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„Tears aren't a woman's only weapon": Myths of gender
in *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*“

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Ricarda Hacker, BA

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1. Acknowledgements

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2. Introduction

Game of Thrones, the internationally renowned TV adaptation of G.R.R. Martin's extensive fantasy epos *A Song of Ice and Fire*, is a pop cultural phenomenon which has been subject to praise and critique alike. Especially its portrayal of women, alongside controversial depictions of excessive violence, has consistently received rapt media attention¹ since its first broadcast on television in 2011. Interestingly, despite female characters' exploitation and objectification, the show has repeatedly been associated with feminism² which is a notion that has been the initial point of departure for this thesis. Similarly, feminism and fantasy are not mutually exclusive since the description of alternative worlds would allow for a presentation of a reality that concedes women to have agency and seize power; unfortunately – with the exception of Martin's saga – this is still an uncommon practice. Generally, the fantasy genre is believed to be rather geared towards the male demographic; thus, it is even more surprising that the *Game of Thrones*' fan community exhibits a strong female presence – as a matter of fact it constitutes nearly 50% of the viewership (Frankel 1).

The fact that half of the series' dedicated fanbase is constituted by females and the circumstance that a significant amount among these claim to be empowered by it, even consider it to be feminist, has been the main incentive for writing this thesis. *Game of Thrones* has become a prominent, cultural entity by now and is consumed by a multitude of people whose opinions about power, politics, sexuality, gender and many more subjects might be influenced through it, which makes an academic analysis thereof by all means justified. To inspect the matter from a gender studies point of view might shed some light on messages about gender and sexuality that – consciously or not – are conveyed and which have the potential to manifest themselves in the public consciousness.

So far, there have not been many academic works published concerning *Game of Thrones* because firstly, it is an unfinished work of art and secondly, it has been broadcasted only recently (the first season aired in 2011). This made it harder for me to ground my work in

¹ Numerous newspaper online websites (the guardian.com, telegraph.co.uk), political weblogs (huffingtonpost.com), online magazines (vulture.com, slate.com) and especially blogs (geekiary.com, feministcurrent.com) have repeatedly addressed sexual objectification, gratuitous violence and female agency.

² For example <http://www.buzzfeed.com/kateaurthur/9-ways-game-of-thrones-is-actually-feminist#.um7wBPLea>, <http://jezebel.com/5993176/game-of-thrones-george-rr-martin-is-feminist-at-heart>, <http://www.vagabomb.com/5-reasons-why-Game-of-Thrones-is-the-most-feminist-fantasy-epic-on-TV/>, <http://mic.com/articles/115172/game-of-thrones-is-back-and-more-feminist-than-ever-before#.kMptq6k1R>.

the academic field since the issue of gender in the series has predominantly been thematised on internet forums and (feminist) blogs rather than in academic journals. Among many contesting opinions, two camps seem to have evolved: one in support of the representation of women in the series (e.g. S.E. Smith on xojane.com) and one in disapproval (e.g. Ginia Bellafante from the New York Times, Rhiannon Thomas from feministfiction.com, etc.). Heretofore, only Valerie Estelle Frankel's 2014 book *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance* is the most prominent academic document that examines the representation of women in more detail. By applying theories of television and gender studies, combined with historical references, to the subject at hand she succeeded in compiling a comprehensive guide that rendered a substantial assistance in writing this thesis. Other scholarly articles on this subject that could have been traced, are also repeatedly referenced throughout the running text.

The ultimate goal of this thesis, then, is the exploration of the following gap: how representations of gender that are generated by such a pop culturally relevant show pervade contemporary society in the form of myths and in what way these constructions could be reflections of our zeitgeist. Therefore the structure of this thesis will be as follows: first of all *Game of Thrones'* role in popular culture will be established before depictions of women in both book and series will be subjected to a comparative, semiotic analysis in order to eventually arrive at conclusions about why women are depicted in such a particular manner and what such a representation might entail. Taking Roland Barthes' seminal work *Mythologies*³ as a prime point of reference, the ensuing claims will, amongst others, be substantiated with theories from gender and film studies.

One of the most noteworthy notions is that Barthes' concept of myth implies that it is naturalised: ascribing universality to something specific, cultural and ideological deprives it of a political dimension which consequently leads to the exertion of power: the power of meaning-making. Images, such as the ones circulated by *Game of Thrones*, have not emerged out of nowhere; on the contrary, they have been carefully constructed to convey particular messages. These, in turn, are constructions of the dominant ideology of the ruling class. Through this form of media, particular values are transported which manifest themselves in their consumers to eventually become the cultural norm. This notion is reminiscent of Gramsci' idea of cultural hegemony which purports that the ruling class of a society

³ First issued in 1957 by Éditions du Seuil publishing house in its original language and only in 1972 translated into English by Annette Lavers, which made it available to a vast audience, this book - taking a semiotic approach - gives a comprehensive account of meaning-making processes in popular culture.

deliberately infiltrates certain spheres of culture with naturalised concepts to impose their belief system on its members (Storey 10). By passing off myth as a natural concept, these meaning-making instances efface themselves: “And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name 'bourgeois', myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made” (Barthes 142).

Furthermore, myth is constituted by different discourses, which vary from culture to culture; therefore, the focus in this thesis will be on contemporary US American (popular) culture since the show is a North American production (although with a British cast) and most of the online gender debate hails from America. Theoretically, analysis could have also been extended on a more general scale to Western society but this would have exceeded the scope of this paper. Moreover, the film studies concepts that are deployed in the subsequent text pertain to TV productions, too; *Game of Thrones* in particular since it corresponds more to a movie than a series⁴ (regarding production costs, cinematography, etc.). Finally, the following thesis will use the first 4 seasons and book instalments (of the existing 5 and planned 7) as primary source material for analysis since the deviation from the original narrative in season 5 would have severely aggravated a comparative analysis.

⁴ For more thorough elaboration on the subject see <http://www.bidnesstc.com/business/hbo-game-of-throne-business-entertainment-the-numbers-game-behind-one-of-the-most-successful-tv-series-of-all-time/>, <http://www.creativeplanetnetwork.com/news/news-articles/game-thrones-reality-production-hbo-s-fantasy-series/423099>.

3. The Game of Thrones Phenomenon

Game of Thrones is a critically-acclaimed TV series which is based on the novels of the epic fantasy saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*⁵ by American author George R. R. Martin. Adapted to the HBO Television screen by David Benioff and Daniel Bob Weiss, the series has reached a vast audience, amounting to an average number of 18.6 million viewers per episode, making it the network's most famous series (Kissell 2014, online magazine article). So far, four seasons have aired with season one having premiered on April 17th, 2011. Season five has started to be broadcasted in April 2015. Although the book instalments – the first one being published in 1996 – have attracted a vast readership over the years, the series appealed to an even wider audience, which in turn resulted in an increase in sales figures. While an ever-growing fan base is eagerly awaiting the release of book six, Martin, who is notorious for taking his time – book five took him six years to complete – claims it is still in progress. However, the series already exhausted much of the source material by incorporating elements of book five in season four, so it is conceivable that the show will soon overtake the books' narrative. Therefore, Martin has already shared his intended ending with the show's creators, although he cannot specify the exact details and character developments yet (Windolf 2014, online magazine article).

3.1. Pop Cultural Relevance

It has already been established that the novels by George R. R. Martin have enjoyed great popularity long before the TV series has been launched; still the show contributed enormously to making the saga available to a larger audience. However, nobody anticipated that it would have such a tremendous impact. Soon after the series' release, a fan base like no other⁶ emerged and both book and show became an integral part of popular culture.

Before elaborating on that, however, it is necessary to determine what the term *popular culture* even entails. Albeit numerous attempts to arrive at a precise definition, it is not really possible to give a satisfying answer. Storey argues that popular culture can be seen as “mass-produced commercial culture” (6), although it does not suffice to take quantity as a

⁵ *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the literary basis for the TV show, is a renowned epic fantasy book series consisting of 5 (of 7 planned) instalments so far, which have been published over a period of 20 years. Years of publication from first to most recent book: *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005), *A Dance with Dragons* (2011).

⁶ See <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21856915>.

determining factor since high culture, for example, can also be liked by many people. High culture, on the other hand, is a debatable term in itself because it is often marked by elitism (6) and suggests that popular culture occupies an inferior position. Closely connected to this is the attitude that “culture has declined under the homogenizing influence of American culture” (9) and that this “Americanization”, in effect, has a great impact on meaning-making processes. It has the power to impose certain ideologies on people but in the end it all depends on what they “actively make from [mass culture], actually do with the commodities and commodified practices they consume” (12).

As can be seen from the discussion above, it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly popular culture implies but it is indisputable that it affects peoples’ lives in one way or another. On that account, it is interesting to observe in what ways *Game of Thrones* is permeating many spheres of popular culture: first of all, many literary works have originated from Martin’s works; he not only wrote several novellas⁷, which describe the events preceding *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but there have also been publications which investigate certain themes that occur in both book and series⁸, companion guides⁹, art books¹⁰, cook books¹¹ and even academic journal articles¹². Furthermore, the works have also been adapted into graphic novels¹³, video games¹⁴, card and board games¹⁵. Merchandise like toys which are modelled after the main characters and replicas of weaponry that is present in the show, but also T-shirts, mugs and DVD’s are produced to meet popular demand. *Game of Thrones*’ fandom constitutes one of the biggest fan communities around the globe, with an impressive

⁷ *The Hedge Knight* (2005), *The Sworn Sword* (2008).

⁸ *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, from a Game of Thrones to a Dance With Dragons* by James Lowder (ed.) (2012), *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper than Swords* by Henry Jacoby (ed.) (2012), *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance* by Valerie Estelle Frankel (2014).

⁹ *The World of Ice & Fire* by G.R.R Martin, Elio M. García Jr. and Linda Antonsson (2014), *The Lands of Ice and Fire* by Martin and Jonathan Roberts (2012).

¹⁰ *The Art of George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire* by Brian Wood and Patricia Meredith (eds.) (2005), *The Art of George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice & Fire: Volume 2* by Patricia Meredith (ed.) (2010).

¹¹ *A Feast of Ice and Fire: The Official Game of Thrones Companion Cookbook* by Chelsea Monroe-Cassel and Sariann Lehrer (2012), *The Unofficial Game of Thrones Cookbook: From Direwolf Ale to Auroch Stew – More Than 150 Recipes from Westeros and Beyond* by Alan Kistler (2012).

¹² *Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom* by Debra Ferreday in *Australian Feminist Studies* (2015).

¹³ : *A Game of Thrones: The Graphic Novel: Volume One* by Daniel Abraham and George R.R. Martin (2012).

¹⁴ *Blood of Dragons* (2007), *A Game of Thrones: Genesis* (2011), *Game of Thrones: The Role-Playing Game* (2012), *Game of Thrones Ascent* (2013), *Game of Thrones: A Telltale Games Series* (2014).

¹⁵ *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* by Fantasy Flight Games (2002), *A Game of Thrones* (board game) by Christian T. Petersen (2003), *Battles of Westeros* by Fantasy Flight Games (2010).

presence on social media and the internet in general. There are numerous fan websites (one of the most famous ones being [westeros.org](http://www.westeros.org)), discussion forums and people even create podcasts and write fan fiction. Moreover, the actors starring in the show have been celebrated by fans and critics alike and have consequently been elevated to stardom. The fact that *Game of Thrones* is one of the most heavily pirated shows in history (Windolf 2014, online magazine article), further stresses its excessive public demand and pop cultural relevance.

3.2. Gender and society in Westeros

Game of Thrones is set in a male dominated society, the epitome of patriarchy, in which women are mere accompaniments to men; “[w]here being female means, regardless of nobility, being nothing more than an asset to a House, a bartering chip to be exchanged for armies and allegiances” (Roldan and Rennie 4). This is due to the fact that the story is set in a fictional continent called Westeros which is reminiscent of medieval Europe. Westeros is comprised of Seven Kingdoms in which a plethora of noble houses fight for the Iron Throne when the king, who has taken the throne by force rather than legal succession, dies. The majority of the houses feel that they are entitled to the throne and as a result the War of the Five Kings breaks out. Having been a place of relative peace with knights, tournaments, gallantry and feasts, the realm soon has to face the dark sides of war which bring along rape, bloody battles, extreme violence, intrigue, and insidious scheming. This most notably affects women: they are treated as objects, humiliated and subjected to sexual violence but as the story unfolds, it soon becomes apparent that they are much more than subservient human beings who only exist to please men. Some of them show good strategic thinking which proves helpful during war whereas others defy the constraints that are imposed on them by patriarchy and display great fighting, hunting and survival skills and yet others are ingenious manipulators. They are three-dimensional characters with skills, wishes, flaws, duties, aspirations, virtues and vices. Although Westerosi society reduces them to their sex and treats them accordingly, they are still depicted as human beings who have to assert themselves in a sexist, feudal world.

What makes the story so believable, despite its fantastical elements, are the parallels that can be drawn to real world politics and history. Martin weaves historical events into the narrative by resorting to historical accounts from Maurice Druon and Thomas B. Costain, who provided

detailed accounts of medieval France in their writings (Miller 2012, online magazine article). Furthermore, one of his greatest historical influences is the “War of Roses” which was fought between two noble families in 15th-century England: the Yorks and the Lancasters (Miller 2012). Their fight for succession bears a remarkable resemblance to the conflicts between the Starks, proud and moral Northerners, and the Lannisters, rich and arrogant Southerners, which are two of the most prominent Houses in the series. Some of the characters are also inspired by real-life personalities¹⁶ and as a result, women are not only reduced to being powerless, subservient human beings, which was indicative of that time, but many of the main female characters are portrayed as strong, wilful and ambitious women, just like their historical counterparts.

Moreover, some universal anxieties that can be found in our society even today find its expression in Martin’s tale. A narrative thread, which occurs at the same time as the main story that has been described above, is focused on ‘The Wall’, a fortification in the North which is made of ice, stretches for 300 miles and protects the people of the realm from what lingers beyond it: wildlings (or free folk) and the White Walkers, zombie-like creatures with supernatural powers which are an impending threat to humanities’ existence. The men guarding the Wall, the so-called ‘Nightswatch’ are understaffed and in dire need of support from the realm which they do not get since its leaders are occupied with fighting a war and do not take their request seriously; they dismiss the White Walkers as mythical creatures and do not take heed of the Nightswatch’s warnings. In my view, if transferred to our present world, the war that is fought in Westeros could exemplify our media; both of them want to distract its members of society from the ‘real problems’ out there by shifting our focus elsewhere. The White Walkers, in this case, could then symbolise the impending, inevitable revenge of nature on humanity. Another reading could be, on the other hand, that they mirror contemporary society’s fear of terrorism but this interpretation could also be put on the wildlings.

Another interesting aspect with regard to the wildlings is what place women occupy in their community. Calling themselves free folk already suggests their liberal approach towards life and gender relations are not exempted from that. Wildling women are free to fight alongside men and demonstrate equal skills in handling arms. They are capable of physically defending themselves and exerting control. This becomes most evident when men are looking for a wife: they ‘kidnap’ the woman of their desire and fight her; only when they succeed, are they

¹⁶ Frankel 2014: Catelyn – Eleanor of Aquitaine (80); Cersei – Margaret of Anjou (96); Daenerys – Empress Mathilda, daughter of King Henry I, Queen Elizabeth I, Henry VII (158-160).

entitled to marry her. Should the woman feel that she is not treated appropriately, she can always kill him. Generally, the wildlings are a free folk who do not abide by any rules; as a result their society, although more brutal, is not as regulated and thus more egalitarian.

Similarly, a more liberal image of women is provided in Martin's accounts of Dorne, one of the constituent parts of the Seven Kingdoms. In this part of Westeros, women seem to be more independent from their male counterparts in that they have more sexual freedom. They can choose several paramours and are not frowned upon by society when they explore their sexuality in different ways. Their tempers are fierce and they seem to be more confident than women in the rest of Westeros. Furthermore, Dorne's succession laws are not as restrictive in that women are granted the same hereditary rights as men.

To tie in with this notion of greater social mobility for women, another storyline, which concurrently takes place on another continent called Essos, a continent separated from Westeros by the Narrow Sea, has to be mentioned. Being exiled into this unknown land is a young girl who at first is a victim of the heteronormative society she was born into: her brother sells her to a feared Dothraki horselord for personal gain (he expects to be given an army in exchange for her). Initially terrified, she finally adapts to the *modus vivendi* of the Dothraki, a tribe reminiscent of the Huns, to ensure her survival. At first she struggles with assimilating into the nomadic lifestyle and the country itself: Essonian culture is marked by a great diversity of languages, people of different colours, slavery, a sophisticated trade network and the practice of magic and various religions. In the end, however, she breaks from the chains that patriarchy put on her: after her husband dies, she becomes the new leader of their following and gradually gains more power, which is dramatically enforced with three dragons that are born (she has been given their eggs as a wedding gift). Dragons have been thought extinct for three hundred years, so it is not surprising when 'the Mother of Dragons' is suddenly worshipped like a goddess. An incredibly empowered woman, her intention is to invade Westeros and retake the Throne that belongs to its rightful heir (her father sat on it before the usurper, the king who dies at the beginning of the story, took it) while abolishing the slave trade in the Free Cities of Essos along the way which is a noble, yet arduous endeavour.

Having established the role of women in this fictional tale, one might expect that *A Song of Ice and Fire* is just another epic fantasy saga in which the hero has to save humankind from supernatural creatures and good vs. evil is easily distinguishable. That, however, seems to be

quite the opposite. Martin has created a complex world in which “[n]o character is unblemished and, against all genre tradition, no morally upright action goes unpunished, [and] evil deeds often bring factions to victory” (Roldan and Rennie 3). Characters are not quintessentially good or bad; instead they are different shades of grey. Somehow the author succeeds in transforming each of his characters, regardless of their gender, into three-dimensional entities which are all relatable to some extent, some of course more than others. Moreover, the fantastical elements efface themselves and exist more on the margins of the narrative which makes the story more plausible. The fact that the fictional alternative world is based in part on real-life historical events and figures, makes the story even more realistic. It is an amalgam of varying cultural, historical and mythological structures (e.g. Elizabethan Times, crusades, King Arthur-movies, Norse mythology, Lord of the Rings, religious philosophies) which is converted into an organic whole. This and the fact that the focus of the narrative is not on the supernatural but on our complex human nature and interpersonal relations, makes the story so appealing to its readers, in my opinion. Or as Roldan and Rennie aptly put it: “[T]hese are human stories, expertly woven into the backdrop of a fantastical land, inhumane, at times, and thus entirely realistic” (9).

All these different stories are further enhanced by an interesting and powerful narrative technique that Martin applies to his books: he uses limited third-person narration in each chapter. The characters constantly rotate, which allows the reader to enter different mindsets and see the world of Westeros and Essos from different but also fragmented perspectives. There is a multitude of diverse point of view-characters, some of which occupy a major role (e.g. Catelyn, Eddard, Cersei, Tyrion, Daenerys, Jaime, Arya, Jon, Sansa, Bran and Brienne) and others who are subordinate (e.g. Melisandre, Barristan, Asha, Quentyn). We as readers experience what happens through the eyes and minds of these characters; what they feel, think, know, see, remember, hear and dream about. What we are not presented with are the happenings that occur in a different place, beyond a character’s reach. Sometimes we are given different accounts of the same story and have to decide for ourselves what we want to take at face value. The characters let us be part of their very own, personal experience of life; how they feel when they are mistreated or betrayed, but also when they are loved and cherished. Furthermore, they express their opinion on particular personalities within this world and this, in turn, impacts our perception of them. Their direct conversations and interactions with other people also give us clues as to what position they take up (Anglberger and Hieke 93). As a result, identification processes take place and we, the audience,

sympathise with the characters to a certain degree, whether they be men or women. The most interesting aspect with regards to this paper, however, is that Martin's readership – male as well as female – is not only presented with a male account of the story but it also gets a woman's take on events and how she sees herself within this male dominated world.

What has to be taken into consideration when analysing the model of femininity in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* is that the depiction of women has to be viewed in a pseudo-medieval context. It is a fictional story which is informed by historical events, figures and eras in which it was taken for granted that women were subordinate to men. Viewing the matter in this context justifies such a depiction of women although this by no means implies that such an image should be advocated (the same applies to the depiction of slavery for instance). It is important to acknowledge "that different cultures have different mindsets, as do different periods in history" (Rossetti le Strange, review blog). We have to keep in mind that we all see certain aspects under a moral filter and our contemporary sense of morality cannot be equated with that of Westeros. Still, we have to remember that a work of art like *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a product of the time it has been written in, and even more so *Game of Thrones*¹⁷. It is no coincidence that an epic narrative such as this resonates with such a vast audience at this particular time in history: it not only informs us about the plight of women in a pseudo-medieval time but, more importantly, gives us an impulse to think about what place gender occupies/should occupy in contemporary society.

¹⁷ The TV show *Game of Thrones* will be the main focus of this paper; the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* will only serve as a tool for comparative analysis. It should always be clearly indicated throughout the running text which one is referred to.

4. Theoretical background

The following chapters should familiarise the reader with certain theoretical concepts which should serve as a basis for the subsequent analysis of the representation of women in both *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*.

4.1. Constructivism

It has already been established that *Game of Thrones* occupies a significant position in popular culture. However, it is difficult, some might even say impossible, to determine to what extent a work of art like this influences society and, in effect, contemporary culture. Still, an attempt to answer a question like this might shed some light on the inner workings of meaning-making processes in Western society. Therefore, it first of all has to be defined what constitutes culture. Hall argues that “[p]rimarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group” (2). How meaning is deciphered depends on what significance we ascribe to it and how we represent it. Once we have established our relation to it, it influences our behaviour and actions (3). In further consequence, meaning has a direct correlation to the construction of our identity. It is not only negotiated by our conversations and social practices, but also by the media (3). How *Game of Thrones* is portrayed in the media, for example, shapes the opinions of its readers and watchers. Furthermore, by supplying the audience with postings on social media platforms like Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook, an extensive exchange and circulation of meanings is facilitated. “In other words, the question of meaning arises in relation to *all* the different moments or practices in our ‘cultural circuit’ – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct” (Hall 4). It can be argued, therefore, that the consumption of *Game of Thrones* and other commodities that are connected to it generates certain ideas about gender.

In essence, then, meaning is not something that is just merely there, an entity in itself but instead is constructed (Hall 5). Such a construction of meaning is the result of a myriad of signifying and representational practices. These, in turn, affect identification processes and help maintain a system in which we can embed ourselves (5). What is worth mentioning here is that meanings are not stable; they are negotiable and therefore open up a space to

make us question our identities, depending on what meanings we ascribe to certain things. Strongly connected to that is the concept of power because it has a claim of truth and thus contributes to how meaning is shaped (10).

Power is also a significant theme in the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault who considers it to be an influential factor in his theorem of 'discourse analysis'. In general parlance, discourse analysis tries to show how society is shaped by various discourses and how these discourses create meaning-making processes and practices (44). What he means by that is that our knowledge is a product of certain discourses. However, he argued that this knowledge is "historically and culturally specific" (47). If we apply this to the current subject at hand we will find that how gender is perceived is always a product of its time and open to new ascriptions. In this regard, *A Song of Ice and Fire* contributed enormously to bringing forth a rethinking about different gender roles. By placing both sexes in a medieval setting which embodies the epitome of patriarchy, all characters are constrained - some to a greater degree than others - by the rules that govern such a world. At the same time, however, the main female characters within this fictional world do not only have a decorative function, as one might expect, given they are placed in such a relentless society; instead they are portrayed as human beings who have great agency. They are active participants in their society and assume a great variety of different roles: from mothers to warriors, protectors, diplomats, manipulators and even rulers. To substantiate this claim, section five of this paper will provide the reader with some examples which should illustrate the portrayal of women in both book and series by using a semiotic approach.

4.2. Semiotics and Mythology

The general term we use for words, sounds or images which carry meaning is *signs*. These signs stand for or represent the concepts and the conceptual relations between them which we carry around in our heads and together they make up the meaning-systems of our culture. (Hall 18, italics in source)

Having evolved from the linguistic theory by Ferdinand de Saussure, semiotics essentially is about how (linguistic, cultural) signs produce meaning in our culture (36). What will be of relevance for this thesis, however, is the semiotic approach that has been expanded on by French theorist Roland Barthes: in his influential book *Mythologies*, which has first been published in 1957, he applied the theoretical framework that has been provided by de Saussure to popular culture by postulating that the same underlying principles of a language

system (signifier, signified, sign) can be applied on a meta-level which ultimately constitutes the so-called 'myth' (Barthes 113). Myth, then, takes the semiological system of language (signifier and signified make up the sign) in which "[t]hat which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (Barthes 113). The first system in this context corresponds to the linguistic level or "*language-object*" whereas the second system is the so-called "*metalanguage*" which comments on the former: myth itself (114, italics in source). What is worth mentioning here is that the first system must not be restricted to language only; it can also be constituted of different "modes [...] of representations" (108) such as moving images in film (which will be of considerable relevance for this paper), fashion, food, advertising and many other instances of everyday life.

In his essay *Myth Today*¹⁸, Barthes further illustrates what has just been mentioned in a more comprehensible way: in the first system, the signifier which can be equated with "meaning" and the signified which can be substituted with "concept" make up the sign, whereas in the second system these three stages can be superseded with "form", "concept" and "signification" (115). To visualise this in a more intelligible way:

meaning + concept = sign (language) → form + concept = signification (myth)

Concept, in this context, is linked to a specific point in history, a "certain knowledge of reality" (118) which is comprised of a multitude of different perceptions of the latter. The "repetition of the concept through different forms" (119) then facilitates the decoding of myth. In more simplified terms, myth is comprised of denotation, which inherently designates the literal meaning of a sign, and connotation, which carries an additional cultural or emotional layer of meaning (Bignell 16) and the mythologist's task is "identifying the signs which [myth] uses, and showing how they are built by means of codes into a structure which communicates particular messages and not others" (21).

¹⁸ *Myth Today* constitutes the second part of Barthes' book and serves as a theoretical basis for the first part, a collection of essays that attempt a dissection of modern myths (each chapter deals with a different topic, e.g. wrestling, detergent, wine, etc.).

A central point that Barthes wants to get across here is that “myth [...] transforms history into nature” (128), so rather than being messages that we take at face value, we have to be aware of the fact that they are constructed and thus not natural at all. These myths permeate our society and according to Barthes, “our society is still a bourgeois society” (137). As a result, the so-called bourgeoisie is responsible for ensuring that myths seem natural because they want to impose their ideology, the ideology of the ruling class, on society in order to secure their supremacy (Bignell 24). By extension, “[m]yth makes particular social meanings acceptable as the common-sense truth about the world” (23) and it is therefore our task to deconstruct these myths to open up space for alternative interpretations. If applied to the topic of this thesis, then, the primary task will be to identify ‘myths’ about women which are foregrounded by *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* and in further consequence challenge and subject them to a critical analysis.

4.3. Feminist Film Theory

Tying in with this notion of myth which has been mentioned in the precedent chapter, film is also a significant and influential domain in which myths are perpetuated. Imposing a dominant way of thinking on society, they influence our “understanding of gender, sexuality and society” (Nelmes 263). Composed of a myriad of images which are “symbolic and highly charged” (263), these myths facilitate identification processes and have an effect on how femininity and masculinity are constituted. How women are represented on screen, for instance, has a substantial impact on what is expected of them in the real world. For a long time, women have predominantly been restricted to the roles of sex objects, mothers, and human beings with limited agency (264) and although a larger variety of female roles has made it to the big screen in the last few decades, they still seem to be “disadvantaged and have lower status” (268) in many cases. They are often locked into so-called stereotypes which prevent them from becoming fully fledged, three-dimensional, complex characters.

4.3.1. Stereotyping or “Woman as the *Other*”

Stereotypes get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity. (Hall 258, italics in source)

Stereotyping is a very convenient organisational system which makes categorisation of our world easier; yet we should try to avoid it because it does not account for the multidimensionality of a character. Seeing the world in black and white facilitates our understanding of it; however, it is the grey areas that should be of interest to us. Nevertheless, we are prone to dividing the world into binary oppositions where one part, as Hall explains using Derrida, is usually charged with more power than the other (**male/female**, **black/white**, etc.) because it is more feasible (Hall 235). “Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order” and by employing this strategy, we create an environment which distinguishes the normal from the abnormal, the inside from the outside, the centre from the other, us from them. (258) Woman, in this respect, then assumes the inferior position of the outsider, the so-called *Other* (259) and this is also a phenomenon which can frequently be observed in mainstream cinema and television.

4.3.2. Gaze Theory¹⁹

When investigating female representation in mainstream cinema and television, establishing a link to Gaze Theory, a concept developed by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who drew very much on the theories formulated by French psychoanalytic critic Jacques Lacan, is inevitable. Lacan argued that the ‘gaze’ is an instrumental mode of self-differentiation and establishes a connection to the mirror stage, which contributes to the formation of a child’s ego in the same way that a film image affects the identity construction of a spectator. In simplified terms, the spectator sees a perfected image on screen, just like a child does in the mirror, and a negotiation between image and self-image takes place (Mulvey 61).

Generally, psychoanalysis and cinema have always been interrelated with each other which can be attributed to the fact that they originated simultaneously, thus sharing similar elements. This relation, however, is very problematic since psychoanalysis at the beginning was very much traversed by phallogocentric concepts which influenced scholars’ readings of films immensely, generally being in agreement that films principally “represent the workings of patriarchal ideology” (Bennett, Hickman, and Wall 253-254). This view was shared by the feminist community who criticised that “the major female contribution to mainstream film

¹⁹ The arguments and ideas put forward in this section correspond to the ones that have been mentioned in a literature review I wrote in 2013 called “Representations of screen femininities in past and contemporary mainstream cinema”.

over the past fifty years [was] a mixture of the decorative, the erotic and the descriptive” (Bennett, Hickman, and Wall 254). Instead of being depicted as individuals with agency, women were ascribed passivity which ultimately resulted in them being not instrumental in the progression of a story.

This notion has been taken up and expanded on by British film theorist Laura Mulvey. In her ground-breaking, much-cited 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* she draws on Freud’s concept of ‘Schaubus’ and Lacan’s theory of the ‘gaze’ to substantiate her claims. One of her main arguments in that essay is that mainstream cinema puts the spectator in a male position; men advance the narrative, exert power and are in sole control whereas women are subjected to the ‘male gaze’, becoming objects of visual pleasure: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 62-63, italics in source). The pleasure that can be derived from looking at a person as an object of desire she terms ‘scopophilia’, with an additional dimension of ‘narcissism’ when the spectator eventually identifies with the image on screen. However, the “look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content” because of the castration complex (since women lack a penis, men are apprehensive of castration) that women represent (62). As a result, there are two ways in which men exercise their control and demonstrate their superiority, the first one being the penalisation of women and the second one being the exaggeration of their bodily traits (such as lips or breasts) which is also known as ‘fetishism’ (65). The role of women, therefore, is reduced to that of “erotic objects” whose function it is to stimulate not only the people on- but also off-screen (63). As a consequence, woman is a mere accompaniment to man, “tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (59).

The concept of the ‘male gaze’ as proposed by Mulvey soon found its way into feminist film studies, advancing to become a major cornerstone in the field. However, her theoretical approach was soon subjected to critique with many scholars disapproving her disregard of the female spectator (Cook and Bernink 355). This led to the revision of her theory, which was repeatedly undertaken (e.g. in her 1981 essay *Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’*) but could never really please its critics (355). As a result, other scholars soon concerned themselves with the subject matter, trying to fill the gap that was left by Mulvey. Mary Ann Doane was one of the first academics who analysed female spectatorship in more detail and her 1982 paper *Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female*

Spectator became well-established in the field. Her main argument revolves around identification processes of women with screen femininities and purports that women cannot disassociate themselves from their cinematic counterparts because they *are* the image (Doane 499, emphasis added). Men, on the other hand, succeed in doing that in order to be able to satisfy their (voyeuristic / sexual) appetite. To evade the “adoption of the masculine position in relation to the cinematic sign, the female spectator is [therefore] given two options: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one’s own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way” (Doane 507). In order to separate “herself [from] the represented femininity on screen” (Cook and Bernink 357), she can put up a mask which Doane terms the ‘masquerade’. This so-called masquerade, then, allows the female spectator to dismantle the male gaze by enhancing and exaggerating feminine traits, ultimately destabilising the female image on screen (Doane 503).

Closely linked to female spectatorship is the topic of female subjectivity which is elaborated on at length in Teresa de Lauretis’ 1985 article *Rethinking Women’s Cinema: Aesthetics and feminist Theory*. Her concept of female aesthetics implies that not only the story itself but also the manner in which a particular story is recounted and visually realised, impacts the female observer (de Lauretis 321). In her article she advocates movies which “[address their] spectator as a woman, regardless of the gender of viewers [in that they define] all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine, or feminist” (de Lauretis 322, italics in source) while concurrently acknowledging that such movies are nevertheless a rarity because mainstream cinema continues to endorse the male perspective. In addition, de Lauretis demands that those movies should provide a more varied representation of womanhood and femininity (not only white middle class women) by incorporating components such as race and class (de Lauretis 326-327). These components have been invariably disregarded by feminist film studies, “forc[ing] an erroneous universalization, and inadvertently reaffirm[ing] white middle-class norms” according to Jane Gaines (Gaines 716). Hence, in her article *White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory* which was published in 1988 in *Screen-Journal*, she encourages the inclusion of marginalised groups (women of colour, lesbians, etc.) in feminist film studies instead of merely addressing gender differences (718) and soon many scholars followed suit²⁰.

²⁰ Cf. bell hooks’ *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* (1992), B. Ruby Rich’s *New Queer Cinema* (1992), Kaja Silverman’s *Masochism and Male Subjectivity* (1988), among many others.

Finally, Claire Johnston's *Women's cinema as countercinema* (1975) is another influential article which is of particular relevance for this thesis because it describes the construction and distribution of myth in films. As has already been mentioned in section 4.2. of this paper, myth is a "product of bourgeois ideology" (Johnston 36) that appears to be natural when in fact it is not. The depiction of women primarily reflects the dominant ideology of a society and Johnston argues that it is the task of women's cinema to deconstruct myths of women that are perpetuated in films: "[I]t is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/ the depiction of reality must also be interrogated" (37). She demands that films should not only be mere sites of "entertainment"; they should also be used as "political tool[s]" (39).

As has been illustrated above, it is an extremely difficult endeavour to make definitive statements about the representation of women on screen since so many different aspects have to be taken into consideration. Moreover, gender representations are continuously open to new ascriptions and change over time which aggravates analysis even more. However, many scholars provide the community with valuable, illuminating new ideas and concepts (cf. Modleski, Stacey, Neale, Metz, Silverman) and will continue to do so as long as films are being produced. The multifacetedness of feminist film studies is reflected in "[t]he polyphony of voices, multiple points of view, and cinematic styles and genres, [which] signify women's successful struggle for self-representation on the silver screen" (Cook and Bernink 362). One thing, however, is for certain: rather than postulating the making of feminist, avant-garde films, as Mulvey did, movies should be made that are inside the popular and that portray a wide range of femininities since it is from popular culture that most people get their information on what constitutes a woman or a man, respectively (Storey 116). Therefore, prevalent (visual) representations permeating the media-sphere have to be questioned and revised.

5. Character and Content Analysis

Since the emergence of motion-pictures at the beginning of the 20th century, literary works of art have repeatedly been used as “prime source materials” (Wise xiii) for films. Especially in the last few years it can be observed that there has been an ongoing trend to use books as a basis for more and more TV shows as well (e.g. *True Blood*, *Gossip Girl*). The adaptation of a book to the screen is always accompanied by a number of difficult issues: first of all, an author of a literary work can create a self-contained microcosm and establish a certain atmosphere with his/her words that is sometimes unattainable for producers. Secondly, the author has the freedom to invent a rich, complex and multifaceted world which is often unrealisable on screen due to time limitations and financial restrictions. As a result, some of the source material inevitably has to be compressed in order to fit into the predetermined framework of a TV show or a film, respectively (Wise xiii). Another precarious aspect is the “question of authorship [...] in a literary adaptation” (Wise xiii) because it is hard to determine who can be held accountable for the movie/TV adaptation – the original author of the book or the people involved in the film/series itself such as screenplay writers and directors. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, I would lean towards the latter although here, too, a clear line cannot be drawn since Martin writes scripts for some of the episodes every now and then.

Generally, great importance should be attached to storytelling and the quality of how it is done. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the narrative has to be transferred one-to-one; it can also be very intriguing for the audience to be presented with a different, distinctive “spin” on a particular story (Wise xiv). This also holds true for *Game of Thrones*; the first couple of seasons have been very much identical with the book, whereas the later ones more and more deviated from the original storyline. Season 5, which was broadcasted not long ago, stands out even more in this regard in that it condenses some subplots, changes character developments and even leaves out major plotlines. To some readers of the books, this can be very disappointing but at the same time, it can also be very exciting not to know the direction the series is taking. It certainly accounts for a more suspenseful viewing experience. For this paper, however, only the first four seasons will have to suffice as the source material for a comparative analysis since the deviation of the fifth season from the books would become elusive.

It is worth mentioning here that in the majority of cases, the common consensus is that literary works are often better than their visual counterparts and in many cases, “Hollywood [indeed] distorts and corrupts serious literature for the entertainment pleasures of a mass audience” (Tibbetts and Welsh xviii). Still, this is a wide generalisation and there are always exceptions to the rule. Furthermore, films and TV series make literary works of art more accessible to a wider audience, which might have never heard about it or consumed it in the first place (Tibbetts and Welsh xv), thereby making them into commercial successes in return. To ensure the enjoyment of both literary and visual medium, it is therefore advisable to avoid constant comparison (although this of course is inevitable), to regard them both as distinct entities and just enjoy them for what they are.

Having provided a brief insight into adaptation studies, it is now time to consider *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its TV adaptation *Game of Thrones* more closely. Taking some scenes from the show and comparing them to their literary counterpart should shed some light on gender representations and how they differ in both book and series. The approach that will be taken here in order to gather material that will be useful for the second part of this paper (i.e. the construction of myths of women) is a semiotic one. With regards to the books, the focus will be on the language Martin uses to convey certain messages whereas, following media semiotics as described by Bignell, the

[...] film sequence[s will] be analysed to discover the relationship between signs in the sequence, and the way that signs from different signifying systems (image, sound) are combined together by means of codes [(e.g. sound effects, lighting, angles, editing, costumes, gestures, etc.)] to generate meanings. (Bignell 191)

5.1. Catelyn – the mother

In both book and series, Catelyn Stark is portrayed as the “archetypal mother” (Frankel 77). She is introduced to the story as a woman who is a product of her surroundings: the harsh living conditions of the North she has been thrown into when she married her husband Ned Stark are mirrored in her personality. She not only is resilient and assertive but is also very protective of her children. As another consequence, she is very pragmatic and realistic. To the readers, these traits become most visible during the first quarter of Book One, when King Robert, protector of the realm, pays a royal visit to the Starks and summons Ned to be his hand. At first, Ned is hesitant about this offer because it would mean that he has to abandon his castle and part of his family in order to take on his duty of advising the king in King’s Landing, the capital of Westeros. It is Catelyn who remains level-headed and tries to make Ned see what repercussions his decision could have on all of them: “He will not understand that. He is a king now, and kings are not like other men. If you refuse to serve him, he will wonder why, and sooner or later he will begin to suspect that you oppose him. Can’t you see the danger that would put us in?” (Martin, “A Game” 59). Although she obviously would prefer her husband to stay, she puts her emotional attachment aside and argues rationally. Instead of acting upon her own wishes and desires, she thinks ahead with the best intentions for her family in mind.

Seen in a pseudo-medieval context, this is a very unusual conduct for a woman in her situation. If she adhered to societal expectations that varied according to gender, she would have begged her husband to stay; a reaction resulting from misery and desperation. Unfortunately, in the series this, indeed, is the reaction she has (S01E01, 47:00). As a result, her agency is compromised which, in turn, makes her a weaker character. In the book, however, she remains persistent and presses her point, and even more so upon learning from her sister that the Lannisters (their arch enemies from the South of Westeros) have conspired to kill her husband, the precedent hand of the king: “Now we truly have no choice. You *must* be Robert’s Hand. You must go south with him and learn the truth” (Martin, “A Game” 63, italics in source). The typical gender roles seem to be reversed here: instead of facing ‘war’ (a war of intrigues), which would be expected of a man of his calibre, Ned refuses to go and abandon his family whereas Catelyn is the one who urges him to leave: “Catelyn’s heart went out to him, but she knew she could not take him in her arms just then. First the victory must be won, for her children’s sake” (Martin, “A Game” 63).

This changes when one of their sons' life is endangered. Due to him witnessing a sexual encounter that was not intended for his eyes, an extreme measure is being taken: one of the Lannisters throws him off a tower which results in him being comatosed. Catelyn is devastated and full of grief, which ultimately makes her change her mind. For fear of her son's well-being and security, she does not want her husband to leave after all: "She had begged Ned not to go, not now, not after what had happened; everything had changed now, couldn't he see that?" (Martin, "A Game" 130). In the end, he decides to leave despite the prevailing circumstances but at the same time entrusts Catelyn with an important task: to help their eldest son, Robb, become a wise ruler and to govern the North while he is away. This shows that he has a great amount of confidence in her and her abilities as both a mother and a leader, which, for the greater part, will prove to be true.

At first, Catelyn seems to be overwhelmed with being left behind (she has to let go of her daughters who accompany Ned to King's Landing) which is aggravated by the fact that her younger son's state remains unchanged. Out of fear for her son's death, she becomes increasingly lethargic, desperate and emotional to a point which is on the borderline of insanity because of her motherly love. On one occasion she even claims that "[she] would gladly butcher every horse in Winterfell with [her] own hands if it would open Bran's eyes [again]" (Martin, "A Game" 129) which reflects her appalling state of misery. The incident that finally marks a turning point in her character development is when an assassin is sent to kill her son and she has to defend not only him but herself as well, which ultimately forces her to dismiss her passivity in order to save both their lives. Consequently, she regains her agency and resolves to take responsibility for her life again: "Catelyn remembered the way she had been before, and she was ashamed. She had let them all down, her children, her husband, her House. It would not happen again. She would show these northerners how strong a Tully of Riverrun could be" (Martin, "A Game" 134).

Thenceforward, she becomes her old self again, displaying all the fine qualities she possesses: determination, resilience and diplomacy. When her husband is murdered in King's Landing, Robb decides to strike out and avenge him. At the same time, he commands Catelyn to stay at Winterfell, their home, in order to look after her youngest son but she refuses him instead. She wants to play an active role in the battle for the North which ensues after the happenings in King's Landing and demands retribution for her husband's death. Thereupon, she becomes her son's political advisor and, more than once, proves her great aptitude for this task. Since she knows the Houses that govern Westeros and its inner workings very well, her advice is invaluable for her son's council meetings. She considers

all the strategies they discuss and its ramifications with great care and tries not to make impulsive decisions, as opposed to her male counterparts. Furthermore, she favours finding a compromise in order to keep peace rather than starting a fight: “A lord must learn that sometimes words can accomplish what swords cannot” (Martin, “A Game” 642). Moreover, Catelyn is very perceptive which proves useful for making war plans. Reading people’s intentions allows her to anticipate possible outcomes of their actions and shows great diplomatic thinking.

Another admirable trait is that, despite being full of fear and grief at times, she maintains a confident and tough exterior for Robb in the hope of rubbing off on him. She does not allow his insecurity and despair to prevail but instead encourages him to fight for what he believes in. She knows politics and apprehends what consequences would arise, were her son to show weakness. Therefore, she repeatedly challenges him to take a stance in order to be respected by the other lords: “*Be* certain [...] or go home and take up that wooden sword again” (Martin, “A Game” 604, italics in source). This might come across as being harsh but it forces him to abandon his insecurities and is just the incentive he needs to really take action. Catelyn knows when to be demanding but is also aware when it is necessary to remain in the background: “He was playing a man’s part now, and she would not take that away from him” (Martin, “A Game” 598). After a long time of being separated and upon realising that her son has proven himself in warfare, her initial reaction would have been to hug and kiss him but she consciously restrains herself from doing it because she is aware of how this would come across in front of the other lords. To secure their respect, she pulls herself together and although she fears for his life, she entrusts him with the demanding task of leading a war. She has faith in her child’s abilities and is pragmatic about her conduct towards him (if she sent him back to Winterfell to ensure his safety, which she would like best, it would only show the other lords that he is still a child and would lessen their respect for him). Anticipating the consequences of her actions before acting upon them, is without doubt one of her best qualities and although she also makes some grave mistakes over the course of the narrative (desperate, impulsive measures that are emotionally-driven by her motherly love) she definitely proves that “[a] woman can rule as wisely as a man”, if they only let them (Martin, “A Game” 366).

During the war that her son is in embroiled in, she repeatedly is sent as an envoy to treat with several noblemen in order to conduct negotiations that are beneficial for him and his entourage. Robb puts great trust in his mother because he knows that her diplomacy can give them an advantage over his enemies. As has been mentioned above, her goal is to negotiate

peace rather than advocate war and although she successfully seals some treaties, she is always realistic about war and thinks one step ahead: “Tomorrow’s trials concerned her more than yesterday’s triumphs” (Martin, “A Clash” 558). At one point during one of her voyages, she encounters Brienne, another interesting female character that will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, who offers to serve and protect her. When Catelyn demands to learn why she chose her, Brienne responds with the following statement: “[Y]ou have courage. Not battle courage perhaps but ... I don’t know... a kind of *woman’s* courage” (Martin, “A Clash” 562, italics in source). She appreciates Catelyn’s strength and fierceness and it is a very powerful scene in which they forge a bond of female solidarity. This very aptly illustrates the perception of Catelyn’s character within the narrative.

In the series, much of Catelyn’s agency is unfortunately taken away in favour of Robb’s character. In one instance, for example, she is the one who gives the orders that Jaime Lannister should be put in chains and only afterwards Robb complies (Martin, “A Game” 700); in the series, however, this is reversed and Robb is the one in command. Generally, her son is portrayed as being much more superior to her whereas in the books, she is the one providing him with guidance, support and council because of his young age. To illustrate this distorted representation on screen, an analysis of a particular film sequence, which will be contrasted to its literary counterpart, should suffice.

The scene in question is the one in which Catelyn decides to free Jaime Lannister, an extremely valuable captive, in exchange for her two daughters who are trapped in King’s Landing, without Robb’s knowledge. Being profoundly affected by the horrifying news of her youngest sons’ deaths back at Winterfell, she decides to do everything in her power to at least fight for her daughters’ lives. By instructing Brienne to bring back Jaime to King’s Landing, she promises herself that her two daughters, Arya and Sansa, will be delivered safely to her in return. She is fully aware of the consequences such an action might entail and is ready to face them. When Robb’s bannermen discover that Jaime is missing and ultimately confront her, she responds as follows:

I understood what I was doing and knew it was treasonous. If you fail to punish me, men will believe that we connived together to free Jaime Lannister. It was mine own act and mine alone, and I alone must answer for it. Put me in the Kingslayer’s empty irons, and I will wear them proudly, if that is how it must be. (Martin, “A Storm” 34)

Since Robb is away fighting battles when her treason is revealed, they have to punish her on his behalf. They regard Catelyn's proposition as being too drastic and instead decide to confine her to a few rooms within her original home that is Riverrun, the castle at which she took up residence during Robb's campaign. After all, she is the mother of the King of the North. The people surrounding her are instructed to talk only the bare necessities, thus it takes her a while to find out that Robb was wounded in battle and is recuperating elsewhere. When he returns, she is summoned into the Great Hall to attend the assembly of the king and his bannermen. She is anxious about her son's reaction to her treason but what comes then, she would have never anticipated:

“No man calls my lady of Winterfell a traitor in my hearing [...] “If I could wish the Kingslayer back in chains I would. You freed him without my knowledge or consent...but what you did, I know you did for love. For Arya and Sansa, and out of grief for Bran and Rickon. Love's not always wise, I've learned. It can lead us to great folly, but we follow our hearts...wherever they take us. Don't we, Mother?” (Martin, “A Storm” 192)

Catelyn, having expected anger and disappointment, is extremely surprised by her son's understanding. He forgives her and only later is it revealed why he has been acting this way: because he has done something which will have even worse consequences in the end. He has married a Westerling-girl who nursed and comforted him during his time of recovery, instead of a Frey girl, which was initially agreed upon. It took Catelyn a lot of convincing to form this pact in the first place in order to render it possible for Robb to strategically use the Freys' assets in his war and by marrying a different girl, he has broken it. Upon learning what grave mistake her son has made, Catelyn reprimands him: “Not only have you broken your oath, but you've slighted the honor of the Twins by choosing a bride from a lesser house” (Martin, “A Storm” 196). She is intelligent enough to anticipate the possible consequences of this action. She knows that the head of the Freys, a very proud man, will feel insulted and might even seek revenge. Furthermore, she is aware that Freys' response to this affront could have a considerably negative impact on the war her son is leading. She rebukes Robb in a harsh tone, trying to make him understand the severity of the problem: “From the way Robb looked at her, she could tell that it had been a long while since anyone had dared speak to him so bluntly” (Martin, “A Storm” 200).

Catelyn's agency, as described above, unfortunately is reduced to a minimum in the series in this particular scene (S02E08, 12:00). The roles seem to be reversed: instead of her rebuking her son, it is Robb who criticises her behaviour and ultimately gives the orders to have her imprisoned. Although the background story is slightly altered in the series in that Robb chooses love over duty (he marries a woman he fell in love with while campaigning; in the book he marries the girl because his sense of honour compelled him to do it), it does not change the fact that he has made just as grave a mistake as his mother. Still, she is the one who has to suffer harsh punishment.

Firstly, the setting of the scene diverges considerably from its literary counterpart: the assembly in the Great Hall is substituted with a tent on the camp they set up during their war expedition. Instead of being surrounded by a mass of people, Catelyn and Robb are only accompanied by one of his followers who intended to use Jaime Lannister for exacting revenge for his two dead sons. The colours in the background are not coincidental; they have been chosen with care because they instantly create a particular atmosphere. The brown and beige drapes establish the setting of the scene: they are out on the field, surrounded by nature with no castle in sight which would demand socially acceptable conduct. Instead, they allow the characters to act naturally and vent their emotions. This is, indeed, what Robb does: he voices his anger and disappointment regarding his mother's behaviour. Moreover, the red drape in Catelyn's background signifies imminent danger. Applying this particular colour scheme allows the creators of the series to foreshadow what is going to happen: Catelyn is in jeopardy. Robb will punish her for freeing his most valuable captive without his consent which is a big blow to his ego. He does not even try to sympathise with her situation but instead exerts his power over her.

In addition to that, the clothes both characters are wearing are also worth considering because they further stress their contrasting positions. Robb is dressed in brown armour which is partly covered by a coat that is fur-trimmed which exudes confidence, strength and stability. The fur adds a layer of extravagance which, in effect, emphasises his superiority. Catelyn, on the other hand, wears a simple grey-blueish linen gown which signals that she occupies an inferior position. Although the colour blue usually triggers predominantly positive associations, in this context it evokes the opposite (cf. feeling blue), representing her unstable emotional state but also her devotion to her cause whereas the grey colour mirrors her sad – and loneliness.

Sound, or lack thereof, is another contributing factor to the effect this scene has on the audience. Generally, "music guides and enhances our responses to the story" (Nelmes 102);

therefore it has a huge impact on its reception. Usually, the ‘soundscape’ of a series or a film is comprised of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds; the first being sounds that occur within the artificial world that is created on screen and the latter being the music that is especially composed to stir particular emotions in the spectator (Nelmes 100). The diegetic sounds in this scene are predominated by trotting noises from the horses that are moving outside the tent. Apart from that, no accompanying music is audible, which, in effect, creates a lot of tension. Only at the very end of the scene, when Robb announces his verdict, some Cello-sounds in minor, which gradually deepen by a half-tone, mirror the forlornness of the situation.

Finally, cinematography which “refer[s] to all those elements of cinematic expression which are performed or controlled by the camera” (Nelmes 93) further emphasises the disparity of their positions. When Robb confronts Catelyn and questions her about her motives, the camera establishes a low angle medium close-up in order to stress his superior position. He looks down which can be equated with looking down at his mother. Catelyn’s inferiority, on the other hand, is stressed by a high angle medium shot which alternates with a high angle close-up throughout the whole scene. She looks up to him, hoping for understanding on his side which unfortunately does not happen. She is seated during the whole sequence, whereas Robb’s standing position is supported by a medium long shot in between. This further stresses his power and freedom to act and her helplessness and inescapability. Only at the very end, after his decree, does she stand up as a sign of protest, at the same time being aware that she cannot change her son’s mind and showing resignation which is affirmed by a medium long shot from her back.

5.2. Brienne – the warrior

Brienne's first appearance is in the second season of the series; in the books she gets her own point-of-view chapters even later, in the fourth instalment. Therefore, she might not be considered a major character per se; however, for this thesis her character is very relevant in that it provides the perspective of a woman who does not conform to the gender norms that are inflicted on her by society.

“Had Brienne been a man, she would have been called big; for a woman, she was huge. *Freakish* was the word she had heard all her life” (Martin, “A Feast” 84, italics in source). Brienne does not really live up to the expectations her society sets up for women, neither with regards to her appearance nor with regards to her behaviour. Being a woman with an unproportionally big stature, she automatically has been condemned to assume the role of an outsider. The fact that she consciously denies the roles that her society offers to women by becoming a knight, forces her into a corner even more. She is an exceptionally good fighter and does not shy away from showing it. Moreover, she continuously is mistaken for a man (people often call her sir) and instantly becomes the object of ridicule and mockery once people find out that she is, in fact, not. Comments like “No man deserves to be cursed with such as you” (Martin, “A Feast” 520) are not an exception; many people regard her as an abomination of nature. This, consequently, causes a lot of psychological damage which results in a severe lack of self-respect and confidence: “I am the only child the gods let [my father] keep. The freakish one, not fit to be a son *or* daughter” (Martin, “A Feast” 672, italics in source).

As a result of being the subject of ridicule all her life, Brienne is an extremely self-conscious woman: “It was not the scorn of the many that left her confused and vulnerable, but the kindness of the view” (Martin, “A Feast” 299). The fact that she does not conform to the beauty standards (in the book she is described as being unsightly with the exception of her pretty, blue eyes) set up by society and, as a consequence, has to suffer ill-treatment because of it is a sad reality that even prevails nowadays, in non-fictional times. These gender expectations, which she cannot fulfil, make her an extremely vulnerable and insecure person: “Lady Stark had been kind to her, but most women were just as cruel as men. She could not have said which she found most hurtful, the pretty girls with their waspish tongues and brittle laughter or the cold-eyed ladies who hid their disdain behind a mask of courtesy” (Martin, “A Feast” 286). It is not surprising, therefore, that Brienne is not only disillusioned

about men (attempted rape, pretence courting in order to take her virginity, mockingly calling her 'Brienne the Beauty'/ wench) but also women, which, in effect, results in her having big trust issues. In essence, then, Brienne is a tortured soul which hides behind a tough exterior.

Despite the countless mistreatments she has to suffer, however, she keeps her head held high and advocates her beliefs. She is devoted to the ideal of the 'noble knight' and strives to live up to this image, probably more so than any other man in Westeros: "*Old or young, a true knight is sworn to protect those who are weaker than himself, or die in the attempt*" (Martin, "A Feast" 665, italics in source). Her intentions are honourable and she feels a great sense of duty towards helping others. This becomes most apparent when she promises Catelyn Stark to search for her daughters and bring them back to her unharmed. Although a lot of obstacles are put in her way during this expedition, she never loses faith in her mission and tirelessly continues her journey to honour her promise.

On her mission, she repeatedly demonstrates exceptional fighting skills, especially with her sword. Her physical superiority is continuously confirmed by the various accounts of her encounters with all sorts of different people, which are often given in flashbacks:

Yet somehow she had found the courage to tell Ser Humfrey that she would accept chastisement only from a man who could outfight her. The old knight purpled but agreed to don his own armor to teach her a woman's proper place. [...] She broke Ser Humfrey's collarbone, two ribs, and their betrothal. (Martin, "A Feast" 202)

Because of her gender, men do not expect her to be such a skilled fighter, let alone imagine she would be even capable of defeating them: "Men will always underestimate you [...] and their pride will make them want to vanquish you quickly, lest it be said that a woman tried them sorely" (Martin, "A Feast" 203). Brienne, however, continues to prove them wrong. Still, it is a shame that the world she is living in hampers her to utilise her talent just because she is a woman. Her self-confidence is repeatedly shaken, up to a point where she even wonders whether becoming one of the "soft helpless women" (Martin, "A Feast" 788) in need of a man's protection, who marry young and have many children, and who conform to a man's conception of the ideal woman would be an option. Becoming one of these women was indeed intended for Brienne when she was still a child but in the end, she took a completely different path and became a knight against all odds: "It always made her feel a little sad, but a little relieved as well" (Martin, "A Feast" 288).

Brienne's portrayal on screen unfortunately is not as nuanced as her literary counterpart. Although she still performs the role of the honourable, yet naïve knight, who is not taken seriously by the majority of people and therefore has to prove herself time and time again, the dimension of vulnerability and insecurity is missing. Instead, according to Frankel, she embodies the typical "stoic warrior woman trope" (53) who is tough and bad-ass:

The warrior women are second-wave feminism's ideal: career-focused and completely independent without spouse or children, equal to "the boys", immune to love or softer emotions [...], however, these women have all cast aside all traces of femininity to compete with men and thrive in a man's world. (Frankel 48)

As a result, the multi-dimensionality of her character is compromised, reducing her to more of a stereotype. She is introduced to the series as a tough warrior who, without hesitation, kills people if necessary. This is a substantial deviation from the book's description: having never killed anyone before, the threat of three men intending to wipe her out ultimately forces her to retaliate. She is significantly affected by this and her internal moral struggle is described in much detail. These different facets of her character unfortunately vanish in the series: her emotional side is obscured in order to match the audiences' expectations of a tough female fighter (Frankel 53).

Having established that, it is worth mentioning that there is a variety of scenes, especially in Season Two, which give Brienne's character some depth: when Renly, the Lord she was sworn to protect, is killed by a mysterious creature, she has to defend herself against two men who attack her because they believe her to be the culprit. After she has finished them, she bends over him and starts weeping bitterly. Here, her supremacy over the two men is very skilfully contrasted with her desperation, vulnerability and powerlessness concerning Renly's death (S02E05, 06:10). Another powerful and encouraging scene is when Brienne offers to be Catelyn's protector and subsequently swears fealty to her (S02E05, 41:10). It is a rarity in Westerosi society when two women decide to work together and support each other and hence sends a strong message of female solidarity. When Brienne stiffly bows before her and commits herself to her cause in a very formal manner, Catelyn takes her hand and puts it into her own in response. Considering Brienne's restraint towards both sexes, as has already been discussed above, this is a very meaningful gesture. Finally, the great amount of her conscientiousness and honour finds its expression in a scene which is absent from the books: when Brienne is on her way delivering Jaime to King's Landing, they come across three women's corpses which are hanging from a tree (S02E10, 16:00). Although

they are in a hurry, trying to flee without being recognised, she nevertheless takes the time to cut them down and give them a proper burial.

Despite these moments which are glimmers of light, there are at least as many scenes (that do not occur in the book) which weaken Brienne's character. Among them is one in which Jaime is highly depressed and does not show any will to live anymore because of losing his sword-hand, which has deliberately been cut off by the people that captured both of them. Brienne, disgusted by his self-pity, thereupon puts him in his place by telling him that people suffer way worse things than having their hands taken away which results in him waking up and finding courage to face life again. The choice of words she uses, however, is very deplorable: by saying "You sound like a bloody woman" she automatically denigrates her own gender (S03E04, 25:00). Another critical scene is the one in which Cersei, after Brienne has brought her beloved brother Jaime back safely to the capital, accuses her of being in love with him (S04E02, 38:00). This suggests that Brienne's incentive to protect him was her love for him rather than her duty as an honourable knight, which weakens her agency enormously. Although there are some hints in the book that she develops feelings for him, they seem to be more platonic than romantic.

These narrative alterations change the perception of Brienne's character (as opposed to its literary counterpart), which is additionally endorsed by her visual representation on screen. One scene in particular illustrates this very well: while both Jaime and her sit together in a tub in a bathhouse and start talking, ultimately resolving their issues with one another (S03E05, 36:40), Brienne is objected to the male gaze. When Jaime insults her by claiming that she has failed to protect him (concerning his hand) just as she has Lord Renly (it has to be mentioned here that she was secretly in love with this man), Brienne instantly springs to her feet in defiance, eyeing him contemptuously, thereby exhibiting her full naked body to him. The camera, however, does not capture her front; instead a medium shot of her back, exposing her buttocks, is provided. In the background, Jaime can be seen looking up to her, asking for forgiveness for his rude remark. After that, a medium close-up of her front shows her hardened facial expression and part of her upper body, interestingly without exposing her breasts. Taking into consideration that *Game of Thrones* is a very sexually explicit show, this visual representation of her body is very surprising. However, the decision to not show this particular part of her body was probably done with a certain underlying intention in mind: to convey that – because she does not conform to 'typical feminine aesthetics' and instead exhibits more masculine traits - she indeed is not a 'real' woman.

5.3. Cersei – the manipulator

Being one of the most debated (and hated) characters on both *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Cersei, a villainous creature, is “manipulating everyone she can to achieve her own ends” (Spector 181). People regard her as the most beautiful woman in the whole kingdom and she tries to live up to these societal expectations in that she conserves her outer appearance accordingly. Consequently, she is one of the most feminised characters in both book and series.

Her behaviour, however, does not resemble that of a ‘typical woman’ at all. She is conniving and callous and does everything in her power to extend her political influence. One of these acts of improving her position is that she gives the orders to have her husband, the King of Westeros, killed, with the intention of being able to rule the kingdom as Queen Regent until her oldest child, Joffrey, comes of age. This plan, however, backfires because her sociopathic son usurps her power by claiming his right to the Iron Throne, making some fatal decisions himself during his reign. Still, Cersei gains a lot of power after her husband’s death and soon overrules the whole council by initiating political moves herself, which are always motivated by her own interests. Modelling herself after her father, the mighty and greatly feared Tywin Lannister, she is a ruthless woman who rules through fear. As opposed to Catelyn Stark, Cersei makes rash decisions without anticipating their consequences, ultimately lacking the necessary patience and pragmatism of a good leader. She only wants power for herself and not for anyone else (regardless of their gender) and this egotism will eventually get in her way: once she has gained the sought-after power, she does not really know what to do with it.

Being a person of low cunning, Cersei is constantly conspiring to obtain some kind of benefit; and if not for her, then for her children. She truly loves her children, which seems to be her only positive quality. Being the product of her incestuous relationship with her twin brother, Jaime, conceiving these children was her only act of self-control. Since she was married off against her will at a young age to a man who was still in love with another woman and eventually resorted to adultery with numerous prostitutes, she decided to take matters into her own hands by usurping his line of succession. Her three children are the outcome of a relationship based on love rather than contempt, although this *modus operandi* is not approved by society. They mean the world to her and she protects them fiercely; on the other hand, her motherly love often stands in the way and makes her act unreasonably:

“As such [...], her motherhood becomes human frailty and irrationality, traditional “feminine weaknesses.”” (Frankel 75)

For a long time, Cersei’s character description is made up by different accounts of various people in the book. In the fourth instalment, however, she becomes a point of view-character, which allows the readers to delve into her mind and ultimately facilitates understanding of her complex character. Her narrative thread starts with the death of her father who she always looked up to. Nevertheless, her relationship with him had always been complicated: she despised him for marrying her off to King Robert, restricting her to the role of a “broodmare” whose sole purpose would be to uphold the Lannister bloodline by bearing children. On the other hand, she felt the desire to make him proud and earn his respect by imitating his ruthless, brutal leadership qualities and by maintaining their family legacy.

Despite being shocked by his sudden death, Cersei’s first thought that comes to mind is which opportunities are opened up and offer themselves to be seized: “*Now there is a hole in the world where Father stood, and holes want filling*” (Martin, “A Feast” 68, italics in source). She is aware of the fact that his death could bring forth a vast amount of contenders, striving to replace him and take his power: “They would try to push her aside, as they always had. She would need to move quickly, as she had when Robert died” (Martin, “A Feast” 69). As a result, she acts swiftly and replaces almost every person of the court council with her own men because she feels that she cannot rely upon most of its original members. Having asserted her authority, her heightened sense of superiority makes her feel unconquerable: “*It is my look they will flinch from now, my frown that they must fear. I am a lion too*” (Martin, “A Feast” 145, italics in source). This feeling of invincibility, however, will be her downfall in the end. Her judgement, clouded by arrogance, will eventually result in her making many unwise decisions. At one point, when she reminisces about her father, her thoughts reflect her complacency very accurately: “He had been a great man. *I shall be greater, though. A thousand years from now, when the masters write about this time, you shall be remembered only as Queen Cersei’s sire*” (Martin, “A Feast” 145, italics in source). Cersei’s determination to assert herself in the ‘game of thrones’, certainly originates in her being forced from an early age to carry out a decorative function, due to her gender: “When she was small she would sometimes don her brother’s clothing as a lark. She was always startled by how differently men treated her when they thought that she was Jaime” (Martin, “A Feast” 345). All her life she has been forced to perform the role ascribed to her by

society and soon realises that women are not permitted any kind of agency in a patriarchal system such as this. Disillusioned by that fact, she soon starts to despise herself for being a member of the 'weaker' sex: "She had a warrior's heart, but the gods in their blind malice had given her the feeble body of a woman" (Martin, "A Dance" 787). As a result, Cersei blames every ill-treatment she receives on her gender rather than questioning her own behaviour and admitting to herself to be a person with flaws, too: "When Tywin Lannister spoke, men obeyed. When Cersei spoke, they felt free to counsel her, to contradict her, even *refuse her. It is all because I am a woman. Because I cannot fight them with a sword*" (Martin, "A Feast" 507, italics in source).

From a feminist perspective, another precarious notion is that she thinks she can seize (political) power by using her sexuality. The following comment says it all: "Tears aren't a woman's only weapon; the best one's between your legs" (S02E09). The motivation behind sleeping with other men, which she does repeatedly, is to ensure their devotion to her. Using her body rather than her mind to further her cause, is an unfortunate decision. This tactic seems to initially bring her advantages; in the end, however, it will be held against her. Generally, Cersei makes a lot of deplorable choices during her tenure as Queen Regent. Her unshakeable belief in herself and her abilities most often engenders unwise decisions with fatal consequences. Furthermore, her undying love for her children makes her act irrationally at times and her uncle's claim that she is "as unfit a mother as [she is] a ruler" (Martin, "A Feast" 162) is by all means justified. She is blinded by her jealousy of her son's betrothed Margaery and does not trust anybody, which, together with her fear of an ancient prophecy (that purports that she will be replaced by a younger, more beautiful woman), eventually makes her paranoid.

What makes the readers despise her so much, in addition to what has been mentioned so far, is her cold-bloodedness and sheer malice. Upon learning that her handmaiden is one of Margaery's whistleblowers, she secretly thinks: "*Do not presume to smile at me, you treacherous little bitch. You will be begging me for mercy before I'm done with you*" (Martin, "A Feast" 259, italics in source). Thoughts such as these occur to her frequently and more often than not, she also vocalises them. What is particularly upsetting is that even the people she loves the most, such as Jaime, occasionally get a share of her mean insults. After realising that Jaime cannot follow her political plans immediately, she for example brings forth the following response: "Were you always this slow, or did losing a hand make you stupid?" (Martin, "A Feast" 248).

This vicious – and deceitfulness is illustrated extremely well in the series. Other aspects that are integral to her character (e.g. her supreme authority, imperiousness and determination to do everything in her power to maintain influence and control which involves inducing terrible acts of violence and crime performed by her inferiors), however, are presented differently (see examples below), which ultimately weakens her agency considerably. In the second season's first episode, for example, Cersei is deeply humiliated by her sociopathic son, Joffrey, and her authority is severely undermined (S02E01, 48:00). He confronts her with the rumours about her incestuous relationship with Jaime and when Cersei slaps him in the face after suffering an insult ("I'm asking if [my father] fucked other women when he grew tired of you"), he intimidates her by claiming that "what [she] just did is punishable by death" and warns her never to do it again. As a consequence of this interaction, Joffrey orders to have all of his 'father's' (actually Jaime is his biological father) bastards killed. Visually, this scene also emphasises Joffrey's superiority over his mother by a particular camera placement: when he threatens her, a close-up of his face underlines his ferocity whereas a medium close-up of Cersei's face highlights her fear of her own son.

In the book, on the other hand, scenes such as the one described above, do not occur. Cersei is the one in command, keeping her son in his place, not the other way round. Her agency is not restricted; on the contrary, she is the one pulling the strings. With regards to this particular scene, it is her that orders the City Watch to kill all of Robert's illegitimate children; a precaution she takes in order to reduce other, more eligible claimants to the Iron Throne. This affirms Cersei's cold-bloodedness and cruelty yet again and becomes apparent in the following conversation between her other brother, Tyrion, and the commander of the City Watch:

"Cersei sent the gold cloaks to that brothel." [...]

Yet it rankled, to sit here and make a mummer's show of justice by punishing the sorry likes of Janos Slynt and Allar Deem, while his sister continued on her savage course. [...]

"A baseborn girl, less than a year old, with a whore for a mother. What threat could she pose?"

"She was Robert's," Tyrion said bitterly. "That was enough for Cersei, it would seem." (Martin, "A Clash" 129-130, italics in source)

There are numerous other alterations in the series which add different nuances to Cersei's character. In one scene, for instance, she starts to cry in front of Tyrion after realising what a

cruel monster Joffrey has become (S02E07, 50:38). Although this evokes some sympathies in the audience, it is still a misrepresentation of her personality. In yet another scene which does not occur in the book, she is insulted by Joffrey again after warning him about Margaery's intention to twist him around her little finger (S03E02, 12:30). Her literary counterpart would not have acquiesced in this.

One scene, however, is especially disconcerting since it depicts Cersei as a victim, robbing her of all her initial agency. The narrative in question is the one in which Cersei and Jaime have sex on their dead child's death bed. This is an admittedly unsettling spectacle; in the series, however, it is an even more abhorrent one because the creators decided to change it into a rape scene. As an illustration of these diverging portrayals of events, the literary description, which describes Jaime's point of view, will be analysed first.

When Jaime arrives in King's Landing after his imprisonment by the Starks, Cersei is in the Great Sept of Baelor, deeply mourning Joffrey's death, who has been poisoned. Being extremely vulnerable and distraught, Jaime's return seems to bring her some kind of salvation: "“I was lost without you, Jaime. I was afraid the Starks would send me your head. I could not have borne that.” She kissed him. A light kiss, the merest brush of her lips on his, but he could feel her tremble as he slid his arms around her. “I am not whole without you””(Martin, “A Storm” 851). Both of them have not seen each other for a very long time which makes them want each other even more, despite the inappropriateness of location and time. Especially Jaime yearns after her, driven by his animalistic side: “There was no tenderness in the kiss he returned to her, only hunger. Her mouth opened for his tongue. “No,” she said weakly when his lips moved down her neck, “not here. The septons...”” (Martin, “A Storm” 851). Cersei is hesitant at first because she is aware of the indecency of the situation, but Jaime does not really care and continues without her consent:

"The Others can take the septons." He kissed her again, kissed her silent, kissed her until she moaned. Then he knocked the candles aside and lifted her up onto the Mother's altar, pushing up her skirts and the silken shift beneath. She pounded on his chest with feeble fists, murmuring about the risk, the danger, about their father, about the septons, about the wrath of gods. He never heard her. He undid his breeches and climbed up and pushed her bare white legs apart. One hand slid up her thigh and underneath her smallclothes. [...] (Martin, “A Storm” 851)

Eventually, however, Cersei thrusts aside her doubts and gives in to her urges (but, admittedly also to his intransigence and coercion) and fully embraces the sexual act:

"Hurry," she was whispering now, "quickly, *quickly*, now, do it now, do me now. Jaime Jaime Jaime." Her hands helped guide him. "Yes," Cersei said as he thrust, "my brother, sweet brother, yes, like that, yes, I have you, you're home now, you're home now, you're *home*." She kissed his ear and stroked his short bristly hair. Jaime lost himself in her flesh. He could feel Cersei's heart beating in time with his own [...]. (Martin, "A Storm" 851-852, italics in source)

Adapted to the screen, this scene carries a radically different connotation. What has to be taken into consideration when attempting an analysis, is the fact that the circumstances of their meeting are different: Jaime has already been in the capital for a few weeks and Cersei increasingly distances herself from him because she cannot really endure him. Both of them have changed and evolved during his absence but Jaime is still in denial about that. When he visits her in the Great Sept, where Joffrey is treasured, Cersei seems extremely bitter and revengeful. Being certain that Tyrion, their little brother, murdered their son, she urgently appeals to Jaime to kill him in retribution. Her anger, however, soon turns into desperation and Cersei starts crying, showing her vulnerable and fragile side. In response, Jaime enfolds her in his arms and they start to kiss, which Cersei eventually stops because of her peculiar feelings towards him. This rejection is the trigger that makes him really upset, confronting her with the following statement: "You're a hateful woman. Why have the gods made me love a hateful woman?" He thereupon grabs her neck, pushing her against the altar while fiercely ripping her clothes off, ultimately forcing her to the ground. All the while, Cersei tells him to stop it, repeatedly crying "It's not right" which he finally counters with "I don't care" (S04E03, 14:40).

The atrocity of this scene is further underscored by the non-diegetic music, which provides a supplementary auditory commentary. At the beginning, when they both kiss, a string-melody in a major key is audible which signals hope for reconciliation. As soon as the dreadful act itself is committed, however, low cello-sounds are transmitted, which slowly deepen by a half-tone, reflecting the imminent danger and the serious menace through Jaime. The high-pitched violin-sounds, on the other hand, are added for dramatic effect and accentuate the inescapability of the situation. The juxtaposition of these sounds and the drifting apart of the respective melodies finally cause a feeling of uneasiness.

Furthermore, the costumes both characters are wearing have a specific effect on their reception. As Nelmes aptly claims, "[c]ostumes may be used to indicate to us information about the personality or status of the character" (90) and this applies to this particular scene, too. Especially Cersei's clothes seem to be chosen very carefully throughout the whole

series. Gaining the power she so much desires is a path of trial and tribulation and “[h]er costumes reflect this, evolving from bird embroidery to lions and finally a sort of armored corset” (Frankel 89). In this scene, however, she is wearing a heavy, long gown delicately embroidered with tiny rhinestones. She is in mourning, therefore the colour of her gown is black, conveying depression and forlornness but at the same time also power and superiority. This is nicely contrasted with Jaime’s attire, a simple leather coat and trousers in an undefinable grey colour, already signalling to the viewer that his behaviour towards Cersei is unpredictable. Their clothes indicate their difference in rank, which will ultimately be turned upside down when Jaime seizes control over her. Generally, lightning is also a pivotal factor: the elementary colour blue permeates the whole scene, which contributes to creating a mystical, gloomy atmosphere; the perfect setting for an act of sexual violence such as this.

5.4. Daenerys – the ruler

In the book, Daenerys is described as a 13-year old exiled princess who is incessantly subjected to her vicious brother's ill-treatment before she is traded off as a child bride to the barbaric horse-lord Khal Drogo. Initially, her displacement into an entirely alien culture challenges her in various ways which consequently forces her to grow up at a faster pace.

Daenerys, who has been leading a fairly sheltered life until her compulsory union, is confronted with a barbaric culture which is nothing like her own: "She was afraid of the Dothraki, whose ways seemed alien and monstrous, as if they were beasts in human skins and not true men at all" (Martin, "A Game" 103). The Dothraki culture is the epitome of a patriarchal, heteronormative society in which women are subordinated to the dominant role of men and this manifests itself in the way women are treated. It is considered a shame, for example, if a woman gives birth to a girl because this bears the same social stigma that is attached to a baby who is handicapped (Martin, "A Game" 490). Furthermore, rape is systemic in their culture; women are raped in public and men do not feel guilty about it, they even consider it as a reward for their strenuous efforts during war time (Martin, "A Game" 102). Generally, the visual description of their fornicating procedures is similar to those of animals which emphasises the inferior position of women even more.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Daenerys is terrified upon learning that she will have to marry the leader of this savage tribe: "She stood there helpless and trembling in her wedding silks while he secured the horses, and when he turned to look at her, she began to cry" (Martin, "A Game" 107). The psychological pressure of being forced to do something against her will preys on her mind and having to watch people murder each other in combat and men raping women in front of her eyes during the wedding celebration most certainly aggravates her situation. However, the reception of Drogo's wedding gift, a white horse, marks a turning point when she rides it: "[F]or the first time in hours, she forgot to be afraid. Or perhaps it was for the first time ever" (Martin, "A Game" 106). Her subsequent acknowledgement of his gift initiates a positive response on his part and this is the point when they both experience a connection for the first time (106).

In the course of time, Daenerys realises that a special status is attributed to her as a woman in the Dothraki culture. Since she is Khal Drogo's wife and therefore their queen or *khaleesi*, as they would call her, she has enormous privileges by comparison. She has the right to command Drogo's subordinates who have to obey her command as much as their king's.

This becomes most apparent in a scene where the Dothraki men brutally rape several women when they plunder a city and Daenerys finally urges them to stop since she can no longer bear to watch this madness (Martin, “A Game” 668). After incipient disbelief, she eventually takes the women as slaves in order to keep them from more harm. This is the first time she is taking matters into her own hands without asking Drogo’s permission, ultimately realising that her agency and power are not as constrained as she initially thought. She can actively antagonise particular issues she does not concur with and thus tries to improve the treatment of women in the Dothraki culture.

The fact that Daenerys is of Targaryen descent, an ancient noble family who reigned alongside dragons for centuries, is repeatedly mentioned in the narrative. Especially in the beginning, when she has to suffer agony, she has recurring dreams of dragons which, in turn, give her enormous strength and push her to endure this forlorn situation. Furthermore, she repeatedly reminds herself of the following: “*I am the blood of the dragon*” (Martin, “A Game” 103, italics in source). By doing this, she reminds herself of her descent, her inner strength and a dragon’s fearlessness, which she ultimately takes as a model to apply to her own character. This becomes most apparent when she intrepidly steps into her deceased husband’s funeral pyre in order to see the dragon eggs, which she received as a wedding gift, hatch.

This scene marks a major turning point in Daenerys’ character development. After embracing the Dothraki ways and accepting her husband’s fate she asks the Dothraki riders, who were sworn to Drogo once, if they plead fealty to her. However, they decline because she is a woman (Martin, “A Game” 800) who cannot acquire a superior status because of her sex. However, when she re-emerges from the fire unscathed with the baby-dragons by her side, the tribe reacts in an unimaginable way: they make her their first female leader in history. One factor that has to be taken into consideration here, however, is that Daenerys could not have become a leader in her own right if her husband had not died. The demise of Khal Drogo opens up a space for her to exercise her agency and act unhindered. Before Drogo dies, Daenerys is open to the Dothraki culture, learns about it and accepts it for the most part but at the same time also develops a mind of her own and criticises certain habits inherent in their culture. However, it is only after he is gone that she can fully act upon her beliefs. She assumes an active role by trying to improve the treatment of women in their culture but her main issue is the abolition of slavery. Her ultimate goal is to be a just leader who not only wants to rule but also serve her people (Martin, “A Storm” 112).

For the most part, the TV show adhered to its literary counterpart and did not make any significant changes to Daenerys' storyline with one exception which had a great and unfortunately negative impact on the overall reception of the character. The scene referred to is Daenerys' wedding night. In the book, the consummation of their marriage is described as a more or less consensual act of love. Although Daenerys is hesitant and afraid at first (after all, she will lose her virginity to a man she barely knows and whom she has been forced to marry), it is her own decision to approve Drogo's attempts at sleeping with her. The scene is described in great detail and the author takes his time to gradually unfold the participants' feelings. As a reader, one gets the impression that Drogo spends a lot of time to make Daenerys comfortable before the actual act of intercourse. In the beginning, however, she feels alienated by her husband since she does not speak his language and vice versa (Martin, "A Game" 102). This hampers their communication. Drogo only knows the word 'no' which he repeatedly uses to direct Daenerys' actions; for the rest they have to use gestures to convey what they feel.

Drogo did not reply. His long heavy braid was coiled in the dirt beside him. He pulled it over his right shoulder, and began to remove the bells from his hair, one by one. After a moment, Dany leaned forward to help. When they were done, Drogo gestured. She understood. Slowly, carefully, she began to undo his braid. (Martin, "A Game" 107)

This is a significant point in the book because it reveals Drogo's vulnerability. For clarification, it has to be pointed out that the braids occupy a special place in the Dothraki culture; they are indicative of a man's strength. If a man is defeated in battle, he subsequently has to cut his hair. This means that the longer his hair, the stronger he is. Drogo's hair has never been cut in his entire life and therefore bears great significance not only for him but also his tribe. The bells are souvenirs from his enemies; he obtained them after he has successfully subdued them. Therefore, it is a momentous situation when Drogo lets her undo his braid. It shows that he trusts her and that he wants her to see him in a different light from that of a brave and brutal warrior. He lets his guard down and shows her that he can also be a gentle lover who cares for her (Rossetti le Strange, review blog).

After a while he began to touch her. Lightly at first, then harder. She could sense the fierce strength in his hands, but he never hurt her. He held her hand in his own and brushed her fingers, one by one. He ran a hand gently down her leg. He stroked her face, tracing the curve of her ears, running a finger gently around her mouth. He put both hands in her hair and combed it with his fingers. He turned her around, massaged her shoulders, slid a knuckle down the path of her spine. (Martin, "A Game" 108)

This passage indicates that Drogo is trying to make his bride more comfortable by slowly caressing her body and touching her tenderly. He is portrayed as a very gentle lover who takes his time and treats her with respect, as is a queen's due. At one point he also demands her to look him into his eyes and face him on the same level which could be interpreted as him wanting to establish a basis where they both are equals. This careful approaching finally leaves Daenerys yearning for more: "It seemed as if hours passed before his hands finally went to her breasts" (Martin, "A Game" 108). It seems as if Drogo effectively arouses her and sparks a desire in her that she wants to have satisfied.

Dany was flushed and breathless, her heart fluttering in her chest. He cupped her face in his huge hands and she looked into his eyes. "No?" he said, and she knew it was a question.

She took his hand and moved it down to the wetness between her thighs. "Yes," she whispered as she put his finger inside her.

(Martin, "A Game" 108)

This passage finally stresses Daenerys' own agency and conveys to the reader that it is her own choice to let Drogo proceed, allowing herself to let go and be pleased. Although this scene underlines her passivity, she becomes more active in the following chapters. From Doreah, a woman she was given as a gift for her wedding, she demands to be instructed to learn about the "womanly arts of love" (Martin, "A Game" 104) in order to counter Drogo's aggressive approaches with her own ways of seducing him. She no longer wants to consent to the way he makes love to her after her wedding because he only rides her from behind like an animal which is normal in the Dothraki culture. She feels she is unworthy of such treatment and decides to actively change the standard procedure. This becomes most apparent in the following passage: "A few yards from her tent was a bed of soft grass, and it was there that Dany drew him down. When he tried to turn her over, she put a hand on his chest. "No," she said. "This night I would look on your face" (Martin, "A Game" 236).

Daenerys' agency, as has been described above, unfortunately vanishes in the TV adaptation because the producers decided to change the wedding night scene into a rape scene (S01E01, 55:36). The entire *mise-en-scène*, i.e. the final film sequence that is comprised by many different aspects of film-making (Nelmes 88), differs enormously from the literary description. First of all, the setting has been changed entirely: in the book, their environment is described as a "grassy place beside a small stream" (Martin, "A Game" 107) which evokes positive connotations in the reader. It is depicted as an idyllic, picturesque and,

above all, safe place. In the show, however, the scene is set on high cliffs which are surrounded by the open sea. Since “[s]etting is central to bringing plausibility and clarity to the narrative diegesis” (Nelmes 88), it is not so surprising that the directors chose these particular surroundings. Their decision to portray a marital rape scene instead of the one described in the book, is accentuated by the setting which is rough and unwelcoming. The hard rocks reflect the bleakness and rigidity whereas the open sea mirrors the inescapability of the situation.

Moreover, the costumes that are used in this particular scene trigger certain associations in the spectator. In the show, Daenerys is wearing a silvery-white, long dress which is reminiscent of the attire of an angel. The colour of the garment conveys purity and innocence and this is further accentuated by her make-up which is virtually invisible, and her hair style. The long ice-blond, wavy hair again stresses her angelic features. Drogo, on the other hand, contrasts her in every single way. Not only does he have dark skin and hair, but his clothes match his natural appearance in colour. He wears buckskin pants which represent his acerbity and his torso is bare, showing off his muscles which, in turn, exude utmost strength. Additionally, his black-rimmed eyes make him look more dangerous and barbaric. All these features ultimately convey a picture of a man who is stronger, intimidating, powerful and in control.

This disparity in their relationship is further emphasised by cinematography: The establishing shot foregrounds Drogo who is tending to his horses and at the same time is glancing at Daenerys who is standing in the far distance. Both of their backs are turned to the audience which could foreshadow that they are going to witness something which is considered very private. Suddenly the camera shifts to a medium shot of Daenerys in which she looks at the vast ocean longingly, which is followed by a close-up of her face. She looks frightened and forlorn, knowing what horrible fate is awaiting her. The succeeding shot merely shows the sea and the red-coloured sky, which could indicate that darkness is falling, not only in the literal sense but also figuratively. Drogo then revolves around his bride, inspecting her from many different angles. For this purpose, long shots and medium shots are alternated in order to stress the act of looking and objectification. Throughout the whole scene Daenerys is crying and when Drogo brushes her tears away, a close-up underlines her distress. While he is telling her ‘no’, thereby implying she should stop whining, the camera focuses on his face again with a straight-on shot. His hardened facial expression is emphasised and signals his merciless nature; any resistance on her side is pointless. While he is undressing himself, several straight-on shots focus on their difference in height,

thereby communicating to the audience that Drogo is in a superior position. He then moves behind her and starts to undress her, the camera focusing solely on her body with a medium shot. At first she tries to cover herself up but Drogo eventually forces her hands away from her body so that her breasts are fully visible to the audience. By doing this, a certain degree of vulnerability and helplessness is conveyed. Subsequently, the camera shifts to Daenerys' neck because Drogo is touching it fiercely. The neck links the body with the head and ensures equilibrium; however, if this part of the body is threatened, the respective balance of body and mind will be destroyed which can have fatal consequences. Finally, when Drogo forces Daenerys on the ground to take her from behind, the camera tracks the movements of her body, stressing the compromising and submissive situation she has been subjected to (Nelmes 93-95).

Sound is another contributing factor to the effect this scene has on the audience. In the rape scene, both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds occur concurrently. The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks reminds the audience of the surroundings the scene is set in whereas the background music evokes specific feelings in them. The basic tune is a very low contrabass sound which is accompanied by a higher-pitched flute sound playing an oriental-themed melody. The low sound is lurking in the background throughout the whole scene until it eventually prevails, mirroring Drogo gaining the upper hand over Daenerys.

6. Discussion

It has been established hitherto that the representation of female characters in *Game of Thrones* differs from their literary counterparts in many regards. When adapting a book to the screen, the directors have to face certain challenges: the readers already have preconceived notions of how the world they have imagined in their heads is supposed to look like. The author provides them with dialogues, character descriptions and a great, epic narrative but the world depicted is subject to their interpretation and this varies enormously from person to person. Television, on the other hand, takes this personal aspect away because it already provides a “visual standard” which cannot measure up to everybody’s expectations (Roldan and Rennie 5-6).

Still, the question remains: why did the show’s creators decide to make certain alterations that consequently have a substantial impact on the perception of the characters? Abraham mentions in his article about adapting *A Song of Ice and Fire* to a graphic novel that people who attempt an adaptation not only want to copy the existing work but they also want to add a personal layer to it, want to create something of their own. The idea behind it is put very aptly in the following statement: “I like to think my own novels carry my vision to readers in ways that are idiosyncratic to me” (Abraham 41). Putting a different spin on an existing work of art to make it one’s own certainly has been a motivation for the creators of the TV show, too, which has been made apparent in the previous chapter.

The following section will try to identify the underlying motivations behind the TV show’s modified representation of the characters that have been discussed in section 5. Taking Barthes’ concept of myth as a theoretical tool for analysis, I will try to provide the reader with some answers for the following questions: Why has the portrayal of these characters been altered? What coded message is thereby conveyed? Is such a representation a mirror of US contemporary society’s attitude towards gender relations?

The second part of this chapter will explore the implications of such a depiction of women in popular culture in general. Why is this particular narrative so appealing in our times? How do its consumers react to the statements that are made about gender? And finally, what could a dissemination of gender-myths entail?

6.1. Myths of Gender

The first half of this thesis has deliberately focused on the visual representation of women (and the juxtaposition with their literary counterpart) because a semiotic analysis of the female characters' depiction on screen can shed some light on the construction of myths of gender which will be elaborated on in the following sub-chapters.

In his illuminating essay *Myth Today*, the last part of his book *Mythologies*, which is a collection of essays set out to deconstruct certain myths, French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes explains how society (the focus in this essay is on French society in particular) is traversed by myths that are designed to perpetuate certain ideas favoured by the ruling class. Taking a semiotic approach, he dissects the respective myths (e.g. about wine, detergents, wrestling, etc.) in the first part *Mythologies* and presents the reader with what they might entail. In his theoretical chapter, which describes the underlying concept of these myths, he gives an illustrative example (115): taking a cover of the French magazine 'Paris Match' which shows a young, black boy in a military uniform giving a salute, Barthes argues that this image does not only convey that France is a great colonial power, but it is something more:

[I]f I focus on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, I receive an ambiguous signification: I respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics, I become a reader of myths. The saluting Negro is no longer an example or a symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very *presence* of French imperialism. (Barthes 127, italics in source)

Taking this approach and applying it to the images of women that are circulated in *Game of Thrones* is a helpful tool for identifying the myths of gender that are thereby constructed and perpetuated. If not viewed critically, such myths can easily be taken at face value and be preserved in our everyday lives²¹. Therefore, Barthes prompts us to pay attention: "What the world supplies to myth is an [sic] historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality" (142). This is precisely the danger of myth: to present itself as a natural given (although it actually is an ideological construct that plays by the rules of the dominant class of a society).

²¹ The series' objectification of women and excessive depiction of nudity, for example, echoes a mindset which presently seems to traverse contemporary popular culture in the US: women, especially in the entertainment industry which is aimed at the masses, objectify themselves enormously (especially female singers like Rihanna, Miley Cyrus, Beyoncé etc.) while at the same time raising the claim to be feminists since they are in personal charge of their body.

6.1.1. Rape

Having established how myths come into being, this chapter will investigate the precarious subject of rape, which is ubiquitous in the series. To support the ensuing claims that will be made, however, it first of all has to be clarified that their visual representation in the majority of cases forces women into a corner by reducing them to sexual objects. *Game of Thrones* is without equal when it comes to the amount of mostly gratuitous sex scenes that are presented. There is unproportionally more exposition of female nudity than male in the series, so much so that even a new term has been coined to describe this phenomenon: “sexposition” (McNutt 2011, review blog). Initially, this neologism has first been used by academic Myles McNutt to describe the expository speeches that give insight into a character’s interior life, which are set against the backdrop of unnecessary nudity (of prostitutes) that do not advance the story in any other way. The term soon gained recognition, eventually permeating the whole mediasphere.

What the series is most criticised for - among its disturbing display of violence - is indeed the excessiveness of female nudity. To obtain a certain degree of reality (as described in the books), it is not reprehensible to show some skin (e.g. when depicting prostitutes or the savage women of Essos who, by revealing one of their breasts which is a custom, indicate to be more sexually open) but it seems to be the consensus among most viewers that the series has taken it too far and is being too explicit. It should be acceptable to depict reality more accurately by exhibiting nakedness and sexual practices but it is worrying when one side is objectified more than the other and in such a dishonourable way which ultimately results in exploiting female sexuality.

Generally, in these salacious scenes the woman seems to function as the “erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator [in front of the screen]” (Mulvey 63). This, in turn, makes the man the controller of the gaze which is emphasised by cinematography. The visual representation favours the male view by focusing on certain parts of the female body and the camera reinforces this by “panning slowly over the body like a pair of staring eyes” (Frankel 19). The female gaze, on the other hand is emphasised by the camera’s focus on the male’s whole body, thereby representing his “manliness” and strength (19). “[T]he *Game of Thrones* sex scenes are biased towards men and do not appear designed to appeal to women” (16). Women expose themselves to be marvelled at by men, whereas men do not undress for the pleasure of a dressed woman (this

specifically applies to the first three seasons; only in the fourth season an exception is made) (19).

A justification for this imbalance in representation often seems to be that the books' visual imagery is also very explicit, and the series is only a mere reflection of it. As Frankel aptly claims, however, "[t]he books may be more sexual, but the show's nudity is more sexist" (7). As has already been established, women are subjected to a voyeuristic gaze most of the time, whereas men are rarely depicted in the same manner. "But now as our contemporary culture turns bodies of both genders more and more into commodities and sites for consumption, film images of men have begun to deploy similar conventions" (Bignell 198-199). This proposition seems to apply to *Game of Thrones* only to a certain degree: men are also occasionally objectified but still considerably less than women.

In her book *The Pornography of Representation*, which is argued from a feminist perspective, Susanne Kappeler investigates the portrayal of women in pornography, while at the same time establishing a link to sexual politics. Her argumentation lends itself excellently to make some further statements about the objectification of women in *Game of Thrones*. In her writings, one of her central claims is that pornography is not a matter of sexuality, but one of representation. There is a dialectical relationship between modes of representation which construct different forms of sexuality and actual sexual practices which are inspired by representations and notions thereof and which are culturally taught and, in turn, depicted. They are influenced by and dependent on each other, and this assertion also holds true for the portrayal of sexuality in *Game of Thrones*. What has to be taken into consideration, however, is that we have accustomed ourselves to those forms of representation and their conventions which appear natural to us (cf. Barthes' naturalisation of myth). Rather than mirroring reality, they have been created by somebody in order to be looked at and to be used as commodities (8).

Kappeler argues that these representations have deliberately been constructed by patriarchy (cf. the bourgeoisie in Barthes' writing) as a means of image cultivation: they are a manifestation of their own subjectivity (62). This is reinforced by depriving 'the Other' (i.e. woman) of their own subject, consequently turning her into an object. This cultural self-image, then, creates the reality, the public spirit, that society adheres to (71). Patriarchy considers woman as similar, but different all the same. Her look makes man become self-aware because he recognises himself in it but at the same time unsettles him. He does not want to abandon the subjectivity of his own look in order to become the object of hers (74).

As a result, the look between man and woman, which makes them perceive each other as active subjects, is destroyed (91). What remains, seems to be “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 63, italics in source) which in turn is a contributing factor to unequal gender relations.

Establishing the dubious sexual depiction of women served as an explanatory framework for the actual argument of this chapter, which is that the series conveys that women do not mind being subjected to sexual violence. By deliberately changing Cersei’s and Daenerys’ sex scenes into rape scenes with no serious, traumatic consequences for the characters, the creators of the show succeeded in making such abhorrent acts appear harmless. The fact that these scenes turn two of the strongest female characters on the show into victims without any kind of agency is revelatory, because only by reducing women to objects, can this rape myth even exist.

The books differ in that regard: although instances of sexual violence occur frequently, they function more as warning messages as opposed to the series, in which these scenes seem to be downplayed. Occurring throughout the whole narrative, they are more an illustration of the ruthless Westerosi society and often happen in character’s flashbacks that reflect their traumatic experience (Rosenberg 16). Moreover, the books convey that rape is not just a solitary act but one that has far-reaching, damaging consequences not only for the victim but for society in general. Besides describing the individuals’ feelings, Martin also comments on the “collective impact of these assaults across continents” (26). Rape is deeply entrenched in Westerosi society and affects nearly everybody in one way or another.

Even when rape isn’t being used as excuse to start a war or a way to manipulate court politics, a tolerance for rape and the failure to provide justice to its victims deforms Westeros and its enemies alike. Rather than an exercise in exploitation, the pervasive nature of sexual violence in A Song of Ice and Fire serves as a powerful indication, and indictment, of corruption and inhumanity. (Rosenberg 26-27)

The series, on the contrary, treats the subject of rape entirely different: it trivialises it. This is highly alarming since the emotional turmoil a woman has to go through and the trauma she walks away with are not really thematised. Although it has to be taken into account that the producers of the show have to constrain a lot of the content in order to make it fit into an episode, this is still no excuse for the fact that they do not spend enough time on dealing with the far-reaching consequences and the involving psychological damages such an act might entail. Instead, they direct their attention towards the woman’s plight and visually

further emphasise her object position while at the same time neglecting the perpetrator (and in further instance, the consequences of his actions such as punishments, etc.).

Especially in Daenerys' case, this lack of dealing with the matter contributes to sustaining such a rape myth. Towards the end of Book One it becomes apparent that Daenerys really grows to love Drogo, despite the inconvenient circumstances under which they met initially. This is featured in the series as well, only the back-story is altered. After being raped, Daenerys, by degrees, develops feelings for Drogo, with no ongoing trauma, despite the gruesome act he has committed. This alteration, however, has devastating consequences because it suggests that falling in love with your rapist is nothing unnatural. By completely ignoring the emotional turmoil a woman experiences after being raped and immediately going back to the original storyline, which is that Daenerys gradually falls in love with Drogo, the creators of the show make a precarious statement. It comes across as though they just wanted to exploit the female body for shock value and entertainment.

The same applies to Cersei's deplorable situation in which Jaime, the one person she actually loves apart from her children, coerces her to have sex with him. Although she seems distant and cold towards him after the incident, the act itself never comes up for discussion. Furthermore, there is no indication in the ensuing episodes that any kind of psychological damage is inflicted on her by this terrible deed. On the contrary; in a later episode she barges into Jaime's chamber, showering him with kisses, telling him that she loves him. After confessing that she told their father about their incestuous relationship and announcing that she chooses only him (which does not occur in the books), they make love and it seems as if the rape never happened. In the books, their relationship is described as being very complex and absurd at times but this reaction seems to be even more opaque. By deciding to take this particular direction, the series' creators, again, trivialised rape.

The only instance which implies the horrors of rape is when Brienne is threatened to be gang-raped by her capturers. When they carry her off, the viewer can only hear her desperate, blood-curdling screams in the background which mirror her terror at the prospect of being raped. By conjuring a lie, Jaime manages to prevent the atrocious deed at the last second. The incident and the consequential trauma is never discussed again whereas Jaime's trauma, resulting from his sword-hand being hacked off, "is referenced in his nearly every scene" (Frankel 14). A possible interpretation of this deliberate transformation of the story could be that Brienne's emotional turmoil is not really taken seriously because she is not regarded as a 'real' woman.

The message that can be taken away from the aforementioned examples is that rape is a serious crime that must not be downplayed. Being “an extreme and humiliating form of violence directed against [the victim] and her body” (Seifert 2, scholarly article), it can have long-lasting consequences on the person affected. The irreparable damages that are caused and the lasting trauma it entails, must not be underestimated. “Entering a women's [sic] body by force has effects that are comparable to torture: It causes physical pain, the loss of personal dignity and self-determination, and it is an attack on the woman's identity” (Seifert 1). According to Seifert, the majority of the countries of the Western world are states with “rape-prone societies” (2). Particularly liable to this are countries in which women have an inferior status but at the same time male supremacy is questioned and unsettled (by feminism for example). One of the most prominent countries with a so-called rape culture is America, where rape ranks among the most commonly committed crimes (2).

Another aspect that has to be mentioned with regards to *Game of Thrones* is that rape is unequivocally tied up with war: “War is a ritualized “game” - [...] Looking back in history, there is evidence that it was or still is one of the rules of the game governing this ritual that the right to exert violence against women is primarily granted to the victor during campaigns of conquest or in the immediate post-war period” (Seifert 3). The wars in Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Croatia but also in the Third Reich have always produced rape victims and this, unfortunately, is true even today (e.g. the practices of the IS) (Seifert 9). It is therefore not surprising that Martin chose to make it such a vital part in his narrative, since this, too, is a story about the game of war. Especially in his accounts of Gregor Clegane, a beastly creature who rapes and murders excessively during his campaigns in many parts of Westeros, this revolting side of war is very accurately illustrated.

While Martin manages to paint a historically faithful picture of war and the horrors connected to it, as well as its fatal consequences, the series often trivialises these themes; rape in particular. In the books, the omnipresence of rape and violence against women is an indication of the “powerlessness” of women for “women are the ultimate outsiders” (Hartinger 164). It permeates all layers of society and is not perceived as something exceptional. Instead it is part of everyday life in Westerosi society; it is not even worth mentioning. By painting such a grim but accurate picture, Martin comments not only on the outsider role of women in his fictional world but also in our “real-world human history” (165).

The images of violence against women that are displayed and belittled in the show, on the other hand, manifest themselves in the minds of its watchers and in some instances might even be considered normal.

While the show claims to use rape as an artistic tool to demonstrate the cruelty of humanity, the series normalizes rape and violence against women, especially for the younger generations. The creation of popular media has furthered both the normalization of sexual violence against women and negative societal perspectives on rape victims and female sexuality. (Palma 5, academic essay)

The fact that the creators of the show decided to downplay rape to such an extent is very alarming since, by representing sexual violence against women in that way, they contribute to perpetuate a certain myth: the myth that women do not suffer from any consequences when being raped; the myth that they might even enjoy being subjected to physical violence. According to Palma, “America’s largest forums for public opinion include popular forms of media, which are crucial in influencing society’s perspective on America’s rape culture, its victims, and its perpetrators” (9). *Game of Thrones*, one of the most heavily pirated shows on the internet, certainly is one of those forms of media. By circulating images of sexual violence which are not scrutinised, it fosters a culture in which rape is inherent.

In more general terms, then, rape culture is a manifestation of the widespread views about what constitutes a man and a woman, respectively and in further consequence, of how such a constructed image of femininity and masculinity is eventually acted out (Ferreday 22). Many different discourses concur to create a social climate that propagates certain gender norms and behaviours, a climate that, in the case of American culture²², is a “product of gendered, raced and classed social relations that are central to patriarchal and heterosexist culture” (22). It is therefore not surprising that many different kinds of ‘rape narratives’ emerge easily and frequently, permeating the whole mediasphere (23). Being an influence on but at the same time an indication of how a society thinks about important issues such as gender and violence, these narratives should not be condoned but instead be subjected to analysis and critique. They not only contribute to making the subject of rape a permanent presence in the collective consciousness of a society but they also paint a distorted picture of reality, which can have damaging effects on how the matter is dealt with in real life (which will be discussed in the ensuing paragraphs). Hence,

²² Even if not explicitly stated, American society always refers to contemporary US American society.

[i]t is particularly productive to analyse the relationship between ‘real’ rape and representations of rape at the current historical moment, when media representations are deeply enmeshed with cultural practices through which we make sense of everyday lives and of lived experience, including the experience of living in societies where the ever-present threat of sexual violence is lived alongside a proliferation of media images of violated female bodies. (Ferreday 23)

This ever-present threat of sexual violence in day-to-day life becomes apparent in America’s countless incidents of sexual assault and rape on college and university campuses, amongst other things. According to a survey by the Association of American Universities, “more than 27% of female college seniors reported having experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact since entering college” (Mastropasqua 2015, research article). Women, even - or more aptly - especially in higher education, are surrounded by a menacing environment which enables men to reaffirm their superior status and image of masculinity by sexually assaulting them. At the same time, there is a conspiracy of silence concerning the subject, which results from women’s shame and the worrisome attitude towards such attacks prevalent in contemporary society.

One illustrative example of this sad reality is the heinous incident, which received nationwide media coverage, in which a well-known, prestigious fraternity of the ivy-league university Yale marched on campus yelling mantras such as “No means yes, yes means anal”, trying to intimidate female freshmen by roaming around the area where their dormitories were situated (Clark-Flory 2010, online magazine article). Although being called a “serious lapse in judgement” by the fraternity’s president who tried to thereby defuse the situation afterwards (which of course does not recompense the damage it has initially done in any way), this is a strong reminder of predominating verbal violence directed at women, which can eventually lead to even more severe and harmful actions. The dire threat of anal rape is a manifestation of males’ attitudes towards female sexuality and authority, making the event indicative of America’s rape culture.

An even more exemplifying case of this hostile climate is the abhorrent crime committed in Steubenville, Ohio, in 2012 by two male high school students who sexually assaulted a 16-year-old, intoxicated and unconscious high school girl. The incident being recorded and spread via social media garnered excessive media attention and sparked off a nationwide debate, however, not for the severity of the crime. Instead, the media continuously highlighted the perpetrators’ plight after being convicted for their gruesome acts. Broadcasting stations such as CNN, ABC News, NBC News and News Today, which are watched by a considerable

amount of the American population, emphasised that the boys' "promising futures" were destroyed while at the same time disregarding the victim and her predicament entirely (Wade 2013, social science online platform). This is very distressing since the media has a significant effect on how rape narratives are presented, circulated and perceived. They have the power to form opinions about rape which will eventually manifest themselves in the collective consciousness of the general public and which, in further consequence, can have serious repercussions. An investigation of social media responses to the Steubenville verdict revealed the disturbing attitude towards rape which seems to be deeply entrenched in American society. Tweets such as "Be responsible for your actions ladies before your drunken decisions ruin innocent lives" (by Kayla Jeter), "way to go now these 2 guys lives are ruined...her vag would have been fine" (by Bill Peace III) and "So you got drunk at a party and two people take advantage of you, that's not rape you're just a loose drunk slut" (by Space Cowboy) are just a few among a multitude of elucidating statements (Wade 2013).

These instances of victim-blaming illustrate America's perverse approach to rape narratives very well. Instead of empathising with the victim and her plight, the public denounces those who have been violated and acquits those who bear the actual blame. By focusing on the issue of excessive alcohol consumption (which is also a relevant topic worth discussing, but in a different context), the actual problem is ignored and displaced elsewhere. It is disturbing that even the victims' peers adopt an attitude which is non-supportive; an attitude which helps maintain a heteronormative system of values. Furthermore, it is conspicuous that consent still is a matter where opinions diverge considerably. Various internet forum discussions mirror the dubious notion of consensual sex that a high percentage of America's youth has, a notion which advocates sexual coercion (Ferreday's investigation of fan reactions concerning Cersei's rape scene, too, reveals that there is a widely held belief in contemporary American society that persuading somebody into having sex is acceptable, despite initial resistance (32)). To thwart this predominant sentiment, education is a vital instrument in mobilising and sensitising the masses. Instead of teaching women not to get raped, men should be disabused in order to ensure the prevention of such abominable acts of sexual violence and ultimately eradicate the double standard surrounding this delicate subject.

As has been established hitherto, the circulation of rape myths, especially in the media, and lived realities of sexual violence are interactive. Such myths seem to be deeply entrenched in US American society, indirectly impacting behaviours, attitudes and actions in everyday life,

as the aforementioned accounts of verbal and physical sexual assault should have demonstrated. Thus, representations of rape in different forms of institutions but especially in media institutions, must not be underestimated. A show like *Game of Thrones* in particular, a pop cultural phenomenon that affects such a multitude of people, is relevant in this regard. By visually objectifying female bodies and portraying rape in a morally questionable manner, the series, I argue, disseminates a worrying image of sexuality which mirrors America's existing rape culture. Whether it is deliberate or not, the creators of the show in this way perpetuate an image which adheres to the norms of a patriarchal society, thereby - reverting to Barthes' terminology - spreading an ideology which may ultimately manifest itself in the minds of the show's viewers.

6.1.2. Motherhood

Martin's work is unusual in that it features quite a substantial amount of diverse mother characters who do not adhere to the tropes of the fantasy genre but also to expectations which prevailed in everyday situations, when being examined in a pseudo-medieval context. They have a lot of agency and wield institutional power, which is uncommon for a societal system such as the one presented in both book and series. The most prominent characters with considerable emphasis on their maternal side certainly are Cersei and Catelyn: in the books, they possess a significant amount of agency which can be attributed to their privileged and superior status that they enjoy because of their noble birth. Their advantageous position allows them to exert authority more so than other women in Westerosi society but it is their personal, instinctive drive which sets them apart from other female characters. Unfortunately, this dominance vanishes in the TV adaptation because a large proportion of agency is transferred to their sons, Joffrey and Robb respectively, which has already been pointed out in section 5.1. and 5.3.

Generally, motherhood is always already implied when it comes to the role of women in Westeros. Women's main purpose is to eventually become mothers in order to ensure hereditary succession and the persistence of humankind. Therefore, their prime role is that of being nurturers, which does not leave much room for other renditions and practices of womanhood. Their overall objective is that of being caregivers who bear sole responsibility for child-rearing, with the ultimate goal being the production of human beings who preserve the status quo and perpetuate the rigid, oppressive system they are living in. As a result, children are raised to conform to the gender roles that are imposed on them by patriarchy: girls are taught to be obedient and submissive, whereas boys are expected to become strong, self-sufficient and fearless men who can be deployed in war. Women's duties, then, are generally restricted to this particular field of activity (Tegelman 57).

The mothers discussed in this chapter, however, rather than being one-dimensional characters who take on the role which has just been described, are multifaceted and do only comply with this over-simplified picture to a certain degree. They are presented as complex, ambiguous and nuanced mother figures who do not conform to the stereotypes that are usually associated with their role. Cersei, against all odds, is a wicked, vengeful woman who would do everything in her power to boost her sociopathic son's as well as her own career. Possessing several 'male' traits such as cruelty, relentlessness and self-confidence, she does not conform to the typical role of a kind, loving mother. Although her children are the most important

people in her life, which she emphasises time and again, her treatment of them does not comply with what is usually associated with maternal behaviour. Catelyn, likewise, does not entirely fit the image of a selfless, nurturing mother; although she is a devoted, loyal and kind woman (as opposed to Cersei), she also shows a deep understanding of politics (which is usually not affiliated with her gender) with her actions often being motivated by revenge and despair. What connects both of these characters is their agency: they give orders, actively participate in political machinations and intrigue and exercise their will. In the TV adaptation, however, this agency has been significantly decreased by deliberately transferring most of the authoritative power to their sons, thereby conveying that motherhood always entails some kind of limitation.

In her 1976 seminal book *Of woman born*, Adrienne Rich addresses and elaborates on this concomitant restrictiveness of motherhood by roughly dividing it into two forms; one entailing a more natural understanding of the concept - a woman's affiliation to her capacity of reproduction and, by extension, to her child/ren - whereas the other takes a more constructivist approach (13): motherhood herein is taken to mean an 'institution' which is imposed by patriarchy to assure male domination. According to her, "motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" all along and continues to do so by perpetuating the idea that "maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless (22)". Thus, mothers should be content with being confined to their home, the private sphere, all day long. They should obtain complete fulfilment by only spending time with their kids and unconditional love for them at all times is a prerequisite. This notion, however, puts a tremendous amount of pressure on them since, as with every relationship, ones' love cannot be perpetually consistent (23).

At the same time, mothers' feelings of desperation and anger towards their kids have long been a delicate subject which has not been talked about, especially in a society in which family, materialism and heteronormativity have been paramount (25). Rich identifies a mother's traits as "beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, [and] nourishing" (34) but at the same time, patriarchy considers women to be threats, especially sexually-liberated ones (with the exception of mothers). This double standard, however, does not account for a woman's multifacetedness; on the contrary, it confines her to a particular role that has to be assumed unquestioningly. Cultural norms dictate how a mother has to behave, feel and function; in essence, however, they transport a certain ideology which is impossible to live up to (38-39). The patriarchal notion that being a mother is the ultimate manifestation of femaleness, of being a 'real woman' (37), is questionable because it disregards different realisations of

womanhood that deviate from this image. Furthermore, motherhood, once it is obtained, seems to be an eternal category that sticks; women are defined by it and nothing else, which discounts other versions of their own selves (42). The institution of motherhood, therefore, prevents women's self-realisation by insisting on "maternal altruism" (212) which, in turn, denies them a considerable amount of agency. As a consequence, motherhood has become a

dangerous archetype: the Mother, source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal; the feminine, leavening, emotional element in a society ruled by male logic and male claims to be "objective", "rational" judgment; the symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness in a world of wars, brutal competition, and contempt for human weakness. (Rich 52)

As can be deduced from the quote above, the concept of motherhood has, at the time of the conception of the book, been associated with 'weak', predominantly negative characteristics and continues to do so even nowadays. Certain stereotypes still prevail in the present day such as the predominance of emotionality over rationality and passivity over activity. Especially the latter is relevant in this context because by denying a mother her agency, her power is consequently taken away. Since power contributes to the construction and maintenance of hierarchies, differences between genders are further emphasised and this ultimately has a substantial impact on the configuration of the private as well as the public sphere (motherhood, for example, is still considered to be a hindrance in the workplace in contemporary society). Another aspect worth mentioning is that there are not only progressive but also destructive forces of power such as self-centeredness, ferocity and desertion. Since the conception of motherhood - and womanhood for that matter - does not really go well with these negative facets (as has been discussed above), the subject of power wielded by women is still a delicate one (Tegelman 16). This becomes most apparent with Cersei's character: she displays these corruptive forces of power most obviously and is heavily criticised for it in return, not only in Westeros but also within the *Game of Thrones*-fan community.

As has been established hitherto, the topic of motherhood is a very ambiguous one and this is manifested yet again in the fantasy genre. In this particular genre, mothers are often portrayed in both a literal and figurative way (Fielden 537); the latter, which almost always has a positive connotation, most commonly in the form of "Mother Earth" or similar abstractions (in *Game of Thrones* this would be "The Mother", one of the principal deities, among others such as The Maiden, The Crone, The Warrior, etc., of the 'Faith of the Seven', which is

predominantly practised in Westeros). The former, by contrast, is a bit more equivocal: being “someone who may offer both security and repression”, mother acquires a position of paradoxically “representing both limitation and empowerment” (537). It is interesting to see that the traditional view of motherhood, even in the fantasy genre, entails some kind of restriction. There always seem to be boundaries which curtail a mother’s freedom to act and do as she pleases which is thought-provoking since fantasy is fiction and would therefore render it possible to provide more liberal and alternative portrayals of maternal characters. There is a potential for presenting better and more varied images of motherhood but, in the majority of cases, this is not exploited (Tegelman 21). *A Song of Ice and Fire* is one of the few exceptions in this regard in that it offers an array of maternal characters with a considerable amount of agency among the main protagonists (21); the series, however, takes a lot of this authoritative power away by transferring it to their sons, which is telling.

Generally, women seem to be destined to eventually become mothers in the fantasy genre. Hence, Daenerys is a particularly interesting and exceptional character: although she has lost her child and, in further consequence, her fertility due to blood magic that has been exercised by an Essonian priestess, she nevertheless exudes a strong, maternal aura. In a figurative sense, her dragons and the people she rules are her children which consistently becomes apparent throughout the narrative. In one sequence, for example, she symbolically gives birth to her dragons by laying their eggs into the funeral pyre she has set up for her dead husband, stepping into it herself and ultimately arising from its midst unharmed with the hatched dragons roosting on her shoulder. Moreover, she forms a bond with the slaves that she frees during her expeditions of conquest, who see in her a maternal figure, which finds expression in them calling her ‘mother’ in a variety of tongues. Thus, Daenerys embodies certain aspects of motherhood more so than many actual mothers in the story: she nurtures her dragons, offers comfort and arouses hope in her followers and tries to be a kind, just ruler which unfortunately becomes increasingly difficult the more power she gains (Tegelman 45-46).

Reverting to Rich’s argumentation, which has been presented earlier in this chapter, the conception of an exemplary mother figure is that of being a loving, kind, and compassionate caregiver. If women, however, do not conform to this traditional image of a mother or if they deviate from the norms set up by society, they are, before long, considered unnatural or bad. Daenerys and Catelyn fit the description of an appropriate mother best although, they too, have traits which do not comply with this ideal. They have flaws, one of the most prominent ones being vengefulness which in several instances makes them cloud their judgement, but

these, in turn, make them more nuanced characters. This rejection of traditional stereotypes is one of Martin's key strengths because it represents real-life human beings and their interactions more accurately. Especially with regards to the notion of motherhood, which, in large part, still holds on to the traditional belief that a mother should be self-sacrificing (Tegelman 29), this is a valuable tool: by ascribing maternal characters agency and, by extension, power, Martin subverts the prevailing understanding of maternity which, even today, limits women more than men. What has to be taken into consideration in this context is that the conception of motherhood is culturally constructed. Members of society have internalised certain images of what it means to be a mother and this has been done through many different forms of media (books, films, TV, etc.) and other channels that circulate certain ideologies (Tegelman 26). That is why Martin's work is so meaningful: because it challenges preconceived ideas about motherhood and offers alternative renditions thereof.

Given their societal status as women in a hyper-paternalistic nation such as Westeros, Cersei and Catelyn are mothers who wield an unusually large amount of political influence and power. Their nobility facilitates this authority, which, being driven by deviating, underlying motivations, they assert in different ways. Cersei's main incentive is the seizure and maintenance of her political position as Queen Regent, in order to be able to act out her vengeful, manipulative side. Moreover, she uses her power to enable Joffrey, her sociopathic son, to exercise it himself, although he does in no way prove equal to that task. She cannot anticipate what damage he will ultimately do because her love for and dedication to him makes her turn a blind eye to his abhorrent course of action (Tegelman 54). The fact that she ignores his cruel behaviour, which reflects on her failure as a mother, is telling. Although she continuously insists on loving her children unconditionally, "they largely exist to enable her other actions – her emancipation, her treason, her political safety" (39).

Catelyn, on the other hand, strategically employs her power to build strong alliances that will be beneficial for her family. During her son's voyage of conquest, she uses her political connections and knowledge about other Noble Houses to create coalitions that will help him secure his claim to the Iron Throne. She serves as her son's political advisor and is repeatedly sent away as an envoy to negotiate terms with other noblemen. Although her motivations are more altruistic than Cersei's, she nonetheless uses her privileged status at times for setting actions in motion which serve her personal vendetta (such as the arrest of Tyrion due to her suspicion of him being the attempted murderer of her son Bran or the release of their main captive Jaime in a hypothetical, uncertain and eventually failed exchange for her daughters who are trapped in the main capital).

What connects both Catelyn and Cersei is their undying love for their children and the fact that they would do anything in their power to ensure their well-being, even if it is detrimental for other people or plans involved. Their maternal motivations seem to impair their discernment and, as a consequence, their actions are considered to be irrational: “[T]he society of the novels views this use of power as something that is inherently tied to their motherhood, and therefore any 'erroneous' acts of political conduct are quick to be labeled as 'mother's madness'" (Tegelman 56). This association of motherhood with irrationality and madness also reflects in male character's utterances and how people in general view political actions of mothers, mirroring Westerosi society's attitude towards them (e.g.: “Mothers.” The man made a word sound like a curse. “I think birthing does something to your minds. You are all mad.”; “The news must have driven you mad”, Ser Desmond broke in, “a madness of grief, a mother's madness, men will understand. You did not know.”).

The most extreme and illustrative example of the aforementioned claim certainly is the character of Lysa, Catelyn's sister, a smothering, overprotective mother whose paramount mission is the securing of her son's well-being. Her behaviour towards him is on the border of real insanity; among her many misconducts is the circumstance that she still lets him suck on her breast although he is already eight years of age and the fact that she allows him to hand down preposterous verdicts, regardless of the political consequences these might entail. This behaviour can also be detected in Cersei but not to such an extent; although she clearly overindulges her son Joffrey because she sees him as an extension of herself, she nevertheless manages to keep a certain sense of perspective, which Lysa lacks entirely. Catelyn, on the other hand, makes poor decisions on the basis of her ever-growing grief (her husband has been decapitated, her son has been thrown from a tower, her two girls are held captive in the main capital and later she is misinformed about the death of her two youngest sons) for reasons more understandable than Cersei's and Lysa's (Tegelman 55).

Without doubt, the conception of motherhood in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* (as has been established in section 5.1. and 5.3.) is tainted with predominantly negative connotations. Maternal characters are associated with irrational behaviour and a lack of agency with the latter, in particular, being strongly emphasised in the series (by deliberately making fundamental alterations in comparison to the book). Mothers and the concept of power do not seem to be fully compatible; even if they are privileged enough to wield it, they constantly have to vindicate it. What is thereby implied is that “agency, desire and will ultimately do violate the very definition of motherhood” (Tegelman 85). This notion is also

taken up in Andrea O'Reilly's anthology *Feminist mothering* in which she calls for an execution of motherhood that is empowering rather than limiting (4). She claims that women are still confined by societal expectations about what constitutes a good and able mother and therefore demands a practice outside of patriarchal control (cf. Rich's institution of motherhood) which she terms 'mothering' because it directs attention to the active role of child-rearing. The most pivotal requirement she lays down is that mothers should realise their full potential, strongly stressing "the importance of mothers meeting their own needs" (6). Furthermore, they do not have to take sole responsibility for raising their child; instead other people should be included in the process. Another integral step in practising mothering would be to dispute the status quo that perpetuates unattainable ideals about motherhood. Moreover, "mainstream parenting practices" should be questioned in order to relieve women of the burden of being the only ones that are liable for their children's development (6). Finally, mothers should be able to express feelings of anger, despair and frustration towards their children without feeling shame or guilt, for perpetual love is an unrealistic notion.

Adhering to those guiding principles is a prerequisite for feminist mothering. According to O'Reilly, women should strive for individual fulfilment because only if they themselves exude satisfaction and self-confidence, can they become role models worth imitating. Mothers should take time for themselves and not be ashamed to rely on others' help; however, it has to be taken into consideration that not all women even have the possibility to do so, due to personal or public circumstances (American statutes which regulate public child care and equal pay, for example, still hamper a realisation of these demands). Their aim should be to set a positive example to such an extent that education on gender-sensitivity, for instance, would become redundant since it is a lived reality anyway (8). The ultimate aspiration for a mother should therefore be the maintenance of her selfhood; however, the institution of motherhood, which is a product of patriarchy, prevents this from happening by denying her power, while at the same time accrediting her with the sole authority for child-rearing (10). Thus, to bring about change, the first point on the agenda would be that "[...] the important work of mothering would be culturally valued and supported and that mothers, likewise, would perform this motherwork from a place of agency and authority" (9).

Although this is a desirable endeavour, American society, according to scholars Michaels and Douglas, is still far from arriving at such an ideal state. In their illuminating book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*, they debunk the contemporary myth of motherhood, which traverses American society by analysing

representations of mothers in film, TV, magazines and other instances of the media, which convey certain, controversial messages. These messages, then, are subsumed under the term “new momism”:

Central to the new momism, in fact, is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy. But here’s where the distortion of feminism occurs. The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a ‘real’ woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a ‘mom’ and to bring to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism that would involve the cross cloning of Mother Teresa with Donna Shalala. Thus the new momism is deeply contradictory: It both draws from and repudiates feminism. (Douglas and Michaels 5)

‘New momism’ therefore takes a woman’s agency away under the pretext that she actually has the freedom to choose whatever she wants that satisfies her but at the same time subtly instilling an image of womanhood that views motherhood as a prerequisite for fulfilment in life. In further consequence, the ideal mother of today is characterised by a voluntary abandonment of her self-realisation in favour of her child’s. She consciously chooses domestic life over her career to prove her selfless devotion and does not revert to governmental aid for this would imply her failure as a mother (26). According to Michaels and Douglas, this seems to be the prevailing sentiment in Western global culture. Instead of taking action to tackle serious, economic problems such as public child care, family leave and equal pay, which would enable women to make independent decisions that allow them to live their version of motherhood without any limitations, media images construct and perpetuate a myth of motherhood which bears little resemblance to reality.

Especially nowadays, with the ubiquity of Web 2.0, the maintenance and distribution of this myth is greatly facilitated. Celebrity mums, in particular, contribute to its preservation by appearing in talk shows and spreading stories about their extended maternity leave and the fulfilment they obtain from their motherhood. This message is increasingly corroborated by their Instagram accounts in which they post often carefully constructed pictures that chronicle their lives as mothers (mainly pictures with their kids), making their vocation seem effortless. This is very alarming since unrealistic images such as these manifest themselves in the collective consciousness of the general public and are ultimately taken at face value. In pursuing an unattainable ideal, women thus restrict their agency of their own accord by sacrificing parts of their selfhood. To substantiate this claim with Barthes’ terminology, a

particular conception of motherhood becomes naturalised, the so-called ‘mommy myth’, which disseminates a certain ideology that is adopted by a high percentage of the American population. *Game of Thrones*, in this regard, is one among a myriad of forms of media which endorses this public sentiment. By deliberately altering parts of the narrative that provides the basis for the TV adaptation, such as depriving Cersei and Catelyn, two of the strongest female characters, of their agency in many instances (by transferring it to their sons), the creators ultimately convey a message that is in accord with the one voiced by Michaels and Douglas.

6.1.3. Masculinity

“Like most women in history, Ice and Fire’s females might be considered outsiders by mere virtue of their gender” (Hartinger 154). However, Martin elevates them to point-of-view characters, thereby moving them into the centre of the narrative (159). As a result, they get as much attention as the insiders, the ones that fit the images dictated by society. One might assume that outsiders in particular are sympathetic towards other peoples’ plight since they themselves have experienced oppression and rejection and are therefore good people (160). Martin, however, confounds this expectation in that he does not necessarily make the outsiders (i.e. women) into good characters. Cersei, for example, illustrates this reversal of stereotypes very well: although being constrained by patriarchy and having to suffer many insults because of her gender, she is still cold-blooded, wicked and manipulative.

Based on the historical figures of Margaret of Anjou and Isabella of France (Miller 2012, online magazine article), both great conspirators and women with agency, Cersei possesses some Machiavellian traits by “doing what is necessary to gain an advantage over opponents” (Schulzke 35). According to Machiavelli, a ruler’s power is dependent on the interplay between ‘virtú’ and ‘fortuna’. Virtú is the capability to seize and consequently maintain power and it is influenced by a person’s surroundings (35). Fortuna, on the other hand, is an expression for the circumstances under which a person has to operate and which are not manoeuvrable (36). “Those who seek power [...] must have the virtú to control their circumstances, so that their circumstances cannot control them” (36). It therefore depends on a person’s virtú as to whether they can wield power unimpeded. Unfortunately, Cersei does not really possess virtú; although she is able to seize power (by deceit, cunning and manipulation), once she has it, she does not really know how to handle it. Furthermore, a ruler is reliant upon the assistance of either the common folk or the aristocracy (37) to gain power. Cersei, however, dismisses both of these groups by despising the ordinary people and discounting the nobility. Although cruelty, which is one of Cersei’s most prominent traits, is also an essential quality for seizing power, says Machiavelli, it has to be deployed carefully in order not to antagonise anybody (39) which she, eventually does in great numbers.

Having established that Cersei without doubt possesses some but by no means all traits of a Machiavellian character, it is important to point out that she tries to adopt many features that are usually associated with men. In fact, she secretly desires to be a man and resents being born a woman, which becomes especially apparent in the books (cf. chapter 5.3.). Although she is beautiful and has a proportionally large amount of agency as opposed to other women

in the story, she despises her own gender and would definitely change it if possible. On a more general scale, she kind of encapsulates the sentiment of an era of second wave-feminism, when women strived to be like men. Although it is a sad notion that she feels contempt for her own gender, this also illustrates what consequences can ensue by being trapped in a heteronormative system. Cersei is hated and reviled for being such a cold-blooded woman, not only in book and series but also in real life. Being portrayed as the typical villain who is acting with the gloves off, she is despised by most viewers. This, in turn, signifies the double-standard of Westerosi as well as contemporary society.

The history of the Iron Throne is one of brutality, murder, and manipulation, and Cersei is merely utilizing the standard toolset to achieve her aspirations of power. [...] [She] wields power by adopting the strategies and behaviors of the patriarchy more often than the ones more routinely available to women. It's telling that she's judged negatively while the men who use similar tactics are celebrated as legends. (Spector 182-183)

Brienne, on the other hand, is a woman who does not conform to the gender norms set up by patriarchy, either. However, she does not comply with the idealised picture of a woman in a different way than Cersei: she possesses immense, physical strength and her stature resembles more that of a man than a woman. By becoming a knight, her main goal is to help people in need but "[n]o matter her skill [...], she is reminded time and again that a woman's primary function is to present herself in a manner appealing to men" (Spector 180). Brienne idealises chivalry which is surprising considering the fact that it contributes to the oppression of her sex. Although its paramount principle is to help others, it does so by singling out a group of people (i.e. women) which are put on a "pedestal of moral reverence" (Goguen 207). Rather than "empowering them to protect themselves" (208), it emphasises the role of the 'weaker sex' which has to be protected. As a result, women are perceived as vulnerable, helpless human beings who are dependent on men. By advocating this particular picture, however, alternative forms of how to be a woman are excluded (217). Brienne becoming a member of Renly's Kingsguard, for example, is breaking these gender boundaries (S02E03, 13:00) because usually only men are admitted to join it. Although this is a powerful scene which proves that women can defy the constraints they are trapped in, it also secludes her even more: "Because her actions fall consistently and fully outside the social norms, Brienne provides a stark lesson on how women who dare to take male power for their own are judged and treated not only in Westeros but in all conventionally patriarchal societies" (Spector 180).

Daenerys' transformation from helpless child bride to ferocious leader is one of the most empowering tales in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. She is leading her own army, gradually freeing one city after another from slavery. What has to be taken into consideration, however, is that her establishment as a ruler has only been enabled by her husband's death. His decease lead to the creation of a space which allows her to implement her plans with agency. Before Khal Drogo's demise, Daenerys tried to keep an open mind about the Dothraki culture and even assimilated to it to a certain degree; however, she also remained true to her principles which entailed a critical stance concerning particular practices and values which are ingrained in her husband's tribe. However, only after his passing can she act freely and independently, not being constrained by a male superior within this paternal system (not even by her baby which she loses before Drogo dies). Her main incentive is to actively participate in changing the status quo which exacerbates women's lives and permits the establishment of slavery. Hence, when she finally has the freedom to act autonomously, she is able to put her plans – driven by her convictions – of being a just leader into practice. As a result, Daenerys' "very existence is perilous to the current power structure [of Westeros]" (Spector 170).

In the series, Daenerys' storyline very much adheres to that of her literary counterpart, making her one of the strongest female characters. Her visual representation, however, weakens her character in many instances by turning her into an object that should satisfy the male gaze. In one scene, for example, Daario, a swellsword who will become Daenerys' future love interest, enters her tent and initially threatens her with a scythe, but, after a lengthy negotiation, eventually swears fealty to her. Throughout the whole scene, Daenerys sits in her bathtub while the edges of her nipples are indicated. When she finally rises from the tub, her naked body is explicitly shown, providing a strong contrast to Daario, who is fully clothed (S03E08 48:00). Furthermore, on a narrative level, some alterations have been made in that it is not Daenerys with her good diplomatic thinking who contributes to the fall of the city Yunkai but Daario with his heroic deeds. Another interesting observation is that Daenerys' apparel evermore differs from season to season. In the first season (e.g. E03), she wears more revealing clothes than in the consecutive ones (clothes which expose her stomach and back, a see-through dress where her nipples are showing, etc.), in which she gradually shows less skin. The creators' intention here might have been to visually illustrate her becoming of a queen but at the same time another message might be conveyed: that only when you objectify yourself, you can advance as a woman in society.

Having elaborated on the position Cersei, Brienne and Daenerys occupy in the show, I will now try to make a connection to the construction of myths that are perpetuated by their representations. My argumentation is that, by depicting those women in a particular way, the following myth is propagated: that woman cannot possess the same abilities usually associated with men (physical strength, leadership quality, ruthlessness) while at the same time maintaining their 'womanhood'. Brienne has the strength of a man and could easily outfight nearly every man in Westeros but because she does not live up to the standards set up by her society (especially with regards to her beauty), she is not even considered to be a female. The message that is thereby conveyed is that women should not be as strong as men, for if they are, they are not 'real' women. Cersei, on the other hand, proves that women, who are as emotionally hardened as men, are not perceived as 'real' women, either. Although her father is just as harsh and unforgiving as her, she is much more hated and reviled for it than him. Finally, Daenerys exemplifies the notion that women are not as good at ruling as men. Although she has the best of intentions (and without doubt shows some remarkable leadership skills), she nevertheless is weakened by her visual representation and eventually fails in the city of Meereen.

Returning to Barthes' terminology, myth is constructed to be consumed, not to be scrutinised. "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (Barthes 143). By providing representational images that all together constitute myth, the creators require the audience to take them in straightaway. These ready-made images, then, are presented to trigger an instantaneous reaction in the viewer. "[M]yth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression - it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it" (Barthes 129). Thus, the consumer of myth, being confronted with it, is forced to embrace it instantly.

The naturalisation of myth, however, has far-reaching consequences in *Game of Thrones* because it conveys an underlying message which is critical. By restricting women's agency considerably and reducing them to their sexual attributes in many instances, it reflects the bitter reality that, in many instances, women are still not equal to men in contemporary

society²³. To get ahead, they have to sexualise themselves (just like in the series) or at least conform to the norms that are set up by society. If they deviate in one way or another, they are denied parts of their femininity, making them less of a woman. As a result, a particular picture of womanhood is advocated that does not allow for different renditions thereof.

²³ E.g. gender pay gaps, domestic discrepancy between the sexes, (sexual) violence against women, female underrepresentation in politics, the media, technology and management positions, etc. For more information see <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do>.

6.2. Ramifications

According to Mary Celeste Kearney,

the media have increasingly become powerful regulators of individual behavior and social practices. For, as systems of communication, they are better able than other social institutions to produce and circulate images and messages that consumers use to construct knowledge and values. For example, the media regularly model particular forms of human identity that consumers use to judge themselves and others. (3)

Both *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* are significant instances that permeate the mediasphere; therefore, they have a considerable impact on the construction of certain values, as has been mentioned above. Especially in the last decade, with the emergence of social networking sites, the negotiation of meanings and struggle over dominant ways of thinking have moved to these particular forms of media. The facilitation of social interaction “has significantly shifted the power dynamics between producers and consumers” (Kearney 12), opening up new avenues for the formation of identity and the construction of ideology. Constituting a substantial part of popular culture, *Game of Thrones* is a phenomenon that has significantly influenced meaning-making processes, especially with regards to gender. The majority of articles and discussions on social media circulating the internet, thematise the portrayal of female characters and are important sites for gender contestation.

Browsing the internet is illuminating in that it reveals the TV audience’s fan favourites: it is interesting to observe that characters such as Arya²⁴, Daenerys and Brienne are preferred as opposed to Sansa²⁵, Cersei and Catelyn, who are repeatedly subjected to critique. It is noteworthy that the “[s]trong characters are portrayed with classically masculine characteristics, and weak characters with feminine ones” (Frankel 2) with the exception of Daenerys, because it suggests that women who are akin to men, are favoured by society. Instead, the message, in my opinion, should be that women should embrace the many different facets of womanhood (whether they want to be tomboys or girly girls or something

²⁴ Arya has not been included in the analysis because she is similar to Brienne’s character in encapsulating the ‘warrior woman trope’, which would eventually have resulted in yielding similar results.

²⁵ Sansa has not been included in the analysis because her character has not been altered in the series (the first four seasons at least) to the same extent as the other female characters, therefore making her less suitable for my argumentation (that by changing the portrayal of female characters, particular myths of gender are reinforced).

in between), without having to make apologies for it. Interestingly, Daenerys is the one character that is favoured by the majority of viewers: she is stunningly beautiful *and* has the potential to be a visionary ruler which is a strong, empowering image for women (bearing in mind that female leaders are still underrepresented in contemporary society).

There is a considerable amount of women who challenge gender stereotypes (Brienne, Arya, Ygritte, Osha, Asha); however, they are described and portrayed as not being beautiful/feminine in the typical sense (although, this of course is subjective). Hence, I was curious about the introduction of the so-called Sand Snakes, Dornish women who are described as being skilled fighters, independent, sexually liberated and beautiful. Unfortunately they, too, have been visually objectified in the fifth season. Another noteworthy aspect is that all the main female characters in the series are thin. As Susan Bordo strongly asserts, “images have enormous power to imprint themselves on us” (455); they set something in motion in ourselves, concurrently requiring an engagement with them. We become acquainted with them through popular culture which advocates a particular body image that ultimately establishes itself in the collective consciousness.

The burning question that fans and critics alike repeatedly ask themselves is whether *Game of Thrones* can be considered a feminist show. There are many contesting opinions on this subject but in the end everybody has to decide for themselves if they feel empowered or offended by the series. Interestingly, Martin, the author of the books that are the source material for the show, unequivocally identifies himself as a feminist: “I regard men and women as all human - yes there are differences, but many of those differences are created by the culture that we live in, whether it's the medieval culture of Westeros, or 21st century western culture” (Salter 2013, online newspaper article). The creators of the show, however, send ambiguous messages by visually objectifying female characters and altering plot lines in a way that considerably weaken their agency, which they are heavily criticised for. After Cersei’s rape scene, for example, which caused a lot of commotion because it misrepresented the original account of the story, the episode’s director claimed that, in the end, both parties engaged in it (Itzkoff 2014, online newspaper article). This was greeted with a lot of outrage since the scene indicates the opposite (Cersei’s cry: “It’s not right”, Jaime’s response: “I don’t care”, S04E03, 14:40). The showrunners Benioff and Weiss refused to comment on it altogether (Itzkoff 2014), which is a statement in itself. In the past, they have generally given questionable answers when being interviewed about their artistic and visual choices. Factoring in the creators’ (and everybody else’s who is involved in the show for that matter)

responses to the public and their convictions concerning certain issues (such as gender, violence, politics, etc.) is therefore relevant when discussing the impact of the show on popular culture because, whether they are aware of it or not, they influence public opinion.

As has already been mentioned, many controversial issues (e.g. objectification and exploitation of the female body on the one hand and female empowerment on the other) are mirrored in the fan reactions (Frankel 177-178). Social media platforms but also blogs and online newspaper articles reflect the feedback of the public who, in turn, can thereby indirectly influence the direction the series is taking (concerning future portrayals of the characters, etc.). If there is a consensus among the audience that particular aspects of the show make them not want to watch it anymore, the creators might react by changing these in future episodes in order not to lose viewership. To what extent they factor in these fan responses, however, is impossible to say.

One thing that can be claimed with certainty, though, is that *Game of Thrones* is a pop cultural phenomenon. The fact that it is the most heavily pirated show on the internet speaks for itself. Moreover, it succeeded in making fantasy more accessible to women and proves that they are equally interested and invested in that genre, respectively. Having one of the most devoted fanbases, one that is comparable to *Star Wars*²⁶ in its scope, only shows how strong its appeal to the masses is. As a result, *Game of Thrones* permeates the everyday lives of its consumers in many different ways: babies are named after characters from the series (Arya being the most popular one), people dress up as their favourite characters for carnival, Halloween, comic conventions and many other occasions and they even get their best-loved quotes tattooed. On social media, a multitude of internet memes are circulated and interactive discussions are initiated. As a further consequence of the series' fame, the cast of the show has gained massive, widespread popularity internationally, with some acquiring celebrity status. Especially the female actresses have become very successful through the series which has opened up new possibilities to further their careers (being offered roles in mainstream cinema productions, theatre, etc.), and this, in turn, is a very empowering image.

The final question that remains, then, is why a medieval narrative is so appealing to a myriad of people in contemporary 21st century? To provide some answers, a forum post on the website "quora.com" that sparked off lively debate, has been surveyed and eventually gave

²⁶ See <http://www.vulture.com/2012/10/25-most-devoted-fans.html>, where *Star Wars* even ranks below *Game of Thrones*, although it must be pointed out here that compiling a list like that is always very subjective.

some illuminating reasons. The most prominent argument that was put forward was that these narratives, although they depict a worldview that does not at all comply with our own, address themes that are relevant even today (world politics, terrorism, gender inequality, etc.). Moreover, they allow for fantasy tropes to exist since the simplicity of a medieval time allows for a better reception of magical elements (magic would not be taken as seriously in a contemporary or future setting). Finally, consuming such epic fantasies that are set in medieval times, is some kind of escapism. We live in a fast-paced, technologised and very complex world, which can often become overwhelming. By consuming such narratives, people are given the possibility to temporarily forget about the challenges of everyday life (quora.com, question-and-answer website).

To conclude, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a particularly relevant, medieval epic because the conception of the books' different chapters makes an allusion to how history is made. There has always been a struggle over power to seize the main narrative (Aoun 2013, online magazine article) and in the past, women have always been neglected in this regard. There was a constant struggle to even be included in the narrative and that is why Martin's writing technique is so appealing but also important: by writing chapters from a female point of view, he acknowledges that they are part of history too and help make it which is often overlooked by dominant meaning-making instances ... and this is precisely what the series does, too, by providing the widest variety of a female cast that has ever be seen on television.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to illustrate how *Game of Thrones* is a perfect mirror of our time by perpetuating questionable myths of gender through its visual portrayal of women. Using Barthes' terminology, these visual representations of female characters are signifiers denoting particular events (e.g. rape, sword-fighting, rebuke by a male, acting irrationally due to motherly love) which take on an additional meaning on a second, mythological level (e.g. that women do not mind being raped, that we live in a rape culture; that motherhood is not a desirable conception in present-day culture; that it is not favourable for women to embrace masculine traits). These illustrations, then, are a product of the contemporary equivalent of the 'bourgeoisie' who is aimed at maintaining an imbalance between the different sexes (whether the creators of the show deliberately made alterations to attain this goal or whether their artistic choices are unconscious reflections of the sentiment of a patriarchal society they have been raised in remains undecided). The main message that is thereby conveyed is that women's individual fulfilment is still impaired by the circulation and perpetuation of gender-myths.

These myths, then, mirror contemporary society's values and attitudes towards certain topics (e.g. sexuality, politics, violence, etc.) and are a manifestation of an ideology that the dominant class wants to convey. The trivialisation of rape in the series, for instance, is a reflection of the current sentiment in American society that women like to be subjected to sexual violence. This underlying conviction reverberates in the unprecedented success of films such as *50 Shades of Grey* which advocate the liberation of female sexuality under the pretence of considering women's sexual preferences, which, according to them, are often of a violent nature.

Although the implementation of these myths is highly questionable and should therefore be subjected to critique, it still has to be acknowledged that *Game of Thrones* induces a dialogue about different gender roles and representations of women, thereby shifting them to the centre of public attention rather than relegating them to the margins. People participate in lively discussions and voice their opinions, even try to bring about change and this is, without doubt, a positive aspect. Another favourable facet is the fact that the series offers a remarkable variety of women who can be identified with although they are more stereotypes than fully-fledged characters, as opposed to its literary counterparts. Still it is interesting to see how a wide spectrum of different female characters operates (from feminine to the butch type)

within such a hyper-heteronormative world. However, it has to be conceded that other aspects such as race and homosexuality are very much neglected. Furthermore, all of the main characters are thin which promotes a certain body image that is unrealistic. Leaving that aside, the books are very empowering for women in that they aptly illustrate how women, despite the constraints put up by patriarchy, exert agency and act according to what they deem right; hence, in that regard they could be considered being feminist. The show, however, compromises this notion by visually objectifying the majority of female characters and altering some plotlines that engender the mitigation of their agency. Thus, the following question remains: “[I]s the show problematic or empowering? Without question, it’s both” (Frankel 184).

As has already been established, *Game of Thrones* elicits different responses with regards to female representations. Thus, it would have been a worthwhile undertaking to investigate the impact of the show on its viewers in the form of audience reception and character identification studies²⁷. However, in the end it has been a conscious decision to carry out a content analysis and in further consequence take Barthes’ concept of myth as a point of reference since it is an extremely difficult and effortful endeavour to arrive at a definite conclusion, due to the sheer quantity of consumers of the show. Another aspect that has to be taken into consideration here is the fact that the series, as well as the books, are not completed yet. At least two, if not more, seasons will be broadcasted (Martin’s intention is to write two more books which provide new strands of the plot) which allow for a lot of character development, hence it causes an enormous difficulty to make bold statements about the role that women occupy in the show since there is still much potential for change. It is nearly impossible, therefore, to come to a definite conclusion but this thesis at least attempted an analysis of the representation of female gender roles to ultimately demonstrate what potential impact they might have on popular culture. Moreover, it has to be taken into account that different approaches to a topic facilitate different readings thereof. It likewise depends on what the reader of a text and the consumer of a show like *Game of Thrones* projects onto the material that is provided; it is therefore not possible to make a definite statement about the impact the show has and the message it is conveying since every person projects their own mindset onto it. However, it is still important to acknowledge what power *Game of Thrones*

²⁷ Other possible and entirely different approaches to *Game of Thrones*: The juxtaposition of Essos (as opposed to Westeros) serves to identify it as the great Other, a mystical land which is informed by Oriental themes and this would also make it an interesting subject for analysis from a postcolonial view, just as Westeros would lend itself excellently for a Marxist reading of its feudal system.

has in sending particular messages and enforcing a main narrative onto the public who consumes it alongside raising awareness of how such a pop cultural phenomenon is a great force in meaning-making processes and, by extension, influences our everyday lives.

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Abstract

Game of Thrones, critically-acclaimed TV series and global phenomenon, has repeatedly been subjected to praise and critique for its representation of female characters. Gratuitous (sexual) objectification, excessive violence but also female agency and empowerment have consistently been much-discussed key topics on social media, blogs, online newspapers, talk shows, television interviews and more, ultimately traversing the whole Western mediasphere. As a result, an intense feminist debate has been sparked off which has continuously occupied viewers' minds up to this day.

Much of the discussion centres on female character's representation on screen and how such representation might influence real-life gender politics and, on a more general scale, social conduct. Thus, a comparative, semiotic content analysis - substantiated by theories from gender and film studies - of both *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the book series which serves as a basis for the TV show, and the series itself should shed some light on different modes of representation and, in further instance, what these might entail.

Furthermore, in the second part of this paper, Roland Barthes' influential work *Mythologies* is taken as a prime point of reference for corroborating the claim that *Game of Thrones* is contributing significantly to the maintenance and circulation of so-called 'gender myths'. In doing so, commentary on the ensuing consequences of such a dissemination of myths should be facilitated in order to finally establish its relevance for and influence on contemporary Western society.

Zusammenfassung

Game of Thrones, vielgefeierte Fernsehserie und popkulturelles Phänomen, erntet immer wieder Lob und Kritik für seine Darstellung von weiblichen Charakteren. Überflüssige (sexuelle) Objektifizierung, exzessive Gewalt, aber auch weibliche Handlungskompetenz und Selbstermächtigung sind serienimmanent und werden in sozialen Medien, Blogs, Internetzeitungen, Talkshows, Fernsehinterviews, generell in der gesamten westlichen Medienlandschaft durchwegs kontrovers diskutiert. Dies hat eine intensive feministische Debatte entfacht, die bis zum heutigen Tag ihre Zuschauer beschäftigt.

Ein Großteil der Diskussion befasst sich mit der Darstellung von weiblichen Charakteren in der Serie und der Frage, inwiefern solche Rollenbilder die gegenwärtige Geschlechterpolitik und generell soziales Verhalten im wirklichen Leben beeinflussen. Eine komparativ-semiotische Inhaltsanalyse der Serie und Buchreihe *A Song of Ice and Fire*, die *Game of Thrones* als Grundlage dient, soll, untermauert mit Theorien aus Gender und Film Studies, Aufschluss über verschiedene Repräsentations-Modi und deren Konsequenzen geben.

Laut meiner These trägt *Game of Thrones* maßgeblich dazu bei, sogenannte ‚Gender-Mythen‘ aufrecht zu erhalten und in Umlauf zu bringen. Die Konsequenzen, die sich daraus für die zeitgenössische westliche Gesellschaft ergeben, sollen im zweiten Teil der Arbeit mit Hilfe Roland Barthes’ einflussreichem Werk *Mythologies* als Hauptreferenz analysiert werden.