

Where Power Resides: Femininity and Power in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the relationship between femininity and empowerment in George R. R. Martin's fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. It combines medieval historical context, psychological and sociological research, and feminist theory to construct a framework through which to discuss how power functions in Martin's fictional world of Westeros. With six key characters, I argue that femininity operates as a kind of natural resource anyone can use to access empowerment, regardless of how one personally identifies; further, I illustrate how these routes to power are ultimately more successful than others. Sansa Stark, Cersei Lannister, and Daenerys Targaryen are the most prominent figures I discuss at length, but Lord Varys, Petyr "Littlefinger" Baelish, and Tyrion Lannister also serve as successful examples who additionally demonstrate the feminine as separated from sex and gender. Overall, I aim to illuminate how power is not exclusively accessed or utilized through masculinity or the rejection of the feminine, specifically by analyzing these six characters' empowerment.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The heroes and heroines of fantasy fiction often access power by adopting masculine traits and rejecting femininity. But in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, characters who exhibit feminine traits and behaviors are more successful in accessing and maintaining power than those who do not. This project examines the characters of Sansa Stark, Cersei Lannister, and Daenerys Targaryen—and also Lord Varys, Petyr “Littlefinger” Baelish, and Tyrion Lannister—through the lens of medieval history and feminist theory to show how those characters succeed by using femininity as a means of empowerment.

Dedication

To Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains, and Mother of Dragons, for teaching me that we are no ordinary women—our dreams come true.

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Where Power Resides: Femininity and Power in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

I. INTRODUCTION

Daenerys Targaryen has lost nearly everything—first her only remaining family in the world, then her husband Khal Drogo and her unborn child Rhaego, and then most of those who followed the *khal*—but she has not broken. Few of her *khalasar* remain after Drogo's death, but instead of forcing them to stay as slaves she frees them, asking them to stay as her family. The men she names her bloodriders, warriors sworn to protect her at all costs, deny her their oaths because she is a woman, yet she does not send them away in anger. Several have told her to sell her three dragon eggs for ships or armies and she refuses to part with them. Daenerys steps onto her husband's flaming pyre at everyone's protests; she knows "*the fire is mine*" (*Game* 806, emphasis in original) and that her children await her inside it.

The last Targaryen emerges unscathed, with two newborn dragons at her breasts and one nuzzling her chin, and her entire *khalasar* falls to their knees. "Blood of my blood," swear her three bloodriders, "And after them came her handmaids, and then the others, all the Dothraki, men and women and children, and Dany had only to look at their eyes to know that they were hers now, today and tomorrow and forever, hers as they had never been Drogo's" (*Game* 806). Rather than the violence of her forebears or the abuse of her brother Viserys, or even the fearsome prowess of Drogo, Daenerys wins her people with the promise of her care. She earns their loyalty with her love, her belief that they are her family rather than her subjects, and her dedication to their protection. The Mother of

Dragons is not punished for her empathy, but rewarded in time with the rulership of cities and the most powerful forces in both her ancestral home of Westeros and current home in Essos.

This project investigates the dynamics of femininity and power in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and, in particular, six key characters who are adept at navigating the relationship between them. The first three characters, Sansa Stark, Cersei Lannister, and Daenerys Targaryen, embody how the highborn women of Westeros use the feminine as a tool of empowerment; the other three, Petyr Baelish, Lord Varys, and Tyrion Lannister, show that access to femininity is not exclusive to any one biological sex. In analyzing these two sets of characters, I aim to illuminate how, even given the patriarchal nature of Westerosi cultural ideology, those who utilize feminine traits and roles are the most successful in the series.

A Song of Ice and Fire, a neomedieval fantasy saga comprising five novels, follows the political machinations of the fictional continent of Westeros, which is largely based on Europe during the Middle Ages. Fifteen years prior to the story's beginning, the Mad King Aerys was overthrown in a rebellion spearheaded by Robert Baratheon, who was led to believe Aerys's eldest son, Rhaegar, had kidnapped and raped Robert's betrothed. The 300-year Targaryen dynasty was ended and Aerys's two remaining children, young Viserys and infant Daenerys, were exiled across the Narrow Sea to Essos. At the opening of *A Game of Thrones*, the first novel in the series, King Robert and his wife, Cersei Lannister, are ruling in King's Landing without great conflict until the sitting Hand of the King dies under mysterious circumstances. After its era of peace, the Seven

Kingdoms of Westeros rapidly erupt into a chaotic War of Five Kings, with multiple claimants to the Iron Throne and even more machiavellian schemes behind closed doors. In Essos, exiled princess Daenerys Targaryen poses an increasing threat to the great Houses as she accrues armies, followers, cities, and, most importantly, three dragons. The series follows a large number of characters, most prominently those of House Stark, House Lannister, House Baratheon, House Greyjoy, and their loyal bannermen; the Night's Watch who guard the realm from the icy, sometimes supernatural wilderness north of the Wall; and Daenerys and her people. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is not without its knights, battles, feasts, and magical creatures, but at its core it remains a political thriller bent on exploring power in all its complexity.

This project examines how femininity operates as a kind of natural resource that characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* draw upon to access empowerment. In contrast with much neomedievalist fiction, as well as the contemporary imagination of the European Middle Ages, these characters all navigate their circumstances to gain power without becoming the masculine sword-bearers often associated with the Middle Ages. By drawing on the historical context and famed noblewomen of medieval Europe, our present understanding of the era, and a careful definition of femininity, I will construct a theoretical framework to discuss the prevailing cultural ideology of gender in Westeros. Further, using feminist theories of power and subjectivity, I construct a more nuanced explication of empowerment, specifically in conversation with the overarching misogynistic worldview of the series. With these as the foundation for analysis, I argue

that in the fictional world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, those who employ feminine modes of power are the most successful players of, as Cersei names it, the game of thrones.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND WORKING DEFINITIONS

Unpacking femininity and power in a neo-medieval fantasy world requires a common understanding of gender in the culture that world is modeled after (in this case, medieval Europe), what is meant when terms like “femininity” are used, and what forms power can take. With the help of histories of medieval Europe, contemporary gender theory, and critical theories of empowerment, I have constructed a foundation of historical context and working definitions of femininity and power. By exploring gender dynamics in medieval Europe, we can gain a more accurate understanding of what dynamics Westeros is imitating, or at least attempting to imitate. Studying historical figures can help develop our perception of what means and paths to power were available to women in the real Middle Ages, which, again, helps to illuminate what is available to those in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Contemporary gender theory helps to delineate a clear definition of what is meant by “femininity” or “the feminine,” and aids in the conceptual separation of gender expression and biological sex. Critical theories of empowerment help clarify the different forms of empowerment seen in Westeros, and especially illuminate an understanding of power that is distinct from traditionally masculinist definitions. All these discourses work together to create a framework through which we can analyze gender and power in the fictional world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and applying that framework to key characters in the series.

IIa. Highborn Women in Medieval Europe

Gender relations in medieval Europe, as in our present world, were not the cut and dry binary they are often thought to be. In *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, Carol Braun Pasternack explains that, even then, “there was no single, fixed idea of the masculine and feminine essential qualities. Rather, gender was inflected by other systems of difference, including social status, religion, and sexuality” (107). Given the complexity of gender relations in the society that served as a pattern for Martin’s series, the lives of real medieval women can serve as useful models of what kinds of power were available and utilized by women of the time.

The highborn women of *A Song of Ice and Fire* share much with their “medieval sisters,” as Carolyne Larrington calls them. Medieval parallels can be found for a large number of prominent figures in the series, as scholars Larrington, Danielle Alesi, and Helen M. Jewell discuss: inspiration from Eleanor of Aquitaine¹, Margaret of Anjou², Elizabeth of York³, Eadburh of Mercia⁴, Elizabeth Shore⁵, Emma of Normandy⁶, Angelberga of Italy⁷, Adelaide of Italy⁸, Brunhild of Austrasia⁹, and the German empress

¹ Queen consort, dowager, and regent, depending on the era, during the twelfth century.

² Queen of England in the mid-fifteenth century and a key Lancastrian figure in the Wars of the Roses.

³ Queen of England in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries. Her marriage to Henry VII solidified the alliance between the two families involved in the Wars of the Roses, the Lancasters and the Yorks.

⁴ Wife of the King of Wessex and daughter of Offa of Mercia who lived in the late-eighth and early-ninth centuries.

⁵ King Edward IV of England’s favorite mistress.

⁶ Queen consort of England, Denmark, and Norway in the eleventh century.

⁷ Wife of Emperor Louis II, Carolingian empress, and member of the powerful Supponid family in the ninth century.

⁸ Holy Roman Empress by marriage to Holy Roman Emperor Otto the Great in the late tenth century.

⁹ Queen regent of Austrasia in the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries.

Matilda¹⁰ can be found among the Westerosi elite. For the most part, these women were of noble birth and married to powerful men, and their power was drawn from their roles as queen consort, queen mother, or other positions within the very blended political-private sphere of the court. In youth, they were raised in the ways of courtesy and eventually wed into other families for the sake of solidifying alliances. While being used as a political pawn certainly deprives one of autonomy on several levels, such marriages could often prove advantageous for medieval women as well.

Closeness to the king came with its own benefits; as these women's roles grew over time, so did their husbands' or children's trust in them and, by extension, their hand in political matters. In fact, for medieval noblewomen, participating in politics was as much a part of keeping house as it was part of rulership, even when their husbands or children actively sat on the throne. Kimberly A. LoPrete notes that, contrary to many historians' claims, women wielding diplomatic power in the Middle Ages would have been seen as neither extraordinary nor unfeminine, but rather as "playing out their traditional household roles" (25), which were "natural extensions, not transgressions, of [their] traditionally 'feminine' and domestic social roles" (37). These women were often lauded for their intelligence or moral fortitude, but still considered unremarkable, as courtly and diplomatic matters fell within their jurisdiction in the private sphere:

The political powers of aristocratic women were woven into the texture of a society in which 'domestic' household management included what we might

¹⁰ A twelfth-century Holy Roman Empress by marriage to the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V as a child and adolescent, wife to Geoffrey of Anjou after Henry's death, heir to her father King Henry I of England, and a key figure in a civil war in England and Normandy called the Anarchy.

consider public political duties: commanding armed warriors and organizing the defence of lands and tenants; adjudicating disputes among fief-holding knights and other dependents, as well as their monastic neighbors; managing revenues from entire lordships, as well as disbursing them – not only to purchase day-to-day necessities, but also to buy political favors and armed allies. (LoPrete 36-37)

Political or “lordly” matters were not inherently male-coded, nor were the women who performed them. No social boundaries were crossed, no roles subverted, and no authority usurped when queens and noblewomen participated in the public sphere.

While the nobility of the time understood the overlapping nature of the political and the private for highborn women, queens’ impact on the powerful men in their lives still proved a source of anxiety. Larrington explains how, for a multitude of reasons ranging from a king longabsent in war, to a child ruler too young to bear the crown, to a husband’s simple request for his wife’s counsel, “the unofficial influence and wisdom of wives and mothers could change the fates of nations” (29). Some lords of the court were known to fear the queen’s influence on kingly decision-making or spurn unwed widows with the ability to wield their dead husbands’ authority. These fears were not entirely unfounded, as ruling women could steal the money under their administration, misuse military resources, or use their position to manipulate their surroundings to their own personal benefit. Nonetheless, even these less-than-virtuous acts did not bar women from femininity or the domestic sphere. Highborn women’s place in politics was both external, as the public and private spheres were largely concentric, and internal, as they could have

significant impacts on their ruling husbands and children. This is not to say that their options were plentiful or that their societies were egalitarian, only that it was, in fact, possible for highborn women to gain some sort of agency and authority.

The same can be said for the noblewomen in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, who often access even more paths to power than their historical counterparts. In Westeros, where concepts of masculinity and femininity are similarly embedded in class, lore, and religion, the explicitly misogynistic culture is incongruous with how these concepts truly but implicitly function. More importantly, we must recognize that our current imagination of how gender functioned in the medieval era does not necessarily correspond to the historical reality of medieval gender relations. Medievalist fiction not only draws inspiration from the European Middle Ages, but from other work in the genre as well, such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* franchise, the works of Robert E. Howard, Maurice Druon's *The Accursed Kings* series, Tad Williams's *The Dragonbone Chair*, and Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl*—all of which Martin himself has admitted to influencing his writing (“Inspiration for ‘A Game of Thrones’”; Beale). This increasingly makes the modern conception of the era just as influential as the reality of it, explains Shiloh Carroll in *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (4-6, 13) and Carolyne Larrington in *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones* (1-2). As such, taking the current imagination of the European Middle Ages into consideration is crucial to discussing medieval fiction.

Further, historical accounts of medieval life are not free from bias. As Carroll notes, total historical accuracy cannot necessarily be judged or achieved: “for the most

part, medieval writers were men, medieval historians were men, and early medieval scholars were men – in that the portrayal and construction of gender is one-sided” (54). Thus even writings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be tainted by this bias, which reifies the view of medieval gender crafted through “an anachronistic analytical prism,” as LoPrete calls it (18). Since our current conception of gender in the Middle Ages is crafted from a wide variety of largely biased sources, not only is it difficult to pin down one wholly true understanding, but it may not be entirely necessary, says Carroll. With fiction, “whether the perception of gender in the Middle Ages as portrayed in medievalist fantasy is ‘correct’ is secondary to understanding what that perception is and how it developed, as well as how writers such as Martin approach, use, and/or reject that perception” (54). To begin discussing femininity and power in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, we must not only acknowledge the history of the culture on which Westerosi society is based, but the literary background that influenced its creator. Alongside this context, such discussion requires a clear delineation of what is meant by “femininity” and “power” within this project.

IIb. DEFINING FEMININITY AND POWER

The concept of femininity, even within the framework of medieval gender relations, is impossible to exhaustively define. As Simone de Beauvoir famously explains, “the model [of femininity] has never been patented. It is typically described in vague and shimmering terms borrowed from some clairvoyant’s vocabulary” (3). Nevertheless, this has not stopped countless scholars from trying. For the purpose of this

project, I propose a definition of femininity that encompasses elements of sociology, psychology, and gender theory.

Much of twentieth-century critical gender theory focuses on femininity as lack: the idea that “woman” only exists as what man is not, and in turn “femininity” only exists as what masculinity is not. These theories create a strict binary system that assumes there can be no more than two options, placing woman and man in opposition and ascribing femininity and masculinity to those positions, respectively. Rather than being defined by a set of traits, femininity for these theorists is simply a group defined by that which it lacks¹¹. Because of this, feminist philosopher Alison Stone argues, “any woman who challenges her subordinate status must by definition be challenging her status as a woman” (qtd. in Mikkola). This reinforces the conflation of masculinity and power, and therefore femininity and disempowerment; any attempt to access power constitutes an abandonment of femininity, making “woman” nothing but a signifier for powerlessness.

Other scholars have offered more positively-defined understandings of femininity. In his study of dimensions of cultural organization, social psychologist Geert Hofstede posits that femininity includes characteristics such as modesty, tenderness, and a concern for others’ quality of life; other feminine traits include resolving conflict through negotiation or mediation and an openness or preference for flexible or non-

¹¹ In Mikkola’s piece, Catherine MacKinnon and Sally Haslanger are most notably discussed as regarding femininity, the female gender, or womanhood as synonymous with objectified or subordinated and always defined through the objectifying and dominating nature of maleness or masculinity. Alison Stone also discusses MacKinnon in *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*, specifically when discussing essentialism, citing the same points. Mikkola also discusses Nancy Chodorow’s theories that daughters are taught to be feminine by encouraging them to emulate their mothers, where sons are expected to individuate themselves from their mothers and create their own identity; this similarly insinuates that masculinity is a positively-defined, separate identity, where femininity is not. And, of course, Simone de Beauvoir’s famous *The Second Sex* hinges almost entirely on the idea of the feminine as Other, which by Lacanian definition is negatively-defined.

traditional family structures (297). According to educational psychologist R. Murray Thomas, other traditionally feminine traits include “gentleness, modesty, humility, sacrifice, empathy, compassion, tenderness, nurturance, intuitiveness, sensitivity, [and] unselfishness” (248). Psychologists Janet Taylor Spence and Robert L. Helmreich have identified patterns of traits that stereotypically embody the feminine, such as caring for the physical and emotional needs of others, “maintaining harmonious interactions among” groups, and “the nurturant, expressive characteristics needed to carry out... interpersonal tasks” (4). Again, negotiation, encouraging cooperation, and concern for others’ wellbeing appear as positively-defined feminine traits. Other attributes discussed include emotionality, sensitivity, and a privileging of “communion” or interpersonal relationships (16).

In describing femininity as a positively-defined set of traits, inclinations, and behaviors, I am deliberately divorcing it from any association with biological sex. The traits that comprise femininity, as I am defining it, do not necessarily correlate with femaleness (or any other biological identification, though because of socialization they may be more likely to manifest in individuals who identify as women). Earlier I referred to femininity as a kind of “natural resource” upon which individuals could draw to access empowerment; like any other resource one might use, it has no innate or essential tie to one’s biology or even necessarily one’s gender expression. In and of themselves it is not gendered or sexed; even if certain “commonly observed behavioral traits [are] associated with men or women,” they remain “culturally learned or acquired” (Mikkola) nonetheless. These associations are deeply ingrained in our understandings of maleness

and femaleness, strongly linking masculinity and femininity to each, respectively. However, with the metaphor of femininity as a natural resource, I hope to illuminate how these traits, inclinations, and behaviors may be accessed by anyone and everyone.

When understood as a collection of positive traits rather than a description of lack, femininity can be more accurately correlated with the forms of power it engenders. Femininity, in other words, can sometimes be a resource for accessing power, instead of a synonym for powerlessness. Just as they have reconceptualized femininity, recent feminist theorists have also offered more nuanced understandings of power. Power, they argue, should be understood not solely as domination or power over others, nor as a finite, distributable resource that is unfairly allocated. Instead, it is more fruitful to consider the notion of power to, or, as feminist philosopher Amy Allen explains it in “Feminist Perspectives on Power,” the “capacity or ability . . . to empower or transform oneself and others.” This definition can also include conceptions of power “as energy and competence rather than dominance” (Hartsock, qtd. in Allen) and “systematically structuring possibilities for action” (Allen). Empowerment does not fundamentally need to be derived from or include the subordination, oppression, or domination of another group, and can be used as a means to benefit multiple parties, not just the empowered alone. Additionally, power is not a finite resource to be distributed, but can instead be understood as a mode of interacting with the world. According to this concept of power, to empower oneself does not necessarily mean disempowering another. Power need not be “taken from” elsewhere because it is not an object to be taken; it is a way of being that

allows for transforming one's circumstances or structuring opportunities for benefit or action.

In arguing for femininity as a form of power, I am ascribing to it the power to. Empathy, emotional intelligence, intuitiveness, and communication all lend themselves to the very competence needed for power to. An emphasis on harmonious group dynamics and mediation complements the systematic structuring of possibilities for action, as often many avenues must be explored before a compromise or agreement can be reached; further, intuition and manipulation can also ensure those agreements fall in the conciliator's favor. Being relationship-oriented, privileging communion and the wellbeing of the group, and seeking to benefit others also speak to an idea of power that can empower one or multiple groups without disempowering others. And, at the risk of stating the obvious, rigid brute force rarely encourages one's allies or adversaries to negotiate, where traits like diplomacy, adaptability, and even compassion can lead to a willingness to communicate or cooperate

To only consider those with large armies, executioners, and crowns on their heads as empowered is reductive and ultimately false. Domination and oppression certainly occur in Westeros (and our own world), but they are not the only means by which characters alter and control their circumstances. Brute force may result in immediate gratification or the achievement of short-term goals, but rarely endures long-term. Nuanced, subtle, and intuitive methods of wielding power provide better results and are often seen as non-threatening by those predisposed to more aggressive, dominating tactics. The influential women of medieval Europe understood this and were able to

utilize feminine modes of power to gain results. While they were not always granted the same military or legal authority as their ruling husbands or sons, their participation in the political sphere was neither abnormal nor unnatural. Even when noblewomen had a less prominent hand in public affairs, their guidance, negotiation, and influence on the men in their lives allowed for access to varied forms of power. Their position afforded them the capacity to transform their environments, showcased their competence and intuition, and at times unlocked possibilities for action previously barred. The women of Westeros, as I will show, similarly wield the tools of femininity and the power to in order to achieve their goals.

IIc. POWER AND GENDER IN WESTEROS

Understanding the relationship between femininity and power reveals the complex workings of gender in Martin's fictional world, despite that world's overtly patriarchal cultural framework. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, femininity operates like a natural resource, available to all characters to draw upon, irrespective of their biological sex. Female characters are seen utilizing the feminine more often, to be sure. As with their medieval European counterparts, femininity is impressed upon highborn Westerosi women from birth, as is seen with Sansa and Arya's early lessons in needlework in courtesy or Cersei's contemplations of the differing expectations between her and her twin brother, Jaime. They understand they have access to it from a young age, and they are expected to embody it. Most men, on the other hand, do not recognize the viability of feminine characteristics. Ideologically, their culture has deprivileged femininity and thus linked it to disempowerment. The culturally empowered—traditionally masculine

highborn men—believe their ways of being provide them with and maintain their hold on power, when in reality they were simply born into privileged positions. Often, those hard set in their ways refuse to engage in any feminine-coded behavior due to its tie to the disempowered, and are ultimately harmed by this rigid adherence to gendered norms. On the other hand, those denied access to such privilege are more inclined to understand the advantage of tapping into femininity. Men are fully capable of accessing and utilizing femininity, and those who do are often far more successful in achieving their ends than those who refuse it.

Westerosi culture is overwhelmingly misogynistic: regardless of who in reality is truly empowered or disempowered, the idea of femininity is ideologically deprivileged. As in the European Middle Ages that serve as the series' inspiration, the overarching narrative of gender in Westeros is reproduced in lore and religion, where brave and chivalrous knights of legend have their lovely, devoted ladies. Westerosi “songs,” which are used to preserve oral history and ancient knowledge, perpetuate the imbalanced positions of powerful, autonomous warrior and disempowered, captive maiden. Like the chivalric knights of medieval Europe, those in Westerosi songs embody the privileged, traditionally masculine knight who “wins” the deprivileged maiden, who more often than not has no defining characteristics—a *lack*, so to speak—beyond, perhaps, her beauty. Reifying the perceived superiority of traditionally masculine men is crucial to maintaining the Westerosi gender hierarchy (which, ironically, allows those without access to privilege to manipulate their circumstances); this ideological system must be ritually reinforced in order to function.

Masculine and feminine traits (or lack thereof) and roles are reinforced in song and story as well as through the archetypal deities of the Westerosi Faith. The dominant Westerosi religion relies on “important archetypes of medieval thinking: the Father, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Warrior, Smith and Stranger” (Larrington 132). Together they comprise three masculine figures, three feminine figures, and an androgynous othered figure. Irrespective of characters’ belief in the seven faces of god, the rituals, hymns, and ideologies surrounding them speak to the same gender traits we see today: the gentle Mother is a “font of mercy” who will “teach us all a kinder way” (*Clash* 814) and is linked with fertility and childbirth; the Crone is a wise and guiding figure who “sees our fates unfold” (*Storm* 641); and the Maiden embodies and defends beauty, innocence, and virtue (*Clash* 498). Conversely, the Father is associated with justice and judgment, the Warrior with strength and courage in battle, and the Smith with craftsmanship (*Storm* 641). These “new gods” are in truth seven aspects of the same god (*Clash* 495, 811; *Feast* 527, 596), which would seem to point to a more balanced and integrated idea of masculine and feminine qualities in a society and its people. But this fact escapes most laypersons in Westeros, where regarding the Seven as separate deities is most common. Therefore, six gendered figures serve to embody an ideal of masculine men and feminine women, respectively, and the shadowy, androgynous Stranger is othered, placed outside of the binary in the “unknown.” Together, lore and religion reinforce the Westerosi gender ideology both manufactured and maintained by the privileged group, creating a cultural idea of what each member of this constructed binary should do, think, and feel.

Westerosi cultural ideology does little to disentangle genders from biological sex: to the inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms, women should always be feminine and men should always be masculine. Men, especially those born into privileged positions, often feel obligated to perform traditional masculinity, both due to the prevailing cultural narrative and to the desire to maintain *power over*. This mindset not only assumes their power stems directly from their masculinity, but imagines power as domination or subordination, where the empowerment of one group relies on the disempowerment of another. The false gender binary of Westeros places masculinity (and therefore men) in opposition to femininity (and therefore women), with men as the empowered and women the disempowered; those who are not considered to be “real” men—even if they are biologically male—are by default othered and placed in alignment with the disempowered feminine. Those who fall outside that structure, as with the nebulous androgyny of the Stranger, have no place in the crafted gender narrative.

This, of course, does not eliminate the existence of those who fail to assimilate into or uphold the dominant ideology. And since, as discussed above, femininity and masculinity can be quite divorced from biological sex (whether Westerosi gender ideology recognizes this distinction or not), the outsider status of men who do not embody the privileged traditionally masculine role can create space for them to utilize other means of empowerment, namely femininity. Since traditional masculinity is not accessible to many Westerosi men, just as it is largely inaccessible to the women of the court, tapping into the feminine can serve as their route to empowerment and, ultimately, success.

The underlying truth of Westeros is that those who embody and apply aspects of femininity are more successful in the game of thrones than those who refuse them. Since female biology is not a requirement for wielding femininity, the feminine can operate as a tool for anyone to employ to their advantage. Petyr “Littlefinger” Baelish, one of the men denied access to traits associated with traditional masculinity, recognizes the triviality of categorizing the game in terms of men and women, explaining instead that “[i]n King’s Landing, there are two sorts of people. The players and the pieces” (*Storm* 933). The dominant cultural narrative of Westeros would identify men as the players and women as the pieces, and often this can be true, but the deeper reality is much more complicated. Feminine traits and characteristics often enable access to empowerment in Westeros, and an inability or unwillingness to wield those traits can result in failure, and sometimes even death. The common idea that only traditionally masculine men—those who model themselves after figures like the chivalrous knights of lore, the Father, the Warrior, or the Smith—wield power encourages an idea that is incongruous with how empowerment truly operates in their culture.

In *A Clash of Kings*, Lord Varys tells Tyrion that “power resides where men *believe* it resides. No more and no less” (132). But such a sentiment is an oversimplification: it is only true of the *conception* of power perpetuated by Westerosi culture. Most of the realm believes that power resides with the most masculine figures, when in reality the men who most embody traditional masculinity are often puppets or mere roadblocks in the true players’ way. The women of the realm are most commonly underestimated, but ultimately they have a powerful influence in the political sphere.

Sansa, Cersei, and Daenerys all exist outside the traditionally masculine idea of power, yet each is significantly empowered in ways more useful to playing the game. Regardless, Varys's response provides a useful way of thinking about power in Westeros. This paper examines not only the ways in which empowerment is achieved, but who wields it—the truth of where power resides.

III. THE WOMEN OF *A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE*

I argue that power most often resides with those willing and able to use femininity to access empowerment, and that this willingness is predominantly seen among the highborn female protagonists of the series. As explained above, Westerosi noblewomen more easily access feminine modes of power due to their socialization within the framework of their cultural ideology. Even Daenerys Targaryen, though exiled to Essos as an infant, is familiar with the prevailing gender narrative prescribed in the Seven Kingdoms. With their lifelong education in the ways of femininity, highborn Westerosi women receive the tools required to apply it as a means of accessing power.

Combining feminine traits and roles with nuanced understandings of power, three particular characters are distinct among the rest. In this project, Sansa Stark, Cersei Lannister, and Daenerys Targaryen serve as the primary examples of feminine empowerment in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Reflecting the multiplicity of feminine modes of being, they all occupy different roles: Sansa as the young maiden, Cersei as queen consort, dowager, and mother, and Daenerys as a child bride turned self-made ruler. Though none operates in exactly similar ways, all display a multitude of feminine modes of power over the course of their character arcs, allowing us to see a variety of paths to

power and tools which can be used to gain it. Additionally, they embody distinct forms of empowerment: Sansa's gradual political education and ascent displays one form, as do the traditional courtly power of Cersei and the maternal rulership of Daenerys.

Most importantly, these three characters' internal dialogues are available to the reader through point-of-view (POV) chapters in the series. Though Cersei's POV chapters do not appear until the later books, she is a key figure in the first three, and our eventual access to her inner thoughts is crucial to understanding her relationship to femininity and to power. Access to these characters' thoughts and emotions is crucial to understanding how they purposely utilize femininity to their own, and sometimes others', benefit. Other Westerosi women exemplify how to wield feminine tools of empowerment deftly and successfully, like the shrewd Lady Olenna and charming Margaery Tyrell, but unfortunately do not have POV chapters. Similarly, Arianne Martell—a character who also accesses feminine modes of power, and whose internal dialogue we do eventually see—would prove a fruitful subject of analysis, but she only has two POV chapters in the fourth book, *A Feast for Crows*.

Sansa, Cersei, and Daenerys arguably hold the most power or have the highest potential for political empowerment of any women in the series. Overall, their influence far outreaches even other highborn women of the realm. A noblewoman like Catelyn Stark may wield a kind of diplomatic power, but ultimately does so by either emulating masculinity or acting as a mouthpiece for her husband, Ned, or son, Robb. Other highborn ladies like Brienne of Tarth and Arya Stark are physically empowered by brute force and battle prowess—which in and of itself is a divergence from the feminine routes

examined here—but neither exercises the diplomatic power which Sansa, Cersei, and Daenerys exert. In sum, the three women chosen are ones with whom the series’ audience can engage intimately through POV chapters and, more importantly, serve as exemplars of utilizing the feminine to access empowerment.

IIIa. “MY SKIN HAS TURNED FROM PORCELAIN, TO IVORY, TO STEEL”: SANSA STARK

Sansa Stark begins the series the image of a refined young lady, even at age eleven. She is polite and well-trained, albeit spoiled at times, and dreams of marrying a prince, preferably the crown prince Joffrey Baratheon. King Robert Baratheon and her father Ned negotiate a betrothal, and Sansa sets course south toward the capital, King’s Landing, ecstatic and besotted with her future husband. The south of Westeros is the birthplace of courtesy and chivalry, and several people close to Sansa acknowledge how well she will fit into such an environment due to her ladylike demeanor and good manners. Erin Currie notes, “Sansa is able to take on the characteristics and behaviors of a proper lady with ease and is rewarded for her conformity by her betrothal to the heir to the throne, thus gaining more access to power” (88). Her hopes of a fairytale life in the royal court are shattered before she even arrives: a spat between Sansa’s sister, Arya, and Joffrey escalates, leading to the wrongful deaths of a butcher’s son and Sansa’s wolf, Lady. After this injustice, Sansa’s idyllic worldview begins to dissolve with increasing speed, but the trauma of witnessing her father’s similarly unjust death ultimately disenchants her with the world entirely. Sansa finds herself trapped in King’s Landing as a traitor’s daughter, still betrothed to Joffrey but now unfit to be his queen.

After a lifetime of being taught to remember her courtesies and of learning how to wear a mask, Sansa assumes the role of a “pretty little talking bird, repeating all the pretty little words they taught [her] to recite” (*Game* 302). Though born out of necessity, Sansa’s “little bird” tendencies produce tangible skills that are crucial to her use of feminine modes of power: manipulation and adaptability. She quickly learns what it means to be someone in her position—a traitor’s daughter and political hostage—and changes her behavior to mimic the sentiments of those around her. Sansa’s initial reaction to her father’s alleged treachery is denial, insisting it isn’t true and eventually advocating for mercy should he confess. When Littlefinger asks, “Do you deny your father’s crime?” as she pleads for his life, she says no, because “*Sansa knew better than that*” (*Game* 626, emphasis in original). By echoing the words thrown at her, even when it means calling her own family traitors, Sansa protects herself.

Sansa frequently uses her prior knowledge of putting up a pleasing front, one that is disconnected from her true feelings, to traverse her newly hazardous circumstances: “[I]n the face of abuse by the royal family, she ‘hides behind courtesy as if it’s a castle wall,’ trying to win her safety by being ‘the perfect Lady’” (Currie 88). Sansa’s mimicry is not merely conformity, to use Currie’s term, but a performative tool that ensures her survival and protection while she is under the power of a family who wrongly murdered her father for treason. Just as Spence and Helmreich observe in their discussion of femininity, Sansa opts to “conceal [her] competence, assertiveness, and other ‘masculine’ characteristics” in favor of “feign[ing] the role of ‘helpless, dependent female’ in order to influence others or gain their assistance or attention” (Spencer and

Helmreich 15). During her time in King's Landing, Sansa must operate almost exclusively in this way, especially when the reckless actions of her eldest brother Robb put her in further danger.

Sansa even considers her assumption of the little bird role to be her armor: "Septa Mordane used to tell her . . . *A lady's armor is courtesy*" (*Clash* 50, emphasis in original), she remembers, and she wears this armor in her ongoing unseen battle to survive the Lannisters, who rule the capital after King Robert's death. Danielle Alesi asserts that "[Sansa] *adopts the tactic* of an almost deadpan recitation of *necessary lies*" (163, emphasis added), and indeed it is truly a necessary tactic of self-preservation. Total freedom is not an option for her, nor is fleeing like her sister Arya has done, and so survival must stand in its place as her priority until she has means to escape. With her skills of manipulation and adaptability, she is able to recede from the spotlight and adapt to her environment, donning the cloak of whomever's approval would benefit her most at the time.

By her first chapter in *A Clash of Kings*, during Joffrey's birthday tourney, Sansa has nearly perfected those tactics of necessary lies. Tyrion Lannister asks her once, "Is it grief for your lord father that makes you so sad?" and Sansa immediately dons her armor: "'My father was a traitor,' Sansa said at once. 'And my brother and lady mother are traitors as well.' That reflex she had learned quickly. 'I am loyal to my beloved Joffrey'" (51). Tyrion may be one of the few who will stand up to his nephew Joffrey or sister Cersei, but he is a Lannister nonetheless; despite his kindness, "*He's still a Lannister, [Cersei's] brother and Joff's uncle, and no friend*" (52, emphasis in original) to

Sansa, and she has quickly learned to take no chances. Her intuition and emotional intelligence inform her adaptability and structure the one possibility over which she remains in control: her survival. While she is surrounded by Lannisters in the capital, this is a technique for self-preservation; once she is free from King's Landing, it becomes a highly useful political tool.

Mediation is another tactic Sansa learns quickly. In this she resembles European medieval queens, who were known for “mediating and intervening on behalf of those who sought the king’s mercy” and who exercised their “intercession, mediation, patronage, and personal influence over powerful men” (Alesi 164, 168). Alesi notes the similarities between Sansa and Elizabeth of York, both in the events of their lives and in how they navigate the constraints of their worlds, explaining that the latter “has often been overlooked by historians, mostly because she is what is considered a ‘good queen’” (168). Elizabeth, like Sansa, acted as a mediator and influencer, and both show how “‘good’ women who operated within the boundaries set by their sex could be just as defiant while still maintaining positive reputations and their personal safety and security” (Alesi 168). Sansa’s approaches to self-preservation and mediation both keep her alive and prepare her to play the game of thrones, yet she too faces the sort of dismissal that women in medieval Europe faced, both in their own time and in the eyes of present historians. However, these tactics prove highly useful in several of the roles Sansa must inhabit throughout her narrative, from the crown prince’s betrothed to a political captive to a presumed traitor on the run.

Because of Sansa's disempowered position, the line between mediation and manipulation is often a thin one. While she is never officially Joffrey's wife, Sansa still manages to manipulate him as a means of de-escalating situations. At Joffrey's birthday tourney, she is able to save the life of a knight-turned-drunkard, Ser Dontos Hollard. Dontos has arrived at the celebration exceedingly intoxicated and naked beneath his breastplate, which the young king takes as a personal offense. Sansa is quick to assess the situation before it begins: "Joffrey had a look in his eyes that Sansa remembered well, the same look he'd had at the Great Sept of Baelor the day he pronounced death on Lord Eddard Stark" (*Clash* 45). When Joffrey threatens to drown Ser Dontos, Sansa objects before she is able to stop herself. She tries to backtrack, saying it would be unlucky for Joffrey to kill someone on his name day; Joffrey relents and agrees, but not before calling Dontos a fool. Immediately, Sansa takes the opportunity to flatter Joffrey: "'He is,' Sansa said. 'A fool. You're so clever to see it. He's better fitted to be a fool than a knight, isn't he? You ought to dress him in motley and make him clown for you. He doesn't deserve the mercy of a quick death'" (46). Joffrey agrees again, and Ser Dontos then lives as the court fool.

Sansa's mediation and diffusion of the situation showcase her powers of negotiation, supplemented by her ability to rapidly assess a dangerous situation and decide which tactics will lead Joffrey to relent. Even though Joffrey is cruel and unyielding, Sansa's quickly crafted plan to save Ser Dontos is successful; her intuition empowers her to manipulate the circumstances and benefit another person without endangering herself. This act eventually benefits her as well, however; Sansa has no way

of knowing it at the time, but Dontos will eventually become the vehicle for her escape from King's Landing. In truth, he is only a catspaw for Petyr Baelish, but Sansa's mercy and mediation keep him alive and with him the prospect of her own freedom. Though she is unaware that Dontos could in any way help her, Sansa's emotional intelligence, desire to preserve others' wellbeing, and ability to manipulate the situation ensure her eventual safety from the Lannisters.

This skillset grows more important after Sansa's escape from the capital. After Joffrey's murder by poison at his wedding to Margaery Tyrell, Sansa's long-held wish to flee comes to fruition thanks to Littlefinger's careful plans. On the boat to his ancestral home on the Fingers, Sansa attempts to understand Littlefinger's motivations, and her lessons in strategy begin when Baelish claims he had no real intent but confusion: "Remember that, Sansa, when you come to play the game . . . The only game. The game of thrones" (*Storm* 841). Sansa has been part of the game for quite some time, but now she is made more clearly aware of her status as a player and understands Littlefinger's intent in becoming her mentor. Once in the Baelish ancestral home, Littlefinger and Sansa craft a safe new identity for her as his bastard daughter, Alayne Stone, which she assumes aptly and readily. Eventually Sansa's aunt, Lysa Arryn, marries Baelish and takes them all to the Eyrie, where Sansa witnesses his plot to control the surrounding lands unfold. The more she watches, the more she learns, and the better she can hone her skills of manipulation and adaptation to fully engage in the game as a player rather than a pawn.

As in her world of Westeros, Sansa is often perceived by readers in our own world to be a weak and delusional teenage girl. In “Power and Feminism in Westeros,” Caroline Spector discusses several of Martin’s female characters’ struggles for power and agency. Here, Sansa is not portrayed as a deft manipulator but as an aimless girl disillusioned by her shattered fantasies and personal losses. Despite these assertions of Sansa’s powerlessness, it is the very traits Spector cites as the source of Sansa’s weakness that actually lead to her development as a player in the game. The “only tools she’s developed within Westerosi culture: being submissive and hiding her true feelings” (Spector 174) are what keep Sansa alive, from the Red Keep to the Eyrie. In what is likely meant to be a critique of Sansa’s character, Spector even notes, “it is because of her passivity that Sansa assumes these different roles so easily” (175), but this only shows that her submissive or secretive nature is what allows her to utilize others’ perceptions of her to her advantage.

Sansa’s adaptability is an acutely valuable survival technique she quite rapidly develops during her time with the Lannisters: “Sansa survives, then plays, ‘the game of thrones’ by using traditional feminine qualities She is not born with, but later acquires, a political intelligence that grows with her character” (Alesi 168-169). Her ability to don the mask most pleasing to whomever is around her is not unlike Littlefinger’s own tendency to do the same for his own gain, yet he is often praised by the series’ audience as a cunning puppet-master, rather than “ill equipped” (Spector 175) or a “passive pawn” (176) who “blinds [him]self to the reality before [him]” (175). Sansa is keenly aware of her situation and what she must do to survive, which she does. If she

were truly oblivious to her circumstances, it is unlikely she would stay afloat as she does; her ability to adapt points not to self-imposed blindness, but to a full understanding of how the world around her works. At the end of the first novel, as she watches Joffrey unjustly sentence several commoners to death, Sansa remembers “*There are no heroes . . . in life, the monsters win*” (*Game* 746, emphasis in original). Later, in *A Clash of Kings*, she recalls, “Once she had loved Prince Joffrey with all her heart, and admired and trusted his mother, the queen. They had repaid that love and trust with her father’s head. Sansa would never make that mistake again” (52). Sansa is far from a delusional adolescent who still believes in the chivalrous knights of lore, but a canny young woman perfectly conscious of the horrors around her. For her own sake, she must play the part crafted for her, and she does so with skill.

After arranging Sansa’s escape from the Lannisters, Littlefinger more directly begins to mentor her as a player in the game. Baelish learned by experience, as he was born a poor boy to a small and unimposing House and worked to create a name for himself. In her precarious position, arguably more dangerous than any Baelish has found himself in, Sansa must also assume a fabricated identity, exhibiting the same talents for manipulation Baelish uses. Sansa begins as a pawn in a larger scheme, to be sure, but quickly learns how to navigate her surroundings in order to survive. Her eventual escape from the Lannisters’ clutches allows her hard-earned skills to be used in a better, freer environment where such abilities enable her to be a player instead of a piece. Though she has not yet had a multitude of opportunities to exercise these skills, she already shows her competency in the few situations she has had. Sansa turns the traits expected of a

highborn girl in Westeros into her protection and survival amidst those who bring violence upon her. Like many medieval highborn women, she is forced to adapt and operate within the constraints of her environment, and her capacity to do so translates to the skills used to play and succeed in the game.

IIIb. “I AM A LIONESS. I WILL NOT CRINGE FOR THEM”: CERSEI LANNISTER

Cersei Lannister, though she is present in each book, proves to be a more complex character to analyze because her first point-of-view chapter does not appear until the fourth book of the series, *A Feast for Crows*. Prior to this all conceptions of Cersei are external, filtered through the perceptions of the characters interacting with her, many of whom are male. Even so, Cersei’s greatest strength shines through: manipulation of her prescribed roles and of the people around her. She is aware of her position as a woman in a patriarchal world; her younger brother Tyrion notes that she has “*always resented being excluded from power on account of her sex*” (*Storm* 909, emphasis in original). Indeed, she may be one of the women most deeply affected by internalized misogyny: Cersei considers women to be “hens” that are ““nothing [without] their cocks”” (*Clash* 846), in this case referring to their husbands, and laments that “When it comes to swords, a queen is only a woman after all” (849). Even so, she is well aware of what means are best used in a quest for empowerment. Cersei speaks rather candidly of these tactics, and though she may see them as inferior tools to the sword-swinging of the men, she knows they lead to success. While Sansa is in King’s Landing, the queen even takes it upon herself to try and educate her possible future daughter-in-law in the ways of being a woman in their world, as shocking as such lessons may be. For example, during

the Battle of the Blackwater, as they wait with the other highborn women in the safety of Maegor's Holdfast, Cersei tells Sansa that “tears are not a woman's only weapon. You've got another one between your legs, and you'd best learn to use it” (*Clash* 847).

Cersei hails from the wealthy, influential, and formidable House Lannister, making her a prime marriage candidate. As with many highborn women in both medieval England and in Westeros, Cersei is used as a means of inextricably linking House Lannister to the Crown. Before the Rebellion that brought the Baratheon monarchy to power, her father Tywin had planned, but failed, to wed her to the crown prince Rhaegar Targaryen; shortly after Robert usurps the throne, Cersei marries him instead. While Cersei has dreamt of being Queen of Westeros nearly her whole life, her marriage declines at an expeditious rate. Over the next twelve years, Cersei and Robert grow to hate each other more but keep their marriage intact to maintain peace in the realm. The personal lives of the King and Queen are, ultimately, the foundation of the political atmosphere in Westeros, and both are aware of this fact. While Robert could hardly be considered someone who employs feminine tactics to benefit himself and others, he and Cersei both recognize the importance of a harmonious group dynamic and of adjusting their behavior to circumstances. Had their crumbling marriage resulted in divorce, it is likely the Lannisters, who “always pay [their] debts” (*Game* 456), would have retaliated with force. So soon after a dynasty-ending and world-changing rebellion, Robert and Cersei's separation is not a viable option.

Cersei's gift for manipulation enables her to eliminate the very man through whom she achieved the monarchical power she craved. Soon after Ned Stark's arrival in

King's Landing, the Lannisters plot an accident to bring about Robert's demise: the night before a tourney, Cersei commands Robert not to participate in the melee the next day, wounding his pride. Varys, in bringing the event to Ned's attention, muses, "'She *forbade* him to fight, in front of his brother, his knights, and half the court. Tell me truly, do you know any surer way to force King Robert into the melee?'" (*Game* 320, emphasis in original). This plot is foiled, but the next attempt on Robert's life succeeds. On a hunting trip, Robert becomes exceedingly intoxicated when his squire, who happens to be a young Lannister, persistently offers him strongwine at Cersei's surreptitious command. As expected, Robert is mortally wounded on the trip. Because Cersei manipulates the situation so subtly, she is able to stage a fatal accident so characteristic of Robert's behavior it causes little alarm. Not only did she orchestrate it successfully without linking herself to Robert's death, but she did so without being present. Cersei may hate Robert, but she intimately knows how he functions and is thus able to manipulate him to her ends, even from a distance.

Rather than engage in a deadly rebellion like her late husband, Cersei expands the reach of her power and influence in subtler, more manipulative ways, as befits the feminine approach to empowerment. Throughout her time as queen consort, more and more Lannisters and Lannister bannermen find their way to King's Landing, even up to the line of succession: unbeknownst to the majority of the realm, Cersei's children Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen are bastards conceived with her twin brother Jaime, devoid of Baratheon blood. Not only does this place purely Lannister heirs in line for the throne, but withholding that information ensures their security in that position. Installing

her other family members and those loyal to them within the capital further increases Lannister influence in the court without causing alarm or sparking allegations of tyranny. This changes the structure of the political dynamic, by manipulating the situation in her and her family's favor. Paired with her children's rulership, this new structure creates a political atmosphere that lends itself to Cersei's will.

In medieval Europe, the various roles of queen, queen regent, and queen mother were seen as "both dangerous and influential" as "[c]ouncillors worried about the queen's access to the king; her capacity to persuade him in private to particular courses of action, often to use her influence in favour of her own kinsmen, were one recurrent anxiety" (Larrington 108). Larrington compares Cersei to Eadburh of Mercia, a medieval queen accused of "[s]etting up a court within a court, creating a faction loyal to her rather than to the king, seeking to undermine his own trusted followers and finally poisoning her husband" (109). The parallel is easy to see, as Cersei does all of these things, right down to "poisoning" her husband from afar.

This approach not only shows Cersei's manipulation of circumstances, similar to what we see with Sansa, but the kind of empowerment the feminine brings: systematically structuring possibilities for action and transforming oneself and others. Having installed her kinsmen in power or in proximity to it, Cersei removes Robert from the equation, making herself queen dowager and, when Joffrey ascends the throne, queen mother. This both opens doors for Cersei and transforms her as she has become, in essence, the ruler of the Seven Kingdoms, rather than merely the wife of said ruler. For the Lannisters in particular, this is a highly influential position; when her father Tywin

informs Tyrion that Robert is dead and ““Your nephew [Joffrey] has been crowned,”” Tyrion replies, ““My sister, you mean”” (*Game* 613). Unruly as Joffrey is, Cersei is still his mother and the queen, thus giving her considerable influence over courtly affairs. Furthermore, as a widow and queen mother Cersei has a great deal more freedom than she had as wife to the king, just as women in the same position had in medieval Europe: “Widows, at least in England, were regarded as no longer under the authority of their father or brother, particularly if they had sons, and they found it easier to avoid unwanted marriages” (Larrington 29). Though a younger widow might be susceptible to a forced remarriage in accordance with her father’s or brother’s wishes—and indeed Tywin at one point threatens to wed Cersei to a son of the great House Tyrell to strengthen the families’ relationship further—Cersei remains unwed.

Even with all that she finds unfair and unsavory about womanhood, Cersei is incredibly attached to her children, at times to a fault; she is deeply, wildly protective of them, with little to no regard for how her actions on behalf of them may affect others. The capability of bearing and rearing children is a biologically female attribute, and the characteristics widely considered to comprise good motherhood often overlap with aspects of femininity. But not every biologically female person displays those characteristics, and Cersei displays them only toward her children, who provide her best chance of accessing power. Self-sacrifice, empathy, nurturance, and privileging communion and interpersonal relationships can prove successful and beneficial traits for mothers, and indeed are often conflated with being maternal. In Cersei, these traits are present in her interactions with her children, and often unhealthily so. Cersei seems to

latently understand this about herself, as she explains to Sansa that ““Love is poison. A sweet poison, yes, but it will kill you all the same”” (*Clash* 761). The love she bears for her children is extreme and at times results in extreme actions; compared to the traditionally positive portrayal of motherhood, as in the “Gentle Mother, font of mercy” who is the “strength of women” (*Clash* 867) in the Faith of the Seven, Cersei believes love to be something harmful and deadly.

For the most part Cersei is unconcerned with anyone besides her children, and the fact that they are her primary connection to power is certainly no coincidence. She exhibits some sort of loyalty to her father, but not enough to unconditionally bend to his will. One cannot say she is self-sacrificing, empathetic, or nurturing to her late husband Robert or brother Tyrion by any stretch of the imagination. Ultimately, she even alienates herself from Jaime after he loses his sword hand; he is no longer a viable path to empowerment, thus she need not treat him as she treats her children. Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen are still avenues to power, and as such she continues to exhibit feminine characteristics in her relationship with them. Yet this behavior cannot be attributed to an innate nurturing, “maternal” streak; for Cersei, as Nicole M. Mares explains regarding medieval highborn women, “the burden of reproduction [gives her] access to power that would normally be beyond [her] grasp” (150). Once Joffrey is dead and Myrcella is fostered in Dorne, Tommen provides Cersei’s last remaining claim to the throne, and she stops at nothing to ensure he remains loyal to his mother rather than his wife, Margaery. The tenderness, emotionality, and concern for her children’s wellbeing we observe in

Cersei showcase attributes of the feminine, but these attributes are inextricably tied to the preservation of her most overt source of political power, her children.

Thankfully for Cersei, her late husband and her children are not the only paths to power at her disposal. Her cunning, intuitiveness, adaptability, and manipulateness all grant her the ability to understand a given situation and identify the best tactic to turn it in her favor. Cersei provides a bold example of how women in Westeros are able to transform violence and disempowerment into gainful modes of manipulation. Because of her astute awareness of the disparity between the lives of men and women, Cersei plays to the roles and traits expected of her as a mother and woman as a way to alter situations to her benefit. After her father's death, Cersei becomes even more obsessed with the threat of Margaery Tyrell's influence on her only remaining son. After one instance in which she reprimands Tommen for listening to Margaery rather than his mother, Cersei thinks on the various circumstances she has endured at the hands of men to reach her current status:

The rule was hers; Cersei did not mean to give it up until Tommen came of age. *I waited, so can he. I waited half my life.* She had played the dutiful daughter, the blushing bride, the pliant wife. She had suffered Robert's drunken groping, Jaime's jealousy, Renly's mockery, Varys with his titters, Stannis endlessly grinding his teeth. She had contended with Jon Arryn, Ned Stark, and her vile, treacherous, murderous dwarf brother, all the while promising herself that one day it would be her turn. (*Feast 491, emphasis in original*)

In all these roles, Cersei had “played” her part in the name of accessing empowerment, utilizing the close-minded ideology of the misogynistic culture around her to her advantage.

Cersei does not retire these tactics once she is ruling in Tommen’s stead, either, but continues using them as necessary. After she is caught in a scheme to dethrone Margaery based on a false accusation, Cersei is charged with fornication and imprisoned in the Sept of Baelor. When confessing her sins, she blames her desire to protect her children: “May the Maid forgive me. It was for my children, though, for the realm.” But she also blames her emotional nature, manipulating her judges’ expectations of feminine weakness and wantonness: “‘I was lonely.’ She choked back a sob. ‘I had lost my husband, my son, my lord father. I was regent, but a queen is still a woman, and women are weak vessels, easily tempted [A] woman *needs* to be loved, she needs a man beside her’” (*Dance* 791, emphasis in original). Though inwardly Cersei holds no remorse, fully calculating her responses and reactions as she “confesses,” externally she fully leans into the perceptions of women that her persecutors hold and utilizes them to avoid harsher punishment and to reunite with her son. She intuits her situation and adapts accordingly, as she understands that adopting the persona of a helpless woman repenting of her sins will allow her to evade her present circumstances and unlock previously barred possibilities for action. Her atonement is brutal, but she makes it back to the Red Keep alive, intact, out of imprisonment, and still Queen Mother.

Due to her deep-seated misogyny and blatant disregard for anyone other than herself and her children, Cersei’s relationship with the feminine is fraught, but it still

plays the key role in her quest for power. As queen consort, dowager, and mother, Cersei holds a position of immense political power unmatched by any other woman and superior to most men. In her interpersonal relationships and interactions, she is able to influence the men around her according to what they desire: money, status, sex, or any combination of the three. This is not restricted to men, but to anyone who can be of use to her. When she takes Taena Merryweather, a friend and informant to Margaery Tyrell, as her own companion, Cersei uses this opportunity to manipulate the information Margaery receives. Jaime warns her against this tactic, but Cersei understands Lady Merryweather in ways her brother cannot: “I know she is a mother, with a young son that she wants to see rise high in this world. She will do whatever is required to see that he does. Mothers are all the same” (*Feast* 332). Cersei may be disillusioned by her inability to access traditional masculinity and the tactics it entails, but this does not prevent her from accessing femininity or from successfully using it to empower herself.

Besides simply being indoctrinated by the crafted gender hierarchy in Westeros, her disdain for her own womanhood also arises from her awareness of the differences in power and privilege between men and women in her society. Growing up with a male twin, she was able to see someone she felt was her mirror image—“We are one person in two bodies,” she tells Ned Stark (*Game* 485)—have access to countless things she didn’t have due to the trivial difference in gender. She fiercely admires her cunning, callous father, determined that she is “the only true son [Tywin] ever had” (*Feast* 69) because she was the only one of her siblings to take his teachings to heart. In this, Cersei simultaneously sees herself as a woman and as above being a woman. She is aware of the

cultural confines within which she must operate as a woman; she considers Jaime identical to her in all ways, but knows that his “lot was to be glory and power” while hers is “birth and moonblood” (*Clash* 849) due to their different genders. Recognizing this disparity is arguably a major contributing factor in Cersei’s ability to utilize femininity as a tool. She was raised to be ladylike, as all highborn girls are, but the knowledge of what was *not* available to her perhaps hastened her discovery of what *is* available to her, illuminating the usefulness of feminine routes to empowerment.

On the other hand, she clearly does not identify with the other women she says are “nothing” without their husbands, seeing as she neither has a husband nor considers herself one of the “flock of frightened hens” (*Clash* 846). While Cersei is apt at using the feminine as a tool, the misogynistic culture of Westeros bars her from consciously reconciling femininity—and by extension women, due to their culture’s conflation of the two—with empowerment, even in herself. Because she recognizes her position of power as Queen, she mentally and verbally removes herself from the same category as other noblewomen. Even as she says such things, though, Cersei employs femininity to her advantage. She tells Sansa in Maegor’s Holdfast that it “behooves me to give their women my protection” since “they will return to their husbands and fathers full of tales about how brave I was, how my courage inspired them and lifted their spirits, how I never doubted our victory even for a moment” (*Clash* 846). By keeping the realm’s noblewomen safe, Cersei places herself in a positive light in the eyes of the ladies and their powerful husbands; she manipulates the situation, and by extension both the

women's and men's emotions toward her, to her advantage and in a way that affords her more possibilities for influential power.

Cersei may consider herself her father's only true son and separate from the "useless" hens of the court, but that does not remove her from her position as other. For the majority of the series, Cersei is able to use the feminine tools available to her with success, but this is not always the case, especially as her hunger for power grows: "Cersei . . . barely masks her ambition, and as time passes her intentions become clearer. This naked ambition pushes her further from the center of power; she is marginalized in court, shamed in public, thrust to the viewing gallery rather than seated at the King's side, and locked away" (Mares 149). Her loosening grip on power can be blamed on her departure from the resources of femininity, as she increasingly attempts to emulate the "relentless and implacable" tactics of her father (*Feast* 334); ironically, those approaches were never as successful as she believed. She may fancy herself "Lord Tywin with teats" (*Feast* 334), but she fails to consider that her idol is now dead at the hands of his own son due to his hypermasculine behavior. Truly, as Carroll's examination of Cersei aptly explains: "More than anything, Cersei wants to be respected like Jaime and the other men in her life; she does not rebel against the patriarchy so much as internalize the misogyny of it, believing that she should have been born a man so that she would be given the respect she feels she deserves" (65-66).

Even though Cersei has a distorted understanding of how power actually functions in her environment, this does not prevent her from adeptly maneuvering in her circumstances. Just as she told Sansa, Cersei has long recognized what avenues of agency

are available to her, and is practiced in using them to her advantage; she “uses her womanhood as a way of consolidating power . . . and uses [sex] to pay men for their loyalty” (Carroll 67). Her tactics of manipulation and adaptability allow her to restructure her circumstances in her favor and her fierce protectiveness over her children in turn is a means of protecting the modes of empowerment available to her. Cersei’s ideas of power and who should exert it may be distorted, but her ability to navigate the confines of a misogynistic system remains a canny use of her femininity. She resents the tools she must use, but they ultimately serve as a successful route to empowerment nonetheless.

IIIc. “DO NOT FEAR FOR ME. THE FIRE IS MINE”: DAENERYS TARGARYEN

Daenerys Targaryen’s narrative arc demonstrates that the patriarchal cultural standard in *A Song of Ice and Fire* extends beyond Westeros into the lands of Essos, reaching from King’s Landing to Slaver’s Bay. At the beginning of the series, Dany is essentially powerless, as she is sold as a child bride to an older, foreign leader in exchange for an army. However, her character shows us a prime example of the ability to turn the violence exercised against her into something useful to her, usually by way of feminine modes of empowerment. Unlike Cersei, Dany’s relationship with femininity is overtly positive and even noted as such by those around her; like Sansa, she must learn how to play the game given the means available to her, but her successes extend well beyond mere survival or the promise of future political power. As Dany grows, we see her drawing upon a multitude of feminine qualities to access different forms of empowerment. Daenerys is compassionate, intuitive, emotionally intelligent, and exhibits a considerable talent for adaptability. She privileges the wellbeing of others, fosters

community (through a form of flexible or non-traditional family, as the people she leads call her “mother”), and skillfully manages group dynamics, sometimes even to her own personal detriment. She fully understands how to assess a situation, adjust accordingly, and manipulate her surroundings not only to her own benefit, but to others’ as well. Her journey from child bride to *khaleesi* to queen is an impressive illustration of how high a player of the game of thrones can rise when employing the proper tools.

Similar to Sansa, Cersei, and countless medieval noblewomen before her, Daenerys is initially used as a pawn for political alliance. Her older brother, Viserys, exiled son of the dead Aerys Targaryen and true heir to the Iron Throne, barter her hand in marriage for the promise of an army to help him win back the Seven Kingdoms. Even before being sold, Dany’s position is distressing: her family’s dynasty was demolished while she was in utero, her mother died shortly after her birth, she and Viserys were exiled across the Narrow Sea, and much of their time in Essos has been spent fleeing hired assassins paid to eliminate the last remaining Targaryens. Her arranged marriage to Khal Drogo similarly begins less than satisfactorily, namely because she must assimilate into an unknown language and entirely different culture; the Dothraki *khalasar* is a nomadic, pillaging- and hunting-oriented community of horse lords that is even more violently patriarchal than Westeros. She is mostly without bodily agency at first because she is unable to communicate with her new husband, but she is quick to seek the help of her handmaidens and in time regains control of her sexuality. Her handmaidens and, once her relationship with Khal Drogo improves, her husband also teach her the Dothraki language, which she picks up rapidly. In the beginning of her narrative, Daenerys

showcases her striking ability to adapt to her surroundings, both in accepting her new culture and language and in understanding how to position herself in a way that gives her influence over her husband.

Daenerys's nurturing and empathetic nature makes her a well-loved ruler, someone others would want to have as queen. She is a sensitive and empathetic person who believes in the just treatment of all beings, which her knightly advisor and fellow Westerosi exile Ser Jorah Mormont describes as having a "gentle heart" (*Game* 668). Ultimately, her gentle heart is a major catalyst in her more proactive use of power as *khaleesi*. She frees the slave girls given to her and names them handmaidens; she claims Lhazareen women as her daughters to prevent them from being raped by the men of her *khalasar*. Even her abusive, racist brother receives her mercy, and only when he threatens her unborn child does she retaliate. Due to the conflation of these traits with motherhood, others see her as a mother figure—a sentiment illustrated quite literally when she takes Meereen (as I will discuss later). By embodying these feminine attributes, Daenerys has a certain degree of maternal power similar to the way mothers generally hold strong influence over their children. Even separate from the role of metaphorical mother, Dany's compassion and concern for others' wellbeing brings her the love and dedication of her people, which proves a useful tool throughout her narrative.

What is arguably the most important benefit of her gentleness and sensitivity, though, comes from her relationship with her gifted dragon eggs. Having received three ostensibly petrified dragon eggs as a wedding present, Daenerys almost immediately forms a spiritual bond with them, and often finds herself caressing, cradling, or otherwise

focusing on them. She, too, initially believes they are only stones, but nonetheless cherishes them and treats them almost like they were living creatures. Whereas Viserys sees them only as precious stones and unsuccessfully tries to steal and sell them in exchange for gold, ships, or an army, Daenerys protects and cherishes them. Of course, the eggs are priceless, as they eventually hatch and bring forth living dragons. Had Dany seen them as her brother did—emotionally detached from their value, merely a form of currency—they would have remained stone forever, likely traded for resources later on. Instead, her emotional connection to the eggs, her intuition that they may be hatched by fire, and her careful treatment of them as though they were alive ultimately give her the most powerful weapons in the known universe. Dany’s gentle heart protects and eventually hatches the eggs, and she is tremendously rewarded for her tenderness.

Daenerys continues her skillful use of feminine power even after she experiences the death of both her husband Drogo and her unborn son in a series of tragedies that break up the *khalasar* and render her barren. After the majority of Drogo’s *khalasar* flees, Daenerys offers protection to those who remain; instead of threatening them, as Drogo would have done, she reimagines the group as a family:

“You will be my *khalasar*,” she told them. “I see the faces of slaves. I free you. Take off your collars. Go if you wish, no one shall harm you. If you stay, it will be as brothers and sisters, husbands and wives . . . I see the children, the women, the wrinkled faces of the aged. I was a child yesterday. Today I am a woman. Tomorrow I will be old. To each of you I say, give me your hands and hearts, and there will always be a place for you.” (Game 800)

When Dany walks into Drogo's funeral pyre, taking with her the three dragon eggs, Ser Jorah, her bloodriders, her handmaidens, and the remainder of her *khalasar* doubt her choices, but stay with the pyre out of loyalty. The next morning, Dany miraculously emerges unharmed along with the three dragons hatched from the dragon eggs, which she nurses and claims as her children. Her gentle but courageous heart keeps her *khalasar* intact and brings dragons back into the world. With a new family to protect, no husband to whom she must answer, and the most powerful weapons known to man at her breast, Daenerys has the means to move forward as the "daughter of dragons, bride of dragons, mother of dragons" (*Game* 806).

Because of gendered cultural norms, femininity may also include a certain adaptability and fluidity: the skill to evaluate one's situation, determine what behavior would produce the desired outcome, and successfully embody that persona to achieve one's ends. Malleability, intuitiveness, and emotional intelligence are not just skills in and of themselves, but allow for a deeper understanding of a social situation or cultural climate; with that understanding often comes the knowledge of how to adapt to that situation or climate to suit one's needs (or, at times, simply ensure survival). Even as a very young teenager, Daenerys already displays skillful adaptability. She is wed to a stranger into an entirely new culture, yet soon learns their language, traditions, and worldview, unlike her brother. Though she comes to have a fair amount of influence on her husband, she approaches their relationship from a place of trust, as someone who is truly part of the *khalasar*, rather than a foreign bride demanding that he yield to her culture.

With time, Daenerys also adjusts her own worldview, no longer fearing Viserys's abuse and instead finding him to be "a pitiful thing. He had always been a pitiful thing. Why had she never seen that before? There was a hollow place inside her where her fear had been" (*Game* 231). As she grows in confidence, her approach to life changes, and her newfound authority follows her even after the trauma of her husband's and son's deaths. Daenerys's constant internal mantra, "*If I look back I am lost*" (*Game* 800, emphasis in original), illustrates her growing courage, and rather than be consumed by grief she continues to adapt. William Blake Erickson and Dawn R. Weatherford explain in their chapter on the psychology of problem-solving that "Daenerys treats the death of Drogo as a transferable experience to a newfound skepticism of outsiders and once-trusted advisors like Jorah Mormont" (223). Her ability to successfully adapt and learn from her mistakes allows her to retain new knowledge as she moves forward in her quest for the throne, from ascending to the head of the *khalasar* to becoming queen of Meereen.

Daenerys's skill for adapting to her environment, learning from her previous errors, and privileging others' wellbeing continue to prove beneficial even as she struggles in her role as *khaleesi*. After Drogo's death, Dany's main concern is for her people and her dragons: protecting them, keeping them alive, bringing them to safety. Though her journeys across Essos are difficult, she remains focused on improving her people's lives rather than despairing at the tumultuous circumstances they encounter. As more followers join the few remnants of her *khalasar*, Dany grows more confidently into her roles as queen, nurturer, and protector. Eventually she and her people approach the

Slaver Cities of Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen, all run by the Great Masters: the wealthy elite who purchase, train, and sell slaves. Much like her perturbation at how the Dothraki men treated the Lhazareen women, Dany's gentle heart cannot accept their institutional slavery and unjust treatment of their slaves. However, since she has experienced the inevitable difficulties of attempting to liberate others on an individual basis, Dany learns from her past experiences. She cannot claim each slave as her child or handmaid, as she did with the Lhazareen, both due to lack of funds and the kind of influence over the slavers that she held in her *khalasar*. Thus, Daenerys adapts to the situation at hand and utilizes her knowledge from her prior mistakes, and therefore understands the larger cultural structures that must be addressed in order to truly free the cities.

Daenerys is aware that she lacks influence and brute force and instead relies on manipulative tactics to achieve her desired ends. In Astapor, while negotiating the purchase of the Unsullied—highly lethal but inhumanely trained soldiers—with a Great Master, Dany feigns ignorance of the Valyrian language: “Dany understood him well enough, but she smiled and looked blankly at the slave girl [translating for him], as if wondering what he might have said” (*Storm* 312). Since the Great Master, Kraznys mo Nakloz, is unaware that she understands him, he speaks increasingly crudely, relying on the translator to mediate his rudeness. Dany uses this obliviousness to her advantage, taking the opportunity to gather information from the uncouth slaver while withholding information about her abilities from him. Rather than react in reckless anger to his crude comments, Dany opts to conceal her competence and feign dependence on the translator

as a means of maintaining control of the negotiation. She understands that pretending ignorance is the surest way to structure the possibilities in her favor.

In controlling what knowledge Kraznys has of her abilities, Daenerys can by extension alter the situation to her benefit. We see this tactic throughout her time in the Slaver Cities, as she similarly does this concerning political and military matters, affecting naiveté by frequently insisting, “I am only a young girl” who does not know or understand “the ways of war” (*Storm* 575, 577). Dany pretends to exchange supplies, ships, and one of her dragons, Drogon, for the Unsullied. Nearly as soon as the exchange is made, she orders Drogon to shoot flame at the Great Masters, frees the Unsullied from the bonds of slavery, and asks those who wish to stay and serve her to free any slave they see. Because she adroitly plays into the Great Masters’ underestimation of her, both as a young woman and a Westerosi, she achieves her ends without any personal loss. Her manipulation of this negotiation ultimately results in her acquiring more than 8,000 Unsullied who are willingly loyal to her rather than serving her as slaves, keeping all that she had promised as payment to Kraznys, and freeing the slaves of Astapor.

Through trial and error, Daenerys finds routes to empowerment that structure possibilities that lead to her desired ends: adaptability, manipulation, and using her prior failures to inform how she adjusts her behavior in future circumstances. These approaches to power are both fueled and supplemented by her empathy, privileging of others’ wellbeing, and nurturing disposition. Driven by her compassion for others, she marches to free the city of Yunkai next, backed by her *khalasar*, the recently acquired Unsullied, and “tens of thousands” of freedmen from the newly liberated Astapor (*Storm*

573). Though she is advised to leave the Astaporians behind to save resources, Dany refuses to do so. Her empathy and desire to improve their livelihoods has freed them from Astapor, and now she has accepted them as part of her people—members of her family, her “children”—as she did with those before them. When Daenerys and her armies conquer Yunkai, she enters the city greeted by crowds of former slaves yelling *Mhysa*, *Maela*, *Aelalla*, *Qathei*, or *Tato*, which all translate to “Mother” in different languages (*Storm* 589). Daenerys goes on to take Meereen, where she installs herself as queen. The trials she faces there are more political ones, which once more allow her to exercise her diplomatic capabilities. Her attempts to quell rebellion, keep the peace, and respect the traditions of Meereen all require the same adaptability and talents of negotiation, intuition, and compassion she has developed and sharpened in her journeys across Essos.

Of the women in *A Song of Ice and Fire* who become prominent players, Daenerys is arguably the most in tune with aspects of femininity and their many uses. She accepts and thrives in feminine-coded positions such as wife, mother, and queen. Wind Goodfriend describes how Daenerys “uses her dragons as tools to gain even more political power. Even the name she is given by her subjects and former slaves, ‘Mother,’ emphasizes her acceptance of the feminine roles while defining what it truly means to be feminine” (203). Daenerys’s role as metaphorical mother is an interesting one, as she is the only main protagonist unable to physically bear a living child; it is the feminine qualities she embodies and uses as a means of empowerment that lead her people to call her mother, not any biological capability. Daenerys embraces femininity and its associations with motherhood, simultaneously dismissing whatever negative connotations

are attached to them as well as using them to her own advantage. Without becoming “some kind of sheltered and stereotyped maternal figure” (Goodfriend 203), she seeks and successfully gains empowerment through her use of the feminine.

Some critics have argued that over time, with the dragonfire, warfare, and hardships that Daenerys faces throughout the series, she becomes “harder and less compassionate, her choices less personal” (Spector 185). But if one looks to her intentions, the opposite is true. If anything, Daenerys becomes *more* passionate and empathetic as time goes on. When she is first presented to the Dothraki, she is afraid of them and their customs; by the end of her time as Drogo’s wife, she considers them her family and children. Henceforth, all her decisions arise from her desire to keep her “children” safe, even when her tactics tend toward the violent or militaristic.

As Daenerys grows as a young woman and as a ruler, her own needs and desires become increasingly irrelevant to her as she places the benefit of her chosen family above all else: above her own health when aiding the ill, her aversion to marrying a Meereenese nobleman to earn the city’s trust, and even her other children, her dragons. Her concern for others’ safety and flourishing and her privileging of community inform all her decisions, and she most often relies on feminine tools to access empowerment primarily to benefit others. Daenerys may have an intense and at times aggressive sense of protectiveness over her people, but the same can be found in Cersei, who wields feminine power with more selfish intentions. Dany’s willingness to go to extreme lengths in the name of her insistent protectiveness does not point to a change toward becoming

desensitized or unsympathetic, but rather a deepening of her empathetic and caring nature.

Indeed, the hardships of her past inspire Daenerys to help and care for others, rather than eliminating any compassion or empathy. Regarding leaders who rise in the face of trauma, Lara Taylor Kester explains, “Daenerys transforms her trauma into a reason to fight for the underdog, stand up for what she believes in, and not back down . . . Not only does she free [her people] from their shackles, she genuinely loves them and does her best to make sure they are fed and safe. She cares for them to the extent that they call her ‘mother’ and are inspired to go forth and do good in order to make her proud” (166). Daenerys’s quest for power is not solely for her own benefit, but stems from her desire to improve the livelihoods of her people and rule them justly. When she first arrives in Astapor to purchase the Unsullied, a dejected Dany asks of Jorah, ““Why do the gods make kings and queens, if not to protect the ones who can’t protect themselves?”” (*Storm* 374). This simple rhetorical question encompasses much of her worldview and approach to rulership. Her people’s safety is the core determiner of her decisions as *khaleesi* and as Queen of Meereen, and power, along with whatever unsavory events may occur in its attainment, is primarily a means of achieving that goal of helping others.

Though setting witches on fire and commanding dragons to kill slave owners are rather violent acts, Daenerys’s intentions remain centered around a concern for the wellbeing of the masses, stemming from her nurturing manner and her desire to protect those in need. She is able to manipulate others by playing on their assumptions of her

innocence and youth, and can adapt and adjust to nearly any situation she finds herself in, from filling her role as *khaleesi* to respecting the customs of Meereen. Her rise to power similarly occurs through feminine modes of empowerment: her marriage to Khal Drogo made her *khaleesi*, but her adaptability and acceptance of Dothraki culture allowed her to begin speaking up for herself and making large-scale change; the birth and rearing of her three dragon “children” stemmed from her nurturing bond with the dragon eggs, which ultimately resulted in her wielding the most powerful weapons in the world; and her conquering of the slave cities of Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen is due to her abhorrence of slavery and the desire to help her “children,” who in this instance are her people. Of the three women discussed in this project, Daenerys is by far the most in touch with feminine routes to power, and ultimately it is she who becomes the most powerful player thus far in the game of thrones. Daenerys’s empowerment not only benefits her, but also her subjects; her *power to* comes from the possibilities she unlocks for her people as well as herself.

IV. THE MEN OF *A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE*

The women of Westeros may be aware of their ability to access and use feminine modes of power, but they are far from the only characters who do so. Because, as I discussed earlier, the characteristics associated with femininity are not biologically determined, the feminine resources that serve as tools of empowerment are not restricted to any one group or another. Of course, the crafted gender hierarchy of Westeros privileges the traits traditionally associated with masculinity: physical strength, battle prowess, House reputation, and the resources to “eat and drink and wench [themselves]

into an early grave” (*Game 47*). However, simply being biologically male is not enough to gain access to that privilege, as we see with several characters both major and minor. Among other things, if a man is physically unimposing, disabled, unskilled or uninterested in combat, emotional, sensitive, or sexually attracted to men, he is othered and coded by surrounding characters as feminine by default. Men who are denied the privilege of traditional Westerosi masculinity must learn to adapt, operate in the category of other, and determine how to maneuver their circumstances to their benefit. This most often manifests in the same ways it does for women, thus showing that femininity is deprivileged in Westerosi culture even though it is crucial to wielding power. Even traditionally masculine figures, who may be able to exercise brute force for short-term results, often display a rigidity, lack of empathy, and unintuitive nature that begets their eventual demise. Conversely, within the category of othered men who understand and utilize femininity, we find some of the most powerful players in Westeros.

Three central characters in the series illustrate how the men of Westeros can successfully wield the tools of femininity to access and accumulate power. Lord Varys, who sits on the High Council, is a slave-born eunuch with effeminate manners. As such, he is deemed non-threatening and even at times an aberration. Petyr “Littlefinger” Baelish, a small and slight man with no wealthy lineage or warrior skills to bolster his image, serves as Master of Coin on the same High Council. Tyrion Lannister has the resources and reputation that Varys and Littlefinger lack, but is similarly othered due to his dwarfism. Each of them exists outside of traditional masculinity, and therefore outside of what most of the realm considers traditional access to power. Like the noblewomen of

Westeros, they must use other means of empowering themselves, and most often their methods are coded as feminine. Characteristics women use and have used to their advantage for centuries—gaining and artfully wielding information, adaptability to their circumstances, producing an approachable public image, empathy and emotionality, sexuality as a tool, and so forth—become crucial to these men in their quest to succeed in the game of thrones.

IVa. MEN WIELDING FEMININITY

Men denied access to traditional masculinity are quick to learn the benefits of fluidity and subtler tactics. Lord Varys, who has arguably made the highest social climb of anyone in the series, gains power through information. Lavishly dressed and unimposing, he is highly feminine-coded: a man who is “plump, perfumed, powdered, and hairless as an egg” (*Game* 173) and who “giggle[s] like a little girl” (174) hardly seems a threat to men who are looking for war hammers and broadswords. As a eunuch, and therefore the most emasculated of figures, Varys is aware of and even uses others’ perceptions of him to his advantage. His ability to pass under the radar makes him seem unthreatening, allowing him to manipulate his surroundings without much interference.

Varys, often called the Spider or the Master of Whisperers, specializes in gathering intelligence and planting it into the minds of those who have the political power to act on it. Varys is masterful in his manipulation and seems to have a hand in every major plot point in some way or another. As Cersei explains to Tyrion, Varys ““gives each of us just enough to convince us that we’d be helpless without him”” (*Clash* 775). He has information on all sides and dispenses it according to his interests, ensuring he is always

on the winning side and seen as necessary to their victory. Knowledge reigns, and Varys is acutely aware of its exchange rate. His outsider status grants him the ability to see the world differently; in his case, a childhood and adolescence spent begging, stealing, and working as a prostitute in Essos taught him that “*Secrets are worth more than silver or sapphires*” (*Dance* 82, emphasis in original), as he once said in his youth.

Petyr Baelish, though technically son to a Lord and head of a House, operates in a manner similar to Varys. Where Varys is a delicate eunuch, Baelish is simply small and physically non-threatening. His nickname, Littlefinger, might overtly refer to his slight frame and meager holdings on the smallest peninsula of the Fingers, but implicitly reinforces a more emasculating notion: a lack of phallic power, much like Varys’s literal castration. If anything, Littlefinger leans into others’ ideas of his weakness, much like women who play at incompetence, passivity, or helplessness to gain the upper hand. Rather than adopting the original sigil his grandfather chose, the Titan of Braavos with flaming eyes—or a powerful and fearsome creature like the direwolf, lion, or stag—Baelish chooses a mockingbird, nodding to his ability to mimic those around him as he sees fit.

Littlefinger’s weapons are, like Varys’s, information, manipulation, and camouflage. He worked his way up from a desolate and unimpressive family into the High Council and uses that position to mold politics in his favor. Over the course of the books, we learn Baelish himself is responsible for the constant wars in Westeros: using his childhood friend Lysa Arryn’s affection for him to his advantage, he convinced her to kill her husband and Hand of the King, Jon Arryn. When he urged Lysa to blame it on the

Lannisters, her frantic letter to her sister Catelyn Stark planted a seed of suspicion in Ned and Catelyn both that eventually bloomed into a never-ending cycle of treason and revenge. Littlefinger destabilized the Seven Kingdoms with nothing but words, all in his plan to usurp the crown.

For men like Tyrion, this road to empowerment is more complicated. As the son of a great House, he is afforded political and financial power at birth; as a dwarf, he is denied the chivalrous masculinity and battle prowess Westeros privileges. However, Tyrion is smart enough to recognize his precarious position and navigate it skillfully. He influences those around him through name-dropping and bribery, and maneuvers all situations with his foresight and intellect. Born without the physical stature and warrior talent of his knightly brother Jaime, Tyrion considers his cleverness his power: “All his life Tyrion had prided himself on his cunning, the only gifts the gods had seen fit to give him” (*Game* 328). He feels he can talk himself out of any situation, and oftentimes he can. There are several points at which Tyrion is able to transform his circumstances using intuition, emotional intelligence, and manipulation, including escaping from Catelyn Stark’s clutches in the Eyrie, surviving an ambush from the Mountain Clans while exiting the Vale, and, much later in the series, joining the Second Sons in Essos to evade being recaptured into slavery.

Tyrion is able to read people’s underlying intentions and emotions in a way that often escapes the likes of straightforward men like Ned Stark or Robert Baratheon; he has “a way of sensing things” as Jon Snow describes it (*Game* 186) and knows the value of station. At times he simply outwits an opponent or reminds them of his family’s

exorbitant wealth. For finer politics, he mentions his power in the capital—“I have a place in court . . . A word in the right ear, and you’ll die a sour old man before you get another boy to train” he warns Ser Alliser Thorne of the Night’s Watch (*Game* 187)—and in less savory circumstances, makes the promise that House Lannister always pays its debts. Whether he’s using the threat of his House’s power, the incentive of their gold, or a clever and well-planned scheme, Tyrion influences the world around him with his mind. Rather than causing him to become embittered by his otherness, Larrington notes, “Tyrion’s outsider status, his struggle for acceptance, has given him extraordinary insight” (107). His ability to see the larger picture, utilize his emotional intelligence to predict others’ thoughts or actions, and understand how to adapt to nearly any circumstance keeps him alive and, for the majority of his arc in the books, empowered.

IVb. MEN REFUSING FEMININITY

In Westeros, one of many elements of refusing the feminine is the desire to separate the private and public spheres. Where the highborn women of the realm—and the othered men who tap into feminine modes of power—understand the blurred boundaries between the political and domestic, as well as how to maneuver both, most of the ruling lords’ understanding is not quite as nuanced. Though they certainly know their family name and ancestry determine much of their political power, they still compartmentalize their “kinging” selves and their “real” selves: there is Robb the brother and Robb Stark the Lord, Robert the friend and Robert Baratheon the King, Ned the friend, husband, and father and Lord Eddard Stark, Warden of the North and Hand of the King. The rigidity of these roles does not lend itself to the subtlety of Westerosi politics.

A certain level of liquidity and adaptability is required to stay alive in the game of thrones, and an inflexible man is a dead man. Robb's militaristic temper and strange sense of ethics lead his army to ruin and family to death; Robert's irreverent kingship and impulsive personality result in his own wife plotting his murder; and Ned's staunch morality and blind belief in honor lead to his crumbling beneath the burden of his duty as Hand, and eventually put his head on a spike.

Ned Stark, a man both driven by and killed because of his honor, is a prime example of the consequences of failing to adapt. He perhaps best illustrates how even those with the best intentions—and, arguably, sound morals—can still reap terrible consequences for refusing to employ the resource of femininity. In Winterfell, he is a noble and even relationship-oriented leader. According to Larrington, Ned has an approach similar to Anglo-Saxon England's, with “a group of close warrior comrades, called *heorthgeneatas*, or ‘hearth-companions’” in a dynamic where “[t]he tie between lord and bannerman depends on loyalty and oath-swearing, not on payment” (115). The knights sworn to defend Winterfell are not as well-funded and may be more unruly than the chivalrous southron knights, but their allegiance is more personal. Arya recalls a time when Ned “used to say a lord needed to eat with his men, if he hoped to keep them. ‘Know the men who follow you,’ she heard him tell Robb once, ‘and let them know you. Don’t ask your men to die for a stranger’” (*Game* 217). In this sense, he blends the public and private much like others who thrive in Westeros's political arena; at Winterfell, Ned even emphasizes the strength of the pack in times of hardship, the need to forge strong alliances for protection.

And yet Ned is somehow unable to transfer these ideals to his role as Hand once he reaches King's Landing. He refuses to participate in the culture of the south because he cannot find the value in it as he does his own, which is unfortunately quite clear, from his curt, intransigent behavior on the High Council to his absence from the tourney he finds so frivolous and unnecessary. Ned is often exasperated with the players in King's Landing; he has "no patience with this game they played, this dueling with words" (*Game* 192) and "no taste for these intrigues" (258). He expects those around him to bend to the ways of Winterfell, where an honorable dead man is worth more than a cunning live one. He is able to sense, if only vaguely, how Varys and Littlefinger function and even thrive, yet remains too firm in his behavior to follow suit. Time and again Ned watches the subtler players pull the strings and sees only their personal desire to escape consequence, rather than the value of their part in larger plots, such as saving King Robert's life by preventing him from participating in the melee.

Ned's uncompromising worldview is ineffective and even dangerous in King's Landing; as Erickson and Weatherford explain, "Cunning and ruthlessness are the path toward respect there, and he fails to adapt before investigating Jon Arryn's death. For this, he ultimately loses his head" (218). Ned is slow to learn and quick to distrust, but cannot back that suspicion with the information he might have acquired if he approached problems like Varys, Littlefinger, or Tyrion do. Ultimately, his failure to adapt results in his untimely death. Ned's execution serves as a warning to readers as it does to the people of Westeros: the game is dangerous for all, but especially those unwilling to implement

feminine routes to power. Tactless, detached, or violent means used to achieve *power over* may yield short-term successes, but true empowerment lies elsewhere.

V. WHERE POWER RESIDES

Contrary to Lord Varys's pronouncement, power does not always reside where men believe it resides. In fact, in Martin's world, the reality of who is empowered fails to be recognized by most men. For the Westerosi elite, those who employ femininity as a means of achieving empowerment are the most successful, regardless of whether they are male or female. Empathy, nurturance, intuitiveness, diplomacy, and adaptability are all crucial to surviving and triumphing in the game of thrones. Privileging relationships, showing concern for others' wellbeing, and making use of others' (sometimes mistaken) expectations are similarly key. Negotiation, malleability, a show of ignorance or incompetence, and the capacity to manipulate one's situation also prove surer routes to empowerment than tactics like brute force and rigidity. To play the game is to understand both its rules and its players on a deep level, and the characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* who do that most successfully are those who draw upon the natural resource of femininity.

The characters who succeed in the game also have a more nuanced idea of empowerment: they wield the *power to* transform themselves or others, change their circumstances, and structure possibilities for action to their own or others' benefit. This conception of empowerment, rather than the oppressive or dominating *power over* that relies on the disempowerment of one group to benefit the other, describes how power often functions in Westeros and is, one could argue, a superior model overall. The best

players understand that treating power as a capability that proves advantageous to multiple parties is ultimately more beneficial than treating it as a finite resource to be taken and hoarded.

A Song of Ice and Fire's relationship with women and femininity is fraught, to be sure. Martin's fictional Westerosi culture relies on a gender hierarchy crafted and reinforced by the privileged group, one that reifies both the binary of feminine women and masculine men and the subordination of the former group. As a result, the series' audience and characters alike must contend with a patriarchal ideology that appears to ritually disenfranchise women and men denied access to traditional masculinity. While the misogynistic culture of Westeros is self-constructed, this does not lessen its real impact on these characters. I do not aim to argue that the abuses to which some of these characters—particularly the women—are subjected do not affect or hinder their lives and wellbeing. Instead, I hope to have illuminated how each of these characters is able to navigate their circumstances and, using the tools of the deprived feminine, achieve a form of empowerment more useful to them than the brute force or unearned titles coveted by other players of the game. It is due to their outsider status that these characters succeed where members of the privileged group do not; others' inability to see where power truly resides is partially a foundation of these characters' empowerment.

Though I have touched on only a few of the hundreds of characters in the *Song of Ice and Fire* series, there is more to be said about how Martin constructs and complexifies understandings of femininity and empowerment. The prevailing sexist Westerosi culture complicates the relationship between gender and power, as its cultural

ideology differs from how gender truly functions in practice. Westeros is replete with intricate characters through whom we can see the reality of where power resides, from the little bird Sansa and her dubious mentor Littlefinger, to the power-hungry Cersei and her quick-witted younger brother Tyrion, to the Mother of Dragons and the sweet-smelling spy Varys who aims to place her family back on the throne.

Moreover, there are countless other women worth exploring: vengeful tomboy Arya Stark, charming but cunning Margaery Tyrell, rebellious Arianne Martell, the fierce and loyal Sand Snakes, Captain Asha Greyjoy, knightly Brienne of Tarth, and mysterious and spiritual Melisandre, to name a few. For some of these characters we are given entry to their minds and emotions and for some we are not, but all prove to have complex and fascinating relationships with feminine modes of power. There are also other men with complicated connections to femininity, such as diplomatic Renly Baratheon, the Knight of Flowers Loras Tyrell, passionate Oberyn Martell, one-handed Jaime Lannister, and the late and melancholy Prince Rhaegar Targaryen. All these characters and more lend themselves to future research as a means to uncover, illuminate, and examine the elaborate nature of feminine empowerment in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

Wherever such studies go, one core idea remains: power can, and does, exist outside of masculinity. The characters of Martin's series illustrate the myriad ways of becoming empowered without avoiding or repudiating femininity. After countless stories in which we are told to despise, pity, or be ashamed of the feminine, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is an engaging and refreshing departure from the norm. Power need not be modeled after how men perceive and wield it, and characters are often more successful when it is

not. Varys, Petyr Baelish, and Tyrion Lannister exhibit that feminine routes to power are not restricted to women alone; through them, we see that this form of empowerment is not merely a means for women to survive their circumstances. Instead, utilizing femininity proves to be a more successful device than the traditionally masculine routes which they are denied. Nevertheless, though these men are more than apt, it is three Westerosi women who are shown to wield feminine power best. Sansa, Cersei, and most of all Daenerys exemplify a way of operating in the world that answers the question of where power truly resides: with them.

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