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**“Tears aren’t a woman’s only weapon, the best one’s between your legs”:**

Postfeminist Conceptions of Gender and Power in the American TV Series  
*Game of Thrones*

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## 1. Introduction

“In an age of cultural ambivalence when it comes to emancipation, female identity, feminism, and postfeminism, HBO has created individual characters reflecting ‘the contradictions we all live with each and every day’, Akass and McCabe argue” (Gjelsvik and Schubart 4).

As Akass and McCabe state, contemporary TV series reflect conceptions of womanhood, but also shape them. HBO has aired complex and progressive, but also very provocative, series, making use of its freedom through privatization. In particular, postfeminist perceptions of gender and power are mirrored in the series *Game of Thrones*, resonating positively with the audience, who consider the series feminist, progressive and unique:

“Game of Thrones is an extraordinarily engaging story, with complex plot lines and historical depth” (O’Brien).

“However, one of the most compelling undercurrents of the show — the one which kept me glued to the screen despite my skepticism — is how it develops a kind of ‘against the grain’ feminism with its female characters” (Hendel).

“*Game of Thrones* has always stood out from other works of fantasy because of its feminism. The women had to deal with the misogyny inherent in a Medieval society, but, forced to the sidelines, they found creative ways to seize power” (Dockterman).

The series, as the title indicates, is about various strategies to win the throne and become a powerful ruler. The world of *Game of Thrones* has a medieval setting and fantasy elements. It is shaped by extreme sexism and hierarchical structures, but women and ‘low-born’ people nevertheless manage to gain power, which is a sign of the series’ feminist potential. Additionally, half of the protagonists are female, which creates an opportunity for the diverse portrayal of women. However, the depiction of many female characters supports a binary view of gender, keeping women’s sexuality in the foreground and representing it as their only or main power strategy.

This thesis argues that postfeminist notions of gender are mirrored in the

series, which emphasizes the embodiment of women and creates certain images of femininity, but also empowers women through depictions of liberation and the embrace of womanhood. These conceptions are aligned with contemporary understandings of body, gender and power that paradoxically support binarity and diversity at the same time. This will become clearer through the theorization of postfeminism, which is the first step to understanding *Game of Thrones*' representation of women. Afterwards, the conceptions of gender performance and power will be analyzed both separately and in relation to one another. In feminist studies, these two notions are inseparably linked, as power defines gender and gender determines power balances. *Game of Thrones* mirrors contemporary conceptions of these topics and has similarities with other postfeminist representations in media. However, the series presents these subjects in a medieval setting, and therefore depends on historical knowledge and assumptions.

However, *how* they navigate their world is a matter of narrative, of author decisions, of television producers' calculation in audiences and commercial strategies, of game producers' choice of design, and of users and fans' interactions with the various media forms. In the transmedial GoT especially, representations of sex and violence and sexualized violence have proven both provocative and problematic. (Gjelsvik and Schubart 2)

Therefore, the series cannot only be analyzed in its historical context; contemporary thoughts must be acknowledged as well. Representations are not automatically positive and realistic just because they appear in great numbers – *Game of Thrones* cannot simply be praised for its portrayal of a variety of women, because the messages and implications these representations transmit have to be taken into account. This is also the reason why scholarly work in media representations is of great importance, as it helps to identify representations of women that mirror society's conceptions of gender. It also has an impact on what is accepted as 'normal' and adds to feminist aspirations for greater equality. In comparison to many other series with medieval settings, *Game of Thrones* stands out because of its representation of women who have a voice and effectively contribute to the storyline. It is important to place the series in the context first of other contemporary films and series and then of TV series with medieval settings, and evaluate its feminist and postfeminist content within this comparison.

Within these frameworks and with the defined concepts of postfeminism, gender performance and the power discourse in gender studies, the series can be

analyzed meaningfully. This will be done through close readings of explicit scenes, characterization and film analysis tools. As some female characters are foregrounded more than others, represent complex images of womanhood and show development, they provide room for interpretation. The characters Daenerys and Cersei are represented as ‘feminine’ characters that make use of their sexuality to gain power, while the characters Arya and Brienne represent ‘masculine’ traits, not using femininity or sexuality as power tools but with different approaches to reach their goals. Therefore, the show presents different conceptions of womanhood, and it is worthwhile to analyze their feminist and postfeminist notions.

*Game of Thrones* is a highly controversial, popular and successful series with much potential for feminist, cultural and media studies, as it covers topics such as power, womanhood and race – the depiction of which is often criticized. Scholarly works about the series cover political strategies, morals, fantasy elements, feminism and postfeminism. In particular, the show’s representation of women is a complex issue, and therefore many scholars deal with it. Most bring out the series’ feminist potential, particularly with the example of Daenerys, but there is less work on postfeminist conceptions reflected in the series, which is probably related to the complexity of postfeminism. There are various integral works covering postfeminism’s ambiguity and offering meaningful definitions and evaluations, like papers by Genz, Gill and McRobbie. For further research, in order to analyze these scholars’ findings in connection with *Game of Thrones* and cover different approaches, it is integral to emphasize a certain direction of postfeminism and then reflect upon that direction specifically and how it relates to the series’ representation of women. Additionally, more research is needed in a more general context, evaluating the series’ overall representation of postfeminism, considering its nude and sex scenes and the characterization of minor characters as well. For this thesis, the focus will be on a few main female characters (Daenerys, Cersei, Brienne and Arya), reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of postfeminism and primarily working out the series’ emphasis on empowerment through female sexuality.

## 2. Gender and Power in Postfeminist Times

As the struggle for power is the main theme of *Game of Thrones*, the series provides a good basis to reflect upon contemporary conceptions of gender and power. Our thinking is shaped by recent achievements around the emancipation of women – Western societies' environment of greater gender equality is marked by terms such as postfeminism and postmodernism, questioning the objectification of truth and the necessity of political feminist movements but also creating new opportunities for diversified gender performances. As Flax states, “in such a ‘decentered’ and unstable universe it seems plausible to question one of the most natural facets of human existence – gender relations. On the other hand, such instability also makes old modes of social relations more attractive” (627 f.). These tendencies are also reflected in *Game of Thrones*, building upon conceptions of postfeminism, gender and power.

### 2.1. Postfeminism

In some critical investigations, the ‘post-ing’ of feminism is denounced as an invasion of the feminist body and a vicious attempt to debilitate and sabotage the women’s movement ... postfeminism’s appropriation of feminism is more complex and subtle than a simple rewriting or modernization ... In its various manifestations, postfeminism exhibits a number of relations to feminism ranging from complacency to hostility ... In its most denunciatory expressions, postfeminism clearly misreads and classifies feminism as a monolithic movement that is archaic, binaristic and unproductive for the experiences of contemporary women. (Genz and Brabon 12)

Just like feminism itself, postfeminism is a phenomenon with various meanings. On the one hand, it is used to mark the end of an era, which can be interpreted as the end of feminisms altogether because their function is no longer seen as necessary. Considered in relation with other ‘post’-s, such as postmodernism and poststructuralism, postfeminism is simply a protest against essentialism. “Postmodernism’s emphasis on ‘deconstruction’ and ‘difference’, and its challenge to the idea of a single epistemological truth, added to the voices of those who had been marginalised by feminism’s modernist heritage” (Brooks 92). Postfeminism criticizes the sexes’ binarity and society’s normative gender roles. “...[H]ere, the prefix is understood as part of a process of ongoing transformation” (Genz and Brabon 4). Contemporary theories in gender studies

focus on the social aspects of gender construction and support the dissociation of biological markings, which will be elaborated in upcoming chapters. The dissolution of the heteronormative, binary genders, consequently makes feminism seem obsolete. There is no more definite gender, and therefore no oppressor (man) or oppressed (woman). Although feminism criticizes traditional sex roles, it is also built on essentialism because it differentiates between two sexes, men and women. One postfeminist view, therefore, is to denounce essentialism and to focus on the suffrage of a more diverse group of people including queer people and women of other races. However, “critics are concerned that an abstract celebration of difference might encourage cultural relativism and political passivity” (Genz and Brabon 32).

On the other hand, postfeminism can also reinforce sexist developments even though it celebrates individuality and the free expression of gender (performance). In today’s Western societies, all feminist movements promote self-determination. The most well-known contemporary concepts are third-wave feminism and new feminism, which scholars often use interchangeably with postfeminism, in order to distinguish new understandings of feminism from second-wave feminism. However, postfeminism is a more abstract expression that describes a contemporary feeling, or “sensibility”, as Gill calls it. Therefore, it contains ambivalent attitudes and can even be anti-feminist, whereas the other feminist movements are certainly defined by pro-woman attitudes and political engagement. Braithwaite describes contemporary feminisms as passive about “political ... activism” and selfish for their obsession in “reclaiming personal experiences and female pleasures” (336). As Genz and Brabon explain, postfeminism is not “radically revolutionary” but has tendencies towards two opposing sides: “backlash” and “innovation” (65).

Howsoever connoted, all new concepts make use of self-determination, individuality and femininity. They want women to break free from their role as the victim and find power in their femininity; this is, for instance, reflected in Naomi Wolf’s *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How it Will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, in which she coins the terms “Power Feminism” and “Victim Feminism” (xvi). A way of gaining power and feeling powerful, according to Adriaens and Van Bauwel, is the consumption of fashion and beauty items or even men; it is represented as identity-constructing and self-esteem-boosting (cf.

181). As financial status was and is still seen as a marker of masculinity and power, it is now also significant for women's power, as it shows that the woman is self-sufficient, independent and able to make her own decisions.

Self-determination is not only dependent on economic freedom, but is also often connected with a more open attitude toward women's decisions in their sex lives. This created damaging conflicts during second-wave feminism, splitting the movement "into so-called 'pro-sex' and 'anti-sex' camps" (Synder-Hall 258). The anti-sex attitude came from the perception that heterosexual sex involves a certain dominance of the man, generally based on penetration and specifically on sex positions, and therefore "seemed to reinforce or mimic patriarchal power relations" (Synder-Hall 258). Even though feminism has had major impacts on the sexual liberation of women, some movements were very prescriptive concerning sexual behavior or actions in general in order to achieve their goals. "Third-wave feminism," in contrast, "reintroduces the ideal of sexual liberation into a feminist discourse that many believe came, by the 1980s, to prioritize gender equality over sexual autonomy and to view sexual desire as problematic" (258). In postfeminist times, women can decide who they have relationships with and feel more liberated to express their sexuality, as a pro-sex attitude is becoming more accepted. The highly discussed aspect of sex positivity and self-determination is if it includes sex work and adult films. If it does, women should be free to choose their profession – without legal limitations and/or judgment.

Refusing the label of 'victim,' [sex workers] ... offered an alternative view of feminism that emphasized their right to pursue their own desires ... feminism ... is about 'personal empowerment', and 'the choice to be a stripper ... is personally empowering'. (qtd. in Synder-Hall 257)

While both women and men are part of these industries, what is problematic about these professions is that more women than men suffer through them because they are immensely objectified. Therefore, women's wish to act with a sense of power rather than victimization might even enforce their suffering. What makes postfeminism seem passive or too tolerant towards these developments is the problematic belief that equality has been overcome, which leads women to experience the newly gained freedom by any means without reflecting on the dangers of some activities and attitudes.

Although the self-determination of women has been (and still is) an

essential goal of feminism, it is important to consider how self-chosen paths and self-expressions are supporting and reinforcing objectification and why the eroticization of women in all areas is still more common than that of men. However, women should be careful not to judge while reflecting on their own and others' actions, which has happened too often in second-wave argumentation. "Statements that seem judgmental of other women's choices – particularly when they are not really 'choices' but rather deep-seated desires or identities – can undermine the solidarity necessary to build a political movement" (Synder-Hall 258). Second-wave feminism focused on and criticized the inequality of values and the generally accepted gender images constructed by male-dominated cultures, but did this in a very prescriptive way. In contrast to postfeminist approaches, radical feminism, which developed through second-wave feminism, did not approve varying performances of femininity or heterosexual sex. It "aimed not ... to provide women with equal opportunities within existing society but to transform the entire multifaceted sex/gender system that advantages men at the expense of women" (Synder-Hall 257). This approach is not only problematic for women who enjoy sex (as many radical feminists saw heterosexual sex as an instrument of the submission of women) and women who find their source of happiness in marriage and family, but also for women in non-Western societies and religions.

An often discussed issue is the Muslim women's head scarf. For radical feminists, wearing the scarf is a clear submission to patriarchal society. In contrast, postfeminist approaches seem more tolerant and more interested in the individual opinions of women. Women who wear the hijab by choice argue that they do not do it for men but for God, who has no gender. The tolerance and acceptance of their belief (that the rules are not made by men but by God) – although it might seem men-favoring from the Western point of view – and even considering the covering as empowering, is a modern, postfeminist development. Accepting the fact that all women have different interests and do not necessarily share the same political agenda is a logical side effect of the celebration of individuality in postmodern and postfeminist times. As Banet-Weiser explains, "the current feminist landscape" is too complex to assume

that 'we' all share a feminist politics, that we all 'want the same thing,' [as] not only does this propagate the mistake made by many second-wave feminists, who

insisted on a universal feminist standpoint, but it also functions as a kind of refusal to identify what it is we all apparently want. (210)

“In effect, in these circumstances, the idea of a collective ‘sisterhood’ – a united feminist ‘we’ and, related to this, a collective politics of engagement – becomes not only dubious but almost impossible” (Genz and Brabon 35). Nevertheless, radical feminist approaches should not be entirely abandoned, as they argue for a more critical thought process and lifestyle and for acknowledging subconscious male hegemonic actions, as there is still objective inequality between men and women.

Another aspect of current inequality is the enormous pressure on women to reach certain beauty standards. It is a fact that more women than men are victims of these expectations and pressure, as seen in the numbers of women who have plastic surgery (especially breast augmentations, which is also a sign of normalized eroticization). In the postfeminist era, plastic surgeries, makeup and other tools used to achieve beauty ideals are considered part of the freedom of self-expression and justified as self-evident methods to gain happiness. This approach “simply avoids all the interesting and important questions about the relationship between representations and subjectivity, the difficult but crucial questions about how socially constructed, mass mediated ideals of beauty are internalised and made our own” (Gill 154).

One of the most striking aspects of postfeminist media culture is its obsessional preoccupation with the body. In a shift from earlier representational practices it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than (say) a social structural or psychological one. Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood being regarded as central to femininity (all, of course, highly problematic and exclusionary) in today’s media it is possession of a ‘sexy body’ that is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women’s source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness. (149)

Considering the more open-minded debates and attitudes towards femininity and sexuality, many second-wave views are now seen as judgmental and limiting. The negative connotations feminism gained through its supposedly anti-sex and anti-men attitudes have had serious effects on today’s feminist movements and shaped postfeminist thoughts. “Women today often see feminism as narrow-minded and judgmental, which contributes to the ‘I’m not a feminist but...’ phenomenon”

(Synder-Hall 258).

Although postfeminism is often sold as a new, more open-minded and more accessible feminism, the reality is still disappointing, as “the ideal postfeminist subject is seen to be a white, middle-class, heterosexual girl” (Genz and Brabon 8). The media contributes greatly to inequality and the enforcement of certain images of femininity, which include unrealistic beauty ideals and certain looks and behavior, as postfeminism and self-determination are also used to justify the sexual representation of women and femininity in media. Being sex-positive, wearing revealing clothes and using femininity to manipulate men is considered empowering because women have the ability to choose to do so.

Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so (Goldman, 1992). Nowhere is this clearer than in advertising which has responded to feminist critiques by constructing a new figure to sell to young women: the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever ‘up for it’. (Gill 151)

A reinforcing factor of this problem is that certain series and programs become very popular for their allegedly feminist and pro-woman approaches, even though they only promote one-sided images or reinforce standards of femininity, which then become mainstream opinions on feminism.

*Game of Thrones* is often argued to present a very feminist portrayal of women. Considering the ambivalent attitudes of postfeminism, almost all lifestyles and expressions or representations of womanhood can be regarded as feminist, as long as the women are aware of their situation and have the power of self-determination. *Game of Thrones* is praised for its many types of women with different agendas. It portrays rounded female characters that are able to gain more power than men and show suggestively male personality traits like decisiveness, analytical thinking and strength. Critics of the show declare it to be anti-feminist for its excessive nudity, sexually objectifying portrayal of women (the male gaze) and violence against women. They also argue that most women on the show try to gain power by using their femininity and sexuality rather than character strength, unlike most men in the series. Analyzing various gender performances and power distributions in *Game of Thrones* will help to put the series in the postfeminist context and evaluate its feminist content. This will help determine which gender

roles and performances are presented as necessary to maintain or gain power.

Summarizing the concept of postfeminism requires emphasizing the various directions it contains: it can be a new, more open-minded form of feminism, an anti-feminist way back to traditionalism or a tolerant gender-pluralist understanding of society that has no need for feminism. Postfeminism needs to be interpreted in its historical context and in relation to postmodern phenomena: “[it is] situated in the twenty-first century context that is characterized by neo-liberalism, capitalism, consumer society, individualism, ... and a decreased interest in politics and activism” (Adriaens and Van Bauwel 6).

Analyzing TV series and other cultural products of this time will help scholars to understand the meanings and effects of postfeminism. Generally, postfeminism has much potential given its tolerant, unbiased approach towards women; however, a more politically organized and clearly defined, but non-judgmental, movement is needed in order to address the still-existing inequality and needs of women. Listening to all women and their problems is the only way to create a new, fundamental standpoint to which all women can relate. Postfeminism’s most helpful facet in the fight for equality has been the defeat of the limiting and excluding aspects of second-wave feminism. Postfeminism emphasizes expanded possibilities and aims for empowerment by overcoming reductive, narrow-minded and prescriptive attitudes. Although postfeminist debates still mostly “revolve around the cultural and economic freedom of Western women” (Tasker and Negra 12), picking up its generally more inclusive attitude (compared to second-wave feminism) will help in making significant impacts. This potential has not yet been exploited because until now the focus has been more on personal consumption and individual fulfillment than on political movements. Taking all genders into account, the first step in fighting inequality is to enhance respect for human beings regardless of their looks and to represent diverse images of people in media. Furthermore, it is very important to name and underline the still-existing injustice, rather than undermining it and only focusing on the successes achieved thus far. Part of this includes reflecting on and criticizing medial representations of women, as they have a great impact on society. As Tasker and Negra point out, especially currently, “when women face significant challenges to their ... hard-won reproductive rights, and even authority

to speak”, “feminist critique” is essential because “popular culture blithely assumes that gender equality is a given” (Tasker and Negra 12).

## **2.2. Gender Performance**

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir).

This famous quote by Simone de Beauvoir has had a major influence on today’s conceptions of gender and sexuality, as it questions the validity of essentialism. Although she recognized that sex roles were socially constructed, de Beauvoir still had to make use of the essentialist binary perspective on gender in order to discuss inequality and the oppressor. For feminists, “the assumption that existing differences between women and men were ordained by nature” was unavoidable and was actually even necessary in order to “emphasise the social construction of masculinity and femininity and the social ordering of relations between women and men” (Jackson and Scott 1).

After de Beauvoir, the distinction between gender and sexuality became more common. The sociologist “Oakley defined sex as the anatomical and physiological characteristics which signify biological maleness and femaleness and gender as socially constructed masculinity and femininity” (Jackson and Scott 9). This means that behavior and/or “attributes” that are characterized as masculine or feminine are socially constructed results of a “process of becoming a man or a woman in a particular society at a particular time” (9).

On a political level, “masculine qualities are instrumental ones which are more likely to lead to behaviors that qualify one for success in a patriarchal and capitalist society” (Devor 32). This makes sense considering common associations with masculinity, which include logical thinking, aggressiveness and assertiveness. Feminine traits, on the other hand, would make it more difficult to serve and succeed in a capitalist system – they include following associations, determined in Broverman’s study: “very talkative,” “very gentle,” “very aware of the feelings of others,” “very interested in own appearance”, and a “very strong need for security” (qtd. in Devor 32).

As these attributes are products of and determined by their time, they are dependent on people’s definitions and theories of identity – which also means

they are flexible and changeable (cf. Jackson and Scott 9). An example of this is the image of women in the nineteenth century, which was determined by “the white middle classes ... [for whom] the ideal of women [was portrayed] as fragile, innocent creatures requiring the protection of chivalrous virile men [which] could be achieved only by the socially privileged” (10). Black female slaves, for instance, who as a collective group experienced womanhood in diverse ways, could never possibly achieve this ideal, as they were obliged (but also able) to work hard under poor conditions, which white privileged women would supposedly never be capable of (cf. 10). Therefore, this understanding could not be a universally valid image of femininity, as race and gender are interrelated and it did not reflect the reality of many women. Naturally and reasonably, the image of women changed over time. This generalization of womanhood would not only completely neglect the individuality of women as it is, but also the diversity of experiences women have due to racial inequalities and their implications for constructions of womanhood.

As West and Zimmerman explain, the sex categories have certain “sex criteria” attached to them (43). There are certain performances that are socially constructed that relate to each category. Even if some criteria are lacking, people might feel that they belong to one or the other sex category. Therefore, the term gender rather than sex category is more appropriate when talking about socially required performances (cf. 43). West and Zimmerman assess gender as the management of “situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category ... [which] emerge[s] from and bolster[s] claims to membership in a sex category” (43). Here, it becomes clear that sex and sex identity are not necessarily in accordance and that specific distinct activities are considered to be part of each gender. Sex identity also includes sexuality which is heteronormative in modern Western society. People make use of gender activities in order to show which category they belong to. Garfinkel was the first person to use the expression “performance” in that discourse. The transsexual

Agnes ... provided him with a means of explicating his ethnomethodological approach to the social order, in which ‘members’ (of society) are conceptualised as constantly making sense of social reality and, in the process, constructing it ... ‘Passing’, for Agnes, entails a carefully managed ‘performance’ of femininity through which gender is accomplished. (West and Zimmerman 16)

This example shows that genders on the one hand have socially prescribed binary attributes and certain expected behaviors attached, and on the other hand are flexible because they can be mimicked by the other sex/gender. Garfinkel realized that gender is a performance that was not only done by the subject but also read by other members of society (cf. West and Zimmerman 16); however, he made this assumption based on two binary genders.

Judith Butler takes that discourse a step further by arguing that there are as many genders as people, and even goes as far as saying that sex is gender – which means sex is also socially constructed and only dualistic because it is pre-discursive. She questions biological assumptions by discussing the materiality of the body and criticizing the body-soul duality (cf. Butler *Gender Trouble* 12). The Cartesian body-soul/mind duality distinguishes the material body as a “non-thinking thing” and the mind as a “thinking, non-extended thing,” arguing that the mind could exist on its own (Descartes 298). The binarity of the genders male/female is reflected through this duality: whereas the female nature is represented by the body, being able to carry children and degraded as a non-thinking but feeling being, the male represents the mind, responsible for objectivity and science. Feminist scholars like Judith Butler try to dissolve the body-soul duality, concentrating on bodily experiences and the scientific connections between thoughts, feelings and body, as “the ontological distinction ... supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 12).

Even though Butler’s arguments seem very theoretical and philosophical, people that biologically have both male and female characteristics are good examples that make the fact of two sexes questionable. “Women and men are not always or emphatically distinguished from one another either biologically or psychologically ... ‘Intersexuality’ is a case in point” (Stanley 34). At this point, it is adequate and target-aimed to differentiate between sex and gender and to focus on socially constructed gender roles instead of over-complicating the issue by discussing the biological reality of sexes and the materiality of the body. Assessing gender as a social construct is sufficient and the arguments for doing so are self-evident, as most prejudices towards men and women can be proven wrong. In addition, there are societies that have very different concepts of gender, which also shows the ambiguity of gender. “Anthropological work has pointed out

the fascinating and, for feminist theories of women's oppression crucial fact that within this what is believed to constitute maleness and femaleness is subject to seemingly endless variation" (Stanley 32).

Butler formulates her ideas as a critique of current feminist movements because their theory is based on the subject 'woman', which, she argues, is a procedure of exclusion and limits feminism's aspiration for representation (cf. *Gender Trouble* 4). Furthermore, she explains, the category of 'woman' inevitably determines and controls gender relations (cf. *Gender Trouble* 4). Butler then picks up the idea of mimicking performances and tries to explain it by arguing that gender is totally independent from biological sex, and therefore that there are endless performance possibilities:

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (*Gender Trouble* 6)

Her argument is based on the understanding that gender performances are unconsciously based on unrealistic images of 'genders' and only on the binary system of femininity and masculinity, and that they are reinforced through repetition. She tries to declare this imitative and not natural by explaining the 'drag example', in which she logically concludes from gender being distinct from anatomy that gender and anatomy are also distinct "from the gender of the performance," and that the performance is therefore independent from gender (*Gender Trouble* 137). By imitating gender and gender performances, "drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (*Gender Trouble* 137) The imitation is proof that there is no essential, biological truth of gender and that it is only performance, connoted by society and achieved through repetition and mimicking.

Butler's theory is a product of our postfeminist, postmodern society. She criticizes essentialism by rejecting the two categories of masculinity and femininity, which creates more opportunities for individual expression and diverse representation. One of her central ideas, based on Foucault, is that "power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation" (Butler

“Further Reflections” 13). This approach is very essential to feminism, as it questions the natural order and offers breaking the pattern as a solution.

Foucault’s and Butler’s ideas have been very influential for our conceptions of gender. They have enforced a poststructuralist way of thinking that is based on a discursive ‘reality’ of gender and power. Yet women still face inequality and binarity, and even degrading representations of ‘femininity’. Even if they want to reject it, “... many feminists, by paying close attention to women’s daily lives, and to common elements in diverse women’s experiences, have found the odour of biological essentialism clinging to them” (Ramazanoğlu 7). Butler’s arguments have played an important role not only in feminism but also in the recognition of the inequalities of minorities, like inter-people, which she links to heteronormativity. In addition to the discourse on gender, the discourse on sexuality has helped to unveil patriarchal, heteronormative structures. Here, scientific facts are not denied but theorized in order to detect their problematic connotations and representations.

When analyzing gender representations in popular culture, scholars still make use of the binary system simply because media and society differentiate between men and women. Although this might seem regressive after Butler’s approach, it is actually inevitable, as using common categories (men and women) helps to reveal unrealistic representations of genders and to change these images through criticism. In *Game of Thrones*, the differentiation between women and men and their required behavior is very distinct. This makes sense when taking the historical frame of the series into account. Nevertheless, the show is a modern cultural product and provides room to break stereotypes and create diversity in representation. It even has the responsibility to do so, as it is praised for its various female characters and feminist tendencies. In this paper, gender performance will be analyzed in the series’ given frame and the suggested traditional categories of man and woman, and afterwards put in the context of postfeminist and the power discourse.

To summarize the discourse on gender and gender attributes, it becomes clear that although gender has been proven to be flexible and dependent on education and identity construction, the binary sex system is still normative and defines distinct characteristics which have a great impact on power distribution in societies. Even though social theories on gender and gender performances have

gained much validation, maleness is still seen as the norm and the victor in society, whereas femaleness is often associated with passiveness. Not only allegedly male personality traits, but also biological maleness is seen as the norm. This was shown in a study by Kessler and McKenna where people had to categorize images of people into gender categories by making use of certain gender indicators:

It also shows that when there is a doubt as to the gender of an individual, people have a pronounced tendency to see maleness. This ... suggests that maleness is readily seen whenever there are indicators of it, whereas femaleness is seen only when there are compelling female cues and an absence of male cues. This way of seeing corresponds closely to patriarchal gender schema notions of maleness as a positive force and femaleness as a negative force; of maleness as a presence and femaleness as an absence; of maleness as primary and femaleness as derivative. (in Devor 49)

Connecting the central ideas of gender in this chapter with the ideas of the previous chapter, one can observe that women's dealing with new circumstances and achieving their major goal of being appreciated and being 'seen' has two opposing extreme outcomes. On the one hand, women use their newly gained power and recognition to formulate ideas on the sameness of gender(s) and question the materiality of the body in order to (re)gain invisibility; this is, however, fairer now because it includes men and generally focuses more on the inner than the outer appearance. On the other hand, women have gained more self-awareness and confidence in their bodies and therefore emphasize embodiment and femininity.

### **2.3. Power Discourse in Gender Studies**

Gender roles are power relations. Gender is not only a cause but also a consequence, instrument and embodiment of power-over relations. It is a key mechanism through which power not only constrains but constitutes individuals and is perhaps the most persistent form of 'invisible power' in our world. (Koester 3)

In feminist discourse, not only is the analysis of gender itself important, but so is analyzing the relations between men and women in order to unveil inequality and imbalances in power distribution. In most societies, men are still in charge. Even though the societal roles of men and women have changed, men mostly still have leading positions and women still feel more responsible for housework.

“Representations in the media and across popular culture have contributed to the normalisation of austerity politics, disguising the systematic impact on women and other groups” (Lacey and Perrons 3). In *Game of Thrones*, for instance, violence and sexism is a common topic that creates a certain image of women. Moreover, different forms of power are presented that are tightly connected to gender and gender performances. Some forms are presented as more valuable according to their influence and the quantity of representation. The media’s representation of power in connection with gender provides insights into associations that are made in reality but also into what messages are transmitted.

The conception of power in gender discourse will be made clearer through three steps, which will later help to analyze representations in *Game of Thrones*. First, defining power will provide insights into different forms of power in order to later evaluate their influence and hierarchy. Secondly, Observing people’s positions towards power in general provides a basis for determining the reasons for its importance and maintenance as well as its future development. Lastly, it is integral to determine the justification of male hegemony in order to analyze its plausibility.

The most popular definition of power is probably that of Max Weber: “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (53). Similarly, John Locke’s concept of power is concerned with the possibilities power holds. Lukes criticizes this definition of power, which he defines as “being able to make or to receive any change, or to resist it”, because he thinks Locke undermines power to make it simply “a potentiality, not an actuality” (69). However, this is exactly what makes it compelling for feminist politics: the potentiality itself is the actuality. This not only acknowledges power’s substance, but also underlines its flexibility. It focuses not on the agents of power but on the openness of it, as it can be influenced by everyone, regardless of gender. There does not have to be one oppressor but equal people who determine the power distribution and make changes together. Although this concept of power is appealing because of its flexibility, the question arises whether it fails in recognizing the oppressor and whether this is harmful.

There are other definitions of power that have been criticized for being too theoretical and for undermining men’s performance of power over women.

However, Locke's definition is more general and practical. It does not neglect the agents of power but rather points out its influenceability and questionability. Furthermore, this does not mean that the objects of power cannot become the agents of power. In contrast, the objects can establish their own pursuits within the unequal power performance, and if they become the agents of power – which is not impossible – they would be influenceable and flexible as well. Thus, Locke's conception of power does not ignore the agents of power but acknowledges the possibility of change. In addition, the fact that power relations are not just one-sided and limited to certain areas should be taken into account:

Thus if we treat power relations as exclusively hierarchical and unilateral, we overlook an entire class of relations between persons or groups in which the control of one person or group over the other with reference to a particular scope is balanced by the control of the other in a different scope. (Wrong 11)

Especially when analyzing *Game of Thrones*, one has to consider all aspects and relations of power, because there are many powerful agents in the background that have huge impacts on the course of the series. From a feminist perspective, however, the above quote can serve as a justification of inequality. Considering it was written in the seventies through a male, uncritical lens of male hegemony, which becomes clear in other parts of the book, it should be approached carefully. Here, the quote is not used to undermine the inequality of male and female power possession but seeks to address the various forms and effects of power, which must be considered in the analysis of *Game of Thrones*.

Another definition of power that contains different aspects of its exercise is the following: “the capacity to produce intended effects, regardless of the physical or psychological factors on which the capacity rests, and then to proceed to differentiate *force*, *manipulation* *persuasion*, and *authority* as distinct forms of power” (Wrong 22). The examination of power and the forms it can take not only helps to identify certain issues but also has an effect on how we judge them. Lukes points out in what ways our conceptions and discourses of power may affect its effectiveness: “... how we think of power ... may contribute to their continued functioning, or it may unmask their principles of operation, whose effectiveness is increased by their being hidden from view” (Lukes 63). The second aspect of ‘unmasking’ is very important when it comes to unequal power distributions, especially concerning women. As one examines scientific facts

about gender and behavior, one becomes able to question the current hierarchy, as there is no logical qualification for men to be at the top. But when current 'normalized' behaviors do not change or are not questioned, they will be repeated, so that the underprivileged group thinks of the situation as being fair:

... the acquisition and maintenance of 'habitus' appeal to the workings of power, leading those subject to it to see their condition as 'natural' and even to value it, and to fail to recognize the sources of their desires and beliefs. These and other mechanisms constitute power's third dimension when it works against people's interests by misleading them, thereby distorting their judgment. (Lukes 13)

Another aspect of power and its maintainability lies in people's desire for security. Changes are often challenging because they require thinking, planning and taking risks. Andreas Anter explains the existence of power relations by the natural human need for security, and therefore suggests power relations may be advantageous and maybe even necessary for a political togetherness:

Sie kommen dem menschlichen Selbstentlastungsbedürfnis entgegen. Sie entlasten von Entscheidungskonflikten. Sie reduzieren Komplexität. Das wiederum bedeutet: Machtverhältnisse sind für das menschliche Zusammenleben funktional, vielleicht sogar die Bedingung der Möglichkeit einer politischen Gemeinschaft. (156)

This statement should be taken very seriously, as it explains why revolutions or major changes in political structures take a lot of time and are, at the beginning, mostly led by a minority of the society. Even though people might recognize inequality and problems, they often tend to choose the known rather than the foreign, unsecure way. Moreover, people have experienced or learned that revolutions can lead to disasters and worsen the situation. To overcome these challenges and doubts, inequalities have to be disclosed and explained and the movements for change very well organized.

“Gender relations so far as we have been able to understand them have been (more or less) relations of domination. That is, gender relations have been (more) defined and (imperfectly) controlled by one of their interrelated aspects – the man” (Flax 629). Trying to understand male hegemony's perspective necessarily involves restating views on the biological differences of male and female that allegedly have impacts on behavior and psychology. Most arguments about this have already been disproven and are no longer taken seriously. Freud's argumentation of male superiority is one of these, as it has no researched basis or proof whatsoever.

Es [das Mädchen] bemerkt den auffällig sichtbaren, groß angelegten Penis eines Bruders ..., erkennt ihn sofort als überlegenes Gegenstück seines eigenen, kleinen und versteckten Organs und ist von da an dem Penisneid verfallen ... Im analogen Fall, wenn der kleine Knabe die Genitalgegend des Mädchens zuerst erblickt, benimmt er sich unschlüssig ... Zwei Reaktionen werden aus diesem Zusammentreffen hervorgehen, die sich fixieren können und ... zusammen mit anderen Momenten sein Verhältnis zum Weib dauernd bestimmen werden: Abscheu vor dem verstümmelten Geschöpf oder triumphierende Geringschätzung desselben. (Freud 162 f.)

Although Freud's analysis of the psychological consequences of anatomical differences was written in 1925, its central idea, namely that men are the original, superior sex, is still present in current times. As previously explained, Kessler and McKenna's study has shown that male anatomy is still seen as the standard in postmodern times. Combining this finding with Freud's idea of "Penisneid", one can conclude that male hegemony is and has been explained by biological superiority, which women are/were supposed to naturally accept. According to Freud's analysis, girls become modest women and feel inferior because of their 'incompleteness', which affects their whole behavior. Men, on the other hand, feel superior because they feel they have 'more' and are 'complete'. This awareness of their body affects their behavior. Their penis becomes a metaphor for their abilities – the ability of penetration signifies their activeness, aggressiveness and decisiveness and gives them an overall feeling of power.

If the female is not limited to her 'imperfection', she is at least always defined by her relation to men, which is a conclusion of heteronormativity. According to Christianity, Eve is made of Adam's rib and is his wife, seducer, helper and the mother of his children (cf. McClelland 98). In parallel, women are often not seen as independent individuals but as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. Even if the feminist movement has achieved major changes in gender conceptions, Freud's justification of male supremacy explains the still-existing inequality in power distribution.

Richmond-Abbot elaborates on how power is interactively stabilized by valuing traits of the dominant group:

In other words, because men have had power and have dominated social institutions, masculine traits and occupations have been more valued and 'masculinity' [Kimmel qtd. In Richmond-Abbot 5] has become a collection of traits that lead to success. If men are socialized to be masculine, they will have traits ... that keep males in positions of power. If women are socialized to be feminine (passive and dependent), it will be difficult for them to achieve power and change institutions and the value structure. (5)

Women, therefore, still have trouble achieving real equality in many areas. In order to gain more power, women feel compelled to make use of various strategies that are also represented in media, and especially in *Game of Thrones*. Earlier, it was explained that power can have different forms and cannot be limited to legal, rule-making areas. Richmond-Abbot explains the differentiation of formal and informal power through Lipman-Blumen's expressions. "Macromanipulation" is the formal power that includes legal power like the right to vote and "laws that have kept them [women] from controlling their fertility and thus have effectively kept them in the home" – in other words, the formal manipulation of their freedom and way of living (Richmond-Abbot 12 f.). "Micromanipulation" includes "interpersonal skill and charm", which "the less dominant groups often use ... to offset the control of the powerful" (12 f.). It seems that this informal power is completely ignored by feminists. Although it is not the ideal form of power that guarantees equality and independence, it is a form that should be elaborated and used when other options are limited. "... [W]omen may have a great deal of informal power. Indeed, in their own realm or through manipulation of various sorts, they can exert a great deal of influence, although legitimate power is reserved for men" (23). Considering the great changes women have made despite their lack of official power, other forms of power are definitely of value: "Because very few women held positions with power, they had no comparable group. Women therefore did not influence change through decisions over institutional policies, because they did not control institutions" (Jackson, R. 179).

In postfeminism, women seem to value informal power, as great emphasis is placed on femininity and women's power to manipulate men using sexuality. Even though this approach enforces sexism and seems limited, it deals with apparent – that is, already existing – undeniable, everyday sexism in an ironic way, which is empowering because it rejects the role of the victim and turns weakness into strength (cf. Gill 153 f.). "In this regime power is not imposed from above or from the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity" (152). Here, it is important that women are aware of their situation and make use of objectification in order to achieve balance, and not because they view their sexuality as their only weapon or the most defining part of their identity; otherwise their use of irony will probably cause the re-enforcement of the hierarchy. As Kim states, "moving from

passive object of the male gaze to self-objectification does not necessarily achieve subjectivity, and it can be a false freedom” (324). She states that this approach “promotes the myth turned practice that a woman’s greatest tool is her sex: woman equals sex”, and that this is not a progressive “strategy but a very old one called the masquerade: the performance of femininity” (324). This conception of masquerade is very present in *Game of Thrones*. Women often use their femininity as means of power because they have few other options to achieve their goals. This thesis will analyze whether other gender performances and power strategies are suggested as well. If the series does not offer diverse representations, then it not only stays within the limits of its historical context, but also mimics the power relations of our current postfeminist reality by not constructing frames for power interpretations other than sexual manipulation.

Foucault takes on a very distinct and formative perspective on power that actually questions its existence but focuses on its outcomes:

... it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not the *vis-à-vis* of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle. (214)

He does not deny the effects that power has but assesses its reality as a construction. “He conceptualised people’s experiences of domination and subordination as ‘effects’ of power rather than as proceeding from a specific source of power” (Ramazanoğlu 5). Even though Foucault, like Butler, questions the existing state of power as naturally given and changeable, he also undermines the reality of oppressor and oppressed. According to another view, Foucault can be very useful for feminism:

She [M.E. Bailey] argues that Foucault used his genealogical method to show that the supposed truths of sexuality exist in a material world where power is brought to bear on all the forms they take. This implicitly deconstructs the idea of a monolithic patriarchy as a source of power. Rather, women make their bodies conform to historically specific ideas of femininity. Bodies are then usually seen as variable sites of power/knowledge\* relations. (Ramazanoğlu 15)

This, similar to Butler’s view, is a poststructuralist approach to feminism. It criticizes the acceptance and justification of power by pointing out its discursive nature. Although women are the victims of male hegemony, power structures are

strengthened by themselves, through or against their will. This often takes place unconsciously, as power structures shape identity and thus help to keep the system intact. Garland's elaboration on Foucault's understanding of power makes this clear:

Power is a pervasive aspect of social life and is not limited to the sphere of formal politics or of open conflict. It is also to be thought of as productive in its effect rather than repressive in so far as power shapes the actions of individuals and harnesses their bodily powers to its ends. In this sense power operates 'through' individuals rather than 'against' them and helps constitute the individual who is at the same time its vehicle. (qtd. in Lukes 89)

The paradox of the dissolving of gender roles is that it is actually based on the assimilation of the female gender to the male gender. To poststructuralists, transcendence, emancipation and progress have a male connotation; women who acknowledge these values are seeking masculinization, which will not change current power distributions (cf. Galster 43). Acquiring the traditional logics of identity during the process of subjectification and equalization cannot help in overcoming existing oppression mechanisms, and therefore a new way of thinking and different methods are required (cf. 43). This phenomenon is not only related to the association of masculine traits with power, but also to clothing reforms (women wearing pants instead of men wearing dresses), women undertaking the double burden of working outside and inside the house and women making use of masculine conceptions and theorizations of power. While rejecting gender norms, poststructuralists inevitably base their language and definitions of 'norms', just like Freud, on masculinity. Is it possible to create new categories that are not dependent on the image of masculinity (cf. McClelland 99)? And more importantly, can deconstructing the general understanding of gender really be independent of masculinity? The question remains open whether real societal changes in the unequal distribution of interpretation and definition of the genders can be achieved in a way that could change the concept of androgyny from merely a 'phenomenon of transition' (Schmerl and Großmaß qtd. in Bock 101) towards a heuristic concept that is not connoted with masculinity (cf. Bock 101).

Through feminist approaches towards more equality, changes in power distributions have been most significantly achieved by education and financial independence:

Women sought education, they took jobs, they had fewer children, they joined voluntary associations, they entered the political party system, they joined unions, they demanded a greater voice in family decisions, and they divorced husbands to escape bad marriages. All these actions, and others, challenged constraints on women's identity. Although these were individual actions, they had historical impact because they represented the shared interests and ideas produced by women's changing social circumstances. (Jackson, R. 175)

The most efficient way for women to gain more power and independence was to actively take part in society and the employment market. To be able to do this, women had to take control over their family planning, which has been made possible through abortion and birth control (although the pill is often criticized for its harmful effects and the responsibility it has assigned only to women).

Power distributions are not only dependent on conceptions of gender but also on relations between genders, or rather people. The future prognosis is rather pessimistic, considering the changes so far and the still-existing power imbalance despite women's increased financial independence. Nevertheless, extended access to information and more tolerance towards differences keep hopes alive:

It seems unlikely that the uncertainty and unpredictability of human existence will diminish in any significant respect. Thus, we must expect that our bedrock existential anxiety that attracts us to power relationships will remain. Still, consciously recognizing the basis of the attraction and the alternatives available gives us some foundation for action. Confronting the irreducible fact of existential uncertainty weakens its power to drive us to unconscious remedies. Conscious choices, even when they are less than ideal, help us to transcend our sense of entrapment ... Education and knowledge, crucial resources in most situations, go a long way towards diminishing one's sense of powerlessness. Knowledge allows the less powerful to assess the alternatives and exercise some control over choices. (Lipman-Blumen 128 f.)

### **3. Representation of Women in Contemporary TV Series**

They point to the varied ways in which different groups of women are targeted and excluded from the media and at how representations help to shore up conventional gender roles and expectations, thus playing an important role in enabling persistent, multiple and intersecting inequalities. For instance, for feminists working on media and culture, key questions have emerged around the ways in which different media manage public expectations of what is natural and what is taken for granted – what is normalised – not only about women as individuals and as a group, but also in relation to austerity politics, divisions among and between genders, and other hierarchies, inclusions and exclusions. (Lacey and Perrons 48)

As the quote above states, representations of women in media make a significant contribution to opinion formation concerning 'normal' gender roles; therefore, it is important to analyze cultural products of our time. Academic work in this area has unveiled inequalities, underrepresentation, unrealistic body images and binary behavioral expectations. "Media production and representations are understood here not simply as reflective of a social and political reality to be discovered and truthfully reported, but constitutive of what kinds of interpretations are possible, and thus formative of our social reality" (Lacey and Perrons 50 f.).

As Stuart Hall explains, culture consists of "shared meanings", and it is the people of a culture who determine its meaning and shape it together – meaning is not only produced in everyday life but also through media and our use of it (3). Hall's take on exhibitions in modern museums can be transferred to the representation of certain groups in media, as it is also connected to power and choice: "Every choice – to show this rather than that, to show this in relation to that, to say this about that – is a choice about how to represent ... each choice has consequences both for *what* meanings are produced and for *how* meaning is produced" (8). Additionally, the 'other' gets meaning through "stereotyping" and the "essentializing of 'difference'" (8). Because women have more stereotypical categorical representations on TV than men, they are, according to this approach, 'the other.' In her groundbreaking theory of film analysis, Mulvey constructed the idea of 'the male gaze,' which is proof to her that media is not gender neutral and that it objectifies women through certain cinematographic techniques. She adds that viewers as well adapt the same perspective, as women are shown "as erotic object[s] for the spectator within the auditorium" (Mulvey 207):

Scopophilia thereby is the power which determines the camera perspective of the film. According to Mulvey, all spectators would be forced to assume a male gaze perspective through a male camera perspective, because the cinematic apparatus or the cinematic dispositive is not gender neutral. In the context of Mulvey's analysis the gaze regime of the cinema was principally equated with the male gaze, whose voyeurism was fed by mainstream narrative cinema, turning the woman into an object of its scopophilia. (Finzsch 3)

Moreover, women's underrepresentation is not a coincidence or acceptable situation but a choice. Hall argues that there cannot be one true reading and understanding of images but that "the best way to 'settle' such contested readings is to look ... at the concrete example and to try to justify one's 'reading' in detail

in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing” (9).

From a more radically feminist view, objectified representations of women not only mirror power relations, but also enforce the feeling of power behind the screen: “As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to ... his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (Mulvey 207).

### **3.1. Postfeminism and Media**

Television in particular has a great impact on society through a variety of series. In postfeminist times, the danger of a backlash to the progress made by previous feminist movements has increased – anti-feminist representations of women are being normalized and even celebrated. “Television scholars have already identified the ways in which particular television texts identified as ‘feminist’ redirect independent, assertive female characters into safely traditional female categories” (Rabinovitz “Sitcoms and Single Moms: Representations of Feminism on American TV” 3). The celebration of these supposedly pro-women attitudes and “power feminism” (cf. Wolf) is very connected to consumerism, as it emphasizes the financial independence and power of women and is exploited to promote certain TV series, which are in turn dependent on commercials. Appealing to a greater number of viewers will lead to more potential buyers of advertised products; therefore, ideologies and trends are often addressed in TV series or used for promotion.

Television usually operates according to strict capitalistic principles: its goal lies in bombarding its viewers with images that will entice them to purchase the products featured on the channel’s publicity spots ... At the same time, most channels develop a set of characteristics, a personality of sorts, that allows them to attract specific audiences for whom advertisements – and, of course, programs – are then tailored. (Pagès and Kinane 3)

Regarding feminism, “network programming executives” were aware of societal changes after feminist movements and adjusted their programs accordingly – “‘feminist programming’ was “good business” (Rabinovitz “Ms.-Representation: The Politics of Feminist Sitcoms” 145).

Most current representations of women (and men) in series and movies are very problematic because they still revolve around heteronormative and traditional gender roles and represent unorthodox ways of life as problematic. Examples include ‘liberated single women’, who are represented as ‘incomplete’ because their main goal in life is finding their prince charming, like in *Sex and the City*; unhappy, single career women in movies like *13 Going on 30*; or very sexually active women, like in *Trainwreck*. All these examples have in common main characters who realize that they need men for real happiness and feel like something is missing in their lives when they focus on other things like sex or their career.

Many feminist issues are discussed in *Sex and the City*, and many different readings of the series are possible. However, the end of the series, in which the main character Carrie reconciles with her on/off boyfriend Mr. Big, who often disappointed her, suggests that a happy ending cannot be achieved through independence from men but only through being with ‘the one.’ *13 Going on 30* creates a distinct image of the ideal woman, and any variance in that image is represented negatively: “the postfeminist heroine is vital, youthful, and playful while her opposite number, the ‘bad’ female professional, is repressive, deceptive, and deadly” (Tasker and Negra 9). Thus, the great variety of women and gender performances are underrepresented because of common stereotypical categorizations. A prescriptive image of women is created due to the negatively connoted depictions of women with non-traditional lifestyles, leading to a backlash to feminist progressivism – masked by ‘empowering’ messages through consumerism power, self-determination and individuality, reflecting postfeminist attitudes concerning womanhood. Although TV series create the opportunity to represent more rounded and multidimensional characters, many still choose to portray stereotypical women. This is especially the case in series with historical settings, which make use of the sexist perceptions of their time. Contemporary popular TV series that address critical topics and create feminist characters (with postfeminist approaches) are *The Mindy Project*, *Scandal* and *Orange is the New Black*. In these examples, there are various representations of women that are not flat or unrealistic and do not represent non-traditional choices as ‘negative’ or sad.

In conclusion, “the press has legitimised and supported some forms of feminism while de-legitimising, ignoring or silencing others” (Media 51). This

has led to the representation of very few empowering and progressive female characters, and instead the representation of mostly stereotypical and unrealistic portrayals of beauty and womanhood – which is deeply connected to consumerist approaches.

### **3.2. Series with Medieval Settings**

These ideas about the representation of women in media and the need for well-rounded, uncommon female characters can be applied in the context of *Game of Thrones*. One of the noticeable aspects of the series is the large number of women in it. Although this raises hope, prima facie, there are much fewer women in power, and for many, their nudity and sexuality is in the foreground. Furthermore, looking at images of women in the fantasy genre reveals that there are categorizations and stereotypes, like the ‘damsel in distress,’ the ‘witch’ and the ‘woman warrior’ (Frankel 37 ff.), which is also mirrored in *Game of Thrones*.

As *Game of Thrones* is set in a medieval world, a closer examination of series of the same genre will provide greater insight into the gender discourse in this historical context. This will be useful in evaluating *Game of Thrones*’s feminist potential and postfeminist notions in relation with other contemporary series that are based on the Middle Ages but are built on modern and postmodern ideas and theories of gender and power. Throughout the analysis, the fantasy perspective of *Game of Thrones* must also be considered, as it lessens the importance of factual history and creates more opportunities for creativity and imagination:

First, the Middle Ages as represented on television has come to be associated increasingly with the genre of fantasy. Overall, recent television programs focusing on the Middle Ages or set against a medieval background show a marked decline in concern with historical accuracy, glorifying instead in the imaginary and the fantastical and thereby looking more like medieval romance – with its own cast of dragons, monsters, fairies, and magical adventures – than any contemporary notion of historical realism ... Such lack of interest in historical ‘truth’ is further in evidence in HBO’s *Game of Thrones* set against the imaginary world of Westeros. In truth, neither of these shows attempts to depict the medieval historical era. Rather, they – like most contemporary ‘medieval’ shows – take place in a vague pre-industrial culture, one that we are meant to recognize as proto-medieval but that is not clearly designated as such. (Pagès and Kinane 6)

Keeping in mind that most series and films with medieval settings have fantasy elements and do not try to display a truthful, factual setting of the Middle Ages, one must be even more critical when it comes to the representations of women. As many aspects are imaginative, there is a greater possibility for them to cover diverse female characters that create the opportunity to transmit feminist messages.

Because TV series noticeably have “clear ideological implications” (Pagès and Kinane 3), which are connected to their capitalistic needs, their analysis is of great importance. TV series are most likely to underline certain elements, also with the help of things like promotions, which can lead to increased consumerism. Feminism has become a very popular theme that is supposed to attract young women as loyal viewers, but still fails in becoming an appropriate motif in TV series. As previously stated, representation is a choice. Medieval settings in contemporary cultural products might seem restrictive but they actually offer new opportunities through the combination of postmodern discourses and medieval conceptions:

Television medievalism stands outside both the medieval and the contemporary, presenting audiences with the best of the two eras. Recent examples of television medievalisms eschew some prominent aspect of the medieval experience in favor of more attractive elements of the period. Such products reduce or eliminate any discussion of class, gender, and racial inequalities in the Middle Ages while emphasizing the sense of adventure and fantasy at the heart of much of medieval literature ... Contemporary television medievalisms offer us a romantic, pre-industrial world free of inequities and injustice. (Pagès and Kinane 7)

Although the potential of Middle Age settings must be recognized, this is overall a very naïve perspective on medieval TV series. If they reduce or eliminate discussions of class, gender and race, they do so by not representing them adequately and therefore by ignoring these topics – because, in fact, most American TV series still create very problematic representations of minorities, women and people with a lower economic status. In *Game of Thrones* in particular, race is a major issue, considering the various places, peoples and languages it portrays. The Dothraki, for instance, are portrayed as a nomadic people who are extremely brutal and misogynist, and rape is a form of celebration. They are shown as barbarians and are even called savages and animals by other people. It is striking that they have rather dark complexions and long black hair and beards, which makes it impossible not to draw comparisons with nomadic

steppe Turkic peoples or Arabic people. This is even more so because their language has sounds reminiscent of Arabic.

The statement “the best of the two eras” is true when it comes to outer appearances of the actors in medieval TV series. Of course, ‘the best’ is used here ironically, as contemporary representations of attractiveness promote unrealistic and potentially harmful goals (thinness, for instance). These series make use of modern cosmetic products and employ actors that make use of plastic surgery or other ‘beautifying’ enhancements. Women’s appearance in particular is bound to certain expectations, which include size and skin color. The represented body images and beauty standards are very unrealistic in terms of historicity or even modernity. The Middle Ages were known for their lack of hygiene, whereas most Middle Age-themed movies and series display only clean, styled hair, perfect teeth and fit bodies. This is at least the case for the main characters, as they are the ones that are seen most of the time.

Violence and sexuality always seem to be important parts of series with medieval settings. Examples of series that frequently display the two are *Vikings*, *The Tudors*, *The Borgias* and, of course, *Game of Thrones*. Violence is often presented as an indicator of strength and masculinity. There is a striking imbalance concerning sexuality and nudity among the genders – whereas women are often shown naked, men do not necessarily undress in the same scenes, or less of the naked male body is shown. This phenomenon underlines what Mulvey summarizes as “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” (206). She elaborates:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female ... 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*. (206)

The male gaze – which is linked to female passivity and objectification – is very common in the previously mentioned series, especially *The Tudors*, and will be analyzed in more detail in the following sections. Regarding sexuality in general, in order to view its representation vis-à-vis medieval reality, McSheffrey compares *The Tudors* to the reality of Henry VIII and concludes that the show is a “de-emphasis”:

If sometimes we feel that *The Tudors* emphasizes sexuality too much, it should be noted that not even that television series emphasizes the male genitals as much as the prominent codpieces in Henry's actual portraits, and his armor, did. One distinct difference between Henry's actual dress – at least in his portraits – and Jonathan Rhy Meyers's costume in the television series is the latter's *de-emphasis* of genitals. (67)

Here, McSheffrey focuses on male representations and fails to recognize that the representation of sexuality is problematic mainly because of its imbalance and objectification of women, and not because of its depiction in itself. Even though McSheffrey links the lack of representation of male nudity to an enforcement of masculinity, or rather male pride, by arguing that there is “a contemporary tendency both to avoid explicit references to penises in many cultural representations of masculine potencies, and to de-link priapism from the issue of fertility” (67), she does not compare that phenomenon to the display of female nudity and the imbalance that arises with it. While male pride is protected by not displaying the male sexual organ, since it might not be up to standard or could evoke questions of functionality or fertility, female pride is not protected or respected but rather exploited, although female nudity can in the same way provoke criticism.

Another common phenomenon in TV series with medieval settings is emphasizing the sexual difference of men and women not only by the imbalanced display of nudity but also by accentuating male physical and influential power through rape scenes:

In the recent spate of medieval television productions, the plot-lines strongly associate aristocratic male sexuality (and in some cases, any kind of medieval male sexuality) with coercion. In *The White Queen*, which chronicles the Wars of the Roses in 15<sup>th</sup>-century England, most of the sexual relationships in the dynastic marriages are brutish couplings in which husbands force themselves on their frightened wives; even the central and erotically charged relationship between King Edwards and his future wife Elizabeth Woodville begins with his nearly raping her. One of the central turns in the plot of *The Pillars of the Earth* occurs when the earl of Shiring's beautiful daughter, Lady Aliena, is raped by the dastardly William Hamleigh, whose father has usurped the earldom. In *The Vikings*, scenes with female characters, especially in early episodes, seem more often than not to involve repelling rapists, a gesture to contemporary girl-power framed in a medieval world of sex as rape. *World Without End* takes the sexual violence furthest, with perhaps more scenes of rape than consensual sex.

If most of the recent medieval television series employ a brutalist vision of sex before the civilizing force of modernity, *The Tudors* presents a model of erotic relationships that emphasizes sex as strategy and commodity. (McSheffrey 68)

*Game of Thrones* combines these two representations of sex, one being brutal and the other a form of ‘power’ and strategy, which the title of this paper suggests.

In *The Tudors*, although there is no force, King Henry chooses any woman he wants (married or not) and asks them to come to his room to have intercourse. The women do not deny him, as they hope for more power. Even though they seem to enjoy the togetherness and often express their love for the king, their motivations are probably different, as seen through the examples of the sisters Anne Boleyn and Mary in the beginning of season one. Anne Boleyn manages to gain the king’s trust by “playing with his passions” as her father suggests (S1 E2 00:51:34). Although Anne Boleyn succeeds in marrying the king and having an influence on him, and by doing so allegedly increases her power, ironically this development is tied to men’s wishes. It is her father and her uncle who profit from Anne Boleyn’s relationship with the king. She manages to attract and keep his interest by denying intercourse, and thus uses her sexuality as a weapon. Only if he marries her will she agree to have intercourse. As the Catholic Church prohibited divorce during Henry’s time, Anne Boleyn might have had a great impact on the initiation of the English Church, which acknowledged Henry as the Supreme Head of the Church instead of the pope and led to various reforms. In the series, Henry decides to get a divorce after a serious illness, when he realizes he has no legitimate heir, rather than because of Anne. Her power is limited because it is tied to the satisfaction of the King: after a while their relationship changes because Anne does not give birth to a boy, and at the end of season two she loses her head after being accused of adultery, which she constantly denies. Here again it is shown that Anne’s power was dependent on men (Henry and a son).

In *The Tudors*, most female characters are passive and only shown in relationships with men. They are either represented as men’s toys with no voice or flat characters whose only desire is to have good relationships with their spouses. Even Henry’s sister, who is forced to marry a much older man and then kills him out of disgust – thus taking her destiny into her own hands – is always shown in interactions with either her brother or her lover, and apart from that is a dull character with no voice or motifs. When women speak up, they are often not listened to or are forced to be quiet. Henry’s first wife Catherine, who from time to time offers her advice or voices her concerns towards her husband, is not taken seriously. When she tells him that she cannot hide her feelings, he tells her that

she is going to have to (S1 E1 00:49:27-00:49:36).

Of course the series has limited options in creating a different reality, as it is mostly based on historical facts. Nevertheless, Anne's power could have been represented in various ways, or at least her influence could have been made more visible. Furthermore, as stated before, historical series do not completely mirror reality; therefore, it is always possible to represent women in different ways and to write their characters more multidimensionally. Representing men's power by denying women's feelings and opinions is a decision that draws a certain image of women.

*The Borgias* is similar to *The Tudors* when it comes to nudity and the objectification of women:

Episode 1 of *The Borgias* contains several sex scenes. In the first, a woman is shown gazing at herself in a mirror during the act, emphasizing herself as an object of gaze. Later the new pope slips into his ward's room to watch her naked and flagellating herself at his orders before he seduces her. Later she has sex with another man – he is fully clothed; she is naked and soon murdered. As the episode begins and ends with men's conspiracies, it's clearly established as a man's world. (Frankel 21)

In *Vikings*, the love relationships between men and women are represented as more balanced and equal, although men often have the last word. In contrast to *The Tudors*, women are not silenced but taken seriously, and wives of leaders talk with their husbands in a less distant way in which the hierarchy is less visible. However, there is still an overall inequality of power, which becomes clear through the countless rape scenes that create no sympathy for the victim due to the shortness of the scenes and the lack of display of the women's emotions. An exemplary scene is when a female slave is 'incidentally' raped (S1 E2 00:15:10-00:15:42). This scene has no function in the story and is not connected to other scenes whatsoever. The woman's name is not mentioned; she is only called "slave" and is shown only twice, first serving the men and then during the rape scene. All these aspects enforce the objectification of women and represent male empowerment through the men's ability of penetration, as discussed in previous chapters. Rape is shown as normal behavior that is neither judged nor intervened with nor criticized.

Gender roles in *Vikings* are represented in a traditional way, although characters develop with time and gain more power. An example is the character

Lagertha, who does not tolerate her husband wanting a second wife and so leaves him and marries another man, who she stabs in the eye because he was hitting and disrespecting her. She later becomes a leader herself. In contrast to the women in *The Tudors*, she makes her own decisions and is as capable, decisive and strong as any man in the series. There are more women who live as warriors and/or do not find power in their sexuality but rather in their wit and physical strength. Aslaug is an ambivalent character who does not intrigue Ragnar simply because of her sexuality but because of her intellect and her abilities as a seer. Nevertheless, she is later primarily valued for her fertility and especially for giving birth to sons. All in all, the series has a greater variety of representations but has still fewer female characters than male. Furthermore, for most women, their relationships with men are often the focus and there are fewer scenes of solely women making plans, etc., whereas men are often seen with each other making the important decisions. Compared to *The Tudors*, it has more feminist potential but lessens it through unnecessary, unsympathetic rape scenes.

In summary, most TV series with medieval settings commonly display violence and sexuality and use the traditional gender roles of the Middle Ages when representing women. Although some series have much more feminist potential through their multidimensional, gender-ambivalent female characters, they undermine this potential by constantly going back to traditional gender roles and power distributions through which women are shown as less powerful and weaker than men. In particular, rape scenes and excessive female nudity lead to objectification and support the conception of the male gaze, by which the male characters are shown as the active decision-makers and doers, whereas women, even when powerful, are dependent on men. Even if they have total control, women's relationships with men are more in focus than powerful men's relationships with women. Sexuality is represented as an important strategy to gain power, which is connected to postfeminist conceptions of femininity and empowerment. Furthermore, the beauty ideal of the white, fit, long- and straight-haired woman is very present even in the most recent and progressive series.

#### **4. Gender Roles and Power Distribution in *Game of Thrones***

“Martin’s female characters ... have generated praise, intense attention and fascination, heated debate, controversy, and have been read as both feminist and antifeminist, as subversive and repressive” (Gjelsvik and Schubart 1).

Having started with only men in the highest ruling positions, *Game of Thrones* has now moved in a more female-empowering direction by displaying many women in charge. The high number of women in powerful positions is a striking difference from other TV series with medieval settings. In the beginning, Westeros (the continent shown most often in *Game of Thrones*), with its nine regions, is ruled by men, combined under one king. Men are shown as the rule makers and politicians, whereas women are represented as expressing opinions on decisions rather emotionally, considering the situation of the family and not the general political necessities. An example is Catelyn Stark’s opposition towards her husband’s acceptance of a position supporting the King, because she worries about the safety of her family. However, Eddard Stark does not listen to his wife and accepts the position of the ‘Hand of the King’ because he sees it as his duty and a matter of honor (E1). The series thus begins with the representation of traditional gender roles and of power as men’s property. It is set in a medieval world in which women are not respected as people but are valued for their bodies and fertility. They are raised to become good housewives and mothers, and thus many are often only shown in relation to men: “too many women spend every appearance in show and book relating to, seducing, and otherwise completely consumed with obsession for men” (Frankel 31).

The series mostly concentrates on the aristocracy of the continents, and therefore only on the most privileged women. Female representations from the “small folk,” as George R.R. Martin (the author of the original book series) calls the common people, are mostly prostitutes. Compared to the noble women, women of the small folk have more disadvantages and are respected even less. Although rape is shown as common among aristocrats as well, women of the common folk are in greater danger because of their lack of protection. Therefore, they not only lack formal power but also suffer on other very basic levels like self-preservation and power over their own bodies. They are not respected as humans but are rather shown as objects attached to men.

Although these conditions are shown as very restrictive for women and their exercise of power, their situation is not totally hopeless, as the series is known for its twists and sudden, unexpected changes in power balances. An example is the death of the popular character Eddard Stark, the Warden of the North. The overthrow of the powerful and the constant changes in balance create potential for feminist approaches. It is related to Foucault's definition of power, which states that power structures are questionable and changeable and therefore not natural.

An article in *Forbes* portrays the recent changes in *Game of Thrones*:

There was a period not too long ago where *Game of Thrones* was having a bit of feminist problem. Gratuitous rape was all too common - the episode when the Nights Watch took over Craster's Keep felt like a full hour of intensely brutal rape, from different angles ... General misogyny and abuse ran rampant in the world of Westeros. Lately, and especially in the latest female-centric episode, ironically titled 'The Broken Man,' the tables seem to have permanently turned. We see Jon Snow beg a little girl for military assistance, Sansa Stark directly disobeying his orders, and Yara Greyjoy proudly bearing her sexuality, daring someone to take offense. The women of *Game of Thrones* may still inhabit a man's world, but they're increasingly shown to be adapting to it. Not just in a typical Hollywood fashion of holding up a sword and fighting like a man, but hitting back strategically, with intelligence and inner strength. (Di Placido)

With these changes in mind, one can now argue that there is feminist potential that is represented through the characters' development. Main female characters that have been presented as powerless and voiceless in the beginning of the series, especially Danereys Targaryen, who was first dependent on her brother and then on her husband, are now shown as the main game changers. However, although women are now represented as more active, there are still less visible problems that complicate the feminist potential. These are seen in the relations between the genders and in stereotypical gender performances, which suggest that only predetermined strategies can lead to power. These strategies are connected to sexuality, masquerade, mimicking masculine gender performance and hidden agendas. Furthermore, the expression of adapting to a "man's world" does not emphasize female power but rather supports male power and hegemony – it is not possible to change the man's world, only to adapt to it. This implies that women still have no formal power and supports the thesis that only certain strategies or performances are represented as successful.

Another quote about the feminist approach of the series takes a different perspective in that matter:

Thus far the likeliest female power contingent in the Seven Kingdoms to hang on their power is the bloc involving Dany, Yara, Olenna, and the Sand Snakes (with Tyrion and Varys in key advisory positions). Those women, who promise vengeance for their fallen families and to build a better world than their fathers did, are coming to Westeros to clean house. And, as Daenerys pointed out, she has no intention of climbing the ladder the old-fashioned way. Coolly ditching her side-piece Daario, she says she's not sure she *has* to marry in order to consolidate her power base. (Robinson)

Here, it is stated that the female characters not only adapt to become powerful but also seek major changes “to build a better world than their fathers did”, and therefore to break away from patriarchy and create more equality. They arguably also use ambivalent gender performances by crossing lines and creating room for freedom. However, this is only the case for Daenerys, as she is the one who not only changes perceptions of gender but also fights against hierarchal structures by trying to restrict slavery. The other characters, although rebelling against men and existing power structures, are still stuck in old traditions; Yara, for example, adapts to traditional male gender performances. She does not think she should be the Queen of the Iron Islands because she is generally a better leader but because she is more of a man than the other candidates. (Theon: “She can’t lead an attack! ... You are a woman!” Yara: “You are the one in skirts.” – S2 E2 00:38:10-00:38:16). This is a logical consequence of equating capability with masculinity, which is very often the case in the series.

In *Game of Thrones*, family ties, alongside gender, play an important role in power distribution. Blood lineage and age determine the heir and there is overall a very noticeable hierarchy. In some parts of the presented world, slavery is common. As the medieval world of *Game of Thrones* contains different continents, countries and cultures, power relations and gender roles differ. Although in most parts of Westeros traditional gender roles, heteronormativity and a very noticeable male hegemony are present, in Dorne (a region in Westeros), for instance, gender performances and sexuality are presented as more flexible and liberal. Oberyn Martell and his lover Ellaria Sand are shown to be openly bisexual, engaging in orgies. Women are respected for their strengths, abilities and intellect. Although they had no formal power until the last season, it is probably not uncommon for Dorne to have female leaders, as men and women

are legally more equal than in other parts of Westeros. An example of this is the equal right of inheritance.

In Essos, the eastern continent, slavery is allowed. The people have different ethnic backgrounds but in general are reminiscent of Middle Eastern people, with darker skin and eye colors. Strikingly, these people are represented as more violent (as seen with the Dothraki). The hierarchal system differs from that in Westeros due to the presence of slavery and even less powerful women. In fact, women of the aristocracy and the wives of leaders are less respected compared to those in Westeros. Whereas the Khal, a Dothraki leader, has a large amount of power and is respected for his physical strength, his wife, who is called Khaleesi, has no power whatsoever. Daenerys, who was sold by her brother to a Khal of the Dothraki, is offended by her husband's people in the beginning of the series but later gains their respect and changes the usual power structures by becoming their leader. This is also connected to the fact that power is not inherited through bloodline but is gained by physical strength and the proof of being fit to be a leader. The other two continents are not well-known; they are either mentioned by characters or only shown on the map of the 'Known World'.

Returning to the development of the series, the latest episodes display women taking active control of situations and an enhancement in gender performances. Not only are the women shown having major impacts on the course of the series, but they have also developed from being victims of violence to becoming executors.

After five seasons plus of marital rapes, walks of shames, and numerous other degradations, 'Book of the Stranger,' last night's episode of *Game of Thrones*, showed the women of the seven kingdoms wielding true determination and power. Starting with Sansa Stark's reunion with Jon Snow, and continuing through the fiery moment of Dany's non-immolation, we were treated to scene after scene of women telling the men of Westeros what's up. Even Tyrion, lover of women and relatively fair-minded, gets a schooling from Missandei when he claims to know the plight of her people. 'How many days were you a slave?' she asks. 'Long enough to know,' he says. 'Not long enough to understand,' she replies. (Lasota)

This quote again displays the change during the series and how it is exemplified by the fierce, defining actions of women. A former slave's lesson for Tyrion not only represents the lack of sympathy of aristocrats towards slaves but also the men's difficulty in understanding women's unequal situation. This is an important message to the oppressors, who might not be aware of the inequality or cannot

take the issues seriously because they cannot empathize with the oppressed, as they have never walked in their shoes and do not question existing structures. Moreover, women are shown as perpetrators of violence, making use of the same power exercises as men. This approach must also be taken into account when analyzing gender performances and the different strategies for gaining power.

An integral aspect of power in relation to gender in media is the representation of sexuality, which was also addressed in previous chapters. Examining the male gaze in *Game of Thrones*, there are distinct methods used in order to represent female passivity: “It isn’t that more female body parts are shown than male body parts (though they are). It’s that the men are treated as characters and controllers of the scene, while the women range from exploited to ignored barely-people” (Frankel 16). Projecting Mulvey’s theories on *Game of Thrones*, Valerie Frankel unveils the male characters as controllers by giving specific examples:

This split appears several times, as Littlefinger directs his own porn show between two strippers in his brothel and Joffrey does something similar in his chamber, while displaying his own savagery. In both scenes, the women are minor characters, naked prostitutes designed to be watched, who aren’t significant to the story. The more important male characters don’t strip or participate in the sex scene; they instead order the women to put on artificial performances, while the men watch and judge them. (18)

In addition, rape scenes are very common in *Game of Thrones*, similar to *Vikings*, and enforce women’s passivity and powerlessness. The rape scenes underline that women’s bodies are not respected as their own property in the series. Here again, one has to keep in mind that representations are a matter of choice and are read within a certain frame of modern conceptions and ideas:

Since *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the TV series *Game of Thrones* are products of our modern times, the various paradigms featured in the fictional universe of Ice and Fire are constructed from ideas about how sexual relations were organized in a long-gone, pre-modern world. As mentioned before, while the narrative is fantasy, implying that any social organization can be constructed within the conditions set up by the narrative, it still connects with our perceptions of history ... Simultaneously, the paradigms are understood from a modern, realist perspective of sexuality and intimate relations. (Larsson 21)

The representations are not only read in a pre-determined way but also influence our conceptions. Therefore, the sexual relations represented in the show cannot simply be accepted as historically factual but have to be recognized as a modern (or postmodern) construct.

The sexual relations in *Game of Thrones* mirror the power relations and underline the gender differences; therefore, it is important to take these into account when looking at examples of power imbalances and gender performances. Furthermore, the means of power, in connection with overcoming the portrayed limitations of womanhood, represent certain images of gender and femininity which will be discussed below. In summary, *Game of Thrones* offers a variety of female characters and unexpected changes that are often declared to be feminist. However, it does this in a pre-conditioned frame and with postfeminist connotations of empowerment, that is, strong female characters who mainly gain power through sexuality and ‘femininity’ and the transmission of images of ‘feminine’ bodies.

#### **4.1. Sexuality as a Weapon**

*Game of Thrones*’s excessive presentation of nudity and sexuality can be criticized and seen as unnecessary. However, it plays an important role in the struggle for power. It represents not only male hegemony through sexuality as a power exercise, but also women’s use of sexuality as a strategy to gain power – “the game is structured explicitly around sex/sexism, and ‘fucking’ becomes part of the game plan that allows players access to the ‘pitch’” (Genz 253). Whereas the women in *Game of Thrones* are often shown using their sexuality to manipulate, the series clearly represents sexuality as something that is more important and enjoyable for men. This can be seen in the regular display of brothels and the constant fear of rape. “Sex is often depicted as painful, most commonly exercised by men upon women and, as such, symptomatic of male supremacy that trades in power and violence” (Genz 253). Through this, men are often represented as the active agents and women as objects. Even more active female characters that ‘choose to be sexualized’ are mostly seen using sex to strengthen their power position and not as a means of pleasure. Margaery, who is first married to a gay throne claimant, offers a threesome with her brother in order to ‘please’ her husband. After his and her second husband’s death, she uses the same strategy to gain her third husband’s trust and manages to do so, as he puts her before his mother Cersei.

Similarly, the ‘magical priest’ Melisandre uses sex to enforce her chosen king’s power by seducing him and giving birth to a demon that kills his brother. Through that she strengthens her relationship with the throne claimant and later even manipulates him to kill his own daughter. Sex is thus represented as a powerful tool that only ‘gifted’ women are able to use, by which the series transmits a heteronormative, sexist message that men are easily manipulated through sex and that women’s best option to gain power in the world of *Game of Thrones* is by using their femininity.

Cersei and Daenerys are also characters who recognize sexuality as a source of power. In contrast to Margaery and Melisandre, who are flat characters and almost caricature-like in their excessive use of sexuality as a means of power – displayed through their long, low-cut dresses, constant flirting and undressing in the presence of men – Cersei and Daenerys are more rounded characters. As they are more complex and controversial, and also very often in the foreground, it is worth analyzing their strategies in more detail.

#### **4.1.1. Daenerys**

Daenerys Targaryen is a main character who represents the power of sexuality in its different forms. Although she is now often seen as a strong, feminist character, her game-changing feature, and therefore arguably her main source of power, has been her sexuality. Being dependent and voiceless in the beginning of the series, Daenerys looks for ways to change her destiny. After her controlling brother sells her to the Dothraki to increase his power, she becomes dependent on her new husband Khal Drogo and is therefore only represented as an object, attached, sold and abused by men. “The irony ... is ...the marriage itself leads to a reversal of the power relations between brother and sister. By becoming Khaleesi, Daenerys frees herself from her brother’s coercive influence” (Larsson 23). The ‘liberation’ from her brother leads to more independence and the realization that Daenerys’s destiny is no longer necessarily tied to her brother’s. Soon, Daenerys learns about the impact of sexuality and uses it as a source of power, as a solution. As Larsson recognizes; “sexuality plays a not insignificant part in Daenerys assertiveness” (23). Before and shortly after her marriage, Daenerys is scared of her husband and

even says that she does not want to marry him. Although their first sexual encounter is described in the novels as consensual, this is not the case in the TV series, in which Daenerys unquestionably does not give her consent and cries while Drogo forces himself on her. This scene raises questions, as the deviation from the original enhances Daenerys's victimization and the power imbalance. Strikingly, rape scenes between Daenerys and Drogo appear more often than love scenes.

This imbalance and the deviation put more emphasis on the power of sexual manipulation. The resulting understanding and mutual pleasure are represented as symbols of Khal Drogo's rising respect for Daenerys. This is done with the variation of sex positions, from sex from behind to positions that involve eye contact. As Larsson states, "[s]ex from behind is used when representing degrading, primitive, or abusive sex and rape", and *Game of Thrones* makes use of that connotation when representing abusive sex, such as the example of Drogo and Daenerys (24). According to the books, the Dothraki's preferred sex position is an "imitation of how horses mate" and is therefore "associated with something primitive and animalistic" (24). Daenerys forcedly bending over during their first intercourse emphasizes her victimization, as it is reminiscent of "submission or ... sacrifice" (25).

Daenerys sees using her sexuality as the only way to gain her husband's love and respect. Having grown up with an abusive, dominant brother who emphasizes her sexuality and often reduces her to her womanhood and her obligations towards him, it is logical that she cannot think of other ways of 'earning' her husband's love. As her brother reduces her character to her sexuality and uses it as a means of power for himself ("I would let his whole tribe fuck you, all 40,000 men and their horses, too, if that's what it took" – S1 E1 00:39:12-00:39:20), it is difficult for her to break away from that binarity and self-consciousness. Another problematic factor in improving her relationship with Drogo is that they do not speak the same language and therefore have no way to communicate other than body language, including eye contact. Additionally, Daenerys finds out that sexuality can mean knowledge when the female (sex) slave Doreah has more information on dragons, for instance, than Daenerys, and tells her that "men like to talk when they're happy" (S1 E2 00:33:08-00:33:10). Daenerys thus learns theoretical lessons and exemplified practices by Doreah,

who is not only sexually experienced but also knows the Dothraki. While she compares the Dothraki way of having sex to dogs mating, she also points out that they prefer having sex from behind with slaves and asks Daenerys if she is one (cf. Larsson 25). When Daenerys manages “to ... manipulate Khal Drogo into other sexual positions” that involve eye contact, even “with Daenerys on top in the missionary position”, their relationship develops and becomes “more respectful and equal” (25). Keeping in mind that there is a language barrier, the eye contact is of special importance, as it can serve to communicate feelings.

At this point, it is inevitable to compare the series to the books, as there are variations that create antifeminist and racist notions. For instance, both the first rape scene and Doreah’s comment that the Dothraki only have sex with slaves from behind do not mirror the book. As mentioned before, this position is more connected to horses, which have an essential place in Dothraki life and are respected. Comparing Daenerys to a slave is even more degrading and again a tool of victimization. The series presumably used these tools to emphasize Daenerys’s development for dramatic, cinematographic effects. Additionally, on a more problematic level, Daenerys’s development is more dependent on her sexuality than on anything else, which can be connected to postfeminist perceptions of empowerment through femininity and micromanipulation.

Schubart also detects postfeminist connotations when analyzing Drogo’s and Daenerys’s relationship. She assesses Daenerys’s actions not as a means of power and a way of manipulating Drogo, but rather as an active improvement of her hopeless situation. “Daenerys’s task is ... to transform her own terror into pleasure” (114). Furthermore, she acknowledges her actions as a choice of liberation and of a personal, as well as sexual, development opposed to the other option of victimization: “The impossible task is not to endure, but to master Drogo ... he also represents a new world, new sensations, sexuality, power, authentic pride, and freedom, the latter also signaled by his wedding gift to her, a mare” (115). Schubart calls Daenerys a “postfeminist Beauty [from *Beauty and the Beast*]” who is “adapting to a new culture and writing her own sexual script”, and through that “changes her sexual scenario from victim to agent” (116). Moreover, Daenerys achieves a stronger connection not only through sexuality but also by learning the Dothraki language and later impresses her husband with her self-confidence. Therefore, Daenerys’s empowerment cannot be reduced

simply to sex; it also involves her interest in gaining knowledge and her open-mindedness towards the Dothraki.

As Daenerys's and Drogo's relationship develops into a loving, trusting companionship on a more equal level, Daenerys also gains more respect from the other Dothraki. But her worth drastically increases only after she gets pregnant and everyone expects her to give birth to a boy who will fulfill the prophecy of taking over the world. This emphasizes not only the patriarchal system that favors men over women but also the mind-body dichotomy. Accordingly, Daenerys is not respected for her own personality and intellect but rather for her body and her fertility that guarantees the birth of new, strong, important members of the society, who will then represent the mind. This, consequently, underlines the power structures in which women have the primary function of the body and do not hold power, or rather only hold power through their sexuality. Daenerys also defines herself as the wife of Khal Drogo and the mother of his child. She becomes more self-confident towards her brother and stands up to him, demanding his respect because she is a "Khaleesi of the Dothraki", "the wife of the great khal" and carries his son, and she even threatens to cut his hands if he hits her again (S1 E4 00:38:16-00:38:33).

Later, when Daenerys becomes a leader and rescuer, her power is sometimes still questioned because of her womanhood. Her main source of power are now her dragons and the fear they cause, as can be seen in her title "Mother of Dragons", which again is an implication that she represents the body and nature. When she enters a big fire, in which she burns her dead husband and a witch who caused his death, she takes her dragon eggs with her, and everyone thinks she has gone mad. However, when the fire is burnt out, she is unharmed, but carries three little dragons (S1 E10 00:50:09-00:51:22). The scene emphasizes her femininity due to her nudity and her strangely unburnt long, white hair. Although the nudity could also be read as a symbol for birth, as she rises with new power thanks to her dragons, the display of almost her whole body emphasizes her sexuality more than anything else. First, she is not shown in an embryo-like position – which would have made sense if the birth were to be emphasized – but in a sitting position. Next, she is shown straightening her back, enabling the sight of her breasts. Then, in a long shot, her whole body is seen, one dragon covering her genitals, one sitting on her shoulder and one climbing up her leg. This scene, although aiming

to display her strength connected to her ‘impossible’ survival of fire, and with that her uniqueness (creating excitement for the next season), ties her power to femininity and sexuality, emphasized by avoidable nudity.

A similar scene is created when Daenerys triumphs over Dothraki men, burning their holy place and them down, and then walking through the fire, naked and long-haired (S6 E4 00:55:56-00:57:20). The Dothraki bow down before her power and womanhood while Daenerys is standing in a proud, straight posture, looking down on her people. Her nudity represents her embodiment and the bowing the respect for her womanhood. This representation of female power through embodiment and sexuality mirrors postfeminist understandings of empowerment.

This is not the only scene that shows how Daenerys’s power in the later episodes is still represented as tied to her sexuality. Although she does not feel the need to manipulate men by using it, she still recognizes that sex can be a means of power. She has slaves around her, like Doreah, who she asks to have sex with Xaro Xhoan Daxos in order to gain more knowledge about the foreigner, reminding Doreah of her own advice that “men like to talk [...] when they’re happy” (S2 E5 00:32:34-00:32:42). A sign of the decreased emphasis on her sexuality is the reduction of nudity. From season two on, Daenerys is seen naked around twice in total, whereas she had at least two scenes in the first season. There are also actions and statements (by her and others) that partly disconnect her from that binary conception of gender and underline her character strength and ability to lead. An example is in season three, episode four, where she autonomously, without the consultation of her male followers, frees slaves, takes over a city and wins an army of thousands of men by tricking the enslavers into thinking she would trade one dragon for the army. Her ambivalent gender performances represent other means of power that are not reduced to her sexuality. She makes use of the underestimation and acts bravely and intelligently, as her actions lead to success. By freeing the slaves, she proves her ‘goodness’ to them and wins their obedience; by taking over the city she proves her strength to the Dothraki, thereby increasing their trust. She gains the title “Breaker of Chains” through her personal achievements and proof of strength and power.

At this point, it must be noted that Daenerys also struggles with her decisions, as older slaves, for instance, argue that their situation as slaves was

better than their current situation as free people. This mirrors postfeminist criticism of the prescriptive nature of second-wave feminism but also the paradox of the limitation of self-determination through liberation. To the struggling older slave, Daenerys replies that freedom also means free choice and accepts that he may sign a one-year-contract with his master (S4 E10 00:22:35-00:22:45), mirroring the extensive postfeminist advocacy of self-determination even if it might seem anti-feminist.

Daenerys's own sexuality is still shown as a source of power when, for instance, Daario Naharis pledges his obedience because he finds her beauty fight-worthy (S3 E8 00:45:23-00:45:34). Therefore, Daenerys's sources and means of power are ambivalent through the current season. Because she is always shown as traditionally very feminine with her long, often braided hair and long dresses, and emphasizes her womanhood herself, her gender performances are female-coded; however, she is represented as a complex character with a variety of methods that emphasize not only her 'female power' but her character strength, unattached from gender. However, her increasing power has a bitter taste for the critical viewer, as the liberation of the 'barbaric' people has racist connotations – a 'superior' person teaching 'the others' and showing them the right way – visually reflected by Daenerys's extremely white skin color and silver hair in contrast with the 'others'' dark skin. "Lingering on shots which surround blonde Daenerys by adoring people who are marked as ethnically other (indeed symbolically Middle Eastern) becomes one of the central ways the show reinforces her claims to leadership" (Tasker and Steenberg 187 f.).

Overall, Daenerys's character represents postfeminist notions of womanhood, mirroring the power of femininity but also its ambivalence and variety of choice. When Jorah Mormont tells her that people will follow her because she is "a Targaryen" (the rightful heir to the throne) and "the Mother of Dragons", she answers that she has to be more than that (S4 E5 00:09:32-00:09:41) – she does not want simply to be reduced to the privileges she was born with but to legitimate her power through self-chosen and self-made achievements. Furthermore, she is the only female character in the series who changes systems and customs (leading a Khalasar as a woman, abandoning slavery), making her the most influential character, possessing great formal power, in total.

#### 4.1.2. Cersei

“Tears aren’t a woman’s only weapon, the best one’s between your legs.”

In contrast with Daenerys, Cersei is shown as finding her own main source of power in her sexuality. Her famous statement implies a very binary, limited way of thinking of gender. Throughout the series, Cersei is displayed as a manipulative character who mostly acts out of fear and vengefulness, all connected to her family and its protection. She is shown as a feminine character, with her long, blonde, styled hair and long gowns; however, her behavior is in contrast to Margaery’s caricatured femininity, as Cersei is rarely shown smiling or flirting and always has an upright and confident posture. She finds her femininity and sexuality to be very powerful weapons she can use to manipulate men. For instance, she uses sex in order to win her cousin’s loyalty. This attitude is not only portrayed as empowering, but also as a perceived limitation of womanhood with no other options to gain or perform power. Cersei is shown to be very aware of the man’s world she lives in, and she ‘performs’ femininity to achieve her will: “The femme fatale often flaunts her femininity and powerlessness...until she strikes” (Frankel 72).

Frankel analyzes the representation of prostitutes as an example of the literal performance of femininity: “embodying feminine sexuality and nudity like a performance ... they are asked to pretend for a spectator like Littlefinger or Joffrey. This emphasizes that the feminine role *is* a performance” (72). This scene, Frankel mentions, displays two female prostitutes ‘performing’ sex under the instructions of the ‘pimp’ Littlefinger (S1 E7 00:09:54-00:14:00): he tells the prostitutes that their act has to be more convincing, meaning a more realistic expression of satisfaction. He explains that all men start playing with their genitals as soon as they can, knowing that they are generally “better than other men”, especially concerning their sexual performance, and that they look for that proof when they go to prostitutes; therefore, he says that men want to believe them. This implies that men’s masculinity is directly tied to their ego, which in turn is connected to women’s perceptions of them. However, their abilities do not really have to be approved by women – men just have to believe women’s

performance. Even though this scene concerns prostitutes, the implications can still be projected onto representations of masculinity and femininity in the series. It mirrors the expectations towards women, as connected to performances of femininity.

Although Cersei is not shown being directly asked to present her femininity in such a distinctly sexual way, she is still expected to behave 'feminine'. This can be seen when Cersei scolds her husband for not acting in a more radical, brutal way (S1 E6 00:02:55-00:03:21). Furthermore, she insults his 'masculinity', saying that she should wear the armor and he the gown, so that he slaps her in the face and tells her to be quiet. This scene has three implications concerning gender that mirror the hierarchy in *Game of Thrones* and have consequences for Cersei's perception of womanhood. First, masculinity is tied to aggressiveness and violence (King Robert should act more aggressively because he is a man). Second, men make the decisions (Cersei implies that she should wear the armor, because the one who wears the armor makes the decision, and more directly because she is told to shut up). Third, masculinity is better than femininity (telling men to wear a gown – which is coded feminine – is understood as an insult).

For Cersei, these perceptions of gender mean that she values masculinity more than femininity, which seems paradoxical considering that she sees her sexuality as her main source of power. But it actually makes sense because it reveals the patriarchal dominance in medieval society, which Cersei experiences as limiting. The series' binary conception of gender is represented through Cersei, who on the one hand realizes the differences between men and women in the world of *Game of Thrones*, but on the other hand blames her gender and the fact she was born a woman for it, rather than the system that creates unequal validation of masculinity and femininity. Cersei's conception of womanhood and power can be specifically shown by the close reading of the following two scenes:

Cersei: The Gods have no mercy. That's why they're gods. ... I should have been born a man. I'd rather face a thousand swords than be shut up inside with this flock of frightened hens.

Sansa: They are your guests under your protection. You asked them here.

Cersei: It was expected of me, as it will be of you if you ever become Joffrey's queen. If my wretched brother should somehow prevail, these hens will return to their cocks and crow of how my courage has inspired them, lifted their spirits.

Sansa: And if the city should fall?

Cersei: You'd like that, wouldn't you? The Red Keep should hold for a time, long enough for me to go to the walls and yield to Lord Stannis in person. If it were anyone else outside those gates, I might have hoped for a private audience. But this is Stannis Baratheon. I'd have a better chance of seducing his horse. Have I shocked you, little dove? Tears aren't a woman's only weapon – the best one's between your legs. Learn how to use it. ... Do you have any notion of what happens when a city is sacked? No, you wouldn't, would you? If the city falls, these fine women should be in for a bit of a rape. Half of them will have bastards in their bellies come the morning. You'll be glad of your red flower then. When a man's blood is up, anything with tits looks good. A precious thing like you will look very, very good. A slice of cake just waiting to be eaten. (S2 E9 00:28:19-00:31:03)

Here, Cersei defines sex as a weapon. Her binary conception of gender leads to the degradation of other women. She despises them because of their fear and is very cynical of the danger of rape. Her hatred towards women is also reflected in her relations with other people – she is rarely seen communicating with other women, and if she is, she is either cynically nice or threatening them. While building power, she only relies on men; therefore, any female alliances are missing.

In this scene, on the one hand, she internalizes the 'male' perspective, arguing that women are fearful and explaining men's 'demand' for sex and Sansa's appeal. On the other hand, she is very cynical, underlining the unfortunate situation of women. The scene also shows that Cersei is obliged to fulfill certain expectations that she has learned from her childhood on. This awareness is explained further in the next scene:

Cersei: When we were young, Jaime and I, we looked so much alike, even our father couldn't tell us apart. I could never understand why they treated us differently. Jaime was taught to fight with sword and lance and mace, and I was taught to smile and sing and please. He was heir to Casterly Rock, and I was sold to some stranger like a horse to be ridden whenever he desired.

Sansa: You were Robert's Queen.

Cersei: And you will be Joffrey's. Enjoy. (S2 E9 00:34:21-00:34:52)

Here, Cersei explains the sexist upbringing of her and her twin brother. She states her discontent with it and emphasizes the performative nature of her behavior and the unrealistic expectations to please. Even though she is jealous of men's upbringing, this statement actually displays the disadvantages of binary sex roles for men who also suffer from the expectations of society. This can be seen in the characters Tyrion, who is too short to become a warrior; Sam, who is more

interested and talented in literature; and Theon, who is ridiculed for not being as tough as his family members.

Cersei's reflection on society's conception of womanhood is very critical. However, she does not realize that this conception can be changed and is not 'natural'. Instead, she is bitter and angry with the gods who, as she says, "have no mercy". She does not choose other ways of expressing her gender like Arya or Brienne, but chooses to conform to the norms and uses the limited 'feminine' strategies to expand her power. She does so with a certain irony, degrading men for their sex drive and obsession with their genitals, of which she accuses her younger brother (S2 E8 00:28:22-00:28:52): "You, on the other hand, are as big a fool as every other man. That little worm between your legs does half your thinking". She states that she is more dangerous than men, just like the eunuch Varys, because she does not have a penis; her brother confirms his obsession, arguing that "it's not that little." Nevertheless, in contrast to Daenerys, she does not celebrate womanhood and find strength in the fellowship of other women but rather degrades them, no matter if they are more or less powerful than her. Therefore, she does not represent the postfeminist conception of 'girl power' because she does not want to identify as a woman, although she makes use of 'female weapons'.

Still, Cersei's character can be read in a postfeminist framework, since postfeminism is very wide and supports pro-sex, pro-choice attitudes as long as there is an awareness concerning conceptions of womanhood. This is the case with Cersei, especially because she handles the inequality with irony, using sexuality because she is aware of its power and simply because she can (stating that she is dangerous because she does not have a penis and can use this as an advantage). She chooses to manipulate men through sex, and she is represented as a sexual subject "who choose[s] to present ... [herself] in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits ... [her] liberated interests to do so" (Goldman qtd. in Gill 151).

In later episodes, as Cersei's power grows, she identifies with traits that are represented as masculine, such as violence, self-assertion and decisiveness. Her idealization of masculinity is also reflected in her envy of her twin brother Jaime, with whom she has an incestuous relationship. Strikingly, as her power grows, Jamie's power decreases with the loss of his strong hand – the two swap

gender roles, one could say. Because Cersei tells Eddard that she and Jaime “belong together”, having shared one womb, thus making it seem like they are ‘one’ (S1 E7 00:07:33-00:07:37), it appears that she sees herself as a half, only complete with her other ‘masculine’ half. When she is later imprisoned for fornication by a newly arisen ‘fundamentally religious’ group and punished with a ‘walk of shame’ (S5 E10 00:48:07-00:52:56), in which she has to walk naked through a crowd, the inequality of women is underscored because her male counterparts are not being punished. “As a noblewoman in Westeros, her sexual nature is not natural, because in a patriarchal society, sexual desire is a masculine domain” (Buchanan 17). Her nudity reflects how her womanhood is directly tied to sexuality, as people insult her as a whore and make comments about her body and men show her their penises, one man suggesting that she “suck him off”. Unlike the worship Daenerys experiences in the face of her nudity, Cersei is being degraded.

In the latest episode, after her walk of shame, Cersei claims the Iron Throne, becoming Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and the most powerful person in the series. With her short hair and high-necked, dark, armor-like leather dress, she is shown as having untied her identity from femininity. She is calm, with a hint of a smile, watching the city burn with all her enemies (00:17:42-00:18:00), making use of an extreme version of male-connoted violence and not of female manipulation or sexuality, and without female-connoted empathy. In the following scene, she leaves a massive, abominated knight (“The Mountain”, resurrected through ‘uncommon’ procedures of healing after a deadly injury) to torture and most likely rape one of the so-called ‘septas’, who starved and degraded her during her imprisonment (00:21:27-00:22:03). This way, she makes use of the ‘power’ of male penetration to punish a woman, applying the patriarchal habits of the world of *Game of Thrones*. This depiction of masculinity is enforced by the fact that she has lost all her children and with that her status as a mother. Therefore, she is no longer defined by her sons or husband, who granted her power through their positions as political leaders. Her father, who had great influence and power, also died, and with that she loses the relationship-defined identity of women – she is no more a mother or a daughter. She is still a sister, but this fact has always had less impact on her life, as one of her brothers is a dwarf and therefore disregarded throughout the series, and the other is her lover, who is

currently shown as less powerful and also as dependent on and ‘controlled’ by Cersei from the beginning.

Cersei is represented as a powerful, aggressive character who loves no one else but her children and is ready to do anything to keep them safe. Her motherly character is even more foregrounded in the TV series than in the books. She is shown to be aware of the difficult circumstances for women, and although she finds the gender inequality unfair, she conforms to the norms and acts very ‘feminine’ – for example, by giving in to the orders of her father, marrying and using her sexuality, in order to ‘please’ men. But she uses sexuality as a weapon not because she finds her femininity empowering but because she has a very limited conception of masculinity as well, and reduces men to animalistic, sex-driven beings whom she can easily manipulate. She is shown as lacking a moral code (incestuous relationship, killing babies, threats and manipulation) and therefore makes use of every method she can in order to provide safety and power for herself and her children. Her femininity is represented as a strategy and performance that she sets aside in the latest episode, and she proves that “power is power,” the ability to make other people do anything for oneself (S2 E1 00:38:34-00:39:09): she had previously demonstrated this to Petyr Baelish (Littlefinger), who claimed that “knowledge is power,” by making her soldiers attack him but then by deciding otherwise. After reaching her wished-for powerful position, she uses male-connoted power exercises and strategies and avenges everyone who exploited her womanhood.

“Cersei is a portrait of a tragic pre-feminist queen – someone out of Greek drama, a Clytemnestra-like figure who perpetrates evil because her idea of empowerment rises no higher than mimicking the worst in the men around her” (Mendelsohn qtd. in Levesque 3 f.). Her character almost reflects Freud’s concept of ‘Penisneid’. This representation of womanhood through Cersei’s perspective also mirrors the current backlash in feminism because it undermines the abilities of women and works around binary conceptions of gender; nonetheless, it depicts complex thoughts and ambivalent behaviors that make it difficult to assign Cersei to a certain trope. Furthermore, her acts of manipulation and sexuality are represented as her personal choices, emphasizing Cersei’s self-assertion and valuation of her body as her property. As Buchanan states, “even when the patriarchy punishes Cersei for her subversion she continues to fight against it not

allowing the punishment to deter her and force her to act as women are expected to” (19). However, exactly because her behavior is represented as empowering, sexuality and ‘being a bitch’ are depicted as useful, and even necessary, methods of power for women, which supports binary notions of gender, in turn reflecting antifeminist notions of postfeminism. In the latest episode, Cersei’s character is shown to be unattached from the traditional female gender role but is represented as a powerful, frightening character, making use of extreme forms of violence while fighting traditions and rules – imitating masculinity – to get revenge.

#### **4.2. Masculinity as an Instrument of Power**

These female characters defy easy categorization within the fantasy genre or quality TV, and they are out of step with postfeminist action heroines, who are framed by an insistent emphasis on sexualized physicality ... we take postfeminism to signal a particular conflation of sexualization and power that challenges assumptions of female powerlessness, while also affirming their function as sexual spectacle. The unglamorous masculine clothing adopted by warrior women in *Game of Thrones* attests to precisely this difference. In many cases the women are presented as outside the system of eroticized objectification: Arya is a child, and Brienne takes up a career as a knight, wears men’s clothes, and frequently refuses to be called ‘lady’. (Tasker and Steenberg 174)

As *Game of Thrones* presents a variety of female characters, there are also some who refuse to use sexuality as a power strategy. Although such characters are, in comparison, much fewer and are shown less, they are essential for the story’s development. To name a few, there is the warrior Brienne of Tarth, the leader Yara Greyjoy, Obara Sand (one of the “Sand Snakes”) and the young Arya Stark. What distinguishes them from the other female characters in the series is that they have a plain and rather ‘masculine’ look, and Brienne and Arya in particular are often mistaken for a man/boy. They all have in common that they are represented as very independent and feisty.

In particular, the character Yara Greyjoy has formal power, which supports the hypothesis that the successful ‘imitation’ of ‘masculinity’ leads to success. She is shown as identifying herself with men, and this identification is enforced by her homosexuality and her companionship solely with men. Her commentaries on gender and manhood also reinforce the binary conception of gender; however, as it is often the case in *Game of Thrones*, her representation is ambivalent – especially in the last season where she unites with Daenerys to rebel

against male leaders who do not think of women as being fit to lead.

Even though there are other physically strong and/or skilled-in-combat women, they are represented as 'feminine' and sexually manipulative, such as Tyene Sand and Osha. In contrast, Brienne and Arya "are presented as outside the system of eroticized objectification", as it is stated in Tasker and Steenberg's quote above. This is connected to the fact that "Arya is a child, and Brienne takes up a career as a knight". While these characters display a variation on the gender scheme, as visible contrasts to feminine characters they are also represented as 'freaks.' This is shown not only through mockery of their outer appearance but also through the challenges they endure. Arya is represented as a fierce, vengeful, psychopathic killer who is on the run and in constant danger due to her name. Brienne is represented as an honorable, loyal fighter, keen to fulfill her oaths but not taken as seriously as she wishes.

Nevertheless, both characters manage to survive in the extremely dangerous world of *Game of Thrones*, which reflects their power, considering that survival is often directly and indirectly presented as power in the series. As opposed to many other female characters, they also manage to escape rape. As Tasker and Steenberg observe, "the warrior women of *Game of Thrones* are perpetually threatened with sexual violence, but are not the victims of rape" (176). They explain this by their "warrior training" (176); however, Brienne's and Arya's representation as being 'immune' to rape also reflects their masculinity and the masculine privilege of not being in danger of rape. Therefore, although their representation enhances a contrasting gender performance to other females, it still mirrors the binary thinking of gender in the world of *Game of Thrones*, with no options other than male or female.

Arya is represented as the most gender-neutral character in the show. She manages to escape this binary concept, not limiting her gender performance by refusing to connect her identity to gender and to judge it to be an important issue. This is also easier for her than for Brienne because she is a child with no sexual feelings. Brienne, on the other hand, is shown to be in love with Renly Baratheon and Jaime Lannister and speaks of past hopes for love and her happiness when she felt the (pretended) admiration of boys.

Both masculinity and femininity are depicted as instruments of power for women, whereas traditionally feminine traits are not represented as powerful for

men. This mirrors the idealization of ‘masculine’ traits in Western societies. Still, performances of masculinity by women are not represented as being equally powerful as femininity. Even if the ‘masculine’ characters of the series do not feel the need to explain their gender, they are constantly put into categories, which shows the potential of the series to address queer issues. However, the show does that only in a limited way – presenting little insight into the ‘masculine’ characters’ thoughts about gender struggles and focusing on the superficial perceptions of others.

Women who do not want to be involved in sex politics are represented as performers of masculinity, as they become victims of the binary coding of gender. Because sexuality plays such an important role, those who avoid it are represented as misfits.

Arya (Maisie Williams) avoids sexual dangers by cross-dressing. Other characters – like the androgynous knight Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie) who purposefully seeks to step outside the power structures of heterosexuality, or the eunuch Varys (Conleth Hill) who is similarly deemed ‘unfuckable’ – are shamed and punished, demonstrating those who remove themselves from sexual relationships are less socially acceptable and valued (Genz 254).

The characters are outsiders not only because they avoid sexual relationships – as Genz argues – but also because they cross the lines of the heteronormative, binary sex system.

#### **4.2.1. Brienne**

“You’re as boring as you’re ugly” (S2 E8 00:13:15-00:13:17).

What Jaime says here to Brienne once again shows the expectations towards women concerning looks and entertainment, emphasizing femininity’s performative nature and anticipated ‘pleasingness’. In the series, it is repeatedly mentioned that Brienne does not conform to prescribed gender norms, as she is considered too tall and too ugly and prefers to wear armor instead of dresses. Sometimes she is mistaken for a man and then mocked when her ‘true’ gender is revealed. Other characters also have difficulties finding the right way to address her, as she rejects the title ‘lady’ as well as ‘knight’. Her “ritualistic denials of the titles ‘lady’, and ‘knight’ signal her uneasy and unsettling combination of both

categories” (Tasker and Steenberg 176). Although she formally embodies both categories, the combination is uneasy because she does not fulfill the requirements of either. Brienne actually wants to be a knight but cannot because of the restrictions of patriarchy; therefore, she does not willingly refuse being put in the category of the knight, only the category of the lady. She does feel uncomfortable in both categories because she does not feel she fits in either, but in contrast to being a lady, which she was born to be and wants to reject, being a knight is a self-chosen path that is her wish but is not tolerated. She consciously denies the title ‘lady’ because she has experienced that she cannot meet that ‘standard’ and thus wears her ‘freakish’ identity like an armor, as the dwarf Tyrion suggests to the bastard Jon Snow: “Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armor, and it can never be used to hurt you” (S1 E1 00:43:10-00:43:19). She insists that people only call her Brienne, which represents her emphasis on her ‘true self’, regardless of gender or title. Other people’s respect for her is shown through the acceptance of her wish.

Although Brienne is not represented as a ‘misogynist’, as Cersei is, it still becomes clear that Brienne does not identify with certain women and their character traits. An example is when she expresses her respect for Catelyn, who she thinks has a lot of courage but “not battle courage ... a woman’s kind of courage” (S2 E5 00:38:49-00:38:58). This shows that she distances herself from other women by defining courage in gendered terms and identifying with “battle courage”, and therefore with ‘male courage’, as she is a warrior and aims to earn respect through battle. Furthermore, her definition excludes women who do not choose the same ‘way’ as her, meaning independence from men, open fighting and not being able to break the patterns, but at the same time shows her ability to respect these other women nonetheless.

Others mostly ridicule Brienne and do not appreciate her skills. Women and men equally make comments on her appearance, although women are shown to be more tolerant, as seen in Catelyn’s quick trust, Margaery’s friendly, non-judgmental behavior, Arya’s respect and Sansa’s neutrality as early reactions (except from Margaery, who she is shown to have known for a longer time). As Brienne almost never speaks about her personal gender struggles and any direct comment on the difficulty of assigning herself to a gender is missing, the series represents her not as transgender but rather as a woman with ‘uncommon’

interests and an ‘unfitting’ look. Thus, it strongly supports the objectification of women and the prescription of beauty standards by displaying only certain looks of womanhood and femininity and presenting exceptions as not ‘beautiful’ and not ‘worth’ being seen. This perception is enhanced by the fact that only certain groups of women are shown naked, namely those that mirror current conceptions of beauty, with their fit but curvy bodies. Brienne is never shown naked, which says a lot about her femininity according to the series. Aligning with Genz in “I’m not going to fight them, I’m going to fuck them”, Brienne’s representation of being “unfuckable” makes her seem “less socially acceptable” (254). Her representation also mirrors current resentments towards second-wave feminism, considering the parallels between her character and the prejudices towards second-wave feminists, which include judgment of other women, anger, ‘masculinity’ and ‘unfuckability’. Although most women of the series respect Brienne, they do not see her ‘way’ as the ‘right way’. The series as a whole creates an environment in which more ‘feminine’ and sexually active women are seen as desirable, more powerful and self-confident and even more tolerant towards other women (especially Daenerys), perfectly reflecting postfeminist attitudes as a contrast to second-wave feminism. Nonetheless, Brienne is a very popular character among viewers, especially female viewers, who appreciate different representations of women: “Women and girls are not *supposed* to be big ... They certainly aren’t meant to take up space or traumatize passerby with their protruding muscles ... For those reasons and more, Brienne Of Tarth on *Game Of Thrones* is a crucial character” (Ospina). However, not only is the representation in general essential, but so are the connotations the media transmits.

As Williamson also shows through the analysis of a scene in season two, episode ten (00:13:09-00:16:12), Brienne’s representation has strong ‘masculine’ connotations. Here, Brienne has started her way to King’s Landing with Jaime Lannister under the command of Catelyn Stark, and they see three female corpses hanging on a tree. While she attempts to take the bodies down, three men cross their path. She is mistaken for a man by the three who laugh at her after finding out that she is a woman. Afterwards they are very interested in Jaime Lannister, assuming he could be an important person, and threaten Brienne with fighting her and provoke her by telling rape stories of the hanged women. Williamson points

out how the scene portrays an image of Brienne's mimicry of masculinity as a form of power:

Brienne kills all three men, but the last one she slowly inserts her sword into while taking a mock-missionary position over him, sliding the sword into him from the groin and all the way up slowly, using her sword phallically, killing him. This death by sexual innuendo ... [represents] her active destruction of femininity with her body. (11)

The destruction of femininity using the male 'ability' of penetration is reminiscent of Cersei's punishment of the septa, showing that 'masculinity' is an effective power tool. But in contrast to Cersei, Brienne punishes a man, not a woman, mocking his 'masculinity' and his bragging about rape, getting revenge for other women and not just herself.

In general, Brienne is different from other characters in the series because she "does not use violence to gain money, power, or political gain, but rather she uses it to gain respect" (Buchanan 13). In this example, she not only gains respect for herself in the eyes of Jaime but also shows that other women deserve respect as well, especially because she wants to take the bodies down and bury them. Therefore, her representation of second-wave feminism does not only have negative connotations but also shows its strength and struggle for respect for all women.

Brienne is portrayed as an independent character who "wishes to take her fate into her own hands" (Buchanan 13) and in doing so proves "that a woman must [not] rely on others for protection" (13). Her depiction therefore has feminist, but also postfeminist, tendencies, as it emphasizes the self-determination of women. However, the de-emphasis of her gender through the avoidance of sexuality and nudity and her androgynous look are reminiscent of second-wave feminists, who are represented as less desirable women who nevertheless 'ought to be fucked' in order to dissolve their anger and to make them feel like a "woman". This idea creates rape fantasies for them, wishing that men would "overpower you, fling you down, tear off your clothes" as Jaime suggests to Brienne (S2 E10 00:12:19-00:12:34) and as men still suggest to feminists. Additionally, they are represented as conflicted women who are not taken seriously by men, and with that as less powerful than their postfeminist counterparts. Even though Brienne's strength is underlined and her self-determination is presented in a positive light, the series transmits a critical opinion

of second-wave feminism by presenting ‘masculine’ performances by women as less powerful than ‘feminine’ performances and the avoidance of sexuality as ‘freakish’.

#### **4.2.2. Arya**

“Boy, girl... You are a sword, that is all” (S1 E3 00:53:58-00:54:04).

Arya is the only character in the series that is represented as gender-neutral, due to her young age, her actions and her cross-dressing/performance. Although she feels the pressure to perform her gender, as does everyone else in the series, she rejects gender norms and focuses on her fighting skills. Like Brienne, she is aware of the danger of rape and is a few times confronted with threats, but she manages to escape the danger. When told she needs to pretend to be a boy in order to survive after her father’s death (S1 E10 00:02:42-00:02:47), she is able to hide her true identity. “She is conscious of her performance and how her gender impacts the way others view her. Her ability to perform both genders gives her the ability to escape notice and saves herself from becoming an abused prisoner” (Buchanan 26). Because she is aware of the implications of being a girl/woman and also knows about the dangers, she is forced to pretend to be a boy. However, she does not define herself by her gender but by her motives and her abilities, as seen when she points out that a “great killer” cannot limit her/himself through gender binarity:

Sandor Clegane: “Poison’s a woman’s weapon – men kill with steel.”

Arya: “That’s your stupid pride talking. That’s why you’ll never be a great killer.” (S4 E8 00:36:58-00:37:07)

Her training with the skilled swordsman Syrio Forel represents her crossing of traditional gender roles and her refusal of gender binarity. Her gender neutrality is shown not only by the fact that her training in sword fighting is called “dancing class”, but also through Syrio’s disinterest in her gender: he calls her “boy”, and after she responds that she is a “girl”, he says, “Boy, girl... You are a sword, that is all” (S1 E3 00:53:54-00:54:04). As Buchanan states, “this attitude influences Arya as she stops defining herself by gender and instead refers to

herself as a sword, a cat, the wind, and a shadow” (25). Williamson argues that dancing is described as a positive contrast to fighting, metaphorically standing “in opposition to the patriarchal norms” (6). He follows by comparing the introduction to a new fighting style to learning a different way of living: “It shows Arya a different option for how to live her life ... directly connected to the opposition of boy and girl, and it is stating that a sword does not need to be what it was raised from, it is something that can have a nonpatriarchal standpoint ...” (6).

Because Arya does not identify with most women, since she prefers ‘male’ activities like fighting to ‘female’ activities like sewing, she has deep respect for ‘strong’ female warriors. This is seen when she reminds Tywin Lannister, when talking about the achievements of Aegon Targaryen, that Aegon was not alone but had help from his two sisters:

Arya: Aegon *and* his sisters ...It wasn’t just Aegon ... Visenya Targaryen was a great warrior.

Tywin: Aren’t most girls interested in the pretty maidens from the songs?

Arya: Most girls are idiots.

Tywin: You remind me of my daughter. ... You’re too smart for your own good.  
(S2 E7 00:12:55-00:14:49)

While she expresses her respect for the two female conquerors, she also insults “most girls” as “idiots”. Interestingly, this is a parallel to Cersei’s hatred of other women, which Tywin Lannister also states when saying that Arya reminds him of his daughter. His response that she is “too smart” emphasizes the binary conception of gender in the series, assessing intelligence as something dangerous for women.

Arya’s strength, however, is constantly underscored because she does not care about others’ opinions or listen to their advice – she does not let anyone else define her identity. This is perfectly seen when she undergoes challenging training in the “House of Black and White” in order to become “no one” and is regularly tested to see if she still identifies as Arya Stark or if she has achieved becoming no one (S6). Although she accepts the challenges and seems to have lost her motivations (especially her need for revenge) and become “no one”, she finally kills her ‘oppressor’ and says: “A girl is Arya Stark of Winterfell and I’m going

home” (S6 E8 00:56:28-00:56:35). The whole storyline of Arya’s road to becoming “no one” can be read, in a wider context, as society’s imposition of certain gender roles on people and even the restriction of individuality. The reclamation of her name and motivations reflects feminist protests against accepting minor roles in society and the abandonment of individual aspirations. It also mirrors the demand to define oneself in contrast to accepting prescriptive gender roles and images.

On the other hand, Arya’s self-discovery can mean the embracement of her femininity, considering that she reuses the third person form: “A girl is Arya Stark”, repeating Jaqen H’ghar’s (her mentor and metaphorical ‘oppressor’) way of talking – as he always speaks in third person – but not repeating his assumption “Finally a girl is *no one*” (00:56:22). Instead, she gives ‘the girl’ her name, her identity back – for everyone to notice. Only afterwards does she speak from the first person perspective, finally reclaiming her goals, and not needing an outer perspective on her gender. Just like a feminist, she does not let others define her identity or goals but fights for the acceptances of her aspirations. In postfeminism as well, self-determination is the main goal, independent from patriarchy’s prescriptions, but also from feminist prescriptions.

As exemplified through the diverse notions of her storyline in the House of Black and White, Arya’s character is full of contradictions, which makes her so unique and complex. Tasker and Steenberg describe her as a generally “border-crossing figure”: “a boyish girl and an adolescent woman, captive and yet free, searching for justice and also for vengeance ... In contrast to many cross-dressing girls/women in film and television ... no great stress is laid on her gender disguise” (184 f.).

Although “no great stress is laid on her gender disguise”, Arya’s cross-dressing does not stay unnoticed, as seen when she is compared to Brienne by her friend with reference to their clothing. The friend states that Arya “was all dressed up as a boy, like your ladyship [Brienne], only without the armor” (S4 E7 00:34:30-00:34:34). Still, she does not suffer the same judgment as Brienne does. She resembles Brienne in her evoking of “loyalty” through “her name and position”, but also through her own achievements (Tasker and Steenberg 185). But in contrast to Brienne, Arya does not act in the name of honor. She does do what she thinks is right, but her motivations are not ‘honorable’ or arise out of

duty; rather, they are marked by feelings of revenge. “She initially evokes the purity of the masculine adolescent girl yet increasingly seems sociopathic in her appetite for violent revenge” (185). Although her feminist actions are put in a negative light, represented as ‘sociopathic’ and brutal, Arya is a very popular character.

Arya’s character is ambivalently feminist and anti-feminist, reflecting postfeminist perceptions of self-determination – concentrating on individual fulfillment rather than a political movement in all women’s interest. Her actions are motivated by her very own aspirations, claiming freedom for her identity, ‘regardless’ of her gender. She is thus represented as a progressive character – not assessing her gender experiences as limiting. In particular, because she does not use ‘femininity’ at all, even though men in *Game of Thrones* view female people as sexual objects regardless of their age, she does not represent the postfeminist celebration of womanhood and the power of sexuality. However, she also does not serve as a negative representation of second-wave feminism – unlike Brienne. Rather, Arya’s character mirrors postfeminist conceptions of ‘choice’, individual self-determination and gender flexibility. It is feminist in terms assertiveness but at the same time anti-feminist in terms of attitudes towards other women.

## **5. Conclusion**

Martin subverts the traditions of the fantasy genre by creating female characters that are not only fundamental to plot, but also demonstrate high levels of awareness of the complexity of gender roles. Martin’s characters move beyond the female characters found in Tolkienesque fantasy tradition and act as independent characters that do not rely on masculine influence. (Buchanan 28)

Throughout this thesis I tried to display the complexity of *Game of Thrones*’ female characters. This complexity distinguishes the series from others of its genre (having concentrated more on the historical than the fantasy), as other series’ medieval settings affect the representation of women in a limiting way. In contrast, the female characters in *Game of Thrones* subvert power structures in a way that leaves them in more powerful positions than men and gives them the opportunity to change the system, which is especially the case with Daenerys. Furthermore, sudden deaths, conflicting situations for men and unexpected twists in the series raise its feminist potential and “underline that here, masculinity is in

crisis, and, more broadly, that patriarchy – as a political, cultural, economic, and sexual/sexist institution and discourse – is as damaging and dangerous for men, as it is for women” (Genz 248). Although this may not mean the end of patriarchy, as Genz states, “it shows, nonetheless, the fragility, hollowness, and vulnerability of a paternalistic gender order in which male rule is based on acts of gendered strength – and, therefore, at least to some extent performative” (248), supporting the thesis that gender is a performance prescribed by society, limiting personal fulfillment.

In *Game of Thrones*, the female characters are aware of their inferior position, addressing it in discussions with men and criticizing men’s claim of hegemony, pointing out their own abilities. They use prejudices and underestimation in their favor and in doing so prove their tactical superiority and personal strength. Women in the series have to deal with greater obstacles than men in order to gain power; thus, their development is on the one hand used for dramatic purpose, but on the other hand is generally assessed as feminist. Daenerys is one of the characters who represent the greatest development:

Like other women in fantasy who succeed within a patriarchal realm, Daenerys must endure disempowerment in order to rise to power. She must learn the rules of the system and rise by seducing a man, attempting to bear a child, and marrying to secure a political advantage. As Tolmie points out, oppressive structures must exist in medieval fantasy fiction in order for women to subvert them: the ‘expectations must still be there in order to be reversed’. (Beaton 208)

The series creates a unique framework that limits gender performances and displays extreme forms of sexuality, which makes overcoming them seem more dramatic and satisfying. For that reason, the strategies to reach a certain level of power are represented as justified and useful.

Yet through the series’ postfeminist direction, the emphasis is mainly on the sexuality of women, supporting contemporary beauty ideals and creating a prescriptive image of femininity. As can be observed in the postfeminist developments, sexuality has recently received more attention and is seen as a tool of power, reflected in discussions concerning sex work and self-determined displays of nudity. As Genz correctly summarizes, “femininity and sexuality also function as a potential source of female agency and power, following a well-rehearsed sex-positive postfeminist logic around sexual subjecthood” (249). The embodiment is a result of ‘wanting to be seen’, which is linked to postfeminist

conceptions that value femininity “as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one” (Gill 149). It comes as no surprise, then, that contemporary pop culture and TV series, and specifically *Game of Thrones*, adopt these ideas and promote female empowerment through nudity and sexuality.

In this respect, a backlash occurs, as women at the same time are reduced to their sexuality and femininity, which is in contrast to men’s feelings of empowerment – men are not shown needing to use their sexuality in order to perform power, as they have wider access to it. Therefore, their representations are more diverse and not concentrated on their bodies or relations with women, whereas most female characters in the series are shown depending on their sexuality and femininity.

In particular, the analyzed characters Cersei and Daenerys find their sexuality to be a means of power. However, they are complex characters, trying to become independent from men and acting independently from their expectations or their advice. Through that, for the most part, they defeat antifeminist perspectives. They first ‘adapt’ to the men’s world but later act autonomously, although this thesis has found some of their strategies to be problematic, like Daenerys’s fallback on her sexuality and Cersei’s degradation of women.

The other characters analyzed, Brienne and Arya, are shown to act without using their sexuality. Although their representation acts as a variation, they are shown as ‘different’, even ‘freakish’, and as judgmental of other women. Brienne serves as a representation of second-wave feminists, connoted negatively through her ‘freakishness’ and ‘masculinity’. Arya represents gender neutrality but almost becomes machine-like due to her sociopathic acts and her drive for revenge.

Generally, there is no great companionship or unity between women on the show, except for a few female friendships and purposeful collaborations, mirroring postfeminism’s failure as a political movement. Other postfeminist phenomena that constitute the backlash and lead to the objectification of women and that are reflected in the series are sexuality’s position as a power tool, excessive nudity and pride in ‘femininity’ (‘girl power’) – supporting gender binarity. At the same time, *Game of Thrones* also mirrors more empowering notions of postfeminism such as the emphasis on choice and self-determination. The series displays the ambivalence of postfeminism and with that the complexity of contemporary understandings of empowerment.

*Game of Thrones* is anti-feminist in its excessive portrayal of nudity and sex. It uses the female body as an object to be viewed and represents female passivity and the expectations for women to 'perform' and to 'function' in opposition to men, who are shown as the active, speaking, deciding agents in these scenes. It is feminist in its creation of complex female characters that break free from passivity and victimization. Overall, it is an outstanding production, especially in contrast to other series with medieval settings, unique for the deepness of its characters and its unexpected storylines, representing women as rightful, worthy and able leaders. However, through its occasional objectification of women, it has not completely broken free from or revolutionized the patriarchal, heteronormative attitudes displayed in American TV.

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