

YAAAAS QUEEN! – Daenerys Targaryen as a Contemporary Feminist

By

Jacob Aaron Reeves

Honors Thesis
Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of English
and the Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts – English, Literary Studies

May 2017

Approved by:

Dr. Donna L. Lillian, Thesis Director

Dr. Jessica Blackburn, Reader

Dr. Matthew Richards, Reader

Dr. Kristina Groover, Departmental Honors Director

Dr. Ted Zerucha, Interim Director, Honors College

Abstract

This essay examines Daenerys Targaryen from *Game of Thrones* through the lens of contemporary feminism. Her character's use of the systems available to her to change those same systems represents contemporary feminist characteristics, while also helping to shape and drive contemporary feminism into a more solidified theory and movement. In her journey from property to queen, Daenerys gains agency through sexual control, then uses that agency to create opportunity for others, ultimately freeing her people from oppression. At times, she steps close to white saviorism, but she confronts her privilege and recognizes the need for intersectional politics for her followers. She redefines what it means to be a woman through stepping into traditionally male-specific positions, and she refocuses the concepts of violence and power to reflect a feminine 'power-to' structure, rather than masculine 'power-over' one. Daenerys utilizes the contemporary feminist focus on intersectionality and media, giving contemporary feminists a figure to look to when attempting to achieve these goals in our world, by gaining her own agency, rejecting the male-dominance that has shaped her life, creating agency for others to choose their own path, and refocusing the concepts of power, class, and violence to further the goals of feminism overall.

Introduction: “I am the blood of the dragon.”

In an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation show, *George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight*, George R. R. Martin, author of the acclaimed *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of fantasy novels, the source material for HBO's *Game of Thrones*, Stroumboulopoulos told Martin, “One thing about your books that I notice is that you write women really well, you write them really different. Where does that come from?” Martin's reply, which has been taken by our internet culture and spread through various media, stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical sexualized view of women in fantasy stories: “You know, I've always considered women to be people.” While it is likely that Martin was being tongue-in-cheek with his reply, this answer caused a string of laughter and applause from the audience, implying that viewing women as people is something to be praised rather than expected in our current society.

When HBO announced that it was adapting Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* saga, there were fans of the book series that were skeptical, due to the graphic nature of the novels. Known for not shying away from difficult scenes, HBO continued with the project, and *Game of Thrones* has become one of the most highly-rated shows in their history. Early on, the show received much criticism regarding its depiction of female characters, but this dialogue has shifted somewhat due to the increasing number of females in power in the show (Armstrong). Some of these women have risen above rape, incest, beatings, and much more to get where they are, yet it would be mistaken to view this show as a feminist text, as viewers have claimed (Hendel). These women do ascend to higher positions of power, yet so many other characters, male and female, are still oppressed by the hierarchical domination present in the series. Oftentimes, this

domination is reproduced by the women characters who have survived their oppression, marking a significant contrast with feminism's goal of ending oppression of others.

While *Game of Thrones* is a complex narrative filled with nuance and detail, the series is steeped in sexual violence, which tends to dominate the narrative. In a video compilation made by *The Huffington Post*, all of the nude and sex scenes in the first three seasons are shown, running to fifteen minutes (Noble). This video features multiple acts of sexual violence, including two scenes that were changed from consensual sex to rape in the adaption (Ferreday 24). Unsurprisingly, the amount of specifically female nudity has become a large criticism of the show, generating the phrase "sexposition" to describe the multitude of scenes depicting nude women that do not advance the plot (McNutt). Few of these scenes acknowledge the consequences of the sexual violence and exploitation they display, even though many of them are quite graphic in nature. For example, one scene shows a naked sex-worker chained by her hands, filled with crossbow bolts, while another involves a husband forcing his slave to beat and orally stimulate his bride, who was forced into the marriage. These scenes only represent a fraction of the graphic, violent depictions of people in this series, leading many feminists, myself included, to criticize the general tone of the show.

The show does feature one female character who may exemplify some of the characteristics of a contemporary or millennial feminism, offering a reprieve from the devastatingly misogynistic society. Through her application of feminist principles, Daenerys Targaryen has the potential to lead the people of Westeros out of the depths of patriarchy and set them on a path to a more just and accepting society. Most importantly though, this character sets out not just to unseat men and gain positions of power, but to upend the entire patriarchal structure and replace it with a more inclusive form of rule. Daenerys's application of

contemporary feminist principles in her patriarchal society reflects and exemplifies emerging 21st Century feminism, giving fans of this series an example to follow in order to combat inequality in their own world.

A Very Brief History of Feminism: “Tell me what the women say.”

In order to understand the possibility of a feminist character in such a decidedly non-feminist text, feminism must be placed in some historical and cultural context. There are many types of feminisms, but for the purposes of this paper, I will use bell hooks’s definition: “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 10). This definition labels specific issues that feminism takes issue with, focusing on combating sexism rather than on being anti-male, and including people of all identities. The methods and manner used to achieve these goals have varied from culture to culture and from era to era, but all have kept the same goal in mind. Females and males have been socialized from birth to accept sexist thought and action, and as such they have equal opportunity to be sexist. Because this sexist style of thinking is ingrained in our culture, we must combat sexism itself, rather than a particular gender that benefits from sexism. While this does not excuse patriarchy and sexism, it does show that we cannot view feminism as simply as “women against men.” Women are just as capable of sexism as men are, as evidenced by the 2016 election. One of the most common comments during the election season regarding women not supporting Hillary Clinton was: “If I am supporting her because she is a woman, that’s equally as bad as not supporting her because of her gender” (Marton and Uotila). These comments made people think about why they were supporting a certain candidate: did they actually believe in their policies, or was it simply because of their gender? This definition sets the issue very clearly as sexism and patriarchy,

another term for institutionalized sexism, and seeks to combat these issues by creating equality for people of all backgrounds and identities.

Using our definition of feminism, we can examine certain theoretical feminisms and identify how they attempt to combat sexism and patriarchy. For example, liberal feminism focuses on the concept that “female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women’s entrance to and success in the so-called public world” (Tong 12). This theme of feminism seeks to combat gender oppression by changing the society in which people operate, creating opportunity for women to have as much agency and advancement in the public sphere as men do. This type of feminism does not seek to redefine femininity or push women to change how they act, but rather it seeks to give them access to spaces such as education and workplaces on par with men (Scholz 16).

While patriarchy runs deep within the narrative of *Game of Thrones*, certain characters echo different threads of feminist politics and, in turn, reflect the shortcomings of such feminisms in the world of Westeros. We see this brand of feminism embodied in the characters Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth in *Game of Thrones*. These women hold interests such as engaging in swordplay and combat that conflict with their society’s expectations of women. Westeros often relegates women to a domestic role, managing the home and tending to the needs of men. Arya and Brienne break these expectations and choose to subvert patriarchy by stepping into spheres dominated and controlled by men, and they often prove themselves to be more capable at these roles than their male opponents. However, these women simply reproduce the patriarchal culture found within *Game of Thrones*, engaging in the same actions and interests as the men around them – violence and murder. In performing these actions, they combat gender expectations of women in these roles, yet in doing so, they do not change the patriarchal culture

that created these expectations. The issues these characters face in this fictional story are not entirely isolated from the challenges feminisms confront in our world. Westeros is based loosely on Western Europe, and as such, we see issues such as race, class, and gender utilized as a commentary on the western contemporary culture.

While liberal feminism rejects gendered limitations in occupations, as seen in the characters of Arya Stark and Brienne Tarth, other feminisms recognize a need for more comprehensive changes in the conversation around gender. Twentieth century society's continued strong emphasis on traditional gender roles for women influenced the growth of another form of feminism, this time one that sought to oppose society and its expectations. Radical feminism may sound like the "hairy-legged, man-hating lesbians" that some picture when presented with the term "feminism," but this is hardly the case (Rich 504). Radical feminism instead opposes the idea of patriarchy itself on the grounds that patriarchy roots its control over women in their biological sex; because women can bear children, they have been relegated to the private sphere of the family and domestic life (Scholz 19). These feminists seek to radically change the social structures around gender and abolish this system. One type of radical feminism involves the rejection of compulsory outward hyperfemininity in favor of androgyny (Tong 13). This radical-libertarian feminism calls for women to embrace traits associated with the masculine as well as the feminine and reject the oversexualized view of women. *Game of Thrones* and its theme of sexual violence is a particular problem for this strand of feminism. For example, Cersei Lannister, Queen Regent of Westeros, is accused by the church of committing incest and murder, and she is punished for her actions by being forced to perform a "penance walk" where she walks miles through a city, naked, in front of thousands of people. After this, Cersei plots to destroy the church, literally blowing it up, along with all of its

occupants, and she even has her guard, a seven-foot tall soldier, rape and torture a nun. Instead of working to prevent her experiences from being replicated, Cersei reinforces the same patriarchal form of rule. Despite achieving a position of power where she can institute equality and justice for other women, such as stopping sexualized punishments such as a naked penance walk, she creates even more sexualized punishment and torture as revenge. Radical feminists would vehemently oppose this type of intragender violence, instead calling for a community-driven approach to equality.

Whereas radical feminists focus on biological sex as the root of patriarchal and female oppression, postmodern feminists question the validity of gender, claiming that the idea of the female being “other” to the male is constructed through our phallogocentric societies (Scholz 32-33). Those who identify with this ideology claim that “the specifically feminine attributes within any given society are devalued and underappreciated” (Scholz 26-27). The Wildling society in the north of Westeros reflects the ideals of postmodern feminism to a degree. These women often engage in combat with their male counterparts and are notably as ferocious as the men. Additionally, their marriage customs give some amount of agency to the women, as men are expected to steal their women from other clans, while the kidnapped women are expected to put up a fight every step of the way, establishing their independence and their ability to defend themselves. It should be noted that there is no physical harm done to the women, and a courtship does begin after the ceremony of stealing. This culture embodies Julia Kristeva’s central idea of postmodern feminism in that “insisting people are different because of their anatomy is to force both men and women into a repressive structure” (Marks and Courtivron 287). Through breaking the societal norm of marriage customs and giving women agency and control, as postmodern feminism does, the Wildlings’ customs suggest that for a woman to achieve the same sense of

self and subject that a man has, she must “transcend the definitions, labels, and essences limiting her existence; She must make herself whoever she wants to be” (Tong 126).

Postmodern feminism closely aligns with a relatively new type of feminism that I refer to as “contemporary feminism.” As a contemporary female icon and founder of the #HeForShe campaign that advocates for men to join the conversation around feminism alongside women, celebrity actor Emma Watson spoke to world leaders and members of the press at the World Economic Forum in 2015, voicing the concerns of many modern feminists, male and female: “What now? What can we practically do to end gender inequality? As feminists, what do we actually do?” (Cesarine). Contemporary feminists such as Emma Watson have identified issues with the feminisms that have predated them, such as a lack of focus on intersectionality and media, and they have begun articulating a new, still ill-defined, brand of feminism that is being shaped by and is shaping many young feminists today. Rather than dismissing previous feminisms, contemporary feminists recognize the achievements and successes of those who went before them, while identifying the need for a new feminism in and of our time that pulls from others while also filling the gaps.

While contemporary feminism is still evolving, it is possible to see characteristics already manifesting themselves. One of contemporary feminism’s defining traits, for example, is a deep focus and interest in intersectional and identity politics. Intersectionality is the idea that an individual’s social categorizations – such as race, class, gender – as well as the interaction among these identities create a whole that is different than the separate identities. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who originated this term, has discussed how the “elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities. Ignoring differences *within* groups contributes to

greater tension *among* groups” (Crenshaw 1242). This has been somewhat apparent in other feminisms in history, but we have seen a resurgence of this idea as our world becomes smaller and more connected in our digital generation (Tuin 20). Alison Crossley’s just released book, *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution*, addresses contemporary feminisms within the millennial generation. In an excerpt from the book, Crossley analyzes results from college campus surveys regarding feminist ideals and notes that students overwhelmingly include considerations of differences in race, class, and sexuality in their conversations about feminism and what it entails (Crossley Clayman Institute). The recognition that two people can experience an event, a comment, or even a television series in radically different ways based on their identities has driven an increase in more inclusive language and media across the world (Tuin 120). By acknowledging these differences, contemporary feminists are able to take a more nuanced approach to combating sexism and to operate within cultural constraints to end sexist oppression.

Another broad characteristic of these feminists is that they attack gender inequality using methods and media that have not been widely used in the past, namely digital technology. In the 21st Century, many of our discussions are filtered through celebrities and their lives, and with the increasing popularity of social media connections, the renewed focus on interconnection through social media allows us to have role models to mediate this new feminism. Social media allows people to connect with celebrities and public figures like never before, creating dialogue with these figures and allowing them to spread information quickly (Marwick 5). This digital connection gives us an example for how we mediate contemporary feminism in our society. When Beyoncé released her self-titled album in 2013 and her 2016 album “Lemonade,” the conversation around feminism and what constitutes it drew in many young people, as the

singer's popularity is far-reaching (Weidhase 128). Many of our discussions are filtered through celebrities and their lives, and seeing a figure like Beyoncé proclaim to be a feminist and release music discussing female empowerment added to the growing change in public discussions around feminism in a way that previous generations have not been able to do. This in turn becomes a meta example when we examine *Game of Thrones*. The show's massive popularity across communities and cultures has sparked a firestorm of conversation around feminism and what constitutes it. While the creators of the show might not have set out to create a feminist text, it has become so embedded within our culture that we have begun to look through this show to examine our own societal understanding of feminism, furthering the characteristic of contemporary feminism meditating itself through popular culture.

While *Game of Thrones* is a decidedly unfeminist text on the whole, as shown by the sheer amount of sexual violence and oppression committed against people of all genders, we are able to recognize aspects of contemporary feminism in one of its main characters, Daenerys Targaryen. Throughout her journey, we witness Dany utilizing aspects of earlier feminisms to achieve agency and employing contemporary feminist ideals to continue her journey. Through observing Dany's journey and seeing how she achieves equality for herself and others, we can begin to further the discussion around contemporary feminism and lead more people to accept the definition of feminism: to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.

Analysis: "A dragon is not a slave."

HBO's adaption of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga started its run with only a few dedicated fans of the books viewing the show, but it quickly grew to reach international recognition as one of the best television shows on the network, even surpassing the ratings of *The Sopranos*, with 18.4 million viewers across all platforms, as compared to *The*

Sopranos's 18.2 million (Hibberd). Due to the show's rapid rise in popularity and cultural relevance, and because it has surpassed Martin's pace of writing the novels, it is better situated for an analysis of the feminist undercurrents present. The *Game of Thrones* series concerns the relations and rivalries between different houses and families as they struggle for power and dominance in the fictional land of Westeros. Set in a world loosely based on medieval Europe, with elements of fantasy fiction tropes, the series follows kingdoms in turmoil, where men have held power for centuries. By the end of Season Six however, these men have fallen prey to their arrogance and selfish desires, resulting in many of their kingdoms, and lives, being lost to women, making a statement that cultures generated by men will tend toward chaos, and leave women to pick up the pieces. One character, Daenerys Targaryen, has experienced the result of patriarchy most directly.

Three hundred years prior to the events of the series, seven houses each ruled separate regions of the country: The Starks were Kings of the North, the Greyjoys were Kings of the Iron Islands, the Tullys were Kings of the Riverlands, the Arryns were Kings of the Vale, the Tyrells were Kings of the Reach, the Baratheons were Kings of the Stormlands, and the Martells were Kings of Dorne. A new house - the Targaryens - conquered them all and established themselves as rulers of the Seven Kingdoms, a name used interchangeably with Westeros. When Daenerys was born, her family was in the midst of a civil war, as her brother Rhaegar had kidnapped a noble woman who was promised to another lord. This lord, Robert Baratheon, led a rebellion against the Targaryens for stealing his bride. Already it is clear that patriarchy has rooted itself in Dany's life, through two men fighting over the control of a woman and her affection, not considering her agency. This rebellion, the result of the male gaze upon women, causes the death of Daenerys's family, except for her other brother Viserys and herself, and forces them to run

from Robert's forces. Here, one of the show's protagonists is not just born of a patriarchal struggle for power and control, but her character's identity emerges from and must rise out of that struggle, juxtaposing her potential feminist thread within the narrative against the show's more omnipresent patriarchy.

Dany and Viserys flee to old allies of the Targaryens, and seventeen years later they end up in Essos, the other main continent of the series. It is here that Viserys is able to enact a marriage contract with Khal Drogo, a Dothraki tribal warlord who commands a substantial army. Viserys agrees to give Drogo his seventeen-year-old sister, Daenerys, in exchange for Drogo's support in retaking the throne of Westeros. Viserys's dominance over his sister is reinforced in the show during a scene in which he gropes Dany while she remains submissive. Once again, the show establishes male dominance by positioning women as objects and reinforcing this through sexual violence. When Dany voices her dissent against the marriage after meeting Drogo, her brother responds by asserting, "I would let his whole tribe fuck you - all forty thousand men - and their horses too if that's what it took [to get his army]" ("Winter is Coming"). Dany's journey is one that moves through objectification and sexual violence, tropes that are amplified in this fictional world.

The Dothraki are a people portrayed as a savage race, an important stratification for Dany's journey as she evolves from a sex slave to a leader and queen. During the wedding to "celebrate" her marriage to Drogo, Dany observes many men and women dancing erotically, some even actively having sex in full view of everyone. At one point two men begin fighting when they realize they desire the same woman. One is killed in the fight and two women immediately flock to the winner. Sex, power, and violence are intertwined in this culture, and power and violence are quickly established as the primary ways of negotiating relations. These tensions brings us the first

shocking rape scene found in the show: during their wedding night, Dany is raped by her husband in order to consummate their marriage. This scene in the books is quite different, with her husband comforting her and treating her gently, until she willingly consents to the sexual contact. Due to the fact that she was still in an arranged marriage, there was no way that this act could be completely consensual, yet the book's version attempts to suggest acceptance and consent, with Daenerys taking command of the situation and taking Drogo inside of her. In contrast, the show unambiguously shows him forcing himself on her body. Starting the series off with such a graphic depiction of sexual violence and strong deviation from the source material highlights the complete lack of agency Daenerys has in the series: she is not even able to achieve the little amount of consent available to her in the books, let alone be independent from patriarchy. This lack of agency for Dany sets the stage for her profound growth and achievement later in the series and allows for Dany to use her experiences in unique ways to achieve change and progression not only in the Dothraki people, but eventually within Westeros.

Breaking Gender: "All men must die. But we are not men."

Despite her position at the start of the series, throughout the first season, Dany begins to develop sexual agency in her relationship with Drogo, and she uses this to create power in other aspects of her life among the Dothraki, positively affecting the lives of others. Even though Daenerys faced severe sexual trauma in her marriage, she recognizes, after a conversation with a handmaiden, that removing the sexual abuse from Drogo's hands would allow her to make steps towards greater control of her personhood. The handmaiden trains Dany in the arts of sexual pleasure and offers insight into how to begin developing this sexual agency: "Are you a slave, Khaleesi? Then don't make love like a slave. Out there he is the mighty Khal, but in this tent, he belongs to you," states the handmaiden ("The Kingsroad"). Following this, we view the first

scene that shows Dany and Drogo engaging in sexual activity facing one another, and even with Dany on top of Drogo, underlining her newfound power over herself and her body, turning her situation into one that she controls and forcing Drogo to view her as his queen, not his concubine.

As a result of the sexual agency that she develops, Dany gains the opportunity to attain control in other areas, but the status of sexual agency has been a highly debated topic among feminists for many years. Gayle Ruben, a cultural anthropologist known for theories of sex and gender politics, discusses the connections between feminism and sexuality:

There have been two strains of feminist thought on the subject. One tendency has criticized the restrictions on women's sexual behavior and denounced the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active. This tradition of feminist sexual thought has called for a sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men. The second tendency has considered sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse. (Ruben 270)

Dany's increased sexual control and freedom fall on the sex-positive side of this debate, seemingly arguing that agency for women is found through dominance and control, adhering to the script that patriarchy has set for them. However, in employing her sexuality in the fight for agency, Daenerys utilizes the existing patriarchal systems to achieve a position of power. She turns something that had previously been used against her into an advantage, taking the power away from her oppressor. This in turn allows her to begin changing the conversation around her gender and how she should act because of that. She changes how Drogo sees her through their sexual engagements, and after this, her experiences with agency develop as she further develops her personal power.

Gaining sexual agency is only the beginning for Dany's rise out of patriarchal domination, and she soon begins claiming different kinds of agency in other situations, notably with her brother. An argument ensues when Dany insults Viserys's honor and power among the Dothraki, and he raises a hand to strike her. In contrast with their first on-screen interaction, in which Dany meekly submits to his dominance over her, she proclaims, "I am a Khaleesi of the Dothraki! I am the wife of the great Khal and I carry his son inside me. The next time you raise a hand to me will be the last time you have hands" ("Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things"). Through her newfound agency, Dany turns the violence of the Dothraki culture that she has entered on her own brother, eventually having Khal Drogo kill him, as he is seen as the last male-force in her life that she cannot truly control.

Although she had sought the death of her brother, she was revolted by the particularly violent and brutal manner in which it was carried out, and through this event, Dany realizes that she does not want to perpetuate the system of violence that has surrounded and shaped her life to that point. Daenerys's facial expression is passive during this scene, eerily emotionless, with her only comment being, "He was no dragon. Fire cannot kill a dragon" ("A Golden Crown"). The Targaryens use their house sigil – a dragon – to identify one who is a strong leader, fit to rule. This is where we see the beginnings of contemporary feminism in Daenerys's journey: even though she has gained agency and power, she still recognizes the need for further growth and change in society at large. In observing her brother's violent history and finally being free from his control, Dany recognizes that she does not want to be this kind of ruler; rather she seeks to break the system of violence that created both her and her brother.

Through her power and control over the tribe, Dany changes Dothraki culture to prevent her personal history from repeating itself with other women, attempting to create an

interconnected community of support for women, echoing the feminist goal of ending sexist exploitation. The Dothraki often raid villages and take the women and children for slaves and concubines, but after Dany witnesses one of these raids, she orders the soldiers to stop and claims the women as her own to protect them. Drogo allows this, amused with his wife's fierceness, despite protests from his council and guards ("The Pointy End"). This is the first time we see Dany begin to change societal standards to create some form of equality, the likes of which hasn't been seen before in this culture, all of this foreshadowing her future activities in Slaver's Bay.

Despite making changes and finally having a voice in her tribe, Dany's agency and power become threatened when she is faced with the realities of a patriarchal system collapsing. Dany's position as a leader and a force for change is at risk when her husband is poisoned and killed by one of the slaves she claimed as her own. The Dothraki have never followed a Khalessi without a Khal, so she is expected to retreat to the widow's community and serve out her life sequestered from others. Dany has recognized the ability that she has to bring equality to these people, and so chooses to break with the system that would subjugate her. After accepting the loss of her husband, Dany decides to claim her right as queen and dismantle the patriarchal system she inhabits. It is only after losing her brother, husband, and son (whom she miscarried while attempting to save Drogo) that Dany recognizes the need to completely dismantle the male power structure that surrounds her in favor of a newer form of rule, one more focused on willing cooperation and freedom. She frees her slaves and asks, rather than commands, Drogo's people to follow her.

Having the support of her tribe, Dany identifies the need to use the violence of the patriarchy to remove the patriarchal system itself. After learning of deep magic in the world, Dany puts all of Drogo's possessions, including his body and what little Dany claims as her own,

namely her three dragon eggs, along with the slave that killed her husband, on Drogo's funeral pyre and burns them. This sacrifice allows the eggs, long believed to be petrified, to hatch, and Dany emerges from the ordeal as the "Mother of Dragons." These creatures are known for their violent and destructive nature, but, as their mother figure, Dany tames the dragons and treats them as children, eventually even scolding them when they misbehave. She makes use of the power and violence they bring, but tames it, as she has used and tamed the violence of her husband and tribe. This informs contemporary feminism about gaining a voice in the system: if violence and power are to be used, it must be tamed and controlled, otherwise it will bring destruction. While the level of violence of the dragons may work within the fantasy setting of *Game of Thrones*, we must find a more appropriate way to enact power in our world, possibly through such actions as civil marches and protests. These actions arguably take violence and anger and tame it, showing force and power without destruction. In looking to Daenerys, we see how she has gained a voice, and the agency to begin making change. As we look further into her journey, we see how she begins to exercise this power and how contemporary feminism can find a future for itself.

Power and Rule: "My reign has just begun."

Even once Dany has gained control over her tribe, she is still a relatively minor power in Essos and she needs to expand her influence before she can remove patriarchal dominance and rule. Exercising her new power, Dany moves to a region called Slaver's Bay after hearing about a large army available for purchase in Astapor, one of three cities there. These soldiers, the Unsullied, are trained and abused from birth to be world-renowned fighters and to be obedient to their male masters. Part of their abuse includes being castrated in childhood, continuing the thread of sexual violence in this text. Dany deceives the slave masters and once she is given control of the Unsullied, she uses her newly obtained army to turn on the masters and kill them. She then

offers the Unsullied freedom and states that anyone who wishes to stay is free to do so, but asks that they fight for her not as slaves, but as free men. After a moment, the soldiers begin tapping their spears on the ground in support, until every soldier is striking the ground in praise of Dany (“And Now His Watch is Ended”). By earning the allegiance of a slave army and freeing them, Dany has removed the “slave” qualifier, and in doing so she firmly establishes her focus on ending inequalities and oppression as central to her character and her reign.

After gaining an army and seeing the oppression and violence the slaves are subjected to, Dany makes the conscious effort to remove the slave economy from the region and to put an end to the subjugation of others. Moving further into Slaver’s Bay, she reaches Yunkai, the second slave city, and orders a raid on the city. After hearing of the fate of the masters in Astapor, the masters in Yunkai release their slaves to Daenerys. Even larger amounts of violence occur when Dany moves to the final and largest slave city, Meereen, where she styles herself as Queen of Slaver’s Bay. She doesn’t free only the women and children, but also any slave in these cities, demonstrating feminism’s goal of ending oppression of others. Through her pragmatic use of the systems put in place before her and her status in Slavers Bay, Dany echoes contemporary feminism in two ways: first, she operates within the structure of the slave economy, purchasing these soldiers and commanding them to kill their masters. It is only after that she frees the slaves, demonstrating her ability to make use of systems in place, while destroying those systems. Second, her reputation as a tactical leader forces the oppressors to release their slaves, allowing her to prevent further violence. As a figure in the region, she creates conversation among the people, and they recognize this force of power and flow with it, albeit reluctantly, rather than die fighting against it.

Dany's campaign in Slaver's Bay displays some ideals of feminism, yet it also pulls on tensions between feminist goals and exercising power to achieve these goals. None of these events occurred without violence and death, even if those killed were rejecting human rights and equality. A significant strand of feminist theorizing of power starts with the contention that "power-over, domination, or control is implicitly patriarchal" (Allen). This is reflected in Crenshaw's discussion of battered women and their husbands, as she notes that in the 1990s, many immigrants who married United States citizens had to remain "properly" married for two years before applying for permanent residency. Under these circumstances, many immigrant women were reluctant to leave even the most abusive of partners. "When faced with the choice between protection from batterers and protection from deportation, many immigrant women chose the latter" (Crenshaw 1247). The slaves that Dany frees mirror the real life situations of many immigrant women of color facing the choice of a better life at the risk of further violence. This idea is reflected in Daenerys: she is freeing slaves, yet few, if any of them, have ever experienced freedom, or know what it means. Feminists like Allen who argue that power is patriarchal would see Dany as exercising a "power-over" system in freeing these slaves then assimilating them into her army. By utilizing violence to free battered and oppressed people then taking them under her, Daenerys arguably reinforces the patriarchal dominance and control that has preceded and oppressed her. However, when we look at the exercise of power through women's understanding of power, we begin to see how Dany is creating a "power-to" structure, rather than a "power-over" structure.

Feminists from a variety of theoretical backgrounds have argued for a reconceptualization of power as a capacity or ability, specifically, the capacity to empower or transform oneself and others (Allen). Jean Baker Miller, known for her relational-cultural theory on relationships

between people, claims that “women’s examination of power...can bring new understanding to the whole concept of power” (Miller 241). Similarly, Virginia Held, known for her work on ethics of care and traditionally female roles in society, argues against the masculinist conception of power as “the power to cause others to submit to one’s will, the power that led men to seek hierarchical control and...contractual constraints” (Held 136). Feminists like Miller and Held reject the definition of power as domination, instead, defining it as the capacity to produce a change, or the ability to move something from one position to another. Miller suggests that power understood as domination is particularly masculine. From women’s perspective, however, power is understood differently: “there is enormous validity in women’s not wanting to use power as it is presently conceived and used. Rather, women may want to be powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance, rather than diminish, the power of others” (Miller 247-8).

Female relationships to power are further removed from masculinist conceptions due to their identities as mothers. Held states that women’s unique experiences as mothers and caregivers are the basis for new insights into power: “the capacity to give birth and to nurture and empower could be the basis for new and more humanly promising conceptions than the ones that now prevail of power, empowerment, and growth” (Held 137). While Daenerys is unable to give birth to children following her miscarriage, she does make herself a mother in other ways. As noted previously, she is called the “mother of dragons” after her dragon eggs hatch, and her role as a non-traditional mother grows during her journey through Slaver’s Bay. When the people of Yunkai are freed, they raise her on their shoulders and proclaim her “Mhysa,” their word for “mother” (“Mhysa”). By freeing them, Dany has given power and agency to these people, and they recognize this by acknowledging her connection to a mother figure. According to Held, “the power of a mothering person to empower others, to foster transformative growth, is a different

sort of power from that of a stronger sword or a dominant will” (Held 209). On Miller and Held’s view, a feminist analysis of society and politics leads to an understanding of power as the capacity to transform and empower oneself and others. When we look at Daenerys’s personal justification for her campaign in Slaver’s Bay, this is certainly what we are supposed to view her actions as: empowering the slaves rather than controlling their fates. It is difficult to create change in a society as deep-rooted as that in Slaver’s Bay, so the exercise of power is necessary in order to begin social change, since the previous system must be broken down before a new one can take its place.

One of the most damning critiques against Dany’s plotline in Slaver’s Bay is that a white person is leading the charge over large numbers of people of color. Daenerys is very fair-skinned and even has bone-white hair, yet she ascends to a position of leadership and dominance in a society where the slaves she frees are people of color, leading to many claims that the series endorses “white saviorism,” the archetype in which a white person acts to help people of color. This is most visually apparent when the people of Yunkai are freed. They raise her on their shoulders and proclaim her “Mhysa,” in a shot where she is the lone white dot in a sea of brown skin (Robinson). Since the early 1960s, women of color have worked to transform feminism, challenging white feminists’ inattention to race and other differences between women (Frankenburg 51). While this conversation applies to more than just race, honing in on the racial aspect reveals the tensions and conflicts in Dany’s journey. As a young and relatively untested ruler, Dany is learning how to rule as she goes along, even acknowledging that her time in Slaver’s Bay is a testing period for her: “How can I rule seven kingdoms if I can’t even rule Slaver’s Bay?” (“First of His Name”). As she is learning through her time as a ruler, so is

contemporary feminism learning through its infancy as a feminist theory, growing and solidifying itself and its methodology for defeating sexism.

The scene at Yunkai caused large amounts of controversy and criticism for the show, which the writers eventually acknowledge in the series. After Dany has been a ruler for some time, we see her hanging a freed slave for killing a prisoner (who had been murdering other freed people) without her orders. The people who previously praised her and called her “mother,” these freed people of color, now beg for mercy before the execution and then hiss at her once the execution is carried out (“The House of Black and White”). As Dany grows in power, her knowledge of cultural operations and opinions decrease, as she has become removed from the general populace. By achieving this power then committing these cultural missteps, Dany’s narrative and actions acknowledge the presence of intersectional politics in the world of *Game of Thrones*, and give contemporary feminists a leader to emulate when they are faced with views and experiences different from their own.

Because she was faced with the reality of cultural difference and her contribution to an oppressive system, Daenerys, while not perfect, is able to recognize her mistakes and make efforts to rectify them. In recognizing the criticism of the “mhysa” scene, the writers altered Dany’s storyline and gave her an opportunity to reject saviorism and learn from her former actions. Dany learns that she must be careful to consider the people that she has given agency to, as they, like herself, do not wish to be put under a controlling ruler again. It is only later, when she is captured by the Dothraki and forced to join the widow community that she recognizes how she has remained entangled in the very patriarchy that she sought to destroy. When her fate is being decided by the remaining Khals, she recognizes that her own actions have unintentionally reinforced their dominance, and in a further display of violence, she sets the building on fire,

killing the Khals. She survives the ordeal unscathed and stands before the Dothraki as they bow to her and her show of force. She asks, rather than demands, their support, and tells them that they will be her equals, something no other Dothraki leader has done before. “Every khal who ever lived chose three bloodriders [personal guard, and most trusted counsel to a khal] to fight beside him and lead his tribe. But I am not a khal. I will not choose three blood riders. I choose you all” (“Blood of My Blood”). This proclamation is followed by rousing support from all of the Dothraki, who unlike the slaves, have experienced freedom and recognize the choice not to follow Daenerys, resolving her tension of white saviorism by acknowledging these people of color as her equals and removing the oppression of the male-dominated Dothraki culture.

Dany’s attention to intersectional politics extend beyond race, as race and class intertwine during her time in Essos, adding another dimension to contemporary feminism’s discussion on intersectionality. Although Daenerys rose from having nothing to commanding a realm, this was only possible because she was of royal lineage and was educated and brought up around power. Drogo agreed to marry her because of her family’s history, reinforcing a system of class-based marriages. As I have noted, the Dothraki people are portrayed as a savage race throughout the series, and this violent nature codes them as a low-class population. As Whitehead says, “In many popular presentations of indigenous or ‘tribal’ ways of life, the message is usually that the lives being portrayed are subject to the kinds of arbitrary violence that Western liberal democracy has banished from everyday existence” (Whitehead 46). Violence is central to the various cultures of Essos, each taking slaves and subjecting them to numerous tortures, some of which Dany has received herself. However, while her experiences and growth do not disrupt class as much as it seems, what she has learned on her journey through Essos has the potential to disrupt the existing systems of class in Westeros when she eventually voyages there.

Dany's journey through Essos attempts to mitigate some of this violence, utilizing combat only when necessary and not allowing her followers to engage in needless shows of force and dominance. Dany has grown through this culture, and experienced class in a vastly different manner than other Westerosi people, even commenting on the Westeros class system, "Lannister, Targaryen, Baratheon, Stark, Tyrell. They're all just spokes on a wheel. This one's on top, then that one's on top, and on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground. I'm not going to stop the wheel. I'm going to break the wheel" ("Hardhome"). She recognizes the violence that the upper classes inflict upon the lower ones, and by including herself, as a Targaryen, in this statement, she recognizes her contribution to the classist structure of society and desires to overturn this system. As the series stands as of this writing, Dany is only now beginning her action in Westeros, so we do not yet know how this will play out, but she is on the track to challenging and upending Westerosi views of class, in favor of a more mobile class structure.

Conclusion: "I will answer injustice with justice."

Fans have argued that Daenerys Targaryen is the feminist symbol in a show about female empowerment, yet when we look closely at the *Game of Thrones* series, it is impossible to claim it as anything close to feminist considering the amount of violence against women, both sexual and physical, the oppression and enslavement of people of all genders, not just female, and the exploitation of female bodies in advertising this show. However, in spite of the overwhelmingly anti-feminist material in the show, Dany's personal and political journey from childhood to adulthood and to control over armies and territories disrupts the overarching misogynist tone in *Game of Thrones*, through her employment of contemporary feminist principles. Moreover, Dany's journey disrupts this tone in a way that allows us as viewers to begin to create dialogue

and discussion around what contemporary feminism is and should be, giving us an example to follow while this movement is growing and solidifying.

Daenerys rose from a position of complete subjugation and oppression, to now commanding one of the largest forces of people in the world, and she is making her way to Westeros at the end of the most recent season. Through her time in Essos, Dany has embraced the definition of feminism I have used in this paper: a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression, and she has made use of contemporary feminist methods to do this. She experienced sexism, sexual exploitation, and oppression in her early life, and these events caused her seek out and gain power and control so that she could prevent her experiences from being replicated. Initially, she gains sexual agency in her marriage and uses this power to gain a leadership position in her tribe, ultimately leading her people independent, after her husband is killed. This sets her in a position to enact the changes she wishes to see, freeing slaves and upsetting patriarchal dominance and control in this region of the world. These events display Daenerys's sensitivity to intersectional identities, recognizing that her experiences, while similar, will differ vastly from those of these people who have been enslaved since birth.

Dany's narrative doesn't just reflect contemporary feminism, however. Her status as a celebrity in popular culture informs the audience on how we can discuss and perform contemporary feminism in the larger world. Like Daenerys, we can look to oppressive situations and find where we can take our own agency in these scenarios, and then use that power to empower others to make change, remaining conscious of the difference between empowering others and exercising power over others. Furthermore, we must focus on where our experiences must be mediated through our personal history and identity, and be able to acknowledge and correct our mistakes. If we forget the realities of differing experiences based on differing

identities, we have the potential to slip into the roles that we have been fighting to remove. These two central aspects of contemporary feminism inform and guide Dany's journey to power, and they must also inform our journey to equality if we are to truly bring about an end to sexism and oppression.

In her journey, we see Daenerys disrupting the overwhelmingly misogynist tone of *Game of Thrones*, moving from being a piece of property to being a ruler who has redefined her sexuality, freed thousands of slaves, and incorporated their values into her rule, all giving her the potential to radically redefine the patriarchal structure present in Westeros. In utilizing these aspects of contemporary feminism, Dany also solidifies contemporary feminism in giving the movement a figure that millions of people respect and admire, and one that they can look up to. Fans of the series are able to see someone who resists the patriarchy and misogyny present in this society and has the potential to create drastic and long-lasting change around the world, in turning emulating her actions and goals to further the goal of feminism: to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.

Works Cited

- Allen, Amy. "Feminist Perspectives on Power." Fall 2016. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
Ed. Edward N. Zalta. 22 April 2017,
plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/feminist-power.
- "And Now His Watch is Ended." *Game of Thrones*, season 3 episode 4, HBO, 21 Apr. 2013.
HBOGo, play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU2cggensVFvjSoJAT0K.
- Armstrong, Jennifer. "'Game of Thrones': Feminist or Not?" 18 April 2011. *Entertainment Weekly*. Web. 14 April 2017, ew.com/article/2011/04/18/game-of-thrones-feminist-or-not.
- "Blood of My Blood." *Game of Thrones*, season 6 episode 6, HBO, 29 May 2016. *HBOGo*,
play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVumh5wO0BpugPzkJAAG-.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241-1299.
- "Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things." *Game of Thrones*, season 1 episode 4, HBO, 8 May 2011. *HBOGo*, play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU3gPAZ0Ao7DwwwIAYy-.
- Crossley, Alison Dahl. *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.
- . "Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution." 17 April 2017. *The Clayman Institute for Gender Research: Gender News*. 29 April 2017.,
gender.stanford.edu/news/2017/finding-feminism-millennial-activists-and-unfinished-gender-revolution.

Ferreday, Debra. "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture, and Feminist Fandom." *Australian Feminist Studies* 30.83 (2015): 21-36. Web.

"First of His Name." *Game of Thrones*, season 4 episode 5, HBO, 4 May 2014. *HBOGo*, play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU31awfmNYNJjhsJAZ-k.

Frankenburg, Ruth. "Growing Up White: Feminism, Racism, and the Social Geography of Childhood." *Feminist Review* 45 (1993): 51-84, www.jstor.org/stable/1395347.

"A Golden Crown." *Game of Thrones*, season 1 episode 1, HBO, 22 May 2011. *HBOGo*, play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU4ZvwePBFFvjSoJAcVW.

"Hardhome." *Game of Thrones*, season 5 episode 8, HBO, 31 May 2011. *HBOGo*, play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU4lpQPMbVFvjSoJAdDk.

Held, Virginia. *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Hendel, Jess. "'How 'Game of Thrones' Became One of the Most Feminist Shows on TV.'" 7 July 2016. *Bustle*. 21 April 2017, www.bustle.com/articles/171065-how-game-of-thrones-became-one-of-the-most-feminist-shows-on-tv.

Hibberd, James. "'Game of Thrones' whacks 'The Sopranos' to become HBO's most popular show ever." 5 June 2014. *Entertainment Weekly*. 28 March 2017, ew.com/article/2014/06/05/game-of-thrones-sopranos-ratings.

hooks, bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

"The House of Black and White." *Game of Thrones*, season 5 episode 2, HBO, 19 Apr. 2015. *HBOGo*, play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU2-JAdktlFvjSoJAWPH.

- “The Kingsroad.” *Game of Thrones*, season 1 episode 2, HBO, 24 Apr. 2011. *HBOGo*,
play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVVD52AFtf8NosSQJAAGb.
- Marks, Elaine and and Isabelle De Courtivron. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. New
York: Schocken Books, 1980.
- Marton, Stephanie and Siri Uotila. "Millennial Feminism vs. Baby Boomer Feminism: Cross-
Generational Strategies Must Converge." 31 March 2016. *The Huffington Post*. 19
February 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/stephanie-marton/millennial-vs-baby-
boomer_1_b_9583712.html.
- Marvin, Taylor. "Game of Thrones, Racism and White Saviors." 22 June 2013. *Smoke and Stir*.
22 April 2017, smokeandstir.org/2013/06/22/game-of-thrones-racism-and-white-saviors.
- Marwick, Alice E. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*.
Yale University Press, 2013.
- McNutt, Myles. "Game of Thrones - "You Win or You Die"." 29 May 2011. *Cultural Learnings*.
Web. 14 April 2017, cultural-learnings.com/2011/05/29/game-of-thrones-you-win-or-
you-die.
- “Mhysa.” *Game of Thrones*, season 3 episode 10, HBO, 17 Apr. 2011. *HBOGo*,
play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU28XQKO6oNJjhsJAWEr.
- Miller, Jean Baker. "Women and Power." *Rethinking Power*. Ed. Thomas Wartenberg. Albany:
SUNY Press, 1992. 240-248.

Noble, Oliver. "'Game of Thrones' Sex and Nudity: The Complete Collection." 16 June 2014.

Huffington Post. 25 March 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/17/game-of-thrones-sex-scene_n_1601883.html.

"The Pointy End." *Game of Thrones*, season 1 episode 8, HBO, 5 Jun. 2011. *HBOGo*, play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU3pywqKglFvjSoJAZMZ.

Rich, Emma. "Young Women, Feminist Identities, and Neo-Liberalism." *Women's Studies International Forum* 28.6 (2005): 495-508.

Robinson, Joanna. *How Tonight's Episode of Game of Thrones Redeemed the Show's Most Controversial Image*. *Vanity Fair*, 19 April 2015. Web. 2 April 2017, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/04/game-of-thrones-critique-white-savior.

Ruben, Gayle S. "Thinking Sex: Note for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Ed. Carole S Vance. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1992. 267-319.

Scholz, Sally J.. *Feminism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010.

Strouboulpoulos, George. "George R.R. Martin On Strombo: Full Extended Interview." 11 July 2013. *Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC)*. Web. 2 April 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/strombo/books/george-rr-martin-full-extended-interview.html>.

Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2014.

Tuin, Iris van der. *Generational Feminism: New Materialist Introduction to a Generative Approach*. Lexington: Lexingtonbooks, 2015.

Weidhase, Nathalie. "'Beyonce Feminism' and the Contestation of the Black Feminist Body."

Celebrity Studies (2015): 128-131.

Whitehead, Neil L. "Violence and the Cultural Order." *Daedalus* 136.1 (2007): 40-50.

"Winter is Coming." *Game of Thrones*, season 1 episode 1, HBO, 17 Apr. 2011. *HBOGo*,

play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GVU4NYgvPQlFvjSoJAbmL.