BREAKING THE WHEEL: EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE ARCHETYPES IN *GAME OF THRONES* (2011-2019)

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis interrogates the representation of the female archetypes of the monstrous mother and the warrior woman in HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). As a complex text that pushed the boundaries of what is possible on television during its run, *Game of Thrones* is unusual in terms of the prominence of strong women. Simultaneously labelled feminist and anti-feminist on account of the centrality of women and the debates surrounding issues like sexual violence and the objectification of their bodies, the show has produced numerous discourses that question whether its representation can be considered progressive. This thesis develops the concept of layered complexity as a means by which representation in twenty-first century televisual texts may be read and explores the extent to which that produces progressive discourses that challenge the construction and transgress the limits of existing female archetypes. In exploring those archetypes, this thesis develops an understanding of how representation functions in modern televisual texts. It harnesses detailed textual analysis to read the construction of characters in conjunction with existing scholarship on the archetypes of the monstrous mother and the warrior woman.

Two distinct theoretical frameworks are pursued, structuring the thesis into twin sections, one for each archetype. The first section deals with the monstrous mother through the characters of Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) and Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke), with chapters on the mother archetype, dysfunctional motherhood, reproductive power and monstrosity. The second section deals with the warrior woman through the characters of Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie) and Arya Stark (Maisie Williams), with chapters on the warrior woman archetype, her aesthetics, codes of conduct and performativity.

Through the televisual text's four dimensions of layered complexity - the storyworld, seriality, narrative, and deeply entwined arcs – this thesis argues that *Game of Thrones*' intricately woven televisual landscape offers the potential to address television's under-representation of certain archetypes. In exploring, reversing and reconstructing established archetypes, it reflects the realities of modern identities and makes the case for more inclusive categories of identification and representation.

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INTRODUCTION

'Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger.' This seemingly innocuous list is one that viewers of HBO's pseudo-Medieval fantasy *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) will be extremely familiar with, and perhaps wary of. The first line of the Westerosi wedding vows, it is recited just six times throughout the eight seasons of the show's run – at the marriages of Robb Stark (Richard Madden) and Talisa Maegyr (Oona Chaplin),[1] Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage) and Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner),[2] Edmure Tully (Tobias Menzies) and Roslin Frey (Alexandra Dowling),[3] Margaery Tyrell (Natalie Dormer) and Joffrey Baratheon (Jack Gleeson),[4] Margaery and Tommen Baratheon (Dean-Charles Chapman),[5] and Lyanna Stark (Aisling Franciosi) and Rhaeghar Targeryen (Wilf Scolding)[6] - and yet it holds great significance, with each wedding marking a shift in the narrative landscape. However, the line itself also serves as a starting point for the interrogation of the representational categories embedded within the show's storyworld.

The Westerosi wedding vows call upon the Seven, or the New Gods, to bless the couple marrying as they pledge their lives to each other. Although both labels used here suggest that there are several individual deities, the list refers to the seven faces of a single deity, all of whom symbolise different aspects of life. The Seven also all happen to be medieval archetypes, but only one of the faces invoked is of indeterminate gender. The Stranger is

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[1] Alan Taylor, dir., "Valar Morghulis," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 10, HBO, 2012.
[2] Michelle MacLaren, dir., "Second Sons," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 8, HBO, 2014.
[3] David Nutter, dir., "The Rains of Castamere," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 9, HBO, 2013.
[4] Alex Graves, dir., "The Lion and the Rose," *Game of Thrones,* season 4, episode 2, HBO, 2014.
[5] Mark Mylod, dir., "High Sparrow," *Game of Thrones,* season 5, episode 3, HBO, 2015.
[6] Jeremy Podeswa, dir., "The Dragon and the Wolf," *Game of Thrones,* season 7, episode 7, HBO, 2017.

neither male nor female but simply the face of death to whom people rarely pray.[7] The other

faces of the Seven, however, are gendered based on the roles imposed within society. The

order itself is symbolic, positioning those roles typically performed by men first, while those

associated with women follow them. This accurately reflects the patriarchal traditions, norms

and values within *Game of Thrones* as well as the policing of the gender binary that is

enshrined within its fictional systems and institutions. However, it belies the complexity of the

televisual text's representation and the way in which the show opens up a range of

possibilities, potentialities and opportunities to challenge existing archetypes and paradigms,

creating a range of identities that are more fitting for the twenty-first century context than

the fixed representational categories presented by the Seven.

Representation has been a central concern of television for as long as the medium has

existed as a consequence of the importance of characters in ensuring continuity and

presenting a 'realness' and 'nowness' that appeals to audiences.[8] As Richard Dyer clarifies in

his quite extensive work on the topic, 're-presentation, representativeness, representing have

to do […] with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have

the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we

are treated.'[9] Dyer also points out that the representation of women and other oppressed

groups is often characterised by negative tropes and thinly veiled insults.[10] As television is

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[7] Ryan Mitchell Wittingslow, "'All Men Must Serve': Religion and Free Will from the Seven to the Faceless Men," in *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire,* ed. Jes Battis and Susan Johnston (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), 114.
[8] John Fiske, *Television Culture,* 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2011), 150-151; Martin Shuster, *New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 50-52.
[9] Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1.
[10] Dyer, *The Matter of Images,* 1.

intrinsically complicated as a medium and mode of communication,[11] it has incorporated

representational strategies that are in keeping with Dyer's observation as well as those that

directly challenge it. Traditional programming has maintained family values and safeguarded

the binary gender roles that are designed to contain women under patriarchal structures,

although more progressive shows have presented alternatives. I contend that *Game of*

Thrones fits into the latter category and provides a televisual text through which modern

representation can be explored. The show pushes the boundaries of what is possible on

television in a range of ways and representation is certainly one of those during the course of

its run. It is, however, noteworthy that it does so gradually by highlighting the problems of the

representational discourses that underpin the patriarchal society in which it is based.

Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines posit that patriarchal culture has led to the inevitability

of men creating and applying language norms within society, thus encoding patriarchal power

into the discourse that encompasses all members regardless of their position at the centre or

margins.[12] Consequently, '[t]he kinds of stories we hear and see, the ways these stories play

out, and the ways in which they are transmitted, shape our beliefs and attitudes, and these

get fed back into the stories we ourselves make.'[13] Representation is dependent on such

stories and they condition the narrative landscapes presented in televisual texts. However,

the breadth and depth of more recent televisual texts like *Game of Thrones* provide a means

of exploring those narratives as well as determining how popular cultural artefacts directly

challenge the status quo. Complex televisual texts therefore engage with the twenty-first

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[11] Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, "Introduction: An Owner's Manual for Television," in *How to Watch Television,* ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 6-7
[12] Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines, *Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 2012), 66.
[13] Furby and Hines, *Fantasy,* 66.

century *fin de siècle* contextual environment and lend it scope to challenge the hierarchical norms and values present. This is exactly what *Game of Thrones* does.

i Representational Strategies, Otherness and the Twenty-First Century Televisual Text

Developing an understanding of the representational strategies that underpin twenty-first century televisual texts begins with discourses of otherness. Traditional conceptions of gender, for instance, are based on outdated binary values that are no longer sufficient for explaining, defining or containing modern identities. Those binaries pit the Self against the Other, us versus them, where the former represents the dominant group in society that establishes what constitutes the norm and promotes conformity.[14] Those who refuse to follow established rules and strive for the ideals of the dominant group are effectively othered and then marginalised. However, television provides a medium through which the Other can be explored, reconfigured in line with not only the dominant attitudes of the era but also alternative attitudes and approaches that challenge dominant ideology.

Dominant attitudes towards otherness are well documented in the extensive scholarship that is dedicated to representation in society and in visual culture. In feminist theory, for example, Simone de Beauvoir defines otherness through the conscious maintenance of gendered inequalities, observing that the marginalization of women is administered through the designation of Object and Other while men claim the positions of Subject and Absolute: "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is

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[14] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 1-3.

not considered an autonomous being."[15] Through being defined in relation to the Subject, the Object is deprived of autonomy and also of an identity that is divorced from the forces that dominate it. The absence of that identity and autonomy further problematises the ability of those pushed to the margins to forge the self-determination required to challenge the identities imposed on them by the Subjects that designate them as Other. As such, the dynamics of social, cultural and political systems are designed to perpetually maintain the status quo and its hierarchies of power as far as possible, resisting challenges from within by suppressing the mechanisms that can give rise to them in the first instance. The difficulties of the Other challenging its position and possibilities in patriarchal societies are further addressed by de Beauvoir, who argues that the division between the Subject and Other is maintained by women submitting to it.[16] In contending that women submit to the societal positions imposed on them, de Beauvoir's theory maintains the gender binary that underpins traditional power structures, but it is useful in assessing gendered representation and explaining why power shifts may still occur despite the patriarchy's attempts to prevent them.

De Beauvoir's feminist approach to otherness differs from that of other theorists, although there are also marked similarities between their respective discourses. For instance, in his scholarship on the horror genre, Robin Wood's definition of otherness in the context of visual culture labels it as 'that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with […] in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself.'[17] The dual

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[15] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 6.

[16] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 7.

[17] Robin Wood, "The American Nightmare Horror in the 70s," in *Horror: The Film Reader,* ed. Mark Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 25.

strategies of exclusion and containment that Wood describes outline not only the perception

of the threat the Other poses to hegemonic cultural frameworks, but also the patriarchal order

that would seek to protect itself against that threat. Such strategies are also visible in de

Beauvoir's work, but Wood is much more explicit about what exclusion entails. Not only could

an Other be removed to the margins for the purpose of control, but it could also be annihilated

should the threat to the established patriarchal norms and values endure. Here, the status of

the Other is dependent on the society from which it has been cast, as is the way it is

represented.

Both de Beauvoir and Wood define otherness in relation to binary values, but those values

do not provide the scope for nuance or the possibility for the emergence of alternatives that

Stuart Hall notes are a key part of representation.[18] Hall argues that otherness is pivotal in any

symbolic or actual struggle for power, but the application of binaries to categories of identity

is awkward and potentially dangerous from an anthropological perspective. He attributes such

danger to the growth of negativity that emerges when the cultural order is disturbed and the

symbolic boundaries that produce meanings and identities are violated.[19] That negativity is

often visible in the televisual text where characters challenge the representational boundaries

that they are placed within. In *Game of Thrones,* for example, those characters that subvert

the norms and values established, maintained and policed by the Westerosi patriarchal order

are automatically designated as Other. Whether their subversion is by necessity or choice,

their non-conformity positions the Other outside of existing binary identities and challenges

the validity of those structures. However, far from disrupting the production of identities,

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[18] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE, 1997), 236.
[19] Hall, *Representation,* 236.

transgressions expand the scope of representational categories and identities. They foster difference and facilitate the emergence of multiple identities that can thrive when structural constraints are removed.

Television has the potential to remove such structural constraints, with storyworlds and complex narrative landscapes inviting interrogation of existing archetypes and paradigms through nuanced representational strategies. There are multiple such strategies in *Game of Thrones,* with numerous women disturbing the cultural order and violating symbolic boundaries in various different ways, as per Hall's anthropological observations.[20] Indeed, Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik (2016: 1) articulate the belief that female characters are the 'key to the originality and, thus, to the appeal and popularity of the GoT universe.'[21] They substantiate this argument by pointing to the level of attention that the storyworld's female characters have attracted, whether praise or condemnation, fascination or controversy. That those female characters are central to the development of the narrative throughout its run is significant and provides scope for them to challenge the dominant male voices that are the loudest in the first season.[22]

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[20] Hall, *Representation,* 236.

[21] Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik, "Introduction," in *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones and Multiple Media Engagements,* ed. Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1.

[22] The first season of *Game of Thrones* positions men at the centre of the show, particularly King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy) and Ned Stark (Sean Bean), his Hand of the King. Although it gradually shifts to position monstrous mothers and warrior women as important characters who drive their respective narratives forwards, women are very much secondary to their husbands and fathers while those who maintain and police the status quo – Baratheon and Stark – remain alive. In addition to this figurative point, male voices are also literally the loudest in the first season, with Robert regularly speaking over his wife, Cersei, and rejecting her advice or opinion, as is discussed in the first section of this thesis.

ii A Song of Empowerment and Exploitation

Game of Thrones is a show beset by contradictory dualities. It is simultaneously progressive and regressive, feminist and anti-feminist, a site of empowerment and exploitation. It is difficult to reconcile such oppositional qualities, particularly where one value would directly undermine another. Where a text exploits the bodies of sex workers to advance the character arcs of the perpetrators of sexual violence, for instance, can it then be deemed a space for empowering women to move outside of the gender roles imposed on them via the patriarchal policing of social, cultural and political values? Such contradictions emerge out of the layered complexity of the televisual text, particularly the number of ongoing narrative arcs that are present at any one point in the show's history and the construction and development of highly nuanced characters.

Martin Barker, Clarissa Smith and Feeona Attwood comment on this nuance, noting that the rich range of characters cannot solely be attributed to their ages, sexualities, ethnicities and personal attributes. It can also be attributed to 'the way that the characters simply do not fall into easy archetypes or embodiments of moral attributes […] [T]here are such important differences between the *kinds* of character offered and the complex ways that they both belong within their cultures and are individualised.'[23] The number of characters and types of character is highly unusual for a television show, but, to return to the observations of Schubart and Gjelsvik, the possibilities for difference are where its originality resides.[24] *Game of Thrones*

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[23] Martin Barker, Clarissa Smith and Feeona Attwood, *Watching Game of Thrones: How Audiences Engage With Dark Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 47.
[24] Schubart and Gjelsvik, "Introduction," 1

has more than 150 named characters, all of whom provide opportunities for nuanced representation.

However, there is one duality that has been attributed to representation in *Game of Thrones* that this thesis disputes. Barker *et al.* read the show's approach to representation as 'derived from a long-standing tradition of thinking about media in terms of positive or negative images.'[25] This view of the show's representation is reductive. Viewing the politics of representation as divisible into two distinct categories of positive and negative is wholly problematic when it is applied to modern television shows that contain antiheroes who have non-linear development trajectories. Representation in *Game of Thrones* is complex, nuanced and impossible to categorise in a positive/negative binary, thus demonstrating that binarism may be unfit for purpose where the modern televisual text is concerned.

There are numerous factors that contribute to *Game of Thrones'* outright rejection of the positive/negative binary, one of which is genre. The show evades neat generic classification, predominantly borrowing visual markers from fantasy but taking precedents from a range of genre categories that contribute to its narrative formula, such as horror and melodrama. The broad generic framing of the televisual text provides it with the freedom to push the boundaries of established norms and form new narrative structures, thus creating "discursive connections" that address aesthetic forms within texts.[26] Otherness is one such discursive connection, with fantasy in particular presenting a range of representational possibilities that extend beyond binarism. Although primarily concerned with the warrior woman archetype,

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[25] Barker, *et al., Watching Game of Thrones,* 4. This view was repeated by Feeona Attwood and Clarissa Smith in a panel dedicated to their *Game of Thrones* research at CST Conference 2021.

[26] Jane Arthurs, *Television and Sexuality: Regulation and the Politics of Taste* (Maidenhead: OU Press, 2004), 8.

Yvonne Tasker and Lindsay Steenberg argue that fantasy offers an ontological rupture whereby it enables the positioning of powerful women where cultural disruption may be distanced from reality.[27] In *Game of Thrones,* it is monstrous mothers and warrior women that cause that cultural disruption, pushing back against the patriarchal forces that seek to maintain the status quo.

The fantasy genre is an important space for challenging the legitimacy of the archetypes used to categorise women. It is potentially an ideal space for the characterisation of complex individuals because it does not have to observe temporal and spatial unity and broadly evades the parameters of experience established by both the human condition and reality.[28] Furthermore, Rosemary Jackson notes that fantasy projects a nostalgic vision of lost social and moral hierarchies within specific social contexts: 'it is in the unconscious that social structures and "norms" are reproduced and sustained within us, and only by redirecting attention to this area can we begin to perceive the ways in which relations between society and the individual are fixed.'[29] The fixity of the real is challenged by the possibilities and opportunities for the individual within the fantastic, allowing boundaries to be tested without instituting substantive changes that exist beyond the symbolic. The complex televisual text provides a means of challenging the boundaries of genre, drawing together seemingly incompatible values within singular entities.

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[27] Yvonne Tasker and Lindsay Steenberg, "Women Warriors: From Chivalry to Vengeance," in *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones and Multiple Media Engagements,* ed. Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 173.

[28] Jackson, *Fantasy,* 1.

[29] Jackson, *Fantasy,* 6.

Barker *et al.* supplement this point via their argument that *Game of Thrones*' status as 'another world', complete with numerous elements that are firmly positioned in the realm of fantasy, 'make it hard for characters to be completely grasped and assessed against "real" measures.'[30] No definition is offered for what constitutes 'real' measures, but I suggest this rather misses the point. Representation cannot be quantified or presented in the definitive. Instead, multiple readings extend across discourse surrounding individual televisual texts because the essence of characters invites interpretation. *Game of Thrones* in particular is a site of empowerment *and* exploitation, redefining women's roles through mechanisms in the text that allow the two values to sit side-by-side though they remain difficult to reconcile.

The coexistence of values that are difficult to reconcile underpins my examination of the representational strategies employed in the televisual text, emerging out of the complexity of *Game of Thrones* and the sheer number of characters and character types represented. Analysing different character types in conjunction with each other is problematic because each type has its own theoretical framework. However, as I have chosen to interrogate two different archetypes within this thesis, the monstrous mother and warrior woman, a unifying theoretical framework that runs throughout my analysis is required. The framework of monstrosity and performativity identifies commonality and provides a singular foundation on which all archetypes may be built. For instance, Rosi Braidotti articulates the importance of the female form as a site of fascination, fear and danger: 'Woman, as a sign of difference, is monstrous. If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of

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[30] Barker, *et al., Watching Game of Thrones,* 71.

bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror.'[31] This positions women who dare to challenge the status quo, even in its absence as is the case here, as monstrous, but it also identifies a woman's body as privileged in its ability to level a threat against those who seek to exert control over it. Woman is therefore irrevocably and absolutely Other, and yet she is also the site of reordering, challenging and rejecting patriarchal norms. She offers a threat to the established order that does not simply disappear despite the death of the two monstrous mothers at the very end of the show's run. Her legacy endures beyond her lifetime, which directly contravenes Jeffery Jerome Cohen's contention that the monster disappears and re-emerges in a slightly different form.[32] This is not the case within *Game of Thrones* because, although monstrous characters may disappear materially, their influence underpins the new political and social structures that are put in place to secure the future of Westeros.

Cohen's Monster Theory is useful in developing an understanding of how monstrosity functions within a text, televisual or otherwise, by presenting 'a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender.'[33] Focusing the fragmentary nature of identity as opposed to broad epistemological wholes, the theory defines the monster as a cultural entity and is predicated on seven theses: [I] the monster's body is a cultural body; [II] the monster always escapes; [III] the monster is the harbinger of category crisis; [IV] the monster dwells at the gates of difference; [V] the monster polices the borders of the possible; [VI] fear of the monster is really a kind of desire; and [VII] the monster stands on the threshold of becoming.[34] All of the theses outlined here apply to the women of *Game of Thrones,* who operate on the

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[31] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 81.
[32] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 4-5
[33] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 3.
[34] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 4-20.

margins and are subject to the attempts to control them through the implicit assumption of power in each one. Such power dynamics are also present in theories on the monstrous feminine, most notably those of Barbara Creed, whose fascination with 'woman as monster' is explored through gender and sexuality.[35] The function of the monstrous feminine is to instigate 'an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.'[36] *Game of Thrones* directly challenges this simple premise. Although generic formulae are predicated on predictability, complex television is able to buck the trend, rejecting both a viable symbolic order and the expectation of stability. Instead, *Game of Thrones* provides a space within which the Other can move from the margins to the centre, which becomes a site that facilitates a challenge to opposing claimants but from another Other rather than the Self. However, Creed's framework remains useful for exploring how the monstrous feminine encroaches on masculine norms and structures and therefore creates a pathway for interrogating the archetypes of the monstrous mother and warrior woman.

Creed's use of 'symbolic order' requires further attention here. The concept itself originates in the Lacanian Symbolic and gives rise to the concept of the patriarchal symbolic order that is present in *Game of Thrones*' social and cultural milieu. Jacques Lacan proposed three orders – the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real - as registers of human subjectivity, with the symbolic being concerned with language, narrative and the acceptance of the laws established to control communication.[37] Those laws are coded as paternal by Lacan's assertion that '[i]t is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which,

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[35] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1-3.

[36] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 11.

[37] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 2001), 74.

from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law.'[38] The language used here is weighted towards the masculine and, although Lacan's intentions are disputed in respect of gender and meaning,[39] it establishes a framework through which the patriarchy can exert control over social systems and institutions. However, such patriarchal systems and institutions invite resistance from those they oppress.

The symbolic order is also grounded in feminist theory, with Julia Kristeva expanding on the work of Lacan by defining it as a 'symbolic system, within a given society, to the order of language in its universality (binary aspects of phonology, signifier-signified dependencies and autonomies, etc.).'[40] While the categorisation of the order is dependent on language, as it is in Lacan's theories, Kristeva refers to a social symbolic system that '*corresponds* to a specific structuration of the speaking subject in the *symbolic order.*'[41] It is this discourse that Creed applies to her analysis of horror, reading the order as one that has been constructed, wielded and manipulated by patriarchal hierarchies to maintain power over those considered to be inferior. It is Creed's framework that will be applied in this thesis as a consequence of its feminist approach and the extent to which it emphasises the social alongside Kristeva's language-based approach.

Like Creed's work, Judith Butler's philosophy on gender performativity is useful for exploring archetypes where those contained within a given category encroach on masculine behaviours as well as norms and structures. Behaviours that are coded as masculine are visible

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[38] Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 74.
[39] See François Sauvagnat, "Fatherhood and Naming in J. Lacan's Works." *Lacan,* last accessed 27 February 2023, https://www.lacan.com/fathername.htm for an overview of the debate concerning gender in Lacan's theory of the Symbolic.
[40] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 66.
[41] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 67.

in the warrior women and monstrous mothers of *Game of Thrones,* thus positioning the show

as a site that is conducive to exploring how gendered performativity operates within the

complex televisual text. Warriors and mothers have to contend with the recurring issue of

exclusion from male-dominated structures, institutions and hierarchies. Under Butler's

theory, self-identity is malleable and relates to the concept of performative power:

> Neither power nor discourse are rendered anew at every moment; they are not as
> weightless as the utopics of radical resignification might imply. And yet how are we
> to understand their convergent force as an accumulated effect of usage that both
> constrains and enables their reworking? [...] If the power of discourse to produce that
> which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is
> one domain in which power acts *as* discourse.[42]

Here, Butler contends that gender performativity is key to reworking discourses within which

the individual may wield power, thus overcoming the large-scale exclusion of the Other. The

reversal of power dynamics can induce radical change, but it is notable that Butler advocates

the formation of multiple discourses within a single domain. This problematises the notion of

a coherent identity within a collective space and instead advances what Kate Cregan deems

'radical individuality' over a 'radically inclusive identity'.[43] This critique of Butler's gender

performativity is valid where performance is rendered an individual act that challenges the

dynamics of power, but it also draws attention to the distinction between gender

identification and gender performativity. It hints at the complexity of modern identities as

they can be read through bodies as they stand within frameworks of culture as active entities

rather than passive surfaces.[44] As bodies are active in establishing identities and how they are

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[42] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 224.
[43] Kate Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body: Mapping the Abstraction of Embodiment* (London: SAGE, 2006), 124.
[44] James Loxley, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2007), 117.

represented on-screen, both may be read through a methodological approach that embraces that complexity. In this thesis, representation is read through layered complexity.

iii The Layered Complexity of the Televisual Text

Game of Thrones is a multi-layered complex televisual text. It exhibits the complexity that Jason Mittell's concept of complex TV reflects on, which is derived from a shift in storytelling practices identified in televisual texts produced after the turn of the twenty-first century. Mittell argues that the shift itself is predicated on 'how storytelling has changed and what cultural practices within television technology, industry, and viewership have enabled and encouraged these transformations.'[45] The narrative mode identified here encompasses a range of contributing factors that have shaped medium-specific discourses from within and outside of the televisual text itself and also have a profound impact on representation. While Mittell does not directly discuss the representational possibilities that emerge out of complex TV, he acknowledges that the complexity of the text correlates with the opportunities for the construction of identities that oppose their hegemonic counterparts. This thesis is essentially built around those identities and the opportunities, possibilities and potentialities to thoroughly interrogate archetypes and related paradigms through the televisual text. The archetypes I selected for analysis are embedded in the *Game of Thrones* storyworld, which certainly fits into Mittell's discourse, and he uses the show itself is as an example to illustrate

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[45] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 2.

some of his points, but the approach taken does not quite explain the complexity I observe within the show itself.

Mittell explains his approach in relation to the questions it asks of televisual texts, moving the analysis produced beyond meaning making practices and issues of power towards a model of poetics that takes its direction from a range of different contextual influences:

> I point to ways that poetics might lead to more nuanced understandings of broader social issues that often concern cultural scholars, but the focus of my analysis is understanding the way television tells stories, not the cultural impact or interpretation of those stories […] My own approach to poetics is influenced by a model of cultural circulation, in which practices of the television industry, audiences, critics, and creators all work to shape storytelling practices, and thus questions about form are not restricted to the realm of the text but deeply connected to contexts.[46]

This attitude to storytelling takes its cue from television in moving beyond the narrow formal narrative properties that defined approaches to the medium in the second half of the twentieth century, mirroring the transformations that occurred off-screen in terms of authorship, transmedia relationships, viewer practices, viewer comprehension and the modes and platforms via which television is now delivered. The application of a model of cultural circulation is therefore reliant on how a text engages with storytelling practices and functions in a context that extends beyond the boundaries of the show's storyworld. Where storytelling is viewed as a process that involves numerous stakeholders, it adopts a networked quality that lends itself to the creation of life beyond the text itself. However, I am interested in the televisual text as an intricate and complex work within which 'interesting possibilities for the representational analysis of identity'[47] can be identified. So, while Mittell's concept of complex

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[46] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 5.
[47] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 3.

TV does apply to *Game of Thrones* and provides a means of interrogating its wider storytelling practices, an approach centred on the show's inbuilt complexity is more pertinent to the concerns of this thesis. I will refer to this as layered complexity.

The layered complexity I identify in *Game of Thrones* sits alongside Mittell's wide-ranging exploration of storytelling practices. It also builds on the discourse surrounding long-form serial television. Kristina Graour argues that seriality should be recognised as a form in its own right and produces a series of televisual norms through a feedback loop between the industry and the audience.[48] This element of seriality leans into the reciprocity of the dynamic between the televisual text itself and the external factors that Mittell observes, but it does not form an element of layered complexity, which instead focuses on the 'coherent expansion' of a series.[49] It does not explore external factors like technologies and industry developments, but is rather more introspective and returns to the issues of content, context and culture that Mittell sought to move beyond.[50] Layered complexity refers to the intricately woven tapestry that constitutes the televisual text, which in turn provides a method of reading representations within that text.

However, layered complexity is not a new phenomenon as elements of it are identifiable in other long-form serial narratives, such as soap operas. Soap operas are continuing long-form narrative texts without any prospect of a definitive ending and so are not necessarily examples of layered complexity, but they do incorporate the pattern of intertwined narrative arcs on which the concept is based. Layered complexity therefore did not begin with *Game of*

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[48] Kristina Graour, "Story, In Progress: Considering New Methods for the Analysis of Ongoing Television Series," (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2018), 4.
[49] Graour, "Story, In Progress," 6.
[50] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 4.

Thrones or other similar twenty-first century television shows, but it is pivotal to the fabric of the show and overarching questions about representation.

In using the storyworld as a mechanism for constructing complexity, stretching stories across episodes and seasons, switching the focus between narratives and entwining narrative, character, world-building and thematic arcs so deeply that they are difficult to separate, layered complexity provides a means of reading representation of multiple archetypes simultaneously and comprehensively. There are four dimensions that contribute to the layered complexity of *Game of Thrones* and serve to define the parameters of the concept in the field of Television Studies: the storyworld, seriality, narrative, and deeply entwined arcs.

The storyworld that underpins the televisual text functions as a mechanism for constructing complexity in and of itself. Continually expanding storyworlds are documented as a part of the twenty-first century televisual environment, particularly where there is interest in transmedia discourses and paratexts.[51] However, narrowing the scope of the storyworld to a single text alone reveals how it can influence representation within it. In *Game of Thrones,* the storyworld is extensive, having been constructed by George R. R. Martin, author of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of novels that the show is based on. As such, there is a reciprocity between the storyworld and the televisual text. The text is situated within a broader storyworld that provides social, cultural, political and historical context, but actively contributes to that context. In interacting with elements that extend beyond the given moment on-screen, the narrative landscape enjoys the possibilities for both continuity and radical departure from

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[51] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 302; Yvonne Griggs, *Adaptable TV: Rewriting the Text* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4.

what has gone before.[52] This reciprocity is pivotal for challenging the parameters of existing archetypes and reading representation through layered complexity.

Seriality also contributes to the layered complexity of the televisual text. The format itself has been discussed extensively within the literature on Television Studies, often with the specific application of the concept to how texts are read. Veronica Innocenti and Guglielmo Pescatore discuss it in relation to the diegetic worlds that stretch beyond the confines of a single episode, providing 'variations of every kind – characters, scenarios, narrative techniques – [which] are constantly sought out, and indeed appreciated and celebrated by viewers', thus exceeding the boundaries of the text itself.[53] Similarly, in exploring television performance, James Walters notes that shows that 'commit themselves to numerous seasons and […] develop involved plots that stretch across many accumulated hours of television' reward their devoted viewers with motifs and patterns that their close scrutiny reveals, privileging them over casual viewers who do not have the same in-depth involvement.[54] However, those variations, motifs and patterns are as significant to the development of characters within the show as they are to audiences because they feed into representational strategies and paradigms. While Innocenti and Pescatore and Walters focus on audience readings of the narrative, I contend that seriality aids the reading of representation in a similar way in the modern televisual text. In looking to the text itself rather than beyond it, it is possible to see how seriality adds depth and unleashes the possibilities that impact on representation. It is

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[52] Matt Hills, "Television Aesthetics: A Pre-structuralist Danger?" *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 8, no. 1 (2011): 109.

[53] Veronica Innocenti and Guglielmo Pescatore, "Changing Series: Narrative Models and the Role of the Viewer in Contemporary Television Seriality," *Between* IV, no. 8 (2015): 3.

[54] James Walters, "The Enduring Act: Performance and Achievement in Long Television," in *Television Performance,* ed. Lucy Fife Donaldson and James Walters (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), 61.

long-form seriality that ensures stories stretch across multiple episodes and seasons, with the act of stretching character development over an extended period of time contributing to layered complexity.

The narrative is a further factor that contributes to layered complexity. In his 1985 book *Narration in the Fiction Film,* David Bordwell identifies three potential approaches to the study of narrative: narrative as representation, structure or as a process of narration.[55] In the case of long-form complex television, narrative creates arcs through which representation can be read and explored. However, where televisual texts exhibit layered complexity, as *Game of Thrones* does*,* narrative helps to shape how it manifests in the them. Benefitting from the seriality of the show, shifting and often parallel narrative arcs intersect and interact so that no one storyline is a singular prominent focus. In *Game of Thrones,* there are several narrative strands or arcs ongoing at any given time, all varying in prominence and importance to the text's direction at that point. Those arcs intersect through narrative alignment, with events and temporal spaces joining one to another. They interact through shared characters and geographical locations. Both forms of linkage facilitate the switching of narrative priorities, enabling *Game of Thrones* to explore multiple archetypes simultaneously as there is no singular focus on one individual or type of character.

Finally, narrative arcs also contribute to the much larger textual fabric of complex television shows, lending them depth as well as an expansive narratological landscape. The televisual textual fabric of *Game of Thrones* is composed of deeply entwined narrative, character, world-building and thematic arcs, all of which are so intricately combined that it is difficult to

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[55] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), xi

separate them without losing a degree of coherence within the text itself. In using the arcs to trace character development, it is not only possible to determine how the character is situated within the text but also how representation can be read through its layered complexity. Narrative arcs track multiple characters' physical journeys through the televisual text, and within each narrative arc a character arc explores an individual's development. World-building arcs identify representational contributions to the storyworld made within the text, while thematic arcs interrogate recurring ideas, principles and topics. These arcs share a mutual dependence upon which the complexity of representation in the televisual text itself rests. [56]

iv Structuring Representational Readings through Layered Complexity

While layered complexity will provide a method of reading representation in *Game of Thrones* through detailed textual analysis, this thesis is also concerned with overarching questions of how the televisual text provides an environment that nurtures nuance and is conducive to expanding categories of identity. I do not contend that this applies to all twenty-first century television. Neither do I contend that it applies to all shows that fall into the categories of 'quality' or 'complex' television.[57] However, I do claim that *Game of Thrones* is an example of

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[56] I do not claim that layered complexity is all-encompassing in its role of facilitating the reading of representation. Neither do I claim that it is possible to apply it to all televisual texts across various genres, formats and platforms. However, there is scope to test the concept beyond *Game of Thrones*. In my limited examination of its veracity thus far, I have identified its applicability to other shows like *The Umbrella Academy* (Netflix, 2019-present), *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-present), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *The Witcher* (Netflix, 2019-present), *The Last Kingdom* (BBC, 2015-2017; Netflix, 2018-2022) and *This is Us* (NBC, 2016-2022). In all of these shows, layered complexity provides a means of exploring the overarching concern with representation through the possibilities and potentialities for characters to develop beyond established archetypes and paradigms.

[57] See Jason Mittell's analysis of complex television and Sarah Cardwell's discussion of quality television - Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond,* ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 19-34.

a long-form serial narrative that provides scope for challenges to the relevance and applicability of archetypes that have traditionally been used to encourage audiences to instantly recognise characters as belonging to certain categories. Where instant recognition is important in film and some types of television show, notably those with an episodic format, shows with extensive and expansive storyworlds can construct identities over an extended period of time and are not as dependent on the preconceived ideas required for audience engagement.

This thesis contributes to the field of Television Studies through the development of an understanding of how representation functions in modern televisual texts, particularly through archetypes that are under-represented in television history and are now the subject of progressive representation in experimental televisual landscapes. Although televisual representation has long been an area of academic interest, avenues of inquiry have been responsive to the cultural moment. The importance of this thesis also resides in its responsiveness to the cultural moment of the 2010s that *Game of Thrones* belongs to, although its relevance extends into the current cultural moment as a consequence of the recent premiere of *House of the Dragon* (HBO, 2022-present), which has expanded the franchise and is based on a similar televisual model. Furthermore, *Game of Thrones'* approach to representation marked a significant departure from what had gone before. Although there are exceptions to the rule, it is unusual for single televisual texts to incorporate more than one archetype. It is rarer still for multiple archetypes to be present among the lead characters in that televisual text. *Game of Thrones* therefore presents an important opportunity to explore how different archetypes are framed and challenged within the same televisual text and how those archetypes are impacted by such dualities.

In order to explore the representational strategies present in such a pivotal artefact of the modern televisual landscape, this thesis breaks the approach to analysis down into three distinct but overlapping aims. The first aim is to trace the relationship between layered complexity and representation, exploring how the breadth and depth of the televisual text creates the space for possibilities, potentialities and opportunities for more nuanced representation. The second aim is to identify how the intricacy of the televisual text provides scope for the creation of representational paradigms that highlight the reality and the complexity of modern identities. The final aim is to determine how the show explores, reverses and reconstructs archetypes, moving beyond established limitations to challenge dual strategies of exclusion and containment that underpins the purpose of archetypes. As with the concept of layered complexity itself, separating the scope of these aims into completely distinct points of interest poses a challenge. However, this thesis frames each aim around a single constituent idea – the breadth and depth of the text, the complexity of modern identities, and the evolution of archetypes.

This thesis does not have a conventional structure, but rather consists of two separate sections of three chapters each. Each standalone section is dedicated to an archetype that is not only found in *Game of Thrones,* but appears in the list at the start of the Westerosi wedding vows – the Mother and the Warrior. More specifically, I apply layered complexity to read the representation of monstrous mothers and warrior women. Both of these archetypes are well-established and have life outside of *Game of Thrones* and even outside of the fantasy genre the show sits uneasily in. The monstrous mother has long been associated with the

horror genre while the warrior woman is usually found in the action genre,[58] so the transition across genres from their typical locations to fantasy serves to question visual culture's ability to contain them before representation is even discussed.

My decision to explore both monstrous mothers and warrior women in depth heavily influences the structure of the thesis and the need to have standalone sections that keep the two largely separate. This is primarily because they each have their own separate theoretical frameworks, although there is some crossover between the representations of the two archetypes in *Game of Thrones*, which is discussed within the individual chapters where border-crossing occurs. Trying to synthesise two very different bodies of theory would be counter-productive here given my intention to explore two very different archetypes. There would be a deep irony in trying to impose categories on characters to contain them while arguing that the parameters of such categories should solely be used for loose identification as more complex representational discourses empower characters to move beyond them. Instead, existing literature on mothers, including monstrous mothers, and various incarnations of the warrior woman provide the foundation on which I build my textual analysis, with the relevant theory outlined in the introduction of each section. I am aware of the potential problems caused by mapping my analysis onto theory too closely in this thesis. In most cases, the theories are concerned with film with notable philosophical exceptions on monstrosity and otherness that reside in other fields of inquiry. Demarcating between the two archetypes therefore also enables me to critique existing theory and build on it in the context

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[58] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3; Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 77-79.

of the televisual landscape, adapting it to supplement my contribution to the field of Television Studies.

The first section focuses on the monstrous mother through the characters of Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) and Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke). Both Cersei and Daenerys are deemed monstrous because they ultimately provide direct challenges to the status quo and resist the dynamics of traditional male power, grabbing it for themselves and transgressing the gender binaries that are present and exerted within the pseudo-Medieval world as a consequence. They are also both mothers, approaching conventional and unconventional motherhood respectively from a complex position whereby their identities are defined by their experiences rather than the roles that are imposed on them in the first season. I chose them for analysis because they are two of the most prominent mothers in the show, lead characters overall and together demonstrate the depth and breadth of the representation of mothers. The first chapter in this section will introduce the archetype of the monstrous mother while subsequent chapters are concerned with dysfunctional motherhood, reproductive power and the maternal body, and monstrosity and power.

The second section focuses on the warrior woman through the lens of Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) and Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie). Much like Cersei and Daenerys, they represent very different types of warrior woman within the show, with Brienne presenting as a warrior from the outset and Arya developing into the role through a combination of self-discovery and necessity. Both choose to subvert the gendered expectations imposed upon them by Westerosi society and, more specifically, by their own highborn families. Neither woman is cast aside, but rather they are given opportunities within their domestic

environments to adopt characteristics that are broadly associated with the masculine. This form of agency is unusual within pseudo-Medieval society. It does indicate that they are both independent to a degree and provides an opportunity to explore the factors that shape them as characters and as warrior women archetypes. Like Daenerys and Cersei, both Arya and Brienne are lead characters in the show, but their shared cultural origins are important for interrogating individual deviation and explain why I chose them for analysis over other characters that are warrior women but do not have a common cultural base, like Yara Greyjoy (Gemma Whelan) for example. Mirroring the monstrous mothers section, the first chapter of this section will introduce the archetype of the warrior woman before subsequent chapters explore her aesthetics, values and code of conduct, and performativity and violence.

The selection of two individuals for analysis in each section has been necessary because the televisual text is too expansive to discuss everything in appropriate depth and detail. I have tried to balance the need to nurture difference as far as possible and have also been mindful of inclusivity, particularly with the terms of reference applied here. All four of the characters selected for analysis – Cersei, Daenerys, Arya and Brienne – are assigned female at birth (AFAB), actively use and respond to the pronouns she/her and refer to themselves as girls or women in their own dialogue. For this reason, I refer to them as women in this thesis. I also refer to them as female where appropriate, particularly where existing theory uses such wording, because it is this element of their identity that has been wielded by the patriarchy where attempts have been made to contain them. Although this language may not be appropriate in other case studies, it is important to establish the relevant framing here.

In this thesis, I contend that progressive representation can challenge established archetypes in televisual texts, particularly where the processes of exploring, reversing and reconstructing such categories of identification reflect the realities of the modern identities. Binarism sustains traditional forms of social and cultural control, but it can no longer hold where it is incapable of acknowledging nuance and encapsulating the multifaceted sense of self an individual might hold. In attempting to reduce women to a single particular role and contain them, representation that pursues traditional archetypes in televisual texts is inappropriate and fails to maintain relevance in the contemporary cultural landscape.[59] As such, the layered complexity of televisual texts has the potential to facilitate the development of more nuanced characters who are given depth through their participation in multiple narrative strands and experience non-linear development stretched over hours of television.

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[59] That is not to say that those archetypes do not persist in some contemporary televisual texts, particularly those that do not have that layered complexity and/or feature tokenistic characters that serve a very specific purpose. Archetypes may therefore be deemed unfit for purpose in modern televisual texts that try to balance narrative engagement with modern relevance.

SECTION ONE

MONSTROUS MOTHERS

1 CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE MONSTROUS MOTHER

'Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger.' The symbolism of the Westerosi wedding vows, the list of idealised gender roles that provide the first sentence of this thesis, also forms the basis for this section. The order itself is symbolic, placing the figures of Father, Smith and Warrior before Mother, the first listed role performed by women. It reveals how women's roles are valued in Westeros. Secondary in importance to the familial, productive and protective male roles in a fundamentally patriarchal society, women are valued for their reproductive capacity above all else. However, the Mother of the Seven complicates this demarcation between gender roles in Westeros.

According to Marta Eidsvåg, '[t]he people of Westeros look to the Mother […] to keep their sons alive when the Father has sent them to fight with the courage the Warrior has given them.'[60] Here, it is the male gods that send men to war and force them to fight for whatever cause those in power decide to pursue. The responsibility for the survival of the armies sacrificed by the patriarchy falls squarely at the feet of the maternal figure that is left to pick up the pieces. The heavily gendered framing of roles in society therefore extends from the ideological to the religious, placing the blame for failures firmly on the shoulders of women. Eidsvåg further clarifies this by asserting that the task of the mother in the wider *Game of Thrones* storyworld can be simplified into a single task: 'keeping her children alive.'[61] In fact, reducing the Westerosi mother's function into such simple terms belies the complexity of

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[60] Marta Eidsvåg, "'Maiden, Mother and Crone': Motherhood in the World of Ice and Fire," in *Women of Ice and Fire,* ed. Anne Gjelsvik & Rikke Schubart (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 151.
[61] Eidsvåg, "'Maiden, Mother and Crone': Motherhood in the World of Ice and Fire," 151.

motherhood in the show, which is exacerbated by the intricacy of the narrative arcs and the extensive character development that underpins the almost continuous expansion of the storyworld. Where gender roles provide opportunities for containment, the Westerosi storyworld creates the potential for disruption.

This section focuses on the representation of the mother in *Game of Thrones* as one of several broad types of women characters that push the parameters of representation established by and through theories of otherness. However, the scope of analysis is narrowed by my choice to focus on the monstrous mother. A well-used trope that is rooted firmly within psychoanalysis, the monstrous mother is instantly recognisable within film, literature and, to a lesser extent, television. Although it evades easy definition and is not based on a single unified theory of what constitutes a monstrous mother, Creed stresses the gendered nature of monstrosity that lies at the heart of the trope where the monstrous feminine and monstrous mother overlap.[62] Both pose a threat to the stability of the symbolic order and have traditionally been policed by the patriarchy. Stability is an element of fundamental importance in the construction of the mother as Other and therefore directly impacts on the way the monstrous mother is framed on-screen. Returning briefly to Wood's assertion that otherness necessitates action in one of two distinct ways, specifically 'rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself,' stability requires removal or containment of the perceived threat.[63] The containment process is therefore applicable to representations of both the monstrous feminine and the monstrous mother.

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[62] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 3.
[63] Wood, "The American Nightmare Horror in the 70s," 25.

The monstrous feminine is constructed within the patriarchal order and by its phallocentric ideology, which marks female sexuality as a site of difference and its threat as monstrous.[64] These paradigms are identifiable within *Game of Thrones* and the characters that exhibit them are multifaceted in scope, sharing the common traits of refusing to conform to society's gendered expectations and subverting patriarchal values while also developing into individuals that are markedly different from one another. For instance, Cersei Lannister is, at first glance, a biological mother of three children for whom she is the primary carer in a traditional family setting. Spoilt and cruel, Joffrey Baratheon is Cersei's eldest son and the heir apparent to the Iron Throne on the death of his given father, King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy). Cersei's remaining children, Myrcella (Aimee Richardson/Nell Tiger Free) and Tommen, are indulged just as much as their elder brother but possess none of his barbarous traits. All three are actually the products of an incestuous relationship between Cersei and her brother, Jaime (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau). In contrast, Daenerys Targaryen is the adoptive single mother of three dragons - Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion - hatched through her magical familial connection with the creatures, but unable to have biological children of her own. Their respective differences illustrate the variation and the extent to which they push beyond existing paradigms of the mother archetype, challenging their respective designations of monstrosity.

The analytic framework established within this section provides scope to explore, reinterpret and reconstruct the monstrous mother's identity within the televisual text, challenging the application of monstrosity to women who do not conform to patriarchal

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[64] Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, no. 1 (1986): 44.

expectations and ideals. After forming the framework through a range of theories and concepts that have been influential in exploring the representation of motherhood, the exploration of the mother's complex identity reflects the impact that patriarchal values have on gender roles and the dynamics of conformity and otherness. The process of reversing determines how the characters develop in opposition to patriarchal expectations, challenging stereotypes and undermining the traditional framing of idealised motherhood as desirable and aspirational. Ultimately, the reconstruction of the monstrous mother's identity acknowledges nuance and difference as imperative to the recognition that modern motherhood is paradoxically empowering and limiting. It also presents television as a vital medium for the interrogation and potential rejection of the tired trope that labels a mother who refuses to conform to patriarchal demands as monstrous.

1.1 The Construction of the Monstrous Mother

Although this section is dedicated to the monstrous mother in *Game of Thrones,* the construction of the archetype begins with her reproductive role and the representation of mothers and motherhood in visual culture. Since the late 1990s, the representations of motherhood in visual culture have provided a site through which the intersections of ideologies on class, gender and race can be interrogated, thus producing a new 'momism' that ostensibly celebrated motherhood, but positioned mothers as subservient to their children rather than their husbands.[65] An idealised and romanticised view of motherhood that

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[65] Kathleen Rowe Karlyn *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 3; Julia Mason, "Mothers and Antiheroines: Analyzing Motherhood and Representation in *Weeds, Sons of Anarchy* and *Breaking Bad,*" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 3 (2019): 647. Karlyn draws on Hollywood blockbuster *Titanic* (1997) as an example of momism via the application of a white, middle-class

conforms to the unattainable standards of the 1950s, momism also attempts to engage with the complexity of modern life without actively engaging with factors that impinge on individuals' experiences, such as cultural beliefs, religion, race, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status.[66] The return to the idealisation of intensive mothering continues to ensure that patriarchal societies placing emphasis on traditional gender roles benefit from the labour of mothers without recompense. In this sense, motherhood remains 'one of patriarchy's main institutions that suppress women'.[67] However, while ideology is an essential element of the construction of the mother in visual culture, particularly film, the theoretical framework extends beyond it. As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn powerfully claims, '[t]he feminist struggle for social transformation and justice can only benefit from our continued willingness to think about the institutions of motherhood, and to reflect on and strengthen our generational connections.'[68]

Although there has been a consistent willingness to rethink and interpret the mother in visual culture, the types of mother appearing have remained relatively stable since the 1980s, with scholars irrevocably linking the representation of mothers and motherhood to the subordination of women within patriarchal societies. For instance, E. Ann Kaplan's analysis of the complex relationship between feminism and the figure of the mother notes that second

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consumerist sensibility to motherhood via Ruth (Frances Fisher), the mother of protagonist Rose (Kate Winslet). It is a sensibility that Rose rejects as she repudiates Ruth's social climbing in favour of the freedom to make her own choices. The intergenerational struggle that underpins Rose's character arc is an echo of feminisms that have sought to distance the ideologies of the daughters from those that bound their mothers, but it also exhibits a desire to free the female body from the biological determinism that has traditionally defined it. The framing of motherhood as tied to the desires of children is regressive, but it is a dynamic that demands close scrutiny.

[66] Mason, "Mothers and Antiheroines," 647.

[67] Janine Engelbrecht, "Magical Mothers: The Representation of Witches and Motherhood in Contemporary Fantasy Cinema," *Communicatio* 47, no. 1 (2021): 22

[68] Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers,* 5.

wave feminism broadly focuses on the mother from the perspective of the daughter, therefore following familiar patterns of social and cultural relations that relegate her to the margins.[69] Further, Kaplan quotes the scholarship of Adrienne Rich to reinforce her point. Rich's seminal text, *Of Woman Born* (1976), draws attention to the diametrically opposed categories that mothers are shoehorned into as a consequence of the refusal to acknowledge them as complex individuals with desires, needs and aspirations of their own outside of their reproductive roles. Drawing on various mythological examples, Rich illustrates that the mother is either idealised as a nurturing and selfless individual or derided as a neglectful and selfish mother who is concerned only for herself.[70] Such binary opposites are unhelpful in exploring the characterisation of the mother and largely went unchallenged by second wave feminist discourse, which reinforced the binary and the patriarchal influence that underpinned it.

Kaplan explains second wave feminism's influence on the construction and visibility of motherhood: '[F]eminism was in part a reaction against our mothers, who had tried to inculcate the patriarchal "feminine" in us, much to our anger. This made it difficult for us to identify with Mothering and to look from the position of the Mother. Unwittingly, then, we repeated the patriarchal omission of the Mother.'[71] The omission may manifest in an absence or in a silent presence, both of which are monitored and controlled by the patriarchal structures that the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s fought against. This, she argues, has led

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[69] E. Ann Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," *Heresies* 16 (1983): 81.

[70] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1976), 110-127.

[71] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81.

to the stereotyping of mothers in visual culture, although stereotyping is visible within societal discourses that extend beyond cinema.

Although Kaplan's analysis is based on her observations of Hollywood cinema, she identifies four dominant paradigms, thus expanding on the binary representations noted by Rich – the Good Mother, the Bad Mother, the Heroic Mother and the Silly, Weak or Vain Mother.[72] Taking the Good Mother first, Kaplan describes her as 'all-nurturing and self-abnegating – the "Angel of the House." Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them and is marginal to the narrative.'[73] The Good Mother in visual culture is therefore marginalised and identified through her essential role as a reproductive vessel. Defined by and through the family, the paradigm is reductive and strips the identity of the individual character right back to an idealised form of motherhood that conforms to the ideology of intensive motherhood. Rebecca Feasey notes the ideology begins in pregnancy and dictates the appropriate codes of behaviour, style and general appearance before manifesting in the 'sole care and responsibility for her children's emotional development and intellectual growth, is devoted to them and their needs rather than her own, and never has any negative feelings towards them, only unfailing conditional love.'[74] The Good Mother is therefore expected to unquestioningly embrace the self-sacrifice demanded under traditional gender roles, positioning her at the beck and call of her husband and children and responsible for any failures of the nuclear family.

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[72] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81-82.
[73] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81.
[74] Rebecca Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Popular Television* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 2.

The preoccupation with the family underpins the Good Mother paradigm through all of her incarnations. Katherine Kinnick observes that the Good Mother is located firmly within domesticity and the existing traditional gender roles imposed on women, incorporating activities that conflate the wife and mother roles like cooking, cleaning and other domestic chores.[75] She is also enshrined in social and cultural discourse: 'the media idealize and glamorize motherhood as the one path to fulfilment for some, painting a rosy, Hallmark-card picture that ignores or minimizes the very real challenges that come along with parenthood.'[76] The Good Mother is therefore an unrealistic figure who women are encouraged to strive to be only to inevitably fail. She is therefore not only mythologised, but also lacks authenticity.

The emphasis placed on the Good Mother as the ideal is not grounded in the authentic experiences of motherhood that occur within the everyday. Instead, the type is rendered too rigid by the ideological biases entrenched in the institution of motherhood via the more powerful agent of the paternal figure.[77] This is a view shared by Andrea O'Reilly, who maintains Rich's distinction between motherhood and mothering; that the institution of motherhood is controlled and defined by patriarchal structures, thus oppressing women, but mothering experiences are personal and therefore female-defined so can be considered a source of power.[78] Where the Good Mother is an intrinsically patriarchal construct, the disruption posed by counternarratives grounded in female-defined mothering directly challenges the validity of the archetype and draws attention to its inability to evolve in line

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[75] Katherine Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," in *Mommy Angst: Motherhood in American Popular Culture,* ed. Ann C. Hall and Mardia J. Bishop (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 12.
[76] Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," 3.
[77] Sarah Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 37.
[78] Andrea O'Reilly, "Introduction," in *Feminist Mothering,* ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 3.

with the cultural needs of the day. As such, the Good Mother remains one of the most present archetypes by which mothering, motherwork and motherhood are represented in visual culture.

The Bad Mother, or Witch, is the polar opposite or 'underside' of her Good counterpart and is characterised as '[s]adistic, hurtful, and jealous, she refuses the self-abnegating role, demanding her own life' expressly against the 'desired patriarchal ideal.'[79] This role occupies the opposite end of the moral spectrum to the Good Mother because she resists the position imposed on her by the patriarchy, refusing to accept her place as a powerless and silent figure who watches on from the margins. That is not to say that the Bad Mother is not marginalised, but rather that she is resolutely othered based on her approach to motherhood rather than solely as a result of her gender.

Although there is broad agreement on what constitutes the Good Mother, the paradigm of the Bad Mother features greater variance in the traits and characteristics that define her as such. For instance, just as the Good Mother's virtues are enshrined in popular media-based narratives, her Bad counterpart is also subject to media discourses that draw attention to specific and often stereotyped flaws according to Kinnick: 'Media narratives often cast motherhood in moral terms, juxtaposing the "good mother" with the "bad mother", who frequently is a working mom, a lower-income mom, or someone who does not conform to traditional gender roles of behaviour, ambition, or sexual orientation.'[80] In contrast, Sarah Arnold observes that the Bad Mother in the horror film genre is 'not only a product of the patriarchal imaginary [...] but also a transgressive figure who resists conformity and

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[79] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81.
[80] Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," 3.

assimilation. Her very transgressions often indicate the slipperiness of patriarchy. The Bad Mother can point to dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the psychosocial structures of the family.'[81] Although Arnold, Kinnick and Kaplan concur on the transgressive nature of the Bad Mother, there is no tacit agreement of what defines that transgression.

The absence of specificity here is indicative of the paradigm's relationship to the Good Mother as opposed to establishing a coherent definition of its polar opposite. Instead, the Bad Mother is broadly defined in terms of her refusal to conform and positioned as literally any maternal type that does not fall within the demands of patriarchal idealisation. Just as the Good Mother lacks authenticity, so do those absent, neglectful and otherwise unsuitable mothers who are all classified as Bad Mothers. Although the latter has greater potential to account for the challenges of modern motherhood, the patriarchal insistence on branding those mothers that refuse to conform to the traditional gender roles expected of them as bad is fundamentally limiting and lacks nuance. It pushes the individual towards monstrosity rather than developing contextually appropriate understanding.

Televisual texts provide scope for exploring such context and disrupting the existence of binding categories, although the possibility of crossing the boundary of the Good Mother/Bad Mother binary has already been addressed to a degree. Drawing on the work of Kaplan, Arnold identifies the possibility for transition between the Good Mother and Bad Mother binaries in Hollywood cinema.[82] Where predicated on the sacrificing/selfish trope, the two may be collapsed within a single figure where there is a redemption arc embedded within the relevant narrative, thus allowing a member of the Bad Mother category to renounce her selfish ways

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[81] Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film,* 69.
[82] Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film,* 23.

and correct her behaviour. Again, though, this is problematic as a consequence of the inauthenticity and unattainability of the Good Mother paradigm. However, the existence of further theoretical paradigms does allow for some deviation from the binary.

The final two paradigms presented by Kaplan - the Heroic Mother and Silly, Weak or Vain Mother – rarely appear alongside the binary opposites of Good and Bad in the current theoretical framework.[83] The Heroic Mother is an extension of the Good Mother, built on her 'saintly qualities' of refusing to indulge in self-satisfaction over the interests of the family. Kaplan indicates that she 'suffers and endures for the sake of husband and children.'[84] Here, the label of 'heroic' subverts the traditional framing of heroism as indicative of bravery and valour in favour of a form of self-sacrifice. Instead of resisting her designated place, she embraces it. The Heroic Mother is therefore a further idealised paradigm alongside that of the Good Mother and ineffectively deals with the modern challenges of motherhood.

However, the Heroic Mother provides a starting point for a newer paradigm that does address the modern challenges of motherhood. Julia Mason identifies the emergence of an antihero mother in twenty-first century television, which functions as a site for the presentation of misogynistic images and for empowerment through 'multiple forms of power and agency.'[85] She cites *Breaking Bad*'s Skylar White (Anna Gunn), *Sons of Anarchy*'s Gemma Teller Morrow (Katey Sagal) and Tara Knowles-Teller (Maggie Siff), and *Weeds*' Nancy Botwin (Mary-Louise Parker) as examples of the antihero mother, or outlaw mother, who is white and conventionally beautiful, but also engages in problematic practices and criminal behaviours.

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[83] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 82.
[84] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 82.
[85] Mason, "Mothers and Antiheroines," 646.

She fiercely protects but does not always prioritise her children.[86] She is complex but well-rounded, reluctant to conform to mainstream parenting practices and presents a more realistic approach to motherhood that acknowledges the multifaceted emotions that are a normal part of parenting.[87] The representation of the antihero mother is therefore nuanced and acknowledges the existence of deviance within the type that resembles that of the Bad Mother, thus pushing against the homogeny associated with the Good Mother.

Despite the evolution of the Heroic Mother into an antiheroic space, the Silly, Weak or Vain Mother - henceforth simplified to the Weak Mother – has remained constant. She is commonly found in comedies and does not command the respect of her family, instead being subjected to the scorn and ridicule of her husband and children. This is the archetype that most overtly illustrates Kaplan's point that all mothers are presented from the perspective of her husband or children because doing so from her own position would present the difficulty of acknowledging the existence of individualised needs and desires.[88] This paradigm is the least applicable to *Game of Thrones*, but it contributes to a further paradigm that has emerged in recent discourse pertaining to the mother, mothering, motherhood and motherwork – the 'good enough' mother.

Feasey recognises that women struggle to live up to the impossibly high standards that underpin the Good Mother paradigm, drawing attention to the importance of television programming in negotiating idealised practices of motherhood to achieve a more attainable and sustainable form of mothering that rejects intensive motherhood in favour of practices

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[86] *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *Sons of Anarchy* (FX, 2008-2014) and *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005-2012).
[87] Mason, "Mothers and Antiheroines," 647-648.
[88] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 82.

that are 'good enough.'[89] Although such practices are difficult to quantify, televisual

constructions, circulations and interrogations of contemporary mothering practices are crucial

to developing an understanding of the medium's 'power and scope to foreground culturally

accepted familial relations, define sexual norms and provide "common sense" understandings

about motherhood and maternal behaviour for the contemporary audience.'[90] Televisual

representation should not be taken as indicative of contemporaneous reality, particularly

where such representations are grounded in a fantasy genre that typically pushes the

parameters of what is possible when the limitations of lived realities are removed.[91] Despite

that, the notion of a mother being 'good enough' is grounded in the lived experiences of

motherhood that exist outside the ideological framework controlled and maintained by

patriarchal values.

This theoretical framework pertaining to motherhood only applies to *Game of Thrones* to

an extent because of the nature of the show in its capacity as fantasy. The genre is not typically

associated with or known for motherhood, as is evidenced by the focus of existing scholarship

on genres like melodrama and soap opera, both of which are considered to be domestic in

scope and therefore predominantly concerned with the lives of women. Similarly, mothers

are pervasive in those genres, whereas they have traditionally been absent in the most

popular fantasy texts. For example, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films is notably devoid of

maternal figures, leading Lianne McLarty to comment that the races of Middle Earth are

defined by a 'masculine exclusivity' within which characters are born 'wholly formed, notably

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[89] Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives,* 9.
[90] Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives,* 9.
[91] Joanna Russ, Speculations: "The Subjectivity of Science Fiction," *Extrapolation* 15, no. 1 (1973): 52; Jackson, *Fantasy*, 20; Dino DeFino, *The HBO Effect* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 115.

without mothers.'[92] The fantasy genre is therefore not a domain traditionally associated with motherhood, mothering or motherwork.[93]

Returning briefly to the figure of the monstrous mother, she has traditionally been associated with the horror genre because its framework typically allows for the emergence of the Other, with individual texts being predicated on the threat it poses to the established social order. Where the monstrous mother is the Other, she is constructed as a destabilising force who must be contained or destroyed in order to achieve the narrative closure that horror texts rely on to provide their audiences with pleasure.[94] Like other monsters, she resides on the margins and is subject to numerous binaries – good and evil, normative and supernatural, and human and non-human. Most importantly, she is subjected to the binary of those who take up their proper gender roles and those that either cannot or refuse to conform to the demands established by patriarchal discourse.[95] *Game of Thrones* exhibits elements of horror, but it evades neat genre classification as those elements are situated within a storyworld that is defined by its fantastic genre-based tropes and traits. In incorporating the figure of the monstrous mother, then, the show drags her across genres. And what happens when she moves from pure horror texts to those hybrid fantasy texts that she does not typically inhabit? Does she lose her potency because she does not fit neatly within fantasy structures, which are

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[92] Lianne McLarty, "Masculinity, Whiteness, and Social Class in *The Lord of the Rings*," in *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings,* ed. Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 183.

[93] That is not to say, though, that fantasy is unsuited to the development of the mother archetype. The literal nature of the fantastic removes its women characters from the realm of relatable in the same way that melodrama and soap opera can be said to provide characters that the audience know and see in their own everyday, but the figure of the mother remains relevant to the audience. It is therefore the type that is of interest here, and the show's mediation of issues that are pertinent in the lives of women and to motherhood are explored in disparate ways.

[94] Mark Jancovich, *Horror* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1992), 9.

[95] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 49.

typically more hopeful and benign than those of horror? As the existing theory concerning the monstrous mother is matched to the expectations of the horror genre, these questions inform the interrogation of the archetype here.

It is accurate to say that, where fantasy limits the relatability of mothers in *Game of Thrones,* it opens up further possibilities for the archetype. The construction of the mother as monstrous offers a different dimension to discourse concerning the idealisation of intensive mothering, expanding on how the role may be subverted and become subversive. The monstrous mother emerges out of the intersection of the representation of the mother and the monstrous feminine. It is important to clarify that it is the monstrous mother that is of interest here rather than the monstrous feminine because the latter straddles categories and can be applied to numerous archetypes. Conversely, the monstrous mother establishes parameters that are connected to a specific role, one that is important to the characters that will be explored within this section.

In her exploration of the monstrous mother, Marilyn Francus traces the archetype's early manifestations to the eighteenth century, in which British narratives represented mothers in deviant and sensationalist terms, 'as wicked mothers, abandoning mothers, infanticidal mothers, pushy mothers, and evil stepmothers' in fables, ballads, plays and novels.[96] Good Mothers were rare in such texts, but the binary of good and bad was applicable to the cultural landscape at that time despite its failure to capture the nuanced nature of motherhood in reality.[97] Francus' interrogation of monstrous motherhood therefore highlights the longevity

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[96] Marilyn Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 10.
[97] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 10.

of specific types of mother and illustrates how the monstrous mother emerged out of the principle of difference. Difference endures regardless of the extent to which cultural landscapes may shift, but the basic categories of Good Mother and Bad Mother provide the foundation from which deviation emerges.

Difference is a trait that unifies much of the existing theory on both the monstrous feminine and the monstrous mother. In *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body,* for instance, Jane Ussher identifies the reproductive body as a site of fascination and fear, with the combination of power and danger that underpins these qualities positioning it as monstrous in terms of both femininity and motherhood.[98] Furthermore, the expectations of femininity and motherhood overlap within male-dominated frameworks that impose patriarchal expectations on the reproductive body, designating the body that cannot be controlled as subject to failure in both functions:

> [It is] the enacting of femininity within a highly regulated framework, which produces notions of the 'natural' reproductive body […] reifying the woman who is in control of the unruly reproductive body as a creature of substance; an ideal to which we, as women, should aspire. Women who fail in this control, who fail to perform femininity within the tight boundaries within which it is prescribed at each stage of the reproductive life cycle, are at risk of being positioned as mad or bad, and subjected to discipline or punishment, which masquerades as treatment or rehabilitation to disguise its regulatory intent.[99]

The monstrous feminine and the monstrous mother are therefore regulatory devices harnessed to ensure compliance with the roles identified as desirable by the masculine hierarchy. Ussher further emphasises the reproductive female body as a site of surveillance

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[98] Jane Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1-2.
[99] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 1-2.

and the policing of femininity, asserting that it is a means of ensuring social control.[100] In adhering to expectations and performing both femininity and motherhood within a prescripted societal framework, the reproductive body is under patriarchal control. Any deviation from maternal expectations renders the individual monstrous, particularly where they refuse conformity and mechanisms of enforcement.

The monstrous mother offers a further threat to patriarchal power via her abject corporeality, sexual knowledge and desire, the latter of which is contained within the mother's body but should be repressed.[101] The mother's hold over any child that emerges from her body also poses a latent threat that stems from the influence and power she wields in direct contradiction of masculine power norms.[102] The importance of the monstrous feminine, and therefore also the monstrous mother, cannot be overstated, having long driven the representations of, and otherness associated with, women who do not conform on-screen. Thesis V of Cohen's (1996: 15) theory asserts that the monster dwells at the gates of difference, and the monstrous mother can be located there based upon the complex theoretical image of her that emerges from Ussher and Creed: 'Feminine and cultural Others are monstrous enough by themselves in patriarchal society, but when they threaten to mingle, the entire economy of desire comes under attack.'[103] In the context of complex and often fantastical twenty-first century televisual texts like *Game of Thrones,* women who are Others do mingle and exhibit desires that patriarchal societies consider to be dangerous threats to the status quo.

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[100] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 4.
[101] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 86-87.
[102] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 50; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 13.
[103] Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 15.

The fantasy genre is a fertile space for the monstrous mother and has provided scope for the construction of individual maternal figures whose role has harnessed their transgressive potential to empower them as opposed to suppressing them, becoming the subject instead of the object.[104] For example, Janine Engelbrecht interrogates the relationship between magic and motherhood in recent Hollywood cinema via the examples of *Maleficent* (2014) and *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2016).[105] In both films, Engelbrecht identifies an adoptive form of motherhood that enables Maleficent (Angelina Jolie) and Miss Peregrine (Eva Green) to remain outside of patriarchal control.[106] They evade the ties of traditional kinship, adopting children in a protective capacity - Miss Peregrine as a headmistress and Maleficent as a pseudo-fairy godmother – and accept responsibility for them. Although they are consequently defined by their relationship with the children, their exhibiting of masculine *and* feminine parental characteristics serves to empower them. Both characters are deemed witches because of their magical abilities and subvert established tropes through adoptive and surrogate motherhood. *Game of Thrones* features a similar transgressive potential in the form of Daenerys Targaryen. Through her, the extensive storyworld and intricately woven character arcs facilitate numerous opportunities to push back against the patriarchal status quo that controls the institutions and instruments of power in Westeros.

Although Engelbrecht's interrogation of alternative mother figures in the fantasy genre occurs through the lens of Hollywood film, there are parallels between the transgressive potential of characters in film and televisual texts. The nature of television impacts on the

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[104] Engelbrecht, "Magical Mothers," 20.
[105] Engelbrecht, "Magical Mothers," 28-31.
[106] Engelbrecht, "Magical Mothers," 31.

construction and progression of narrative and character arcs, which produces its own set of interpretive problems. For instance, Feasey captures a sense of the disjunction between how television is perceived and the meanings it produces: 'television should not be dismissed as mere entertainment, escapism or distraction; rather, it must be examined as a "site of struggle over meaning and values" in general and a site over meaning and values concerning motherhood and the maternal role in particular.'[107] There is a temptation to do this with shows that draw at least in part on the fantasy genre, but the representation of mothers and motherhood in *Game of Thrones* is highly complex and reinforces Feasey's point that it is important to explore how archetypes are constructed and circulated via television.[108]

1.2 The Monstrous Mother in *Game of Thrones*

While the construction and circulation of the monstrous mother is of particular interest to me, the layered complexity of *Game of Thrones*' storyworld renders it a fertile space for the exploration and interrogation of various iterations of the mother archetype. This has already been documented in some of the analysis of the mother in the show. For instance, Eidsvåg's reading of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* storyworld suggests that it deviates from other high fantasy texts by displaying a tendency to avoid the use of archetypes, quoting Barbara Lynn Lucas' observation that it 'features characters who are more psychologically complex and morally ambiguous than is typical in epic fantasy.'[109] This thesis is predicated on

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[107] Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives,* 9.

[108] Rebecca Feasey, "From Soap Opera to Reality Programming: Examining Motherhood, Motherwork and the Maternal Role on Popular Television," *Imaginations* 4, no. 2 (2013): 25.

[109] Eidsvåg, "'Maiden, Mother and Crone'," 153; Barbara Lynn Lucas, "Epic Fantasy," in *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy, Volume Two: Entries,* ed. Robin Anne Reid (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009), 103-104.

a similar position, but it is vital to note that Eidsvåg distinguishes between Martin's books and the television adaptation. Her primary argument is that the show, unlike the books, demonstrates 'a consistent pattern of bringing the mother characters closer to Kaplan's archetypes as well as a modern ideal of what a mother should be.'[110] My argument deviates from this premise. I argue that there are exceptions to Eidsvåg and Lucas' respective observations in the *Game of Thrones* television adaptation that demonstrate the depth and breadth of the televisual text. That is to say that there are examples of characters that are mapped onto Kaplan's archetypes, but there are others that exhibit elements of several paradigms and push back against the parameters established in existing theory. It is this latter category that I am interested in. Such exceptions raise the question of how television can facilitate the exploration, reversal and reconstruction of established archetypes to more engaging, multi-layered and realistic characters.

Although the representations of motherhood discussed here are decades old, they endure within various televisual texts today. The vengeful and monstrous mother who has been separated from her child and threatens the order of things is visible in the character of Allison Hargreeves (Emmy Raver-Lampman) in *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-present), a show that also features Grace (Jordan Claire Robbins), a robot who has been purpose-built to assume the role of the idealised mother to the Hargreeves children.[111] *Grey's Anatomy*'s (2005-present) Ellis Grey (Kate Burton) is framed as a neglectful Bad Mother whose daughter, Meredith (Ellen Pompeo), is a secondary concern behind her career as a world-renowned

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[110] Eidsvåg, "'Maiden, Mother and Crone'," 153.
[111] *The Umbrella Academy* (Netflix, 2019-present).

surgeon.[112] Along with those antiheroic mothers already identified here are other mothers who put themselves in physical danger to save their children, such as *Stranger Things*' (2016-present) Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder).[113] Although I have categorised these examples based on the paradigm they most resemble, only Grace fits neatly into a single category and that is by design. Allison, Ellis and Joyce all exhibit the complexity that underpins the representation of motherhood, mothering and motherwork in the twenty-first century[114].

William Clapton and Laura Shepherd point out that the impact of the complexity of the televisual text on women heightens the extremity of the intersection between power and gender: *'Game of Thrones* "knows" the gendered nature of political authority in a way that emphasises connections between *realpolitik* and sexualised violence, between sovereign power and gendered subordination.'[115] The paradoxes that are implicitly bound to such seemingly incompatible structures of power are especially pertinent in cases of the depiction of monstrous mothers like Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen. At the very beginning of the first series, Westeros is depicted as feudal, patriarchal and highly misogynistic, positioning women as objects that are firmly under the control of men, who may use and abuse them with impunity. None of those introduced in the first season have any substantive political power or a position of authority within the status quo. The first exception is Olenna Tyrell

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[112] *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-present).

[113] *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-present).

[114] Such representation reflects the cultural milieu of the past two decades or so, within which the issue of balancing motherhood with paid labour has become more prominent and working mothers have become more visible in politics, business and popular culture alike, thus pushing back against enduring discourses that say women cannot have it all. I do not wish to engage with this particular ideological debate here because it exceeds the scope of my research, but it has affected televisual representations of the mother and complicated attempts to enforce the boundaries that are still visible in theoretical discourses. See Elizabeth Podnieks, "Introduction: Popular Culture's Maternal Embrace," in *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture,* ed. Elizabeth Podnieks (Montreal: McGill-Queens University, 2012), 14-16.

[115] William Clapton and Laura Shepherd, "Lessons from Westeros: Gender and Power in Game of Thrones," *Politics* 37, no. 1 (2017): 6.

(Diana Rigg), the matriarch of House Tyrell, who bucks that trend in the third season by being forthright and refusing to conform to the domestic ideal of the submissive, docile woman.

Olenna refuses to conform to the expectations of masculine hierarchies, as is evidenced by the dismissal of her son, Mace (Roger Ashton-Griffiths), the incumbent head of House Tyrell, with the cutting line, 'Not now, Mace. Lord Tywin [Lannister] and I are speaking.'[116] Although she is afforded the freedom to speak out on account of her seniority, she still operates from within the patriarchy having learned how to play the political games that not only ensure her survival but also empower her to manipulate events to her advantage. Cersei and Daenerys, however, are irrevocably bound to masculine hierarchies during the early seasons of the show and have to earn the right to challenge them. Cersei is bound by her marriage to Robert Baratheon as well as her father, Tywin (Charles Dance), and children, while Daenerys is bound by her brother, Viserys (Harry Lloyd), before being bound by her marriage to Khal Drogo (Jason Momoa). It is somewhat poetic that Cersei and Daenerys, two monstrous mothers, would later push the patriarchal structures to their limits, to which they were inextricably bound while their relatives by blood and marriage lived.

The mother occupies a paradoxical position in the *Game of Thrones* storyworld. As has been documented as common in visual culture by Kaplan, there is a distinct absence of mothers and the influence of motherhood, in most of the main characters' lives.[117] This ostensibly corresponds with the observation that the fantasy genre is not typically associated with motherhood. However, despite that, certain mothers are positioned at the heart of the show's narrative tapestry. The paradox that exists here lends the prominence of motherhood in

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[116] Graves, dir., "The Lion and the Rose."
[117] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81.

certain characters' arcs an authority that is visible because mothers (as a category) are not pervasive. It places emphasis on the maternal role that Cersei Lannister, for instance, assumes for the first six seasons of the show and contributes significantly to her identity and development within and beyond it.

Despite the prominence of the role of motherhood within the show, only nine of the named female characters are mothers – Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen, Catelyn Stark (Michelle Fairley), Ellaria Sand (Indira Varma), Selyse Baratheon (Tara Fitzgerald), Melessa Tarly (Samantha Spiro), Lysa Arryn (Kate Dickie), Gilly (Hannah Murray) and Olenna Tyrell, with the latter being a grandmother too. Although all gave birth to children, this list incorporates a range of different types of mothers and experiences of motherhood, all of which are characterised by a toxicity that is a prerequisite of the condition of motherhood within the male-dominated patriarchal society in Westeros. Interestingly, only one - Melessa Tarly - may be considered to embrace conventional motherhood.[118] All eight of the other mothers listed here provide an insight into how motherhood is unsustainable when an idealised version of it is imposed on them. They are expected to be docile, doting mothers in line with societal representations of intensive mothering but are monstrous mothers who are prepared to do unimaginable things for their children, much like the antihero mother.[119]

Ultimately, the site at which motherhood, patriarchy and female agency intersect in *Game of Thrones* highlights the complete absence of order in Westerosi society. Cersei and Daenerys

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[118] Melessa Tarly is the exception to the rule because she embraces traditional motherhood without attempting to push against its parameters. She is the Good Mother; ultimately subservient to her husband and accepting of the limits imposed by traditional gender roles.

[119] Mason, "Mothers and Antiheroines," 646. This is a view shared by Marina Warner, who posits that women are typed as manipulative, purposely concealing their true identities as aberrations who are capable of committing monstrous crimes in the name of maternal love precisely because they rebel. See Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time. The 1994 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), 7.

both develop within its chaos and provide vehicles to thoroughly explore the trope of monstrous motherhood. The environment serves to foster discourses of individualised deviance, a pattern that is common where monstrosity is attributed to mothers and effectively absolves society of all blame for them and their equally monstrous offspring.[120] However, the dynamic under which mothers are perceived as the source of deviance and instability is also further complicated by the fact that the mothers present do not occupy the same maternal space as each other.

Although Cersei and Daenerys are prominent mothers in the Westerosi storyworld, they occupy very different roles and represent diverse forms of motherhood. Daenerys, for instance, represents unconventional motherhood whereas Cersei is cast in the role of conventional motherhood, at least initially. Daenerys is a conqueror, a warrior woman who traverses the continent of Essos to free slaves and accumulate an army that can help her to reclaim her birthright, the Iron Throne. Her aesthetic reflects this, evolving from the drab and rough clothing of the Dothraki (Figure 1) to ornate dresses and robes of a queen in her own right through the course of the show (Figure 2), although she retains the Dothraki tradition of adding a braid to her hairstyle every time she defeats an enemy.

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[120] Nicola Goc, "'Monstrous Mothers' and the Media," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil,* ed. Niall Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 149.

Figure 1: Daenerys in Dothraki clothing, "A Golden Crown" (1:6)

Figure 2: Daenerys in the ornate clothing associated with her queenship, "The Iron Throne" (8:6)

Daenerys' children, three dragons born from the petrified eggs she nurtures in the first season, are a key element of her battle strategy and enable her to retain power over the lands she conquers, but their upbringing is rarely addressed in any detail on-screen. As an adoptive mother, Daenerys' relationship with her dragons is based on a reciprocity not usually associated with motherhood. Cersei, on the other hand, exemplifies highborn motherhood,

dedicating herself to her role of wife and the upbringing of her children. She is dressed in fine gowns and has the intricately styled hair that is befitting of a queen (Figure 3), but is subservient to her husband in a strategic marriage designed to bring the Houses Baratheon and Lannister together to consolidate power. Cersei therefore adheres to the idealised intensive motherhood expected of her by the patriarchal order to which she belongs, although she later subverts that order by declaring herself queen.

Figure 3: An example of Cersei's fine gowns, "Kissed by Fire" (3:5)

As is evident from these brief observations of their aesthetic appearance and characterisation, neither Cersei nor Daenerys are solely mothers. Their respective identities are not reduced or tethered to a given function within the televisual text because the complexity of the storyworld is replicated in their multi-layered personas. They are also daughters, sisters, onetime prisoners, sexually desirable women and powerful leaders in their own right. Their character arcs are intricately woven to form rounded individuals who are not bound to or confined by a single role, but they are also fundamentally flawed. The ensuing chapters will interrogate their identities based around their maternal identities via

dysfunctional motherhood, their maternal bodies and the threat they pose to hegemonic masculine power. All three areas contribute to the construction of the monstrous mother in *Game of Thrones* and reveal the possibilities that the televisual storyworld provides for those mothers that are released from the maternal bonds that define the Good Mother. The scope and scale of the storyworld provides an opportunity for the monstrous mother to push back against gendered expectations and comment on the limitations of the roles forced upon them. *Game of Thrones* goes beyond binary conceptions and does not just follow standard representations of monstrosity grounded in fear. Instead, the televisual text is not reflective but active in reworking the monstrous mother paradigm.

2 CHAPTER TWO

THE MOTHER AS OTHER - DYSFUNCTIONAL MOTHERHOOD IN WESTEROS

The mother's role of imposing order and unity within the social order and its cultural products is an expectation in patriarchal societies.[121] However, as most characters in *Game of Thrones* are denied maternal role models, order is imposed, controlled and regulated by the patriarchal order that effectively polices gender roles. Where individuals fail to perform those gender roles in line with expected standards and ideals, society becomes dysfunctional. That is not to say that there is no dysfunction where mothers are present. In fact, quite the opposite is true.

With Rhaella Targaryen and Joanna Lannister both dying in childbirth, neither Daenerys Targaryen nor Cersei Lannister has a maternal role model to follow. In classic literature, the absence of living mothers is symbolic because it renders the progeny as monstrous. The monster has no mother, only a father, and so the absence of the maternal represents an 'essential lack or gap in existence.'[122] In absenting the maternal, *Game of Thrones* provides no behavioural framework for either Cersei or Daenerys to follow and no overt link to their female lineage. Both points of interest form foundational elements of their identities because they are open to the direct influence of the patriarchy from childhood.

Creed's assertion that monstrosity stems from the paternal order's failure to separate mother and child, in this case from the daughter, is invalidated here by the presence of death

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[121] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 8.

[122] Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 208.

as opposed to the mother being a living entity.[123] Although both Daenerys and Cersei refuse to take up their proper places in the symbolic order, the separation does not represent a failure of the paternal order to remove the child from the mother, but rather lends the children different influences during their childhood. This is dysfunctional because, although they remain deprived of choice, agency and freedoms as a result of the imposition of gender roles on them, the deviation from expected familial norms directly subverts the accepted order of things over which the patriarchal order presides. This is a point that merits closer analysis.

This chapter is primarily concerned with exploring how the dysfunction that surrounds Cersei and Daenerys transfers to their approach to motherhood, manifesting within a disruption of order and unity that evolves into the category crisis that Cohen identifies as a key point of interest where monstrosity exists.[124] As traditional gender roles do not afford women political deviation or agency, it stands to reason that neither Daenerys nor Cersei can be easily and effectively classified within the traditional symbolic order and are deemed monstrous, particularly as they reject unity that does not suit their ambitions. Neither can they easily and effectively fit into existing archetypes and paradigms of motherhood, but understanding why and how this is the case begins with interrogating dysfunctional motherhood as it is developed within *Game of Thrones'* televisual storyworld*.*

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[123] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 38.
[124] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 6.

2.1 Family First: Introducing Dysfunctional Westerosi Motherhood

In contrast to the relatively stable trajectory of the mother's development that is documented in existing theory, the development of the figure of the mother is not linear in *Game of Thrones.* Instead, it is disrupted as a direct result of the decline of the status quo at the end of the first season of the show. Television shows that focus on family tend to position the mother at the heart of the institution to perform the vital role of maintaining family unity via reproduction and nurture, as per the Good Mother paradigm. This iteration of the mother is signposted from the outset. In the very first episode, 'Winter is Coming' (1:1), Cersei and Catelyn Stark are positioned in the centre of the banqueting table at Winterfell, side-by-side and behaving with the propriety expected of them while their men drink and carouse in front of them (Figure 4).[125] This iconography reflects woman's position in the Westerosi hierarchy, emphasising their continued conformity to the domestic ideals that Kaplan identifies as key to the construction of the Good Mother while physically moving them to the margins of the celebration.[126] Cersei participates in rituals that are designed to perpetuate the status quo, separating the child from the mother and fitting neatly into the structures established to lend the societal framework stability.

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[125] Tim Van Patten, dir., "Winter Is Coming," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 1, HBO, 2011. Both women are integral to the cohesion and unity of the family as well as the discussions concerning marriage between Cersei's son, Joffrey, and Catelyn's daughter, Sansa: 'I hear we might share a grandchild someday […] Your daughter will do well in the capital. Such a beauty shouldn't stay hidden up here forever.' This soft diplomacy is left to the women as a part of their gender roles but is key in perpetuating the patrilineal order within hierarchical societies like Westeros as gendered expectations pass from one generation to the next.
[126] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81.

Figure 4: Cersei and Catelyn Stark surveying the Great Hall at Winterfell, "Winter Is Coming" (1:1)

Similarly, in 'Blackwater' (2:9), Cersei appears to be playing her gendered role perfectly.[127] The episode revolves around the Battle of the Blackwater, the attack on King's Landing by Stannis Baratheon (Stephan Dillane), the brother of the deceased King Robert Baratheon who believes himself to be the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. As queen mother, Cersei's task is to lead the women to safety deep within the castle as the menfolk prepare to fight Stannis' army. Although she is physically ensconced in a barricaded room with the honorific ladies and their maids, there are subtle signs that she rejects this role and resents its imposition on her. Cersei has body armour on as a symbol of her elevated status and her son Tommen next to her throughout the battle. Although she has to relinquish one son, King Joffrey, to the violence going on outside, ensuring that Tommen is never out of her sight echoes the doctrine of intensive mothering that is predicated on the responsibility for the sole care of the child.[128] Giving Cersei such responsibility, for her son and the other women in the room, is a patriarchal tool that is designed to 'suppress' her, as per Engelbrecht, by keeping her in her heavily

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[127] Neil Marshall, dir., "Blackwater," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 9, HBO, 2012.
[128] Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives,* 2.

gendered place.[129] That is not to say that Cersei is solely concerned with their collective plight because of an instinctual need to protect her child. The interactions she has with Sansa Stark indicate instead that her thoughts are as more attuned to the dynamics of power than her role as a nurturer.

Cersei spends the siege drinking wine and imparting her knowledge on leadership, which she is excluded from on account of her gender, to Sansa through quasi-authoritative reflections that highlight her experience adjacent to and exclusion from power. For instance, she orders the executioner, Ser Ilyn Payne (Wilko Johnson), to deal with traitors who tried to steal horses and gold cups: 'The only way to keep the smallfolk loyal is to make certain they fear you more than the enemy. Remember that if you ever hope to become a queen.'[130] This reveals Cersei's understanding of the dynamics of power in Westeros is equal to that of the men that the patriarchal order regard as superior to her. She is alert to the workings of society and not completely ignorant of the harsh realities of war. However, it also reveals that her contempt for the gendered hierarchy of power is bound to her frustration not of being a mother, but being a woman within a society that stifles her: '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.'[131] Her self-pity causes her to lash out at those who unquestioningly conform to the idealised womanhood established as the standard in Westeros, those who she holds in contempt. In fact, she deliberately separates herself from them in the episode's scenes, positioning herself on a plinth at the opposite side of the room and symbolically elevated above them. This is

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[129] Engelbrecht, "Magical Mothers," 22.
[130] Marshall, dir., "Blackwater."
[131] Marshall, dir., "Blackwater."

ostensibly because Cersei is queen but also denotes her refusal to conform beyond the prioritising of her children. She epitomises dysfunctional motherhood here, having her child where she is able to protect him while decrying the limitations imposed on her by those who deliberately make her reproductive role the extent of what she can be. However, she is already pushing the parameters of what is possible here and extending her ambition beyond motherhood.

While Cersei's refusal of self-abnegation and rejection of gendered roles positions her as a Bad Mother,[132] the sacrifices she is willing to make and lengths she is prepared to go to protect her children complicate this designation. She cannot be a Good Mother as a consequence of her deviation from the standards that underpin idealisation, but her willingness to sacrifice her body to preserve her own life rather than for her children crystalise when she discloses to Sansa that she would be prepared to give her body to the victor of a battle as a symbol of surrender in another of their 'Blackwater' exchanges:

> Have I shocked you, Little Dove? Tears aren't a woman's only weapon. The best one is between your legs. Learn how to use it […] If the city falls, these fine women should be in for a bit of a rape. Half of them will have bastards in their bellies come the morning […] When a man's blood is up, anything with tits looks good.[133]

Cersei's blasé attitude towards such brutality is shocking and yet highlights her determination to not only survive but prosper under a new regime should the need arise. This is not the sensibility of a typical lady, but it does reveal just how different she is from her peers, further complicating how the figure of the mother should be read in the context of the complexity of

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[132] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81.
[133] Marshall, dir., "Blackwater."

the *Game of Thrones* storyworld.[134] In both episodes discussed here, 'Winter Is Coming' and 'Blackwater', the mother is positioned firmly at the centre of the family but is decidedly Other. However, the latter highlights the development of the monstrous mother within the context of the televisual text, demonstrating how the mother operates within the framework established by the patriarchy and how she can operate outside of it when the need arises while evading neat categorisation in the existing theoretical framework.

Creed's theory of the monstrous feminine asserts that the true source of monstrosity is actually the paternal order's failure to separate mother and child.[135] This is borne out in 'Blackwater', but the problem lies with the capability of the patriarchal order. Both Joffrey and Tommen are within Cersei's sphere of influence and her actions are clearly indicative of a mother who is prepared to take any action necessary to safeguard her family. However, Creed's theory itself does not fully explain the toxicity of motherhood within a dysfunctional society and its othering of the women who would normatively reside in the centre as opposed to on the margins of society. Cersei is an Other as a result of the decisions she consciously makes because she refuses to conform to the expectations placed on Good Mothers. Instead, she pursues an individualistic course of action that deviates from existing norms and standards to preserve the family while paradoxically being limited by it.

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[134] Cersei is pragmatic and a survivor, dismissive of the expectations imposed on her whilst prepared to fulfil them because she has little other choice. To protect her family from the violence that is inevitable should King's Landing fall, Cersei is prepared to murder her son, which is thoroughly monstrous, but it is also paradoxically an action designed to prevent him from coming to undue harm.

[135] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 38.

The primacy of family is established from the outset in *Game of Thrones,* as is its status as a source of power as the 'first agent of socialization.'[136] Under the Good Mother paradigm, the family provides a place where motherhood traditionally resides and flourishes.[137] Although the power of the family rapidly diminishes as the patriarchal order begins to fail, the idealisation of the mother endures and it connects Cersei to the remnants of her husband's legacy just as duty binds her to the patriarchy in his lifetime. Cersei provides an interesting means of examining the trajectory of power of the monstrous mother in twenty-first century complex television narratives because she is essentially shackled by the patriarchy even after the status quo crumbles following the deaths of Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark (Sean Bean). Cersei's role as Robert's queen and subsequent simultaneous roles of queen regent and queen mother bind her to the instruments of power but compound her status as Other. This is evidenced by her interactions with her father, Tywin and with her eldest son, Joffrey. Taking the former first, Cersei is regarded as inferior to her brothers, Jaime and Tyrion, by virtue of the fact that she is a woman. She is therefore incompatible with leadership and power, and yet she is the one that listens to Tywin and learns his lessons, despite being treated with contempt, thus bucking the gender binary imposed within Westerosi society.

Cersei's conversation with Tywin in 'And Now His Watch Is Ended' (3:4) is significant to her character's development arc throughout the course of the show, emphasising that she is seeking to emulate him as opposed to fulfilling her designated gender role.[138] The encounter

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[136] Gerald Poscheschnik, "Game of Thrones – A Psychoanalytic Interpretation Including Some Remarks on the Psychosocial Function of Modern TV Series," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 99, no. 4 (2018): 1004
[137] Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," 3.
[138] Alex Graves, dir., "And Now His Watch Is Ended," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 4, HBO, 2013. Cersei is known as a Lannister rather than a Baratheon despite marrying into the latter house, immediately divorcing her from her husband's control and positioning her alongside the values of her own house and, more importantly, the patriarchal influence of her father.

occurs when Cersei looks to Tywin for advice over Joffrey's relationship with Margaery Tyrell, granddaughter of Olenna who is, according to Cersei, manipulating her son into marriage. However, Cersei quickly uses her motherly concerns to turns to the conversation to her own self-advancement, thus underscoring her position outside of the Good Mother paradigm. This immediately renders her monstrous and abject, an Other by virtue of the fact that she deliberately pushes against her patriarchally-imposed limitations:

> Did it ever occur to you that I might be the one that deserves your confidence and your trust? Not your sons. Not Jaime or Tyrion, but me. Years and years of lectures on family and legacy, the same lecture really just with tiny, tedious variations. Did it ever occur to you that your daughter might be the only one listening to them, living by them? That she might have the most to contribute to your legacy that you love so much more than your actual children?[139]

There is much to unpack in this speech, from the patrilineal legacy Tywin is the guardian of to his deep-seated misogyny, but both of these elements are derived from the broad societal contempt in which women are held and the determination to keep them in their subordinate place. Although Engelbrecht notes that motherhood is designed to 'suppress women,'[140] the institution of the family reinforces that suppression and control where other avenues fail. In this scene, the camera switches between Cersei and Tywin, framing their individual points of view as equal, but the tone of voice Cersei uses belies her impassive expression (Figure 5).

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[139] Graves, dir., "And Now His Watch Is Ended."
[140] Engelbrecht, "Magical Mothers," 22.

The questions Cersei asks are imbued with emotion, betraying her bitterness and her desire to please her father, while confirming that the power in the relationship belongs with Tywin. Indeed, he continues to write letters as she speaks, which serves as a silent rebuke for speaking out. Given the emphasis placed on gender roles in Westeros, it is not difficult to imagine that Tywin did not consider the possibility of Cersei being his named heir, although his response is initially to humour her and listen to her concerns. However, Tywin's justification for ignoring Cersei as an heir to head of the family is pejorative: 'I wish you knew how to manipulate [Joffrey]. I don't distrust you because you're a woman. I distrust you because you're not as smart as you think. You've allowed that boy to ride roughshod over you and everyone else in this city.'[141] There is an immediate contradiction within this speech. Although Tywin claims to ignore her gender as a factor in his judgement of her, his questioning of her ability as a mother confirms that the reverse is in fact true and the charting of their relationship within the *Game of Thrones* storyworld reinforces this latter point. The

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[141] Graves, dir., "And Now His Watch Is Ended."

complexity of the storyworld as well as the narrative arcs that overlap within it enable audiences to examine moments like this and situate them within the broader context of relationships. As such, existing archetypes are proven insufficient to contain characters within a designated role. Cersei's performance of the role of daughter directly contravenes the expectations placed on her as a mother. The televisual text serves to expose the dysfunction that resides at the heart of motherhood and the confusion over how fully developed mother characters can ever be confined to a single unrealistically idealised role.

2.2 Monstrous Mother, Monstrous Children

Turning back to Tywin's response to Cersei's questions, the notion that Cersei has allowed Joffrey to do as he pleases firmly places the blame for his monstrosity at her door. This attitude reflects patriarchy's determination to abdicate all accountability for its monsters and attribute them to the failure of mothers to protect society against them. As a monstrous mother and a mother of a monster, Cersei's failure to observe gender roles is used to ignore the limitations of the patriarchal order. Far from challenging the patriarchy, here Cersei is seeking to reinforce the hierarchy of power, but on her terms. Tywin blocks this move and does so again later in the show when she threatens to 'burn our House to the ground' when trying to resist an arranged marriage to Loras Tyrell (Finn Jones).[142] Although this does not manifest in a power struggle for control of House Lannister or its legacy, it is significant that Cersei feels able to repeatedly push back against the patriarchal forces that seek to contain her. Cersei's inability to control Joffrey adopts an important duality here, highlighting her inability to fulfil the Good

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[142] Alex Graves, dir., "The Children," *Game of Thrones,* season 4, episode 10, HBO, 2014.

Mother paradigm and evidencing the patriarchal claim that women are unfit to rule because they are fundamentally incapable of controlling men. The show interrogates this narrative throughout because the storyworld lends Cersei the scope to challenge those lazy tropes and stereotypical traits that continually reinforce the notion that women cannot lead. In this case, Cersei's ability as a mother is equated with her ability as a ruler. Conflating the two is highly problematic because it demonstrates the hypocrisy of the male symbolic order, with the same standards not being applied to men.

Creed's theoretical assertion that the paternal order's failure to separate mother and child is the source of monstrosity may also be applied to Daenerys, although for very different reasons.[143] Cersei initially has access to power through her children, but Daenerys draws it directly from hers. The source of Daenerys' power is her 'display of motherhood', identifying her as one of those mothers whose 'values do not undermine their transgressive potential, but rather become the source of their empowerment.'[144] The dragons are unequivocally monstrous, being located firmly in the realm of fantastical beasts while serving as a vehicle for crossing the horror/fantasy divide that the monstrous mother straddles.

First introduced in 'Fire and Blood' (1:10), the dragons are born from the petrified eggs that Daenerys was gifted by her husband, Khal Drogo, on their wedding day.[145] She is depicted with them sporadically throughout the first season, nurturing them as a mother would until she places them in Drogo's funeral pyre and walks into the flames herself. When night turns to day and the pyre dies down, Daenerys is framed naked and crouched in the heart of its ashy

[143] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 38.
[144] Engelbrecht, "Magical Mothers," 21-22.
[145] Alan Taylor, dir., "Fire and Blood," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 10, HBO, 2011.

remains with three baby dragons wrapped around her body. Symbolising Daenerys' rebirth as Mother of Dragons, the beasts' birth out of fire establishes a monstrous form of reproduction that reflects upon the abject feminine, particularly as she symbolically cradles one to her womb.[146] However, the dragons' relationship with Daenerys straddles manifold boundaries that are temporal, geographic, technological and physical in nature. Their temporal emergence provides their surrogate mother with a unique point of interest that facilitates her journey through Essos, along with the fantastical ability to attack her enemies and gain power. It is tribute to the scope of the show that it is not until the seventh series that the dragons are rendered vulnerable to attack, to technological developments that mark a shift in the dynamics of power, but the line demarcating between their status as Daenerys' children and her weapons, her source of power, is never clearly marked.

The dragons are confirmed as Daenerys' source of power through their own mortality and through her vulnerability when they are not physically around her.[147] Both Drogon and Rhaegal leave their mother during the Battle of Winterfell and she is left unable to defend herself. Had Daenerys' loyal servant Jorah Mormont (Iain Glen) not chosen to defend his queen to the death, she would have lost her life during the battle. The awareness that her power depends on her children illuminates her weakness for her enemies, but the trouble her enemies have in separating her from her dragons also explains her success between their birth

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[146] Taylor, dir., "Fire and Blood." Daenerys' naked body mirrors the fecund body associated with the act of birthing children and so is thoroughly abject, despite the purifying ritual associated with the pyre itself and the ethereal beauty of Daenerys herself; Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*, 7.

[147] Daenerys loses Viserion to a well-aimed spear thrown by the Night King (Vladimir Furdik), the leader of the Army of the Dead, in 'Beyond the Wall' (7:6) and then Rhaegal to King of the Iron Islands Euron Greyjoy's (Pilou Asbæk) dragon killer, a spear slinging machine fashioned to mimic the action of a large scale bow and arrow, in 'The Last of the Starks' (8:4), the power that she had so painstakingly accumulated gradually diminishing. Cersei recognises that the dragons are not infallible in 'The Dragon and the Wolf' (7:7) when only two deliver Daenerys to the Dragonpit, which leads directly to the use of the weapon that ultimately kills Rhaegal in a sneak attack on them.

and her own death. The reversal of dependence here is problematic for the mother in any iteration or paradigm, but it also makes sense in the context of the narrative space that Daenerys occupies in the layered complexity of the Westerosi storyworld, thus redefining the figure of the monstrous mother in her twenty-first century televisual milieu.

There are hints at a non-normative reciprocal dependence between Daenerys and her dragon children during her time in Essos in the third season of the show. In need of an army to fulfil her goal of claiming the Westerosi Iron Throne for herself, she arrives in Astapor and tries to bargain with Kraznys mo Nakloz (Dan Hildebrand), a slave trader and one of the ruling elite Masters of Astapor. Her final meeting with Kraznys in 'And Now His Watch Is Ended' (3:4) directly challenges the idea that mother and child can be separated by men where the patriarchal order still remains intact, thus exemplifying the latent threat Creed identifies where a mother retains influence over her child and offers no hope for separation where chaos has replaced the status quo.[148]

Figure 6: Drogon begins to fight against Kraznys in Astapor, "And Now His Watch Is Ended" (3:4)

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[148] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 50; Graves, dir., "And Now His Watch Is Ended."

In an earlier scene in the previous episode, Daenerys deceives the masters into thinking that she would be prepared to trade a dragon, one of her children, for the Unsullied, an army of slaves who are trained to blindly obey orders.[149] She personally deals with Kraznys, standing before the elevated plinth he sits on and giving him no hint that she understands his misogynistic insults as he speaks to her in Valyrian, even when his translator, Missandei (Nathalie Emmanuel), relays a more tactful message. 'This slut thinks she can flash her tits, and make us give her whatever she wants' becomes '[t]here are 8000 Unsullied in Astapor. Is this what you mean by all?'[150] Here, Kraznys underestimates Daenerys, believing her to be weak and foolish simply because she is a woman.

Kraznys' misogyny and ignorance of the bond between mother and child makes the deception possible. However, when the exchange occurs, the attempt to separate them fails when Drogon begins to fight against Kraznys taking possession of him (Figure 6). Daenerys' response to his complaint is simple and explains why he could not make Drogon submit: 'A dragon is not a slave.'[151] The arrogance of the patriarchy is no match for a mother's understanding and love. However, it is the same arrogance that underpins the patriarchy's belief that it can contain women within idealised paradigms by setting unattainable targets and vilifying them if they do not conform. Here, the practice of shaming is unproductive and highlights egotism as a fundamental flaw in the logic exercised by the systems of power. In pushing back against misconceptions and gender tropes, Daenerys illuminates the space that mothers have to move between and beyond existing paradigms by embracing a more

[149] David Benioff, dir., "Walk of Punishment," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 3, HBO, 2013.
[150] Benioff, dir., "Walk of Punishment."
[151] Graves, dir., "And Now His Watch Is Ended."

individualised complex identity. In Daenerys' case, this means departing from her own familial legacy, embracing her monstrosity and adopting a more maternal approach to leadership.

Men, specifically Targaryen men, had previously been responsible for the decline and extinction of dragons, having wielded them as weapons to secure power while failing to nurture them. The established order cannot perpetuate life as a consequence of its reductive attitude to reproductivity, but the Other can where she embraces the complexity of modern motherhood. She 'combines traditional maternal roles such as protector, mentor, and companion with a more nuanced understanding of women's identities.'[152] It provides hope and salvation where the child remains with the mother and is cherished, even where the Other is perceived to be monstrous. Daenerys elaborates on this in the Dragonpit during 'The Dragon and the Wolf' (7:7), repeating her statement to Kraznys: 'A dragon is not a slave. They were terrifying. Extraordinary. They filled people with wonder and awe, and we locked them in here. They wasted away. They grew small and we grew small as well. We weren't extraordinary without them. We were just like everyone else.'[153] Where Daenerys refers to her dragons as children, this reflection on the failure to nurture recalls Kaplan's description of the Good Mother as completely invested in her offspring along with Kinnick's observation that idealisation of the mother role tends to ignore the challenges of motherhood.[154]

Daenerys explicitly recognises those challenges, problematising the tropes of motherhood that emerge out of wilful ignorance and provides an alternative perspective on how the

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[152] Melissa Wehler, "'Hello, Beastie': Uncompromising Motherhood in Disney's Maleficent," in *Fourth Wave Feminism in Science Fiction and Fantasy, Volume 1: Essays on Film Representations, 2012-2019*, ed. Valerie Frankel (Jefferson: McFarland, 2019), 119.
[153] Podeswa, dir., "The Dragon and the Wolf."
[154] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81; Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," 3.

monstrous mother has the potential to be a complex mother. Daenerys nurtures her dragons

so separation induces the anxiety that precipitates Drogon's reaction to Kraznys and his

refusal to acquiesce to the command of a new master who would abuse him in much the same

way that past generations had. She embodies the power and danger, the site of fear and

fascination that Ussher identifies in the reproductive body, but she also displays a different

form of control over her children that moves beyond the patriarchally-defined mechanisms of

control that are typically imposed on the Good Mother.[155] Daenerys steps beyond the tight

boundaries that are imposed on mothers by learning from the mistakes of her ancestors while

man fails to do the same, believing only that the ways of the patriarchy are absolute. Indeed,

this is a statement on the role of the mother, but also the wider societal environment in which

she exists. The dragons undoubtedly strengthen Daenerys' threat and exacerbate her

monstrosity but this scene casts doubt over whether this is a bad thing, particularly given her

psychological complexity.

However, the show provides scope to further interrogate the effectiveness of Daenerys'

approach to motherhood. Although she draws power from her children, they are also a

burden. As Shannon Wells-Lassagne observed, '[t]hough we are told that dragons are

powerful harbingers of magic, the spectacular birth of the dragons is not a magic cure-all for

Daenerys, but one more responsibility she must shoulder in her efforts to survive and retake

the Iron Throne.'[156] Daenerys effectively controls her dragons without neglecting them,

meaning she does not fit into the Bad Mother paradigm as she limits their natural urges.

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[155] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 1-2.
[156] Shannon Wells-Lassagne, "Religious Aesthetics in Game of Thrones," *TV/Series* 438 (2014), http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/438, para. 2.

However, those urges are not eradicated and are fully displayed when Drogon is left to his own devices and ultimately incinerates a goatherd's daughter, Zalla, in the countryside around Mereen.[157] She can exert her will and limit their destructive tendencies where they are with her, but her power is still firmly based on her possession of them.[158] In this sense, there is a reciprocity that challenges traditional paradigms of power and the theoretical positioning of the monstrous within televisual texts. These questions can also be asked of Cersei because Drogon's actions provide a parallel with the monstrosity Joffrey exhibits.

In truth, Cersei is as much the mother of a monster as Daenerys, although the level of control she has over her creation is considerably diminished in comparison to her rival. Whereas Drogon, Viserion and Rhaegal rarely act without their mother's command, Joffrey draws attention to Cersei's lack of authority or tempering influence on several occasions. The most overt example of this occurs in 'The North Remembers' (2:1).[159] Lacking power and unable to pursue her own goals independently of her son, Cersei attempts to persuade Joffrey to task his men to find Arya Stark so they can use her to negotiate with Robb Stark for the release of Jaime. Instead of indulging her, Joffrey reminds her of her place within the hierarchies of power, taunting her first with the rumour about her incestuous relationship

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[157] As Daenerys holds court, listening to the problems and complaints of her subjects, she is horrified when the goatherd approaches holding the charred remains of his little girl, thus illustrating the danger that the dragons pose when outside of the sphere of her influence: 'He came from the sky. The black one. The winged shadow, He came from the sky and… my girl… My little girl.' It forces Daenerys to confront the reality of her monstrous children and raises questions about how it is possible for the patriarchy to contain a mother where there is also a need to contain her children. This issue is underscored by her impulse to immediately chain Rhaegal and Viserion up underneath the pyramid to ensure that they remain fully under her control, unlike Drogon who is still absent and can commit atrocities with impunity. This is indicative of a much larger symbolic pattern within the narrative though. Although Daenerys is prepared to cage her children, she will only do so where they remain with her. Graves, dir., "The Children."
[158] This is symbolically evidenced by her choice to keep her Rhaegal and Viserion imprisoned literally below her throne following Drogon's attack on Zalla.
[159] Alan Taylor, dir., "The North Remembers," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 1, HBO, 2012.

with Jaime and then Robert's extramarital affairs: 'I'm asking if he fucked other women when he grew tired of you. How many bastards does he have running…'[160] Cersei responds by slapping him at that point. However, instead of being contrite for being disrespectful towards his mother, Joffrey doubles down: 'What you just did is punishable by death. You will never do it again. Never. That will be all, mother.'[161] Cersei is visibly shaken by his behaviour, but she is also fearful because Joffrey would not hesitate to carry out his threat. The power dynamic in the relationship is firmly weighted towards her son and all she can do is placate him and hope that she remains in his favour.

Although Joffrey is an Other via his own monstrosity and his incestuous parentage, he is indicative of the enduring masculine dominance within society. He highlights the presence of a hierarchy of otherness based on gender as well as just how much of a challenge Cersei must overcome to evade the controlling mechanisms of patriarchy. Cersei is a complex character in her own right, but her role as Joffrey's mother is a site of diminishment because her failure to embrace the idealised values associated with the Good Mother is blamed for his character and judgement. Cersei is aware that he is cruel but is protective of and makes excuses for him. However, she harbours a maternal nostalgia and an awareness that he gives her status, as she explains in a further conversation with Tyrion in 'Mhysa' (3:10):

> He was all I had once. Before Myrcella was born. I used to spend hours looking at him […] He was such a jolly little fellow. You always hear the terrible ones are terrible babies. We should have known, even then we should have known. It's nonsense. Whenever he was with me he was happy and no one can take that away from me, not even Joffrey. How it feels to have someone. Someone of your own.[162]

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160 Taylor, dir., "The North Remembers."
161 Taylor, dir., "The North Remembers."
162 David Nutter, dir., "Mhysa," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 10, HBO, 2013.

Here, the maternal perspective exempts the child from accountability based on the notion that the now grown malevolent, violent and sociopathic child was good once. Under the Good Mother paradigm, Cersei must take responsibility for Joffrey. He is *her* failure, which is profoundly unfair when she has raised two other children who exhibit empathy and decency. However, in exempting Joffrey of responsibility for his actions and failing to hold him to account, Cersei echoes the patriarchal attitudes that are designed to contain her but do not offer a solution to the problem of the true monster.

Despite Cersei's admission that he was not terrible as a child, her lack of ability to control Joffrey is manifestly damaging to the symbolic order. This is amplified by a demonstration of power by Tywin Lannister over his grandson in the same episode. Having remained seated and silent throughout an argument between Joffrey and Tyrion, during which Cersei attempts to calm her son and soothe his wounded ego, Tywin very deliberately exerts his own power over his children and grandchild: 'Any man who must say "I am the king" is no true king. I'll make sure you understand that when I've won your war for you.'[163] He deliberately displaces the power invested in the title of king and pinpoints where it truly lies. His steady demeanour contrasts with the agitated and demonstrative approach of Joffrey as well as Cersei's impotence, which is ironic as she performs the Good Mother role by demonstrating sole concern for her child.[164] Although Joffrey pushes back, Tywin has the last word: 'The king is tired. See him to his chambers.'[165] Sending Joffrey to bed makes a powerful statement, and one that diminishes everyone else in the room because it highlights just how spectacularly

[163] Nutter, dir., "Mhysa."
[164] Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives,* 2.
[165] Nutter, dir., "Mhysa."

they have failed to keep him in check. As his mother, it is primarily Cersei's responsibility to raise a king fit to uphold the status quo. She has not done so. However, this episode clearly emphasises the fallacy of the Good Mother archetype by illustrating just how paradoxical it is to expect the mother to exercise full control over her son when it is the son who is empowered by the patriarchy.

In effect, the representation of the monstrous mother here is one of appeasement, of enablement and of reinforcement of patriarchal standards as opposed to challenging them, thus reconfiguring the paradigm in response to the complexity of the character and narrative arcs within the *Game of Thrones* storyworld. Indeed, it is Tywin who challenges Joffrey and asserts masculine power over the Other, meaning that Cersei does not take up the mantle of a latent threat to the patriarchy that is consistently associated with the monstrous mother's abject corporeality.[166] As Joffrey is a product of incest, he is indicative of this threat so it is inevitable that Tywin, as the guardian of the patriarchy, will keep him in check. However, this contrasts starkly with Cersei's position as queen later.

2.3 Idealisation, Convention and Containment

Although Joffrey represents Cersei's abject failure as a mother, he provides a means of allowing her to remain close to power by accepting his monstrosity and abandoning the frameworks of morality and social justice. Myrcella and Tommen, on the other hand, challenge the notion that she is unable to nurture her children because they are fundamentally good

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[166] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 50; Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 86-87; Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 1-2.

and obedient, despite also being products of incest. While the incestuous element of their being reinforces Cersei's status as a monstrous mother, they provide evidence that her conventional practices of motherhood are good enough. As Feasey points out, television offers the scope to interrogate the idealisation of intensive motherhood and the storyworld in *Game of Thrones* certainly provides Cersei with an identity that is at least as invested in who she is as it is in her role as a mother.[167] This deviation in focus manifests in the formation of a complex identity that moves her further away from fitting neatly into any of the dominant maternal theoretical paradigms as well as the idealised Mother of the Seven within the storyworld itself.

Under the Mother of the Seven, Cersei's responsibility is to keep her children alive. While Myrcella and Tommen both offer evidence of her maternal capabilities, all three of Cersei's children die before the end of the sixth season of *Game of Thrones.* Further, although Cersei plays no part in the death of Joffrey, which occurs at his wedding feast at the hand of Olenna Tyrell, she is indirectly responsible for the demise of her other two children over the course of several seasons.

Myrcella is successfully separated from Cersei, as per Creed's assertion that allowing children to remain with the monstrous mother is a threat to the stability of the symbolic order.[168] As Hand of the King, Tyrion sends Myrcella to Dorne ahead of her marriage to Prince Trystane Martell (Toby Sebastian), forging an alliance between the Lannisters and the Martells.[169] The decision is not unusual given the prominence of political marriages in

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[167] Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives,* 9.
[168] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 38.
[169] David Nutter, dir., "The Old Gods and the New," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 6, HBO, 2012.

Westeros, but the reason given by Tyrion for sending Myrcella to Dorne was to protect her from the battles of the War of the Five Kings. However, distance offers no protection from the monstrous mother, neither Myrcella's own mother nor Ellaria Sand, the grieving monstrous mother looking for revenge for the death of her love. Cersei makes an enemy of Ellaria in her quest for revenge over Joffrey's death in the fourth season, who kills Myrcella in her own quest for revenge over Cersei.[170] This particular narrative arc evidences the importance of layered complexity in the *Game of Thrones* storyworld, setting up a payoff some three seasons after the initial development and illustrating how conducive the scope and scale of the storyworld is for interrogating tropes and paradigms of representation.

The fact that Cersei is made to pay for her vengeance over the loss of her son with the loss of her daughter is indicative of the destructive cycle within which the monstrous mother becomes entrapped. It also suggests that even separating the child from the monstrous mother does not necessarily keep them safe, thus drawing attention to the wider context in which she can be found. The figure of the monstrous mother and her sphere of influence is therefore unsettled and displays a distinct instability within an increasingly complex social, political and social framework. The intricate network of relationships in *Game of Thrones* effectively echoes that present in reality and challenges the neat borders that have typically been drawn around the monstrous mother in visual culture.

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[170] Nutter, dir., "Mhysa." The incident that instigates Myrcella's murder by Ellaria is the death of Oberyn Martell (Pedro Pascal) during a trial by combat, which was a consequence of Cersei's quest for revenge. Cersei accuses Tyrion of murdering Joffrey based on a blind assumption and a long-held hatred for her brother. In turn, Tyrion demands a trial by combat and chooses Oberyn as his champion. In pursuing the charge against Tyrion and agreeing to her own champion, The Mountain (Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson), fighting Oberyn to the death, Cersei loses sight of what else may be at stake. Indeed, Myrcella is firmly within the sphere of influence of the Martells, and easy reach of Ellaria.

Where Myrcella's death provides an avenue through which to explore the unsettled sphere of influence of the monstrous mother, Tommen's death comments on how toxic Cersei's influence becomes when she is concerned solely with vengeance for herself, thus abandoning her maternal responsibilities to do so. Tommen chooses to commit suicide by jumping out of a Red Keep window after Cersei murders his wife, Margaery, and the rest of the King's Landing elites by blowing up the Sept of Baelor in 'The Winds of Winter' (6:10).[171] Although this scene will be discussed in greater depth in chapter four, it is pertinent here as the point at which Cersei embraces her opportunity to be truly free from the patriarchal ties that bind her. Unfortunately for Tommen, that includes her only living child. While pursuing the Good Mother paradigm, Cersei consistently professes that her children are at the centre of her world, but her inability to achieve established idealised standards over an extended period of time and her failure to safeguard and protect her children as a primary duty precipitates an internal shift. Her maternal sensibilities give way to a longing for independence and power in her own right, the latter of which she can wield over those who have wronged her. Cersei becomes an abject failure in this sense because she had tried unsuccessfully to straddle and balance the two binary opposite forms of motherhood discussed by Rich,[172] nurturing her children and harbouring her own selfish needs and desires. She is also prone to putting them second where her selfish impulses take over. A mother is not all that Cersei is and, in discovering that she is able to transgress patriarchally imposed borders after chafing against her own containment for so long, that realisation profoundly changes her mindset.

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[171] Miguel Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter," *Game of Thrones,* season 6, episode 10, HBO, 2016.
[172] Rich, *Of Woman Born,* 110-127.

Daenerys follows an entirely different path to Cersei, avoiding the containment that is associated with conventional motherhood, but she is also heavily burdened by the primacy of family and the legacy of her name. Her name initially positions her as a commodity to secure an army for her brother through her marriage to Khal Drogo, just as Cersei is married to Robert Baratheon to forge a political alliance. The positioning of women as objects that the masculine order can trade is a well-worn trope in patriarchal societies, but it is also a key element of the monstrous mother's construction.[173] She is objectified to contain her threat, but Daenerys is able to reject objectification by developing a surrogate family built upon loyalty. Daenerys adds experienced figures like Tyrion Lannister, Ser Jorah Mormont, Ser Barristan Selmy (Ian McElhinney) and Lord Varys (Conleth Hill) to her band of exiled misfits, all of whom have experience in the leadership and politics of Westeros, to advise her. Furthermore, she nurtures and relies on her dragons in equal measure over the course of her own character arc, which captures 'the intricacies of maternal experience [and] the multivalent responses to mothers and mothering' that are present in her unconventional situation.[174] As such, Daenerys' chosen family does not seek to contain her, even where their advice may serve to temper her worst instincts. Instead, it provides an environment in which she can grow and evade narrow paradigms of motherhood.

Despite her introduction, Daenerys achievements throughout the show are broadly her own and often despite rather than because of her family name. She is able to refashion her identity and challenge the negative image of the Targaryens, as well as the nature and shape of her otherness within the context of the televisual text. Further, Daenerys 'threatens to

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[173] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 87; Clapton and Shepherd, "Lessons from Westeros," 11.
[174] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 10.

destroy not just individual members of a society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed.'[175] This point is particularly potent here because Daenerys does threaten the cultural apparatus that underpins individuality, but only that conditioned within systems of oppression. Her destruction is targeted, at least until the final season when her response to the games of war leads to a decision to destroy indiscriminately, as will be discussed more extensively in chapter four.

However, those systems of oppression are also evident in her long list of titles, which reads as a conqueror's victory roll: 'Queen Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lady of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, Lady of Dragonstone, Queen of Mereen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Unburnt, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons.'[176] Daenerys' titles are key to unlocking the identity that she constructs for herself based upon her desire to overthrow the male-dominated symbolic order. In this sense, Daenerys is only monstrous because she fails to conform to patriarchal expectations, but the majority of the theoretical framework pertaining to motherhood – with the exception of Feasey's broad paradigm of good enough mothering - does not allow for such nuanced constructions of the Other.[177] Furthermore, hidden within Daenerys' list of titles are the three distinct phases of that journey that form her experience of motherhood – the mother of Drogo's son, the Mhysa of the enslaved populations she frees, and the Mother of Dragons. This highlights the complexity of her

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[175] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 12.
[176] Mark Mylod, dir., "The Queen's Justice," *Game of Thrones,* season 7, episode 3, HBO, 2017.
[177] Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives,* 9.

experience of motherhood and directly challenges the narrow parameters of the categories upon which theories of otherness are based.

The dysfunctionality of Westerosi motherhood is complex, multifaceted and disregards the norms and ideals that are established to maintain order and unity within society. However, it is the dysfunctional nature of motherhood that breaks existing tropes and moves beyond the parameters of existing paradigms. The notion that Cersei and Daenerys, the televisual text's monstrous mothers, have outgrown established systems of classification is dependent on the fragmentation of their identities as mothers and as women, and this chapter has begun to outline just how that fragmentation moves them beyond the more simplistic ideals that demand self-abnegation and intensive nurturing if one is to be deemed a Good Mother.

However, that does not mean that the show does not position Cersei and Daenerys in relation to ideals based on gender roles. There are significant similarities between the mother narrative centred on Cersei and that of Daenerys, one of which is the idea that neither fulfil the role of Good Mother as a result of their inability to discern, assess and meet their children's needs.[178] Their disregard for such concerns actively rejects the idealised models of the mother thrust upon them, drawing instead upon a more useful form of maternal power that enhances their ability to secure their respective futures. The ideology of idealised motherhood is fundamentally unstable, as is evidenced by the number of paradigms that have emerged out of the binary of the Good and Bad Mother. Although the archetypes of Good and Bad Mothers have endured for centuries, the contextual environment of the twenty-first century serves to

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[178] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 16.

rupture the myths that have sought to sustain them.[179] The Good Mother narratives provide

scope for a legitimate form of maternal power and authority to the extent that it is able to

compete with the patriarchal authority that it had long been assumed to support, although

monstrous depictions of the maternal broadly served to reinforce patriarchal systems.[180]

However, this stems from the acceptance of motherhood as subject to binary values, which it

is not. The complexity of modern monstrous motherhood does not hold to binaries, but rather

is multifaceted, nuanced and exceeds the boundaries of existing paradigms where dysfunction

enables it.

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[179] Tasia Alexopoulos and Shannon Power, "'What Did Your Mother Do to You?' The Grotesque, Abjection and Motherhood in *The Others* (2001), *Mama* (2013) and *The Conjuring* (2013)," *MAI* 2 (12 September 2018), https://maifeminism.com/what-did-your-mother-do-to-you-the-grotesque-abjection-and-motherhood/.
[180] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 16.

3 CHAPTER THREE

REPRODUCTIVE POWER AND THE MATERNAL BODY

While the dysfunctionality of motherhood in *Game of Thrones* positions Cersei and Daenerys as monstrous mothers, identifying them as threats to the patriarchal order that are to be contained, it also signposts their capacity as mothers to push back against the limitations that are imposed on them on account of their gender. Cersei and Daenerys are both imbued with reproductive power as women who are not only able to bear children in some form, but they are able to wield them as conduits of power. In this sense, they buck genre-based and gender-based expectations. The female monster traditionally struggles to find a place within the community in visual culture, particularly within the horror genre where female monsters have continuously terrorised the existing patriarchal order.[181] However, the border-crossing between horror and fantasy complicates the discourses surrounding the monstrous mother. Cersei and Daenerys offer examples through which *Game of Thrones* can interrogate the concerns and consequences associated with their reproductive power, fully realising their potential as the mothers of monsters, albeit human and fantastical respectively, and ultimately becoming monstrous themselves. However, the existing theoretical framework on motherhood does not account for the complex discourses that link the maternal body and reproductive power to the construction of multifaceted identities that extend beyond the role of mother, but this chapter will.

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[181] Brooks, *Body Work,* 210. Brooks attributes this to the monster's phallic gaze, which acknowledges the societal need for awareness of the reproductive potential of a pair of monsters, and the subsequent impact such a pairing may have on the social order.

3.1 The Maternal Body as Object, Abject and Subject

The maternal body is significant in redefining the relationship between patriarchal values and the possibilities for the mother as Other within social and cultural disorder. Defined as abject by Creed and Julia Kristeva, both the maternal body and the feminine body have become sites of sociological fascination. Cregan goes further, arguing that the 'female body' is framed within three broad themes – object, abject and subject:

> The body as object is a body that is being shaped to conformity to external rules and regimes. The body as abject is a body that is socially ambivalent – sanctified and reviled – that exceeds bodily boundaries and borders. The body as subject is a body that is very much invested in the individual and in individual experience within a wider social context.[182]

All three are visible within *Game of Thrones.* The female body is viewed as an object to be used and abused by the patriarchy, as is evidenced by Viserys Targaryen's treatment of Daenerys in the very first episode. In the first scene the Targaryen siblings appear in, Viserys presents his sister with a dress for her wedding to Khal Drogo, creating a brief initial impression that he is a loving brother who wants the best for his sister. However, the light tone of the scene takes a sinister turn as he examines her body: 'You still slouch. Let them see you have a woman's body now.' Viserys removes Daenerys' clothes so that she stands naked in front of him before placing his hand on her breast and fondling her curves as if assessing the price her body would fetch. Although he never asks her consent, Daenerys stands impassive before him as if he has touched her many times before. At this point, she is an object for Viserys to further his own ambition. This is just one example of how her body is objectified

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[182] Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body*, 7-8.

in *Game of Thrones,* but it underscores just how little agency the patriarchal order affords the women who reside within its sphere of power.

In addition to being cast as object, the female body is also abject because it necessarily exceeds bodily boundaries during reproduction, and strays beyond the parameters established within the gender roles that are designed for the purpose of controlling women by the patriarchy. This sets it at odds with the notion of the body as object. In *Game of Thrones,* Cersei and Daenerys wilfully transgress the borders and limits imposed on them, meaning that their maternal bodies are perpetually abject. However, the body as subject provides a position that challenges both the body as object and abject. The three – object, abject and subject - are not mutually exclusive, as the show's narrative arc demonstrates, but the emphasis may shift between the three effectively, which challenges the designated limits of mother theory and its relationship to representation.[183]

Cersei and Daenerys both adopt positions as women who utilise the body and its reproductive power to challenge the status quo, wielding power through their children until they are ready and able to do so in their own right. With Cersei, her children are her connection to power and means of remaining in her privileged position as the queen mother following her husband's death and her son Joffrey's accession to the Iron Throne. This is the correct order of things in a patrilineal society and follows the rule of primogeniture to ensure that power is retained and transferred to safeguard the hegemonic order in place. By extension, Cersei remains on the margins of the structures of power, at least under her eldest

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[183] The representation of the female body was a site of controversy throughout the show's run, most notably via the depiction of rape, but it is seminal in exploring the dynamics of power that extend beyond those same limits of theories of representation and otherness.

son's kingship. She has no authority with Joffrey and is determined to retain her influence over Tommen when he succeeds his brother, despite his growing relationship with Margaery Tyrell, who is just as determined to be queen. There is a competition for attention between Cersei and Margaery, who occupy the typical gender roles of mother and wife respectively and fulfil the tired trope of the battle for influence between an older and younger woman, and yet it is the shifting parameters of both that disrupt power flows.

The relationships Cersei has with each of her sons is markedly different, and it is possible to track and compare the two through the extended televisual text. Her maternal power is limited when Joffrey is on the Iron Throne because he dismisses her advice and routinely puts her in her inferior place when she pushes him to listen to her. As such, Cersei's relationship with Joffrey corresponds to the norms and standards associated with the Good Mother and subsequent momism, not least the idea that she should be subservient to him.[184] That is not the case with Tommen, who Cersei manipulates to achieve the freedom to enact her own strategies to secure her position. This is evident in her comforting of Tommen in 'The Gift' (5:7) after his wife Margaery has been arrested by religious fundamentalist leader the High Sparrow (Jonathan Pryce) at Cersei's behest: 'Your happiness is all I want in this world […] You can't possibly [know]. Not until you have children of your own. I would do anything for you. Anything to keep you from harm. I would burn cities to the ground. You are all that matters, you and your sister.'[185] This scene's importance lies in Cersei's response to Tommen and her conviction that she is acting in his best interests. She believes that she is acting in accordance

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[184] Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers,* 3; Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 2.
[185] Miguel Sapochnik, dir., "The Gift," *Game of Thrones,* season 5, episode 7, HBO, 2015.

with the demands of the Good Mother, but is actually much closer to Mason's antihero mother, fiercely protecting but not necessarily prioritising her son.[186]

In the context of theories of motherhood then, Cersei pushes the parameters of disparate types, engaging her own reproductive power to create situations that best suit her own priorities. This element of her own motherhood practice is further heightened by the need to engage in different, more individualised approaches to her children as a consequence of the recognition that they are entirely different people and treating Tommen as she would Joffrey would not produce the results she desires. As such, developing different ways of dealing with each child also reinforces the need for a more nuanced approach to and recognition of the complexity of motherhood. Cersei's manipulation of Tommen in a way that best serves her needs and desires is an abuse of maternal power, which provides her with a means of continually testing the limits placed upon her by the traditional structures and institutions in Westeros that crumble over time. Cersei uses her privilege, gained from her maternal body, to construct a power base for herself at the heart of Westerosi society, thus abusing her position as a mother while being defined in relation to her child.

Reflecting on the maternal body as a concept, the woman's body is a key tenet of discourses pertaining to both motherhood and reproductive power. It is considered to be abject under Kristeva's theory because it is spoilt, tainted by the grotesque distortion of the womb, the effort of childbirth and the production of bodily fluids indicative of the body as a 'container'.[187] As an abjection via which 'identity becomes absent',[188] the physical act of carrying a child

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[186] Mason, "Mothers and Antiheroines," 646.

[187] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 53.

[188] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 54.

others women via the collapse of borders and mutilation of the Self, both of which are implicit within the process of bearing and birthing children. The child becomes subject to containment from external forces that seek to control it. However, the monstrous mothers in *Game of Thrones* push back against such containment and reject the reductive effect it theoretically has on their respective identities*.*

Cersei recovers from the collapsing of her identity as a mother that accompanies the deaths of her children because she refashions a position for herself as a powerful entity within the governmental framework of Westeros. A mother is never all she is despite the efforts made by Robert, Tywin and Joffrey to contain her within that role. Daenerys, on the other hand, views her surrogate motherhood as a watershed moment that provides a new impetus for her identity and hope for a more meaningful role in her quest for the Iron Throne. Both women therefore use their abject reproductive power as a means of bringing together fragmented elements of their identities, which has lasting implications for existing mother archetypes. In reshaping their own identities over the course of the televisual text, they do not fit neatly into any paradigm and even push beyond the boundaries of those who do acknowledge complexity and nuance, like the antihero and good enough iterations.[189]

Containment is a clear goal of the designation of the female body as abject. Within the theory of abjection, Kristeva's reflection on the archaic mother outlines how she might challenge the patriarchal order over time:

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[189] Further, Daenerys exhibits border-crossing in the context of her magic, which presents as an imperviousness to fire, as per her surviving Drogo's pyre. Again, though, it is the juxtaposition of the maternal body, reproductive power and multifaceted identity in the individual that empowers the mother to challenge theoretical and practical attempts to contain her.

Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing. It is thus not surprising to see pollution rituals proliferating in societies where patrilineal power is poorly secured, as if the latter sought, by means of purification, a support against excessive matrilineality.[190]

Although patrilineal power is not only poorly secured in Westeros but in danger of failing, the fear of the patriarchy being overthrown by matrilineality demonstrates the extent to which it projects its own power and goals onto the women it seeks to contain. Neither Daenerys nor Cersei seek to establish a matrilineal order, but they do crave recognition that extends far beyond the gender roles imposed on them. The burden of subduing that Kristeva identifies is based solely on the perception of power that the archaic mother holds. Under this premise, the maternal body is a powerful entity that is necessarily othered by the patriarchy because it can be used to harness reproductive power. The same maternal body becomes dangerous when it is left to do so unchecked. The decline of patriarchal power beyond the first series of *Game of Thrones* produces the conditions under which the maternal body is delimited and may grow exponentially powerful. However, the same systemic and institutional decline highlights a deficit that abjection is unable to account for.

3.2 Pollution, Incest and Patrilineal Legitimacy

There is an implicit assumption within Kristeva's explanation of pollution rituals that patrilineal power is a continuous feature of society, no matter how 'poorly secured' it is.[191] However, Cersei's incestuous relationship with Jaime suggests otherwise. The audience is

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[190] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 77.
[191] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 77.

introduced to this relationship in the first episode when the pair are caught having sex in a Winterfell tower. It is an important facet of Cersei's narrative arc, with Jaime being positioned as one of the few people she actually loves. However, their relationship is kept a secret as a consequence of the incest taboo. Elizabeth Barnes notes that the incest taboo is socially determined rather than universal and shifts in its social status have tended to coincide with debates about the limits of patriarchal power and its ability to control women's bodies, particularly reproductive power and choices.[192] In the context of the extended televisual text of *Game of Thrones,* it is not Jaime who is in control of the relationship, or the dynamics of power that manifest within it, but Cersei. Matthew Cormier identifies a pattern of behaviour in which Cersei's influence of Jaime is stronger when he is in proximity to her, putting his own happiness to one side in favour of loyalty and a sense of duty that is strongest when she is able to bring him under her sphere of influence.[193] Although interrogating Jaime's choices is not in the remit of this research, that Cersei can inspire such loyalty and love when her performance of motherhood exceeds the scope of the idealised gender roles that the Westerosi hierarchy holds as sacred offers a further reflection on the inability of those ideals to contain mothers with multifaceted identities.

Not only does the symbolic order lose control of Cersei here, but it positions both her and Jaime outside of its borders. There is no need for Jaime to exert control over Cersei's body, which is fundamentally dangerous to the security and stability of patriarchal values and norms. After all, the role of the mother revolves around the husband and children in normative

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[192] Elizabeth Barnes, *Incest and the Literary Imagination* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 6-7.
[193] Matthew Cormier, "Affective Proximity: Tracing Jaime Lannister's Moral Progression in HBO's *Game of Thrones,*" *Canadian Review of American Studies* 49, no. 1 (2019): 7-8

relationships.[194] This is true across all paradigms because every single one explores the mother-child relationship, acknowledging that the mother is viewed through the eyes of her children. However, Jaime is neither her husband nor child and is othered by the patriarchal hierarchy through the incest taboo and later his disability. Her body, even in spite of her rejection of idealised motherhood and its related binary values, does not pose a threat that Jaime has a responsibility to address.[195]

However, Cersei's incestuous relationship also jeopardises the patrilineal legitimacy of the patriarchal order, thus demonstrating her propensity for subversion. All three of her living children were conceived with her brother as opposed to her husband. Cersei raised her children as Baratheons, naming Robert as their father and securing their legitimacy as his heirs. Ned Stark's decision to confront Cersei after discovering that she had made a cuckold of Robert in 'You Win or You Die' (1:7) essentially amounts to a challenge that makes an enemy out of a mother who would do anything to protect her children, which paradoxically positions her within the frameworks of the Good Mother and the antihero mother.[196]

The confrontation occurs in the gardens of the Red Keep with Cersei and Ned standing a short distance apart (Figure 7). The camera cuts between them, with the shots beginning from over the shoulder and gradually moving in to frame the face of first Cersei and then Ned close up to highlight the struggle for power between them. After Cersei freely admits to her

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[194] Rich, *Of Woman Born,* 110-127; Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81-82; Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," 12; Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers,* 3.

[195] There is one moment in which Jaime attempts to assert control over Cersei by raping her that provides an exception to this rule (and will be discussed in more depth shortly), but the relationship itself broadly illustrates the threat Cersei poses to the patriarchy via her influence and the potential for the establishment of an alternative form of patriarchy under her leadership.

[196] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81-82; Mason, "Mothers and Antiheroines," 646; Daniel Minahan, dir., "You Win or You Die," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 7, HBO, 2011.

relationship with Jaime and that he is the father of her children, Ned vows to tell Robert the truth and advises her to leave King's Landing. In return, Cersei utters a thinly veiled threat:

> And what of my wrath, Lord Stark? You should have taken the realm for yourself. Jaime told me about the day King's Landing fell. He was sitting on the Iron Throne and you made him give it up. All you needed to do was climb the steps yourself. Such a sad mistake […] When you play the game of thrones you win or you die. There is no middle ground.

Ned's mistake is in confronting Cersei and providing her with an opportunity to hit back at him, but this conversation early in the show's run provides a clear reading of Cersei as a strategic player in the game of thrones she refers to. Ned underestimates her because he expects her to conform to Good Mother ideals, fleeing King's Landing with her children to keep them safe from the wrath of Robert and the patriarchal system it is his job to defend. Instead, Cersei's determination to protect her own self-interest as well as her children mean that she transgresses established borders without a second thought, facilitating the removal of Ned Stark and bringing about the final collapse of patriarchal authority.

Figure 7: Cersei's confrontation with Ned Stark in "You Win or You Die" (1:7)

More importantly, Ned's discovery highlights the direct and wilful subversion of the line of Baratheon succession and redefines the nature of reproductive power in the *Game of Thrones* storyworld. Using 'vaginal violence' to effectively castrate her husband,[197] Cersei subverts the legitimate line of succession by 'substituting another man's child for Robert's own, an act that is both treason and the ultimate emasculation'.[198] Such an act of usurpation is indicative of the harnessing of reproductive power and the maternal body to challenge patriarchal power while evading the containment that is associated with the existing paradigms of motherhood.

Cersei's monstrous actions can be read via the application of Creed's *vagina dentata*.[199] The site of abnormal sexual activity, incest is a form of pollution in this instance because the Baratheon children's illegitimacy prevents them from upholding the status quo as their existence subverts it. Cersei's female body becomes monstrous precisely because the *vagina dentata* devours the phallus, neutralising its power and imposing its malevolence on the patriarchal order.[200] However, this element of her otherness is multifaceted rather than straightforward, incorporating a wide range of elements that require the delimiting of paradigms of motherhood to explain her actions and expand on the role and application of an evolved form of *vagina dentata.* This is evidenced by the hint that Cersei usurped the line of succession by killing a child that was Robert's legitimate heir. In 'The Kingsroad' (1:2), she tells Catelyn Stark about her 'first boy, a little black-haired beauty. He was a fighter too, tried to

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[197] Tobi Evans, "Vile, Scheming, Evil Bitches? The Monstrous Feminine Meets Hegemonic Masculine Violence in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*," *Aeternum* 5, no. 1 (2018): 20.

[198] Caroline Spector, "Power and Feminism in Westeros," in *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire,* ed. James Lowder (Dallas: Smart Pop, 2012), 182.

[199] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 105.

[200] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 1-2.

beat the fever that took him.'[201] The way she phrases her tale suggests that the child died of natural causes, but there is an ambiguity about it that evades direct reflection.

Only later does the show's use of callback, a facet of long televisual texts, encourage the audience to reconsider the initial interpretation of her story.[202] For instance, Cersei takes the blame for ordering the cull of all of Robert Baratheon's illegitimate children, with the exception of Gendry (Joe Dempsie), an armourer's apprentice who escapes because he is sold to the Night's Watch and successfully evades those sent to locate him. Although Tyrion realises that it was Joffrey's order rather than Cersei's, she justifies her choice to stand by and allow it to happen: 'He did what needed to be done.'[203] This action demonstrates her ruthlessness and casts her as 'the infanticidal mother [who] was deemed monstrous for wielding power for her own benefit.'[204] It is in her interests to support Joffrey's order, reinforcing his authority to safeguard his own position. However, although allowing her son to slaughter children exacerbates her own monstrosity, it also indicates that she exceeds the boundaries that are designed to contain the monstrous mother: '[W]here the monstrous mother revels in her authority to direct and dominate narrative as a mother, the infanticidal mother uses violence to defy and deny her motherhood.'[205]

Infanticide exceeds the bounds of the monstrous, particularly where the children killed are her stepchildren by marriage who she denies any responsibility for. In turn, this situates her in a complex and paradoxical space that juxtaposes her fierce protection of her own children

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[201] Tim Van Patten, dir., "The Kingsroad," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 2, HBO, 2011.
[202] There is no proof that Cersei is directly infanticidal, but she is certainly complicit in other atrocities and it is not a stretch to believe that she would kill a child of Robert's.
[203] Alan Taylor, dir., "The Night Lands," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 2, HBO, 2012.
[204] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 20.
[205] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 20.

with her blatant disregard for those she refuses to acknowledge. This dynamic is further

complicated by her stepchildren not being blood relations to any of her own children and

serves to emphasise her own reproductive power. The trope of the 'female genitals as a trap'

therefore certainly applies to and is informed by Cersei's duplicity.[206] By installing Jaime's

children as Baratheons and preventing Robert from perpetuating his own line, Cersei is the

embodiment of the *vagina dentata*, but that is not all she is. She is much more dangerous as

a force in her own right, subtly polluting the patriarchy from within initially, although she

becomes more brazen as her confidence grows. The complexity of the televisual text allows

the identification of such shifts over time and the graduated escalation of Cersei's behaviour

indicates a growing surety that ultimately enables her to orchestrate a coup and take the Iron

Throne for herself.

The *vagina dentata* can also be associated with Daenerys, although not in conjunction with

the framing of the female genitals as a trap. She bucks Creed's mythological figure because

she is unable to have biological children after the stillbirth of Rhaego, her son by Drogo.[207] She

does not adopt the same castrating behaviours as Cersei, although engaging in sexual relations

with men does prevent them from reproducing and perpetuating their line. Daenerys chooses

Daario Naharis (Ed Skrein/Michiel Huisman) and Jon Snow (Kit Harrington) as sexual partners,

both Others by virtue of their confirmed bastard status, so their inability to reproduce through

her maternal body is deemed beneficial to the patrilineal order in contrast with Cersei's refusal

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[206] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 106.
[207] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 106.

to bear Robert's heirs. Instead, her castrating force lies in the symbolism of the teeth of her dragon children.[208]

Like Cersei, Daenerys poses a shifting threat that evolves in line with the progression of her own narrative arc across the course of the televisual text. The threat that Daenerys poses to the Westerosi status quo in the first season stems from her reproductive power. This is Robert Baratheon's primary concern on hearing of her marriage to Khal Drogo. In a conversation with Ned during their journey from Winterfell to King's Landing, Robert confirms that he does not see Daenerys herself as a threat to his rule but her ability to bear a son to perpetuate the Targaryen legacy : 'Soon enough, that child will spread her legs and start breeding.'[209] Here, reproductive power is perceived as the only form of power women have in Westeros, thus once again ensuring all meanings constructed by and in relation to the mother's orbit around her children. In effect, the maternal body's reproductive power is exploited by the patriarchy to perpetuate its own power, reinforcing it continually while those who harness that power are contained within the hugely restrictive parameters of idealised motherhood.

The pervasiveness of this outlook is further evidenced by Robert's concerns being shared by Daenerys' brother, Viserys, albeit from a slightly different starting point. Viserys immediately seeks to other his nephew and reject any claim he might have to what the Targaryen heir perceives to be his, specifically his right to the Iron Throne: 'He won't be a real Targaryen. He won't be a true Dragon.'[210] This rejection of Daenerys' son as a part-Dothraki

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[208] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 108. Creed uses the examples of *Jaws* (1975) and *Alien* (1979) to illustrate the symbolism of teeth as a castrating metaphor, and the iconography of Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion incorporates the same horror and threat as both of those entities do.
[209] Van Patten, dir., "The Kingsroad."
[210] Daniel Minahan, dir., "A Golden Crown," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 3, HBO, 2011.

hybrid demonstrates that Viserys fears that the child will usurp him, just as carrying a son frees Daenerys from Viserys' symbolic power over her. Daenerys' reproductive power is a catalyst for the realisation that she has not only eclipsed her brother but has facilitated a line of succession that threatens the very fabric of the Targaryen dynasty. This is illustrated through a symbolic ceremony in 'A Golden Crown' (1:6). Although Daenerys is aesthetically and culturally a Targaryen, she also immerses herself and her unborn son in Dothraki culture via the antenatal ritual of consuming a horse heart and Drogo's subsequent pledge to his unborn son:

> And to my son, the stallion who will mount the world, I will also pledge a gift. I will give him the iron chair that his mother's father sat upon. I will give him Seven Kingdoms. I, Drogo, will do this. I will take my Khalasar west to where the world ends and ride wooden horses across the black salt water as no Khal has done before! I will kill the men in iron suits and tear down their stone houses! I will rape their women, take their children as slaves and bring their broken gods back to Vaes Dothrak![211]

There are numerous threats to Westeros contained within this performative speech, including a vow to take the Seven Kingdoms territorially and to eradicate its culture. In also vowing to rape women and enslave children, Drogo would command the reproductive power and control the maternal body. In essence, this renders Robert's concerns over Daenerys' reproductive power as legitimate, but the danger of her maternal body is something that the patriarchy has brought on itself.

In attempting to contain women by valuing them solely for their reproductive potential, the patriarchal structures and institutions are rendered vulnerable to external ideological attack. This inadvertently makes the case for transitioning from Good to good enough

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[211] Minahan, dir., "A Golden Crown."

motherhood to give society an opportunity to protect itself, but instead the patriarchy doubles down on its ideological position, which leads to the same concerns arising as another army threatens King's Landing a season later in 'Blackwater' (2:9).[212] The televisual text captures the complexity of these multiple narrative strands across the arcs that are cast out during the first episode through the use of characters as focal points. As the one with reproductive power, Daenerys is an effective focal point in this respect.

Although Drogo is a powerful masculine leader who upholds the rule of his Khalasar, Daenerys is his source of power through her reproductive capabilities, despite her strength and resilience being attributed to her son in the womb. In this sense, she has no substantive power because she either defers to her husband or is positioned in her son's orbit, as is expected of the Good Mother. Neither does she have agency. Drogo's speech clearly identifies men as political actors under the cultural status quo, with women objectified as 'subordinate objects' who may be raped as the spoils of war and shaped to conformity by Dothraki rule.[213] However, the maternal body lends Daenerys reproductive power through her children, as is the case with Cersei. This, Ussher argues, channels female desire solely through her maternal role, framing the body as grotesque and monstrous.[214] The mother's ability to bear children makes her desirable within a hierarchical society that is patrilineal and values women only for their service in perpetuating it, but she still has little power on her own merit. As such, Daenerys' reproductive power briefly mirrors that of Cersei in the respective societies they

[212] Marshall, dir., "Blackwater."
[213] Clapton and Shepherd, "Lessons from Westeros," 11; Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body,* 7-8.
[214] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 87.

reside within as both are patriarchal, value masculine power and idealise the mother to an extent that neither woman can live up to expectations.

Ultimately, Daenerys' reproductive power and futurity does not lie within her ability to bear human children, but instead resides in an ethereality that enables her to hatch petrified dragon eggs and become a surrogate mother to three monstrous children.[215] Having failed to nurture her human son, who is stillborn, her maternal body is polluted by the magic of Mirri Maz Duur (Mia Soteriou), a witch kidnapped by Drogo as part of the spoils of war, but it is also magic that purifies it. Rhaego is stillborn after Daenerys begs Mirri Maz Duur to save her husband's life and agrees to the spell without actually asking what the price would be. Although Drogo lives, he is unable to communicate or move and the loss of Rhaego's life compounds the price Daenerys chose to pay. In choosing her husband over her child, making the choice out of naivety rather than selfishness, Daenerys is firmly positioned in the Bad Mother paradigm. The baby is subsequently described by Mirri as 'monstrous, twisted […] He was scaled like a lizard, blind with leather wings […] I warned you that only death could pay for life.'[216] Here, the Real is exchanged for the Symbolic, which mirrors Kristeva's theory of abjection to a degree but ultimately subverts it. The Real is associated with abjection and the maternal, with the Symbolic being inextricably linked to the patriarchal order. The Real, a baby still in the womb, is exchanged for a Symbolic monstrous entity that does not resemble a human after birth and directly challenges the accepted order of things, rendering the patriarchy entirely vulnerable to those willing to sacrifice it for their own objectives. In this

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[215] Jaime Hovey, "Tyrion's Gallantry," *Critical Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2015): 96.
[216] Taylor, dir., "Fire and Blood."

case, that is love and family. The irony is that, in doing so, Daenerys is punished by a curse that prevents her from being able to have a biological family.

However, Daenerys' maternal body is subsequently purified by fire, with her own rebirth and the hatching of her dragons occurring within the flames of Drogo's pyre. The iconography of the dragons wrapped around her naked body upon her emergence from the ashes is powerful and the purification ritual, when complete, provides her with children that pose a greater threat to the remnants of the patriarchal status quo. The ritual itself marks the start of a new phase in Daenerys' character arc, enabling her to radically alter the form of motherhood she embraces and escape the gendered role she had been contained in while under the control of her brother and then her husband. This is a subversion of the Good Mother paradigm, but also a rejection of the binary as Daenerys does not cross into the Bad Mother paradigm either. The end of the first season therefore marks a new transitional phase of motherhood that existing theories of motherhood do not account for. The televisual text facilitates the transition through the development and evolution of an intricate character arc within the layered complexity of the *Game of Thrones* storyworld. Daenerys' maternal body is irrevocably changed but her reproductive power paradoxically continues to grow alongside her adopted children.

3.3 Containing the Reproductive Power of the Maternal Body

Patriarchal concerns over the reproductive power of the maternal body also manifest in other forms of control and containment in *Game of Thrones.* Female subjugation by rape is a key form of control administered by dominant and powerful men in the show throughout its run

and is evident from the first season. Jessica Needham's analysis of the sexual objectification in *Game of Thrones* determines that male sexuality takes precedence over female sexuality, with the latter being coded as inferior and commodifying the female body as an object designed to satisfy male desires.[217] Daenerys provides a particularly appropriate example of this in the very first episode, her initial subjugation emerging from the threat of rape. Under the care of her brother, Viserys, Daenerys is thoroughly oppressed. She is positioned as an object to be controlled through the deprivation of bodily autonomy and the sexual threats made against her in 'Winter is Coming' (1:1), all of which stem from the patrilineal power Viserys wields over her and his need to exchange her body for an army through an arranged marriage.[218] Although she expresses a desire to go home rather than becoming Drogo's queen, Viserys rejects her request in graphic terms: 'I would let his whole tribe fuck you. All forty thousand men and their horses too if that's what it took.'[219] The threat of sexual violence is underpinned by intent and deprives Daenerys of an autonomous identity that extends beyond her value as an object to sell to the highest bidder.

Viserys also makes a repeated non-specific threat of violence against Daenerys, warning her not to 'wake the Dragon' several times until his death in 'A Golden Crown' (1:6).[220] The capital D is implicit within Viserys' language, positioning him as an embodiment of the powerful mythical creature his family is inextricably linked to. The imagery invokes an inherited power that enhances his masculinity and claim to the throne while implying that Viserys has magical abilities alongside an aggression that may be unleashed against those who

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[217] Jessica Needham, "Visual Misogyny: An Analysis of Female Sexual Objectification in *Game of Thrones*," *Femspec* 17 (2017): 3-4.
[218] Van Patten, dir., "Winter Is Coming."
[219] Van Patten, dir., "Winter Is Coming."
[220] Minahan, dir., "A Golden Crown."

displease him. Although Viserys has done little to prove himself worthy of the label, he arrogantly assumes that, as the sole remaining male heir, it is inevitable that he is the Dragon. In fact, in excluding the possibility of a woman being capable and worthy of the role, he underestimates the very person he uses sexual threats against. Daenerys is the Dragon and uses it to disrupt the established order, harnessing her power in a much more productive way than her monstrous brother would have done. That Viserys does not even contemplate his sister may have such qualities reflects on the status of women and the value of their reproductive power being placed above all else. At that point, however, she has no power to shape her own future as a result of the gender roles and expectations imposed upon her by the male-dominated status quo. It is through her maternal body and the excess of reproductive power she exhibits that she ultimately proves Viserys' folly.

Daenerys is subject to a further sexual act of subjugation that extends beyond the threats made by her brother. Her rape at the hands of her husband on her wedding night echoes the conquests that he is famed for amongst the Dothraki, but it also consolidates the objectification and ownership of Daenerys' body in transactions that are solely designed to benefit the men around her. The scene itself is disturbing but reinforces a pattern of male dominance and patriarchal disregard for woman's bodily autonomy that is evident throughout the first season. It is indicative of the pronounced primacy of the rights of husbands over their wives. Drogo takes her to a space away from the rest of the wedding party, framed by a stunning sunset and the sea gently lapping against the coastline (Figure 8). He towers over Daenerys as he begins to circle her. Despite being married, it is clear Daenerys does not consent to sexual intercourse. She begins to cry, clinging to her clothes as Drogo strips them away and admires her body. The beauty of the setting contrasts jarringly with Daenerys' visible

fear and Drogo does nothing to address this. Instead, the rape is framed as savage, animalistic and degrading for Daenerys as her new husband bends her over and takes her from behind. As he stands behind her, the inequality of the relationship and the dominance of man over wife underlines the victimisation of an inexperienced young woman who has been sold to serve the masculine needs of both her brother and her husband.[221]

Figure 8: Daenerys is raped by her husband, Khal Drogo, on their wedding night, "Winter Is Coming" (1:1)

Daenerys' wedding night is not an anomalous occurrence. Men taking what they perceived to be rightfully theirs is common in *Game of Thrones*. Cersei reflects on patriarchal dominance to Ned Stark in 'You Win or You Die' (1:7), elaborating on her own experience of bodily subjugation to Robert's masculine will on her wedding night:

> I worshipped him. Every girl in the Seven Kingdoms dreamed of him, but he was mine by oath. And when I finally saw him on our wedding day in the Sept of Baelor, lean, fierce and black-bearded, it was the happiest day of my life. And that night he crawled on top of me, stinking of wine, and did what he did, what little he could do, and he

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[221] Mariah Larsson, "Adapting Sex: Cultural Conceptions of Sexuality in Words and Images," in *Women of Ice and Fire,* ed. Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 25.

whispered in my ear "Lyanna". Your sister was a corpse and I was a living girl and he loved her more than me.[222]

Like Daenerys, Cersei was a girl in her marital bed and part of a transaction made for political power, but, unlike Daenerys, she did consent. However, Cersei's romanticised girlish notions of what love would look like were blown apart by Robert, who had no consideration for her needs when he fell upon her drunk and sated his own sexual desires. Like Drogo, Robert simply took what he wanted, which he was entitled to do under the patriarchal gender roles assigned to them both. Cersei's body serves a purpose. Referring back to Cregan's framing of the body, women are both an object to be used for sex and abject because of the aim of getting them pregnant.[223] There is no subjectivity through reproductive power as both Cersei and Daenerys' bodies were controlled by men on their wedding days, but when they are eventually able to evade that control, they automatically become monstrous.

Daenerys does harness power through her material body after the trauma of sexual violence as she takes ownership of her sexuality, a point that is made by Debra Ferreday in her analysis of Westeros as a rape culture in which sexual violence is inevitable and endemic.[224] Ferreday's rape culture does not just originate in sexual violence and abuse, but emerges from the hierarchical male-dominated structures and institutions that police societal behaviours and norms as 'the product of gendered, raced and classed social relations that are central to patriarchal and heterosexist culture.'[225] It is in challenging those structures and subverting gendered relations that Daenerys is able to take control of her body, reclaiming it

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[222] Minahan, dir., "You Win or You Die."
[223] Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body,* 7-8.
[224] Debra Ferreday, "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom," *Australian Feminist Studies* 39, no. 83 (2015): 22.
[225] Ferreday, "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom," 22.

from those who would willfully abuse it. For instance, Ferreday points out that she

purposefully learns seduction techniques in order to reclaim control of her body from her

husband, thus disrupting the power dynamics within the relationship and bucking the

normative expectations embedded within her gendered role.[226] It would, however, be a

mistake to deem it empowering in any sense as it still conforms to patriarchal social relational

norms.[227] Drogo is still the dominant partner and Daenerys is still a survivor of marital rape,

but her desire to challenge him sexually does mark a shift in the relationship.

There is a further example of Daenerys taking control of her sexuality and using her body

to challenge and subvert heteronormative culture in the third season, which marks her

progress in subverting Ferreday's heterosexist culture.[228] In 'Second Sons' (3:8), she is

depicted fully naked, getting out of a bath after the remaining leader of the mercenary group

Second Sons, Daario Naharis enters her private field tent outside of Yunkai and confronts

her.[229] This scene is a callback to the very first scene Daenerys appears in, serving to reflect

upon how far her character arc has facilitated personal growth and exacerbated her otherness

between the first and third seasons. In the first episode, Daenerys is depicted getting into a

scalding hot bath after being sexually assaulted by her brother, Viserys. There, the water acts

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[226] Ferreday, "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom," 24.
[227] After once again being forced to acquiesce to Drogo's demands for impersonal and aggressive sex from behind in 'The Kingsroad' (1:2), Daenerys asks her handmaiden, Doreah (Roxanne McKee), to teach her 'how to make the Khal happy.'[227] Although this is still coded as catering to heterosexist culture, it provides a small way for Daenerys to claim a measure of agency where none previously existed. Although during her lesson with Doreah she voices the concern that 'I don't think that Drogo will like it with me on top' because it is not 'the Dothraki way', Daenerys challenges him when he enters the candlelit tent and roughly tries to force her onto her stomach. After declaring her intention to look at him during sex, she positions herself on top of Drogo, inviting him to bend to her will instead. He initially resists her attempts to face him, but her need to reclaim a measure of bodily autonomy during a sexual act that is inevitable as a part of a cyclical routine of positioning the body as object enables Daenerys to become a subject. Van Patten, dir., "The Kingsroad."
[228] Ferreday, "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom," 22.
[229] MacLaren, dir., "Second Sons."

as a means of purifying her body of his assault. However, in this scene, she takes control of the situation despite the threat that Daario poses. She chooses when to get out of the bath and fully expose herself to him, demonstrating her strength and control despite recognising potential vulnerability. Her woman's body is not subjugated, but rather his fully clothed man's body is as he responds to her question of whether he will fight for her: 'My sword is yours. My life is yours. My heart is yours.'[230] The camera frames Daenerys from Daario's perspective as he kneels before her, putting her in a position of power. However, Needham argues that this scene 'might indicate sexual empowerment resulting from presentation of Daenerys' control of her own sexuality [but] becomes instead a vehicle to fetishize Daenerys' nudity as the man (Daario Naharis) sexualizing her claims to fight for her physical beauty.'[231] The dual interpretation injects ambiguity into the use of nudity within the scene because, although it objectifies her female body, it also articulates the difference in power relations between the two points.

The reading of this scene as a problematic subjugation of the female body taps into Myles McNutt's concept of sexposition, or the use of nudity or sex as a backdrop to exposition that reveals the speaker's motivations or otherwise important insights into their character.[232] Valerie Frankel captures the essence of sexposition effectively by defining it as 'the show's frequent expository speeches delivered by or to naked women who otherwise have no effect on the plot.'[233] The application of sexposition in the show tends to position women as Other,

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[230] MacLaren, dir., "Second Sons."
[231] Needham, "Visual Misogyny," 13.
[232] Myles McNutt, "Game of Thrones – You Win or You Die," *Cultural Learnings,* last modified 29 May 2022, https://cultural-learnings.com/2011/05/29/game-of-thrones-you-win-or-you-die/.
[233] Valerie Frankel, *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 7.

neglecting their subjectivity. It does not negate the potential for feminist readings of individual scenes though. In 'Second Sons' (3:8), Daenerys does have subjective agency despite being naked, and she is the one who pushes back against cultural tropes and the natural order served previously by Daario that position her body as subject to heterosexist norms.[234] Although sexposition is linked to the notion of the abject body and the imposition of masculine desires on the female body as an object, Daenerys harnesses it to reverse normative power flows. There is a substance within the scene that overtly rejects the imposition of masculine control over her body, a remnant of the status quo that is directly challenged by Daenerys' full control over her own experience. There is scope for women to tell their stories, so the show once again challenges theoretical limitations and parameters. Furthermore, it reorients the focus on the female body, rendering it a site where subjectivity battles with objectivity and the maternal body becomes important in showcasing the complexity of identities that extend beyond its reproductive function.

Daenerys manipulates Daario to a degree to encourage his loyalty.[235] This, asserts Brooke Askey, enables her to co-opt patriarchal power, turning it to her advantage in order to strengthen her femininity and authority simultaneously: 'Queen Daenerys, a quickly rising main player in the game of thrones, has power over the phallus, while simultaneously rejecting phallic power. In fact, much of her authority stems from womanhood and actions toward

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[234] MacLaren, dir., "Second Sons."

[235] D. B. Weiss, dir., "Two Swords," *Game of Thrones,* season 4, episode 1, HBO, 2014. Daenerys' manipulation of Daario, a reversal of the manipulation that she previous experienced at the hands of brother Viserys, extends beyond this scene as her relationship provides an insight into how she subverts the dynamics of traditional power. In 'Two Swords' (4:1), he has been engaged in a sword balancing contest of strength and endurance with Grey Worm (Jacob Anderson) for several hours with the winner enjoying the honour of riding by Daenerys' side. Her response immediately puts her in control of the situation as they drop the swords: 'That honour goes to Ser Jorah and Ser Barristan as neither of them kept me waiting this morning. You two will ride in the rear-guard and protect the livestock. The last man holding his sword can find a new queen to fight for.'

social justice.'[236] This interpretation is paradoxical because it positions Daenerys' power over Daario as emerging from her femininity and sexuality, but she does so by adopting masculine behaviours such as the offering of privilege and rejecting his masculine performativity that is designed to appeal to her womanhood in favour of behaviours that would likely be acceptable to a king.

Daenerys' final interaction with Daario exemplifies her adoption of masculine behaviours. In 'The Winds of Winter' (6:10), she commands him to stay in Mereen to keep the peace they have won instead of heading to Westeros with her: 'You promised me. "My sword is yours. My life is yours." This is what I command. If I am going to rule in Westeros, I'll need to make alliances. The best way to make alliances is with marriage.'[237] Here, Daenerys confirms that she is still willing to adhere to certain patriarchal conventions, such as women entering into marriage in exchange for political alliances. However, unlike her marriage to Drogo, which was also agreed under the same principle, she at least has a choice this time. The repetition of her own personal history, a useful technique that is often exercised in the televisual text, demonstrates just how far she has developed as an agentic actor despite, rather than because of, the trauma of rape. Daario reminds her that a king would not think twice about bringing a lover to Westeros, which provides a reminder that Daenerys approaches leadership with a different attitude to men, but the whole scene is more important for highlighting her ruthlessness. At this point he has no value to her. Paradoxically though, Daenerys subverts the values of the status quo using established masculine behaviours despite the difference in

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[236] Brooke Askey, "'I'd Rather Have No Brains and Two Balls': Eunuchs, Masculinity and Power in *Game of Thrones*," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 1 (2018): 61.
[237] Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter."

attitude. She claims equality despite her responses and strategies being framed as gender performativity and wielding a form of female masculinity, an element of her identity that exists outside of motherhood and indicates that a mother is not all that she is. As Butler notes, gender performativity is indicative of the reworking of discourses within and surrounding hierarchical power structures and, in reversing those discourses and taking control of them, Daenerys refuses to be contained in the idealised gendered roles that she was placed in at the very start of the show.[238]

Like Daenerys, Cersei is also subject to sexual violence in *Game of Thrones,* but her lived experience of rape is different because it is twofold – marital and incestuous. In both cases she is powerless and the target of male aggression. Jaime rapes Cersei in 'Breaker of Chains' (4:3) and his aggression is all about the need for control over her in that moment as well as reclaiming power back from her.[239] It is the only overt challenge to the hold she has over him before he leaves Winterfell at the end of the seventh season.[240] This reflects the relevance of incest in discourses on the limits of patriarchal power and its ability to control women's bodies.[241] Incestuous rape has wider ramifications in relation to the subjugation of the female body and the positioning of Cersei as Other within patriarchal power structures. As Cersei is routinely depicted as the dominant twin, the rape essentially inverts the relationship between Cersei and Jaime, reversing the dynamics between them and allowing his raw, if Other, masculinity to overpower her. The dynamics of power therefore revert to patriarchal

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[238] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 224.

[239] Alex Graves, dir., "Breaker of Chains," *Game of Thrones,* season 4, episode 3, HBO, 2014.

[240] Cormier, "Affective Proximity," 7-8.

[241] Barnes, *Incest and the Literary Imagination*, 6-7; Ferreday, "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom," 30-32.

expectations that are in keeping with the gender roles that underpin existing representational paradigms of motherhood. The scene itself is bleak, with darkness shrouding the twins as they stand next to the dead body of their son, Joffrey, as he lies in state in the Sept of Baelor (Figure 9). The presence of the abject corpse lends the scene a perversity that serves to remind the audience of the fruits of their incestuous love affair as well as replicating the broader power struggle that is ongoing in Westeros in the wake of Joffrey's death. As such, the rape is almost framed as a secondary concern, a plot device as opposed to yet another personal trauma that Cersei has to endure.

Figure 9: Cersei and Jaime stand over Joffrey's body in the Sept of Baelor just before he rapes her, "Breaker of Chains" (4:3)

The platform of the assault itself is set up by Cersei's complete dismissal of his frustrations and grief for Joffrey, which is framed as selfish when she claims Joffrey as *her* son in line with the Good Mother paradigm of putting the children at the centre of a mother's being. Yet it also marks her failure in the single most important task of keeping them alive.[242] It is quite ironic that Jaime uses her maternal instincts as a cue for blaming Cersei for his attack on her:

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[242] Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers,* 3; Eidsvåg, "'Maiden, Mother and Crone': Motherhood in the World of Ice and Fire," 151.

'You're a hateful woman. Why have the Gods made me love a hateful woman?' These rhetorical questions are punctuated by the violence of Jaime grabbing her hair and ripping her skirts as she tells him to stop. The rape is an abhorrent symbol of the emergence of castration anxiety on the part of Jaime.[243] He is rendered impotent because he always acquiesces to her demands, and effects a means of trying to control Cersei just as she moves to transgress the borders of established gender roles and the oppression associated with patriarchal power that has sought to keep her in check.

However, unlike Daenerys, who gradually accumulates enough power to reclaim her sexuality, Cersei's rape represents a single disruptive trauma in a much more complex landscape. That is not to dismiss the significance of the assault as outlined above, but to view it in the context of Cersei's character arc. The televisual text facilitates the presentation of two vastly different lived experiences of motherhood and positions them next to each other. Further to that, the layered complexity of the storyworld provides scope for multiple deviations that effectively draw attention to the extent to which representational theories of motherhood are insufficient to contain or explain either Daenerys or Cersei. They are an amalgamation of elements taken from each of the paradigms, oscillating from one to another in a way that ostensibly appears unstable but actually serves to produce a realistic development arc that challenges the hierarchies of power.

Returning, then, to Cersei's character arc, she mirrors masculine behaviours in a form of alternative patriarchy. Even though she is expected to marry to forge alliances with other houses under the established Westerosi paternal order, Cersei routinely exploits young men,

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[243] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 53-54.

like her cousin Lancel Lannister (Eugene Simon), to satisfy her sexual desires, as per the Bad Mother paradigm.[244] This relationship underscores Cersei's manipulative nature and her determination to fulfil her own desires no matter whose expense she does so at, resisting any attempts to contain her and force her to conform. It is Cersei's resistance to containment and her determination to pursue her own sexual desires that leads to the exposure of her maternal body in a further act of sexual violence against her.

Arising from accusations of improper sexual conduct made against her and as a consequence of a plan to remove Margaery from Tommen's life that went spectacularly wrong, Cersei's walk of atonement in 'Mother's Mercy' (5:10) renders her a thoroughly abject spectacle.[245] Designed to simultaneously shame her and provide an example for those who challenge the dominant patriarchal order, it Others the female body as the source of pollution and moral degradation. By exposing her body, it nullifies Cersei's dangerous sexuality and reproductive power, temporarily bringing it under the power of a branch of the patriarchy. After being imprisoned by the fundamentalist religious sect the Faith Militant, Cersei is charged and taken to a packed town plaza. The High Sparrow makes a speech prior to Cersei being stripped and paraded through the streets as an abject spectacle, the language illustrating the patriarchal need to contain her:

> A sinner comes before you. Cersei of House Lannister. Mother to His Grace, King Tommen, widow of His Grace, King Robert. She has committed the acts of falsehood and fornication. She has confessed her sins, and begged for forgiveness. To demonstrate her repentance, she will cast aside all pride, all artifice, and present herself as the gods made her to you, the good people of this city. She comes before

[244] Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," 3.
[245] David Nutter, dir., "Mother's Mercy," *Game of Thrones,* season 5, episode 10, HBO, 2015.

you with a solemn heart, shorn of secrets, naked before the eyes of gods and men, to make her walk of atonement.[246]

This speech imposes certain qualities on Cersei that are simply not valid, framing the walk of atonement as persecution for daring to step outside of the idealised gendered expectations imposed on her. The notion that she repents, that she has a solemn heart and no secrets is undermined by the fact that she only admits to incestuous sex with Lancel, not Jaime. Furthermore, her subsequent actions of taking the Iron Throne for herself demonstrates that she has not been subdued by the display of power from the High Sparrow.

Cohen's fifth thesis asserts that the monster 'is transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker; and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed. The repressed […] always seems to return.'[247] The body of the monstrous Cersei is a site of pleasure within a system of subordination, and the walk of atonement is designed to destroy her, exiling her from the centre and returning her to the margins. However, although she is degraded and abjected, the punishment does not break her or undermine her spirit. This extends beyond the scope of Cohen's theory and positions Westerosi society in territory that it is unable to address. It also provides an insight into who she is beyond the role of mother, reinforcing the message that it is not all she is and that she cannot be contained within neat gendered categories.

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[246] Nutter, dir., "Mother's Mercy."
[247] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 12.

Figure 10: Cersei's walk of atonement, "Mother's Mercy" (5:10)

However, Cersei's penance is also symbolic because the degradation she is subjected to strips her of her femininity. It literally divests her of her long, blonde hair, which is violently shorn off by Septa Unella (Hannah Waddingham) before she is forced to disrobe. Her body is then violated by the crowd throwing faeces and rotting food at her bloody form (Figure 10). When she eventually reaches the Red Keep at the end of her punishment, she is emotionally broken and her physical abjection is complete, but it does not negate her otherness. Instead, it compounds it because she is reborn without the limitations placed on women by the expectations of the paternal order. Having endured humiliation at the behest of the very patriarchal order that her incestuous relationships threatened, she is no longer bound by its conventions. Instead of humbling her, the walk of atonement has precisely the opposite effect. It metaphorically pushes her back to the margins of society because it highlights her otherness, tearing her down from her regal pedestal and rendering her abject at all levels of society. However, despite her experience, she re-emerges from her ordeal with a renewed determination to reclaim the power that her enemies sought to divest her of. Cohen's theory notes that the body of the monster is both corporeal and incorporeal, posing a threat in its

propensity to shift between the two.[248] Corporeally, she is punished. Incorporeally, the experience of being required to atone for her sins so publicly, so abjectly, so absolutely drives her determination to redefine the dynamics of power.

In effect, both Daenerys and Cersei reclaim their bodies, subverting the power dynamics of male ownership by implementing strategies that reject masculine dominance in favour of feminine agency. As Cohen asserts, female Others are monstrous within patriarchal society simply because they exist,[249] but the actions and decisions taken by Cersei and Daenerys in response to the wilful subjugation of their bodies by the patriarchal order reinvent the expectations associated with their existence. The complex televisual text therefore stretches the application of monstrous feminine and mother theory, highlighting the need for existing mother paradigms and theories of otherness to evolve to accommodate the experiences and subjectivity of the Other and move beyond the role of motherhood. As a site of power, the female body is subject to a fluidity of representation throughout *Game of Thrones*' run, providing the patriarchy with a tool via which they may exert and maintain control in the earliest seasons before the Other is able to reclaim control. The rejection of male dominance over the female body is indicative of the threat female Others pose to the hegemonic power dynamics. In terms of the maternal body and reproductive power, the examples given here demonstrate an evolution of the representational type and the limitations of the paradigms that reflect on its containment, particularly those that reflect the refusal of access to other elements of identity that exist outside of the role of the mother.

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[248] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 5.
[249] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 15.

4 CHAPTER FOUR

MONSTROSITY AND MAD QUEENS – THE FEMALE THREAT TO HEGEMONIC POWER DYNAMICS

Just as the body is a site for the exploration of the multifaceted identities of Daenerys and Cersei throughout their respective journeys through the *Game of Thrones* storyworld, there are further and more intangible points of interest that provide scope for exploring how they challenge and transgress existing paradigms of motherhood. Neither character can be described as adhering to normative gender roles, just as neither can solely be contained within their respective experiences of motherhood. A mother is not all they are, although their roles as mothers are expanded into the much wider context of becoming the mother of the nations they rule. This context offers the paradox of breaking the narrowly defined role of mother established by the patriarchies that they usurp, or form an alternative to in the case of Cersei. However, this merits further discussion, particularly where their queenships, when they achieve them, are framed in terms of monstrosity and thus leave them 'at risk of being positioned as mad or bad.'[250]

The individual identities of Cersei and Daenerys as Other incorporate forms of monstrosity related to control, power and violence, positioning them firmly outside of the patriarchal norms and values of Westeros and rejecting any attempts to contain them. Amy Zimmerman interprets the fantasy element of the show as key in exploring the outcomes of such challenges to the legacy of the status quo, specifically 'their complex relationships to power,

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[250] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 1-2.

self-autonomy, and liberation.'[251] It facilitates interrogation of how the complexity of characterisation mirrors the layered complexity of the show. Cersei's challenge to the line of succession from within provides a subtle means of undermining the patriarchal order before her opportunistic decision to take power for herself in the immediate aftermath of the death of Tommen, her final golden-haired child. However, Daenerys' challenge is much more overt and alerts those who reside in the centre of power of her intentions. Again, the duality of the monstrous mother expands out into areas of characterisation that have a more tenuous connection to their motherhood but provide further insights into who they are beyond that role. This chapter will therefore focus on this expansion and how the combination of monstrosity and power continues to provide a threat that patriarchal structures and institutions attempt to contain.

4.1 Delimiting the Identity of the Mother

Daenerys initially begins to break hegemonic patriarchal norms by taking what she wants. Having arrived in the walled city of Qarth at the beginning of the second season, she continues to nurture her dragons and watch them grow. The dynamic of power between Daenerys and her children is complex and precarious at this point.[252] If her dragons survive, Daenerys will

[251] Amy Zimmerman, "The Abused Wives of Westeros: A Song of Feminism in 'Game of Thrones'," *Daily Beast,* last modified 12 July 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-abused-wives-of-westeros-a-song-of-feminism-in-game-of-thrones.

[252] This is evidenced by a conversation she has with Quaithe (Laura Pradelska), an ethereal shadowbinder who serves no further purpose beyond elucidating on the reciprocity that exists within the relationship: '[S]he is the Mother of Dragons. She needs true protectors now more than ever. They shall come day and night to see the wonder born into the world again. And when they see, they shall lust. For dragons are fire made flash, and fire is power.' This dialogue illustrates that Daenerys' children are her source of power, reinforcing the notion that she lacks power of her own without them and is vulnerable while they are still babies, but also that the threat of the monstrous mother is theoretical rather than latent. David Petrarca, dir., "The Ghost of Harrenhal," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 5, HBO, 2012.

become powerful, which would undermine hegemonic patriarchal norms. However, this signposts the abject place where meaning collapses,[253] because Daenerys simply takes what she needs to ensure that happens.

The most powerful example of Daenerys taking what she wants via the combination of power and monstrosity occurs in 'Valar Morghulis' (2:10).[254] Absorbed into the House of the Undying by the warlock Pyat Pree (Ian Hanmore) to reunite her with the dragons he has kidnapped, she follows the calls of her children through several visions, including one that serves as a premonition of the Iron Throne in a destroyed Throne Room covered in ash.[255] Another of her visions features Drogo and her infant son, Rhaego, in an alternative version of what could have been had they both survived. It presents an idealised future rather than the reality that she experienced walking through the Throne Room in the previous vision. However, she chooses her reality over fantasy as she is pulled out of her vision quest by the cries of her dragon children. The pull she feels to protect them triumphs over the urge to remain with her human child, which is indicative of her perceived monstrousness. She rejects the fantasy of conventional motherhood in order to return to her adopted children, thus challenging hegemonic patriarchal dominance via a twofold rejection of the idealised Good Mother paradigm. However, an alternative interpretation is simply that she rejects the forces of the past and the ties that bind her in favour of harnessing her personal power and moving forwards.

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[253] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 46.
[254] Taylor, dir., "Valar Morghulis."
[255] It is revealed in the final *Game of Thrones* episode to be an accurate representation of what happens when Daenerys finally gets to sit on the Iron Throne that she has coveted for so long.

This scene marks Daenerys' transition from being at the mercy of the patriarchy to directly undermining it, establishing that the dragons facilitate this shift in the balance of power. When Daenerys locates Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion imprisoned in a small, candlelit room in the House of the Undying, she finds them chained to a stone plinth and realises that she is magically chained to them herself. Moving out of the shadows, Pyat Pree explains his need to enslave them all: 'When your dragons were born, our magic was born again. It is strongest in their presence and they are strongest in yours.' The reciprocity between mother and monstrous children mutually empowers them, which soon becomes evident as Daenerys resists her own imprisonment and harnesses that power to free them all. Standing in front of her dragons with her arms spread as wide as the chains are pulled taught, she issues a single command: 'Dracarys' (Figure 11). Daenerys' faith in her children is borne out as they begin to breathe fire, slowly at first before it is channelled through and amplified by her. The chains that bind them crumble as Pyat Pree dies, taking his magic with him, and symbolise those patriarchal chains that were used to contain her. Daenerys' ability to perform the first duty of the archetypal mother – keeping her children alive – means that she succeeds here where Cersei fails, although this premise is challenged when the dragons are fully grown.[256] In this instance, Pyat Pree's wish to enslave Daenerys positions his desire for power as superior to her freedom and agency, mirroring the same masculine desires exhibited by Viserys and then the Dothraki. She reclaims both in tandem with her children. Sylva Sheridan suggests that this whole episode reinforces Daenerys' ethereality and the 'deep and magical power' she finds in

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[256] Eidsvåg, "'Maiden, Mother and Crone': Motherhood in the World of Ice and Fire," 151.

fire.[257] Her ability to nurture dragons and use the elements to subdue her enemies provides evidence of her monstrousness, but it also heralds the end of her first stage of development.

Figure 11: Daenerys amplifies her dragons' fire to kill Pyat Pree, "Valar Morghulis" (2:10)

Daenerys' second stage of development is also irrevocably entwined with her role as a monstrous mother, positioning her as a conqueror and freedom fighter. Within the *Game of Thrones* storyworld, women are unable to challenge for power and position in Westeros, with men replacing men when those in power are no longer viable rulers. The chaos that increases as the status quo declines provides an opportunity to rework the rules of leadership, enabling women Others to emerge as viable rulers by challenging that contention. However, Daenerys does so by dismantling patriarchal power structures in Essos and accumulating enough power to challenge those in Westeros over an extended period of time, as is evident by her conquests of Astapor, Yunkai and Mereen. The beauty of the televisual text resides within this extended characterisation. The layered complexity that underpins each character's development arc

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[257] Sylva Sheridan, "Progression Through Regression: The Inferno of Daenerys Targaryen," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 49, no. 1 (2019): 72.

allows audiences to understand where and how transgressions occur, pushing the boundaries of gendered norms and reworking paradigms.

Styling herself, quite unwittingly at first, as a 'female white messiah',[258] Daenerys initial freeing of slaves is a decision founded on compassion and a recognition of her own earlier powerlessness in those she champions. However, it is not a purely altruistic act. She commands the Unsullied to destroy those who enforce the institution of slavery before leaving Astapor with them as her own army, riding ahead of them on a white horse.[259] Daenerys' otherness is absolute and she embraces it via her subsequent 'eye for an eye' philosophy, but this scene also casts her as heroic: 'The maternal body bears children, dies, and vanishes; the heroic body fantastically self-sufficient, can bear nations and be forever remembered in the name of its colossal progeny.'[260] Her heroic body and her maternal body are one and the same, presenting her as the mother of Astapor having freed its people. In doing so, she reorients the valour and bravery of the Heroic Mother paradigm, shifting it away from the suffering and endurance 'for the sake of husband and children' towards the radically different context of the nation. The iconography in this scene presents Daenerys as a heroic saviour, an important and now powerful entity who can challenge the hegemonic power dynamics of the Western world. That she is also framed as an Other who embraces humanitarian values in laying down

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[258] Dan Hassler-Forest, "Game of Thrones: Quality Television and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification," *TV/Series* 6 (2014), https://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/323, para. 24.
[259] Allen Kerkeslager, "Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy, and the Rider on the White Horse in Rev 6:2," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 1 (1993): 116; J. S. Considine, "The Rider on the White Horse: Apocalypse 6:1-8," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1944): 406. The symbolism of the white horse is entrenched in Christian mythology and specifically linked to the first horseman of the Apocalypse, being interpreted as a figure representing Christ himself or alternatively as a conqueror who is a representative of war. Daenerys is both. The ambiguity here is balanced by on overhead shot of Daenerys leading the Unsullied away from Astapor with her dragons flying overhead. There is a sense of triumph intermingled with a foreboding as the camera moves upwards and the scale of the Unsullied is revealed as it poses to the patriarchal order in Westeros.
[260] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 47.

that challenge paradoxically contravenes the notion of the Monster as a force for destruction. While she does destroy the patriarchal order in Astapor, she also signals her intention to do things differently when constructing her own societal order.

Daenerys' ability to free the Unsullied and other slaves is another element of her identity that moves her beyond existing mother paradigms and is not accounted for in theories of monstrosity because such representation is more nuanced in complex televisual texts than in the shorter filmic texts that they are typically applied to. There is no suggestion that the monstrous mother can be deemed benevolent or humanitarian in relevant theories, and yet Daenerys exhibits both traits in her earliest conquests: 'Unsullied! You have been slaves all your life. Today you are free. Any man who wishes to leave may leave and no one will harm him. I give you my word. Will you fight for me? As free men?'[261] The use of force employed by Daenerys in Astapor, Yunkai and Mereen follows these ideals, many of which are unworkable in practice despite being noble in theory. Under Westerosi idealised gender roles, they are typically masculine in nature and therefore mark a further point at which Daenerys departs from typical conceptions of motherhood. Building on the notion that she is a mother in a much wider context, she is designated the moniker of 'Mhysa', a mother of the common people who assumes the role of guardian and has slave collars thrown at her feet.[262] In line with this, and in direct contravention of the masculine leadership displayed elsewhere in the *Game of Thrones* storyworld, Daenerys invites people to join her rather than forcing conscription on them. The performative masculine nature of leadership intersects with a more reasonable and compassionate approach that reflects Daenerys' own values and lived

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[261] Graves, dir., "And Now His Watch Is Ended."
[262] Nutter, dir., "Mhysa."

experiences. Although she experiences difficulties along the way, particularly the resistance of the traditional patriarchal order in Mereen, she is able to draw upon the faithful support she has to achieve satisfactory outcomes. It is when she is attacked that she transitions into the third stage of her development.

The third stage of Daenerys' challenge to hegemonic power dynamics is introduced in 'Hardhome' (5:8).[263] A conversation between Tyrion and his new queen demonstrates just how far she has developed as a leader, a conqueror and an Other. Daenerys has no desire to fit into the structures and institutions that safeguard hegemonic power despite her admission that she has had to acquiesce to some of the archaic practices that were a staple under the patriarchal systems that she has attacked and undermined. She accepts cultural transitions must be managed appropriately to secure her position, thus demonstrating her intelligence and recognition of the fact that she must become a strategist in order to get what she wants. This nuanced approach mirrors her position in relation to motherhood and actively bucks established convention. Daenerys is already a strategist though, remaining impassive throughout the conversation and refusing to respond to Tyrion's gentle ridiculing of her ambitions as an unoriginal dream until she outlines her plan:

> I fought so that no child born into Slaver's Bay would ever know what it meant to be bought or sold. I will continue that fight here and beyond, but this is not my home […] Lannister, Targaryen, Baratheon, Stark, Tyrell. They're all just spokes on a wheel. This one's on top, then that one's on top, and on and on it spins crushing those on the ground […] I'm not going to stop the wheel. I'm going to break the wheel.[264]

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[263] Miguel Sapochnik, dir., "Hardhome," *Game of Thrones,* season 5, episode 8, HBO, 2015.
[264] Sapochnik, dir., "Hardhome."

Tyrion's view of Westerosi hegemonic norms are far more cynical than Daenerys'. Having been located within the patriarchal systems and structures his whole life, Tyrion is fully aware of the mechanisms of power that are designed to maintain the oppression of Others. However, Daenerys recognises her own naivety and employs Tyrion as her advisor to mitigate her own failings. Daenerys forges alliances and adopts Others into her surrogate family to empower her by balancing out those weaknesses. The advice Tyrion, Ser Jorah and Ser Barristan offer her negates her naivety and strategic deficits, thus enhancing her ability to achieve her aim. Their network of relationships reworks the nuclear family, redefining the institutional mechanisms that contain mothers and forces them to strive for the idealised values that are not designed for their benefit.

However, the reading of all three phases of Daenerys' development as a threat to hegemonic power dynamics must also consider that, unlike Cersei, Daenerys is not an Other primarily by virtue of her behaviour. Rather, she is rendered a perpetual Other by virtue of her status as a non-Western ethnic Other who exists outside of all Westerosi power structures and the normative parameters of patriarchal influence.[265] As such, Daenerys exists within a space that is highly conducive to exploring representational deviation and transgression of existing norms. She evades the established spatial order, belonging to neither the Dothraki nor Westerosi cultures. She is deemed Western by the Dothraki by virtue of her silver hair and fair skin but othered by Westeros based upon her marriage to a 'savage' horse lord and the

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[265] Hassler-Forest, "Game of Thrones: Quality Television and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification," para. 21. Her family's exile casts Daenerys adrift of those of Westeros, but she exists within a space that Dan Hassler-Forest appropriately refers to as in between a 'basic binary distinction between the civilised world of Westeros and the more mythical, dangerous, and generally more primitive areas to the east and south.' There are also issues of whiteness to consider here. Daenerys is racially white and this is amplified by her presence among the Dothraki, who are people of colour. However, her race does not preclude her from being an ethnic Other.

Valyrian heritage of the Targaryens. Daenerys is therefore an outsider who evades binary classification and does not have to adhere to standards other than those she formulates herself. She highlights the trouble with all attempts to put a label on problematic identities in order to contain the threat posed by difference.[266] Daenerys' identity therefore exhibits a complexity that established frameworks cannot adequately classify precisely because she does not adhere to or oppose any set of norms and ideals. Instead, she establishes her own values, aided by the scope of the televisual text, that ask frequent questions of the patriarchal efforts to contain her. As she is resolutely more than a mother, it is difficult to situate Daenerys in existing discourse without expanding the complexity of paradigms that she would otherwise fail to fit into.

4.2 Forming an Alternative (to) Patriarchy

In stark contrast to Daenerys, Cersei forms a complex relationship with hegemonic patriarchal power throughout the course of the show's run because she remains firmly positioned within existing institutions and structures. Initially, Cersei is oppressed by the power of patriarchal structures and forced to conform to the role of royal wife and mother, thus containing her within the established gender roles imposed on Westerosi women. However, despite appearances, she subverts the accepted order of things and ultimately dismantles male power

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[266] As a consequence, she also evades classification within the twentieth century theoretical framework concerning otherness and representation. Not only does that framework suppose a central power, which is absent in *Game of Thrones,* but it also assumes that external entities are defined by the norms and ideals of that central power.

structures. Where Daenerys attacks the Westerosi patriarchy from the outside, much as Arya Stark does, Cersei mounts her assault on hegemonic systems and institutions from within.[267]

Cersei is unable to subvert hegemonic patriarchal dynamics to the extent that it marks a profound departure from what has gone before and effects a fundamental shift in the heterosexist attitudes that Ferreday notes as a feature of Westerosi power hierarchies.[268] Cersei takes power from Robert in death, but she is unable to wield it herself because of the gendered limitations imposed by the patriarchy he safeguarded, the legacy of which remains in force in the immediate aftermath of his death.[269] The collapse of order is a direct consequence of Robert's fall and, although Cersei could not have envisioned the far-reaching consequences of her decision to become a widow, she continues the pattern of acting solely in her own self-interest. There is no altruistic motivation or feminist goal. Neither is there a consideration of the impact of the death on her children beyond the prevention of Ned informing Robert that he is not their father. Instead, Cersei challenges the positionality of women within society by using covert means to remove the single most powerful entity in her way, the husband that forced her conformity to traditional gender expectations. The act of resistance empowers her via her position as an Other and increases the measure of self-determinism she has as a mother.

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[267] Louise Coopey, "Representation, Otherness and Fantastic Storyworlds: Breaking Gender Binaries and Reworking Identities in *Game of Thrones*," *Imagining the Impossible: International Journal for the Fantastic in Contemporary Media* 1, no. 1 (2022): 1-17.

[268] Ferreday, "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom," 22.

[269] In addition to her refusal to bear Robert's legitimate heirs, Cersei orchestrates Robert's death. Encouraging sexual partner and cousin Lancel to ply him with wine and dull his reflexes, Cersei contributes to the accident that kills him in a way that does not attract blame or cries of foul play. This fits into Cohen's castration fantasies because she makes him a cuckold, using her young lover to render him impotent and remove his masculine power while rejecting the gendered norms that Robert, as king, was tasked with upholding and embracing monstrosity. Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 17.

A further example of Cersei's threat to the hegemonic power dynamics that underpin Westerosi society necessitates exploring her relationship with the Faith Militant and its leader, the High Sparrow, in more detail. The religious order others Cersei further, pulling her out of the centre via the dominant discourse of paternalist morality they introduce to the populist crowd. As previously stated, her rise to queenship is not predicated on her own power, but the need to wield that afforded to her by the men that she is related to or those she is able to manipulate. Cersei believes that the High Sparrow belongs to the latter category, although her logic is fundamentally flawed and grounded in an arrogance that her family name holds weight. This is evident initially when she goes looking for him in 'High Sparrow' (5:3): 'The Faith and the Crown are the two pillars that hold up this world. One collapses, so does the other. We must do everything necessary to protect one another.'[270] This power play is ostensibly linked to her role as the queen mother because the mutual protection she requests is essentially an admission that she needs allies to move against the Tyrells, particularly Tommen's wife Margaery. Cersei is vocal about her belief that Margaery is manipulating Tommen, but even that is rooted in self-interest and the desire to maintain her own influence over her son. Every mother paradigm stipulates that a Good Mother, an effective mother, has the best interests of her children at heart,[271] but Cersei's motivations are far more nuanced than that and only fully decipherable across the whole of the televisual text to that point. While Cersei is fiercely protective of her children, a sentiment that she verbalises for the audience repeatedly, her concerns about Margaery are also selfish and concerned with

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[270] Mylod, dir., "High Sparrow."
[271] Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 81; Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," 3; Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives,* 2.

retaining her own place in the hierarchies of power, which leads her to chronically underestimate the High Sparrow.

Cersei's enabling of the High Sparrow suggests that the power of hegemonic institutions lies with her, but that is not the case and she empowers him.[272] There is a callback to Tywin's damning indictment of her in 'And Now His Watch Is Ended' (3:4), during which Cersei takes the opportunity to question him about why he simply dismisses her even though she has been moulding herself in his own image.[273] Tywin's declaration that she isn't as smart as she thinks is borne out initially, but she ultimately learns from her mistakes. Far from the Monster retreating, as in Cohen's theory of otherness, Cersei comes again and hits harder.[274] Her initial use of the paternal order to achieve power instead of accumulating her own influence directly challenges her ability to rule and accomplish her strategic goals, as is evidenced by her inability to move against the Tyrells alone. However, her revenge draws on the application of violence as a means of seizing power, engaging with the masculine where her feminine approach fails.

The construction of Cersei's characterisation as an empowered and subversive ruler in the final two seasons has invited readings that emphasise the multiplicity and complexity of the Other within the extended narratives facilitated by the televisual text, but rarely in conjunction with the implications for her role as a mother. For instance, Tobi Evans' interpretation of Cersei as monstrous is based on a perceived duality, which is underpinned by the discourses and values established as cornerstones of power under male absolutism:

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[272] The struggle for control that characterises the relationship between the two highlights Cersei's initial naivety, but it also ultimately accentuates the same quality in the High Sparrow. His fundamental belief in his own power, and the right to that power, engenders a complete underestimation of his enemy.
[273] Graves, dir., "And Now His Watch Is Ended."
[274] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 4-5.

> Almost all of Cersei's decisions are hastily made and poorly considered, which may suggest […] that female masculinities are poor imitations of male masculinities, or worse, that women should be excluded from power because they cannot rule effectively. However, it is masculine practices such as violence and domination – monstrous stylized acts – that make Cersei an evil queen. Rather than contesting dominant and oppressive gender regimes, she retraces the steps of the patriarchy and achieves the same monstrous ends.[275]

Evans' interpretation acknowledges the gradual subsuming of Cersei's feminine identity by a form of female masculinity that is grounded within the patriarchy. It positions masculinity as the dominant force even after the decline of the status quo, and yet simultaneously challenges the normative milieu of power relations. There is no acknowledgement of her maternal body in Evans' excellent critique, primarily perhaps because their focus is not on Cersei's motherhood and her children die before she becomes Queen Cersei in her own right. However, that is not to say that her status as a mother is irrelevant here because it keeps her close to power until she is free to take it herself. In this sense, there is more to the mother as Other than the maternal role imposed upon her, but that role is not automatically expunged from who she is and still forms a vital part of her identity.

However, not all of Cersei's decisions are either hastily made or poorly considered. Instead, I contend that they are very deliberately rendered in the image of her father. That is to say, she reinforces the hegemony of patriarchal power by using the masculine norms of violence and force, thus thoroughly transgressing the boundaries of her gendered role while remaining a threat because she subverts the notion that women cannot rule. Cersei demonstrates that they can in an approximation of the same way as men do, but also that those women worthy of leadership are equipped to overcome the obstacles placed in their path by the patriarchal

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[275] Evans, "Vile, Scheming, Evil Bitches?" 24.

order. This paradoxical position is disruptive and reworks Cersei's own position, but it does little to rework the heavily gendered structures embedded within the hierarchies of power. By the opening scene of 'The Winds of Winter' (6:10), Cersei has completed her personal apprenticeship in the patriarchal order, learning from her father and husband how to co-opt masculine behaviours to use against those tasked with safeguarding the hierarchical order, and is ready to step out of its shadow.[276] She seizes power in a wholly spectacular way and removes all of her enemies in a single act to pave the way for her accession to the Iron Throne.

More than any of the battles in *Game of Thrones,* Cersei's destruction of the Sept of Baelor to seize power in 'The Winds of Winter' serves as a symbolic shock to the Westerosi system.[277] There is no transition that follows the pattern of the same masculine order, but one that marks a significant disjunction in terms of how power looks. Although I contend that Cersei's leadership is very much in the same mould as Tywin's, the visibility of a woman seizing power, a failed mother who does not fit into any of the existing paradigms, is problematic for the patriarchal system she takes over.

The destruction of the Sept of Baelor takes place in a single extended scene that follows the scheduled trials of Loras Tyrell for homosexuality and Cersei for incest. The trial initially focuses on Loras' confession and punishment, all of which is witnessed first-hand by the remaining ruling elite who form a surveilling outer ring around him. However, it quickly becomes apparent that Cersei does not intend to attend her own trial, instead blowing up the Sept with wildfire, an explosive substance that is stored beneath the city. The extended scene itself is beautifully constructed to juxtapose the mundane with the spectacular, depicting

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[276] Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter."
[277] Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter."

Cersei dressing, pouring and drinking wine, and looking out over the city from the Red Keep as her plan begins to fall into place. As her Hand of the Queen, Qyburn (Anton Lesser) explains her plan succinctly: '[S]ometimes before we can usher in the new, the old must be put to rest.'[278] The notion of 'putting the old to rest' is multifaceted, but it begins with reworking Cersei's old public identity. She is no longer the queen mother, but a powerful entity in her own right as the Lannister who seizes the Iron Throne. She is no longer beholden to idealised expectations as she has the power to overtly reject those she does not wish to conform to or strive to achieve.[279]

Cersei grasps power that is very much in the image of the patriarchal order and yet is driven by the desires of the monstrous feminine. Theories of motherhood do not allow for the possibility that those within established paradigms will be able to claim significant power and challenge the very fabric of society, particularly the Good/Bad Mother binary. In overcoming such limiting containment here, Cersei resets the symbolic order and highlights the inadequacy of the theoretical framework as it applies to complex televisual texts.

According to Ross Murray, feminist empowerment is the natural enemy of the patriarchy, so Daenerys and Cersei can be read as antagonists who seek power by strategically deploying co-opted masculine traits and means.[280] However, they ultimately do so against each other as

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[278] Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter."

[279] Putting the old to rest includes destroying the guardians of the patriarchy, such as luring Pycelle (Julian Glover) and Lancel Lannister to their deaths, giving the latter a glimpse of the slow burning candles, wildfire and what is to become of the rest of the Sept of Baelor, so he is punished twice for betraying Cersei. She is also aware that Margaery would realise that that she has planned revenge for her humiliation in the name of patriarchal institutions. She calculates that Margaery would be aware that the High Sparrow's own need for power and control would prevent anyone leaving the Sept, thus delivering mental torture before the spectacular manifestation of violence that brings about the removal of the very last vestiges of the patriarchal order that had limited her power beforehand.

[280] Ross Murray, "The Feminine Mystique: Feminism, Sexuality, Motherhood," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 2, no. 1 (2011): 61.

opposed to against a normative masculine representative of the symbolic order. As such, they are representative of a shift away from patriarchy and towards the symbolic process of forging a new power structure that is more receptive to the inclusion of complex women. Paradoxically, although they stand united in their opposition to masculine hegemonic power, they represent very different approaches to the empowerment of those who are traditionally excluded from it.

Daenerys' leadership, like her maternal body, is a site of subversion, completely departing from what had gone before in terms of her approach to power, if not her actions and orders. However, Cersei is a site of reinforcement, utilising the methods and approaches to power that her male predecessors adopted. This directly challenges binary theories of otherness that categorise as Self and Other, as same and different, as human and monstrous. Binary opposites are not sufficient to illustrate the complexity of twenty-first century televisual texts, particularly where layered complexity exists within and beyond individual shows. In *Game of Thrones,* identities stretch along and beyond binaries as a consequence of the need for realistic representation that acknowledges that a mother (in this case) is not all that an individual is and explores the possibilities that arise from that development. However, those possibilities are amplified when Cersei and Daenerys meet, drawing attention to the difference that exists between members of the same categorical archetype as well as highlighting just how spectacularly patriarchal strategies of containment have failed.

Cersei and Daenerys only ever meet twice in the show, but the initial meeting perfectly illustrates their mutual rejection of the hegemonic power dynamics in favour of a process of resettling the established order in a way that accommodated them. In short, they reject the

processes of containment that had previously been imposed on them. As both queens have crossed the symbolic borders established by the patriarchy to impose control, they are overtly abject in the theories of both Creed and Kristeva.[281] However, they are also afforded full control over the meeting at the Dragonpit in 'The Dragon and the Wolf' (7:7) as the only two potential rulers of Westeros, with male heirs having been killed in the War of the Five Kings and those remaining who could take power refusing to do so.[282] Although Jon Snow is revealed to be the rightful heir as the son of Rhaegar Targaryen, his rejection of the Iron Throne cements the validity of the lines of succession claimed by both Cersei and Daenerys, meaning that patriarchal strategies of containment have failed.

The scene itself is complex and incorporates layered dynamics that are borne of unresolved tensions and issues between numerous characters, but there is overt competition between the two queens on account of their competing claims to the Iron Throne. Daenerys arrives at the Dragonpit riding on Drogon and accompanied by Rhaegal in a show of power. Cersei is the incumbent and brings the power of the Iron Throne to bear by refusing her rival's request for an army to join the fight against the Army of the Dead. Their stalemate is indicative of their respective desires to be recognised as powerful in their own right, but forms a demonstration of the viability of matriarchal power. However, Askey argues that it is not possible to have matriarchal power without the opposing force of patriarchal power, with the two adopting a reciprocity that constitutes continual recreation and tension.[283] Although Cersei represents an alternative form of patriarchy in terms of the way that she approaches power, *Game of*

[281] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine,* 11; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 4.
[282] Podeswa, dir., "The Dragon and the Wolf."
[283] Askey, "'I'd Rather Have No Brains and Two Balls',"61.

Thrones directly challenges this contention. The meeting of the two queens deprivileges the phallus, positioning masculine physical power as a force to be wielded on a woman's authority within the remnants of the failed patrilineal status quo. The adoption of masculine qualities and traits by both Cersei and Daenerys does not negate the fact that they are firmly positioned outside of the patriarchal symbolic order, but their positionality disturbs 'juridical regularities' and straddles the impossible and forbidden.[284] In doing so, their differences demonstrate just how far occupying that space empowers women to seek authentic identities on their own terms.

Furthermore, the evasion of patriarchal containment and refusal to adhere to mother paradigms provides scope for multiple readings of the significance of their versions of otherness. For instance, Gerald Poscheschnik offers an alternative interpretation of Daenerys presence in *Game of Thrones*, one that marks her out as diametrically opposed to Cersei as an Other. This reading lends her a greater symbolic value that extends beyond the resettling of the status quo and simultaneously illustrates the problem with it:

> Daenerys Targaryen somehow represents a glimmer of hope. Daenerys seems to satisfy the hope that a better world in which peace, more justice, less greed, less competition could be possible […] Daenerys stands as a cipher for the feeling that a lot of things are going wrong in Western society but nobody quite knows how it could be different.[285]

This interpretation of Daenerys' otherness is interesting, providing the possibility for change outside of the scope of the televisual text itself without the need for resolution or closure. That hope for a better world does not come without conditions, but Daenerys' presence

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[284] Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College De France, 1974-1975* (London: Verso, 2003), 51.
[285] Poscheschnik, "Game of Thrones – A Psychoanalytic Interpretation," 1010.

provides evidence of an alternative choice or path. Traditionally, the answer as to how things could be different has been found within the patriarchal orders that dominate the political, social and cultural landscapes within which televisual texts exist, but this is not the case in *Game of Thrones*. Instead, the show comments on complacency and continual struggles for power as sources of chaos with no hope for salvation as a consequence of the rejection of otherness and difference. To overcome the obstacles that remain, difference and deviation must be embraced.

Although neither Cersei nor Daenerys ultimately become the legitimate and unchallenged ruler of a peaceful Westeros in *Game of Thrones*, their success as leaders paves the way for the Other to adopt a more permanent position at the very centre of society and closer to the power that is routinely denied them by the hegemonic (old, masculine and white) order. In this sense, the female threat to hegemonic power dynamics is key to the acceptance of the Other as a legitimate alternative to the traditional status quo. The symbolic importance of Daenerys and Cersei therefore resides in their potentiality and possibility as they smash Westeros' glass ceiling. However, this is negated somewhat by the inconsistencies towards the end of *Game of Thrones*, which undermine the progressive nature of the representation of motherhood and the other elements of the multifaceted identities established by Cersei and Daenerys over the course of the televisual text. Indeed, the use of the Mad Queen trope suggests that there are still fundamental problems in forging representations of the Other that apply the same standards to all characters, regardless of gender.

4.3 The Mad Queen Trope and the Limits of Progressive Representation

In his interrogation of the ontological dilemmas posed by the question of what a monster is, Peter Brooks asserts that 'one may ask if the Monster is not in fact a woman who is seeking to escape from the feminine condition into recognition by the fraternity.'[286] The discussion to date has noted that both Daenerys and Cersei refuse to conform to idealised gender roles and, in some cases, relinquish traits that are identified as feminine in order to accumulate a level of power that is able to challenge the status quo and subvert the patriarchal order. However, escaping the gender roles imposed on them is a continuous battle. Cersei's conversations with Tywin and Daenerys' decisions and behaviours within the context of war indicate symbolic fraternity, but Brooks' observation does not go far enough in exploring the representations of the two queens in the context of televisual text.

In line with the patterns of otherness explored here, monstrosity is a nuanced state in the twenty-first century and has been subject to reconfigurations that present the Monster as a single entity that can provide a site for both good and evil simultaneously in popular culture.[287] However, the maintenance of binary opposite values is highly problematic given the subjective nature of what constitutes good and bad, or even what may be deemed as monstrous as opposed to heroic, and such lines are often blurred, reversed or even intersect.[288] This provides scope for the formulation of a new understanding of the monstrousness of human nature. This manifests in the perception that madness underpins the behaviours and decisions of Queen Daenerys and Queen Cersei, particularly in the context of the final series. This is not

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[286] Brooks, *Body Work,* 218.
[287] Erica McCrystal, "Hyde the Hero: Changing the Role of the Modern-Day Monster," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2018): 241.
[288] McCrystal, "Hyde the Hero: Changing the Role of the Modern-Day Monster," 243.

a subjective interpretation of the way that their respective identities are indicative of how they handle their accumulated power, but rather a broader discourse that has become intricately intertwined with their character arcs. As Ussher points out, the monstrous feminine is often associated with those women who avoid containment and are therefore 'at risk of being positioned as mad or bad',[289] but the reversion to such a lazy trope to explain why women cannot lead demonstrates how far progressive representation is subject to the vision of the showrunners.

Madness is a staple part of the discourses concerning monstrosity and the monstrous feminine. Creed notes that the horror film represents the confrontation of death as giving rise to 'a terror of self-disintegration, of losing one's self or ego […] signifying the obliteration of self.'[290] As identity is an imaginary construct,[291] the notion of losing oneself can be read as instigating a descent into a personal crisis, within which one may lose their grasp on reality and their individual sense of self. However, the representation of madness in *Game of Thrones* is inherently problematic. Both Cersei and Daenerys begin their individual journeys firmly under the control of patriarchal structures, highlighting the need to personally develop in order to reject that control. They achieve freedom through strategic actions and decisions that help them to accumulate power without exhibiting any tendencies towards madness, and yet they are framed as mad or bad when they evade containment on their own terms. This begs the question of whether the patriarchy is simply keen to project madness onto women who are capable of exploiting its vulnerabilities. The twenty-first century has been a site of what

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[289] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 1-2.
[290] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 64.
[291] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 64.

Marie Maguire describes as new female assertiveness in that women's lives neither revolve around the family nor adhere to paternal authority, with the male response often being grounded in vulnerable male individualism and manifesting as emotional distress.[292] This reframing of gender roles also offers an explanation as to why existing mother paradigms are incapable of explaining the layered complexity of identities that facilitate personal transgressions. It is this insecurity that necessitates an exploration of how the monstrous feminine becomes mad, or may be read as prone to madness, when the possibility of patriarchal containment is removed.

The show formalises and reinforces the Mad Queen trope that, although absent from many of the twentieth century theories advanced concerning monstrosity, has long been linked with monstrosity in literature and film. The figure of the Mad Queen originates with Juana of Castile, whose madness is controversial in modern scholarship but led to her father seizing power from his intelligent daughter and ruling in her stead during the early sixteenth century.[293] This has become the foundation for the trope since, its patriarchal perpetuation reinforcing the notion that women are emotional and unfit to rule.[294] Women who reject established gender roles or transgress their limits are perceived as posing a danger to the patriarchal order, which has fundamentally failed in its hegemonic desire to contain them. The Mad Queen trope not only makes that danger real but enables her to wield it from the very

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[292] Marie Maguire, *Men, Women, Passion and Power* (London: Routledge, 1995), 82.

[293] David George, "Necrophilia, Madness and Degeneration in Manuel Tamayo y Baus's *La locura de amor* (1855)," in *Juana of Castile: History and Myth of the Mad Queen,* ed. Maria Gomez, Santiago Juan-Navarro and Phyllis Zatlin (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 74.

[294] Jane E. Kromm, "The Feminization of Madness in Visual Representation," *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 3 (1994): 507. Closely associated with degeneration, it also taps into the eighteenth century idea that madness is a 'female malady' and therefore a gendered disorder that gives rise to sexual proclivities and self-abuse that are not recognised within the expectations associated with established female roles within society.

top of society. The application of the trope to Cersei and Daenerys is therefore expected, if not at all accurate.

Daenerys' identity as a conqueror is viewed positively despite her tendency to act on instinct and make decisions based on an emotive response to a situation, but there is a distinct shift in 'The Bells' (8:5).[295] Her decision to raze King's Landing to the ground despite already receiving its surrender is grounded in anger and grief, but the moment Daenerys 'snaps' is highly ambiguous and can be read in numerous ways. Depicted sat on Drogon, her only remaining child, and surveying the burning remnants of King's Landing as the bells ring out to announce the city's surrender, Daenerys' usually controlled demeanour slips. Her emotional response to the recent deaths of protector Jorah, dragon child Rhaegal and assistant and friend Missandei manifests in her decision to raze the city to the ground.

The shot itself captures the devastation her attack on the city has caused, with the smoke of the city visible behind her, but it also captures her personal devastation. Daenerys is initially still, taking deep breaths and staring at a fixed point ahead (Figure 12). Only when the camera presents her perspective is it revealed that she is staring at the Red Keep where Cersei hides. When it focuses back on Daenerys, the camera moves slowly into a close up of her face as her expression changes from one of sorrow to one set in a grim determination to destroy her enemy. Megan Garber's review of 'The Bells' provides two potential readings of the scene:

> You could read Daenerys's behavior as well, in a series that has often failed in its treatment of would-be queens, as an endorsement of tired and dangerous tropes about manipulative women, and emotional women, and ambitious women. You

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[295] Miguel Sapochnik, dir., "The Bells," *Game of Thrones,* season 8, episode 5, HBO, 2019.

could read it as a person, reeling from rejection and grief, acting out on her heartbreak.[296]

The former is rooted in otherness, the second in subjective experience, and a third not mentioned here in inherited genetic anomalies that pass madness from one generation to the next. This third is a familial parallel in which Daenerys' decision to burn King's Landing echoes her father, the Mad King's, command for Jaime to 'burn them all' when he loses control of the city during Robert's Rebellion.[297] Although this is an easy point of comparison, it is also a lazy one.[298]

Figure 12: Daenerys sits atop Drogon, surveying King's Landing as it burns, "The Bells" (8:5)

All evidence points to Daenerys being a capable and highly benevolent ruler throughout the show. Until she is not. As a thoroughly monstrous mother, Daenerys' descent into apparent madness is broadly based upon a pivotal moment, but the fact that her death follows

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[296] Megan Garber, "The Only Thing Worse Than a 'Mad' Daenerys," *The Atlantic,* 13 May 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/05/game-of-thrones-mad-daenerys-masks-a-deeper-horror/589348/.

[297] Alex Graves, dir., "Kissed by Fire," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 5, HBO, 2013.

[298] Aerys was undoubtedly mad, although his story is not told within the televisual text and the event itself is only recounted from Jaime's perspective so it is difficult to ascertain when, how and why he went mad.

so soon afterwards deprives this analysis of the opportunity to assess her state of mind in the wake of the attack, a state of mind that is shared by Missandei's boyfriend, Grey Worm, and yet the framing of his facial reaction is so brief that it is easy to miss. As such, the episode frames her decision as the defining moment by which those who deem her mad are proved right without opportunity for rebuttal.

Hints about Daenerys' madness are deeply embedded within the show's narrative arc. The Targaryen name is synonymous with monstrosity as a consequence of its history with dragons as well as the madness that is recorded as historically afflicting various members of the family, as is revealed in a conversation between Tyrion and Cersei: 'The Targaryens wed brother and sister for hundreds of years […] Half the Targaryens went mad, didn't they? What's the saying? Every time a Targaryen is born the Gods flip a coin.'[299] The implication here is that, as the Targaryen lineage is perpetuated via incest, the natural outcome of the unnatural reproductive process is madness. However, the familial link and abject construction of the patrilineal order within it suggests that Daenerys' madness is an inevitability. A monstrous Other, she is already othered by multiple elements of her complex identity including gender, ethereality, her marriage to a savage Other and motherhood, but madness questions the stability of that identity, particularly whether it is a continuation of her constructed Self or a distinct break from it.

Daenerys is primarily a threat to the patriarchy because she embraces difference and forms a set of values based on her lived experience. However, there is a difficulty in constructing and maintaining gender identities within cultures that are entrenched within values and norms

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[299] David Nutter, dir., "A Man Without Honor," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 7, HBO, 2012.

that produce anxieties where deviation occurs.[300] This forces women to become deviants where they challenge existing structures and, in this case, adopt masculine qualities. However, the context of the emergence of Daenerys' apparent madness is of vital importance in bucking the Mad Queen trope and forcing a re-examination of how women are perceived where there is a 'hierarchical system of naturalised leadership and control' that traditionally precludes them.[301] This necessitates a loss of identity for women that do stray outside of the patriarchal realm and a need to destroy them. Although Cohen points out that the Monster emerges at a time of crisis,[302] and Daenerys and King's Landing alike are in the middle of major crises, the context raises the question as to whether she is actually a mad monstrous mother or whether she is simply in a world that has become narrowed by a grief and agony that nobody but mothers could ever understand. The same argument can be made for Cersei in the wake of the deaths of her children, although she is more stoic in contrast to an overtly emotional Daenerys and therefore is more likely to be positioned as bad than mad.

The scope of the televisual text facilitates the formulation of nuanced otherness, of the readings of monstrosity that expand far beyond the parameters set by theories that do not make provision for the evolution of characters within a more complex and interrogative text. It also facilitates the formulation of madness as a narrative entity that contributes to characterisation. The length of the text allows for a gradual build, which is narratively and strategically important because it injects ambiguity. It is not clear whether either Cersei or

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[300] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 9.
[301] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 13.
[302] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 6.

Daenerys are mad, but there is enough doubt to inspire a range of readings of the actions and responses of both.

Returning now to the identification of Missandei's death as one of the tipping points that shattered Daenerys' control over her emotions in 'The Bells' (8:5), Missandei is a prominent member of Daenerys' surrogate family and is therefore a significant loss to her.[303] After freeing her from her abusive master, Kraznys, Daenerys inspired loyalty in Missandei and the relationship between the two progresses to that of friendship, with Missandei being more of a confidante than an assistant.[304] The status of their relationship is reframed later on via the clarification that Missandei could leave if she ever wanted to but that Daenerys is instead her queen by choice during a conversation with Jon Snow and Ser Davos Seaworth (Liam Cunningham) in 'The Spoils of War' (7:4).[305] The loss of that bond is disastrous for Daenerys' mental state and provides a stark reminder of the fallibility of those around her.

There is a further significance of Missandei's death in relation to Daenerys' potential for madness. In fact, she is murdered by Cersei as a means of provoking Daenerys into action. Having brought the people of King's Landing into the Red Keep for their protection, Cersei establishes a narrative that Daenerys is a monster who will kill the city's people as opposed to the saviour that earned her the title of Mhysa in Yunkai and Mereen. She choreographs the

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[303] Sapochnik, dir., "The Bells."

[304] Benioff, dir., "Walk of Punishment." The pathway for this is established shortly after their initial meeting, with Daenerys pointing out a commonality: 'All men must die, but we are not men.'[304] Otherwise surrounded by men who, although members of her surrogate family, are primarily there to advise her, the two therefore bond over their lived experiences of strict gender roles and expectations. The relationship between Daenerys and Missandei is, at that point, still relatively new and is unequal based upon the latter's indebtedness to her queen for freeing her from slavery, which is confirmed by Daenerys' assertion that Missandei 'belongs' to her. However, this single, powerful and poignant observation is a means of extending Daenerys' protection over Missandei, bonding the two women together.

[305] Matt Shakman, dir., "The Spoils of War," *Game of Thrones,* season 7, episode 4, HBO, 2017.

spectacle, standing on the walls of the city with Missandei in full view of the people in King's

Landing and Daenerys' army outside the gates before beheading her. The murder is monstrous

on Cersei's part, not least because of the intent that underpins it and the completely abject

disregard for the value of human life. However, the grief and thirst for revenge that Daenerys

experiences also contributes to the monstrous decisions she makes when attacking King's

Landing. The death of innocents there directly contravenes her earlier orders. For instance, in

'And Now His Watch Is Ended' (3:4), her first command for the Unsullied specifies that

innocents must not be punished for the actions of the slave owners: 'Unsullied! Slay the

masters, slay the soldiers, slay every man who holds a whip, but harm no child. Strike the

chains off every slave you see!'[306] This identifies her actions in 'The Bells' (8:5) as a significant

departure that must take context into account,[307] meaning that this interpretation of the

meeting between Cersei and Daenerys and the subsequent battle characterises them as

strategic and grieving respectively rather than as mad.

However, the structuring of Queen Daenerys' response to grief as emotional directly

reinforces the patriarchal ideals that underpinned Westerosi society under Robert Baratheon

and frames women in terms of gender roles as opposed to their own individualised identities.

The strategies of containment that are present in Westeros are also incorporated into theories

of motherhood and monstrous femininity via the stereotyping of those who display their

emptions as being a potential risk of violence and hysteria.[308] By extension, women are unfit

to rule because they are emotionally unstable and too strong for their husbands to control,

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[306] Graves, dir., "And Now His Watch Is Ended."
[307] Sapochnik, dir., "The Bells."
[308] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 98.

although similar strength and emotional responses to adversity would be viewed very differently when displayed in a man.

This point is overtly recognised via the revelation that Robert Baratheon's rebellion was predicated on Lyanna Stark's rejection of his advances in favour of Rhaegar Targaryen. Despite war being waged on account of his jealousy, Robert was deemed to be fit to be king based on his heroic victory alone and his ability to rule was not questioned even though he was demonstrably poor at it. Similarly, Jon Snow's mistakes in battle are constructed as emotional, particularly in 'Battle of the Bastards' (6:9), although this does not subsequently exclude him from the machinations of power. In fact, parallels may be drawn between Ramsay Bolton's (Iwan Rheon) taunting of Jon before the battle starts in 'Battle of the Bastards' and Cersei's taunting of Daenerys in 'The Last of the Starks' (8:4). Ramsay leads Jon's brother Rickon (Art Parkinson) out to the battlefield tied with a rope before telling him to run. He then shoots numerous arrows at Rickon, all of which are designed to miss until Jon reaches his brother in the middle of the field, isolated, alone and realising that he should have listened to Sansa's warning that her husband plays with his opponents. Similarly, Cersei stands Missandei on a platform above the King's Landing gates, parading her in front of Daenerys while she listens to Tyrion beg her to take a different course of action with no intention at all of doing so. As such, the framing of the deaths of Rickon and Missandei are very different, but the outcome is the same. Both die as a part of a game designed to elicit in an emotion response and strategic advantage in battle. Despite that, Jon is perceived as a hero while Daenerys becomes a Mad Queen.[309] Emotionality is only deemed a negative trait that disqualifies the individual

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[309] Abigail Chandler, "*Game of Thrones* Has Betrayed the Women Who Made It Great," *The Guardian,* last modified 8 May 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/may/08/game-of-thrones-has-

from leadership where that leadership would subvert gender roles and free women from their domestic responsibilities, thus displaying the hypocrisy of the patriarchal order and their strategies of containment.

The double standards and gendered expectations that underpin the role emotionality plays in representation, as read through layered complexity, confirms that women are held to different standards to the men who belong to the patriarchal order that has repeatedly deemed itself fit to rule. *Game of Thrones* is a problematic text in this sense. Although it highlights the hypocrisy of the masculine order and the different standards that women are held to, it doubles down on those standards by branding Daenerys unfit to rule based on the re-emergence of gendered stereotypes embedded in the monstrous mother paradigm, as per Ussher.[310]

Lord Varys, a eunuch and therefore an Other himself, is at the front and centre of this narrative and perpetuates the Mad Queen trope to an extent that makes it impossible for Daenerys to be considered in positive terms even before her decision to raze King's Landing after the war is won in 'The Bells' (8:5).[311] His attacks on her are more damaging precisely because he is an Other who has consistently hovered around the structures of power, serving on the ruling body of Westeros, the Small Council, for numerous kings and switching allegiance when he no longer considers the person to whom he had pledged loyalty to have the best interests of the realm at heart.

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betrayed-the-women-who-made-it-great; Miguel Sapochnik, dir., "Battle of the Bastards," *Game of Thrones,* season 6, episode 9, HBO, 2016.
[310] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 98.
[311] Sapochnik, dir., "The Bells."

Varys actively projects the notion that women cannot rule, and it is his approach to first

Tyrion and then Jon that precipitates Daenerys' death: '[Jon] is temperate and measured. He's

a man, which makes him more appealing to the lords of Westeros, whose support we are

going to need [...] And he's the heir to the throne. Yes, because he's a man, cocks are important

I'm afraid.'[312] The implication here is that Daenerys is an unsuitable ruler because she is a

woman and reacts emotionally. It is a view held by the status quo that Varys both served and

attempted to overthrow. However, it is an unfair but damning indictment of a character that

overcomes numerous challenges and yet is unfit to rule based on reductive biological

essentialism. It demonstrates that, although the status quo begins to fail some eight seasons

previously, the same attitudes endure despite the progressive façade that has been adopted

in the interim. The hope for progressive representation that is generated by the layered

complexity of narrative and character arcs throughout the course of the show is profoundly

damaged by the reversion to stereotypes. This actively demonstrates the continual need to

fight for change not only within the televisual text but beyond it, as is further evidenced by

numerous attacks on diversity, inclusion and human rights in society over the past five years

or so.

It is troubling that there are readings of Cersei's development as a character that identify

her progress as a descent into madness, like Judith Williams' rhetorical analysis of the seventh

season.[313] Her behaviour evolves over time, incorporating decisions that may be deemed

more erratic or illogical, but they can also be read as strategic manoeuvres that characterise

her as calculating rather than mad. As is evidenced by the use of her children to remain close

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[312] Nutter, dir., "The Last of the Starks."
[313] Judith Williams, "Game of Thrones: A Rhetorical Analysis," *Cinematic Codes Review* (Spring 2018): 55.

to the Iron Throne, Cersei manipulates others with more power than herself to achieve outcomes that she believes will be more desirable, even if she is unable to achieve her objective. When her children are alive, the examples of this are often in what she perceives as their best interests and consequently also in hers. However, when they are all dead there is a distinct shift away from the politically nuanced approach to power towards a more overtly brutal attitude. The safeguarding of her children is juxtaposed with the need to secure power, contextualising ruling by fear through of the limitations placed on her as a mother. However, the reciprocity that is visible within this dynamic is embedded within the Bad Mother paradigm as a consequence of the absence of self-abnegation in favour of ambition.[314] Further, in some instances, her strategy is underpinned by revenge as much as the need to exert her power and remove her enemies, which positions her outside of all gender roles that are formulated to contain her and firmly within an identity that necessitates her transgression. Again, a mother is not all she is and there is no patriarchal system or institution that recognises that until she creates one herself.

However, Cersei's approach to mothering also establishes a values-based framework through which she is able to rule. In excusing Joffrey's behaviour during his reign, Cersei is able to wield power through similar conduct when queen herself. She embraces the quality of ruthlessness when taking revenge on her enemies, most notably Septa Unella and Ellaria Sand. The revenge taken on both women is indicative of monstrousness on the part of Cersei, but not of a descent into madness. Septa Unella's demise is hinted at in 'The Winds of Winter' (6:10) and is quite deliberately juxtaposed with her tormenting of Cersei and the walk of

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[314] Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood," 3.

atonement.[315] It is a spectacular indication that the walk failed to humble her and has instead contributed to the emergence of an even more monstrous feminine. Instead of retreating, Cersei immediately emerges as an even greater threat to any attempt to re-establish the status quo. Septa Unella is strapped to a table, unconscious until Cersei wakes her by pouring wine all over her face while mimicking her own experience of imprisonment:

> Confess. Confess. Confess. Confess it felt good beating me, starving me, frightening me, humiliating me. You didn't do it because you cared about my atonement. You did it because it felt good. I understand. I do things because they feel good. I drink because it feels good. I killed my husband because it felt good to be rid of him. I fuck my brother because it feels good to feel him inside me. I lie about fucking my brother because it feels good to keep our sons safe from hateful hypocrites. I killed your High Sparrow […] because it felt good to watch [him] burn.[316]

During her incarceration, Cersei withheld this confession from Septa Unella and the High Sparrow for self-preservation, but the content and extent of it is indicative of Cersei's power. Certain in the knowledge that her henchman, the Mountain, will torture and kill Septa Unella, Cersei's admission does not jeopardise her power. The Septa's terror does bring about a sense of satisfaction for Cersei though, as is evident by the dark humour of her shutting the cell door and walking away repeating Septa Unella's walk of atonement intonation, 'shame'. Cersei does not exhibit fear, hesitation or a lack of control in this scene. It is all carefully orchestrated to achieve an end goal. It frames Cersei as a sadist who follows her own selfish whims and desires, traits that position her firmly within the Bad Mother paradigm, but also as perfectly sane.

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[315] Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter."
[316] Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter."

The violence used against Septa Unella contrasts with Cersei's approach to Ellaria Sand in 'The Queen's Justice' (7:3).[317] This incident is ostensibly driven by the need to remove her enemies because Ellaria is an ally of Daenerys, but the choice of punishment is made based on the need to get revenge on her for murdering Myrcella, as previously referenced. Like the Septa, Ellaria is also chained in a darkened cell along with her daughter, Tyene (Rosabell Laurenti Sellers), both of them gagged (Figure 13). Cersei taunts her in a similar way, leaning into her personal space without allowing her a response: 'I want you to know I understand. Even though we're enemies, you and I, I understand the fury that drives you. I was there that day when Ser Gregor crushed your lover's head. I close my eyes and I can hear the sound of Oberyn's skull breaking. The sound of your scream.'[318] She revels in Ellaria's heartbreak, using it as a weapon alongside her physical vulnerability. This emphasises her deliberate cruelty and the need to extract fulfilment from her interactions with her enemies, displaying her power. The vicious cycle finally breaks with a gentle kiss, which injects a feminine element into the masculine posturing Cersei engages in, but the kiss itself is not an anomaly. Instead, it is designed to mimic the kiss with which Ellaria poisoned Myrcella with in 'Mother's Mercy' (5:10).[319] This act demonstrates that Cersei has not completely abandoned her femininity in favour of a more masculine approach to leadership and also that she does not intend to uphold the patriarchy in its entirety, which the audience has become well acquainted with over the course of the televisual text. It once again shows that she is a calculating strategist as opposed to a Mad Queen.

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[317] Mylod, dir., "The Queen's Justice."
[318] Mylod, dir., "The Queen's Justice."
[319] Nutter, dir., "Mother's Mercy."

Figure 13: Cersei taunts Ellaria Sand, "The Queen's Justice" (7:3)

Despite the causes of the respective deaths of Septa Unella and Ellaria Sand being tailored to reflect the nature of their relationships with Cersei, both murders are all about revenge and predicated on calculated manoeuvres as opposed to being on a whim. Her actions are not impulsive, but rather carefully thought out. There is, however, emotional investment in each death and that provides a parallel with Daenerys' reaction to the deaths of her surrogate family and subsequent decisions during the attack on King's Landing. As such, under Varys' verbalising of the male-dominated view of what makes a good ruler, neither should be deemed fit to rule. The weaknesses that are categorised as indicative of madness are highly problematic in the context of the dynamics of power because they draw attention to the double standards that are applied to male and female leaders. Zimmerman's reading of Cersei's characterisation leads to the assertion that her 'sheer, feminized pettiness diminishes Cersei's innate power as a woman smart enough to question the patriarchal system under which she resides, and bold enough to challenge the men who would seek to diminish her.'[320]

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[320] Zimmerman, "The Abused Wives of Westeros."

As with Daenerys, Cersei does exhibit traits that are indicative of madness within stereotypical representations of women who break free from the patriarchal order and are placed 'at risk of being positioned as mad or bad, and subjected to discipline or punishment',[321] but she is by no means mad. As such, she pushes back against such representations and highlights the flaws in those arguments that are quick to dismiss powerful women as mad with no evidence to reinforce such assertions.

Cersei's acts of revenge provide a site at which her motherhood and queenship intersect, demonstrating the lengths she would go to for her family as well as power. As such, any perception of madness cannot be completely divorced from her role as a mother. The layered complexity associated with how Cersei represents motherhood leads Zimmerman, somewhat ironically, to compare Cersei to a 'stereotypical, frustrated, 1950s homemaker.'[322] Her argument is compelling precisely because there are distinct parallels, not least the fact that Cersei embodies gendered frustrations because she is no longer a wife or needed as a mother and thus is a spent force in theory. However, it is necessary to take issue with Zimmerman's subsequent description of the sense of loss that stems from this redundancy as a 'unique, manic depression.'[323] Although this fits in with the stereotyping of women as too prone to emotional outbursts to have any responsibility beyond the domestic sphere, it is fundamentally harmful to perpetuate such ill-informed tropes.

In the cases of Joffrey and Myrcella, Cersei deals with the loss by focusing on her other children and gaining revenge on those she deems responsible, although that is clouded by the

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[321] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 1-2.
[322] Zimmerman, "The Abused Wives of Westeros."
[323] Zimmerman, "The Abused Wives of Westeros."

need to secure her own position as queen mother after the death of her son. However, Tommen's death is completely different. Instead of the visible mourning she endured with her other children, she has no time to do so if she has any chance of seizing power for herself unopposed. Having been dependent on her sons for power while they were alive, she is only able to take the Iron Throne for herself when the role of mother is no longer required. This contrasts with Daenerys' position as her ability to take power is amplified by her children whereas Cersei is unable to take power until all her children die. The distinctly different contours of power and paths taken to achieve their shared goal of taking the Iron Throne confirms that the journey of the mother is neither linear nor uniform. The Monster, in this case the monstrous mother, must be able to respond to attacks, barriers and obstacles to move from the margins to the centre. That both women are able to complete this journey, however briefly, reflects on the absence of a central power and the need for society to assimilate to the chaos induced by the needs of the new political, social and cultural landscape.

In her analysis of monstrous motherhood, Francus argues that 'good mother narratives force the acknowledgement of legitimate maternal power and authority and implicitly compete with the patriarchal imperative they were supposed to support.'[324] She contends that the presence of the mother 'demonstrates will, and action in order to *have* a narrative.'[325] Although this reading of the *Game of Thrones*' mother is not always borne out by the analysis in this section, it is in this chapter. The focus on monstrosity and the Mad Queen trope necessitates a degree of agency on the part of Cersei and Daenerys to undertake decisions

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[324] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 16.
[325] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 16.

and actions that demonstrate a movement away from the patriarchal institutions and structures tasked with containing them. While exploring their respective queenships has moved the analysis away from the challenge the televisual text allows them to mount against existing models of motherhood, it advances the argument that layered complexity emphasises that they are more than conventional gender roles allow. Both Cersei and Daenerys are mothers, but they also form complex identities based on their beliefs and agentic decisions. They apply their own subjective agency to safeguard their power, as men did before the decline of the status quo, and yet their actions are interpreted based on their otherness. The Other is marginalised and excluded from central structures of power so the assumption that they are unqualified to rule automatically facilitates a transgression of borders, of rationality and deems them mad. The televisual text of *Game of Thrones* directly challenges that and highlights the limitations of such theoretical assumptions when they are applied to twenty-first century complex texts.

SECTION TWO

WARRIOR WOMEN

5 CHAPTER FIVE

INTRODUCING THE WARRIOR WOMAN

"Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger." Returning once again to the Westerosi wedding vows, each of the archetypes comprising the Seven presents a singular idealised figure that is entrenched in the values society holds dear while the *Game of Thrones* diegetic storyworld simultaneously undermines the existence of that unified ideal. In the previous section of this thesis, I explored the Mother archetype through Daenerys Targaryen and Cersei Lannister, highlighting the complexity of their respective identities and reflecting on the deviation from the expectations placed on a singular type. The same diversity of identities may also be observed in other character types present in the television show. The Warrior, for example, is the archetype that takes up the space immediately prior to the Mother in the list of New Gods invoked at wedding ceremonies. Predictably, where the Mother is the embodiment of femininity in the Seven, the Warrior is male and the epitome of masculinity. Just like the Mother, however, the idealised type does not extend to the characters present in the show's fantasy storyworld.

As an established mythological figure, the Warrior is symbolically important because he connects masculinity and power while simultaneously serving as a counterpoint for the idealisation of the beloved woman within the narratives and ideals of courtly love and chivalry.[326] The chivalric ethos or code of honour that guides all warriors is embedded within a complex socio-cultural system that defines the behavioural, social and cultural ideals of

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[326] Hovey, "Tyrion's Gallantry," 89.

knighthood, establishing order and an internalised set of expectations.[327] In literature, the chivalric ethos binds knights to love, honour and the protection of the beloved woman, idealised for her beauty, purity, devotion and goodness and for whose virtue every knight is bound to fight.[328] The juxtaposition of idealised men and women within such narratives is political and more concerned with the public display of gendered ideals than romantic love.[329] The symbolism of gendered roles is therefore pivotal to the success of the chivalric ethos because such ideals simply do not exist in reality. However, the structures that society seeks to preserve via the implementation of codes of honour do.

The gendered ideals and expectations expressed in the chivalric tradition are all inextricably linked to mythology and are used to regulate society and enforce norms. The warrior himself is the protector and guardian of the status quo. He embodies the uneven structures of power and underpins the notion that history is simultaneously composed by those who have power and imposed on those who have little or none.[330] This framing advocates that power is a binary value, embedding the struggle of the powerful against the powerless within social relations to define individual positions in that struggle and maintain order. Social identities are therefore formed by warriors, proliferated by them and maintained within the structures they create. Consequently, mythology establishes the warrior as a protector of the patriarchy and a subjugator of women.

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[327] D. J. B. Trim, "Introduction," in *The Chivalric Ethos and the Development of Military Professionalism,* ed. D. J. B. Trim (Leiden: BRILL, 2003), 31-32; Antti Matikkala, *The Orders of Knighthood and the Formation of the British Honours System, 1660-1760* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), 44.

[328] Sharon Yang, *Goddesses, Mages, and Wise Women: The Female Pastoral Guide in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-century English Drama* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2011), 105; Richard Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 324.

[329] Kenneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Le Morte Darthur* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 79.

[330] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 11.

Myth, Joseph Campbell (1971: 3) argues, 'is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation.'[331] The archetypal hero in Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) is constructed by mythology and steeped in a range of rituals, motifs and tropes that herald idealised strength, order, masculinity and heroism. The journey and growth of the hero is framed as an adventure to discover his own potential and the authority that allows him to 'regenerate' society, a euphemism utilised by Sarah Nicholson to describe the process of reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and bolstering the validity of patriarchal structures and systems of power based on those ideals.[332]

While Svenja Hohenstein agrees that quest narratives validate and stabilise patriarchal power and celebrate hegemonic masculinity, she also argues that the portrayal of male warriors casts women as weak, passive and vulnerable.[333] This is borne out by Campbell's monomyth, driving the contention that 'Woman' represents the totality of what may be known and the hero as the one able to know it.[334] This places her at the centre of the quest and identifies the limitations placed on women alongside the delimited potential of man. According to the thought underpinning the cycle, Woman is 'the paragon of all paragons of beauty, the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly quest.'[335] This implies that the figure of the warrior reinforces binary values. It also raises the question of how the warrior woman fits into the mythological landscape and what relevance she holds in

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[331] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 3.

[332] Sarah Nicholson, "The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell," *Feminist Theology* 19, no. 2 (2011): 184.

[333] Svenja Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors: Feminist Revisions of the Hero's Quest in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2019), 2.

[334] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 116.

[335] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 110-111.

modern popular culture. Nicholson's scholarship identifies numerous problems with Campbell's monomyth, from his defaulting to the male as hero at the expense of the female to the binary approach of 'woman as receptive dreamer, man as active warrior'.[336] In doing so, she lends credibility to the position that Campbell's gender symbolism is misogynistic and exclusionary.[337] Such criticism explains why Campbell's monomyth is read as centred on the male warrior.

There is extensive scholarship on the male warrior figure, detailing his well-defined role, identity and the deviations of both. There is, however, comparatively less analysis of the warrior woman to date and the relevant theoretical and conceptual framework that does exist incorporates such a range of ideas, characteristics and types that coherence is problematic. Similar observations lead Creed to assert the need for a new hero's journey, identified by a structure that embraces all of *her* manifestations as well as those tangible differences that are still (somewhat problematically) constructed on gender binaries:

> While male heroism is defined in relation to preservation of the male symbolic order, female heroism is [...] oppositional. In many contexts, the male hero signifies fixity, the female fluidity. Unlike the classic male hero, she rejects the phallocentric, fixed nature of the world, preferring instead of question the meaning of patriarchal civilisation and its values.[338]

Creed's observations provide a foundation on which an alternative form of heroism can be built. Despite the invocation of gender binaries here, Creed's framework itself is not

[336] Nicholson, "The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell," 189.

[337] John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 2013), 117; Michael A. Solis, *Rescuing Women from American Mythology: The Damsel in Distress* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 18.

[338] Barbara Creed, "The Neomyth in Film: The Woman Warrior from Joan of Arc to Ellen Ripley," in *Women Willing to Fight: The Fighting Woman in Film,* ed. Sike Andris and Ursula Frederick (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 23.

exclusionary, allowing for the possibility of fluidity and flexibility to embrace difference where it exists in the form of the warrior that modernity demands. Unlike Campbell's hero's journey, Creed acknowledges the presence of space for deviation and difference and that serves as the starting point for this analysis into the warrior woman on television.

There is no widely agreed upon warrior woman figure in visual culture so this section will explore existing scholarship and go beyond it, working towards identifying the warrior woman in complex television by embracing the trifecta of exploring, reversing and reconstructing the archetype. *Game of Thrones* provides a visual cultural vehicle through which she can be coherently recognised and interpreted.

Exploring, reversing and reconstructing the warrior woman as an archetype occurs on multiple levels, embracing both her physical and mental manifestations. The exploration of the televisual warrior woman's complex identity encompasses fragments like her aesthetic appearance, her adherence to gendered values and norms and her performance of masculinity and violence. The process of reversing provides a platform for her characterisation to challenge stereotyping in the televisual text, dismantle outdated cultural framing and embrace the multiplicity of modern identities. Finally, reconstructing the warrior woman's identity is vital in redefining her in the context of the emergence of complex television and the real-world cultural shifts that provide space for her emergence and development.

The warrior woman is a significant and constant element of the *Game of Thrones* storyworld. As such, this section of my thesis will focus on Brienne of Tarth and Arya Stark as warrior women, exploring the type through the two very different characters and their respective journeys. Unlike Brienne and Arya, other warrior women like Lyanna Mormont

(Bella Ramsey), Yara Greyjoy (Gemma Whelan) and Ygritte (Rose Leslie) along with the Sand

Snakes (Keisha Castle-Hughes, Jessica Henwick and Rosabell Laurenti Sellers) sit easily within

the narrative because they occupy the geographical periphery of Westeros, demonstrating

the possibilities and potentialities for warrior women outside of traditional patriarchal

systems. They exist within non-Westerosi cultures that do not question status based on

gender and are therefore automatically othered. Although Yara does miss out on becoming

Queen of the Iron Islands after her father Balon Greyjoy's (Patrick Malahide) murder, her

ability as a warrior is not questioned. Although her gender is cited as a reason why Yara cannot

be queen, it is not a barrier to warriordom. Arya and Brienne, on the other hand, are firmly

entrenched within the highly gendered Westerosi structural order and so are compelled to

challenge the patriarchy because their identities are tied to its cultural norms.[339] They provide

an opportunity to explore the warrior woman trope and how it manifests within the twenty-

first century televisual text.

I will reinterpret the figure of the warrior woman, going beyond the structures established

in visual culture generally and *Game of Thrones* specifically to recognise her and position her

in relation to her earlier incarnations. As such, this section is divided into three chapters to

provide a comprehensive insight into the warrior woman, exploring her aesthetic appearance,

values and beliefs and performance. The complex televisual text is well placed to directly

challenge existing representations of the warrior woman in visual culture and each of these

areas demonstrate both why and how that is the case. It reverses the depiction of the warrior

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[339] Their otherness within the specific contextual environment constructed within *Game of Thrones* also
provides scope to challenge the validity of gendered norms and expectations in a broader sense, challenging
traditional values that are outdated in modern society.

woman in the context of the constraints placed upon her by the monstrous feminine. Finally, it reconstructs her through *Game of Thrones'* warrior women, who actively transgress the binaries that contain them.

5.1 The Construction of the Warrior Woman

By virtue of her position outside of dominant patriarchal structures, the warrior woman is a non-conformist who challenges binaries and societal expectations via subversion and the reversal of norms. She is also a figure that defies easy definition within critical discourse. There is no consensus on what constitutes a warrior woman, although there are several critical approaches to the type. One such approach emerges from genre-based analysis of the monstrous feminine.

The warrior woman is a site of difference, a deviant figure who evokes fascination and horror, as per Braidotti's examination of the monstrous female form.[340] Her willingness to embrace her own perceived deviance enables her to reject gendered norms and ideals, lending her an in-betweenness, a common concept in warrior woman scholarship that defines her as a monstrous and temporal counterpoint.[341] The warrior woman's female body is a threat to the established order. It becomes a manifestation of violence and instability in line with Braidotti's position that women are able to challenge the status quo because the female body is able to threaten those who would otherwise seek to control it.[342] In juxtaposing the

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[340] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 81.

[341] Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 25; Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 2; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 145.

[342] Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects,* 81.

nurturing and perpetuating capacity of the body with threats and violence, the warrior woman embraces the potentiality of multiple paths that are dependent on her agency and choices. The female body is therefore a cultural text and it is read as a site of liminality that links established gender roles and the struggle to reject them in favour of a more progressive future.

The commonalities here between the warrior woman and the monstrous mother suggests that female figures emerge from a common foundation but can be read through a lens that acknowledges nuance. The *Game of Thrones* storyworld provides scope for both types to exist in the same fantasy text, exerting the same constraints and pressures on the characters while being expansive enough to explore difference. Both monstrous mothers and warrior women are subject to and shaped by the same power structures and are versions of Creed's monstrous feminine where it constitutes a broad category that births different types.[343] In addition, the same position paradoxically imposes a homogeneity upon women who are deemed a threat to the hegemonic status quo.[344]

The basis of the threat of the monstrous woman is difference, therefore she is Other. However, such simplifications are dangerous. The warrior woman certainly fits into such a broad classification, but the televisual text not only illuminates her specific traits but also provides her with the opportunity to explore, reverse and reconstruct her identity. It empowers her to contest the binaries that have bound othered characters to patriarchal

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[343] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 44.

[344] Ridley Scott's titular heroines in *Thelma & Louise* (1991), for instance, are best friends living ordinary lives but fight back against abusive men. They are the polar opposite to Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), a warrant officer on board the spaceship *Nostromo* in *Alien* (1979) who is the sole survivor of a monstrous attack that killed her male co-workers. Despite the gulf between them, Thelma, Louise and Ripley are united by the monstrous potential and threat that they, as woman at the centre of their respective narratives, pose to the patriarchal order of things.

structures in visual culture. The concept of Other is in itself a binary value. As otherness is reduced to the subordinate in the Self/Other dichotomy and remains excluded from power structures in society, the implication is that all binaries hold by maintaining the dominance of one over the other. Masculine is dominant over feminine, for instance. The warrior woman contradicts binary values, demonstrating the complexity and multi-layering of identities that implicitly reject the viability of reductive binaries and embrace elements of masculinity and femininity simultaneously. Despite this, there are further analyses that attempt to anchor her to binary values.

Diana Marques' interpretation of the warrior woman adopts an approach that preserves binary identities. She argues that the warrior woman directly seeks to appropriate traditionally male activities to engage with the dynamics of power, adopting an aesthetic appearance that is more aligned with notions of what constitutes the masculine as opposed to the feminine: 'a woman must forfeit her femininity to be taken seriously in a male-dominated world and to perform deeds mostly ascribed to men.'[345] However, the reality is more complex than that. The notion that a woman must forfeit her femininity and is automatically taken seriously when she chooses to behave like a man is fundamentally flawed. Similarly, Murray also contends that women at least have to look like men if not act like them in order to be taken seriously by and have agency within a society that has long been run by men, even if the status quo is no longer able to hold.[346] Both Marques and Murray's assertions draw on the very binary distinctions that the warrior woman herself transgresses. The existing critical framework

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[345] Diana Marques, "Power and the Denial of Femininity in *Game of Thrones,*" *Canadian Review of American Studies* 49, no. 1 (2019): 47.
[346] Murray, "The Feminine Mystique: Feminism, Sexuality, Motherhood," 61.

already places her beyond Marques. She simply cannot be reduced to the appropriation of traditionally male activities and aesthetics when her complex identity highlights the limitations of representation. The warrior woman occupies a liminal space and adopts an in-betweenness that empowers her to simultaneously redefine her Self and embrace her otherness.

Marques' view does have some merit because it acknowledges the warrior woman's agency, but there are many characters in complex televisual texts that reject this maxim. For example, although *Game of Thrones'* Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen both adopt behaviours that are reminiscent of those of the men who had previously held power in Westeros, neither adopt a masculine style of dress. *The Witcher*'s (2019-present) Queen Calanthe (Jodhi May) has a dual identity, donning armour on the battlefield before changing into a dress for an evening reception after defeating her enemies.[347] In all three cases, there is a duality that is indicative of nuance and difference, challenging typical gender roles while straddling the binaries that are clearly demarcated in Marques' analysis.

There is a growing body of work focusing on the positioning and development of the warrior woman in visual culture. The warrior woman is not a new figure as versions of her have appeared at various points from the mid-twentieth century onwards, inspiring a range of labels and conceptual types within critical analysis. Tasker's female heroine, Sherrie Inness' tough girl, Schubart's action babe, Jennifer Stuller's superwoman, Kate Waites' warrior woman and Hohenstein's girl warrior all occupy space within the critical history of the warrior

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[347] *The Witcher* (Netflix, 2019-present).

woman. Each one contributes to the same critical framework, developing an understanding of strong women and their place within visual culture.

Tasker's female heroine is defined by her spectacular body and her relationship to the muscular cinema of the 1980s and early 1990s. Focusing on action films, Tasker's analysis is centred on the way the female body is reinscribed with physical masculinity and consequently challenges the binary conceptions of gendered identity along with cultural discourses of sexuality and class.[348] She develops the innovative concept of 'musculinity' to describe how the physical definition of masculinity is predicated on the musculature and extends beyond the representation of the male body to the female.[349] Power is intimately bound up with the body in this particular version of the warrior woman, but often at the expense of her developing a voice of her own to challenge the patriarchal structures that she remained subordinate to. The juxtaposition of Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor and Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) provides perspective for this particular element of the framework. Connor offers an example of Tasker's hard-bodied female heroine, sacrificing her own personal identity and her femininity, which is invested in her role as a mother, to save the world alongside a hypermasculine heteronormative hero.

Inness' tough girl is similar to Tasker's female heroine in that toughness may manifest within a muscular physique, but the figure is far more complex and difficult to define than the concept of musculinity suggests because 'there is much more involved, including self-presentation, attire, setting, and attitude.'[350] Whereas Tasker's female heroine bears the

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[348] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 3-4.
[349] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 3.
[350] Sherrie Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 12.

physical attributes expected of heroes, Inness' tough girl performs toughness to demonstrate

a competence and credibility that rejects the notion that men alone are capable of wielding

power. Although her inability to pin down specific attributes of toughness frames it as a

somewhat abstract concept, Inness acknowledges the complexity of modern identities. She

also sheds light on the nuance required to develop a full understanding of women who fail to

conform to established cultural binaries, thus revealing that 'the artificiality of femininity' is

not the *normal* state of women.[351] That Inness is subsequently not clear on what constitutes

a normal state effectively captures the point – that is for each tough girl to determine.

Schubart uses the terms 'action babe' and 'female hero' interchangeably to describe the

active and independent women of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who

push against traditional gender roles, falling into an in-between that straddles them.[352] Female

heroes are therefore ambiguous creatures who depend largely on the genre they appear in

for specific traits. Embracing the ambivalence that also underpins Inness' analysis, Schubart

provides a tacit acknowledgment of the complexity involved in trying to draw diverse female

heroes into one conceptual framework that attempts to encompass them all. To remedy this,

she proposes five archetypes to provide broad categorisation rather than universality under

the female hero umbrella: the dominatrix, the rape avenger, the mother, the daughter and

the Amazon.[353] In identifying all five archetypes, Schubart acknowledges the diversity of the

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[351] Inness, *Tough Girls,* 21.

[352] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 5.

[353] See Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 23-36. A product of the intersections of capitalism, prostitution and masochism, the dominatrix is a 'caricature, a role for the female hero to step in and out of, an act, and a self-conscious masquerade' exemplified by various incarnations of Catwoman or Pamela Anderson's Barb Wire in the eponymous 1996 movie. Schubart's rape avenger is the woman who seeks revenge over, and often kills, the man or men who raped her, like Charly (Geena Davis) in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996). The categorisation of this archetype has been complicated further recently with *Promising Young Woman*'s (2020) Cassie Thomas (Carey Mulligan) seeking revenge for those complicit in the rape of her deceased best friend. The mother archetype in traditionally male genres is not a 'good' mother, but is a 'maternal figure *within* patriarchy' who is also an 'object

female hero in the late twentieth century, even though all of them are effectively defined by the nature of their respective relationships with men.

Each of Schubart's archetypes is established through repetitive retellings and paradigmatic symbolism in contemporary popular culture, but they also reinforce the ambiguity that underpins Inness' analysis. The conceptual framework of the warrior woman as a whole is beset by such ambiguity because it is built on the idea that she is a feminised version of a dominant male figure who is symbolically important to patriarchal cultures. However, she does not have the same level of power as her male counterpart, which naturally limits her characterisation and ability to pursue an identity that draws her out of the shadow of her male relations or mentors. The feminised version of the male figure Schubart refers to is not a figure in her own right, but one that encroaches upon masculine norms, which she is forced to appropriate to breach binaries and is ultimately unable to break away from.

Drawing on the female body as a cultural text, Schubart does ultimately frame her female hero as representing 'a cultural field where today's male and female generations negotiate gender, feminism, patriarchy, and women's roles in society.'[354] This is a sentiment that also underpins Stuller's superwoman. Instead of trying to define the superwoman as Tasker, Inness and Schubart do their respective types, Stuller never attempts to do so, instead applying a mythological lens to explore the wide range of superwomen that have featured in film and

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of desire'. *The Long Kiss Goodnight*'s Charly is again an example here, as is the *Terminator* (1984-2019) franchise's Sarah Connor. The female hero has no mother herself, which is a key element in the archetype of the daughter, who is educated and therefore constructed by her father. Schubart names the eponymous hero of *La Femme Nikita* (1990), played by Anne Parillaud, as the prototype for the category of daughter. The final category of the Amazon is the most complex, being divided into good Amazons, who are 'young, beautiful, heterosexual and in favour of the patriarchy' like *Conan and the Barbarian*'s (1982) Zula (Grace Jones), and evil Amazons, who tend to be greedy, amoral, asocial and are always on their own side rather than the patriarchy's, just like *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*'s (2003) Madison Lee (Demi Moore).
[354] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 38.

television since Wonder Woman first appeared in 1941.[355] This approach reinforces the continuity that filters through the history of the warrior woman, with each decade giving birth to a new incarnation that would leave her revolutionary and evolutionary while remaining 'limited by socially accepted gender stereotypes that kept her from being radically progressive.'[356] However, Stuller also gives film and television equal critical attention, analysing televisual texts like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)*, Alias* (2001-2006) and *The Powderpuff Girls* (1998-2006) alongside characters in already heavily analysed films like *Alien* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996).[357] This adds a further dimension to the figure of the warrior woman, enabling a transformation in longer texts that provide greater scope for her development. It also acknowledges the importance of television as a cultural field.

Mirroring Stuller's approach, Hohenstein identifies a growing prevalence of 'girl warriors' in twenty-first century visual culture spanning film and television, but does not clearly define the label itself.[358] Instead, there is an implied gendered link between warrior figures, which enables her to subvert the established notion that quest narratives are typically used to reinforce gender norms and the prevalence of patriarchal ideals. Consequently, the empowerment of the female warrior and rejection of the standard damsel in distress role is designed to 'bring down patriarchal power systems.'[359] The girl warrior achieves this by demonstrating physical skill in combat but also adopts a more symbolic role as a monstrous

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[355] Jennifer K. Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 15.

[356] Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors,* 2.

[357] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997-2001; UPN, 2002-2003); *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006); *The Powderpuff Girls* (Cartoon Network, 1998-2006).

[358] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 1-4.

[359] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 3.

anomaly who wields the physical power to challenge men and the psychological power to reject their protection.

Finally, Waites' warrior woman for the new millennium is 'a highly skilled, non-sexualized, non-"masculinized," genetically or socially freakish loner whose appropriation of violence is neither balletic nor cinematically cartoonish.'[360] Waites is concerned solely with the warrior woman in film and acknowledges the continuation of the ambiguity recognised by Inness and Schubart, but she also argues that the modern version of the archetype supersedes her predecessors. This approach recognises earlier warrior women as seminal for the type's development. However, it moves away from the *femme fatale* tendencies that underpin earlier sexualised warrior women while paving the way for an anti-establishment female action hero to investigate and attack patriarchal and capitalist systems that sustain male authority, power and control.[361] In simultaneously evoking and departing from earlier warrior women, characters like Rooney Mara's Lisbeth Salander (*The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo,* 2011) and Jennifer Lawrence's Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games* franchise, 2012-2015) are more suited to the challenges posed by the twenty-first century, not least because they can act independently of men and are responsive to social, cultural and industrial changes. All warrior women are products of their time, but this degree of evolution demonstrates their ability to evolve and adapt, growing into the spaces their predecessors' transgressions carved out.

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[360] Kate Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," in *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction, and Film,* ed. Julie A. Chappell and Mallory Young (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 34.
[361] Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 34-36.

The warrior woman types identified and interpreted by Tasker, Inness, Schubart, Stuller, Hohenstein and Waites all make valid and insightful contributions to the construction of the conceptual framework, but there remains a significant gap in analysis. Although explaining the presence and increasing prevalence of the warrior woman in visual culture is an ongoing endeavour, there is a disproportionate focus on her representation in film. However, the presence of the warrior woman in the complex serial televisual text marks a point of divergence and discontinuity. Television is a site of transformation because the nature of viewing and engagement has evolved, but long and complex televisual texts provide a new vehicle for exploring and challenging established identities. Discontinuity can be found within the provision of greater scope for reversing typing before reconstructing the identity of the warrior woman within the modern contextual environment. This approach symbolises the need to consolidate and build upon the freedoms that the tough girl, girl warrior, action babe, superwoman and female hero fought hard to achieve.

The warrior woman furthers her symbolic role within the televisual text because she rejects the normalisation and socialisation that underpins patriarchal societies under the established status quo. The processes of socialisation encourage the adoption of dominant values, but the individual may choose to differ in the extent to which they adhere to standards, roles, ideals and stereotypes.[362] Further, Stuller identifies 'regressive ebbs in representations' of women that follow periodic progressive characterisation throughout the twentieth century.[363] Such cyclical reactions to depictions of female liberation and agency echo the societal patterns identified by Susan Faludi in her polemic *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American*

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[362] Barrie Gunter, *Television and Gender Representation* (London: John Libbey, 1995), 1-3.
[363] Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors,* 8.

Women (1991). Faludi identifies backlashes against campaigns for equality and feminism specifically as 'a recurring phenomenon' as traditionally male structures and institutions seek to claw back any gains won in the battle for women's rights.[364] It is, she contends, no surprise that military terminology is employed to construct a powerful metaphor that characterises the ongoing struggle as an all-out war between male culture and the women who seek to inhabit it on their own terms.[365] Women are framed as outsiders here, suggesting that the creation of a female culture cannot be considered a reasonable or viable objective. However, while male culture is dominant and singularly powerful, the warrior woman's emergence as an important figure in complex television suggests that a culture defined by women rather than their oppressors is beginning to take shape and gender performance and performativity are factors in that.

Gender performativity is, Butler contends, multifaceted, although there are certain elements of it that demand close scrutiny here. For instance, Butler's discussion of cultural practices that construct parodic identities, thus reframing the gender experience as well as the original meanings afforded to the binary categories of man and woman.[366] All of the variations of the warrior woman reflect this thinking, not least because they all perform elements of masculine identities that can be attributed to the notion of parody that Butler invokes. In this sense, the complexities of gender performativity are destabilising because Butler's theory actively recognises the existence of parodic identities without the assumption of an original, with the parody itself posturing as an imitation to produce desired outcomes:

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[364] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991), 46.
[365] Faludi, *Backlash,* xx.
[366] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999), 187-189.

> [P]arodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization.[367]

While Butler stops short of asserting that parody can deprive that it is essentially mocking of power, they do note its status as a performative entity that challenges hegemonic norms. This view is supplemented by the example of drag culture, within which drag masquerade may generate a form of insubordinate resistance through parody as well as repetition and excess. However, it also raises the question of whether all imitative gender performativity is parodic, or whether performativity can be a productive method of reworking an individual's identity in an authentic manner.

Although there are subtle differences between the types of woman warrior outlined here, they are united by a common foundation; they are all defined by the culture and politics of their respective eras. Similarly, the warrior woman that exists today is a product of her cultural, political and social contextual environment, but she is also a beneficiary of her predecessors' experiences and gains. There is no artificial time or space marking a rupture in the warrior woman's heritage. Instead, there is continuity across the last eighty years that marks her as a cultural product of the history of women's struggle for self-determinism.

The warrior women that exist and develop within late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century televisual culture embody this struggle, highlighting a fluidity of identity that challenges gender binaries and expectations. Televisual warrior women are underrepresented in existing theory, with most scholars exploring their place in film rather than on television,

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[367] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 188*.*

but they occupy an important cultural space. One of the first modern warrior women, *Xena: Warrior Princess'* (1995-2001) eponymous warrior marked the start of a resurgence of the type for consumption in the comfort of viewers' own homes, marking a moment of cultural and social transition.[368] Far from being the first example of the warrior woman, Xena (Lucy Lawless) became the starting point of a new incarnation able to expand the reach and appeal of the figure and challenge the validity of the constraints placed upon her based on the patriarchal clawing back of gains made through sporadic representation and cultural shifts.

Xena's status as a powerful but complex action hero reshapes and complicates the traditional view of heroism, largely because there is a tacit acknowledgment of her propensity for good and evil within the show.[369] Although Xena's gender is a factor here, her fallibility and humanity reframes the hero, thus presenting the warrior woman as the key to understanding how heroes fit into contemporary popular culture and society at large. This is further evidenced by the representation of an action hero as a sexually active, polyamorous woman who embraces same sex relationships but is neither immoral nor deviant.[370] Xena effectively provides a version of the warrior woman who not only refuses to conform to societal gender norms and expectations, but actively rejects the binaries and limits that are imposed on women as a mechanism for containment. Despite being 'masculine in spirit', she provides an insight into what is possible for the warrior woman and marks the point at which television became a point of transition.[371]

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[368] *Xena, Warrior Princess* (SyFy, 1995-2001).

[369] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 238.

[370] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 238; Anise K. Strong, "Xena: Warrior, Heroine, Tramp," in *Epic Heroes on Screen,* ed. Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. pp. 141.

[371] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 238.

Other complex warrior women have followed in Xena's footsteps. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and *Alias'* Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner) are radically different to Xena physically, aesthetically and functionally but are valuable in the development of the *fin de siècle* warrior woman nonetheless. The representation of Buffy draws on the quest narrative to frame her as a just warrior capable of forming a tradition of her own before empowering other future vampire slayers to follow in her footsteps.[372] She is transgressive, Frances Early argues, because she demystifies the closed image of the warrior by opening it up to scrutiny and comedic parody.[373] The televisual text provides her with scope to achieve that and empowers Sydney Bristow in a similar way, stretching the development of both characters over multiple seasons and positioning them at the centre of their respective storyworlds. Both warrior women have highly complex emotional and family lives that form a key element of their individual identities and are fully explored within their respective complex television shows.[374] Neither Buffy nor Sydney have the musculature of Xena so their status as warrior women extends beyond the physicality that forms the central tenet of relevant theories. For instance, Tasker's observation of musculinity and power being bound to the body does not apply here.[375] Although Buffy and Sydney are both physically fit, they are not muscular and are not solely reliant on their physical abilities. This element of *Buffy* and *Alias* facilitates the further development of the warrior woman archetype beyond territory gained by their predecessors and expands into a narrative space much larger than that afforded by film.

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[372] Frances Early, "Staking Her Claim: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as Transgressive Woman Warrior," *Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 3 (2001): 17-18.

[373] Early, "Staking Her Claim: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as Transgressive Woman Warrior," 18.

[374] Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors,* 78; Mittell, *Complex TV,* 3.

[375] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 3-4.

There is an element of fantasy and mythology that unites all three of these complex television shows though. The fantasy genre inverts the real, thus lending showrunners the freedom to test the boundaries of what Western societies deem acceptable.[376] In turn, they provide the warrior woman with a safe space that permits her a degree of protection to explore new territory and make representational gains without being forced to relinquish them again immediately. Unsurprisingly, there are more recent continuations of this incarnation of the warrior woman, most notably *The Last Kingdom*'s (2015-2022) Lady Æthelflæd (Millie Brady) and Queen Calanthe in *The Witcher*, both of which are Netflix shows, with the former being historical fiction with an element of fantasy and the latter being fantasy with a historical context.[377] The warrior woman therefore provides a site of resistance and transformation that transcends attempts to categorise her, although some televisual texts provide a more effective landscape for exploring, reversing and reconstructing her identity.

Each of the examples discussed here demonstrates that the twenty-first century televisual text has sought to directly challenge existing gendered representations, expanding the scope for the emergence and evolution of possibilities that embrace alternatives to the binary of strict gender roles. *Game of Thrones* incorporates several warrior women who refuse to adhere to societally imposed gender roles and create their own opportunities within a system that has traditionally sought to limit their ability to cross prescribed boundaries. Warrior women create hybridity at the point of resistance and raise questions of gendered difference within collective identities.

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[376] Jackson, *Fantasy,* 20; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 23.
[377] *The Last Kingdom* (BBC, 2015-2017); *The Witcher* (Netflix, 2019-present).

I intend to move beyond the existing analytical framework to explore the warrior woman and establish her place in the twenty-first century complex televisual text; updating, revising and reconstructing her identity. Tasker, Inness, Schubart, Stuller, Hohenstein and Waites' development of a critical framework provide the starting point for analysis of the warrior woman, but there is a need to go beyond its limits to explore, reinterpret and reconstruct the figure in the context of the long televisual text. The warrior woman is still a political and cultural product of her era and she therefore reflects on how the monstrous feminine transforms within specific temporal and medium-based contexts. As a complex televisual text that directly and repeatedly challenges what is possible on television for the best part of the 2010s, *Game of Thrones* provides an appropriate case through which to explore, reverse and reconstruct the characterisation of the warrior woman.

5.2 The Warrior Woman and the *Game of Thrones* Hierarchy

Game of Thrones features many women who seek to wield power, who are mentally and physically strong, who sometimes choose violence and who disrupt gender norms because that power traditionally belongs to men. Despite that, the defined and recognised warrior woman is absent from the Westerosi hierarchy. Male warriors are pervasive in *Game of Thrones'* hierarchical lore and are mythologised for their violent masculine exploits. Their deeds are recorded in the Book of Brothers. The tome is essentially a record of the conquests and victories of the Kingsguard, which are selectively recorded by their fellow knights to project a highly masculine narrative of victories and maintain their thymotic reputations. As the gendered title suggests, not a single woman's great deeds are recorded within its pages.

Although recognition of the warrior woman is not forthcoming from the Westerosi patriarchal order, she does exist.

Like the monstrous mother, the warrior woman is a visible type within the show by virtue of the prominence rather than prevalence of the characters who occupy that space. The previous section documented how few named characters were mothers but warrior women number even fewer. Brienne of Tarth, Arya Stark, Yara Greyjoy, Lyanna Mormont, the Wildling Ygritte and the Sand Snakes are the only named characters who solely represent the type, although other characters do display some of the characteristics of warrior women mentioned here, not least Daenerys and Cersei. The analysis in the previous section illustrates the fierce determination that Daenerys and Cersei exhibit. In fighting for the Iron Throne, both are strategically adept, ruthlessly engage in violence to bring down their respective enemies and challenge the patriarchal structures that seek to contain them. These are all traits of the warrior woman, but there are contradictory elements to their characters that prevent them from assuming warriordom in its entirety. For instance, neither queen physically fights in battle, instead using surrogates. Daenerys is shown to be inept with the sword in 'The Long Night' (8:3), but is capable of destroying cities with her dragons.[378] Cersei gives orders to the Kingsguard, particularly Ser Gregor Clegane, to mete out violence on her behalf or uses tools like wildfire to deliver revenge on her enemies, but she does not lift a finger in battle herself. These distinctions may seem minor, but they separate the warrior women from those who assume elements of the archetype without fully embodying it.

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[378] Miguel Sapochnik, dir., "The Long Night," *Game of Thrones,* season 8, episode 3, HBO, 2019.

In contrast, Brienne of Tarth and Arya Stark are both credible warrior women who become embedded in the protective and chivalric order, performing acts of heroism to save the day when all seems lost. They are both highborn ladies who would be expected to conform to the standards and expectations imposed on daughters of prominent Westerosi houses. Despite early upbringings that reflect this, neither Brienne nor Arya are willing to do so. Both push back against patriarchal expectations and find warriordom in their childhoods, refusing to perform femininity according to patriarchy and forcing their respective fathers to allow them to train in swordplay instead. However, despite the commonalities that unite Arya and Brienne, their embodiment and performativity of the warrior woman is dependent on their own experiences and challenges. They exemplify the variety in the warrior woman archetype by virtue of the sheer size of the storyworld constructed within the complex televisual text. The scope for the development of warrior women is such that there is no reliance on immediate recognition of the type, as is the case in film. Instead, characters can be built across hours and hours of television within a complex narrative framework.

Brienne and Arya make the case for recognition of the warrior woman present in *Game of Thrones* because*,* as viewers, we lack a critical assessment of their role, purpose, agency and dynamic in relation to the existing patriarchal order within the show. As with the analysis of Cersei and Daenerys in the previous section, the Westerosi patriarchy itself is not a focus but a framework, a landscape that the characters of the show must navigate.

The very presence of the warrior woman in popular culture, and particularly on television, necessitates a confrontation between the symbolic order and the monstrous force that

threatens its stability.[379] It ties her to the monstrous feminine as an abject force of disruptive and damaging otherness. It also breaks the power binary that pits the powerful against the powerless. As othered warrior women, Arya and Brienne initially fall into the latter category but overcome the challenges they face to confront, defy and ultimately threaten the former. They become powerful through their own endeavours and despite those attempting to keep them firmly in their gendered place. The concept of power is not straightforward though, at least not where Arya and Brienne are concerned. Where Daenerys and Cersei seek power, neither Brienne nor Arya do. The power they achieve is unconventional in the context of *Game of Thrones*, being over themselves and their own destinies as opposed to over others in any more than a temporary capacity, such as overwhelming an enemy in battle. This complexity is typical of the warrior woman and has posed a problem for this section.

Where investigating Daenerys and Cersei in conjunction with the monstrous mother archetype was relatively straightforward insofar as demarcating between elements of their gender roles and character arcs is concerned, the same cannot be said of *Game of Thrones'* warrior women. This section will explore their aesthetic appearance, the codes of honour they live by and their performativity across issues like masculinity and violence. These areas produce significant areas of overlap, precluding neat separation of the analysis into separate thematic or categorical concerns as was possible in the previous section. Each chapter in this section will therefore acknowledge the fluidity of the warrior woman's identity and its interlinked elements, referencing overlaps where necessary but otherwise choosing the most appropriate category for each point made.

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[379] Murray, "The Feminine Mystique: Feminism, Sexuality, Motherhood," 63.

6 CHAPTER SIX

THE AESTHETICS OF *GAME OF THRONES'* WARRIOR WOMEN

Warrior women are aesthetically abject, disturbing conventional identities within the societies that are inclined to marginalise them. This tends to render them immediately identifiable by virtue of a certain aesthetic appearance. For instance, in their analysis of the intersection of the monstrous feminine and hegemonic masculinity, Evans points out that '[n]ormative masculinity in fantasy texts often materialises through clothing such as armour, short or shoulder-length hair, the capacity for violence, ownership and proficiency with weapons, and mastery of the self and others.'[380] The aesthetic traits noted here are inscribed in the existing theoretical framework concerning the warrior woman, but there is a need to explore the basis of physical difference on which she is built, particularly as *Game of Thrones* allows different types of warrior women to coexist within its storyworld.

Cohen's assertion that collective identities, particularly gendered identities, are established by repetition is pertinent to the aesthetics and performativity of the twenty-first century warrior woman and facilitated by the layered complexity of the televisual text in the case of *Game of Thrones.*[381] The hours over which the show is stretched allow for nuanced deviation between individual representations of the archetype, but also facilitate extensive repetition. This type of repetitious pattern is visible in Brienne's behaviour, actions and decisions, but Arya directly challenges the same premise because her identifiable pattern of performativity lies within her adoption of a different identity depending on who she is interacting with. Although this bucks Cohen's theory, it is in keeping with Shawn Shimpach's notion of

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[380] Evans, "Vile, Scheming, Evil Bitches?" 15.
[381] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 13.

transitory patterns of repetition and difference, within which context may alter role, meaning and cultural expectation.[382] Butler's identification of repetition as a 'mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities' reinforces this position, although they also acknowledge the possibility of inversion and subversion of cultural identities via patterns of repetition.[383] As a performative action, the spectacular heroic body may either repeat an action or adopt difference, with Tasker's musculinity providing an example of how a warrior woman's body can project that difference.[384] However, the very notion of a female body being heroic is problematic in the context of Westeros' pseudo-Medieval society, although not in the audience's twenty-first century context.

The aesthetics of the warrior woman intersect with the codes they live by and gender performativity. The patriarchy upholds established male hero and female damsel tropes that are common in heroic quest narratives, framing the warrior as a masculine figure of honour.[385] Those tropes do not make allowances for female masculinity, instead rendering it 'a troubling presence.'[386] Further, Clapton and Shepherd argue that 'the masculinity of the warrior is reinforced through his violations of feminised bodies.'[387] This language speaks more to the masculine exploitation and exertion of power over feminised bodies associated with the warrior men present in *Game of Thrones* than it is to its warrior women.[388] Brienne and Arya,

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[382] Shawn Shimpach, *Television in Transition* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 35.

[383] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 44.

[384] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 3.

[385] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 2.

[386] Tasker and Steenberg, "Women Warriors: From Chivalry to Vengeance," 173.

[387] Clapton and Shepherd, "Lessons from Westeros," 11.

[388] Carolyne Larrington, "'(No More) Reaving, Roving, Raiding or Raping': The Ironborn in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and HBO's *Game of Thrones,*" in *The Vikings Reimagined: Reception, Recovery, Engagement,* ed. Tom Birkett and Roderick Dale (Berlin: Medieval Institute Publications, 2019), 162. For instance, the Dothraki hoards and individualised behaviours of some Westerosi knights are predicated on such violations, as is the reaving, roving, raiding and raping associated with the Ironborn, which Carolyne Larrington links to the distinctive medieval cultural domain, customs and ethos of the Vikings.

on the other hand, both directly challenge the validity of the idea that a warrior's masculinity is reinforced through such violations by refusing to participate in them, meaning that female masculinity is a legitimate alternative. Furthermore, there is a clear demarcation between female and feminised bodies here, which speaks to the way female masculinity manifests on the body as a site inscribed with the culture of difference. This provides an excellent starting point for this chapter, which will explore the aesthetic complexities of the modern warrior woman and the meanings produced by the framing of her body in *Game of Thrones.*

6.1 Framing the Warrior Woman's Body

The initial introduction to Brienne casts her as a monstrous spectacle, but not immediately as a woman. Instead, her gender is only revealed after her skills with a sword are unambiguously displayed, placing emphasis on her physical strength as a warrior over her gendered societal position. Brienne's introduction in the opening scene of 'What Is Dead May Never Die' (2:3) occurs by way of chivalric discourse through performance, linking her physicality and aesthetic appearance to her personal values system.[389] Renly Baratheon (Gethin Anthony) is presiding over a battle between knights in full armour, the choreography of which adheres to traditional games. The two knights doing battle are positioned in the centre of a circle of men who are thoroughly engaged in the violence, cheering the two participants on as they circle each other (Figure 14). The combatants swing their swords and test their physical strength as well as weaponry skills against the other. Half way through the encounter, one combatant is knocked off balance, losing his helmet and is revealed to be the highly skilled Knight of Flowers, Ser

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[389] Alik Sakharov, dir., "What Is Dead May Never Die," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 3, HBO, 2012.

Loras Tyrell. The armour serves as a disguise. It is not revealed that the other is Brienne of

Tarth until her opponent yields.

Figure 14: The introduction of Brienne of Tarth in "What Is Dead May Never Die" (2:3)

The audience is already privy to the fact that Loras is one of the most skilled and successful

knights in Westeros on account of his victory in the Hand's tournament in 'The Wolf and the

Lion' (1:5).[390] However, Loras' anonymous opponent easily overwhelms him, sweeping him to

the ground and forcing him to concede victory, thus demonstrating a physical prowess that is

typical and expected of a knight. The big reveal of her identity elicits a response from the

crowd that is not based on her status as a warrior but as a woman. They gasp as she removes

her helmet. Loras' face also registers surprise and disgust that he has lost to her. The armour

presents Brienne as Loras' equal, removing gender certainty and presenting skill and chivalric

values as a leveller that encourages the Westerosi audience as well as the television audience

to judge Brienne on her capabilities as opposed to her status as a woman. The sculpted form

of the armour also enhances Brienne's musculinity, in line with Tasker's warrior woman and

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[390] Brian Kirk, dir., "The Wolf and the Lion," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 5, HBO, 2011.

the rejection of exclusive representation through the codes of femininity.[391] Unlike Tasker's

heroine though, the limits of Brienne's musculinity are not defined by her female body or any

(imagined or real) symbolic sexualisation. Instead, her physical prowess is presented ahead of

her status as a woman to ensure that her identity manifests in a scheme of chivalry, visual

aesthetics and action, thus placing emphasis on the reversal and reconstruction of the warrior

woman as a type in a landscape that holds the potential for equality beyond gendered

identities. Brienne therefore directly challenges patriarchal structures and gendered attitudes

from the outset, gaining a voice by defeating the best warrior Westeros has to offer. Her

victory converts her symbolic potentiality into a real threat to gendered roles within the show

and, in the broader context of visual culture, consolidates the warrior woman's claim to a

space within the twenty-first century televisual landscape.

Kinaesthetically, Brienne's gait is not coded as feminine, incorporating long strides, strong

arms and a masculine swagger. Her armour is not coded as feminine, in diametric opposition

to the body armour Cersei wears in 'Blackwater' (2:9).[392] Where Cersei's armour is an ornate

breastplate, designed to offer minimal protection against a physical attack while setting her

apart from the conventionally dressed women around her at that moment,[393] Brienne's full

body armour means she blends into the crowd of her male counterparts. Armour is a key

aesthetic choice, coding Brienne as a warrior and framing her identity based on chivalric

values, thus rejecting overt femininity. That identity is reinforced verbally later in the same

episode as she claims she is 'no lady' when approached by Catelyn Stark. Here, she does not

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[391] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 132.
[392] Marshall, dir., "Blackwater."
[393] Louise Coopey, "Where the Streets Have No Shame: Queen Cersei Lannister's Journey to Alternative Patriarchy," in *Antiheroines of Contemporary Media: Saints, Sinners, and Survivors,* ed. Melanie Haas, N. A. Pierce and Gretchen Busl (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 104.

reject or deny womanhood but rather plays on the gendered role of noble lady, which is an honorific title bestowed on those highborn women positioned within society. In Brienne's case, her rejection of the title supplements her aesthetic coding and underscores the fact that it was her choice to become an Other occupying a position on the margins as opposed to conforming to the patriarchal norms of the centre.

Brienne's armour also serves as a tool to emphasise her stature. In challenging the primacy of men by claiming the typically masculine role of protector for herself, Brienne disrupts the traditional place of women. Immediately after her victorious introduction, she becomes a member of Renly Baratheon's Kingsguard before becoming the protector of Catelyn Stark upon his death. Finally, before departing Catelyn's company to deliver her prisoner, Jaime Lannister, to King's Landing, Brienne swears allegiance to the Stark family as a whole and promises to locate and protect its daughters, Arya and Sansa. Aesthetically, Brienne towers over all four characters and has the physical presence that legitimises her role as their protector. In contrast to her previous position as one of a number of chivalric warriors fighting in Renly's tournament, her armour defines her difference in this instance, setting her apart from the physically inferior people around her.

Brienne is physically imposing because her tall, broad-shouldered and androgynous physique adheres to Westerosi masculine ideals. Bodily ideals are framed by the pseudo-Medieval patriarchy and correspond to gendered expectations instead of accepting and celebrating the natural differences that occur between individuals. Brienne's difference manifests physically in a way that bears a striking resemblance to the hard-bodied heroines of the 1980s. Tasker's description of actor Brigitte Nielson, for instance, could quite easily also

be applied to Brienne to some extent: 'A six-foot, muscular blonde, [her] androgynous image combines "masculine" characteristics, such as her height, muscular physique and boyish short hair, with an exaggerated female sexuality.'[394] Brienne's sexuality is not exaggerated and she does not beguile men in the same way that Neilson does, but they share a rejection of the stereotypical female trait of passivity, embracing female masculinity via their determination to challenge gendered expectations and mobilise their individuality. Their respective physical statures therefore adopt a symbolic meaning that extends further than a superficial embodiment of difference. Although Brienne's characterisation is deeper and more complex than Neilson's characters because she is formed within the complex televisual text and thus developed across multiple hours rather than the two hours allowed for characters contained within the medium of film, both disrupt the established order.

Although they draw on nineteenth century literature, Butler expands on the issue of disruption to the established order, which can also be applied to Brienne's assumption of the role of protector causes:

> The novel *Frankenstein* managed to keep women in their place, and yet the monster may well be carrying that excess of gender that fails to fit properly into 'man' and 'woman' as conventionally defined. If the monster is really what a 'man' looks like when we consider his aggressive form, or if this is really what 'woman' looks like when her own gendered place is destabilized […] then the 'monster' functions as a liminal zone of gender, not merely the disavowed dimensions of manhood, but the unspeakable limits of femininity as well.[395]

Texts that define and decode monstrosity span different eras and mediums, but there are commonalities that unify them. Here, Butler draws on the gender binary present in Mary

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[394] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 14.
[395] Judith Butler, "Afterword. Animating Autobiography: Barbara Johnson and Mary Shelley's Monster," in *A Life with Mary Shelley,* ed. Barbara Johnson (Palo Alto: Stanford University Place, 2014), 47-48.

Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) to identify an excess of gender that reflects on the limits of conventional definitions and the societal need to position individuals within their own neatly labelled space. Butler is also careful to clarify that this is not borne out in societal reality. Brienne in particular challenges what woman looks like, although her gendered place is destabilised from within. Her desire to become a knight is hampered by biology so she straddles the dimensions of manhood and womanhood that form Butler's liminal zone of gender, becoming monstrous by virtue of gender performativity and chivalric aesthetics. Brienne is queered, resisting binary definitions and embodying a heteronormativity noncompliance that manifests in her aesthetic appearance.[396] Both Tasker and Inness note that displays of masculinity, whether aesthetic or performative, have to be negotiated in complex ways to address real or imagined queered sexualities.[397] This is supplemented by Brienne's own desire and the identity she adopts to pursue a dream that is not afforded to her by adherence to the man/woman binary, neither acceptable under the Westerosi patriarchal order. The outcome is Brienne occupying a landscape constructed on account of a fixity of identity that is no longer viable within complex and chaotic societies.

Brienne's rejection of fixed gender roles is evident in a conversation she has with Cersei in 'The Lion and the Rose' (4:2). Cersei corners Brienne, her ornate gown and intricate hairstyle contrasting starkly with the warrior woman's simple trouser and tunic outfit and slicked back short hair, all of which codes her as more masculine and therefore works as a marker of difference (Figure 15).[398] Cersei greets her as 'Lady Brienne'. Brienne then bows and reiterates

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[396] Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris, "Monsters, Desire and the Creative Queer Body," *Continuum* 30, no. 5 (2016): 518-519.
[397] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 29-30; Inness, *Tough Girls,* 23.
[398] Graves, dir., "The Lion and the Rose."

the sentiment that she is 'no lady', echoing her earlier declaration to Catelyn Stark, breaking

the binary and positioning her chivalric values in contrast to Cersei's monstrous femininity.

Cersei finds it amusing that Brienne bows, pursuing her as she walks away to press her point:

'Lady Brienne, you are Lord Selwyn Tarth's daughter. That makes you a lady whether you want

to be or not.' Cersei uses the patriarchal hierarchy against Brienne here, harnessing its power

to secure her own position as queen mother while weaponising it against Brienne, who

paradoxically represents and rejects the order as a warrior.

Figure 15: Cersei and Brienne converse, their personal styles contrasting starkly, "The Lion and the Rose" (4:2)

The message that underpins Cersei's taunt is that Brienne is unable to choose her own

identity because she is a highborn woman and thus is still subject to and constrained by

gender-based expectations and ideals. Brienne's title binds her to those expectations. In fact,

it is Cersei who is bound to those expectations because she remains tethered to the patriarchal

hierarchy as queen mother, a factor that means she is unable to fully embrace warriordom

despite her exhibiting some traits of the warrior woman later in her narrative arc.

Paradoxically, Brienne has chosen her identity by embracing her perceived deviance and thus challenges Cersei's ability to exert hierarchical control over her.[399]

However, Brienne directly problematises Butler's contention that gender imitation manifests as a drag masquerade that generates a form of insubordinate resistance through repetition, excess and parody.[400] Although I have yet to analyse her in any depth, Arya also does the same. Neither character parodies the masculine, but instead adopts clothing and attitudes that suit their individual situation at a given moment in order to promote their survival and facilitate achievement of their goals. Further to Brienne's donning of full armour when among knights, she also wears gender neutral clothing that is fitted to her body but allows her the freedom to move quickly should she need to. Arya's attire is similar in both colour and shape, even when she is required to wear clothing suitable for a highborn girl. For instance, during the banquet in 'Winter Is Coming' (1:1), Arya is depicted wearing a gown, but it has a high neck, long sleeves and is dark in colour.[401] There is very little to distinguish her girl clothing from her later boy clothing and then finally her Arya clothing when she emerges from her training as a warrior in her own right. This does exhibit a form of repetition, but is not indicative of excess or parody. The individual identities Brienne and Arya harness are built

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[399] Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects,* 81; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 2. Confusingly, Brienne only rejects specific controls, subverting the dynamic she establishes with Cersei and lending credibility to gendered ideals by proclaiming that Jaime Lannister 'rescued her', the context of which will be discussed shortly. This choice of words reinforces the quest trope of the hero coming to the aid of the damsel in distress. That Brienne frames herself in such terms is part of the reversal of the warrior woman figure, acknowledging a degree of weakness while maintaining strength in the face of Cersei's interrogation. However, the juxtaposition of Cersei's point, Brienne's identity and this brief reversion to type reinforces the latter's liminality while acknowledging the complexity that plays out on her body.
[400] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 187.
[401] Van Patten, dir., "Winter Is Coming."

upon concrete traits that provide a means of resistance rather than a shared desire to appropriate masculinities.

Brienne's identity is fixed from the moment we meet her, but the same cannot be said for Arya, who evolves throughout the show's run as she moves through the multiple identities of girl, boy and no one before finally simply becoming Arya, a blend of her adopted identities and experiences. Arya's identity as a boy is a necessity rather than a choice grounded in a desire to adopt a different gendered identity. It is imposed upon her by Yoren (Francis Magee), an old friend of Ned Stark and member of the Night's Watch tasked with recruiting for them. As they stand in the middle of the baying crowd in the immediate aftermath of Ned's execution, Yoren loudly proclaims Arya to be a boy: 'Look at me! Do you remember me now, boy? Eh? Remember me? There's a bright boy. You'll be coming with me, boy, and you'll be keeping your mouth shut.'[402] Arya, traumatised by the violence she has witnessed, completely misses his prompt. Already dressed in masculine coded clothing of trousers and a shirt instead of the dress expected of a lady, Arya automatically denies that she is a boy as Yoren drags her to the safety of a deserted alley, where he begins to hack off her hair and completes her aesthetic transformation (Figure 16). It takes a further forceful assertion on Yoren's part for her to fully understand the need to switch identities: 'You're not a smart boy, is that what you're trying to say? Do you want to live, boy? North, boy. We're going north. You're Arry now, you hear me? Arry the orphan boy.' This masculine identity further others Arya, forcing her to straddle the normative gender binary deemed socially acceptable in Westeros.[403] This assumed

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[402] Taylor, dir., "Fire and Blood."
[403] However, her boy disguise ensures her survival not only as Ned Stark's daughter but also despite the threat posed to her by the violent rapists with whom she has to flee as a part of the Night's Watch caravan that Yoren leads out of King's Landing.

identity does not symbolise conscious resistance to the patriarchal values that have bound her

to that point, although that does come later. Instead, it reflects on the resistance that women

face when they seek to escape the subjugation imposed upon them. As a girl, Arya cannot

escape. As a boy, she can.[404] In changing the dynamic, Arya's gender imitation acknowledges

the inequality within Westerosi society and provides the first stage in her personal

empowerment as she overcomes it.

Figure 16: Arya becomes Arry after Yoren cuts her hair to change her appearance, "Fire and Blood" (1:10)

In stark contrast to Arya's imposed and necessary gender switch, Brienne does not adopt a

different identity or pretend to be someone she is not. However, like Arya, she does not

embrace gender performativity as a form of parody.[405] Instead, Brienne has no choice but to

embrace gender imitation in order to live by the chivalric ideals that she is formally excluded

from within the Westerosi social hierarchy. Again, the notion of imitating a specific gender is

problematic here because, while Brienne's armour is a rejection of the female body that can

be read as gender imitation, it is also a symbolic aesthetic embracing of her Self. Mimi

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[404] Coopey, "Representation, Otherness and Fantastic Storyworlds," 12.
[405] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 187.

Schippers asserts that hegemonic masculinity legitimates men's dominance over women, specifically via physical strength, authority and the ability to use interpersonal violence in conjunction with an established inferiority of femininity: 'To complement these characteristics in a way that subordinates femininity to masculinity, femininity includes physical vulnerability, an inability to use violence effectively, and compliance.'[406] Under this framework, Brienne is deemed monstrous because she subverts every characteristic listed. Her introduction precludes physical vulnerability, instead demonstrating that she can hold her own with anointed knights, while a later sword fight with the Hound (Rory McCann) and her participation in the Battle of Winterfell against the dead demonstrates that she can wield violence effectively. However, the issue of compliance is more complicated than physical demonstrations of strength because it is rooted in Brienne's masculine performativity. Her retreat to the margins in her quest to fulfil a promise to Lady Catelyn Stark and find Sansa and Arya illustrates her noncompliance with feminine characteristics, but she must embrace chivalric masculinity to a degree to evade the constraints imposed by her gender. Although Brienne does not parody masculinity and neither does she exhibit excess, her quest is indicative of a dedicated compliance with chivalric values. However, such compliance emphasises her deviation from feminine norms and casts her as a monstrous anomaly within Westerosi society.

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[406] Mimi Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (2007): 91.

6.2 Juxtaposing Beauty and Monstrosity

Although there are notable exceptions like *Alias'* Sydney Bristow and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* eponymous lead, warrior women are rarely aesthetically beautiful. Instead, they tend to exhibit a monstrous beauty that is derived from their qualities, which is more difficult to pin down and control. The threat Brienne is perceived as posing to the hegemonic masculine order positions her firmly in the category of monstrous beauty. This inspires both fear and awe in the men who oppose her and manifests in the imposition of femininity on her, the most striking example of which occurs in 'The Bear and the Maiden Fair' (3:7).[407] In order to nullify the threat Brienne poses to them, Roose Bolton's (Michael McElhatton) men, Stark loyalists at that point in the show and a collective instrument of the Westerosi patriarchy, force her to become a parody of herself by emphasising the elements of femininity that she rejects in favour of the masculine. This bizarre reversal occurs via the dress provided to Brienne as a change of clothes. The dress itself is symbolic; it is pink, frilly and everything Brienne is not, turning her into a different kind of monstrous spectacle and a parody of femininity. The dress removes her sense of Self, destabilising her identity and othering her further by diminishing her chivalric value. When contrasting the Lady Brienne aesthetic to her initial introduction in *Game of Thrones,* the disjunction between the two is quite jarring. The audience knows her and accepts her as a warrior woman so the shift to a feminine iteration of herself is incongruous in the extreme.

Brienne is objectified by the imposition of what she should be according to the societal and cultural values written by men. As Inness puts it, '[t]he more a woman adopts signifiers of

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[407] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 187; MacLaren, dir., "The Bear and the Maiden Fair."

masculinity, the more she disturbs mainstream society. Our culture likes its girls to be girls and its boys to be boys'.[408] Brienne's encounter with Bolton's men evidences this claim and their need to reverse the 'artificiality of femininity.'[409] It speaks to their own need to reinforce their masculine power over the threat she poses to their dominance. They frame her as a plaything as opposed to a person who has earned the right to embrace her desired identity, thus limiting her threat to them. This is implied in Qyburn's answer to Jaime's question of what would happen to her: 'She'll be their entertainment tonight. Beyond tonight I don't think they care very much.' Entertainment has a very specific meaning: forcing her into a pit to fight a bear with only a wooden sword to defend herself. The challenge of the bear is designed to keep Brienne small, literally in the sense that she is smaller than the bear and metaphorically in terms of challenging her to prove that she is a warrior in a way that not one of her captors has ever had to. It underscores the fact that the rules are different for her and that she has to work harder and longer to achieve anything resembling the respect and warriordom that her male counterparts do. As a consequence, the scene also demonstrates just how unfair the system is for warrior women like Brienne. The spectacle itself emphasises her monstrosity, highlighting the dissonance between her dress and her role as a warrior.[410]

Although Arya does not have to live up to the same chivalric expectations as Brienne, she still exhibits the bodily incoherence that her fellow warrior woman does and thus is also

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[408] Inness, *Tough Girls,* 21.
[409] Inness, *Tough Girls,* 21.
[410] The visual incompatibility of the two is quite jarring and ostensibly positions her woman's body as irreconcilable with masculinity, although viewers know that not to be the case. As such, this parody projects how the patriarchy views her rather than how she views herself. She is a monstrous Other to them so there is an urgent need to divest her of her chivalric identity and contain her.

subject to the same designation of monstrosity.[411] Monstrosity is a problematic category for

Arya because she can be categorised as monstrous by virtue of her position on the outside of

societal bounds, but she is also forced to occupy that space and induces a crisis.

Cohen's third thesis posits that the monster is the harbinger of category crisis and exhibits

an ontological liminality based upon resistance:

> [R]efusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters
> generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist
> attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is
> dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.[412]

The warrior woman can be deemed indicative of crisis as a consequence of the failure of

chivalric warriordom in the context of *Game of Thrones,* and the presence of Brienne and Arya

– the externally incoherent bodies that do not conform to the masculine archetype of hero –

reinforce that. The refusal to participate in the established order of things is a key trait of the

warrior woman, although symbolic resistance brings about a crisis, or a point at which

extremes clash. This clash can be seen on the body of Arya, who embodies the crisis, although

Brienne's situation is more complex. As a warrior, she seeks to assuage the crisis by upholding

pure chivalric values, but as a warrior woman she is indicative of the failure of the masculine

order and the crisis it precipitates. Both Brienne and Arya challenge binary identities via the

'freakish compilation of the monster's body.'[413] This complexity and often paradoxical series

of traits demonstrates that both characters push back against categorisation and straddle

boundaries and binaries that are otherwise designed to contain them. This does render

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[411] Her bodily incoherence, specifically her refusal to adhere to the Westerosi societal expectations placed on highborn ladies, induces a crisis and her automatic rejection by those institutions.
[412] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 6.
[413] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 7.

warrior women like Arya dangerously abject because it pits their hard-won self-identities against the patriarchal order, casting them as hybrid as a consequence of their resistance to societal expectations and internal coherence.

The warrior woman's body is incoherent and Other precisely because it requires the gatekeepers of the social order to make sense of it, but it is only the warrior woman herself and the real-world audience that are required to understand her inner identity for it to become coherent. That is not to say that the inner identity of the warrior woman is immutable. Self-identity is not fixed and may shift over time, but liminal creatures are capable of deliberately adopting different disguises to suit their needs and experiences.[414] Arya is undoubtedly a liminal creature who defies borders, thus establishing her status as a monstrous figure who continually confronts those who would seek to limit her development and force her to conform rather than allowing her to embrace her otherness.[415]

Further, Cohen argues that the monster prevents intellectual, sexual and geographical mobility and the delimitation of social spaces through which bodies may move.[416] However, Arya's mobility is second only to that of Daenerys by virtue of her journey around the margins of Westeros and Brienne delimits Westerosi social spaces from the moment she is introduced to viewers simply because she refuses to conform. The fact that they stray outside of the gendered borders established by the Westerosi patriarchy moves the boundaries that regulate

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[414] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.
[415] The processes associated with defying borders are complex and bound to monstrosity. The monster of Cohen's theory polices the borders of the possible, patrolling the limits of knowing and acting as a warning to those who would transgress those boundaries. As women warriors who assume traditionally male roles, Arya and Brienne automatically challenge the borders of the possible if they step outside their designated roles, which they inevitably do. However, they do not police those borders. Instead, they willingly transgress them.
[416] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 12.

what is and is not possible, providing a direct challenge to the established order and undermining its authority. Where Tasker's warrior woman and Schubart's female hero demonstrate the emergence of new possibilities despite the limitations that bind them,[417] the scope of the complex televisual text enhances the opportunities to dismantle those limitations and fully embrace their own destiny. Modern warrior women have had a measure of success in bringing down patriarchal power systems in film, notably *The Hunger Games'* Katniss Everdeen and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*'s Lisbeth Salander.[418] However, the televisual text's layered complexity provides scope for a greater examination of the character arcs of warrior women and how they interact with those systems.

Returning to the opening of spaces for new challenges to patriarchal authority through layered complexity, the warrior woman operates within and outside of borders as a matter of course. In fixing gendered boundaries in the first instance, arbitrary classification becomes problematic because there is no incentive to adhere to those boundaries or the hierarchical system of control that they are designed to protect: 'Primarily these borders are in place to control the traffic in women, or more generally to establish strict homosocial bonds, the ties between men that keep a patriarchal society functional.' It is the tectonic shift in the political landscape in Westeros that renders this contention problematic in the *Game of Thrones* social framework, illuminating paradoxes within Cohen's theory. Firstly, women, as monstrous Others, would police the borders that are designed specifically to limit them and therefore must accept self-regulation as a means of limiting their own opportunities. Secondly, the implication is that women are relied upon to enforce cultural codes, but then this begs the

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[417] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 38.
[418] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 3; Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 34.

question of who maintains the hegemonic masculine hierarchy that sustains the patriarchy. Brienne does maintain the hierarchy to an extent because she values the chivalric code, but Arya does not do either as neither appeals to her. [419] It is the tectonic shift in the political landscape in Westeros that renders this contention problematic in the *Game of Thrones* social framework, illuminating paradoxes within Cohen's theory. Firstly, women, as monstrous Others, would police the borders that are designed specifically to limit them and therefore must accept self-regulation as a means of limiting their own opportunities. Secondly, the implication is that women are relied upon to enforce cultural codes, but then this begs the question of who maintains the hegemonic masculine hierarchy that sustains the patriarchy. Brienne does maintain the hierarchy to an extent because she values the chivalric code, but Arya does not do either as neither appeals to her.

Arya's refusal to engage in self-regulation is evident from the first season of *Game of Thrones* and is reflected in her aesthetic choices. For instance, Arya's appearance stands in contrast to that of her sister, Sansa, from the outset. In 'A Golden Crown' (1:6), Ned explains to them both that he is sending them back to Winterfell because remaining in King's Landing poses a danger to them.[420] Although this is not the first scene the sisters share, it is important because the camera frames the sisters sitting side-by-side and looking up at Ned, the antithesis of each other. Sansa is sitting up straight, wearing a dress, a shawl and sporting an intricate hairstyle that is indicative of her concern with traditional feminine beauty. Arya, on the other hand, is dressed in a dark androgynous outfit of trousers and tunic, sporting a simple but practical ponytail and adopts a slouched posture (Figure 17). The shot draws attention to

[419] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 13.
[420] Minahan, dir., "A Golden Crown."

the aesthetic difference between the two, reflecting their individual personalities and goals. Arya has no intention of becoming a lady, whereas her sister is every inch the Westerosi noblewoman.

Figure 17: Arya and Sansa sit side-by-side in "A Golden Crown" (1:6)

By the time the Stark sisters appear side-by-side in 'The Dragon and the Wolf' (7:7) in the penultimate season, the difference is more obvious and amplified by their individual experiences.[421] After Arya's execution of Petyr Baelish (Aidan Gillen) on Sansa's order, the sisters are standing side-by-side on the Winterfell battlements (Figure 18). Both are standing tall, comfortable in their own skin having formed coherent identities that contrast with their undeveloped identities present in the first season. Again, Arya is depicted with a practical hairstyle and a more ornate but pragmatic cloak, trouser and tunic, which contrasts with Sansa's more intricately plaited hair and jewelled cloak. Although the aesthetic differences between the sisters is more visually pronounced in the earlier scene, it is the conversation that amplifies the difference in identities here. Arya minimises her role in Baelish's execution,

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[421] Podeswa, dir., "The Dragon and the Wolf."

pointing out 'I was just the executioner. You passed the sentence. You're the Lady of Winterfell.'[422] In response to Sansa's question of whether that bothers her, she continues 'I was never going to be as good a lady as you. So I had to be something else.'[423] There is no recrimination here, or an insistence that either sister become something she is not in order to fulfil gendered expectations. Instead, there is an acceptance of the identities they forged. In the case of Arya, that identity is framed by female masculinity and the chaos of patriarchal decline, demonstrating a new level of acceptance of the possibilities for women warriors within the changing society that goes beyond those available to her predecessors in visual culture.

Figure 18: Arya and Sansa stand side-by-side in "The Dragon and the Wolf" (7:7)

In contrast to Arya's growth and evolution into assured female masculinity, Brienne subverts the image of the courtly knight associated with the pseudo-Medieval contextual environment, adopting a form of dress that Tasker and Steenberg refer to as 'neither disguise

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[422] Podeswa, dir., "The Dragon and the Wolf."
[423] Podeswa, dir., "The Dragon and the Wolf."

nor burlesque, but an outward indicator of her inner commitment to chivalric ideals.'[424] This

reading of Brienne's attire once again challenges Butler's contention that gender imitative

performativity constitutes excess and parody, noting that it is not designed for either purpose,

but it does contend that her armour serves as a projection of her identity.[425] However, this

raises complicated questions of the level of agency Brienne herself has in forming a nuanced

sense of who she is beyond the construction of her chivalric identity, which is fundamentally

patriarchal by design, and also beyond the label of Other. That label is projected onto her from

her first appearance and reinforced repeatedly through her armour as a symbol of her desire

to be a knight. Her armour provides her with Tasker's 'musculinity'.[426] However, it is clear that

Brienne is not conventionally muscular as per the female action heroines of 1980s and 1990s

cinema. Instead, the armour lends her an equivalent hard body. This relatively unproblematic

armour is later replaced by a new set of armour gifted to her by Jaime Lannister in

'Oathkeeper' (4:4).[427] It is one of three gifts, the other two being a Valyrian steel sword and

the squire Podrick (Daniel Portman), both of which are befitting of a knight. Brienne

acknowledges it with a curt nod of the head. There is so little attention paid to it on-screen

that it seems quite inconsequential, but it contributes to Brienne's identity.

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[424] Tasker and Steenberg, "Women Warriors: From Chivalry to Vengeance," 178.
[425] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 187.
[426] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 3.
[427] MacLaren, dir., "Oathkeeper."

Designed by Jaime for Brienne, the armour he gifts to her is ornate and highly stylised, incorporating moulded shoulder plates and a bright silver steel body (Figure 19). However, it does not contain any markers of gender, such as the breasts that appear on Cersei's plate armour or the codpiece or upper arm musculature that is visible on the armour of male knights like Jaime himself. Instead, it reflects how he sees her, projecting his vision of her onto a metal artefact that she uses as self-protection to a far greater degree than is physically required. Brienne's armour guards her sense of self, her identity, as well as her body. This renders Jaime complicit in Brienne's otherness in a more symbolic sense than the abstract input of gendered societal norms for two reasons. Firstly, his status as a knight means that his recognition carries significant weight. Secondly, she allows him to see her beyond her masculine performativity. Ironically, in doing so, Jaime strips back a layer of her emotional armour because it is personal and intimate, reflecting his awareness of her body: 'I hope I got your measurements right.'[428] It detracts from her agency in terms of identity building but highlights the complexity of that

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[428] MacLaren, dir., "Oathkeeper."

identity as she develops relationships of consequence. This adds a further layer of complexity to Brienne and to the diversity of warrior women in the twenty-first century televisual text. As Brienne is a chivalric warrior, she still needs the approval of at least one of her peers to be legitimised as such. Consequently, Jaime's encouragement is indicative of the external influences that impact on the development of the warrior woman, reinforcing that she does not emerge and grow in a vacuum. The patriarchy contributes to her characterisation and remains the gatekeeper of warriordom, at least to an extent.

Where Brienne embodies the hard-bodied chivalric warrior, it is interesting to compare her to Arya. Where Brienne is tall, statuesque and exhibits brute strength that is a match against the many soldiers she defeats during her seven-season journey, Arya is a diminutive, nimble and intelligent fighter. In terms of masculinity, her stature is not valued in the same way as Brienne's is because she does not exhibit exceptional physical strength or the musculinity of Tasker's warrior woman.[429] Instead, she is closer to Hohenstein's girl warrior and exhibits traits that are broadly considered to be feminine, fusing them with the typically masculine desire to fight in the same way.[430] This fusion is referenced in the Hound's reaction to her fighting style when he finds her practicing swordplay in 'First of His Name' (4:5):

> Arya: No one's gonna kill me.
>
> The Hound: They will if you nance around like that. That's no way to fight.
>
> Arya: It's not fighting. It's water dancing.
>
> The Hound: Dancing? Maybe you ought to put on a dress. Who taught you that shite?[431]

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[429] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 3.
[430] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 8.
[431] MacLaren, dir., "First of His Name."

The Hound's attitude towards Arya's practice is dripping with disdain. The long narrative of the televisual text privileges the audience, which is aware that Arya's tutor in the earliest episodes, Syrio Forel (Miltos Yerolemou), is the First Sword of Braavos, a successful and effective swordsman. However, the Hound disputes Arya's ability to fight based on his conviction that there is only one way to fight – the 'masculine' way of full-blooded contact. This is the style that Brienne employs, but Arya's approach is deemed more feminine via the Hound's language, particularly the homophobic notion that she is 'nancing' about and should don a dress instead of armour. His contempt is palpable, but that does not make her fighting style any less effective.

Arya's style of fighting challenges established conceptions of masculine and feminine as well as the fixity of identities that are embedded within the conviction that only men can win fights. We already know that not to be true by this point given Brienne's success at Renly's tournament, but Arya reinforces the folly of fallacy again and again. The maxim that bigger is better leads her opponents to underestimate her, as Brienne does when the two spar at Winterfell in 'The Spoils of War' (7:4), a scene that will be discussed in more detail in chapter eight.[432] However, the difference between the two warrior women questions entrenched ideas of what constitutes a warrior and the validity of categorising traits as feminine or masculine.

Arya and Brienne are women warriors because they fight for social justice and chivalric honour respectively, but the physical difference between the two highlights the multiplicity of the application of female masculinity and consequently the representation of the Other.

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[432] Shakman, dir., "The Spoils of War."

Again, the aesthetic appearance, coding and performance of the two characters overlap here, illustrating that the substance of the warrior woman starts with, but extends beyond, their physical looks. Furthermore, their coexistence within the same storyworld and televisual text not only shifts the parameters of who qualifies for the category of warrior woman, but also provides proof that it is possible for more than one type of warrior woman to inhabit a space. Diversity is not tokenistic but substantial, providing more opportunities for warrior women and women that exhibit traits of the warrior to challenge the patriarchal norms and structures that ordinarily exclude them.

Along with physical stature, beauty is a factor in evaluating the value of the women of Westeros. Brienne is labelled as ugly and monstrous repeatedly by her male counterparts, who reject her desire to be a warrior and exclude her from what essentially remains a boys' club. There is no ambiguity about Brienne's appearance, which is unequivocally hard-bodied throughout, but she is still compared to the ideals of female beauty by those who seek to diminish the threat she poses to their crisis-ridden masculinity. The use of 'woman' in particular is derogatory, spat out in a tone that is designed to challenge Brienne's authority and the validity of her identity. This is most overt in 'A Man Without Honor' (2:7).[433] Tasked with guarding the entrance to Catelyn Stark's tent at the Stark army camp in the Westerlands, she intercepts a priest as he attempts to enter. His immediate reaction is '[k]eep your hands off me, woman!' The dismissal reaffirms the social and cultural perception of male superiority. However, Brienne's response subverts that superiority: 'Don't enter without an invitation, man.' Made aware of her authority, he immediately offers an apology, but the slur itself is

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[433] Nutter, dir., "A Man Without Honor."

echoed later in the episode. When imprisoned by Robb Stark, Jaime's reaction upon first laying eyes on Brienne is to question whether 'that' is a woman before calling her a 'beast'. This reaction is mirrored by the Stark soldiers later in the second season and a Bolton man's dismissive '[i]f you can call that a woman.'[434] Their awe and disbelief that Brienne is indeed a woman manifests in a fear response that paints her as a monstrous freak who is abnormal and abject, reinforcing her status as Other based on appearance alone. This does become less frequent as her character survives all obstacles she faces, thus mirroring her growth in status and authority as she earns her warrior identity and moves from the margins towards the centre.[435] However, the continued references to her gender demonstrates the extent to which she unsettles the Westerosi patriarchal structures, pushing back against them and realising that the recognition of her worth begins with herself. Such worth also manifests in the individual values and codes of conduct that warrior women live by and which merit further attention here.

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[434] Taylor, dir., "Valar Morghulis"; Daniel Minahan, dir., "Dark Wings, Dark Words," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 2, HBO, 2013.

[435] Brienne points out that she is able to adopt the identity of a woman warrior based on her successes to Jaime, but only when provoked by his relentless teasing: 'All my life men like you have sneered at me, and all my life I've been knocking men like you into the dust.'[435] Here, Brienne recognises her worth, effectively demonstrates that she is more than just an aesthetically statuesque monstrous woman. In doing so, she once again draws attention to the overlap between the aesthetics, code and performance of the warrior woman. Her chivalric value resides in her performance of female masculinity, showcasing her ability to fight, to challenge other warriors. Her deeds and successes garner respect, which ultimately culminates in an acceptance into an elite group that gender alone had previously excluded her from.

7 CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WARRIOR WOMAN'S CODE – VALUES, BELIEFS AND IDENTITY

Chivalry is a key element of the pseudo-Medieval context of *Game of Thrones,* ostensibly underpinning the masculine hierarchy of power that sustains the patriarchy. However, it also forms the basis of one warrior woman system of values, although chivalric values cannot be uniformly applied to all who embrace the archetype. The difference in values defines who each warrior woman is, underpinning her identity and the choice of who or what to fight for. While they do fit within the same archetypal category, Brienne and Arya embody the dichotomy of the warrior woman, tapping into warriordom and its masculine-facing nature via distinct values and ideals while embodying its antithesis – the monstrous feminine.

Under Cohen's first thesis, the monster's body is a cultural body and a projection of a single moment that gives life to anxieties, fears and multifaceted desires.[436] Desire underpins the construction of the warrior woman and, as a driving force of monstrosity,[437] gives rise to her presence in patriarchal frameworks, such as the hierarchical order in place in Westeros. Arya and Brienne certainly exhibit a desire to be warriors, from which develops men's desire to challenge them and assuage masculine fears about empowered women. There is also a more specific anxiety that their presence in Westeros will disrupt the patriarchal order and prevent the reestablishment of the status quo that existed at the very start of the series. Brienne feeds those masculine fears via championing chivalric values. Arya does so by operating outside of

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[436] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 4.

[437] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 44; Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 86-88; Patricia MacCormack, "The Queer Ethics of Monstrosity," in *Speaking of Monsters: A Teratological Anthology,* ed. Caroline Joan S. Picart and John Edgar Browning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 255-258; Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 15.

societal standards and therefore rejects those values out of hand. In this sense, the monstrous warrior woman fits into Cohen's theory, although she also directly challenges Cohen's framing of the cultural body as an epistemological space that bears a genetic uncertainty because it embodies displacement.[438] Neither Arya nor Brienne vanish or may be figuratively dissected as bodies that are solely of a specific moment in time. Instead, they are bodies of a specific medium, unique to the complex televisual text that fashions longevity via its storyworld. They carve their own societal niche within that storyworld, becoming increasingly comfortable in the space over an extended period of time despite the discomfort of other characters around them. Such time is facilitated by the multiple hours of television that span the length of the show itself, and even beyond when the legacy of *Game of Thrones* is considered. The warrior woman's embodiment of certainty and self-determinism rather than specific binary identities is just one part of that legacy.

The woman warrior directly challenges this construction of identity, conflating the approximations of masculinity and femininity whilst outwardly rejecting the premise that women are unaware of the full weight and import of social justice. In psychoanalysis, the masculine and feminine are identified and read in relation to three diametric oppositions – active/passive, subject/abject and phallic/castrated – with the masculine being aligned with the first positions and feminine being secondary, weaker and imbued with a diminished sense of social justice.[439] Social justice is a driving feature of *Game of Thrones'* warrior woman, placing a version of moral values at the very core of her identity and therefore drawing attention to the overlap between individual values and performativity. Arya and Brienne

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[438] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 4.
[439] Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 91-92.

consistently pursue social justice and are defined by the weight and importance they invest in upholding laws, albeit very different laws. Arya is committed to upholding moral justice whereas Brienne seeks to uphold the laws of Westeros, which are bound to the chivalric code. This chapter will explore their respective codes and how they affect their approaches to being warrior women, drawing attention to how the layered televisual text facilitates the construction of more than one type of warrior woman and enables them to coexist rather than pitting them against each other.

7.1 Arya Stark's Code of Conduct: Social Justice

Cohen's method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender positions warrior women as monsters, a product of collected fragments of a given culture that merge to form a hybrid body.[440] However, this assumes that monsters remain products of very specific moments and are incapable of adaptation within those moments. Arya and Brienne challenge this assumption. Although both occupy a cultural space within highborn Westerosi society, they experience multiple cultural shifts during the course of the show within which they face challenges as a consequence of the introduction of new ideas, attitudes and behaviours into their orbit. Arya in particular is a product of all of the cultural shifts she experiences, or endures in the case of her imprisonment under Lannister guard at Harrenhal in the second season, and the personal code of conduct she adopts. Her experiences and code empower her to buck Cohen's theory by becoming a coherent whole rather than a series of disjointed fragments, but only after she actively develops via adaptation to her circumstances. Such

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[440] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 3.

cultural multiplicity and temporal and spatial disparities are not accounted for by Cohen but are present within the complex televisual text on account of the sheer size of its diegetic storyworld and the intricacy of the narrative arcs that traverse it.

Arya's childhood does not mark her as monstrous; instead it is her development after the decline of the status quo that does so. During the first episode, 'Winter Is Coming' (1:1), she lives under patriarchal codes of conduct and is subjected to hegemonic socially constructed reality.[441] Within that reality, she is expected to learn behaviours that are socially and culturally appropriate for her gender, thus normalising the stereotypical noble lady who will become a wife and mother within the paternal order that is closely maintained and controlled by men.[442] However, Arya chooses not to conform, which is the founding trait she has in common with all of her warrior women predecessors.[443] This is evident from the outset. She exhibits a series of behaviours that make her attitude towards convention plain. She is the last to arrive to greet the Baratheons as they arrive at Winterfell early in the episode. The rest of the family is in an orderly line, whereas Arya arrives late wearing an armoured helmet. She flicks food at her sister Sansa during the banquet held in honour of King Robert in the Great Hall, thus forcing her brother Robb to physically carry her out. She is also rude to Septa Mordane (Susan Brown) during a sewing lesson. Each of these actions sets the tone for Arya's development but none cast her as monstrous because she is still firmly within the patriarchal framework at that point, an unruly child who is controlled within her father's house. She only

[441] Van Patten, dir., "Winter Is Coming."
[442] Gunter, *Television and Gender Representation,* 1.
[443] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 14-18; Inness, *Tough Girls,* 18-26; Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 7; Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 33-36; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 4-5.

becomes problematic within the chaos that follows the deaths of Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark when the control the latter wields over her is removed.

Despite the fact that Arya aspires to be a knight and stands in scathing judgement of the archetypal ladies she is surrounded by as a highborn member of House Stark, she remains firmly within the patriarchal hierarchy while Ned lives. His indulgence of her manifests within the borders of child's play as she is the second daughter and therefore does not have the weight of expectation of making a suitable marriage with House Baratheon on her. After Ned's death, the safety and security of that identity and those borders fall away, exposing her to danger and othering her. The chivalric order has no capacity to protect her because the person who valued honour above all else – Ned - is no longer alive to ensure that it protects his daughter. Whereas chivalry provides a comfortable space for Brienne to develop her own identity, Arya does not have that luxury. There are examples of her playing at being a knight, most notably her swordplay with Syrio Forel, or 'dancing' lessons as they are labelled.[444] As a child, she likes the idea of being a knight and pushes against the suggestion that she cannot achieve that ambition because she is a girl, as exemplified by her rejection of Ned's suggestion that she will marry a lord and subsequent refusal to listen to his paternal plans for her in 'Cripples, Bastards and Broken Things' (1:4).[445] However, she does not live by chivalric ideals beyond those enforced by Ned in her childhood, despite the quest that she embarks on the moment her childhood dies.

Arya does not parody masculinity or masculine identity as a form of resistance at any point during her quest for revenge on those who she deems responsible for Ned's death, instead

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[444] Minahan, dir., "A Golden Crown."

[445] Brian Kirk, dir., "Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 4, HBO, 2011.

adapting to suit her situation.[446] The televisual text lends her scope to adapt, exhibiting

flexibility for her continuing challenge to binaries and gender-based expectations beyond her

childish indulgence. Such nuanced representation is pervasive within this televisual text and

is an enduring element of Arya's characterisation. The development of her own sense of social

justice, which bucks the established system of justice in Westeros, is a prime example of such

nuance.[447] Ned contained Arya within the familial parameters he set, but their removal and

her subsequent disappearance designates her a threat. Arya's monstrosity is therefore

constructed by the systems of power that cast her out,[448] which simultaneously seek to

dominate and dehumanise her as an object to be controlled rather than as a consequence of

the idea that she is any threat. However, the situation also lends Arya the opportunity and

later the impetus to manage her own self-production, thus using her monstrous status to

explode the myth of moral values that died along with Ned.

Arya embarks on her quest for social justice through a list of names of people who have

wronged her. It explicitly contributes to the self-management of her development and the

emergence of her own moral framework. Born out of a conversation with Yoren about being

consumed by the images of Joffrey, Cersei, Sansa and executioner Ilyn Payne at Ned's

beheading,[449] the list is a defining element of Arya's identity from the second season onwards.

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[446] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 187.

[447] After the sharp shift in the status quo precipitated by Ned's death, Arya is excluded from the Westerosi patriarchal order. Not only is she left exposed to the machinations of power by virtue of Joffrey's rule, Cersei's demand that she be found and returned to King's Landing renders her a pawn in the much larger game of thrones being played against the new Warden of the North, Robb Stark. However, this has a direct impact on the implicit threat that her freedom poses to the Lannisters.

[448] Fred Botting and Catherine Spooner, "Introduction: Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects," in *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic from the Nineteenth Century to the Present,* ed. Fred Botting and Catherine Spooner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 2-3.

[449] Sakharov, dir., "What Is Dead May Never Die."

She recites it like a lullaby before she goes to sleep, linking the past to her present and giving her a reason to survive. The list is populated by those she is determined to kill in retribution for past wrongs, all of whom are under the protection of the state when first added to it. Its significance is attached to Arya's own vow to uphold social justice by punishing those who use their status under the Westerosi patriarchy to act with impunity, thus shedding light on the willingness with which her targets abandon chivalric moral values and justice to suit a self-serving political agenda. In effect, the list is indicative of the myth of moral values in Westerosi society and the corruption of those values and ideals in the patriarchy's quest to maintain power. Given no possibility of recourse and her loss of faith in honour and justice, Arya adopts her own moral framework with the goal of eliminating those who violate it. The framework does not adhere to chivalric values but it does consolidate the threat she poses to those in power.

Arya's sense of right and wrong is black and white and is thus aligned to Daenerys Targaryen's approach to social justice to a far greater extent than it is with that of Brienne. Both Daenerys and Arya echo Waites' warrior woman for the new millennium in this sense: '[I]n her mission to avenge the wrongs done to her [she] challenges the gender binary and the structures of inequity that support it.'[450] This quest empowers Arya, as a warrior woman, to wilfully reject the patriarchal system of justice that Joffrey and Cersei preside over. As the architect of her own moral code, Arya embodies the modern warrior woman who is able to move away from the codes of practice that are established by and for the benefit of the patriarchy. Where her predecessors, and Brienne, initially have to operate in conjunction with

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[450] Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 46.

the social and cultural systems that push them to the margins, Arya chooses and forges a new path.[451] Like Schubart's female hero, she 'offers the *possibility* for change and empowerment.'[452]

One of the names on Arya's list effectively illustrates the irony of patriarchal justice and morality within Westeros, raising the question of what actually constitutes monstrosity. Ser Meryn Trant (Ian Beattie) is added to Arya's list because he kills Syrio Forel in 'The Pointy End' (1:8).[453] As a member of the Kingsguard, Trant is untouchable. He dispenses the King's justice and upholds the law, despite flaunting it himself as and when the mood takes him. This is illustrated at the end of season four when Trant arrives in Braavos to conduct business on behalf of King Tommen Baratheon.[454] Arya follows him to a pleasure house where it becomes apparent that his proclivities include a sexual attraction to and enjoyment of torturing pre-pubescent girls.[455] His behaviour is indicative of the moral corruption at the heart of the patriarchy, indicating that Trant's immorality is incompatible with the chivalric values he should uphold. As a knight, he is able to exactly as he pleases and yet still remains in position as a guardian of law and order.

Ironically, although Arya is considered monstrous for her otherness and flaunting of gender norms, Trant is the true subversive. He exhibits a form of monstrosity that is grounded in moral corruption and innate cruelty. Arya's monstrosity is imposed on her based on societal beliefs and ideals rather than the brand of social justice she seeks to administer and uphold. This

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[451] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 16-18; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 3.
[452] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 4.
[453] Daniel Minahan, dir., "The Pointy End," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 8, HBO, 2011.
[454] Arya had initially been set the task of poisoning an official the Faceless Men, a guild of assassins with whom she trains, known as the Thin Man but abandons it to stalk Trant.
[455] Nutter, dir., "The Dance of Dragons."

reflects on the nature of the monstrous in the twenty-first century televisual text, positioning the monster as a liminal creature who occupies the in-between,[456] whose label is based on representation and status as opposed to actual monstrous qualities. In fact, Arya's own moral code skews dominant moral frameworks because she seeks retribution for violations, whereas the patriarchy seeks to protect its own. Arya proactively uses Trant's perversions to gain access to him, utilising her earlier discoveries to her own advantage.

In 'Mother's Mercy' (4:10), Arya sets a trap for Trant in the pleasure house, posing as one of the girls lined up for him.[457] She refuses to react to the cane he hits her with three times, provoking him to dismiss the other two girls and declare 'I can see I have my work cut out for me.'[458] Arya allows him to hit her once more before removing her disguise, revealing her true identity and springing at him. Her attack is frenzied and brutal. It is also highly personal. She stabs him multiple times, including through each eye, blinding him in a symbolic reference to the justice she seeks. His predilections make him vulnerable and his monstrosity should be remembered. However, Arya's actions ostensibly reinforce her status as a monstrous Other who has the capacity and determination to threaten the patriarchal order. Jaqen H'ghar (Tom Wlaschiha), the leader of the Faceless Men with whom she trains to be an assassin in seasons four and five, conveys this point by punishing Arya. He blinds her in retribution for taking a life she was not supposed to take. Jaqen is unconcerned with Trant and the nature of his crimes, but exerts the power of his own code of justice over Arya. Not only does this underscore the hypocrisy of the absence of punishment for Trant's murder of Syrio Forel, but it also directly

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[456] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 46; Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 5.
[457] Nutter, dir., "Mother's Mercy."
[458] Nutter, dir., "Mother's Mercy."

mirrors her attack on Trant and therefore creates symbolic link to him. At this point, Arya is not cast as a warrior woman, but as a monstrous Other who is trapped in a cycle of moral corruption that she finds difficult to escape. They contain her, albeit temporarily.

7.2 Brienne of Tarth: Upholding the Chivalric Order

In contrast to Arya's more modern sense of social justice, Brienne of Tarth pursues a more traditional framework that is guided by chivalric values and ideals. Her commitment to the chivalric order is presented as a key element of her identity from the moment audiences are introduced to her. Although Brienne is not a knight - women cannot achieve that status in Westeros - she does break a glass ceiling when she requests and is granted a place in Renly's Kingsguard as a reward for her victory over Loras Tyrell in 'What Is Dead May Never Die' (2:3).[459] Renly is aware of her identity and is the only individual that immediately accepts her on ability rather than judging her value based on her womanhood. Consequently, he becomes complicit in the reworking of the Westerosi framework of gender ideals, norms and expectations via the reframing of chivalric values to incorporate a warrior woman, empowering her to reverse the dynamic between male and female roles. Brienne's pledge to 'be one of your seven, pledge my life to yours and keep you safe from all harm' positions her as a female protector of a male ruler. Although underplayed within the show, this is a significant shift that highlights the possibilities for the Other where progressive attitudes are embraced.

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[459] Sakharov, dir., "What Is Dead May Never Die."

Like Arya, Brienne's morality can also be assessed by comparison with the figures who are invested with the power to uphold chivalric values and honour. In contrast to Arya's predicament at this point, her status is less ambiguous. Brienne unequivocally adheres to chivalric values, which sets her apart from the warrior peers she wishes to emulate because they do not remain faithful to the same values they are charged with upholding. For instance, the construction of Brienne as a warrior woman can be framed as the antithesis of the deconstruction of Theon Greyjoy (Alfie Allen). Brienne is everything that Theon is not and yet she is forced to the margins, existing in the in-between, because she is the 'victim of patriarchy' based solely on her womanhood.[460] Brienne's honour, bravery and loyalty stand in stark contrast to Theon's selfish, cowardly and treacherous approach to those around him, positioning her firmly within the chivalric values that are idealised within the pseudo-Medieval context whilst simultaneously rejecting his claim to them.

In the absence of effective law and order after the abrupt decline of the status quo, Theon seeks to assert his claim to power and becomes a menace to the values that Brienne represents.[461] He deserts Robb Stark, conspires against him with his fellow Ironborn and ultimately takes Winterfell from the family that raised him. This is neither chivalric nor honourable. Despite this, Theon attempts to cast his actions as honourable in a rousing speech to his men in 'Valar Morghulis' (2:10):

> We die today, brothers. We die bleeding from a hundred wounds, with arrows in our necks and spears in our guts. But our war cries will echo through eternity! They will sing about the Battle of Winterfell until the Iron Islands have slipped beneath the

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[460] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 2.
[461] Charles Lambert, "A Tender Spot in My Heart: Disability in *A Song of Ice and Fire,*" *Critical Quarterly* 57, no. 1(2015): 24.

waves! Every man, woman and child will know who we were and how long we stood![462]

He invokes an honour he has never exhibited. As a ward of the Starks, Theon did little to independently prove himself and is not an established Ironborn warrior, like his sister Yara. In short, Theon is undeserving of the status of warrior because he disregards chivalry to suit his own desires and purpose. Brienne, on the other hand, does not need to shout about her chivalric qualities. Although she makes no secret of the need to repeatedly prove herself worthy, her most notable moments are bound up with her demonstrations of her strength of conviction and honour.

There is opportunity to directly contrast Brienne and Theon in respect of their service to the Starks. Brienne reinforces her commitment to chivalric values by upholding her vow to serve Catelyn Stark and her daughters despite the former's death at the Red Wedding,[463] searching them out in order to pledge her life to them. Theon, on the other hand, deserts Robb Stark to chase a birthright that he has no claim to. Theon believes himself entitled to a status in the Iron Islands that he has done nothing to deserve, and is thus indicative of the male entitlement that underpins some chivalric positioning in Westeros.[464] In contrast, Brienne continually offers her service to those she deems worthy and to fulfil her vows without getting recognition in return.

A prominent example of Brienne's dedication occurs in 'The Red Woman' (6:1) and is particularly poignant because she rescues both Sansa and Theon, previously her superior

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[462] Taylor, dir., "Valar Morghulis."
[463] Nutter, dir., "The Rains of Castamere."
[464] Steven Muhlberger, "Chivalry in Westeros," in *Game of Thrones Versus History: Written in Blood,* ed. Brian A. Pavlac (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 48-50.

under patriarchal structures by gendered default.[465] Sansa, imprisoned by her husband

Ramsay Bolton, escapes with Theon. The two run through the woods around Winterfell

pursued by soldiers and bloodhounds. In her quest to fulfil her oath to protect Sansa, Brienne

is already in situ outside of Winterfell's walls and physically attacks the soldiers and saves both

Sansa and Theon from recapture. The choreography of the fight emphasises Brienne's physical

prowess as a warrior, but it is the fulfilment of her vow to Catelyn and swearing fealty to Sansa

that emphasises her honour and suitability as a representative of chivalric values where those

men who traditionally represent them are unfit to do so. She lays her sword on the ground

and declares: 'Lady Sansa, I offer my services once again. I will shield your back and keep your

counsel and give my life for yours if need be. I swear it by the old gods and the new.'[466] Again,

this is symbolic of her fidelity to chivalric values. As the epitome of honour, Brienne exhibits a

more modern form of chivalry that does not subscribe to traditional Westerosi gender roles.

Instead, it subverts expectations and challenges the rigidity of the chivalric order's masculine

parameters.[467]

Brienne's status as a warrior woman is also framed in contrast with Ser Jaime Lannister.[468]

Jaime is the idealised knight – a handsome combat champion with wealth, rank and family.[469]

However, he is not coded as honourable or worthy of that label, unlike Brienne, when the two

initially meet.[470] Like Ser Meryn Trant, Jaime is beyond reproach as a member of the

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[465] Jeremy Podeswa, dir., "The Red Woman," *Game of Thrones,* season 6, episode 1, HBO, 2016.

[466] Podeswa, dir., "The Red Woman."

[467] Although Brienne swears loyalty to a Lady, the fact that she is also a woman marks a shift in the prospect of challenging and remaking the status quo.

[468] Jaime is an anointed knight and member of the Kingsguard under the Mad King Aerys Targaryen and Robert Baratheon and then later Lord Commander under King Joffrey Baratheon.

[469] Muhlberger, "Chivalry in Westeros," 49.

[470] Ferreday, "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom," 29.

Kingsguard, but he is just as morally questionable. Jaime pushes Bran Stark (Isaac Hempstead Wright) out of a tower window at the end of the very first episode after the boy discovers his incestuous relationship with his sister, Cersei.[471] It is explained that Jaime stabbed the previous king, Aerys Targaryen, in the back despite being his trusted guard in the same episode. Although this latter act is given context that does cast him as honourable later, other actions, like attacking Ned Stark in the streets of King's Landing in 'The Wolf and the Lion' (1:5),[472] present him as unsuitable to uphold the chivalric values that Westeros is built upon, unlike Brienne. His view that vows are dispensable leads Catelyn to later declare: 'You are no knight. You have forsaken every vow you ever took […] [Brienne] is a truer knight than you will ever be, Kingslayer.'[473] Meant as a scathing criticism of Jaime, Catelyn's declaration doubles up as a criticism of the social hierarchy of Westeros and the limitations that the patriarchy imposes on gender roles. Despite being more committed to chivalry and more suited to the role of knight than Jaime, her gender precludes it. In condemning him, Catelyn condemns the mechanisms that subjugate women.

Despite her initial disdain for Jaime, exemplified by her question of '[w]ho wants to die defending a Lannister?',[474] Brienne ultimately rescues him twice, thus subverting the gendered expectations attached to the two characters. Firstly, she physically fulfils her vow to take him home to King's Landing, arriving in the capital during the final episode of the third season, although this is reciprocated by him literally saving her from the bear three episodes

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471 Van Patten, dir., "Winter Is Coming."
472 Kirk, dir., "The Wolf and the Lion."
473 Nutter, dir., "A Man Without Honor."
474 Nutter, dir., "A Man Without Honor."

earlier.[475] The episode is designed to humiliate her, but forces Jaime to return her chivalric

protection. She also acts as a positive influence, leading by example and encouraging him to

reveal his true Self hidden beneath the protective armour of his Kingslayer image. Tasker and

Steenberg interpret this as a projection of courtly ideals onto their respective bodies: 'Jaime

Lannister is a beautifully tragic man in the process of redeeming his honor; and to Jaime,

Brienne becomes an ideal of knighthood uncorrupted by the greed of his family's

ambitions.'[476] This succinct interpretation effectively marks a reversal of roles, positioning

Brienne as Jaime's superior and heralds a new phase of her development.

Brienne's transformation from a freak of un-womanhood in the eyes of the patriarchy to a

worthy knight is sealed in 'Kissed by Fire' (3:5).[477] Having been captured by Roose Bolton's

men and delivered to him at Harrenhal, Jaime jumps into Brienne's bathing pool and begins

to tell her the reality of his murder of King Aerys Targaryen:

> He told me to bring him my father's head. Then he turned to his pyromancer. 'Burn them all,' he said. 'Burn them in their homes. Burn them in their beds.' Tell me, if your precious Renly commanded you to kill your own father and stand by while thousands of men, women, and children burned alive, would you have done it? Would you have kept your oath then?
>
> First, I killed the pyromancer, and then, when the king turned to flee, I drove my sword into his back. 'Burn them all,' he kept saying. 'Burn them all.' I don't think he expected to die. He meant to burn with the rest of us and rise again, reborn as a dragon, to turn his enemies to ash. I slit his throat to make sure that didn't happen.[478]

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[475] Nutter, dir., "Mhysa"; Michelle MacLaren, dir., "The Bear and the Maiden Fair," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 7, HBO, 2013.
[476] Tasker and Steenberg, "Women Warriors: From Chivalry to Vengeance," 180.
[477] Graves, dir., "Kissed by Fire."
[478] Graves, dir., "Kissed by Fire."

Although it would be incorrect to say that Brienne's honour influences Jaime, this speech demonstrates that he identifies her as a kindred spirit. Jaime recognises her honour and chivalry, although the patriarchy fails to do so in any meaningful sense. In unburdening himself to Brienne, he positions her as the hero and adopts the role of damsel, as per Hohenstein's analysis of the warrior typology.[479] Jaime subverts gender roles but, in rescuing him twice, Brienne reinforces his reversal. This empowerment of the warrior woman highlights the resettling of norms and ideals within the chaos that remains after the decline of the status quo, enabling her to move from the margins towards the centre while still occupying the figurative in-between. The reversal also questions the validity of the masculine/feminine binary where the warrior woman demonstrates strength and the determination to fight to validate her identity and the warrior exhibits a fragility that is linked to being forced to live up to the chivalric ideals of an imposed identity. The characteristics associated with each binary ideal are no longer stable and the borders between the two are blurred. Although the televisual text explores this subtly, the representational reversal emphasises the complexity of identities within evolving socio-cultural spaces.

Jaime's honour is ambiguous, partly because he disguises it with bravado and partly because it contrasts with the contemptible behaviour that the audience is privy to in the early seasons of *Game of Thrones,* exemplified by pushing Bran out of a window. The same ambiguity does not apply to Brienne. Her chivalry and honour are key to her stable and steadfast identity, her values remaining the same from the moment she is introduced to the final episode of the show. However, this is problematic because it presents her as a throwback

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[479] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 2.

to the same nostalgic era that the honourable Ned Stark belonged to. Few adhere to the values

she serves to uphold. This disjunction of the existing masculine code of conduct and outdated

performative chivalric values is particularly troubling where Brienne may be read as upholding

patriarchal codes of honour. The fact that she would uphold a system that sought to exclude

her is not uncommon and is actually something she has in common with her warrior women

predecessors.[480] It is, however, problematic when she is the only one who would do so without

fear or favour.

Brienne is ultimately alone in pursuing the codes established and implemented by the

masculine hierarchy that maintains gendered exclusion. She is also one of the very few

characters that seek to maintain a positive thymotic reputation throughout the series.[481] This

paradox enables her to take control of her own destiny and challenge the exclusion of warrior

women by the established order she threatens, but it is notable that she is still reliant on her

male counterparts for acceptance into their exclusive club.[482] That is not to say that she

unquestioningly accepts the norms of that club. Brienne embraces the traits that best fit her

identity and ambition while avoiding the element of courtly ideals that foster war and

manipulate violence to suit political or personal agendas.[483] In avoiding the darker side of

chivalry, Brienne can hold her values to an artificially high standard, reshaping what it means

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[480] Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors,* 8-9; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 1-3.

[481] Rob Stanton, "Excessive and Appropriate Gifts: Hospitality and Violence in *A Song of Ice and Fire*," *Critical Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2015): 58.

[482] Hovey, "Tyrion's Gallantry," 91; Graves, dir., "The Children." Hovey supplements this reading through analysis of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels that form the basis of *Game of Thrones*, interpreting Brienne's adoption of the masculine position as an action that allows her to sidestep femininity in its entirety: 'Instead of looking to her own embodiment as proof that the myths might be wrong, that all knights might not be gallant because all maids are not, in fact, beautiful, she changes position, and becomes a gallant knight.' This is a problematic contention when applied to the televisual text because her extended representation renders such reasoning too simplistic. Her desire to become a gallant knight is not presented as a change in position, but rather a desire she works towards by fighting with boys during her childhood.

[483] Hovey, "Tyrion's Gallantry," 91.

to be a warrior by pursuing justice alone as opposed to a politically motivated agenda. Whereas Jaime is bound to the political games his own family play as they seek to hold on to the Iron Throne, Brienne is not. He is bound to protect Joffrey as his son and as his king, but Brienne is not and instead adopts a neutrality that is guided solely by her chivalric ideals and values. She is able to pursue a simplified version of chivalry because of the absence of familial ties to power in the wider context of Westeros and the Iron Throne while avoiding stereotypical feminine traits via her masculine performativity. In maintaining a positive thymotic reputation and avoiding the worst excesses of masculinity, Brienne unilaterally raises the question of whether she is actually monstrous based solely on her otherness.

In truth, Brienne's chivalry and problematic monstrosity are sources of continuity throughout the televisual text. Her characterisation fits neatly into Mittell's model of character elaboration within complex television, which contends that characters rarely shift significantly in a televisual text but our understanding of them does as the serial form is exploited to gradually reveal facets of their character to the audience.[484] Audiences get to know individual characters so they appear to have changed during the course of the televisual text, when they are, in fact, consistent. Brienne's characterisation actually moves very little between her introduction in the second season of the show and her survival until the end of the final season because she remains steadfast in her values and secure in her sense of who she is. Instead, her character is elaborated on by the show's layered complexity, revealing her personal traits and identity initially to highlight her constancy, although shifts in the narrative

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[484] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 136.

order may suggest that she has changed with experience. As such, our understanding of Brienne develops through this elaboration.

Brienne's earliest appearances place her firmly in warrior mode with very little nuance. She is stoic and reserved, refusing to react to provocation or give anybody an insight into herself beyond the armour. This is indicative of a refusal to show vulnerability or weakness that can be exploited. In fact, Brienne's first show of any form of emotion occurs when Renly is murdered by Stannis Baratheon's magical Shadow in 'The Ghost of Harrenhal' (2:5).[485] She cries out in disbelief, horror and grief as Renly dies, although her refusal to display any vulnerability does not save her from the blame for his death directed her way by his men. Brienne is the only one that witnesses Renly's death so it is logical for them to question her, but that is not why they do. Their suspicion of her is linked to her monstrosity. As agents of the patriarchy, they consider Brienne to be out of her rightful place and thus is exposed to 'all the dangers that being a woman in the public male-dominated spaces of Westeros.'[486] Despite her loyalty to Renly, her status as an outsider, a freak, means she poses a threat to man and thus quickly attracts suspicion. In fact, she feels guilt over Renly's death but she channels that guilt into an honourable goal, avenging his death by pursuing and ultimately killing his murderer Stannis Baratheon, as opposed to extending her emotive display and embracing the traits that are perceived as feminine instead. This moment marks a watershed in Brienne's growth as a character.

In the same episode, Brienne reveals to Catelyn Stark that she never knew her mother, although the remark is once again made dispassionately and offers a fleeting insight into

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[485] Petrarca, dir., "The Ghost of Harrenhal."
[486] Tasker and Steenberg, "Women Warriors: From Chivalry to Vengeance," 176.

Brienne's formative years before the conversation moves on to her credibility as a warrior. Brienne informs Catelyn of her vow to kill Stannis, replying 'I'm as good as any of them' when the older woman reminds her that Stannis would be surrounded by his own guards and therefore difficult to access for even the bravest of warriors. This is indicative of Brienne's priorities and emphasises her difference, which she again reinforces when in conversation with Catelyn: 'You have courage. Not battle courage perhaps but… I don't know. A woman's type of courage.'[487] The use of language here indicates that Brienne's view of the world is conditioned by patriarchal norms to begin with, leading her to label herself in a way that ostensibly rejects her own status as a woman. She does not see herself as a woman, but it is subtle revelations like this emerging as she traverses the *Game of Thrones* storyworld that lead to her becoming more rounded as a character. Here, her chivalric code once again overlaps with performativity.[488] Furthermore, this rigid facet of her character that softens as she becomes more comfortable with her status as a warrior, revealing the extent to which she feels the need to perform masculinity to gain legitimacy while remaining firmly within Mittell's model of character elaboration.[489] Brienne's identity is therefore constructed via a series of negotiations that occur throughout the course of the show and contribute to the multifaceted nature of her status as a warrior woman that becomes apparent as the show progresses.[490]

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[487] Petrarca, dir., "The Ghost of Harrenhal."

[488] Timothy Beal, "Behold Thou the Behemoth: Imaging the Unimaginable in Monster Movies," in *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together,* ed. S. Brent Plate and David Jasper (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 201. Her body is not a neutral form but is instead dependent on performativity, eliciting an 'adrenaline fuelled bravado' that provokes reactions from the men who would hold her to different standards instead of embracing her equality as a warrior.

[489] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 136.

[490] Jane Crisp, "Fashioning Gendered Identities," in *Deciphering Culture: Ordinary Curiosities and Subjective Narratives,* ed. Jane Crisp, Kay Ferres and Gillian Swanson (London: Routledge, 2000), 42.

Brienne's consistency stands in stark contrast to the development of Arya, who does experience a significant transformation between the first episode of the last, thus adhering to Mittell's character growth model of change via an identifiable coming of age narrative, 'evoking the process of maturation in which a character becomes more realized and fleshed out over time.'[491] However, the generalised model advanced here is not sufficient to explain Arya's characterisation or her personal development within the continuously evolving contextual environment she inhabits. She does not follow a linear 'transitioning out of youthful tumult into more stable adulthood', although Mittell does leave room for deviation based on the impact of trauma on the growth narratives of young characters.[492] It is Arya's propensity to evolve, a learned trait necessary for survival, that contrasts sharply with Brienne's steadfastness and stability of identity. Although Arya cannot be described as fully formed as a child, as per the model, she remains firmly within the tumult referenced by Mittell even when she does reach adulthood.[493] The adult world is not static and fails to provide her with a degree of stability so she, in turn, rejects it and evades its rules and institutions altogether. Here, Arya reinforces Cregan's criticism of Butler's argument that boundary crossing should be framed as subversive and dangerous.[494]

Arya disrupts the integrity of boundaries, choosing the relative safety of transgression over the danger of remaining on the 'right' side. Arya's choice renders her monstrous, which is ironic considering those wishing to keep her trapped within King's Landing executed her father for no other reason than he threatened the Lannisters' grip on power, but her liminality saves

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[491] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 137.
[492] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 137.
[493] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 137.
[494] Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body,* 133.

her life. Arya's ability to occupy the margins and rest in the warrior woman's in-between

enables her to leave King's Landing in the first instance and remain evasive despite the

Lannisters' attempts to find her afterwards.[495] Furthermore, the outcome of her sole attempt

to cross back into Westerosi society – her aborted effort to join her mother and brother at a

wedding in which both are brutally murdered - validates her choice to remain outside of

Westerosi institutions and further raises the question not only of who is monstrous,[496] but

also whether monstrosity remains a valid category for the purpose of limiting and controlling

the Other.

7.3 The Construction of Systems of Morality and Independence

Morality is a significant factor in the warriorship of both Arya and Brienne. The evidence

presented here demonstrates Arya's moral ambiguity, whereas Brienne has a clearer sense of

the normative moral distinctions between right and wrong through chivalry, even if those

moral distinctions are constructed and maintained by the remnants of a patriarchal order that

skews them to suit its own interests. David Gilmore's exploration of monsters addresses the

causal factors that underpin such distinctions, noting that morality is a profoundly human

sensibility because transgressions and contraventions reside within the malice and

destructiveness at the heart of human nature:

> The power of monsters is their ability to fuse opposites, to merge contraries, to
> subvert rules, to overthrow cognitive barriers, moral distinctions, and ontological
> categories. Monsters overcome the barrier of time itself. Uniting past and present,

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[495] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 45; Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 5.
[496] Nutter, dir., "The Rains of Castamere."

> demonic and divine, guilt and conscience, predator and prey, parent and child, self
> and alien, our monsters are our innermost selves.[497]

Game of Thrones' monsters are socially constructed rather than profoundly physically different.[498] Although Brienne and Arya are marked by aesthetic difference in terms of their attire, they are human and therefore may assimilate into society but for their rejection of the gendered norms imposed on Westerosi society. Within this reflection on the power of monsters, warrior women are deemed monstrous. Brienne and Arya both actively subvert binaries and reverse the moral distinctions that are often applied to reinforce them. However, the label of monstrous itself still remains firmly entrenched within the threat that the warrior woman's willingness to transgress boundaries and borders induces within a fragile male ecosystem that has a weakening grasp on morality.[499]

Brienne pursues her vow to Catelyn Stark throughout the show, specifically that she will find and protect her daughters as part of her duties to House Stark,[500] despite her male counterparts willingly and wantonly abandoning their vows. A fifth season encounter with Sansa and Petyr Baelish at an inn reveals the deficit between Brienne's own sense of honour and that of her male counterparts.[501] Baelish immediately attempts to discredit her to limit

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[497] David Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 194.

[498] Although I am referring to the characters and archetypes that are relevant to this thesis here, there are other exceptions to this premise. Tyrion Lannister, for instance, displays physical difference as a consequence of dwarfism, while Theon Greyjoy and Lord Varys are both eunuchs and Shireen Baratheon (Kerry Ingram) is facially disfigured by greyscale, a disease that permanently scars those who survive it. A further example is the Mountain, Ser Gregor Clegane, who contrasts with the socially constructed monsters discussed here in literally being created as a monster. Reanimated by Qyburn to bring him back from the brink of death after his fight with Oberyn Martell in "The Mountain and the Viper" (4:8), he is a zombie of sorts that is impossible to kill and yet he follows his single task of protecting Cersei.

[499] This description applies to Westeros following the deaths of Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark, the masculine authority to rule eroded by an impulsive and cruel boy king who has no moral compass to speak of. Brienne upholds the chivalric values that Ned Stark championed as the ecosystem begins to crumble, standing as the last bastion of morality.

[500] Petrarca, dir., "The Ghost of Harrenhal."

[501] Michael Slovis, dir., "The House of Black and White," *Game of Thrones,* season 5, episode 2, HBO, 2015.

any influence she may gain with Sansa should she be allowed to plead her own case: 'We've met, with Renly Baratheon. What did he say about you? He said your loyalty came free of charge. Someone appears to have paid quite a bit for it since then.'[502] This would conflict with the chivalric code Brienne lives by were the charge credible, but it also illustrates Baelish's manipulation of Sansa and his dismissal of honour as weakness. Baelish's complete lack of morality is illustrated by his contempt for Brienne: 'This woman swore to protect Renly. She failed. She swore to protect your mother. She failed. Why would I want somebody with your history of failure guarding Lady Sansa? […] We're family now, and you are an outsider.'[503] Although he is correct about her status as an Other, the status positions her on the outside of a poisonous system that produced her moral antithesis, thus undermining societal values. In upholding traditional moral values, Brienne rejects the fragility visited on society by Baelish and his ilk and instead offers an opportunity for renewal, a way out of the chaos should she be able to move from the margins into the centre and bring about universal human values as opposed to highly gendered ideals.

Arya's morality deviates from Brienne's despite her own moral compass being just as strong. This can be attributed to the way in which she is framed as monstrous through her methods of searching for justice, thus drawing parallels with other popular cultural figures. In her examination of Robert Louis Stevenson's archetypal villain, Mr Hyde, Erica McCrystal asserts that the evolution of versions of the character have repeatedly exerted pressure on the simple binary values of good and evil, encouraging thought on how monstrosity sits within

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[502] Slovis, dir., "The House of Black and White."
[503] Slovis, dir., "The House of Black and White."

and between those categories.[504] Arya's characterisation, although not a manifestation of Mr Hyde, justifies rethinking the distinction between human and Monster. For instance, McCrystal suggests that Hyde reflects the anxieties and issues of his contemporaneous period and can ultimately be repositioned as a hero: '[T]he monster hero has fewer moral qualms and enhanced physical abilities, he is an effective, strong fighter. Acting as a saviour, the monster hero also has, to some extent, humanity.'[505] This proposition spans different cultural texts, but the complex televisual text directly challenges its premise. Firstly, it assumes that the monster hero is male. Arya's monstrosity challenges this gendered qualification. Secondly, it is not that Arya has fewer but rather different moral qualms. Arya's conception of justice is focused on immoral actions as a broad category instead of being heavily biased in favour of those who commit immoral actions via the binary choice of the patriarchal framework's right and wrong. It remains ambiguous because Arya is never clear on what qualifies as moral and immoral.

Her time in Braavos provides a clear example of Arya's moral ambiguity. She joins the Faceless Men knowing that they are assassins from her previous encounters with Jaqen H'ghar at Harrenhal, but certainly does not voice any qualms she may have about their activities in return for the opportunity to undertake training that enhances her own fighting abilities. She does not ask questions about their activities until she is tasked with killing Lady Crane (Essie Davis), an actress with a travelling company whose crime is inspiring jealousy in her understudy. Arya watches Lady Crane, gets to know her and finds that she is not fundamentally morally bankrupt or deserving of the justice she has been tasked with

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[504] McCrystal, "Hyde the Hero: Changing the Role of the Modern-Day Monster," 235.
[505] McCrystal, "Hyde the Hero: Changing the Role of the Modern-Day Monster," 239.

delivering. Her refusal to kill Lady Crane demonstrates that she is not a mercenary and therefore has the humanity that McCrystal references. However, the complexity of characters like Arya in the twenty-first century televisual text further blurs the boundary between humanity and monstrosity.[506] The demarcation between humanity and monstrosity is inherently unstable and Arya illustrates that better than most, constructing her own system of morality from the margins by virtue of the independence that position affords her while simultaneously raising the question of whether she is truly independent at all.

This research has, to date, drawn attention to the agency of the warrior woman by demonstrating how she takes control of her Other status to transgress borders, boundaries, expectations and norms to forge her own non-normative identity. However, there is a caveat. Independence is a problematic issue for the warrior woman. The male warrior contributes to the patriarchal status quo, reinforcing its power and reaping the personal benefits of that dynamic.[507] The patriarchal status quo, no matter how weak it is or chaotic the vacuum it creates is, does not benefit the warrior woman. As the analysis of Brienne has shown, the warrior woman may seek to forge and utilise agency but there is still a level of dependence on those who claim political, structural and institutional power. This is the dilemma faced by women living under the remnants of the Westerosi hegemonic status quo, as the actors within the chaos struggle to construct a new world order.[508] *Game of Thrones* is therefore a conflicted

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[506] Jeffrey Weinstock, "Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory," in *The Monster Theory Reader,* ed. Jeffrey Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 23. Humanity is desirable, monstrosity undesirable, but both are grounded in the idea that immorality breeds monstrosity where choices are made in the absence of rational thought. That is proven to be incorrect in *Game of Thrones*.

[507] Raeweyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 150; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 1-2.

[508] The agency that Brienne has ostensibly accumulated by virtue of her rejection of gender norms and apparent independence is subtly undermined at various points in the show. Although she is ostensibly an independent woman, bound only by her own choice to adhere to chivalric ideals and pledge her loyal service, Brienne occupies

televisual text that is unable to resolve this particular dilemma, reliant on the patriarchal structures in place while posing a challenge to them.

Brienne's pledge to Renly in 'What is Dead May Never Die' (2:3) is a means of gaining legitimacy as a knight, but it is her devotion to a lady in Catelyn Stark that cements her own courtly masculine identification.[509] This poses a dilemma that positions Brienne in an in-between space, cementing her role as an Other without actually securing full freedom. Her relationship with Catelyn Stark adheres to the typical chivalric dynamic in that she is a protector, literally positioning herself a step or two behind Catelyn when walking through the Stark camp and offering advice when asked.[510] The positioning on the boundary between dependence and independence is a relatively new space for the warrior woman. Hohenstein's girl warriors are 'not merely sidekicks, but the protagonists of their respective stories, who set out on quests of their own at the end of which they successfully bring down the patriarchal power systems.'[511] Brienne is a sidekick when she initially pledges her allegiance to Catelyn, just like those knights that pledge allegiance to serve their lords and kings are, but her quest to take Jaime home to King's Landing and then to find and protect the Stark girls liberates her.

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a space in which she remains dependent on the patriarchal order. Under the chivalric values that she lives by, she belongs to the individual or cause she pledges herself to, problematising the concept of belonging.[508] Although knights pledge their loyalty to a king or lord, they are not considered to belong to a father, spouse or partner. Paradoxically, Brienne still is because of her gender. Tasker and Steenberg, "Women Warriors: From Chivalry to Vengeance," 176-177.

[509] Sakharov, dir., "What Is Dead May Never Die"; Hovey, "Tyrion's Gallantry," 92.

[510] This is particularly pronounced in 'A Man Without Honor' (2:7). It becomes apparent to Catelyn that Jaime Lannister will not survive the night in the camp because of his ill-advised murder of Stark bannerman Lord Rickard Karstark's (John Stahl) son and, with Robb absent, she makes the decision to entrust Brienne with the task of transporting him to King's Landing. When they reach Jaime's cell, Brienne remains just outside of it, watching carefully. She performs the role of the measured, controlled protector well, but it renders her unimportant in the dynamics of the scene. Although Brienne's role as a warrior means that she is not passive by nature, she is presented as incidental. Brienne breaks from this positioning when she is removed from Catelyn's presence and still further after her death. In this sense, Brienne resides in the in-between, straddling dependence and independence.

[511] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 3.

She is not able to bring down patriarchal power systems because she is embedded within them, unlike Arya. This is problematic in the context of warrior women's independence, raising the question of whether the choice to bind herself to the patriarchy is indicative of independence or whether it paradoxically removes it; whether the choice is actually to relinquish independence or whether her chivalric values meant the notion of independence is simply an illusion. Brienne could choose to abandon her vows, but that would not be consistent with her identity and commitment to chivalry.

Brienne is also deprived of agency at the moment she achieves her dream of becoming a Knight of the Realm.[512] This scene should be Brienne's triumph. Instead, it is symbolic, fuelled by the male self-congratulation that provides a subtle undercurrent. Her knighting is instigated by Jaime Lannister, who takes control of proceedings as a jealous response to another man's recognition of her as a warrior woman. Tormund Giantsbane (Kristofer Hivju), a Wildling and ally of Jon Snow, is that man. Tormund is an Other because he represents a cultural system that recognises men and women as equals, as per his response upon learning that woman cannot be knights being 'fuck tradition'.[513] He continues, 'I'm no king, but if I were I'd knight you ten times over'.[514] In between these two sentences, Brienne declares 'I don't even want to be a knight.'[515] That is a lie, but it is the last sentence she utters. Brienne does not speak a single word throughout the remainder of the scene. The remaining two and a half minutes is effectively a roundtable during which the men hold court. Jaime orders her to kneel. Brienne does as she is told at the second time of asking. She fills the frame as she moves slowly towards

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[512] David Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms," *Game of Thrones,* season 8, episode 2, HBO, 2019.
[513] Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."
[514] Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."
[515] Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."

him, every step stilted in acknowledgement of her apprehension and reticence to accept an honour that she has always wanted but perpetually been excluded from having. However, as she moves, the power dynamics shift. Jaime wields symbolic power in both knighting her and standing over her as she kneels (Figure 20). This physical manifestation of power illustrates her dependence and provides an appropriate metaphor for her immediate and absolute acquiescence to patriarchal norms.

Figure 20: Jaime knights Brienne, "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms" (8:2)

Evans' reading of the scene notes the complete absence of attention to Brienne's gender and power, although her response highlights her status as an Other and positions her firmly under the perceived benevolence of the paternal order: 'She looks around the room with teary eyes and a wide smile, grateful to this group of powerful white men who acknowledge her as an equal.'[516] The status of a woman warrior as an equal disrupts the paternal order so it still positions her as Other, but the ceremony is more destabilising because it tries too hard to

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[516] Tobi Evans, "'A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms': *Game of Thrones* (2008-2019) Season 8 Episode 2," *Fantastika,* 2019, https://fantastikajournal.com/a-knight-of-the-seven-kingdoms-game-of-thrones-2008-2019-season-8-episode-2/.

empower her while removing her voice. This paradox is indicative of an incoherent approach to Brienne's position as she disrupts the patriarchal order by becoming a part of it and yet simultaneously reinforces it by aspiring to it.

Jane Gallop's observation that there is an abject perversion embedded within the monstrous feminine is certainly worthy of consideration in terms of Brienne's positioning in relation to the dilemma of dependence that Brienne faces: 'The need, the desire, the wish for the Phallus is great. No matter how oppressive its reign, it is much more comforting than no one in command.'[517] Brienne does not wish for a physical or symbolic phallus. She has no wish for power and is comfortable with her identity, even if others are not, but her loyalty to the hegemonic societal framework and willingness to conform to its established normative structure is problematic.[518] Brienne's actions signify her desire to be free from the constraints imposed on her, but only insofar as those areas in which she wishes to exercise agency are concerned. This raises the question of whether independence does lie within the broader right to choose or whether freedom must mean completely free, and indeed removed, from the constraints that have long been present. Gallop does not address this point, perhaps because her scholarship is firmly embedded within the context of the late twentieth century, but it

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[517] Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 130-131.

[518] However, Brienne's abjection lies within the notion that she is a 'woman with a penis', as per Jones and Harris, both figuratively and aesthetically insofar as her gender coding reinforces this depiction. The phallic connotations of this are problematic because it unconsciously reinforces masculine superiority. The intention, though, is to render her a monstrous threat to the patriarchal order despite her broad adherence to chivalric codes. Parody would diminish that threat. Instead, her peers are forced to take her seriously as a woman warrior because of her authenticity and the legitimacy forged out of her status as the embodiment of the intersection of chivalry and monstrosity. Her in-betweenness is a site for subversion that extends beyond her gender ambiguity. This does not negate Brienne's monstrosity, but rather reflects on another dimension of her otherness. Jones and Harris, "Monsters, Desire and the Creative Queer Body," 520; Halberstam, *Female Masculinity,* 192; Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 7.

clearly demonstrates that the complexity of identities within the televisual text incorporates paradoxical elements that require mediation.

7.4 Raising the Warrior Woman

One commonality between Arya and Brienne throughout the show is the absence of their mothers, which is unsurprising given the prevalence of absent mothers in *Game of Thrones* as a whole. Like Daenerys and Cersei, Arya and Brienne can be labelled monstrous because of the absence of maternal role models and the resultant reliance on paternal role models.[519] This sentiment is embedded within the fibre of the warrior woman's being, with Schubart noting that '[i]t is striking how women in male film genres never learn from other women. They depend on men for education, help, fatherly advice, weapons instruction, and sensibility training.'[520] This observation holds in relation to the fantasy complex televisual text, with male influence being drawn out over an extended period of time on-screen in the case of Arya and off-screen in the case of Brienne. The implication of this is that Arya and Brienne have limited examples to follow and therefore the ability to explore their own identities with a greater degree of freedom from maternal constraints, although not from paternal influence. However, the impact of this absence on the two women individually is very different.

Mothers are synonymous with the imposition of order and unity within literary texts,[521] but the televisual text stretches that trope by highlighting the absence of the warrior woman's mother as a means of achieving alternative modes of order. For instance, Brienne pursues

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[519] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 8; Brooks, *Body Work,* 208.
[520] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 30.
[521] Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood,* 8.

order through her father via his own chivalric values. She has a very clear sense of identity, resisting pressure to be something different and ignoring ridicule to remain firmly on her self-determined course. Arya, on the other hand, is left under her father's influence by her mother after the very first episode, and experiences maternal absence from that point onwards. Even before Catelyn leaves her in Ned's care, Arya is notably closer to her father and her adopted brother, Jon Snow. However, all familial ties are severed upon Ned's death, leaving her alone and completely unprotected. Arya's removal from the family in its entirety forces her to seek order herself through her self-developed moral code and multifaceted performances.

Instead of forming bonds with potential maternal substitutes after the forced separation from her family, Arya forms relationships with a series of largely unsuitable father figures who mentor her, facilitate her development and teach her skills and traits that enable her to challenge the paternal order. Arya does not seek them out. Instead, the relationships she develops with each of them are products of circumstance. She is independent of all of them, having no individual, familial or otherwise obligatory ties to any of them. Arya is, however, dependent on those male role models for her survival and her education, taking the decision to walk away from them only when they have nothing more to offer her.

There is no cohesion of ideas within this systematic process Arya undertakes because the men are so different and offer diverse lessons, contributing a single fragment towards the whole when her identity is fully formed.[522] Monsters, including monstrous women who subvert gendered expectations and norms, are formed via the fragmentation and

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[522] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 33. It is this diversity that enables her to depart from the motherless path Schubart notes as formative in the warrior woman's identity, using men who would teach her to follow their lead and absorbing elements of their lessons without giving herself over to them wholly.

recombination of elements to form an independent identity that identifies the political

cultural monster as an embodiment of radical difference.[523] This contention does not take the

contextual environment into account but rather bases radical difference on the extent to

which it deviates from the status quo. Arya embodies this process and the stipulated outcome.

Gender primarily separates Brienne from the status quo, whereas Arya embodies radical

difference via otherness out of choice. Arya chooses to adopt an identity that is formed out of

fragmented pieces, absorbing elements of her education and experience that she feels are

relevant to her and discarding the rest. With the exception of Jaqen H'ghar, Arya does not

choose her mentors, but neither does she underestimate their usefulness to her. They, with

the exception of Syrio Forel, underestimate her. They accept her dependence on them while

she adopts different personas to suit her surroundings and company before just simply leaving

and claiming independence from them. This dynamic illustrates her strength and their

collective weakness.

   To interrogate Arya's relationships with father figures from a different angle, Maguire's

discourse on fragile masculinity can be applied to those with many of the mentors she latches

onto: 'Men's apparent individuality and capacity for paternal authority belies a failure to

recognise women as separate and equal beings with their own will and desire.'[524] The

individualism and vulnerability of masculinity that underpins the need for control manifests

within a denial of women's agency and power, but Arya uses this to her advantage. Her

individuality is a key element of her otherness and identity and it is fostered by Syrio Forel,

her first surrogate father figure and 'dance teacher'. He is an early role model for Arya as the

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[523] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 11.
[524] Maguire, *Men, Women, Passion and Power,* 82-83.

former First Sword of Braavos and the mentor engaged by Ned to teach her the basics of a form of swordplay that is not considered masculine. Instead, Syrio's style is better suited to Arya's gender, which is likely Ned's primary concern, but also taps into her own strengths of speed and agility.[525] It is telling that her formative lessons are disguised and provide her first steps into otherness, rendering her dependent on Syrio's teachings but able to harness tools that will lead to her independence (Figure 21). Their first lesson begins with Syrio assessing her: 'You are skinny. That is good! The target is smaller. Now the grip, let me see! The grip must be delicate […] This is not the dance of the Westeros we are learning. The knight's dance, hacking and hammering. This is the Braavos dance. The water dance. It is swift and sudden.'[526] This particular scene offers early hints of much of Arya's identity, including her gender fluidity, her absolute faith in her ability to fight and her disregard for conventions, binaries and boundaries.

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[525] The label of 'dance lessons' is not inaccurate because the style of fighting Syrio teaches does bear an uncanny resemblance to an intricate dance between combatants, but it is also designed as subterfuge to hide the purpose of the lessons and the skills Arya will learn from him. As the daughter of a nobleman who is firmly embedded within Westerosi patriarchal structures, the lessons threaten the control that dominant males are able to wield over her.

[526] Brian Kirk, dir., "Lord Snow," *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 3, HBO, 2011.

Figure 21: Arya's 'dance' lessons with Syrio Forel, "Lord Snow" (1:3)

Another important, if unlikely, father figure is Tywin Lannister. This label can be applied very loosely here because he does not consciously mentor Arya, much like he does not consciously mentor his own daughter, Cersei, in the ways of Westerosi politics and leadership.[527] Both women succeed as a consequence of his lessons regardless because he underestimates them. In the case of Arya, he teaches her important lessons unwittingly after recognising her as a girl, removing her from the prisoner pen at Harrenhal and employing her as his cup bearer.[528] Under Tywin's conception of gendered difference and hegemonic masculinity, girls should be treated differently to the men and boys around them. Like Cersei, Arya absorbs Tywin's stories and learns from his style of leadership. Also like Cersei, Tywin chronically underestimates Arya because she is a girl and, as a guardian of the Westerosi patriarchy and the established social order, he believes that she poses no real threat to either. He does not recognise the existence of the warrior woman as a reality in the Westerosi

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[527] Louise Coopey, "Sexual Violence and Smallfolk: The Exploitation of the Sex Worker in *Game of Thrones*," in *The Forgotten Victims of Sexual Violence in Film, Television and New Media,* ed. Stephanie Patrick and Mythili Rajiva (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 105-107.

[528] David Petrarca, dir., "Garden of Bones," *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 4, HBO, 2012.

landscape and Arya certainly does not merit the label of warrior at that point.[529] The

relationship is productive but is heavily weighted against Arya because she is dependent on

his benevolence and her ability to conceal her Stark identity, but it contributes to the

ruthlessness and control that she develops to become a warrior woman and challenges the

meaning of what it is to be an Other within a complex social landscape.

The most influential father figure Arya has during her time away from Winterfell is the

Hound. A former member of the Kingsguard, Sandor Clegane's approach to Arya's

assertiveness is somewhat different to that of her other mentors and highlights the reciprocity

on which their relationship is based. Arya's assertiveness is visible from the outset,

manifesting in verbal sparring and taunting that is familial in nature and encouraged by the

Hound. He nurtures her spirit rather than crushing it, but he also protects her. In 'The Rains of

Castamere' (3:9), the pair meet a traveller whose wagon has broken down.[530] Before

interacting with him, the Hound makes their approach quite clear to Arya as he towers above

her: 'Remember what happens to children who run. I'm your father and I'll do the talking.'[531]

This is simultaneously a threat to prevent her deviating from his plan and a statement of his

protection over her. The Hound is the only one of Arya's mentors to directly assume the role

of father. Although it serves his purpose to deceive others in this instance, the Hound does

care about Arya.

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[529] In 'The Old Gods and the New' (2:6), Tywin is unguarded around her, discussing battle strategies with his men
when she is in the room and giving her the opportunity to listen and learn. However, he also recognises Arya's
intelligence and repeatedly praises her, quipping that she should devise his next battle strategy after a letter was
sent to an ally of the Starks because of a mix up. Although he is an enemy, she soaks up his praise and smiles as
she turns away.
[530] Nutter, dir., "The Rains of Castamere."
[531] Nutter, dir., "The Rains of Castamere."

There are further subtle examples of the Hound's protective stance towards Arya. In 'Two Swords' (4:1), the pair stop at an inn for food and end up provoking a fight with a band of men who had previously accosted Arya and stolen her sword, Needle.[532] The leader, Polliver (Andy Kellegher), is on her list and causally offers to trade chicken for the opportunity to sexually abuse Arya. Neither she nor the Hound flinch, both knowing that he will fight to keep her safe. The dynamic of their relationship is unusual but, again, she uses him for protection and to learn how to survive in the hostile environment of Westeros' margins. Arya's instinct for self-preservation becomes a clear pattern across the long televisual text, especially prior to her developing combat skills that empower her to defend herself. Her will to survive is driven in part by anger and revenge, but it is also indicative of a sharp awareness of the need for elective dependence. Arya's lack of familial ties to Syrio, Tywin and the Hound make it easy for her to leave them but she is pragmatic in her approach to personal development, recognising her own limitations and seeking to remedy them. Arya's self-awareness therefore problematises the balance between dependence and independence while reinforcing her choice to be and remain an Other and continually transgressing identity-based binaries. Arya's relationships with alternative father figures therefore go some way to rejecting binarism on the grounds that its strict duality is incapable of defining individual identities where nuance and complexity exist.

After spending so much time learning from her father figures, it is Arya's reunion with both Brienne and her sister, Sansa, at Winterfell in the seventh season that reflects her progress towards independence. Marques reflects on the significance of the moment, noting that Arya

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[532] Weiss, dir., "Two Swords."

is surrounded by the alternate destinies she is uniquely able to choose from: '[A] warrior woman who is not afraid and does not hesitate to kill, and a noblewoman of the House Stark who has to protect Winterfell and her family, reunited with her sister in order to do so.'[533] Had Ned lived, Arya may have fulfilled a similar destiny to Sansa, but instead his death thrust her into a different space within which she carves out an identity more aligned with that of Brienne. Arya effectively embodies the Self *and* the Other within this frame. She straddles the boundaries that demarcate between her sister and her fellow warrior woman. The journey from King's Landing to Winterfell across the previous five seasons of the show is based on the process of becoming monstrous in the view of the Westerosi patriarchy, when it actually signalled her slow accumulation of personal power and self-determination. Arya's relationship with Sansa is complicated and fractious. They clash because of their different outlooks, as normal siblings do, so this difference does not reinforce monstrosity but instead highlights the idea that trauma impacts upon individuals differently, forcing them to undertake personal journeys to reconcile it with their sense of Self. This does not diminish Arya's familial ties and therefore raises the question of whether she is monstrous or whether she is labelled as such because she simply refuses to conform.

The Starks' familial bond highlights Arya's growth as a warrior woman and her value to the family unit despite remaining an Other. There is a general assumption that the law is masculine and conducted through power structures and values that are dictated by the patriarchal order that stood before Ned Stark's death.[534] However, Petyr Baelish's death proves that to no

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[533] Marques, "Power and the Denial of Femininity in *Game of Thrones,*" 56.
[534] Priscilla Walton, "'You Win or You Die': The Royal Flush of Power in *Game of Thrones*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 49, no. 1 (2019): 104-105.

longer be the case. Sansa passes the sentence, condemning him to death for treasonous acts that are too numerous to list, but it is Arya who swings the sword. This is in direct contravention of Ned's edict that the 'man' who passes the sentence is the one who swings the sword.[535] The Stark 'man' present, Bran, has little involvement in the trial other than to recall events of the past in his capacity as the omniscient Three-Eyed Raven. That Sansa wields a greater degree of power in her role as the Lady of Winterfell is indicative of a shift in the gendered dynamics of power and a challenge to the influence of the legal framework constructed by the patriarchal order, which lingers and is later reinforced when Bran Stark takes the Iron Throne. However, there is a change in the operational processes too because the execution itself indicates the formation of a system based on merit, strength and capability.

Arya's contribution to the new order is unclear, but she is the key to the shift. She simultaneously challenges traditional power structures while lending credibility and authority to the new framework that the Starks ultimately put in place. This raises a question about the validity of whether Arya can justifiably be deemed a monstrous Other: 'By revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed.'[536] Arya directly challenges the conceptual framework of difference, reconstituting it after the sharp decline of the status quo, which essentially destroys itself instead of the monster in *Game of Thrones*, and testing the validity and authority of enduring norms. Those norms also manifest in other elements of

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[535] Van Patten, dir., "Winter Is Coming."
[536] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 12.

warriordom that manifest in the identities of both Arya and Brienne, such as the use of

violence and masculine performativity.

8 CHAPTER EIGHT

PERFORMANCE, PERFORMATIVITY AND THE OTHER – MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE

The discussion of the uneasy position that *Game of Thrones'* warrior women occupy at the intersection of chivalry and monstrosity, pursuing their own individual causes and moralities, has served to illuminate the importance of experience, transformation and subjectivity within their respective personal journeys. Under a strong patriarchal order, as Westeros is prior to Ned Stark's death, women do not have the tools required to achieve liberation. They cannot conceive of themselves within a phallocentric worldview, specifically 'what it means to speak as a woman and indeed to think as a woman – to conceive of oneself and to relate with the other.'[537] It is self-knowledge that rejects such worldviews and provides opportunity for women to elude the reductionist stereotypes that maintain control over them, instead embracing a nuanced identity that extends beyond the patriarchal paradigms and gendered expectations.

The warrior woman identity has a duality that is grounded in female masculinity. They behave like their assigned male counterparts in adopting chivalric values and pursuing their own personal ideas of justice, but they also adopt elements that traditionally signify a masculine appearance. After all, 'masculinity is not an exclusive property of men, nor is femininity an exclusive property of women.'[538] This is not an accepted principle in Westeros though. The very definition of female masculinity 'disturbs identity, system, order' so the

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[537] Lucy Bolton, *Film and Female Consciousness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4.
[538] Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives,* 91.

warrior woman is abject and othered from the outset.[539] Yet the warrior woman is a valid role where power structures falter and a new dynamic must be formed.

8.1 The Intersection of Female Masculinity and Violence

The warrior woman has consistently been viewed through a lens that invokes a form of masculinity because, as Creed notes, 'in a phallocentric world, the heroic journey has become thoroughly masculinised.'[540] Both Brienne and Arya undertake their respective journeys within a phallocentric world, thus rendering their heroic acts highly gendered. In short, their behaviours can be read as occupying a complex position, aligning with neither of the traditional binary categories of gender. Jack Halberstam's theory of female masculinity, which attributes femininity and masculinity to behaviour in addition to traits, aesthetic appearance and sex, refutes the idea that there is a correct gendered position and embracing the in-between.[541] In *Female Masculinity,* one of Halberstam's central claims is that 'what we recognize as female masculinity is actually a multiplicity of masculinities, indeed a proliferation of masculinities, and the more we identify the various forms of female masculinity, the more they multiply.'[542] This is true of the warrior woman's female masculinity in *Game of Thrones,* with Brienne and Arya residing in the same in-between of Halberstam's discourse and yet representing different types of warrior women. As the diversity in the existing theoretical framework documents shifts in the warrior woman archetype over the course of thirty years

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[539] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 4.
[540] Creed, "The Neomyth in Film," 17.
[541] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 13-19, 192.
[542] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 46.

in (largely) film, *Game of Thrones* provides a fertile landscape for the evolution of that diversity within a single televisual text.[543]

As previously noted, Brienne is positioned in comparison to other warriors on-screen, pitting her female masculinity against their more conventional masculinity. In 'Valar Morghulis' (2:10), Brienne is confronted by three Stark men while travelling Jaime Lannister to King's Landing.[544] They laugh at her because she is a woman, seeing her as a parody of the archetypal hero for their amusement.[545] They exhibit a typical response to Brienne's identity, but the scene juxtaposes their motivations, honour and comparative masculinity well, linking aesthetics to codes of behaviour and performance. The trio exchange tense small talk with Brienne and attempt to ascertain Jaime's identity. The situation escalates when the ringleader asks Brienne what she thinks of these 'beauties', specifically three women, again defined by aesthetic feminine qualities, that were murdered and hanged from the trees just in front of them. When she responds that she hopes they were given quick deaths, the ringleader deliberately provokes her: 'Two of them were, yeah.'[546] There is no overt challenge, but his posturing reveals the implicit goad. He smirks at her, pushing out his chest and makes a show of his masculine power over the women hanging above him as well as the one standing in front of him. In contrast, Brienne simply turns and pushes Jaime to continue moving. Not only does she refuse to react to the ringleader's words, but she refuses to participate in the performance of masculinity he embarks on. Ironically, the excess and parody identified by

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[543] The multiplicity of female masculinity is linked to the complexity of the text and the ability to follow the development of variations of the warrior woman through a vast fantasy storyworld encourages a level of diversity that is more representative of society both on- and off-screen.

[544] Taylor, dir., "Valar Morghulis."

[545] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 187.

[546] Taylor, dir., "Valar Morghulis."

Butler as a part of gender performativity are therefore his rather than hers, demonstrating that those groups of men outside of the hegemonic masculine hierarchy also have to compete for recognition and legitimacy.[547] Brienne does not need to posture because she is secure in her constructed chivalric identity. The Stark men and Brienne are both inferior to the dominant order and offer proof of the jostling of diverse masculinities for position in Westerosi society, thus directly challenging depictions of warrior women that position them as inferior to all men.[548] Brienne is not inferior to her opponents in this scene; she performs chivalric masculinity better than them.

When Brienne does finally react to the Stark men's goading, it is in self-defence as they identify Jaime as a wanted man. She turns and kills two of the men swiftly before quoting the ringleader's words back at him – 'two quick deaths' - and slowly pushing her sword into his body, mirroring the death they inflicted on their remaining victim.[549] Every move Brienne makes is understated despite her physical strength and prowess in combat. She exhibits woman's ability to harness masculinity in a way that is not only effective but at least equal to that of the men who feel the need to exhibit theirs constantly.[550] The televisual text lends Brienne space to explore this dynamic, rendering her abject and contesting the parameters of Butler's theory as a consequence. Furthermore, the confrontation itself is a key moment in the text because it provides an effective comparison to legitimate her claim to be a chivalric

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[547] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 187; Connell, *Gender and Power,* 150.
[548] See Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 26-28; Inness, *Tough Girls,* 74-79.
[549] Taylor, dir., "Valar Morghulis."
[550] This includes Loras Tyrell in Renly's tournament and the Stark men here. In this sense, her performance of chivalric masculinity is more authentic than that of the men who society has designated her superiors and yet refuse to adhere to the codes of honour they are typically charged with upholding.

protector. It also links into the larger framework of the show by establishing a fluidity of events that documents the elaboration of Brienne's warriorhood within the storyworld.

Brienne's avoidance of the manipulation of chivalry to wage war raises further questions of her relationship with the destructive masculinity the Stark men exhibit and her reluctance to engage with those who perpetuate dishonour. Evans argues that it is women's acceptance of destructive masculine acts that render them monstrous rather than the relationship that develops between the female body and masculinity.[551] Cersei and Daenerys, for example, are both coded as aesthetically and performatively female and yet repeatedly accept destructive masculine acts in order to accumulate and maintain power. Under this premise, an acceptance of violence would render warrior women monstrous, but an acceptance of chivalry and assertiveness would not: 'Masculine resources […] are potentially empowering and productive within the series' fantasy milieu because they do not necessarily perpetuate unequal power relations.'[552] This perspective skews Butler's theory of gender performativity because it rejects the importance of repeated and superficial stylisation of the body, lending a greater degree of substance to the choices made by warrior women and their complicity in highly gendered acts of violence.[553] The notion that masculine resources may be used by women to empower themselves as Others, and subsequently boost their credibility as warriors, does problematise violence within the performance of female masculinity. *Game of Thrones'* representation of the warrior woman further complicates that.

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[551] Evans, "Vile, Scheming, Evil Bitches?" 16.
[552] Evans, "Vile, Scheming, Evil Bitches?" 16.
[553] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 45.

Brienne's challenge to the norms, rather than ideals, associated with the traditional warrior contributes to the subversive force that is the warrior woman, but it also challenges the notion of the warrior woman as a monstrous figure. Brooks suggests that the female Monster is simply a mirror image of her male counterpart with her difference being limited to sexuality, thus binding her very existence to him and defining her *by* him.[554] In essence, she is dependent on the male Monster for not only her identity, but for her entire existence. Further, Brooks asserts that the female Monster will 'never fully come into being.'[555] This lends itself to the construction of the paradox within *Game of Thrones* that notes both Arya and Brienne can be read as monstrous because they reject the gendered norms of the Westerosi patriarchy, and yet are both fully formed subjective entities by the final episode of the show.[556]

Like Cersei and Daenerys, neither woman warrior *does* gender correctly and 'are at risk of being positioned as mad or bad' by the patriarchy.[557] Although this is relevant where there is a functioning power regime that monitors and prescribes gender performance and performativity, this assertion does not hold where there is no credible and authoritative framework in place. The shock to the status quo at the end of the first season of *Game of Thrones* allows those who occupy the margins to begin to venture towards the centre in a bid to challenge existing binaries. The show's warrior women are among them. As has already

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[554] Brooks, *Body Work,* 210.

[555] Brooks, *Body Work,* 210.

[556] Arya and Brienne have no reproductive value because they prioritise the pursuit of an alternative way of life over having a family; honour for Brienne and freedom for Arya. Although neither Brienne nor Arya show any desire to be mothers, it is problematic that they are essentially forced to choose. They both adhere to the monstrous trope defined and driven by men. However, the value that is placed on reproduction and Brienne and Arya's subsequent refusal to comply does not prevent them from becoming fully formed entities who are not mirror images of their male counterparts. Instead, it positions them firmly outside of the patriarchal framework and challenges the compulsion to conform, releasing them from the influence of hegemonic power and challenging the conviction that monstrosity is bad.

[557] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 4.

been demonstrated here, Brienne and Arya do not sit within the tight boundaries prescribed

by patriarchal expectations or norms and neither do they succumb to regulation. They cannot

be forced to conform and neither is positioned as mad or bad despite their assumed status as

monstrous Others. Although Arya would certainly be considered bad under the established

patriarchal order, the symptoms of her badness are simply indicative of what Waites refers to

as 'a survivor's mentality'.[558] To survive her trauma, she has to actively strive to right the

wrongs done to her. There is a sense of both warrior women responding to their own

experiences so it is not possible to apply generalisation to their identities. They both reject

normative womanhood but, with nobody in the Westerosi hierarchy capable of disciplining or

punishing them, there are no consequences for either. This directly challenges the legitimacy

of patriarchal control and highlights the importance of the televisual text in thoroughly

exploring the complexity and multiplicity of the individual.

Brienne's complexity is grounded in performativity, with elements of her character

revealed gradually during her interactions with men who directly challenge her. They force

her to respond to them in a way that moves her away from the behaviour she deems typical

of a knight. Returning to the scene in 'The Prince of Winterfell' (2:8), in which Jaime Lannister

pushes Brienne to defend her credentials as a warrior woman, for instance, she reacts

vehemently to his suggestion that she is simply playing at warriordom.[559] Despite Jaime's

accusation to the contrary, that he has provoked her to anger, Brienne's statement that she

has had to continually prove men like Jaime wrong about her is not borne of emotion, but of

fact. It subtly challenges the very foundation of hegemonic power, illuminating her hard-won

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[558] Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 46.
[559] Taylor, dir., "The Prince of Winterfell."

personal power in a system that is explicitly designed to exclude her. Brienne's actions enable her to match the male warriors around her physically so they are unable to subdue her. However, Jaime's accusation that Brienne is emotional is itself significant because it engages in stereotypes that have continually been used to marginalise women and invalidate their perspectives. Barrie Gunter points out that gender trait stereotyping was prevalent in earlier televisual texts, with emotion being a significant site of feminine weakness: 'The emotional woman is believed to become flustered in the most minor crises; she is seen as sensitive, often fearful and anxious, and generally dependent on male help and support in all kinds of personal and profession situations.'[560] By reducing Brienne to a stereotype, Jaime tries to put her back in normative gendered boundaries. She rejects such containment and refuses to demonstrate any of the qualities and behaviours that may manifest as weaknesses. Although this is to prove a point more than anything else, it is also a part of who she is.

Brienne's stoicism and determination to become a warrior define her from her introduction in the show, demonstrating a stubbornness to remain true to herself rather than acquiescing to expectations and becoming something she is not. The control of emotion can therefore be interpreted as an element of female masculinity as Brienne absorbs the distinct masculine perspectives and experiences that are identified as objective, impartial and reciprocal. That is not to say that Brienne and Arya are devoid of emotion, but rather that they can control it in order to perform their desired, and in Arya's case multiple, roles. Emotion is a feature of the warrior woman that does not feature heavily in existing theory, but one that is notable in its presence in the layered complexity of the twenty-first century televisual text. While Brienne's

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[560] Gunter, *Television and Gender Representation,* 15.

emotionality conforms to the chivalric demands of warriors, Arya's emotionality again provides an insight into the diversity in warrior women types that can coexist in a televisual storyworld. This fundamental truth also identifies emotion as a key talking point for the characterisation of the archetype.

Arya's emotional responses are limited and context-dependent, becoming more controlled throughout the course of the show's run. There is a genuine, if somewhat childish, frustration on numerous occasions during the first season, particularly when she is told to conform to courtly feminine ideals instead of chasing cats and engaging in swordplay. There is suppressed grief, anger and a potent need for revenge in the second season following her bearing witness to the execution of her father, Ned, in 'Baelor' (1:9). These emotions manifest in her list of names. In 'First of His Name' (4:5), Arya and the Hound have made camp for the night and Arya begins to recite the names on her list, declaring that she cannot sleep until she has said every name.[561] This action appears to be therapeutic for her and indicates the need to work through her anger mechanically, projecting onto those she blames for her emotional pain. The Hound questions her before making an astute observation: 'Hate's as good a thing as any to keep a person going.' His insight into her state of mind identifies the driving force behind her desire for revenge. It also gives Arya's emotional state a form, likening it to the Hound's hatred of his own brother, Ser Gregor 'Mountain' Clegane, and legitimising it within the landscape of masculinity.[562] The hate both he and Arya feel is familial and deeply personal, manifesting in a desire to inflict physical pain. This is considered to be an inherently masculine form of

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[561] Michelle MacLaren, dir., "First of His Name," *Game of Thrones,* season 4, episode 5, HBO, 2014.
[562] The Hound's hatred of his elder brother can be attributed to the Mountain torturing him when the two were children so there are tangible parallels.

emotional expression and is therefore acceptable within Westerosi norms,[563] but its application is problematic in Arya's case because of her gender. She challenges conceptions of feminine passivity and subverts them into activity by embracing female masculinity.[564]

Arya's expression of emotion evolves dramatically as she becomes equipped to take the lives she recites in her list. At first, the idea that she will have the power and ability to take life fills her with horror. The Red Woman Melisandre's (Carice van Houton) prophecy of what Arya would become provides an early warning of the transformation hinted at by her determination to seek revenge over those on her list: 'I see a darkness in you and in that darkness eyes staring back at me. Brown eyes, blue eyes, green eyes. Eyes you'll shut forever.'[565] Arya's reaction to this is one of horror and fear, but that horror contrasts most potently with the almost serene visage she adopts when slitting the throats of Walder Frey (David Bradley) and Petyr Baelish.[566] Both are involved in the death of Stark family members – Frey in Robb's death and Baelish in Ned's execution – so murdering them is retribution for the wrongs they delivered on her. However, the act of assassinating both does not produce the relief she once believed it would. In both cases, she acts without hesitation in a measured way, maintaining tight control over her movements and her emotions. This is much more pronounced in Baelish's execution.

The scene that culminates with the death of Petyr Baelish begins as a Stark family court that he believes has been convened to deal with Arya's betrayal, as set up by Baelish himself.

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[563] Lynsey Mitchell, "Re-affirming and Rejecting the Rescue Narrative as an Impetus for War: To War for a Woman in *Song of Ice and Fire*," *Law and Humanities* 12, no. 2 (2018): 231-232.

[564] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 2.

[565] Alik Sakharov, dir., "The Climb," *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 6, HBO, 2013.

[566] Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter"; Podeswa, dir., "The Dragon and the Wolf."

Arya's sense of social justice and fixed moral compass means that any such betrayal would be wholly inconsistent with her character, which is recognised when it is revealed to the audience and Baelish himself that the Starks have discovered his manipulation. Although Arya allows herself a smile of satisfaction as she turns to Baelish after Sansa reads out the charges against him, she remains measured throughout the trial itself (Figure 22), her face impassive as she shows him the dagger that she ultimately uses to slit his throat: 'You told our mother this knife belonged to Tyrion Lannister, but that was another one of your lies. It was yours.' Her tone is stable, soft even, and again contrasts with the far more emotional and demonstrative Sansa in this scene. Where Arya remains impassive and does not react at all as she moves forward, swipes the dagger across Baelish's neck and slowly turns away from his exsanguinating body, Sansa becomes progressively angrier as Baelish attempts to explain his actions. Sansa's response could be labelled as stereotypical because of her emotional and exceedingly human response to being manipulated and lied to. However, although hatred remains a driving force behind Arya's actions, she controls it, directs it and does not allow it to consume her.

Figure 22: Arya remains impassive throughout Petyr Baelish's trial, "The Dragon and the Wolf" (7:7)

Arya's performance becomes a means of coping with the past, compartmentalising horrors and tragedies, and reconciling them with the present. Baelish's execution is a part of an intrinsically complex narrative that combines his treachery and betrayal with the need for readiness to fight a much greater threat in the Night King and the Army of the Dead as part of a united Army of the Living. She is a monstrous Other because she does not conform to emotional norms and expectations, but the otherness she exhibits is based on ownership of her identity and experience. All of this is filtered through female masculinity and strength, incorporating an emotional control that is learned and harnessed to be deployed to achieve the best possible outcome. As such, both Arya and Brienne's emotional development can be tracked throughout the course of their character arcs and identified as a key facet of the warrior woman's identity while moving them away from stereotypical representations of the woman weakened by emotion.

Female masculinity is, by nature, abject because it is read in conjunction with what Ussher describes as the 'monster incarnate' within the figure of the monstrous feminine.[567] That is, the idealised woman becomes the monster incarnate when she falls from her pedestal, where she is placed by men who wish to conceal their dread of her. Furthermore, it rejects 'the fantasy of containment' that is designed to subjugate the threat of the female body and assuage the anxieties of the patriarchal order.[568] This form of containment is problematic because it is applied in conjunction with the imposition of the feminine ideal. When those

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[567] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 3.
[568] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine,* 3.

displaying feminine traits step outside of that model, they are immediately othered because they remove the patriarchal constraints that bind them.[569]

A conversation Arya has with Ned in 'Cripples, Bastards and Broken Things' (1:4) illustrates her othering. Upon asking if she could be a lord of a holdfast, Ned tells her that she 'will marry a high lord and rule his castle, and your sons will be knights and princes and lords.'[570] Her response demonstrates a disarming self-awareness: 'No. That's not me.'[571] Although it is a tragedy that his death allows her to explore who she actually is, Arya's brief but firm rejection of gendered expectations sets the tone for the development of the female masculinity she champions. The same sentiment is echoed back to audiences when Gendry asks her to marry him and become the Lady of Storm's End in the aftermath of the living's victory over the dead: 'You'll be a wonderful lord, and any lady would be lucky to have you. But I'm not a Lady. I never have been. That's not me.'[572] The absolute certainty that underpins the line in the first season is also there in the final season. Like Waites' warrior woman, she 'disdains social expectations and boundaries' and rejects male ownership,[573] so it is unsurprising that Arya rejects Gendry's proposal. She is resolutely and categorically Other out of choice, exercising her agency to remain so despite the opportunity to step back into the ruling class as a new status quo is formed with her family at the helm.

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[569] The failure of the model of containment described here explains the formative expectations placed on Arya, but also why her development begins to move her towards monstrosity before Ned's death and her subsequent escape. She is contained by her status as highborn daughter in House Stark during the first season to an extent, but she pushes against the constraints imposed upon her by the status quo's gendered expectations.
[570] Kirk, dir., "Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things."
[571] Kirk, dir., "Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things."
[572] Nutter, dir., "The Last of the Starks."
[573] Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 46.

Ultimately, all attempts to contain Arya fail. Like other *Game of Thrones* women who are designated monstrous, such as monstrous mothers Cersei and Daenerys, Arya flatly rejects the patriarchy's desire to impose control over her. She always escapes, drawing a parallel with Cohen's monster.[574] Arya's captors are unable to control her for any sustained period of time. She always leaves a place or person of her own free will, with the single exception of the forcible removal of Night's Watch recruits from Yoren by the Kingsguard in 'What Is Dead May Never Die' (2:3).[575] Arya physically removes herself from situations that pose a threat to her or are otherwise undesirable from a developmental perspective rather than becoming immaterial and vanishing, as Cohen's monster does. She remains valid and vital within her own cultural space, consolidating her accumulated knowledge while retaining a sense of purpose that empowers her. She simultaneously and irrevocably changes the societal landscape and possibilities afforded to her because she rejects the perspective of her that each of her companions and captors constructs. She does, however, 'reappear someplace else',[576] which is symbolic of Arya embracing her restless spirit and refusing to remain bound to a single place or way of life. She is open to experiences and cultures that extend beyond her own and has the ability to access them because she embraces a gendered hybridity that provides her access to new paths. In effect, she displays an agency that Cohen's monsters are not afforded despite her status as an Other.

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[574] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 4.
[575] Sakharov, dir., "What Is Dead May Never Die."
[576] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 4.

8.2 The Monstrous Body and Power

Where the body becomes a culturally contested space, the manifestation of female masculinity has also led to some problematic interpretations of the warrior woman in *Game of Thrones.* This includes those that fail to acknowledge female masculinity as a valid form of masculinity and instead label it a pretence that can be categorised as gender imitation or parody.[577] Marques, for example, offers an interpretation that is predicated on two questions asked of Brienne and Arya, both of which raise the juxtaposition of their respective positions within Westeros and their personal choice to adopt elements of a masculine identity: 'Why do women try to look and act like men in order to be accepted in conventionally male roles? And, above all, does the self-disavowal of feminine traits translate to power and authority or are the female characters marginalised and mocked?'[578] This analysis fundamentally misunderstands the essence of the warrior woman as a complex character who has no desire to be a man but instead demands access to the freedoms and behaviours that they are afforded. Arya does not act like a man to gain acceptance as a man or within male roles. The same premise is problematic when applied to Brienne, because there is an argument for her acting like a *man*. She adopts specific behaviours to legitimise her status as a warrior and to make the case for acceptance, but I contend that Brienne does not act like any of the *men* around her who are also sworn to uphold the chivalric order. Unlike them, she does act like the idealised *warrior.* This distinction is critical in understanding not only who Brienne is, but what she wishes to become. However, neither Brienne nor Arya disavow femininity in its entirety to access power.

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[577] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 187.
[578] Marques, "Power and the Denial of Femininity in *Game of Thrones,*" 48.

As gender is a social construct, one that is highly conditioned in Westeros, the act of disavowing femininity implies that both Arya and Brienne unquestioningly accept the validity of gendered norms and traits to begin with before rejecting them to pursue power. They do not. For instance, Brienne is mocked because she looks like a man to those who are confused by her aesthetic coding, a trait she has in common with some of her warrior women predecessors.[579] She also refuses to adopt the title of 'Lady Brienne' on several occasions, as has been documented, but she does not disavow feminine traits. During her first meeting with Arya in 'Mother's Mercy' (4:10), Brienne explains that her father agreed to teach her to fight after previously saying it was an activity for boys: 'I kept fighting the boys anyway. Kept losing. Finally my father said if you're going to do it, you might as well do it right.'[580] Her tenacity and persistence led to her father's acceptance of her warrior woman identity, but that is not to say that she was forced to quit femininity and give herself wholly and unequivocally over to masculinity. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Similarly, Arya does not disavow feminine traits because she actively engages them when the need arises. During her training with the Faceless Men in Braavos, she is 'a girl' who uses her gender to get close to her victims. She adopts the identity of Lanna, an oyster seller, after being given an assignment to assassinate the Thin Man by Jaqen H'ghar and then becomes a stagehand to get close to another assigned target, Lady Crane.[581] In effect, Arya uses her femininity like a cloak, neither actively embracing nor rejecting it but instead engaging with

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[579] Inness, *Tough Girls,* 5; Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 272.
[580] Nutter, dir., "Mother's Mercy."
[581] Sapochnik, dir., "Hardhome"; Jack Bender, dir., "The Door," *Game of Thrones,* season 6, episode 5, HBO, 2016.

that part of her identity when it suits her. She is not defined by her gender and, as with Brienne, neither is she marginalised by it despite the best efforts of the patriarchy.

Exploring power specifically, it is useful to contrast Arya and Brienne as warrior women to Daenerys and Cersei as queens. The queens are powerful and appropriate male behaviour, but they also use their femininity and sexuality to their advantage where the need arises. Brienne and Arya are the antithesis of their queens. As warrior women, their view of power is entirely different and this dictates how they adopt and utilise female masculinity to their advantage. Where queens need overarching power to rule, warrior women need a conviction of belief that manifests in personal power. Both Arya and Brienne have a degree of physical power to fight that neither Cersei nor Daenerys has, but they are also driven by powerful convictions that may be recognised by others and therefore lead to authority and legitimacy within social hierarchies.[582]

Arya, Brienne, Cersei and Daenerys all fit into the typology of warrior women to a degree, with Arya and Brienne fighting in a conventional sense and Cersei and Daenerys using male proxies to fight for them. Arya and Brienne therefore fit into a broad category that identifies them as anomalies within the social order despite not occupying the same space. Both warrior women, Arya and Brienne demonstrate diversity within the Other typology that extends beyond their individual appearances and into their comportment, fighting style and performance. In 'The Spoils of War' (7:4), Brienne and Arya spar in one of the most engaging

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[582] Yara Greyjoy provides an interesting counterpoint here. She is a warrior and ultimately becomes a queen because she has the respect of her people on multiple levels, but the cultural framework of the Iron Islands facilitates this. As there is an equality embedded in the Ironborn culture that allows everyone to prove themselves regardless of gender and a respect for warriordom that eradicates gender boundaries, Yara is simply deemed fit for leadership. In comparison, Brienne in particular has far greater barriers to warriordom to overcome to achieve her desired status of knight.

and fascinating fights in the series.[583] It begins with Brienne teaching her squire, Podrick, how to fight with a sword. After repeatedly knocking him to the ground, Arya approaches them and gives Pod advice: 'Don't fight someone like her in the first place.'[584] The scene draws attention to Brienne's skill but also establishes the parameters of Arya's development as a warrior when she immediately goes against her own advice. Declaring that she would like to train with Brienne, Arya takes control of the scene. The camera frames the pair in conversation from behind Brienne, highlighting the size disparity between the two as Arya is dwarfed by her more battle-seasoned counterpart.

Figure 23: Arya and Brienne spar in "The Spoils of War" (7:4)

The disparity in fighting style also becomes immediately evident as Brienne lunges and swings in a way that is associated with traditional swordplay (Figure 23). Brienne moves with her whole body, applying excessive force to knock Arya off her feet and then her sword, Needle, out of her hands. Arya, on the other hand, is quick, gracefully dancing around Brienne as she blocks and dodges her swings. Arya athletically leaps to her feet when grounded and

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[583] Shakman, dir., "The Spoils of War."
[584] Shakman, dir., "The Spoils of War."

pulls out her dagger when she loses her sword, ultimately holding the dagger to Brienne's throat as Brienne's sword arrives at hers, thus resulting in a draw. It is clear that Brienne underestimates her, looking surprised when Arya points Needle at her throat after their first clash of swords, but the choreography of the fight becomes more serious and kinaesthetically beautiful as the pair become engaged in battle. The contrast of their individual fighting styles highlights the multiplicity of identities and forms of female masculinity available to warrior women, drawing attention to their proficiency with weapons and the fact that swordplay is no longer the exclusive domain of men. Further, the televisual text aids the development of that multiplicity of identities by providing scope for them to coexist side-by-side in a single space, expanding the possibilities of representation along with their visibility to global audiences.

The fight between Brienne and Arya enhances their masculinity, according to Marques, because it is gritty, lacks elegance and marks a shift away from the depictions of other 'female fighters.'[585] Although there are problems with this interpretation of the scene, such as the fact that Marques does not cite further examples of fighting women and fails to narrow the definition of masculinity to female masculinity, this particular assessment of the fight's choreography reflects not only on the performance of the Other, but also the gendered identities that manifest within performativity. 'Gritty' is a term not commonly associated with women's bodies or their physical pursuits, but it applies to this sparring session. Both Arya and Brienne exhibit inordinate skill, determination and tenacity, with each losing the upper hand during the exercise but continuing regardless as the dynamics of the fight flip. Arya's fighting

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[585] Marques, "Power and the Denial of Femininity in *Game of Thrones,*" 55.

style is elegant and her ability to match Brienne's more masculine swordplay contributes significantly to the beauty of the contest. There is a distinct refusal to be beaten, thus positioning the exercise of sparring as a manifestation of broader philosophies of gender and power, which contribute to the formation of bodily resistance.[586]

The warrior woman's body is not devoid of all femininity and that present intersects and interacts with the dynamics of performance and power, particularly where that power is derived from female masculinity. By definition, female masculinity does not violate feminised bodies. The two are not mutually exclusive, challenging the tradition of weakness, vulnerability and softness being mobilised through the traits associated with femininity.[587] Instead, female masculinity frames the agency of warrior women and undermines the threat that warriors typically pose to all women in the context of war. Warrior women do not have the passivity that outdated psychoanalytic frameworks assert sets women apart from men,[588] but Arya and Brienne also make the case for elements of feminisation fleshing them out as heroes by adding complexity of characterisation without undermining their strength, physical prowess and confidence in their own abilities.

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[586] See Alison Phipps, *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 17-18. Phipps highlights the possibilities associated with reclaiming processes and practices of bodily resistance that were otherwise linked to and shaped by oppressive norms and traditions: 'Feminists have also been particularly attracted to postmodern accounts of agency, which is produced by the subject's situation inside a matrix of discourses which, through the performative nature of identity, they are capable of beginning to rework from within.' The presentation of identity via the exercising of agency over the body is a means of resisting imposed hegemonic ideals, values and expectations. Phipps' concept of bodily resistance again positions the body as a contested cultural space, capable of challenging social norms from within as Brienne does throughout *Game of Thrones,* with Arya posing her challenge from the margins. However, the positioning of the body as cultural casts those who do challenge the hegemonic masculine order as monstrous threats capable of preventing the re-emergence of the old status quo as a valid societal framework in a society that has effectively moved on. Their performativity is therefore empowering simply because they exist where they do, in a warrior woman niche that they have essentially carved out themselves over time.

[587] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 17.

[588] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 17; Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 6.

However, Shimpach acknowledges that masculinity is an unstable signifier: 'Although it functions as a sign and source of power, agency and sexuality, masculinity is not an inherent, objective trait, but rather a performative engagement by the subject with culturally and historically specific conditions.'[589] Masculinity is redefined by the Other in this respect because it reflects the state of hegemonic authority and trauma at a given moment in time rather than maintaining a fixed form, meaning and influence. The emergence of warrior women directly challenges the patriarchal order of things, but the process of reflecting the state of hegemonic authority is acknowledged as a feature of this. Arya, for instance, begins to transform into a warrior at her father's execution, a site of trauma where the patriarchal authority that controls her is removed. Brienne is also symptomatic of a failure of authority from childhood, although there is no reference to a specific trigger within the show that leads to her becoming a warrior. In both cases, their success is at the expense of patriarchy.

There is a complexity to the individual identity of warrior women that highlights the importance of otherness in terms of the freedom it paradoxically affords them, despite being thrust to the margins of society. Arya does not develop a fixed identity, at least not one that is projected outwards, and instead becomes a chameleon of sorts. Having escaped from Harrenhal at the end of the second season and spent time with the Hound in the ensuing two seasons, Arya recognises the need to disappear and adopt an alternative identity at the start of the fifth season of *Game of Thrones*.[590] She does do by following the path to Braavos to

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[589] Shimpach, *Television in Transition,* 38.
[590] In this example, Harrenhal is under the control of the Lannister army and a danger to Arya should her true identity be discovered.

become a Faceless Man, an assassin belonging to the secret order headquartered at the House of Black and White.

Arya chooses to pursue training to become an assassin after meeting Jaqen H'ghar while travelling with the Night's Watch. Jaqen is a prisoner in the convoy and, as a convicted murderer and hired assassin, is kept in a cage to limit the danger he poses to the rest of them. Arya earns his respect and gratitude by saving him from the cage when a fire breaks out. When the two meet again at Harrenhal, Jaqen informs Arya that she deprived the Red God of three lives by saving them and thus owes him those lives, which Jaqen will gladly take to pay the debt.[591] Arya chooses to give Jaqen his own name as the third unless he agrees to help her escape. This bizarre series of events creates a strange bond between the two and peaks Arya's interest in learning how to be an assassin from him. When she is finally allowed into the House of Black and White, the headquarters of the Faceless Men, she embarks upon a training program that builds on the combat skills she learns from Syrio Forel and the Hound. This further enhances her ability to fight, maximising her physical attributes and developing the skill of using her senses to gain an advantage over an opponent. This training sets her apart from *Game of Thrones'* other warrior women, providing Arya with a fighting style that incorporates several different techniques and an elevated level of skill. Further, Arya is also taught to become 'no one', relinquishing her own identity so that she is able to perform alternative identities at will to suit her own purpose.

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[591] Petrarca, dir., "The Ghost of Harrenhal." Arya does give Jaqen two names. The first name is that of the torturer of Harrenhal, the Tickler (Anthony Morris), for the purpose of vengeance and the second that of Ser Amory Lorch (Fintan McKeown) for survival after he grows suspicious of her. Although there is an edge of desperation to the latter assassination order, her choice to give Jaqen names demonstrates that she is both ruthless and not averse to manipulation.

Arya is unequivocal in her rejection of becoming a Faceless Man in 'No One' (6:8), responding to Jaqen H'ghar's observation that '[f]inally a girl is no one,' with a clear self-declaration of her own: 'A girl is Arya Stark of Winterfell, and I'm going home.'[592] Becoming a chameleon enables her to blend into the background and manipulate situations to get to her targets. This particular scene is important because she uses those skills to obtain her freedom, again demonstrating that she is able to exercise agency despite the pressure exerted on her to conform to a different set of behaviours. Those behaviours are set by the hierarchy of the Faceless Men to exert control over its assassins and thus subject Arya to an established order that is similar to that of the Westerosi patriarchy. The scene depicts Jaqen following a blood trail to the Hall of Faces, a room in which the skinned faces of those the Faceless Men have killed are displayed, ready to be used as disguises by the assassins. The figurative mechanism of performing different identities becomes literal as a consequence of the physical adoption of alternative selves. As such, it is ironic that it is the site of Arya's reclaiming of her Self. Jaqen follows the trail to its end, which is the resting place of the face of the Waif (Faye Marsay), Arya's fellow apprentice who had been tasked with killing her (Figure 24). Very little is said between Arya and Jaqen beyond the lines already stated and the scene is so simple in its composition and function, but the assertion of Arya's personal identity and agency is powerful. Arya's final rejection of attempts to control her is the ultimate rejection of patriarchy as she takes full control of her destiny, paradoxically asserting her Self in order to embrace her otherness. She leaves the Faceless Men having failed to assassinate a single target because of her sense of social justice and refusal to kill for money where the designated

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[592] Mark Mylod, dir., "No One," *Game of Thrones,* season 6, episode 8, HBO, 2016.

targets do not deserve to die. Arya is not dehumanised by the process of learning from the assassins. Instead, it strengthens her resolve to seek revenge on those she believes deserve it.

Figure 24: The Waif's face in the Hall of Faces, courtesy of Arya, "No One" (6:8)

The connotations associated with the label of 'Faceless Man' challenge the validity of female masculinity in the context of Arya's development because she essentially rejects gender labels. Adopting a loose form of gender fluidity, she is able to adopt various identities by wearing different faces, an apt metaphor for her characterisation throughout the show's run. She is a Faceless Man and yet is 'a girl' with no ostensibly fixed identity. She is Other because she occupies a liminal space that never quite settles within any given category of identity, and yet she does not lose sight of who she is. Her declaration that 'a girl is Arya Stark' in 'No One' (6:8) is wonderfully paradoxical because she embraces her facelessness and established identity simultaneously.[593] She accepts a hybridity that emphasises the complexity of her journey, retaining her otherness despite returning to her previous life at Winterfell with her family, at least as far as she possibly can with the new knowledge she bears. This,

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[593] Mylod, dir., "No One."

according to Cohen's theory, still renders her monstrous: 'Monsters are our children [...] And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, human knowledge – and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the outside.'[594] Arya develops self-knowledge during her time in Braavos, but, as she refuses to engage in murder, her monstrousness is grounded in the inability of patriarchal hierarchies and institutions to control her.

Arya's hybridity and chameleon-like nature are not solely protective mechanisms that are exclusively engaged around her enemies. Instead, they are elements of a multifaceted performance that sits alongside her gender performativity and which she engages in regardless of the company she keeps. Arya may have a developed sense of her own identity, but that is not evident in the face she presents to her companions. In 'A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms' (8:2), her identity shifts multiple times as she moves from person to person, abandoning each different identity as she moves on to the next interaction and destabilises the sense of who she is.[595] She is the equivalent of a shapeshifter and becomes increasingly difficult to pin down. For instance, she initially speaks to Gendry, furtively watching him make weapons from the door of the forge before stepping forward and allowing him to engage with her. She controls the conversation by asking him a series of short questions that are designed to elicit information and teach her about the Army of the Dead: 'What do they look like? What do they smell like? How do they move? How hard are they to kill?'[596] She reveals absolutely nothing of herself in this conversation at all until Gendry tries to persuade her to hide with the

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[594] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 20.
[595] Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."
[596] Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."

rest of the women in the crypt during the battle: 'Look, I know you want to fight and you're not scared of rapers or murderers or… This is different. This is… this is death. You want to know what they're like. Death, that's what they're like.'[597] Gendry's response is consistent with the phenomenon Inness discusses in that he tries to undermine her toughness and suggest that he sees her as 'a pretender to male power and authority.'[598]

Having followed Arya throughout her journey to that point, the audience is fully aware that she is able to back up her curiosity with substance. Gendry's concern soon turns to awe when, far from exhibiting the fear he expected, she utilises her Faceless Man training: 'I know Death. He's got many faces. I look forward to seeing this one.'[599] Each sentence is punctuated with the action of her throwing a knife into a wooden post, hitting the target every time. Gendry is suitably impressed with her skill, but the interaction itself is underpinned by Arya's desire to elicit his promise to make her a weapon. This is not unusual in itself, but the way she responds to his concerns and demonstrates her competence in reading him without revealing anything of herself is. It also demonstrates that her chameleon-like qualities work to produce an outcome like that suggested by Stuller, whereby the modern superwoman is able to be independent and part of a community.[600] Here, Arya provides Gendry with exactly what he needs to see her as a capable warrior and reinforces everything revealed about her in the complex televisual text to that point.

Later in the same episode, Arya holds a conversation with the Hound and Beric Dondarrion (Richard Dormer). She approaches the Hound on the battlements of Winterfell in much the

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[597] Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."
[598] Inness, *Tough Girls,* 5.
[599] Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."
[600] Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors,* 93.

same way as she approached Gendry – quietly to the point at which he observes that '[y]ou never used to shut up. Now you're just sitting there like a mute.' Her answering remark that she has changed is an understatement but, again, one that gives very little of herself away. Instead, she turns the conversation squarely onto the Hound and his motivations for being there, talking to him in a way that mirrors his own terse manner. Her performance is subtly different but punctuated by a coarseness that is best captured in her parting shot to the two men: 'I'm not spending my final hours with you two miserable old shits.' There is no underlying motive here as there was with Gendry, but Arya's interaction with the older men positions her as their equal and therefore induces a shift in the dynamics that existed between them previously.[601]

Arya's interactions with her male peers in 'A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms' contrasts with her reunion with Jon Snow in the previous episode, 'Winterfell' (8:1).[602] As with Gendry and the Hound, she sneaks up on him before revealing herself but her immediate response is the opposite. She rushes into his arms. Arya is softer around Jon, outwardly happy but careful not to reveal too much about her journey, as per her response of 'once or twice' when Jon asks her if she had ever used Needle.[603] Again, she only reveals the side of her that she wants him

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[601] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 13; Inness, *Tough Girls,* 43. The warrior woman has consistently been subordinate to men in theory, particularly where she is sidelined or sacrificed for the advancement of her male counterpart, so this is a subtle nod to her empowerment. It also places her female masculinity on an even platform with the masculinity exhibited by both warriors, validating it within the contextual environment presented in the final season.

[602] David Nutter, dir., "Winterfell," *Game of Thrones,* season 8, episode 1, HBO, 2019.

[603] The most interesting element of Arya's performance around Jon is her determination to bring the Stark family together after its enforced separation, thus giving an indication of her priorities as well as lending this particular version of her an authenticity that is absent in the case of her interactions with the Hound. This is not necessarily an indicator of manipulative behaviour, but rather a process via which Arya performs for different audiences.

to see, but the Arya that appears at Jon's side in the Godswood is not the Arya that appeared at the forge or on the battlements.

Arya shows each individual she interacts with a different face, a part of her that she wants them to see without ever revealing the whole. Her justification for that is revealed during a remark she makes to Sansa in 'Beyond the Wall' (7:6): 'The world doesn't just let girls decide what they're going to be. But I can now. With the faces, I can choose. I can become someone else. Speak in their voice, live in their skin.'[604] This adopts a greater significance where the use of faces as props forces the realisation that Arya alone still cannot take control of her destiny within the borders of Westeros, which speaks to gendered limitations under the patriarchal structures that refuse to allow women to determine their own paths. Although Arya does not choose to wear other faces literally here, the metaphor underpins her behaviour. Her true identity is a composition of all of those parts but she refuses to be pinned down, remaining an enigma and therefore, once again, evades containment.

A further point of interest here is how the warrior woman's body is tied to performance and performativity alike, which offers a symbolic resistance to the reductionism that usually forces adherence to tropes and boundaries. Under Cregan's framing of the body, the rises of Arya and Brienne mark them both as object, abject and subject during different phases of their development.[605] It is the complexity and scope of the televisual text that facilitates their ability to straddle categories, transgress borders and directly explore the forces that bind them within the hegemonic social order. As she moves between Jon, Gendry, the Hound and Beric at the start of the final season, Arya is the subject able to navigate the individual experience

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[604] Taylor, dir., "Beyond the Wall."
[605] Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body,* 7-8.

very much on her own terms, although she simultaneously embodies the abject because she is socially ambivalent and transgresses multiple boundaries and borders.[606] This approach reflects her 'survivor's mentality',[607] demonstrating her self-sufficiency and the stance she has honed to right the wrongs that have been done to her and those around her. Whereas Brienne's subjectivity is limited by honour and chivalric values, Arya harnesses a clear liminal potential of the body that is not tied to patriarchal institutions, structures and ideological positions. This multifaceted and highly complex self-identity enables her to navigate them all effectively.

Applying Butler's theory of gender performativity to Arya is enlightening because she demonstrates that self-identity is malleable and relates to the concept of performative power as well as sitting alongside modes of performance in this specific case.[608] Arya's in-betweenness creates multiple discourses within a single domain, specifically that of her own identity and how she fits into a complex storyworld that has radically shifted to allow those who occupy the margins to move closer to the centre. However, Arya also displays what Cregan identifies as 'radical individuality' over a 'radically inclusive identity'.[609] This critique of Butler's gender performativity is particularly pertinent where the representation of Arya as Other is built on her individual female masculinity. She creates multiple discourses that are active within her personhood, but they do not directly compete. Instead, Arya's multiple personas offer a mode of survival. She is dependent on female masculinity to create the space for the level of agency required to form those personas and position the discourses that

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[606] Nutter, dir., "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."
[607] Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 46.
[608] Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* 224.
[609] Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body,* 124.

underpin them firmly outside of the paternal order. Only then is she able to claim personal power grounded in self-determinism.

Ultimately, Arya's individuality and female masculinity is important to her development throughout the course of the show. However, isolating her from her companions, enemies and family, which is in line with Butler's identification of the appropriation of transgressive boundary crossing and performative power, is unfeasible. Despite Arya's individuality, she is the embodiment of the idea that it takes a village to raise a child, which she is in the early seasons of *Game of Thrones*. Her village is unconventional, including the pseudo-father figures who guide her through her formative years.[610] She is empowered to become Waites' 'lone warrior who does not always ride alone'.[611] In fact, Arya's lived reality challenges the boundaries and limitations that had previously been imposed on the televisual text.

Arya embodies globalised cultural discourses because she travels through several patriarchal hierarchies and cultures, absorbing the knowledge they each have to offer. As such, her journey demonstrates that 'the idea of culture as bounded by place is increasingly untenable in an era of globalization when any given place is permeated by cultural discourses from elsewhere.'[612] Arya crosses geographical boundaries to learn the skills she needs to become a warrior woman able to police her own codes of social justice, collapsing more of the boundaries that would otherwise contain her. More importantly, though, cultural discourses permeate her body through bringing knowledge from those diverse cultures together,

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[610] Syrio Forel, Tywin Lannister, the Hound and Jaqen H'ghar all have experience of the Westerosi patriarchy and know how to navigate it, so learning about its weaknesses allows her to thrive outside of hegemonic institutions. Learning from these masculine warriors frames her subversion as productive, producing an alternative identity that is innovative in the context of the Westerosi patriarchy.

[611] Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 46.

[612] Chris Barker, *Television, Globalization and Cultural Identities* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 1999), 11.

heightening her otherness and hybridity whilst simultaneously highlighting the instability and

fragility of the hegemonic Self's identity. In effect, Arya's quest to undermine a single

patriarchal system, as Hohenstein's girl warriors do, gives her the ability to challenge all of

those she experiences.[613] However, there are still areas of ambiguity that demand scrutiny

here, such as violence.

8.3 The Warrior Woman's Complicated Relationship with Violence

Violence is inextricably bound to masculinity.[614] It is therefore also bound to the woman's

body where it abandons gender norms and becomes 'partially wedded to the worst aspects

of culturally mandated masculinity' by embracing female masculinity.[615] Where female

masculinity is geared towards the individual becoming a warrior, the need to acknowledge

violence as an element of performance is further amplified. As such, Arya and Brienne

construct identities that are directly bound to violence as a force for personal empowerment

within a system that would otherwise seek to impose normative gender identities and roles

upon them. In avoiding the worst violent excesses of masculinity, and in opposition to Cersei

and Daenerys' co-opting of hegemonic violence to gain an advantage, Brienne reconfigures

masculinity. She reconceptualises it within a more productive framework by utilising violence

selectively and within chivalric parameters that are predicated on adequate justification.

Brienne edits the identity of the gallant knight to remove tropes that underpin the

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[613] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 3.

[614] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 109; Lee Bowker, "On the Difficulty of Eradicating Masculine Violence: Multisystem Overdetermination," in *Masculinities and Violence,* ed. Lee Bowker (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1998), 7; Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities,* 2nd Ed (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 45.

[615] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 109.

mythological figure, such as the subordination of and violence against women, whilst retaining the valorisation of war and conflict where it incorporates the protection of women.

Just war narratives underpin *Game of Thrones*.[616] Lynsey Mitchell argues that 'the problem with a just war narrative that presumes to protect women through juxtaposing the enemy's ill-treatment of women, is that it actually blames women, and so, rather than being protectionist or emancipatory, it is actually deeply patriarchal and misogynistic.'[617] It positions women within the traditional passive role that warrior women reject in favour of the active role that has long been the domain of men, a notion that underpins the work of Tasker, Inness, Schubart and Hohenstein.[618] In involving herself in courtly notions of protection, Brienne complicates the just war paradigm, inserting herself into a position in which she is neither protected by men nor belongs to them. Furthermore, Brienne is a protector herself and is therefore able to wage war and enact violence where she deems it necessary with little or no impetus from men. Her choice to position herself outside of this narrative and the subsequent liberation and empowerment of Sansa Stark under her protection directly contradict the principle. Brienne represents the emancipatory impulse that is traditionally missing from masculine narratives and so unilaterally explodes the myth of how just war theories must be used. She lifts other women up rather than subjugating them, despite being positioned within patriarchal structures by virtue of her commitment to chivalry and warriordom.

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[616] Mitchell, "Re-affirming and Rejecting the Rescue Narrative as an Impetus for War," 231-232. This is particularly true of Robert's Rebellion, for which the notion of just war provided justification. Robert's Rebellion was the initial battle that saw Robert Baratheon, the hero, win the Iron Throne and was based on the lie that Rhaegar Targaryen kidnapped and raped Lyanna Stark, the damsel. It relies upon the patriarchal diktat that women belong to men and so can drive declarations of war with little or no impetus.

[617] Mitchell, "Re-affirming and Rejecting the Rescue Narrative as an Impetus for War," 244.

[618] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 16; Inness, *Tough Girls,* 43; Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 6; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 2.

Evans' identifies a central message that underpins *Game of Thrones* narrative arc: 'If violence is to be used at all, it must only be in service to others: protecting those who cannot protect themselves, overthrowing harmful regimes, making the world a more liveable place.'[619] This belief reinforces Brienne's attitude towards the use of violence through the relationship between violence and the chivalrous values performed via female masculinity. Arya's approach is somewhat different though. Arya's relationship with violence is complex and continually evolves in line with her sense of Self, seeking revenge by using violence in the place of the chivalry that she aspired to in conversation with her father during the first season.[620]

During 'The Bells' (8:5), an exchange between the Hound and Arya rhetorically tracks her journey in respect of the use of violence, directly reinforcing the toxicity of hegemonic masculine violence and echoing important landmarks in their relationship.[621] The scene provides a call back to earlier conversation the two had in 'First of His Name' (4:5) regarding their respective uses of hate as a motivating factor.[622] The meanings constructed in both examples are personal and undoubtedly contribute to the diminishing of Arya's regard for chivalry, the growth of her desire to seek violent revenge on her enemies and reflect on the Hound's determination to protect her throughout their pseudo father-daughter relationship. Arya also gains an insight into how bound to violence their relationship is for the first time in the latter example.

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[619] Tobi Evans, "'The Bells': *Game of Thrones* (2008-2019) Season 8 Episode 5," *Fantastika,* 2019, https://fantastikajournal.com/the-bells-game-of-thrones-2008-2019-season-eight-episode-five/.
[620] Kirk, dir., "Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things."
[621] Sapochnik, dir., "The Bells."
[622] MacLaren, dir., "First of His Name."

As the pair arrive in the Map Room of the Red Keep, it becomes apparent that Arya's list, her desire to see justice delivered on Cersei, would cost her life as well as that of her enemy. The Hound warns her of this, gently first before becoming more insistent when she ignores his plea for her to go home: 'You think you wanted revenge a long time. I've been after it all my life. It's all I care about […] You want to be like me? You come with me, you die here.'[623] This statement is not wholly true. Clegane also cares about Arya, as demonstrated by his resolve to save her life. However, the toxicity of hegemonic masculine violence is deeply embedded in the Hound's knowledge that killing his abusive brother will cost him his life, that the feud has consumed them both to the point that there is an inevitability of outcome. In imparting that knowledge to Arya, he encourages her to realise that her quest is ultimately not worth the cost, that she has become embroiled in a pattern of violence that can never be productive. Although she walks away from the opportunity to pursue Cersei, this does not diminish either her code of behaviour or her identity as a warrior woman. Instead, it demonstrates her propensity to learn, to once again evolve and display her 'survivor's mentality'.[624] Where the desire for revenge leads to the demise of the inflexible warrior man, the ability to be flexible facilitates the survival of this variation of the warrior woman.

Returning again to Evans' interpretation of the message concerning the use of violence that filters through 'The Bells' (8:5),[625] it perfectly aligns with the chivalric values that Brienne champions.[626] It mirrors the message that underpins Arya's blinding by Jaqen H'ghar after her murder of Ser Meryn Trant.[627] Although Arya does prevent further harm by killing Trant,

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[623] Sapochnik, dir., "The Bells."
[624] Waites, "Hollywood's Warrior Woman for the New Millennium," 46.
[625] Sapochnik, dir., "The Bells."
[626] Evans, "'The Bells'."
[627] Nutter, dir., "Mother's Mercy."

particularly where his predilection for pre-pubescent girls is concerned, her motivation is revenge and therefore she does not directly act in the service of others. This is recognised by Jaqen in response to Arya's actions. Although the Faceless Men's ethos is undermined by its habit of assassinating those named by clients willing to pay for their services as opposed to dealing with those more deserving of their demise under any conventional moral code, the guild itself does pride itself on its principles of service. Jaqen stands in judgement of Arya and reflects that '[t]hat man's life was not yours to take. A girl stole from the Many-Faced God. Now a debt is owed. Only death can pay for life.' This speaks specifically to the futility of revenge, reinforcing the message through its repetition and demonstrating that Arya is capable of learning from experience.

Broadly, though, the Hound's moral message is presented after *Game of Thrones* actively and repeatedly contradicts it because violence is rarely used in the service of others. The potential to overthrow the harmful regime underpins the movement of the Others from the margins to the centre because they offer an alternative to the patriarchal system that has abjectly failed in its remit to rule effectively. It is explicitly clear in this scene that Brienne has always followed the maxim of only using violence in service through her fidelity to chivalric values and that Arya should too, leaving the destructive path that is formative in her identity but has limited usefulness going forward. The shift fundamentally underpins Arya's development, her acceptance of the need to adapt to survive, and therefore draws attention to the endpoint of her character growth, leaving her formative youth behind and embracing adulthood.[628] The format of the televisual text has enabled the audience to follow her

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[628] See Mittell, *Complex TV,* 137. This point applies under Mittell's character growth model.

progress and develop an understanding of why her final decision is not out of character and is

therefore fundamental in ensuring that the complexity of this message is conveyed over an

extended period of time.

Arya spends most of her journey following her exile from Westeros in 'Fire and Blood' (1:10)

with a variety of boys and men of the Night's Watch, very few of whom have any qualms about

using violence.[629] In comparison, Arya spends far less time in the company of girls and

women.[630] However, Arya's formative experiences as a Stark daughter in the social and

cultural hierarchy conditioned by hegemonic masculinity and her desire to escape the

gendered fate that awaits her directly impact on her ability to forge friendships with other

girls and women from the outset. She is under the protection of Septa Mordane in the first

eight episodes until her death in 'The Pointy End' (1:8), with whom she has a very fractious

relationship.[631] A conformist, the Septa is the guardian of traditional gender roles so it is

inevitable that the rebellious Arya, who would rather fight than sew, clashes with her and

pushes back against the gendered norms and expectations imposed on her. Arya's

unwillingness to conform provides an early indication of her otherness, but also nurtures her

inability to forge relationships with women apart from her sister, Sansa. This is not necessarily

a conscious choice on the part of Arya, but is an unconscious reflection on her opinions of the

wholly frivolous and fundamentally limiting boundaries that define the role of lady and offers

mutual reinforcement of her status as Other. The absence of relationships with other female

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[629] Taylor, dir., "Fire and Blood."
[630] Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 243; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 20-22. This is not uncommon for the warrior woman because of the nature of her activities and performance of female masculinity setting her apart from other females, although there are examples of warrior women that develop strong relationships with their peers, including Xena (*Xena: Warrior Princess*) and Buffy (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*).
[631] Minahan, dir., "The Pointy End."

characters means that Arya resides within an environment punctuated by normalised violence and, given her immaturity, does not have the mental tools to be able to initially process that in the same way that Brienne does.

The only other woman Arya really spends any time with apart from Sansa is the Waif, another apprentice in the House of Black and White who is charged with showing her the ways of the Faceless Men in the fifth season. The dynamic between the two is as fractious as it is with other women because Arya does not conform to the norms of the Faceless Men either, but there is an added edge to this. The Waif is, quite rightly, suspicious of Arya and her motivations for training to become a Faceless Man and is wary of her free spirit. Like Cersei before her, who searches for Arya following Ned Stark's death to make her a hostage and eliminate any threat Robb Stark may pose to Lannister rule as a consequence, the Waif seeks to control Arya. She initially attempts to assimilate her to remove the threat Arya poses to the Waif's own status in the House of Black and White, the headquarters of the Faceless Men, but soon realises that she must annihilate Arya instead. Unlike Cersei, the Waif recognises the threat Arya poses to the patriarchal order she serves. This demonstrates Arya's ability to evade traditional methods of dealing with the Other, as per Wood's observation of how bourgeois ideology approaches otherness by assimilating it and making it safe or by rejecting and annihilating it.[632] It also reinforces the normalisation of violence in Arya's life because that provides the foundation on which her relationship with the Waif is built.

Despite Arya's evasion of assimilation and annihilation, she seeks out those on her list to annihilate instead. In 'First of His Name' (4:5), there are ten names on her list: 'Joffrey, Cersei,

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[632] Wood, "The American Nightmare Horror in the 70s," 25.

Walder Frey, Meryn Trant, Tywin Lannister, the Red Woman, Beric Dondarrion, Thoros of Myr, Ilyn Payne, the Mountain.'[633] Cersei and Melisandre are Others by virtue of the gendered threat they pose to the patriarchy. Beric and Thoros (Paul Kaye) are othered as outlaws in the Brotherhood Without Banners, a group actively working against Lannister interests from the margins. The remaining six uphold the patriarchy and are therefore symbolic of Arya's desire to bring power structures down in the chaotic aftermath of her father's execution. This positions Arya as abject simply because she sits in the space in between the life and death binary, acknowledging the disintegration of her Self at a perpetual site of trauma.[634] However, Arya's trauma itself is grounded in a very specific temporal space. The execution of her father is fixed as a traumatic point at which she loses the life she had become accustomed to and is compounded by the loss of the security that living within the parameters of Ned's patriarchal control gave her. It remains the central point of influence throughout her journey.[635] The lack of regard for binaries and boundaries is enduring, with Arya perpetually choosing to straddle or transgress them to suit herself, but she does gradually regain control over her own chaotic, vengeful impulses. Two events mark her progress; her violent attack on Meryn Trant in 'The Dance of Dragons' (4:9) and her assassination of Walder Frey in 'The Winds of Winter' (6:10).[636]

The frenzied attack on Meryn Trant has been discussed previously in detail in relation to Arya's moral code, but it is important to note the contrast between the start and end of the

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[633] MacLaren, dir., "First of His Name."

[634] Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London: Routledge, 2009), 112.

[635] Cherry, *Horror,* 174. The loss of control Arya experiences in the aftermath of Ned's death also marks the point at which there is an onset of a very specific social breakdown and chaos that has a formative impact on her identity and contributes heavily to her complete disregard of Brigid Cherry's old binaries of order and disorder, normality and abnormality, and the conscious and unconscious Self.

[636] David Nutter, dir., "The Dance of Dragons," *Game of Thrones,* season 5, episode 9, HBO, 2015.

scene. In using a face from one of the Faceless Men's previous victims to get close to Trant, and therefore a different physical identity, Arya demonstrates patience and strategic planning, but that is lost when she attacks.[637] During the build up to the big reveal of her identity, Arya is controlled, refusing to move or make a noise when Trant whips her. This control immediately dissipates when she launches herself at Trant and begins to attack (Figure 25). In contrast, she is able to maintain control throughout her plan to kill Frey. Again, she uses a face to disguise herself as a servant (Figure 26), manoeuvring around the Great Hall at The Twins while Frey and his sons ostensibly continue to celebrate their alliance with the Lannisters, poisoning the younger men present via their drinks before mounting an attack on him when he is finally alone.[638] Again, the whole operation demonstrates Arya's imagination in planning her revenge attacks, but there is visible progress and an unsettling sense of maturity between the different approaches she takes across the two scenes.

Figure 25: Arya loses control and launches herself at Meryn Trant before killing him, "The Dance of Dragons" (4:9)

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[637] Nutter, dir., "The Dance of Dragons."
[638] Sapochnik, dir., "The Winds of Winter."

Figure 26: Arya is more calculated in using a face to approach Walder Frey, "The Winds of Winter" (6:10)

During Arya's attack on Frey, she is not only controlled but also calculated and cold throughout, calmly informing him that she fed him his sons baked in a pie, showing him the evidence to support her assertion and is specifically exacting revenge on him for the murders of Robb and Catelyn Stark: 'My name is Arya Stark. I want you to know that. The last thing you're ever going to see is a Stark smiling down at you as you die.' She uses the knowledge of his unwitting cannibalism as a form of torture, a violent violation of social taboos. After slitting his throat, she stands over him with a satisfied smirk as he exsanguinates. This is indicative of a use of controlled violence that has developed over time and based on Arya's own experiences. In regaining control over her emotions, the use of violence is also controlled and the product of meticulous planning.[639] Arya's control is akin to that of Brienne at this point with both fighting to protect and serve, albeit via their own respective sense of justice and in a way that does not replicate the masculine force Brienne harnesses in battle. Again, the differences stem from the variation in warrior women that occupy the same narrative space.

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[639] Arya remains othered throughout this process and can be labelled monstrous not only because of the manner of both violent murders but also the threat that both acts represent to the powerful patriarchal systems and hierarchies in place and which both Trant and Frey upheld.

Although the attacks Arya performed on Meryn Trant and Walder Frey subvert patriarchal order and power, she is also a key element of a more overt challenge to the destructive potential of hegemonic masculine power. The latent threat that Arya poses is realised as she literally smashes the patriarchy in the third episode of the final season, in performing the ultimate act of heroism by destroying the Night King.[640] In a review of 'The Long Night' (8:3), Evans comments that women characters 'are shown to be capable actors on multiple battlefields and a willingness to disrupt restricting gender norms is celebrated as heroic. At the same time, masculinity is privileged over femininity and violence is presented as a problem and a solution.'[641] Arya does break gender norms repeatedly during the Battle of Winterfell, engaging in multiple battles alongside her comrades in arms before finding herself saying 'not today' to Death. Just at the moment it seems that all is lost and the Night King stands over Bran, the custodian of the history and guardian of the future of Westeros, Arya stealthily flies through the air behind him (Figure 27). Although the Night King catches her by the neck, she drops the dagger from her left hand and catches it with her right – a technique taught to her by Syrio Forel - before plunging it into him in one fluid motion. The scene itself is spectacular, building the tension before rapidly releasing it as the Night King crystalizes and shatters. Ironically, this action is typically viewed as heroic as opposed to monstrous because of her opponent, complicating notions of what constitutes monstrosity and exploring whether it can be negated where the individual in question transgresses gender norms and borders.

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[640] Sapochnik, dir., "The Long Night."

[641] Tobi Evans, "'The [Very] Long Night': *Game of Thrones* (2008-2019) Season 8 Episode 3," *Fantastika,* 2019, https://fantastikajournal.com/the-very-long-night-game-of-thrones-2008-2019-season-eight-episode-three/.

Figure 27: Arya kills the Night King, "The Long Night" (8:3)

There is an interesting counterpoint to Arya's heroism here. Where Arya breaks the patriarchy, the queen who declared she would 'break the wheel' fails in her attempt to deal with another threat.[642] Daenerys demonstrates commitment to the cause of the living, strategizing with Jon to attack the Army of the Dead from the air atop her dragons. Although this initially meets with some success, the Night King riding Viserion - the Targaryen dragon he killed and reanimated - neutralises the threat and leads to Daenerys being stranded in the middle of the battlefield with only Ser Jorah Mormont to protect her. Jorah's masculine style of fighting keeps the dead at bay and he eventually loses his life, but Daenerys is ineffectual with a sword and unable to defend herself from attack. When comparing this to Arya, it illustrates a tension in the representational strategy engaged within their respective character arcs. Daenerys is not the protector she believes she is and is reliant on external forces to maintain her safety, thus adopting a more stereotypically passive feminine position in contrast to Arya's more active stance. Like the warrior woman theorists who have discussed the

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[642] Sapochnik, dir., "Hardhome."

application of the active/passive binary,[643] I am uncomfortable using it in relation to the nuance present in the complex televisual text, but it feels appropriate to do so here given the stark contrast between the role of the two on the battlefield. The masculine is depicted as more effective than the feminine and only one character – Arya – is able to transcend her afforded status in this context. Although Brienne too is fighting, she is pinned back by the Army of the Dead in Winterfell and is unable to make the same impact that Arya does. Evans is therefore correct in asserting that the masculine is still privileged here as the dominant force during the battle despite Arya's success in transcending the symbolic order. This dynamic is reinforced further in the final episode, with Arya expanding the *Game of Thrones* storyworld still further by leaving Westeros altogether while Brienne remains a part of the new (but undoubtedly patriarchal) symbolic order that maintains the earlier structuring of society around binary values. Arya cannot remain where she provides a latent threat to social and political structures and so her choice to leave reinforces the privileging of the masculine, despite her ultimately being the one who saves the world.

The symbolism of the death of the Night King extends beyond Arya's multifaceted challenge to patriarchal systems of power. The dagger she uses to kill the Night King is symbolic, being entrenched in the patriarchal violence that created, prolonged and defined the chaos in Westeros.[644] It is apt that Arya would use an instrument of the patriarchy to not only challenge

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[643] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies,* 16; Inness, *Tough Girls,* 43; Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes,* 6; Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 2.

[644] The weapon started the War of the Five Kings, the name of the conflict that saw Ned Stark, and therefore the stability of the status quo, sacrificed for familial power and the right to lead the hegemonic masculine order in Westeros. It was used in an attack on a bedridden Bran Stark, which was subsequently attributed to Tyrion Lannister by Petyr Baelish based on the alleged ownership of the dagger. In reality, it was Baelish's dagger but his accusation led to Catelyn Stark taking Tyrion captive and consequently setting off a chain of events that saw Tywin Lannister, Robb Stark, Stannis Baratheon and Renly Baratheon vying for the Iron Throne and the power that accompanies it. Although this overview is reductionist and belies the complexity of the televisual text, it adequately explains the contextual importance of the dagger itself. It is ultimately used by Arya to destroy the

a patriarchal system based on the absolute power of a single individual but bring it down. She adapts to and co-opts the masculine theatre of war. In this sense, she resembles the teenage girl warriors Hohenstein identifies in the films of the 2010s, all of whom are 'experienced in dealing with weapons, so that in these narratives, male warriors are exchanged with female ones, a feature which has the potential to fundamentally challenge the hegemonic gender roles and notions of heroism.'[645] Arya's role in defeating the dead provides a point at which heroism and monstrosity intersect at least temporarily, drawing attention to her selective use of violence for moral purposes. Yet where other acts are considered, like the murder of Ser Meryn Trant, such action demonstrates that she has a willingness to transgress moral boundaries for her own personal sense of justice. That is not to say that Trant was not morally abhorrent himself or that he did not deserve to face justice for his willingness to flaunt chivalric values for his own personal proclivities. Instead, it is a comment on Arya's ability to hold a grudge and follow through with the violence necessary to mete out her own judgements. It is this moral ambiguity concerning Arya's use of violence that positions her as Westeros' hope for defeating the evil that would otherwise eradicate them all but positions her in an in-between space that resolutely labels her Other.

Night King, the only overarching form of patriarchal strength, power and control present in Westeros at the time of the Battle of Winterfell. Each of the men who embarked on the War of the Five Kings fell because they were unwilling or unable to learn from their mistakes.

[645] Hohenstein, *Girl Warriors,* 3.

CONCLUSION

When Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik wrote that female characters are 'the key to the originality and, thus, to the appeal and popularity of the GoT universe' in 2016, they did so with the first five seasons of *Game of Thrones* as a frame of reference.[646] The remaining three seasons served to reinforce their observation, foregrounding women and shaping the storyworld into one that invested in their appeal as characters capable of engaging the show's audience. We saw both Daenerys and Cersei become queens, Arya mature into a trained assassin, Brienne become a protector of Sansa Stark, who herself became powerful in the North in her own right, and peripheral characters like Melisandre and Olenna Tyrell play pivotal roles in the narrative tapestry of the show. More than that, they metaphorically broke the wheel.

Daenerys Targaryen's 'break the wheel' speech in 'Hardhome' (5:8) is one of her most iconic moments, one that defines her determination to reverse the hegemonic power dynamics and change the accepted order of things.[647] I have already quoted the speech in this thesis, but it is worth repeating part of it again to reiterate that Daenerys wanted profoundly radical change for the people of Westeros: 'Lannister, Targaryen, Baratheon, Stark, Tyrell: they're all just spokes on a wheel. This one's on top, then that one's on top, and on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground […] I'm not going to stop the wheel, I'm going to break the wheel.'[648] The imagery produced in this speech speaks directly of the determination of the guardians of the patriarchy, whoever that may be at a given time, to maintain the hierarchies

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[646] Schubart and Gjelsvik, "Introduction," 1.
[647] Sapochnik, dir. "Hardhome."
[648] Sapochnik, dir., "Hardhome."

of power. However, it also serves as a metaphor for their determination to maintain gender roles through the dual strategies of exclusion and containment.[649] From Daenerys' perspective, she articulates her intention to challenge the order of things, to push beyond the artificial limits imposed on her. She breaks the wheel by refusing to conform, by refusing to be compliant and useful for the very systems that oppress her. She is not the only one. The monstrous mothers and warrior women explored here stop the wheel by reversing the representation paradigms and tropes that are imposed on them and then reconstructing their own self-image in a televisual storyworld that provides opportunities, possibilities and potentialities for change.

i Representation and the *Game of Thrones* Storyworld

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the layered complexity of the storyworld constructed in the long-form serial televisual text creates an opportunity to explore the possibilities and potentialities of representation. In weaving an intricate pattern of intersecting and interacting narrative and character arcs, the multi-layered storyworld invites us to read archetypes in conjunction with modern values and norms that extend beyond those established by patriarchal hierarchies of power. The televisual landscape is transformational, and yet it is still bound by the limits of the imagination. In an era where a concern for social justice, equality and progressive representation is subject to a considerable backlash, where the positive framing of being 'woke' has been co-opted by those who have subverted its established meaning of being alert to social justice into a derogatory term, and where political,

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[649] Wood, "The American Nightmare Horror in the 70s," 25.

social and cultural transformation is viewed as a threat to conservative values, it is important for television to create space for imaginative discourses that do not shy away from challenging established ideological norms. *Game of Thrones,* for all its faults concerning the representation of women, embraces those discourses through its layered complexity.

Where Jason Mittell's concept of complex TV refers to shifts in the storytelling, cultural practices, technology and viewership of the medium itself,[650] my concept of layered complexity refers to that within the individual show. It encompasses character arcs, narrative arcs, world-building practices and thematic concerns that contribute to the very fabric of the televisual text. While I do not contend that this is unique to the televisual texts that incorporate storyworlds of the scope and scale of *Game of Thrones,* the show's storyworld features interacting and intersecting narratives that depend on archetypes to generate audience recognition and make sense of characters when they are first introduced. However, it is unusual for a single text to incorporate so many archetypes, and multiple iterations of each one, alongside each other. Those multiple iterations reflect on how individual archetypes now sit within complex narratives as televisual texts allow for a depth of representation that is both transgressive and thoroughly modern. Further, the (co-)existence of multiple variations of the same type represent the possibilities and potentialities for the development of nuanced identities on TV.

All four characters explored here – Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen, Brienne of Tarth and Arya Stark – contribute to the transforming of existing ideas as to what constitutes a monstrous mother or a warrior woman and how much variation is possible within each

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[650] Mittell, *Complex TV,* 2.

category. In synthesising the two sections, certain commonalities and patterns that contribute to the complexity of representation become visible. The first is that paradigms lacking the flexibility to allow for individuality as a mode of deviation are limited for exploring identities in the modern televisual landscape, particularly where texts are character-driven. This does not have to be absolute insofar as the development of individuality may not be required for minor characters, but individuality is an essential component for major characters. The problem of rigid paradigms is particularly apparent in the case of mother paradigms that adhere to binary values, like the Good and Bad Mother, but is also applicable to the specificity of warrior women to the cultural moment or genre. In the case of both archetypes, the televisual text therefore highlights the limitations of their respective existing theoretical frameworks.

Game of Thrones' monstrous mothers evade the containment of the Good, Bad, Heroic and Weak Mother paradigms, as well as those other paradigms that have been identified in more recent scholarship, because they do not fit neatly into any single one. Instead, they display characteristics that span the spectrum of paradigms and exhibit traits that are indicative of no fixed sense of belonging from the outset. Cersei, for instance performs the role of the Good Mother in the first episode before exhibiting a concern for the safety of her children that positions her as an antiheroic mother before the end of the first season. Additionally, her conversations with her father, Tywin, provide an insight into her own ambitions a little later on, thus framing her as a Bad Mother who refuses self-abnegation. The representation of Daenerys is similar in scope. She begins as a good sister and then wife, but she unwittingly chooses to sacrifice son Rhaego for the life of her husband Khal Drogo, thus rendering her a Bad Mother. However, her relationship with her dragon children and role as Mhysa to the

territories she conquers complicates her categorisation, positioning her as a Good, Heroic, antiheroic and magic mother at various intervals.

Similarly, the warrior woman in *Game of Thrones* actively challenges enduring patriarchal conceptions of gender and the validity of the binary that has typically been used to exclude them from specific positions that were designated masculine. However, the nature of the theoretical framework means it is slightly more difficult to track their transgression of existing warrior woman paradigms. With existing iterations of the archetype being welded to the cultural moment as opposed to broad observations made over a period of time, the televisual text can serve to frame new iterations that draw tropes and traits from multiple specific moments as opposed to those needing to break free of rigid paradigms. Both Brienne and Arya are coded as masculine through their respective aesthetic appearances, but they do not entirely abandon feminine traits. They construct different moral codes that guide their decisions and encourage them to develop disparate approaches to violence, honour and social justice. As such, the analysis performed in the second section reinforces the need for the flexibility to evolve paradigms that is visible in the first section. It also makes the case for considering different archetypes based on their own theoretical framework and merits as opposed to trying to formulate a common approach that is not optimal for either.

However, all of the existing theories referred to here assume the ordering presence of powerful patriarchal structures and institutions that define normative development. When that ordering presence takes the form of a legacy rather than an active force for control, there are opportunities to precipitate shifts in the landscape of representation, challenge outdated

tropes and update the dynamics of power that have been wielded to contain the monstrous mothers and exclude the warrior women.

A second point I wish to reflect on is that the layered complexity of the televisual text is vital for the development of more complex and realistic characters who are part of multiple narrative strands and experience non-linear character development. Multiple themes are established and examined through them, just as they contribute to the process of world-building and thus participate in the expansion of the storyworld itself. In this sense, layered complexity fosters a reciprocity that enhances the complexity of all elements of the televisual text and creates a more engaging experience for those watching.

I contend that the layered complexity of *Game of Thrones* stresses that attempts to contain women by reducing characters to one particular role or facet of their identity are unproductive and deprive modern televisual texts of the potential to facilitate the development of more nuanced characters. As in society, a mother, a wife, a daughter is not the only thing that a woman is. Instead, they are rulers, leaders, warriors, advisors, decision-makers, lovers, friends, protectors and much more too. They fit into more categories, adopt elements of more than one paradigm, demonstrate a heightened complexity of characterisation and are realistic representations of modern women despite the fantasy setting of the show. In fact, the show uses the fantastic to frame social reality and break the rules that bind gender roles, occupying a space that delimits related real world issues while deliberately transgressing the boundaries, binaries and limitations that apply to them.[651]

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[651] See Jackson, *Fantasy*, 20; Joshua Bellin, *Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 9

Reflecting on the patriarchal mechanisms of containment and exclusion, the storyworld itself serves as a form of containment, keeping characters within its (somewhat malleable) borders while a given society actually forms a small component of it. As such, possibilities exist beyond the scope of society but within the parameters of the storyworld. Where there are no territorial limits, containment and exclusion are conscious strategies employed by or on behalf of the patriarchy and form the foundation of the archetypes that populate the televisual text. The storyworld therefore enables the individual to take control of their own identity and impact on how they are represented.

The scope and scale of the storyworld is conducive to producing a depth of representation that is better equipped to deal with the presence of complex, multifaceted and nuanced individuals that do not adhere to established binaries. Instead, they adopt traits, behaviour and aesthetic features that step outside of those binaries. This, in turn, serves to feed the current demand for new discourses that are more inclusive, foster difference and reframe the roles of women in contravention of the patriarchal norms that still remain resolutely part of the fabric of society. The televisual text is singularly well placed to interrogate that element of what Levina and Bui refer to as the 'collective unconscious', moving those whose identities display difference into the societal framework through the realignment of cultural standards.[652] Indeed, the category of monstrous feminine, to which both the warrior woman and monstrous mother belong, irrevocably changes the fabric of society by its presence. Its reversing and reworking of gender roles further evolves it despite the presence of patriarchy persisting. As such, they effectively reframe the threat of the monstrous feminine into an

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[652] Levina and Bui, "Introduction," 11.

opportunity within the storyworld, thus marking a shift away from the patriarchal perspective and drawing attention to new ways of reading characters and deciphering relevant meanings intrinsic to their arcs. That is not to say that the monstrous feminine is not still viewed as a threat, or that individuals who fall within the category cannot identify each other as threats. Arya evidences this in the final episode in reference to Daenerys: 'I know a killer when I see one.'[653] Although Arya is stating the obvious here given that Daenerys has effectively razed King's Landing to the ground in the previous episode, the recognition is important in reconfiguring how the archetypes, and those who embody them, are viewed.

Finally, in *Monster Theory* Cohen notes that '[w]e live in an age […] when we realize that history (like "individuality", "subjectivity", "gender", and "culture") is composed of a multitude of fragments, rather than of smooth epistemological wholes.'[654] That realisation is played out in the *Game of Thrones* storyworld on and through the bodies and personalities of those whose identities are composed of fragments yet come together to form coherent rather than smooth epistemological wholes. Cohen's is an accurate observation of modern identities, and one that is clearly visible in the characters explored here. Each of the four occupy more than a single role, are shaped by their experiences and trauma, perform gender differently and emerge out of a series of tumultuous cultural shifts that challenge the order of things. They are all composed of fragments, and yet they still form identity-based wholes that will shift, evolve, fragment and grow over time. Following Cersei, Daenerys, Arya and Brienne over the course of the televisual text reinforces the malleability of identity and the need to reject the idea of fixity that fundamentally affects how it is captured in relevant paradigms.

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[653] David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, dir., "The Iron Throne," *Game of Thrones,* season 8, episode 6, HBO, 2019.
[654] Cohen, *Monster Theory,* 3.

This is not to say that archetypes and paradigms no longer apply and can no longer be used to classify or categorise. I am still comfortable referring to both archetypes by the broad labels that I have applied to the monstrous mother and warrior woman throughout. While the individual characters still retain a primary element of their identity that corresponds to their classificatory label, enabling the audience to recognise them and academics to compare them as I have here, they push the parameters of recognition while rejecting more traditional systems of identity.

ii Challenges and Limitations

Although the arguments and relevance of this thesis outlined here serve as justification for my research and clarify why the interrogation of representation in televisual texts is important for the updating of archetypes and paradigms that categorise women, the whole process has not been without its difficulties. Some problematic facets were confined to the thesis itself, while others have ramifications for research that extends beyond it.

Taking the problems that were built into my research first, although the intricacy of the character arcs initially fascinated me, it quickly became apparent that they were difficult to navigate during critical readings of the text. For instance, I experienced some difficulty in exploring Brienne and Arya as warrior women because separating the individual elements of their identity was problematical. Whereas identifying and clearly demarcating between facets of the monstrous mother's identity was relatively straightforward and aided by the existence of paradigms with strict borders, there is a complexity of interaction and intersection in the characterisation of the warrior woman that is further exacerbated by the overlapping of

relevant representational theories. This, again, brings me back to the layered complexity of representation in *Game of Thrones* and the possibility of alternative readings of the televisual text through the application of the concept.

The sheer size of the *Game of Thrones* storyworld and the length of the televisual text itself, which totals 70 hours 14 minutes, also posed a dilemma for analysis. It specifically impacted on the process of identifying the most appropriate scene to evidence a given point. For every scene I have used to analyse the representation of Cersei, Daenerys, Arya or Brienne, there were others that I could have selected but did not have the room to discuss in depth. Similarly, choosing the most appropriate scene was not always straightforward. I am acutely aware that cherry picking can be a problem in Television Studies and has the potential to undermine my arguments, yet selecting scenes that do not offer sufficient support would be equally as damaging. As such, I actively engage with multiple scenes where possible and ensure that any potential contradictions are discussed alongside the relevant points in anticipation of challenges to my work. In addition, it is notable that three of the characters I selected for analysis – Cersei, Arya and Daenerys - are present in *Game of Thrones* from the first episode to the last, while Brienne is introduced in the third episode of the second season. As all of them are major characters with arcs virtually spanning the entirety of the show, the process of sifting through their scenes and making decisions on those to use was time-consuming and often cumbersome. This is not a new problem in the context of Television Studies and is one every scholar in the field will recognise, but I feel it important to reiterate the difficulties of using the televisual text as an artefact for close reading and analysis

I am also fully aware that some of the ideas in this thesis are contentious. For instance, I refer to the representation of the mother as progressive in the first section, at least until the character arcs of Cersei and Daenerys were casualties of the prioritising of the spectacular over the narrative of the final season of *Game of Thrones.* That the final season significantly damages the progressive representation of mothers is not contentious in itself, but the argument that the representation of women is progressive overall is. As I have stated elsewhere, *Game of Thrones* has simultaneously and paradoxically been labelled feminist and anti-feminist, presenting its women characters with opportunities to break out of their narrowly defined gender roles while also provoking extensive debates about the objectification of women's bodies and the prevalence of sexual violence.[655] The criticism levelled at the show regarding its use of sexploitation and sexposition is justified, and I have begun to explore this elsewhere in relation to the show's sex workers, who have rarely attracted critical or academic attention.[656] However, those criticisms should not overshadow the progressive elements of representation that I have discussed here.

Returning to the impact the final season of *Game of Thrones* had on the progressive representation of monstrous mothers and warrior women for a moment, I initially thought that the failure to carry progressive representation through the end of the show was detrimental to my arguments. The reversion to type is best exemplified by the use of tired and wholly damaging trope of the Mad Queen in the case of Daenerys in particular and Cersei to some extent. In fact, I now believe the opposite to be true. Progressive representation rarely follows a linear trajectory, instead being beset with setbacks and challenges. In the case of

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[655] Coopey, "Sexual Violence and Smallfolk," 48.
[656] See Coopey, "Sexual Violence and Smallfolk*,"* 47-62.

Game of Thrones, progressive representation must be mapped over the entire text to gain an insight into just how complex the challenge of stepping outside of the bounds of patriarchal gendered expectations actually is. The resolution does not position either of the monstrous mothers at the top of the hierarchies of power. In addition, it allows warrior women to move from the periphery rather than excluding them completely if they accept patriarchal values in exchange for a measure of their own power. However, that is not to say that there is no progress at all. In fact, the modes of containment shift to limit their perceived disruptive capabilities without necessitating a radical departure from what had gone before. There is actually a nod to this in 'The Iron Throne' (8:6), where Samwell Tarly (John Bradley) suggests the formation of a new democratic system of governance in Westeros only to be met with laughter.[657] The significance of this minor interlude lies in its message that progress is incremental, and so is progressive representation.

In reflecting directly on why the show's warrior women make more meaningful and sustainable progress than the monstrous mothers, the warrior women do not wield substantive power in existing hierarchies and thus are positioned as adjacent to the leadership rather than in contention to lead themselves. The reversion to the need to contain Daenerys and Cersei within old tropes that have long been used to justify keeping women in their subordinate place serve as an acknowledgement that patriarchal attitudes persist and are unlikely to undergo rapid radical change in the immediate future. The televisual text is still rooted in the social, cultural and political realities of the moment and therefore can only push back against patriarchal ideals and values as far as the showrunners will allow it.

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[657] David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, dir., "The Iron Throne."

Further to this point, the reversal and reconstruction of gender roles that contained monstrous mothers and excluded warrior women altogether cannot entirely be undone in a single season. While I do not suggest viewing the trajectory of character arcs as they appear in the final season in isolation, I do believe that the problem of ending a television show should be taken into account when determining just how far the unsatisfactory resolution of those arcs undermines progressive development throughout the rest of the show's run. The difficulty of ending a television show has been discussed by Margrethe Bruun Vaage, who identifies five theses that can offer an explanation for what she describes as an 'intricate narratological and philosophical problem' – ensemble casts and multiple plotlines, complex morality, genre hybridity, open or closed endings, and ending stories and endings in real life.[658] Although identifying which of the theses applies to *Game of Thrones* would be beyond the scope of this research, Bruun Vaage's theoretical discourse starts an important discussion on the extent to which the ending of a televisual text may lead to narratological disruption or incoherence. The same principle can be applied to representational frameworks, networks and arcs. Without knowing precisely why showrunners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss made the creative and narrative decisions they did when writing, filming and producing the eighth season, it is impossible to comment on the extent to which they considered representation a factor in ending the individual character arcs, if they even thought about it at all.

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[658] Margrethe Bruun Vaage, "Five Theses on the Difficulty of Ending Quality TV Series," in *Cognition, Emotion, and Aesthetics in Contemporary Serial Television,* ed. Ted Nannicelli and Hector Pérez (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 161.

iii Research Possibilities and Potentialities

Looking forward beyond this thesis, the research here provides a starting point for a much larger discussion on the representation of women in the *Game of Thrones* storyworld. The actions of exploring, reversing and reconstructing the archetypes of the monstrous mother and warrior woman focus on some of the most prominent characters in the show, but there are further archetypes identifiable in the show that could be interrogated in a similar way. When I initially proposed this thesis, it incorporated a further section focusing on *Game of Thrones'* witches, specifically Melisandre and Margaery Tyrell. Melisandre is a 'wicked' witch insofar as she is able to use magic to advance the interests of the king she serves, Stannis Baratheon. However, Engelbrecht also notes that Melisandre uses her 'sexuality as a means of empowerment', thus providing a commonality with Margaery Tyrell despite their very different characterisation.[659] Unfortunately, as is the way with academic inquiry, I made the decision to narrow the scope of the thesis down to exclude witches because there simply was not the room to add a third archetype and do all three justice. Although I have touched on the use of magic in the discussion of Daenerys' motherhood, this aspect of her multifaceted identity presents a starting point to explore how magic and sexuality contribute to the construction of the witch in the show.

The current absence of scholarly analysis on the representation of *Game of Thrones'* more minor characters provides another area of interest that can be explored, but one that has already helped to shape the arguments made here. Although the scope and scale of the televisual text produces opportunities for more nuanced and complex identities that move

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[659] Engelbrecht, "Magical Mothers," 25.

beyond existing gender roles for its mothers and warriors, the same cannot be said for the show's sex workers. I have produced external work on Ros (Esme Bianco), Shae (Sibel Kekilli) and Daisy (Maisie Dee),[660] but discounted the archetype as unfeasible for this thesis because its inclusion in the show is not substantial enough. Ros, Shae and Daisy are the only named sex workers in *Game of Thrones* and their presence is limited. While they are individuals who are defined by their lived experiences, *Game of Thrones* primarily treats them as narrative devices that drive the show forwards.[661] In this sense, progressive representation is selective rather than a deliberate approach afforded to all characters equally. I have been careful to discuss the opportunities to explore, reverse and reconstruct paradigms of representation here, but have maintained a focus on monstrous mothers and warrior women specifically because they demonstrate the possibilities for more modern representations of women. The televisual text could have provided the same possibilities for sex workers. Although I will not speculate on why it did not, further interrogation of the archetype would be useful in assessing why disparate archetypes are afforded very different treatment in the same televisual text.

There will also be further research possibilities and potentialities that stem from the current relevance of *Game of Thrones*. Television shows are responsive to the cultural moment, and *Game of Thrones* remains so three years after its final episode as a consequence of its legacy. Contemporaneously, it was a show that pushed the boundaries of what is possible on television, including the representational possibilities that it presents in including multiple archetypes within the narrative landscape. It is significant that those archetypes are

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[660] See Coopey, "Sexual Violence and Smallfolk." I have also written two further chapters on the show's sex workers that are currently in the editing process and have yet to be published.
[661] Coopey, "Sexual Violence and Smallfolk," 49.

explored by more than one character and each is equipped to transgress the borders of the categories that contain them and rework existing paradigms. The opportunity to expand the possibilities and potentialities of representation can be attributed to the scope and layered complexity of the storyworld itself, which is again being expanded via the recent premier of the show's prequel, *House of the Dragon* (HBO, 2022-present).

At the time of writing, we are a week out from the release of the *House of the Dragon,* but there is already a focus on the women of the show. For instance, speaking on the day of the red carpet event to launch the prequel, actor Emma D'Arcy spoke of the thematic concern of misogyny, noting that '[c]rucially within this world, womanhood is equated with incapacity, with motherhood, with passivity, with amenability.'[662] Without the context of the statement or having seen the show it is difficult to begin to critique it, but the awareness of patriarchal control over gender roles provides a common foundation with this thesis.

The trailers released to promote *House of the Dragon* also foreground its female characters, particularly Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen (Milly Alcock/Emma D'Arcy), Princess Rhaenys Targaryen (Eve Best) and Alicent Hightower (Emily Carey/Olivia Cooke). Focusing on matters of succession and the right to queenship, the function of gender roles in containing women are just as prominent in the show as they are in *Game of Thrones*. There are multiple hints that support this in the Comic-Con extended trailer.[663] For instance, Rhaenys, the rightful heir to the Iron Throne who was passed over in favour of King Viserys (Paddy Considine) on

[662] Quoted by Claire Gregory, "House of the Dragon: The New £16m-an-Episode Game of Thrones Prequel That Has Fought All Odds to Make It to Our Screens." *SkyNews,* last modified 15 August 2022, https://news.sky.com/story/house-of-the-dragon-the-new-16316m-an-episode-game-of-thrones-prequel-that-has-fought-all-odds-to-make-it-to-our-screens-12673404.
[663] Game of Thrones, "Comic-Con Extended Trailer: House of the Dragon," *YouTube,* 25 July 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_4Bn4fioXA.

the basis of gender alone, tells his daughter Rhaenyra that '[a] woman would not inherit the Iron Throne because that is the order of things.' In voiceover, Rhaenyra returns to this point a few seconds later: 'When I am queen, I will create a new order.'[664] This sequence echoes Daenerys' 'break the wheel' monologue in 'Hardhome' (5:8), thus providing continuity between *Game of Thrones* and its prequel despite the linear reversal of the storyworld's timeline.[665] That continuity is important in establishing representation as a unifying concern as the storyworld expands and develops, raising the historical relevance of heterosexism, containment and gendered disruption beyond *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon.* With HBO already planning to expand the storyworld still further through a series of other spinoffs and prequels, it will be interesting to see how the franchise positions female characters within the patriarchal world and also how the further televisual texts continue or depart from existing approaches to representations.

In terms of the significance of this research in the wider field of Television Studies, the concept of layered complexity can be applied to other televisual texts to explore patterns of representation as well as the construction of individual identities of characters. For instance, there are characters in other texts that could expand on how layered complexity impacts on the development of the monstrous mother and warrior woman archetypes, such as *The Umbrella Academy*'s Allison Hargreeves and *The Witcher*'s Princess Ciri (Freya Allan) respectively. Both of these characters are also found in fantasy texts, but, just as other archetypes could also be explored via layered complexity, the concept could also be useful in exploring the interaction and intersection of different layers of the televisual text across other

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[664] Game of Thrones, "Comic-Con Extended Trailer: House of the Dragon."
[665] Sapochnik, dir., "Hardhome."

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genres. As it is primarily concerned with representation and how multifaceted identities are constructed on television rather than being a tool for reading characters in relation to genre, its application is solely limited by the presence of a storyworld. Similarly, although I have focused solely on *Game of Thrones* to explore, reverse and reconstruct the identities of characters that represent two significant archetypes and their related paradigms, the same process may be applied to shows with a single prominent archetype.

Ultimately, representation matters and exploring how women are represented in televisual texts with vast storyworlds, how they deviate from existing paradigms and iterations, is important for moving to more progressive discourses. The archetypes, and characters, explored here do not occupy a space where meaning collapses, but instead lend credibility to the idea that representation must be nuanced and inclusive as individuals do not fit into neat categories or tropes. Representation must be about more than visibility, empowering individuals to forge their own identities and tell their own stories as well as clarifying what they stand for. Cersei, Daenerys, Arya and Brienne all stand for very different values and are situated within their own unique moral frameworks, composed and edited by them to reflect who they are as people. In short, the layered complexity of the televisual text is pivotal to achieving difference, but also framing it, projecting it, through themes, narratives and the mechanisms and processes of world-building.

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Petrarca, David, dir. "Garden of Bones." *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 4, HBO, 2012.

Petrarca, David, dir. "The Ghost of Harrenhal." *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 5, HBO, 2012.

Podeswa, Jeremy, dir. "The Dragon and the Wolf." *Game of Thrones,* season 7, episode 7, HBO, 2017.

Podeswa, Jeremy, dir. "The Red Woman." *Game of Thrones,* season 6, episode 1, HBO, 2016.

Sakharov, Alik, dir. "The Climb." *Game of Thrones,* season 3, episode 6, HBO, 2013.

Sakharov, Alik, dir. "What Is Dead May Never Die." *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 3, HBO, 2012.

Sapochnik, Miguel, dir. "Battle of the Bastards." *Game of Thrones,* season 6, episode 9, HBO, 2016.

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Shakman, Matt, dir. "The Spoils of War." *Game of Thrones,* season 7, episode 4, HBO, 2017.

Slovis, Michael, dir. "The House of Black and White." *Game of Thrones,* season 5, episode 2, HBO, 2015.

Taylor, Alan, dir. "Beyond the Wall." *Game of Thrones,* season, episode, HBO, 2017.

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Taylor, Alan, dir. "Valar Morghulis." *Game of Thrones,* season 2, episode 10, HBO, 2012.

Van Patten, Tim, dir. "The Kingsroad." *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 2, HBO, 2011.

Van Patten, Tim, dir. "Winter Is Coming." *Game of Thrones,* season 1, episode 1, HBO, 2011.

Weiss, D. B., dir. "Two Swords." *Game of Thrones,* season 4, episode 1, HBO, 2014.

Secondary Televisual Texts

Abrams, J. J., creator. *Alias,* ABC, 2001-2006.

Blackman, Steve, creator. *The Umbrella Academy,* Netflix, 2019-present.

Butchard, Stephen, creator. *The Last Kingdom,* BBC and Netflix, 2015-2022.

Condal, Ryan and George R. R. Martin, creators. *House of the Dragon,* HBO, 2022-present

Duffer, Matt and Ross Duffer, creators. *Stranger Things,* Netflix, 2016-present.

Fogelman, Dan, creator. *This Is Us,* NBC, 2016-2022.

Gilligan, Vince, creator. *Breaking Bad¸* AMC, 2008-2013.

Kohan, Jenji, creator. *Weeds,* Showtime, 2005-2012.

McCracken, Craig, creator. *The Powderpuff Girls,* Cartoon Network, 1998-2005.

Rimes, Shonda, creator. *Grey's Anatomy,* ABC, 2005-present.

Schmidt Hissrich, Lauren, creator. *The Witcher,* Netflix, 2019-present

Simon, David, creator. *The Wire,* HBO, 2002-2008.

Sutter, Kurt, creator. *Sons of Anarchy,* FX, 2008-2014.

Whedon, Joss, creator. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* The WB and UPN, 1997-2003.

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Besson, Luc, dir. *La Femme Nikita.* France: Gaumont Film Company, 1990.

Burton, Tim, dir. *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children.* UK: 20th Century Fox, 2016.

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Harlin, Renny, dir. *The Long Kiss Goodnight.* USA: New Line Cinema, 1996.

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McG, dir. *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle.* USA: Sony Pictures, 2003.

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Scott, Ridley, dir. *Alien.* UK: 20th Century Fox, 1979.

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