach its climax once Daenerys achieved what has been her goal since season one: sitting on the Iron Throne, symbolic of ultimate power. For a woman to end up sitting rightfully on that throne would've been a direct statement against the cultural contradictions of woman and power; it would've said not only that woman and power *can* coexist, but that they *should*. Had this been the ending, *Game of Thrones* might've told a classic feminist fantasy of a single woman rising from oppression and overcoming patriarchal institutions, only to overturn them for the benefit of all womankind. In this way, Daenerys was not just a political woman but the very symbol of female equality in the political realm, promising to challenge the inherent masculinism of the state by uprooting it at its source.[115]

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[114] Elizabeth Beaton, "Female Machiavellians in Westeros." In *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones and Multiple Media Engagements.* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 211-212.

[115] Especially in comparison to Cersei, who would only utilize it to better oppress her female adversaries.

But, of course, that's not what happened. *Game of Thrones* is well known for its narrative subversions, and this was no different—neither Daenerys, nor Cersei, nor the more traditional fantasy hero, Jon Snow, ended up on the throne, despite being the top three contenders. Rather, the narrative placed that honor on the Stark's youngest living child: the strange, narratively underutilized,[116] and not particularly well-liked Bran Stark. Though much of the audience pushback centered around this decision, the passion it provoked was not nearly to the extent of the events that proceeded it: namely, the destruction of King's Landing by the Mad Queen Daenerys, and her resulting execution by her lover, Jon. For the many viewers who saw Daenerys as a feminist hero—including the hundreds of parents who named their infant daughters after her[117]—her madness seemed to come out of nowhere, unfolding over just a couple episodes and completely destroying her character in the process. This, however, was by no means a universal opinion; those who disliked Daenerys, or otherwise saw her madness coming for seasons, felt vindicated, insisting that the foreshadowing had been there since the beginning.[118] Others found the narrative subversion excusable or even clever, but recognized that the implementation itself left much to be desired. "That *Game of Thrones'* final stretch has been badly written and badly paced should not obscure that the overall story is still doing interesting work," writes critic Willa Paskin, "Forcing invested viewers into all sorts of morally awkward

[116] Bran was in fact entirely absent from Season Five of *Game of Thrones,* in favor of more narratively pertinent story arcs. This, alongside a writing choice that stripped him almost entirely of his personality, made his ascension to the throne feel emotionally unsatisfying to many.
[117] Jack Shepherd, "Game of Thrones: Parents Who Named Their Children Khaleesi Respond to Daenerys Becoming The Mad Queen," The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, May 14, 2019), https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/game-thrones-khaleesi-daenerys-children-name-season-8-mad-queen-a8913046.html.
[118] Renaldo Matadeen, "Daenerys Targaryen Is Game of Thrones' Greatest Villain," CBR, May 14, 2019, https://www.cbr.com/daenerys-targaryen-game-of-thrones-villain/.

positions… [and] keeping with the larger moral lessons of the series."[119] Paskin has a point—in many ways, the question of whether the conclusion to Daenerys' arc is 'good writing,' or whether or not it was the 'correct' ending for her character, is irrelevant. What matters is *why* her arc concluded in that way at all, and what exact 'moral lessons' the show was attempting to propagate in doing so. However, as Paskin continues: "*Game of Thrones* is way ahead of us in having women in positions of actual authority, and this means that Dany's madwoman arc does not have to stand in for all women everywhere." Doesn't it? Daenerys is certainly not the only female political force in the show, but she is by far the most prominent (rivaled only by Cersei), and it's difficult to separate her from her gendered roots or from the larger contemporary discussions of female power which she has provoked. But perhaps it all depends on the intentions: what was *Game of Thrones* attempting to accomplish through that narrative choice? More specifically, what was it saying about women in power, and how might it have been responding to existing cultural dialogue?

The audience reactions to Daenerys' arc are testament to the popularity (and the controversial nature) of the character. To *Game of Thrones* viewers, Daenerys tends to alternate between two extreme polarities: from a liberator and feminist icon with her own dedicated fan-base, to a white savior, a hysterical woman, or simply an entitled bitch (with a particularly virulent community of critics on a popular social networking site called Reddit). Even within *Game of Thrones,* Daenerys clearly inspires a wide range of reactions to an extent that few other characters can match. She's idolized nearly to the point of Godhood among the slaves she frees, as exemplified in an infamous scene in which she is physically raised up by them in a show of

[119] Willa Paskin, "Daenerys Doesn't Need to Be a Feminist Hero," Slate Magazine (Slate, May 13, 2019), https://slate.com/culture/2019/05/game-of-thrones-daenerys-feminist-hero.html.

gratitude (and which has, rightfully, earned her this 'white savior' title), whereas the slave masters, the Dothraki leaders, and other powerful men repeatedly belittle or demonize her with sexualized language like "horselord's slut" (S1, E4), "ignorant whore" (S3, E1), or "dragon bitch" (S3, E8). This hatred, however, isn't just sexual in nature—much of it derives from what Daenerys stands for, not just a political woman but one who loudly proclaims herself an opponent to the status quo and those who find themselves empowered by it, for her entire reign is designed to challenge and upturn the oppressive systems (namely, slavery) upon which their privilege depends. As Cersei herself describes it, "She considers herself more of a revolutionary than a monarch" (S7, E3), and that's a large part of both her appeal as a leader to some (the powerless), and her lack of appeal to others (the powerful). U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren, known for her radically progressive policies, even wrote an Op-Ed praising Daenerys' revolutionary tactics in opposition to Cersei's reinforcement of the economic status-quo,[120] for in Westeros and in our world alike Daenerys has come to stand for radical social change, both within and outside the bounds of traditional feminism.

And this feminism is, like everything else, imperfect. "There is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just," writes feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, "We have to hesitate, to temper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure. A feminist movement that proceeds with too much confidence has cost us too much already" (7)—and Daenerys, if nothing else, is a character with an unwavering belief in herself and her values, which utterly blinds her to when these values begin to fail her (and endanger others). Daenerys' former advisor, Tyrion, defines these same fears when he tells

[120] Elizabeth Warren, "The World Needs Fewer Cersei Lannisters," The Cut (The Cut, April 21, 2019), https://www.thecut.com/2019/04/elizabeth-warren-review-game-of-thrones-season-8.html.

Jon Snow, "Everywhere she goes, evil men die, and we cheer her for it. And she grows more powerful and more sure that she is good and right. She believes her destiny is to build a better world for everyone. If you truly believed that, wouldn't you kill whoever stood between you and paradise?" (S8, E6). If Daenerys is a feminist (or leftist) hero, then her eventual breakdown can be read as a critique of the feminist (or leftist) movement, and the dangers it might pose when left morally and intellectually unchecked. And not to say that these concerns are entirely invalid,[121] but the sexist tropes utilized by *Game of Thrones* in its attempts to represent them are certainly misguided at best.

In the end, *Game of Thrones* validates the most negative interpretation of Daenerys' character with her transition into the Mad Queen, and it's this claim of 'madness' which often dogs women who attempt to challenge the status-quo. Madness and femininity are historically linked, and this linkage is particularly applied when young women fail to adapt to the expected norms of womanhood,[122] of which political ambition is a prime indication. These underlying associations can be seen even within the ways in which our modern political figures are discussed; for instance, when conservative congressman Ted Yoho called congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez a "fucking bitch" who was "out of her freaking mind" in front of the Capitol Hill.[123] In many ways, *Game of Thrones* seems to draw a direct linkage between female ambition and female madness with the figures of Daenerys' dragons, which at times come to

[121] Though they do express the common alt-right fears of female liberalism, defined by their vilification of liberal female figures.
[122] Michaela D. Meyer, Amy M. Fallah, and Megan M. Wood, "Gender, Media, and Madness: Reading a Rhetoric of Women in Crisis Through Foucauldian Theory," *Review of Communication* 11, no. 3 (2011): pp. 216-228, https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.578254.
[123] Daisy Maldonado, "How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Is Shaping Gen Z Feminism," StyleCaster (October 13, 2020), https://stylecaster.com/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-gen-z-feminism/.

symbolize both, as if these qualities exist along the same sliding scale. This can be seen especially under the consideration of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 'monster theory,' which explores how the monstrous body "incorporates [the] fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" of the cultural body, existing in order "to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed."[124] Daenerys' dragons are, at their most basic level, monsters, which grow and change as Daenerys moves further along in her path towards ultimate authority (and gradually becomes unhinged). To some, her dragons—as creatures which periodically invoke feelings of both awe and terror in the audience—represent weapons of mass destruction, and could be said to serve as commentary on the growing threat of nuclear war. However, it's impossible to ignore the wholly gendered elements of the dragons, which come to be associated with not just Daenerys' ambitions but those of various female characters throughout the show. Thus, in regards to Cohen's argument, a somewhat different read on them is possible: dragons, as monsters, express the shifting cultural anxiety surrounding women in positions of power, and the ways that they challenge our culturally-ingrained prejudices regarding gender.[125]

As simultaneous symbols of Daenerys' inherited Targaryen madness (specifically attributable to her father, known across Westeros as the 'Mad King' due to his violent delusions), these anxieties seem to specifically revolve around the concept of 'female hysteria,' and thus perpetuate fear and distrust of women in positions of authority. In fact, the situation is

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[124] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Theory: Reading Culture," *University of Minnesota Press*, June 1996, https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctttsq4d, 4-13

[125] It's worth mentioning that Cersei has her own monster—the reanimated Gregor Clegane, a creature reminiscent of Frankenstein's monster—which she seems to utilize as a surrogate phallus, going so far as to (possibly) rape another woman with it. It seems to reflect anxieties less around female ambition, however, and more surrounding gendered difference, as Cersei strives to achieve a fully masculine role in her leadership.

remarkably applicable to the age-old "biology is destiny" argument (often attributed to Freud) which suggests that the future of a person is determined almost solely by their genetic makeup, thus stripping away the possibilities inherent in choice and undermining humanity's freewill. Daenerys, both because of her biologically determined gender and the mythic-historical inheritability of her family's mental illness, becomes a tragic figure almost by nature. Despite aspiring to be a benevolent revolutionary, she is doomed to become an unhinged tyrant due to factors outside of her own control. In the final episode, Daenerys stands before her soldiers to give a victory speech, the wings of her last living dragon rising ominously behind her. With this striking cinematic technique, the symbolism is clear: Daenerys has been utterly consumed by her drive for power; she has *become* the monster, a figure of embodied cultural anxiety, for herself. As Cohen emphasizes, the monster always escapes, and Daenerys ends her queenly reign as a corpse carried away by the last dragon—the threat, therefore, is never quite gone, and the last mention of Daenerys' dragon is at a table of the men in power, with King Bran expressing an interest in determining its whereabouts. As the world of Westeros continues to evolve, the question of women in power (and the apprehension it invokes) is one that will exist indefinitely in the undercurrents of its political dialogue, as it will in ours.

Yet, it's worth mentioning that Daenerys is by no means the only figure of female power in *Game of Thrones*, and her dragons not the only attempt by the show to address this cultural anxiety. In no moment, perhaps, is this better demonstrated than a scene in which Daenerys holds a small council meeting with Yara Greyjoy, Ellaria Sand, and Olenna Tyrell, each a major political figure in the show who has had their own independent storyline spanning multiple

seasons and originating from a separate corner of the map.[126] This scene marks the moment that their diverse paths have finally crossed, each with the shared goal (yet distinct motive) of bringing down yet another political woman: Cersei Lannister. With so many powerful female figures being pitted against each other for so long, this is a rare moment of solidarity between some fan-favorite characters, however short-lasting (and brutally-ending). In many ways, it's highly reminiscent of another group of modern political figures: Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC)—known colloquially as 'The Squad,' and acting as some of the most progressive and diverse members of the United States House of Representatives since their election in 2018.[127] All four of these women are women of color, Omar is a Somali refugee, and she and Rashida together make up the first two Muslim women in Congress. Daenerys' small council, too, is formed of some of the most diverse political candidates within *Game of Thrones*: Olenna is the only elderly woman with a position of political power, Ellaria the only prominent woman of color, and Yara and Ellaria the only queer women. Of all of them, Daenerys holds by far the most narrative significance, thus equivocating herself, perhaps, as the AOC of the group—by far the most well-known of The Squad, and by now a household name within the United States.

In the same way that Cersei and Clinton seem to play comparative roles in their respective political spheres, so do AOC and Daenerys, in that both exist as quite polarizing yet

[126] Also significant: at this point in the story, each of these women lacks a romantic partner in a man. Thus, while previous seasons demonstrated the necessity of achieving power through ones' male relations (either husbands or sons), each of these women claims power directly for herself, outside the bounds of kinship. Even Cersei has escaped her last major tie to a man with the death of Tommen, and Sansa—one of the only politically active female figures unrelated to this grouping—once she kills Ramsey.

[127] In the House elections of 2020, two more Congresspeople of color joined the group: New York's Jamaal Bowman and Missouri's Cori Bush.

revolutionary figures due to their public stance against structurally powerful institutions (in AOC's case, unchecked capitalism). More than that, however, they've both made names for themselves as political outsiders, which draws them in sharp contrast with the political insiders, Cersei and Clinton, already discussed. This is no coincidence; alongside the femininity/competence double bind, Karrin Anderson brings up another: that of the first-timer/front-runner. As she explains, "Male 'first-timers,' like Obama in 2008 and Trump in 2016, often are viewed favorably as outsiders and credible leaders. Conversely, female 'first-timers' historically have been viewed as pioneers with symbolic appeal rather than political strength. To be taken seriously as presidential candidates, women politicians must amass significant political experience, party support, and campaign funds. Once they do that, their political strength is portrayed as antidemocratic entitlement and their presidential aspirations as a manic desire for power."[128] Thus, Cersei and Clinton become figures of entrenched political corruption, whereas Daenerys and AOC—while underestimated for their lack of experience—have some credibility in their disengagement from the systems they claim to want to upturn, yet have greater difficulty gaining the political and financial support they require in order to have any power to do so. This is what makes Daenerys' small council with the other political women, and AOC's purposeful attachment to The Squad, so necessary and significant, as by utilizing strategic alliances and garnering (non-white, female) collective power they're able to compensate for the institutional authority which is otherwise against them.

The small council scene is particularly notable in that it exists as a snapshot of a moment before a string of tragedies which results in the deaths of three of the four of these powerful

[128] Karrin Vasby Anderson, "Presidential Pioneer or Campaign Queen?: Hillary Clinton and the First-Timer/Frontrunner Double Bind," 534.

women, thus curiously undermining its own attempts to grapple with the cultural contradictions of political femininity which they each represent. In the scene, all five characters are discussing how best to defeat Cersei, and despite the many varied voices in the room there seems to exist just two opinions: one, that Daenerys use her dragons to conquer King's Landing immediately, or two, that she lay siege to the capital and secretly take Casterly Rock, in order to prevent unnecessary bloodshed. The three women who Daenerys has brought in as allies appear to act as a unified front in favor of the former position: "If you want the Iron Throne, take it," says Yara, "If you don't have the stomach for [war], scurry back into hiding," says Ellaria, and (again) from Olenna: "They won't obey you unless they fear you" (S7, E2). Of course, the individual character arcs of these women all outline their unique motives for believing so, but it's clear in each case that this motivation is firmly rooted in a dangerous level of ambition (or else a personal vendetta) rather than any real sense of communality. Notably, Tyrion—the only man among them—insists upon the latter plan, which is framed by the narrative as the more moral and, ultimately, superior approach. Daenerys, made to choose between these two opposing viewpoints, inevitably sides with Tyrion's, and they manage to convince the other women to follow suit.

On a surface level, the scene might be problematized in the way that it sets into motion a larger theme regarding the nature of male guardianship over female rule. From the beginning of her political journey, the young Daenerys has always been surrounded by older male advisors, and much of her challenge as a ruler has been over deciding which advice to follow and which to disregard. Tyrion is the final of these string of advisers, and this scene is only one instance in a pattern of his failures to successfully advise. Part of what makes the small council scene so remarkable is the fact that this is the first time in which Daenerys is surrounded by *female*

advice—of which she largely overlooks, but not exclusively. After the small council, Daenerys and Olenna talk alone, and Olenna warns her: "I've known great many clever men. I've outlived them all. You know why? I've ignored them" (S7, E2). After the disaster, Daenerys begins to take this warning to heart, culminating in her ignoring Tyrion's final plea for her to stop ravaging King's Landing when she hears the bell, burning down the city instead. Of course, this isn't framed as a feminist breakthrough so much as an emotional breakdown, and thus Daenerys is once again caught in an unwinnable situation—wrong both for listening to Tyrion and wrong for refusing to. As critic Shiloh Carroll writes: "The (probably unintentional) undertone of her storyline is that a woman's failure to listen to a man's advice, even if that advice is bad, is evidence of madness and said woman must be stopped by any means necessary, then replaced by a man"[129]—which, obviously, has some problematic connotations that might explain the bitter taste left in the mouths of the viewers following that final turn of events. Yet, this reading of the scene is complicated by the fact that Tyrion is not merely a spokesperson of the male opinion; he's actually representing a very particular approach to leadership, and Daenerys' growing distrust of him is thus representative of her shifting political mindset.

The small council scene underscores one of the central questions Daenerys has struggled to answer throughout her seasons-long journey as a ruler: is it better to be loved or to be feared by one's subjects? The question is by no means limited to female political figures; all the way back in the 1500s, Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli himself famously favored the latter. Lesser known, however, is the fact that he actually suggested both—but the balance is rather

[129] Shiloh Carroll. "Daenerys the Unready: Advice and Ruling in Meereen." In Z. Rohr & L. Benz, *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in "Game of Thrones" and "A Song of Ice and Fire."* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 180.

difficult for any one ruler to achieve.[130] Yet, while the question may seem gender-neutral, that isn't quite the case, for it takes on even greater urgency when one considers how the cultural contradictions of political femininity make love even more difficult to achieve, and love and fear almost impossible to balance given the requirement that female rulers prove their communality in order to gain approval. Thus, fear alone becomes a particularly tempting option. Margaery is a clear example of a female political figure who prioritized love (and received it) yet died for that choice all the same, whereas Cersei is a clear example of the opposite. Daenerys herself struggled actively with this balance for her entire arc, before finally toppling over in the final few episodes to join Cersei in her fate. The Machiavellian nature of the choice, and its underlying gendered elements, is even directly referenced by Daenerys in a conversation with Jon, in which she tells him, "Far more people in Westeros love you than love me. I don't have love here. I only have fear" (S8, E5). In this moment with the small council, however, Daenerys has not yet arrived at Winterfell, and still has hope that her presence will be well received. Thus, she *does* choose love despite the better judgement of three political women who know the power of fear, and is swiftly punished for it.

As Michael Tesler points out in his article, in this moment Daenerys is also directly facing the political challenge of the double bind, with aggression being linked to competency and mercy to likeability. As Tesler writes, "Much the way that gender has crept into concerns about the electability of female candidates in the 2020 Democratic primary, gender is inseparable from Tyrion's concerns about Dany's actions alienating the lords of Westeros," for his advice, "has always been aimed at winning popular support—a much tougher task for a queen than a king."[131]

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[130] Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527. *The Prince*. (NYC, N.Y: Penguin Books, 1981).
[131] Michael Tesler, "On 'Game of Thrones,' Daenerys Targaryen Faces a Sexist Double Bind - like so Many Female Leaders," The Washington Post (WP Company, May 10, 2019),

Ironically, it's Tyrion's merciful plan which leads to the greatest bloodshed: the deaths of Olenna, Ellaria, Oberyn's daughters, and countless others (especially considering that it's these deaths which put into motion Daenerys' eventual decline into isolation and madness). In aiming to retain this positive image of herself as a savior, not a conqueror—to rule from love and not fear—Daenerys inadvertently fails on all fronts: she proves her incompetence with a plan that utterly backfires, and yet still arrives at Winterfell next season as an unwelcome stranger. Because of the way the events unfold, the scene is correlating competency in queenship with ruling through fear, while suggesting an inherent incompetency in ruling through love, and thus it's no surprise that it marks a turning point for Daenerys' character. However, when she later rules through fear and not love (a choice Machiavelli himself might support), her failure is only magnified tenfold, for in doing so she reflects not masculine strength so much as feminine madness. No matter what she does or how hard she tries, Daenerys simply cannot seem to successfully resolve the cultural contradictions of political femininity in a way that also allows her to be the fair and just ruler she wants to be, and above all, *that's* the reason she breaks. In the same way that Cersei is a monster because she throws aside her femininity for a more aggressive, 'masculine' form of rule, Daenerys becomes one when she finally gives up on balancing the double bind and stops attempting to be perceived in a positive light. Thus, both Daenerys and Cersei are reflections of each other not just in villainy, but in tragedy—ultimately, neither could overcome the structural and societal barriers of political womanhood while preserving their sanity in the process.

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/10/game-thrones-daenerys-targaryen-faces-sexist-double-bind-like-so-many-women-leaders/.

Despite representing such a diverse range of female political figures, *Game of Thrones* certainly does not deviate from the ultimate cultural vilification of female ambition, if the show's conclusion is anything to go by. After Daenerys destroys King's Landing, she stands before her Dothraki and Unsullied soldiers to deliver her first blatantly villainous monologue: "The war is not over. We will not lay down our spears until we have liberated all the people of the world! From Winterfell to Dorne, from Lannisport to Qarth, from the Summer Isles to the Jade Sea! Women, men, and children have suffered too long beneath the wheel. Will you break the wheel with me?" (S8, E6). Here, it's clear that the focus within the scope of Daenerys' 'evilness' lies less in what she's already done—burn down King's Landing—than what she's *going* to do: burn down many cities more. It's her never-ending ambition, her desire not just to rule over Westeros but over the entire world, which is the greatest threat. Two seasons earlier, right before Daenerys makes a parallel speech to the Dothraki about seizing the Iron Throne, Daario tells her: "You weren't made to sit on a chair in a palace. You're a conqueror" (S6, E6). In many ways, he's proven correct, for Daenerys conquers the throne without ever actually getting to sit in it. But more than that, it speaks to Daenerys as a figure designed for *gaining* power rather than wielding it, in an endless, unreachable climb towards ultimate authority. Later, when Tyrion and Jon are having a discussion about Daenerys' fate, this is exactly what the conversation ultimately comes down to. "I can't justify what happened, but the war is over now," says Jon. "Is it?" asks Tyrion, "Does she sound like someone who is done fighting? She liberated the people of Kings Landing, and she'll go on liberating until the people of the world are free and she rules them all" (S8, E6). It's for this reason above all others that Jon decides to kill Daenerys—her crimes might be excused in isolation, but it's the threat of her unchecked ambition which is simply too great for the men to ignore.

Nevertheless, in some ways it's unfair to say that *Game of Thrones* is being blatantly sexist in this regard. Throughout the show, there have been a number of ambitious male characters who have committed crimes of equivalent if not even greater heinousness in the name of power, and been rightfully shunned for it (either by other characters or by the audience)—Stannis Baratheon burning alive his own daughter, Joffrey Lannister ordering the slaughter of his father's bastard children, and of course Walder Frey murdering the defenseless Starks. Taking the entire show into context, *Game of Thrones'* ultimate message appears to be one which warns of the dangers inherent within ambition as a whole, and the immorality it often leads to. The problem with this message, however, is that by seasons eight the only ambitious characters left are *women*. Jon actively rejects power, Bran is an emotionless husk who desires practically nothing at all,[132] Sam, Davos, and Tyrion are all accustomed to working as the right-hand-man of others more capable, and even Edmure—who makes a claim for the throne when the lords and ladies of Westeros are deciding the future of the kingdom, only to be shut down by Sansa—is depicted merely as a harmless fool. "I don't want it," Tyrion answers when Bran offers him the position of Hand; Bran replies "And I don't want to be king," and, ultimately, they both end up serving the roles they claim to have no interest in (S8, E6). Daenerys and Cersei, meanwhile, are defined by their ambitions, and both inevitably die for them. Sansa and Yara remain alive for reasons further discussed in chapter two, but which ultimately come down to the very limitations of their ambition. Neither ever makes a claim for the Iron Throne which killed so many before them—the highest office of power, where the double bind is tightest—but settle for what is reasonably attainable once there are no more male heirs to compete with. Similarly, the 2018

[132] "I don't really want anymore" Bran tells Tyrion when asked whether he wants to be Lord of Winterfell (S8, E4), a statement that goes beyond the mere political use of the phrase.

House elections may have brought an unprecedented wave of women into the political sphere, but the Oval Office hangs over them all in its unattainability thus far.

In a show brimming with so many ambitious female characters, there's something odd in *Game of Throne*'s ultimate vilification of ambition as a whole. After all, it is through ambition in which women achieve the agency to overcome oppressive circumstances, building better lives for themselves and for one another. Highborn men in *Game of Thrones* might simply 'fall into' positions of leadership they did not want or ask for, but women—or at least the vast majority of them—certainly do not. They must fight, scheme, sacrifice, and seduce for every scrap of power they have access to, and that's just the ones lucky enough to have any access at all. In these cases, ambition is not simply an advantage, but an utter necessity. The irony of this anti-ambition sentiment in a patriarchal world is perhaps best expressed in a 2006 satirical news article by *The Onion*, aptly titled: "Hillary Clinton is Too Ambitious to be the First Female President." "Women can be just as smart and qualified as men," the author writes. "But Hillary Clinton? She's just a little too ambitious to do what no woman before her has ever done."[133] When Varys asks Tyrion, "Have you considered the best ruler might be someone who doesn't want to rule?" in order to undermine Daenerys' claim to the throne, he's projecting a viewpoint later verified by the narrative, and which utterly erases the possibility of any and all female candidates. This is practically confirmed in his following sentences, in which he continues: "[Jon is] tempered. He's measured. He's a man, which makes him more appealing to the lords of Westeros." When Tyrion counters, "Joffrey was a man. I don't think cocks make him the ideal candidate," Varys replies, "He's the heir to the throne because he's a man. Cocks are important, unfortunately" (S7, E4).

[133] Gerald Collins, "Hillary Clinton Is Too Ambitious To Be The First Female President," Politics (Politics, October 18, 2017), https://politics.theonion.com/hillary-clinton-is-too-ambitious-to-be-the-first-female-1819584287.

Linked with the terms ‘tempered’ and ‘measured’—themselves code for Jon’s lack of ambition, which largely fuels Daenerys’ and Cersei’s passion—is Jon’s literal and figurative manhood. Despite all the women of Westeros have done to raise their status, these two men (both ‘othered’ themselves, as a dwarf and a eunuch) agree that a woman in a position of ultimate power just isn’t a viable political option, and because of the established intelligence and morality of these characters, the audience is primed and expected to take their word at face value.

If *Game of Thrones* is attempting to explore the contemporary question of women’s place in politics, its final answer is not a particularly optimistic one. Yes, ambition centers around power, and power can be used for selfish and callous purposes; but, as Daenerys shows, it’s also necessary for the purposes of empowerment, of justice, and of equality. When a civilization hinges upon oppressive social structures which actively work against these very goals, it’s rarely the dispassionate onlooker who makes the difference. Why, then, in a society as blatantly flawed as Westeros, would one construct a narrative which ultimately demonizes those who desire to topple the status quo? Why make a statement of anti-ambition in a world where equality itself is ambitious? As Daenerys tells Jon moments before her murder, “The world we need won’t be built by men loyal to the world we have” (S8, E6)—though neither will it be by those impartial to it.

## IV. Resolving the Cultural Contradiction

If the show ultimately draws Cersei and Daenerys as reflections of one another—or two sides of the same villainous figure—they’re also equating two very different approaches to power and thus limiting the already limited number of acceptable choices available to political women. Under the consideration of the cultural contradictions which Cersei and Daenerys force

the audience to grapple with given the nature of their characters, it might be said that both inevitably fail to offer any sort of resolution. In the end, neither manages the balance of femininity and competence, of passivity and aggression, or of ambition and communality to any satisfaction, which leaves the question open: what does a successful political woman even look like? Might it be possible, or is there simply no way to rectify such a jarring inconsistency as exists in our societal expectations of women vs. our historical associations with power?

Were Cersei and Daenerys the only relevant female figures of power on the show, perhaps the answer would be a resounding *no*, but to consider them so would do an utter disserve to a character with one of the most narratively satisfying conclusions to her arc: Sansa Stark, crowned the uncontested Queen of the North in the last few minutes of the final episode. A woman may not have ended up on the Iron Throne, but Sansa was certainly the closest the audience got to that particular form of feminist satisfaction. Before *Game of Thrones'* ultimate conclusion, Sansa as a budding political figure began to take on increasing significance as fans began to see the signs of Daenerys' ongoing moral and mental collapse. "In terms of experience, survival skills, and actual proven leadership ability," writes Aja Romano, "Sansa is by far the most capable ruler Westeros has at this point."[134] Alyssa Rosenberg calls her the character "with the greatest potential to genuinely [rewrite the rules] in the style of a revisionist fantasy heroine"[135] and Willa Paskin sums it up by granting Sansa the title of "the only living non-idiot on the show." Thus, Daenerys—despite the symbolic meaning her character has accumulated over the seasons—was by no means the be-all, end-all of *Game of Thrones'* feminist potential,

[134] Aja Romano, "The Game of Thrones Finale Had a Chance to Break the Wheel. It Upheld the Status Quo.," Vox (May 20, 2019), https://www.vox.com/2019/5/19/18629699/game-of-thrones-finale-reaction-who-won-the-iron-throne.
[135] Alyssa Rosenberg, "What Would a Feminist Ending for 'Game of Thrones' Actually Look like?"

and Sansa was often juxtaposed against her by those more skeptical of the approach to power that Daenerys offered.

These hopes weren't all for naught, either. Sansa's crowning was a well-deserved and empowering scene to many, from a woman who, like Cersei and Daenerys, has suffered extreme and horrendous patriarchal violence for much of her life. In fact, few characters are as defined by their seasons-worth of helplessness and quiet suffering, but while Cersei and Daenerys both prove tragic figures in the end, Sansa overcomes her tragedy to become anything but. Yet, the question remains: why her? What differentiates Sansa from these alternative female figures who fail where she succeeds? Is it the Iron Throne alone that makes the difference? There is some evidence to support that claim; after all, all the women (and men) who attempt to claim it end up dead, whereas those who set their sights on lesser goals, like Sansa and Yara, come out the winners. Yet, that can't be the only factor—Ellaria and Olenna, too, are political female figures who face their deaths without ever attempting to claim the Iron Throne for themselves. Yara, in fully embracing a masculine role, succeeds in the same way that Brienne does when she becomes the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, but she's barely present in the last few episodes of *Game of Thrones* and hardly holds the same level of narrative weight as the more central protagonists of Cersei and Daenerys. As the eldest daughter of the Starks, however, Sansa does, and the conclusion to her arc holds at least as much thematic significance in the overarching scope of the show as do theirs. So while there are plenty of female figures of power to choose from when looking at *Game of Thrones*, none quite match up to the political trifecta that is Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen, and Sansa Stark.

In exploring the ways in which Sansa might have prospered while her contemporaries faltered, it becomes necessary to judge her successes in the same way in which we measured

their failures—through, for instance, Jamieson's account of the double bind. As discussed in chapter two, Sansa begins her arc as the ideologically perfect girl, and is one of the most traditionally feminine characters in the show.[136] In the beginning, however, this is only to her detriment. Critic Kristin Iverson, in the title of an article published right before season four aired on HBO, calls Sansa "one of the most hated characters in *Game of Thrones*," and at that time she wasn't wrong.[137] Cersei and Daenerys—hated as they eventually became—had at that point many seasons to go before they reached their peak of villainy. But what's vital to note here is that Sansa is despised for an entirely distinct reason from that of her female counterparts, one rooted not in the way that she deviates from the expectations of her femininity but in the way that she conforms to them. Early Sansa is hated, Iversen argues, for being "a specific kind of woman… one whose passivity signifies weakness, one who obedience means cowardice," therefore taking femininity to its logical (and distinctly negative) extreme. Regarding the double bind, by exhibiting peak femininity Sansa is demonstrating an utter lack of competence, exemplified by her obvious naivety regarding her romanticized notions of marriage and queenhood. Sansa, in fact, is hated for the exact opposite reason as Daenerys and Cersei, for being *too* passive while they are too aggressive, conforming too much while they conform too little. However, it's worth noting that some of this hatred does also stem from some similar traits: in season one, Sansa exhibits aggression through teenage brattiness (often expressed through arguments with her better-liked father and sister) and ambition through her steadfast desire to

[136] Save only for Margaery, though her femininity reads more as a performative tool than a genuine trait.
[137] Kristin Iverson, "The Problem with Sansa Stark: In Defense of One of the Most Hated Characters in Game of Thrones," *Brooklyn Magazine*, April 10, 2015, https://www.bkmag.com/2014/04/04/the-problem-with-sansa-stark-in-defense-of-one-of-the-most-hated-characters-in-game-of-thrones/.

become queen by marrying Joffrey. She fails, thusly, on another level as well, as her apparent selfishness and lack of family loyalty (in comparison to her loyalty to her future family)[138] becomes indicative of low communality that cannot buffer her ambition.

However, as Sansa's arc unfolds, her relationship to femininity begins to shift—her most feminine traits, such as passivity and appeasement, become not just proof of her childish naivety, but genuine survival tactics. In one scene in season seven, when Arya tells Sansa, "I was never going to be as good a lady as you… I never could have survived what you survived" (S7, E7), she's alluding to the fact that it's Sansa's very femininity—which Arya herself has always lacked—which proved the tool for her own preservation within a deadly political sphere (whereas, conversely, it was Arya's androgyny which allowed her to survive conditions which Sansa could not). However, once Sansa finally escapes from years of acting the hostage and returns to her brother Jon, there's another marked shift in her character as she's allowed to progress past merely surviving and move towards developing her own political and social savviness. In many ways, this savviness takes on the form of sass. As can be seen in articles titled "13 Times Sansa Stark Was The Undisputed Queen Of Comebacks"[139] and Buzzfeed subheadings quoting: "Sansa Stark is 100% that bitch,"[140] Sansa's popularity as a character, while not defined by this sassiness, is undoubtedly escalated by it—somewhat ironic, considering that the teenage brattiness from which this sass eventually stems once greatly informed the

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[138] Perhaps no scene is more indicative of this than Sansa siding against Arya regarding her fight with Joffrey, resulting in the execution of her own direwolf, Lady, as punishment. Because the direwolves represent the children's connection to the Stark family, Lady's death signifies Sansa's act of familial betrayal.

[139] "13 Times Sansa Stark Was The Undisputed Queen Of Comebacks," Ruin My Week, April 29, 2019, https://ruinmyweek.com/entertainment/tv/sansa-stark-comebacks/.

[140] Morgan Murrel, "We Need To Talk About Sansa Stark In The 'Game Of Thrones' Season 8 Premiere," BuzzFeed, April 16, 2019, https://www.buzzfeed.com/morganmurrell/game-of-thrones-season-8-premiere-sansa-stark-reactions.

audience's dislike of her. Notably, the vast majority of Sansa's sassy moments have one thing in common: when Littlefinger asks Sansa, "What do you want that you do not have?" and she replies, "At the moment, peace and quiet" (S7, E1), or when Tyrion calls Joffrey's wedding a "miserable affair" and Sansa responds, "It had its moments" (S8, E1)—alluding towards his death-by-poisoning—Sansa is using dry humor as an indirect insult against the men who have wronged her, in a subtle act of personal rebellion against her history of patriarchal oppression.[141] It's no surprise, then, that Littlefinger is her most common target. The humor of her sass also helps to blunt some of the impact of her more direct statements, which might prove a successful strategy in coping with the femininity/competence double bind in that it allows her to avoid being *too* aggressive to be seen as feminine or *too* passive to be seen as competent—in other words, she carefully utilizes passive-aggressiveness in order to circumvent the problem. There are, however, a few moments when Sansa does put her aggressiveness on full display: when she confronts Littlefinger about marrying her to Ramsey, or Ramsey about abusing her, or Jon about ignoring her advice. The former two, however, are framed as fully justified under the consideration of how deeply wronged Sansa was by these men, and even when Sansa ends up killing both of them, the ways she does so are purposefully indirect—she lets the masculine Arya murder Littlefinger in her stead, and allows Ramsey to be eaten alive by his hounds. With Jon, however, she instead tempers her aggression with moments of vulnerability, bringing up her abuse, her fears, or her love for her family as subtle justification for her outbursts.

More significant, perhaps, is the way this sass is often linked to Sansa's wider intelligence. In the final few seasons, time and again characters remark on the role Sansa's

[141] Whereas her teenage brattiness was utilized solely against those who cared about her, and thus only to her own disadvantage.

intellect has played in her unlikely survival, even when it wasn't always blatantly visible. This is particularly significant in the case of Tyrion, known for being one of the most cunning and intelligent characters in the entire show. "Lady Stark, you may survive us yet" (S2, E4), Tyrion tells her all the way back in season two, when she refuses to drop her façade regarding her love for Joffrey, and by season eight he sums it up: "Many underestimated you. Most of them are dead now" (S8, E1). This 'underestimation' is what's key here, for the indication is that Sansa has *always* been intelligent, but that it's only once she's free from the constrains of her oppression that she can fully express it, in the same way that her 'sass' only shows itself once she's in an environment where she holds power. As Tyrion comments to Jon, "[Sansa is] much smarter than she lets on," and as Jon responds, "She's starting to let on" (S7, E3)—back at Winterfell, Sansa no longer needs to blanket her abilities with the femininity and passivity she's been relying on all her life. Thus, her competence shines through, even when she herself curtails it. "I'm a slow learner, I'll admit. But I learn" (S7, E7), says Sansa, underscoring the crux of her character growth. Sansa has long established her femininity, but she also has gained an admirable degree of competence along the way.

In consideration of the double bind, one might assume that Sansa has therefore lost her femininity in the process, but this is not the case; her very first scene shows her praised for her stitching, and when she returns home five seasons later, she's seen stitching again, this time to make herself and Jon wolf-pelt outfits that further connect them to their family name. Thus, she's learned to utilize her feminine talents for her own political purposes, and the show goes out of its way to establish her competence in ways that further emphasize this—for instance, with scenes

focusing on her making logistical plans to feed and clothe her armies.[142] In doing so, Sansa avoids the stereotypical pitfalls of many of her counterparts: she's too feminine to be the iron maiden, too competent to be the child or the pet, and overcomes her role as the sex object through the murders of the men who objectified her.[143] In this way, Sansa somewhat stands as a figure *against* the double bind, for as Lindsey Mantoan writes: "Overwhelmingly, the women with power in Westeros (and Essos) take steps to amplify their masculinity as a show of authority and strength. Sansa, however, refuses to view masculinity as necessary for power, and in so doing, she reveals the fallacy of conflating the two."[144] All the same, however, Sansa undeniably sets a standard that is difficult for others—particularly more naturally masculine figures, like her sister Arya—to achieve, propagating the false expectation that women are capable of reaching a perfect balance of the femininity/competence double bind in order to be both respected and well-liked as a political figure.

Season seven further explores the way Sansa relates to this bind through the way it represents the dynamic of the newly reunited Stark sisters. Their conflict from all the way back in season one returns, except the tension between their differing ideologies of girlhood is reframed into a distinctly political clash. Once again, *Game of Thrones* plays off the contemporary trope of women being pitted against one another on a political scale, but this time (unlike all others) it's ultimately subverted when the show reveals the sisters were simply putting on a performance to trick the manipulative Littlefinger. For several episodes, the audience

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[142] Though it's not as blatant as Daenerys' tactics of framing herself as the mother of the formerly enslaved, there's almost something motherly about this, like a woman feeding and clothing her own children.

[143] Unlike Margaery, who attempts to utilize these stereotypes to her benefit, yet still falls prey to them in the end.

[144] Lindsey Mantoan, "Raven: Sansa," in *Vying for the Iron Throne: Essays on Power, Gender, Death and Performance in HBO's Game of Thrones* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 88.

watches in horror as Littlefinger acts as a surrogate for *Game of Thrones'* usual tendencies, planting evidence to force the sisters to see each other as political rivals. "If Jon doesn't come back… [you can] get what you really want" (S7, E5), Arya says to Sansa, implying that her ambition has (once again) overridden her family loyalty, and Littlefinger later prompts Sansa to consider the fact that Arya might be planning to murder her in order to take the title of 'Lady of Winterfell' for herself. Yet, when the sisters kill Littlefinger instead of each other, it suggests that all along the situation was a test—one that Cersei failed with Margaery many seasons ago. Though Daenerys proves her communality through her revolutionary beliefs, Sansa does so through her family and House loyalty, simultaneously placing a check on her own ambitions by refusing to fall for Littlefinger's bait. In other words, she proves her own development since season one, which has finally made her fit to rule. "Turn family against family, turn sister against sister, that's what you did with my mother and Aunt Lysa, and that's what you tried to do between my sister and me" (S7, E7), Sansa tells Littlefinger right before Arya kills him, and in mentioning the animosity between Catelyn and Lysa she's specifically referencing this dangerous pattern of women against women which *Game of Thrones* often falls into, while also placing the blame for it where it belongs: on the patriarchal institutions (represented by Littlefinger) which force women to believe they must find power at the expense of one another rather than to their collective benefit.

But that, of course, brings up another question—why, then, did Sansa so readily pit herself against another political woman, Daenerys? From their first meeting, it's clear that Sansa and Daenerys are at odds, often expressed through mistrusting glares and passive-aggressive exchanges. This might partially be attributed to the fact that Sansa meets Daenerys' dragons before she meets Daenerys herself, the camera focusing in on her expression of blatant concern

as she watches them fly over Winterfell. Unlike the vast majority of female characters in *Game of Thrones,* Sansa has never expressed any interest or affiliation with any form of magic or any breed of monster, and thus remains separated from this specific kind of power (marked by its uncontrollable and untrustworthy nature) which Daenerys often relies on. There's an indication in this scene that, the moment Sansa sees the dragons, she begins to see Daenerys for the threat that she is—notably, the threat of her madness, but also the threat of her specific methods of feminist reform which contrast so powerfully against Sansa's own.[145] This can be seen specifically in a scene in which Daenerys attempts unsuccessfully to win Sansa's favor. "I'm here because I love your brother," Daenerys says, and it's clear that Jon lies at the heart of this conflict, as they both grapple for his support at the expense of the other. Yet, Jon is only a symbol for each's ultimate goal, and Sansa won't let Daenerys disguise the tension between them with pleasantries (or even feminist rhetoric). "What happens after this?" she asks. "What about the North?" (S7, E2). This is different from Sansa and Arya's exchange in that that conflict was framed as two women fighting for the same position of power, whereas this is a conflict between two women already seated in their own respective positions, now grappling over the hierarchy. Notably, this is also a moment which suggests that Daenerys perhaps isn't as much about 'female empowerment' as she seems; it doesn't matter to her that Sansa, a woman, might rule the North—Daenerys wants ultimate jurisdiction for herself alone. Meanwhile, while Daenerys stresses her own right to queenhood, Sansa speaks purely of and about the North, painting Sansa as a figure of communality as much as Daenerys is a figure of ambition. It's not

[145] Sansa's claim that "Men do stupid things for women. They're easily manipulated," even seems to be an indirect jab at Daenerys more sexualized approach, with a large portion of her closest advisors or political supporters (Jorah, Daario, Jon, and Tyrion) having been greatly influenced by their romantic and sexual love for her.

merely a conflict over power but a conflict over how power should be utilized: with an emphasis on the leader (Daenerys), vs. an emphasis on the people.

Sansa may not be as revolutionary a figure as Daenerys, but she does ultimately challenge the very masculanism of the state which Daenerys aims to topple, though not by overturning an existent political system so much as creating her own. In arguing for the North's independence, Sansa is doing more than just separating it from the Seven Kingdoms and the Iron Throne that rules them—she's actively constructing her own state, one with the foundation of female-leadership. In many ways, it's remarkably reminiscent of what we know of Dorne: it began as a number of divided kingdoms, until the warrior-queen Nymeria unified them all under her rule, creating a kingdom that remained independent for another two hundred years. Like Nymeria, Sansa was the driving force behind the unification of the many divided Northern Houses under a single leader—though Jon was the face of the operation, it was oftentimes her plans and her insistence which changed the course of his decisions. In the same way that the physically disabled Bran on the Iron Throne makes reference to Prince Doran, and thus suggests a path towards cultural advancement, Sansa's creation of the Independent North (of which Bran himself grants permission) accomplishes something similar. Cersei and Daenerys were both unable to overcome or overturn the inherent masculanism of the Westerosi political system which has existed for centuries, but Sansa has a different approach: she builds a new political system from scratch, one (hopefully) without the masculanism of its counterparts due to its fresh roots in female rule.

If Sansa balances both competency and femininity, and ambition and communality, she also manages to successful navigate another tricky double bind—that of the first-timer vs. the front-runner. She fits the bill as a first-timer because she's never been in a position of power

before Jon leaves Winterfell under her rule, but paradoxically also a front-runner because she has always been in close proximity to these positions of power, and specifically to the people who claim them. More than any other character on the show, Sansa has garnered incredible amounts of experience through watching other women rule: Catelyn, Cersei, Margaery, Lysa, and even Littlefinger himself (who, though a man, is highly feminized, specifically through his use of wholly manipulative political tactics).[146] Thus, as a first-timer, she gains the outsider status and the credibility of a leader like Daenerys, while as a front-runner she gains the political strength and experience of a leader like Cersei. All the while, she avoids the belittlement often faced by female first-timers and the corrupt and/or entitled reputation often worn by female front-runners, as she has managed to garner significant political skill all without having ever held a position of power. As Rosenberg writes, "[Sansa] appears to have actually absorbed some lessons of what *not* to do from her counterparts," and this is crucial, for each of the feminine figures she once followed is ultimately defined by their political mistakes: Catelyn's lack of ambition, Cersei's failure of communality, Margaery's focus on likeability over genuine displays of competence, Lysa's unconstrained madness and sexuality, and even Littlefinger's spineless manipulation and untrustworthiness. Thus, Sansa compensates for it all: with ambition, with communality, with likeability as well as competence, and (unlike Daenerys and Cersei) with no madness or visible sexuality to speak of. In learning from all these characters, Sansa even somehow manages to perfect the balance of love and fear that Machiavelli suggests. Though she is never loved to the extent of Margaery, she does win the support of the Northerners through the continuous proof of her loyalty, and though she is never feared to the extent of Cersei or Daenerys, her occasional

[146] Her mimicry is even physically represented by her copying the hairstyles of whichever female idol she's most trying to channel at any particular phase in her life.

shows of strength (bringing the Knights of the Vale to the Battle of the Bastards, killing Ramsey and Littlefinger, and her willingness to speak loudly and sharply when necessary) are essential in garnering the respect of those who follow her. *Game of Thrones* particularly explores the distrust of women in leadership, and thus there's some significance in the fact that Sansa finally earns her authority by killing off the most dishonest character in the show; above all, she proves herself a politician who can be trusted. Her counterparts do not.

Thus, Sansa may have begun the show as the ideologically perfect girl, but she ends it as the ideologically perfect political woman, exchanging one unattainable standard for another. If *Game of Thrones* explores the cultural contradictions inherent within political femininity through the reflection of Daenerys and Cersei, then it activity attempts to solve these contradictions through the character of Sansa, the proposed resolution between these alternative figures of imperfect female power. Sansa is a figure who somehow stands both for the status quo and for toppling it, claiming more power by asking for less of it, and otherwise existing as a contradiction in herself—and it is only in this way in which she can be allowed to succeed.

## V. Making or Breaking the Bind

So, once again, we must ask ourselves: what does it matter? What does the solution offered by *Game of Thrones* even mean for its female fan-base, for real life political women, or for modern feminism as a whole? And now that the show is over with, where do we go from here?

For starters, it's worth acknowledging the argument that, no matter how it ended, *Game of Thrones* has done a great deal of good merely through its existence as a female-focused political drama. In representing so many diverse and ambitious women in various positions of

leadership, it's done more in challenging the innate separation between women and power than most media, which has the potential for very real world impacts. For instance, one study on political dramas with strong female leads found that they tend to have numerous prosocial implications. These implications revolve around their provocation of increased political engagement in viewers, which includes political interest, self-efficacy, and participation.[147] However, this study specifically focused on shows which foster parasocial relationships with the female leads, meaning viewers felt significant and positive feelings towards them. When these leads are villainized, as they often are in *Game of Thrones*, the effect may not be quite the same.

And of course there's the fact that these other female leads are modern women, much more easily connected to contemporary political concerns, whereas *Game of Thrones* offers a much more distant alternative. Its fictional fantasy world may seem a strange chosen medium for such a task—for it does, ultimately, seem to attempt to address these types of concerns—but in reality it's entirely through these de-familiarized contexts that *Game of Thrones* is able to work through these challenging questions in a way that other more realist, contemporary depictions cannot. This is perhaps because such a setting allows us to project our smaller concerns onto a much larger scale, offering a 'blown-up' depiction of existing anxieties. And, naturally, this is all irrefutably tied up with the way we feel about real political figures. When *Game of Thrones* crowns Cersei and lets the audience watch two seasons of her disastrous rule, how can we help but consider similar possibilities had Hillary Clinton taken the presidency? When Daenerys destroys King's Landing with her dragon fire, is this not deliberately plucking at the fears of those who wonder what AOC, or Clinton, or any other mistrusted female figure might do with

[147] Jennifer Hoewe and Lindsey A. Sherrill, "The Influence of Female Lead Characters in Political TV Shows: Links to Political Engagement," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 63, no. 1 (February 2019): pp. 59-76, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2019.1570782.

unrestrained access to the nuclear codes? *Game of Thrones* plays with these different extremes—albeit situated in a different context—in order to offer an exaggerated mirror image of contemporary political culture. A mirror which, more than anything else, monstrously distorts the image of the political woman.

In understanding the wider implications of the show's conclusion, it perhaps becomes necessary to return to previous connections between the female figures of Westeros and those within our modern American reality. If Cersei can be brought into comparison and perhaps even seen as a figurative recreation of more moderate, politically-entrenched female figures like Hillary Clinton or Nancy Pelosi, and Daenerys of more radical, revolutionary figures like AOC or Elizabeth Warren, then the fact that both prove villainous can be seen as little more than a grim validation of the cultural anxieties surrounding women in power across all degrees of the political spectrum. Each, as *Game of Thrones* suggests, may very well be a national disaster waiting to happen. However, even as the show was validating some anxieties, it was attempting to assuage others. So what about Sansa? Might there be a miracle woman who could possibly live up to her fairy-tale image? Perhaps we could look at someone like Kamala Harris, arguably the most successful political woman in American history in consideration of her recent ascension to the role of Vice President.

There's something to be said about the particular way in which Harris has risen to her seat of power. Though she initially ran for presidency herself—among a group of nearly thirty others—the focus on electability in the 2020 Democratic primaries ultimately resulted in the candidacy being handed to former Vice President Joe Biden. There's no question that part of what made Biden so electable was merely his existence as a white, straight man in a primary line-up that was otherwise fairly diverse, particularly because Clinton's loss inserted public

doubt as to whether a female candidate could ever achieve the presidency at all; thus, any options alternative from the presidential norm became framed as political risks. All the same, Biden's appeal was hardly universal. One of Clinton's pitfalls in 2016 was a large bloc of radically left-leaning voters—vying for Bernie Sanders to win the primary—who refused to cast their ballots in her name because of Clinton's more moderate reputation, a situation which Biden himself was at risk for. And diversity in politics is a huge contemporary talking point, especially among left-leaning Democrats. In awareness of this, Biden himself pledged to pick a female VP after he won the primaries, and also faced pressure by major Democratic figures to choose a person of color; Stacey Abrams, a black woman and former Congresswoman from Georgia, was quoted saying that Biden ought to run with a woman who "reflects the diversity of America."[148] Perhaps for these reasons, Harris herself was looked over as a presidential candidate, but she was perfect as a running-mate—as a biracial woman, she gave Biden the appeal to the progressives that he was lacking, whereas his partnership allowed her access to the White House that would've otherwise been barred from her due to 'questionable electability.'

Even as a Vice Presidential candidate, Harris has worked meticulously to curate her own image as a political woman. This can be seen especially with her numerous political debates during the campaign, such as those with the ultra-conservative Mike Pence. "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking," Harris told Pence multiple times whenever he attempted to interrupt her, and the phrase proved so striking that it found its way into internet memes and even into the mouth of Harris' *Saturday Night Live* counterpart, Maya Rudolph, who played into Harris' 'sass' much the way that *Game of Thrones* leaned into Sansa's sassiness in seasons seven and eight. As

[148] Timothy Perry, "'Women of Color Are the Core': Biden Challenged to Pick a Black Woman as Running Mate," CBS News, accessed May 14, 2021, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/joe-biden-vice-president-black-woman-running-mate/.

linguistics professor Deborah Tannen claimed, "[Harris's] challenge throughout the whole debate was to avoid coming across as aggressive," and that "she walked that fine line [of the double bind] extremely well"[149]—and Rudolph's emphasis on Harris' sassiness (permeating her character with a humor that enforces her likeability) exemplifies that success. However, it's worth keeping in mind that, because of her identity as a person of color, the stakes for Harris in maintaining this balance are even greater, for black women are already perceived as more aggressive and less feminine than white women, suggesting that black women in politics must work twice as a hard to challenge these stereotypes and manage the double bind.[150] Even the 'sassy black woman' is but another racial stereotype, which—despite her undeniable professionalism on stage—Harris could not avoid.

Harris's attention to this balance is, of course, remarkably reminiscent of Sansa's ruling strategy, but that's not where the similarities end. For instance, the political partnership Harris has struck with Biden is notably similar to that between Sansa and Jon. Sansa and Jon's connection is, of course, rooted in their familial relation, but it's also decidedly on political terms: Jon's claim as the 'King in the North' is grounded in his relationship to Ned Stark, his (presumed) father. However, as a bastard, this relationship is legally and socially tenuous. Conversely, Sansa may be Ned's trueborn daughter, but as a woman her claim to any sort of family power is greatly weakened, specifically considering that she's already been married off and thus taken on multiple names. As Sansa sums it up in a conversation with Jon, "[Rickon is] Ned's trueborn son, a bigger threat than you, a bastard, or me, a girl" (S6, E7). All the same, in

[149] Helier Cheung, "VP Debate: Did Gender Play a Role in the Interruptions?," BBC News, October 8, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-54467093.
[150] Wendy Ashley, "The Angry Black Woman: The Impact of Pejorative Stereotypes on Psychotherapy with Black Women," *Social Work in Public Health* 29, no. 1 (April 2013): pp. 27-34, https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2011.619449.

the absence of this trueborn son, both Sansa's and Jon's claims have some validity which, while weak on their own, are remarkably strengthened when they are together. "The North remembers [the Stark name]," Sansa tells their small council while discussing how they can drum up support and resources to take back their family home from Ramsey. When Davos replies, "But Jon doesn't have the Stark name," Sansa responds, "No, but I do" (S6, E5). As this exchange suggests, only together do Jon and Sansa have any semblance of a chance of being politically supported by their Northern allies, Sansa as the expected trueborn and Jon as the expected man.

Together, too, did Biden and Harris win the White House, with Biden's general electability and Harris' more progressive appeal functioning as complementary attributes. In this way, both Harris and Sansa demonstrate yet another way in which to balance the double bind; for in entering a political partnership, the woman can save face by avoiding any possibilities of seeming overly ambitious, with their own political careers seeming to exist in service to, or at least in tandem with, a man's. This can be seen especially with Sansa and Jon, who—after they begin to rally support in the North—are almost always seen side-by-side. In public, Jon is the one who speaks, while Sansa stands next to him in a show of silent support, though as time goes on she does begin to speak up more and more. Eventually, Sansa manages to turn their partnership to her own individual benefit when Jon has to leave her in charge of Winterfell in his absence, and later this situation becomes permanent when he is exiled to the North; thus, she manages to achieve personal power without ever actually campaigning for it. Similarly, as the Vice President, Harris' best chance at power would be if Biden were ever to be rendered unable to complete his duties (through death or resignation), thus passing on the title to Harris without

her having to be specifically and individually elected to that post.[151] With these strategies, Harris has avoided any particular scrutiny tied to her ambition (at least to the extent faced by Hillary Clinton), and Sansa has been spared the same vilifying treatment by the narrative as faced by some of her political counterparts.

It means so much to so many people that someone like Kamala Harris has managed to reach one of the highest seats of power in the nation. Yet, it's also worth keeping in mind all that it took for her to get there. Like Sansa, Harris does appear to manage the contradictory expectations of political womanhood with remarkable acuity; yet, unlike her, she is a real woman who will be expected to maintain this balance for the full length of her career, and very likely punished when she (inevitably) fails to. Additionally, the fact that the surest way for a woman to reach a place of power is still through political ties to a more powerful man is something of a concern. In her article, Serena Elavia notes one trend in American female presidents on television, in which very few are elected "on [their] own merits," but are instead served by political dynasties or convenient presidential vacancies (as many begin their careers as vice presidents themselves).[152] Even in our fictitious media, it's still difficult to imagine a woman reaching these levels of power without pulling a few political strings or making strategic choices. Like Sansa, Harris as a political figure is simply using the tools that are available to her in order to accrue influence, but the fact that she succeeds in doing so is not the point; the problem lies in the fact that she *has* to, in order to make up for the innate disadvantages of running for office as a

[151] Or perhaps, like many Vice Presidents before her (Biden included), Harris will use this position as a foothold to propel herself to the presidency in future elections—but her potential success in doing so remains to be seen.

[152] Serena Elavia, "Television Loves Female Presidents, as Long as They're Republican," The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, March 5, 2015), https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/03/what-it-takes-to-be-a-female-president-on-tv/385970/.

woman and a person of color. Sansa is obviously not a direct stand-in for Harris, but she does serve a symbol for the specific approach to power that she and many women like her are forced to take in order to achieve any semblance of political success.

In maintaining the balance of the double bind by necessity, rather than seriously questioning the unfairness of its existence, Sansa is perhaps made into an unwitting tool in its cultural longevity. Thus, she fails to be a revolutionary or even a controversial figure in the same way that Cersei and Daenerys are, appearing to challenge the status quo and our cultural preconceptions of empowered femininity without ever meaningfully doing so. In holding her up as the one successful figure of political womanhood, *Game of Thrones* avoids taking a serious political stance against the cultural contradiction of women and power, thus reinforcing its validity in our judgements of real American political women. As critic Aja Romano writes, Sansa's political victory "from a modern sociopolitical perspective [begins to seem] a lot like a gender-based consolation prize," and a highly conditional one at that. However, Romano fails to recognize that Sansa isn't just a prize meant to console grieving feminists—she has rightfully earned her rule, and has been on the journey towards it since season one. Sansa's success was not intended as a way to 'make up' for the failures of Daenerys and Cersei, but as a standard of comparison vital in the construction of the show's central message. Ultimately, in consideration of the limitations faced by its female characters—based on historically ingrained social values which continue to affect the experiences of political figures today—*Game of Thrones* merely reinforces the societal expectation that women must successfully navigate the systems which oppress them, rather than challenge the unjust patriarchal nature of these systems themselves.

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