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“Representation, Otherness and Fantastic Storyworlds: Breaking Gender Binaries and Reworking Identities in *Game of Thrones*”

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Abstract

Game of Thrones' (HBO 2011–2019) fantastic storyworld incorporates narrative and representational arcs that interrogate its gendered social, cultural and political framework. Working from Schubart and Gjelsvik's (2016, 1) assertion that the show's female characters are “key to the originality [...], appeal and popularity of the GoT universe”, I argue that the show capitalizes on fantasy's position outside the realities and limitations of the human condition. In doing so, it challenges representational binaries through characters like Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) and Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) from their respective positions within and outside of the structures of power. They push back against the gendered expectations imposed on them by the patriarchal established order, reworking their own identities to forge their own paths. My analysis therefore reflects the scope for a multiplicity of complex identities to emerge within the show and for a deeper understanding of the representational possibilities in television.

Keywords: television, *Game of Thrones*, gender, fantasy storyworld, representation, otherness.

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Representation, Otherness and Fantastic Storyworlds

*Breaking Gender Binaries
and Reworking Identities in Game of Thrones*

THE FIRST EPISODE of *Game of Thrones*, entitled “Winter is Coming” (1:1), premiered on HBO on April 17, 2011, with the final episode, “The Iron Throne” (8:6), airing eight years later on May 19, 2019. In the intervening period, the show constructed an elaborate and highly complex fantasy storyworld that spanned two continents, weaved multiple narrative arcs together and featured in excess of 150 named characters. The scale and scope of the show pushed the boundaries of what is possible on television via its large-scale battles, epic events and moments, and the use of technologies that are commonly associated with cinema. However, *Game of Thrones* also pushed the boundaries of what is narratively and representationally possible in visual media, providing scope to interrogate social, cultural and political norms and ideals. Gender is one such area of interest that is explored within the fantasy storyworld, which takes full advantage of the genre’s conventions to directly challenge representational binaries.

Game of Thrones is set in a pseudo-Medieval world that is concerned with the preservation of a dysfunctional patriarchal established order, privileging hegemonic masculinity over other groups of men and all women, as per Raewyn Connell’s (1987, 150) model of the power dynamics of dominance and subordination that sustain cultural inequalities. Further, Connell and James Messerschmidt’s (2005, 832) contention that hegemonic masculinity “meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion” explains the basis of such dominance in *Game of Thrones*, whereby chivalric values are invoked to maintain cultural inequalities and the power of the patriarchy

via the maintenance of normative gender roles. That is to say that men are viewed as heroic, protective providers who are either part of the dominant order, and therefore play the game of thrones to win power, status and influence, or support that order. Women, on the other hand, are perceived as weak, passive and incapable of wielding power, instead being confined to the roles of wife and mother. There is therefore a distinct irony in the fact that *Game of Thrones*'s male characters are fundamentally flawed and buck the chivalric values of heroism and honor, while so many of the show's female characters reject normative roles and push back against hegemonic expectations, proving themselves capable of various roles outside of gendered limitations.

Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik (2016, 1) identify *Game of Thrones*'s female characters as the "key to the originality and, thus, to the appeal and popularity of the GoT universe." The originality referenced here resides within the complex and often contradictory nature of characters like Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) and Arya Stark (Maisie Williams). They are framed by and initially operate within the Westerosi patriarchal structures, institutions and discourses that are designed to subordinate them. However, both Arya and Cersei also capitalize on fantasy's position outside of the realities and limitations of the human condition to define themselves as opposed to acquiescing to Westerosi gendered expectations. This is one of the fantasy genre's most important defining features according to Rosemary Jackson's (1981, 1–2) work on the genre and is also a defining feature of *Game of Thrones*. The physical, intellectual and attitudinal constraints that may have been used to contain certain groups of people in reality can be interrogated and challenged in fantasy, enabling characters to push back against them. Such constraints and subsequent interrogations are visible in the fantasy landscape established in *Game of Thrones*, defining the trajectory of narrative and representational development. As Catherine Johnson (2015, 57) points out in her scholarship on telefantasy, this renegotiation of limitations within a "story-world that is different from the realities of our everyday world but still convincing and plausible" is how systems and structures may be subverted and how new social and cultural understandings may be developed. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, the storyworld itself provides scope to subvert and escape the neat binary values of male and female, thus acknowledging the complexity of modern gender identities.

Applying the conceptual framework of otherness to explore representation in the diegetic storyworld constructed in *Game of Thrones*, I contend that the show's prominent female characters, specifically Cersei and Arya, challenge the patriarchal status quo from their respective positions within and outside of the structures of power, thus reflecting the importance of the fantastic in providing the freedom for individuals to push back against the outdated binaries that are no longer sufficient to contain them.

Fantasy and Framing Gendered Otherness in *Game of Thrones*

Cersei Lannister and Arya Stark are two of many female characters that reject normative roles and highlight the framing of gendered otherness within the fantasy storyworld of *Game of Thrones*. Cersei is the daughter of Tywin Lannister (Charles Dance) and wife of King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), thus uniting two of the great families of Westeros by marriage. Arya, on the other hand, is the daughter of Lord Eddard Stark (Sean Bean), the Warden of the North and ally to Baratheon. Both are therefore high-born honorific ladies with prominent positions in Westerosi society. However, they also actively push back against the gendered norms and ideals imposed on them by the established patriarchal society that governs, maintains and polices the values by which the people of Westeros are required to live.

Both Cersei and Arya crave the freedom to decide their own path and express that desire by comparing their positions with their male counterparts. For instance, Cersei's role as Queen demands that she takes shelter with the other women while the men fight in "Blackwater" (2:9), an endeavor she finds frustrating: "I should've been born a man. I'd rather face a thousand swords than be shut up inside with this flock of frightened hens." Arya, on the other hand, asks her father whether she can be a lord of a holdfast in "Cripples, Bastards and Broken Things" (1:4), only to be told that she "will marry a High Lord and rule his castle, and your sons will be knights and princes and lords." She is equally frustrated with this potential future, asserting "No, that's not me." Both of these incidents exemplify how institutional and cultural gender roles and

expectations are designed to contain them. By rejecting the normative gender binary they are subjected to, both Cersei and Arya become Other, a status that empowers them to rework their own identities and embrace non-normative paths.

Like traditional conceptions of gender, otherness is a concept based on binary values. It pits the Self versus the Other, us versus them (Jackson 1981, 1–3). The dominant group in society occupies the position of the Self, establishing what constitutes the norm and promoting conformity while othering those that refuse to follow its rules and strive for its ideals. The Others are then moved to the margins. In feminist theory, Simone de Beauvoir (2010, 6) contends that the marginalization of women as Other is a conscious means of maintaining gendered inequalities, with men claiming the positions of Subject and Absolute while designating women as Object and Other: “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being.” The absence of autonomy is particularly problematic where those on the margins are unable to forge the self-determination to challenge those who designate them as Other. Building on this, Beauvoir (2010, 7) posits that the division between One and Other is maintained when women submit to it, asking why male sovereignty is not contested by those oppressed by it. Although this framework maintains the gender binary, it is useful in assessing gendered relations in society and provides the potentiality for power shifts where challenges occur, as per those mounted by Arya and Cersei in *Game of Thrones*. Robin Wood’s (2002, 25) definition of the representation of otherness in visual culture goes a little further and is equally useful here, articulating otherness as “that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with [...] in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself.” In the case of *Game of Thrones*, this reflects back on Connell and Messerschmidt’s hegemonic masculine culture and institutions, framing the Other as those who exist outside of the structures the Westerosi patriarchy put in place to accumulate and maintain power.

Like that of Beauvoir, Wood’s definition of otherness promotes and maintains binary values reflecting typical approaches in visual culture, which is highly problematic because those values do not provide scope for nuance or acknowledge the possibility of different meanings.

Stuart Hall (1997, 236) addressed this, noting that, although otherness is a vital element in any symbolic or actual struggle for power, such binaries are awkward and can be dangerous from an anthropological perspective, giving rise to negativity by disturbing the cultural order and violating the symbolic boundaries that produce identities and meaning. Indeed, those who subvert Westerosi patriarchal values, whether by necessity or choice, are automatically designated as Other and therefore challenge the validity of those structures, but that is not to say that the production of identities is disrupted. Instead, it fosters difference and facilitates the emergence of multiple identities that can thrive when structural constraints are removed.

The othered status of female characters in *Game of Thrones* reinforces Hall's point of view because they disturb the cultural order and violate symbolic boundaries, but they do so in a multitude of wholly different ways. Cersei and Arya ultimately break the gender binaries that constrain them by crossing the dividing line between the Self of dominant society and the Other pushed to the margins in order to rework their own identities, achieve their individual goals and forge their own paths. However, although their starting positions to the established patriarchal order are similar, with both Cersei and Arya being contained within it by their prominent noble families, their subsequent navigation of hegemonic Westerosi gender roles are very different, with Cersei remaining at the heart of the structures of power and Arya turning to the figurative and geographical margins. As such, despite such contrasting positioning, their presence in the same narrative landscape reflects on the modern complexities and possibilities of gender identities.

Resisting the Hegemonic Order from Within: Cersei Lannister

Despite being King Robert Baratheon's Queen, Cersei Lannister is initially excluded from power because of her gender. This fact is evidenced by Tywin marrying her to Robert for his own political advantage and the way her husband addresses her contemptuously as "woman" during the earliest episodes of the show ("A Golden Crown", 1:6). She is othered by virtue of a combination of factors, such as her incestuous relationship with her twin brother, Jaime

(Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), and her status as the monstrous mother of the illegitimate fruit of their union, her son Joffrey (Jack Gleeson), whom she passes off as a legitimate Baratheon heir to the Iron Throne. Her increasingly overt resistance to gendered expectations simply adds to this material othering. However, she is firmly positioned within patriarchal structures, which is where she remains for the duration of the show. Despite her somewhat paradoxical positioning as an insider of the established order and yet also an Other, the cumulative effect of the fantastic storyworld facilitates her development as a power player in her own right.

Cersei benefits from the impact of the storyworld's sustained narrative, within which serial television shows effectively engage in ongoing character construction (Mittell 2015, 10). *Game of Thrones* is progressive in this respect, leaning heavily on the development of character arcs as one way of achieving narrative progression throughout the show's run, but it is its drawing on the fantasy genre that opens up a wider range of representational possibilities. Cersei's progression is built on the "transgressive impulses" and the blurring and subverting of gender difference that is a product of fantasy's alternative ways of seeing (Jackson 1981 28; Zipes 2009, 83). More impressive, though, is her choice to challenge the stability of gender expectations from the inside, undermining the established order that seeks to contain her in the role of wife and mother by learning from the men that surround her and then using that knowledge against them.

Cersei's transgressive impulses are visible from the earliest episodes of the show. For instance, in "The Wolf and the Lion" (1:5), Cersei exceeds the boundaries of wife to Robert by instigating a discussion with him on a range of issues concerning the governance of the realm. She offers political advice, leading to Robert to comment that "[i]t's a neat little trick you do. You move your lips and your father's voice comes out." Designed to belittle Cersei, this retort actually compliments her by comparing her advice to that given by one of the most politically adept power players in Westeros. Although subtle, Cersei's willingness to offer her opinion in this instance is indicative of the possibilities to interrogate strict gender roles as presented by the fantasy storyworld and is an early indication that new social and cultural understandings can be achieved, as per Jackson (1981, 1-2) and Johnson (2015, 57). That is not to say that

Cersei's development into a power player in the Westerosi political sphere is dependent on the allowances made by the men around her. Instead, it is dependent on the trajectory of her character arc and the opportunities available to her beyond her roles of wife and mother within the fantasy storyworld, most of which are actively instigated by Cersei herself.

Although Cersei is a complex character, the development arc the character undertakes is relatively linear as she covertly seeks opportunities to learn the art of politics in the Westerosi systems of power that actively deny her agency. This is best illustrated by the identification of three distinct but interrelated phases of character development – her subjugation as a wife and mother (under which she has limited agency and is confined to feminine roles), her apprenticeship under her unwitting father Tywin Lannister (within which she has a degree of autonomy as a widow and Queen Mother), and her queenship after she seizes the Iron Throne and rules in her own right (Coopey 2020, 101). In all three phases, Cersei remains firmly positioned within the machinations of power as established by the male-dominated hierarchal order. Such strategic positioning is made possible by what Charles E. Beem (2020, 200) labels “Cersei’s possession of the Iron Throne”. She exists within the power sphere of the Iron Throne as Robert’s Queen, but influences it as Queen Mother when her sons Joffrey and Tommen (Dean-Charles Chapman) assume the role of King and then possesses it as Queen Cersei, First of her Name. At every stage, she learns to bend and subvert the hegemonic hierarchical order to her own advantage from within, making incremental gains while the men that surround her ostensibly remain oblivious to her growth.

One of the most notable examples of Cersei disrupting the gendered power dynamics of dominance and subordination originates in her conscious decision to learn from Tywin, the powerful protector of the hegemonic status quo. This particular subversion of gender roles and expectations is indicative of fantasy’s interrogation of “limiting categories” (Jackson 1981, 28). Tywin does not deliberately teach Cersei and never intends her to wield power and influence, instead being adamant that she remains within her prescribed gender-based social and political role. This is evident in an exchange during her apprenticeship phase in “And Now His Watch is Ended”, the fourth episode of the third season:

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

Tywin: I don't distrust you because you're a woman. I distrust you because you're not as smart as you think. You've allowed [Joffrey] to ride roughshod over you and everyone else in this city.

This exchange demonstrates that Tywin's perception of Cersei's value is intrinsically linked to her role as wife and mother. This is consistent with the values ascribed based on gender by the patriarchal structures that prop up Westerosi society, thus embedding power within the hegemonic institutions that exclude her. However, Tywin also passes judgement on her capabilities in conjunction with her prescribed roles, which undermines her position within those structures. Tywin's criticism is not without merit. Cersei is, as Marta Eidsvåg (2016, 153–155) observes, an incompetent “Bad Mother” who has raised a truly monstrous son. Tywin's point about Joffrey's behavior is also valid, but his decision to place the blame for her son's actions solely on Cersei instead of holding his grandson accountable for his own decisions simply serves to reinforce the problem. Here, Tywin defines Cersei as the Other, as per Beauvoir's (2010, 6–7) theoretical framework, rejecting her conception of selfhood by reinforcing the oppression that confines her to the role of mother while simultaneously undermining the designated reproductive function that makes her useful to the Westerosi patriarchy.

Ironically, Tywin's dismissal of Cersei's capabilities as a leader on account of her failures as a mother to Joffrey indicates that the gendered systems in place are not actually working for the good of society because Joffrey, unsuited as he is to kingship, is able to ascend to the Iron Throne simply because he is the male heir (Coopey 2020, 107). Nor are those systems working in Cersei's best interests. It is, however, clear that her actions bring about what Katherine Fowkes (2010, 5) refers to as an “ontological rupture”. Cersei's fantasy of obtaining the same freedoms as her male counterparts in a society that strictly maintains the male/female gender binary becomes a legitimate possibility. Cersei's questions demonstrate that she has

been listening to Tywin's lessons, applying them in her own approach to power and therefore subverting the hegemonic patriarchal values that are designed to contain her. Therefore she is able to transgress gender binaries and rework her own identity in the fantasy storyworld by using Westerosi structures to gain power, working within and manipulating the system to turn it to her advantage.

The processes of subverting hegemonic patriarchal values are not linear though because being a transgressive woman is not without its problems, particularly as the Westerosi patriarchy attempts to claw back gains when Cersei is deemed to have overreached. For instance, her attempts to control religious fundamentalist group the Faith Militant in season five backfire spectacularly. In "High Sparrow" (5:3), she declares to the sect's leader (Jonathan Pryce) that "[t]he Faith and the Crown are the two pillars that hold up this world. One collapses, so does the other. We must do everything necessary to protect one another." The Faith then protects the Crown by imprisoning Cersei, who is forced to endure a Walk of Shame, traversing King's Landing naked in front of the city's population, in penance for the charge of adultery ("Mother's Mercy", 5:10). The hegemonic institutions turn in on themselves to ward off the threat Cersei poses, demonstrating that it is difficult to cross boundaries and ensure such transgressions are productive when women are still unable to exercise control over and within a system that is designed to protect its own.

Cersei does not become Queen in her own right until her husband and children are dead, thus evading the conventions of succession. In fact, she has no legitimate claim to the Iron Throne at all given that House Lannister has always been an ally to the monarch rather than the symbolic ruler and, furthermore, King Robert Baratheon has one remaining male heir. However, her decision to seize the Iron Throne reinforces the notion that disruption to gender roles is tied to the harnessing of male power that exists within the patriarchal order (Carroll 2015; Evans 2018). Cersei challenges from within, using the possibilities that the fantastic storyworld offers to disrupt and rework her socially defined role. Paradoxically, this also means that she continues to uphold the same hegemonic social order that the patriarchal guardians around her, including both Robert and Tywin, sought to safeguard. There is a distinct irony in the fact that Cersei had no choice but to break the expectations associated with gender roles under the male/female binary in order to achieve self-interested

power and maintains it on her own terms. Yet her queenship reinforces the same unequal hegemonic system she sought to bend. Although Cersei remains resolutely Other and continues to be a transgressive woman, subverting from within by pushing back against the binaries that ultimately fail to contain her, she does not break any glass ceilings or provide pathways for other women to do the same. Instead, Cersei provides a challenge to the “culturally exalted” hegemonic masculine order in situ only (Connell 1987, 150). She symbolically slays one patriarchal dragon, only to leave another similar patriarchal dragon in its place. In effect, Cersei perfectly illustrates the importance of the fantastic in providing the freedom for *individuals* to critique and challenge outdated binaries, without actually bringing the systems based on such binary values to their knees.

Dismantling the Gender Binary from the Margins: Arya Stark

In diametric opposition to Cersei, Arya Stark does not have a linear narrative journey through the fantasy storyworld that underpins *Game of Thrones* and spends the majority of the show operating outside of the patriarchal structures that maintain gender norms and ideals in Westeros. Arya’s challenge to the Westerosi hegemonic patriarchal system and interrogation of the physical, intellectual and attitudinal constraints that women are placed under are therefore framed within a slightly different representational landscape, despite their occupation of the same fantasy storyworld. The complexity of the fantasy storyworld itself provides scope for the coexistence of Arya and Cersei and their separate but interrelated development into multifaceted, engaging and agentic characters (Schubart and Gjelsvik 2016, 1–2). However, unlike that of Cersei, the representation of Arya and her status as an Other taps into fantasy tropes from which her opportunities to evade gendered limitations are derived. Her navigation of the storyworld, for instance, adopts the form of an epic journey, mirroring the departure, transformative trials and return trajectory that facilitates the transition from child to adult (Furby and Hines 2012, 40). It is through Arya’s journey that she negates and breaks the male/female gender binary, although her transgressive impulses begin before she moves to the margins at the end of the first season.

As the second daughter of a noble family, Arya begins the show within the patriarchal hierarchy before being physically removed from it for her own survival after the execution of her father, Ned Stark (“Fire and Blood”, 1:1). Although Arya is positioned within Westerosi society and therefore contained by the hegemonic expectations of normative gender roles, she symbolically rebels against them. This is evidenced in the very first episode, “Winter is Coming”, where she is depicted shooting arrows better than her brother Bran (Isaac Hempstead Wright) and dressing in androgynous clothing, including an armored helmet. Her attire and attitude contrasts starkly with her sister Sansa’s (Sophie Turner) normative femininity later in the season in “A Golden Crown” (1:6). The latter brief scene is not significant in the overarching narrative arc of the fantasy storyworld, but it does establish the extent to which Arya’s individuality is formed. The camera frames the sisters sitting side by side, the antithesis of each other, as Ned informs them of his decision to send them home to Winterfell. Sansa is sitting up straight, wearing a dress, a shawl and sporting an intricate hairstyle that indicates her concern with traditional feminine beauty, whereas Arya is dressed in a dark, typically boyish outfit of trousers and tunic, sporting a simple but practical ponytail and is slouched over. The frame draws attention to the aesthetic difference between the two, thus positioning Arya as a transgressive child who has no intention of becoming a Lady, whereas her sister is every inch the Westerosi noblewoman. This difference is later reinforced in the seventh episode of the seventh season, “The Dragon and the Wolf”, when the sisters are again depicted side-by-side at the culmination of their respective character development. Arya’s aesthetic appearance therefore disrupts gender-based expectations and pushes back against the ideals imposed upon her. Indeed, there is an overt cultural and institutional failure of hegemonic masculinity, as per Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 832), whereby gendered containment fails and Arya is able to symbolically reject the patriarchal order and forge an identity that does not conform.

Arya continually exhibits an inner desire to be something more than her gender allows, that extends beyond her appearance and renders her Other. Her previously referenced rejection of the expected future role of wife and mother in “Cripples, Bastards and Broken Things” demonstrates a self-awareness that she carries throughout her development arc: “No. That’s not me.” She has a confidence in her

identity that is not derived from external forces, but rather a sense of who she is regardless of the fact that it does not align with what is expected of her. This simple response directly challenges gender binaries and precludes her from submitting to the imposition of a specific gender identity. Again, this indicates a failure on the part of the hegemonic order to force conformity and demonstrates a systemic weakness that the fantasy storyworld empowers her to exploit.

The failed containment of Arya is exacerbated by her forcible removal from Westeros's patriarchal society in the immediate aftermath of Ned's execution. Yoren (Francis Magee), a family friend, recognizes that she is no longer safe without familial protection and that Cersei would hold her hostage along with Sansa. Arya has no agency in this instance nor in the subsequent shift identifying her as a boy, which is a necessity rather than a choice grounded in a desire to adopt an alternative gendered identity. Yoren loudly proclaims Arya to be a boy named Arry: "Look at me! Do you remember me now, boy? Eh? Remember me? There's a bright boy. You'll be coming with me, boy, and you'll be keeping your mouth shut" ("Fire and Blood", 1:10). This masculine identity further others Arya, forcing her to straddle the normative gender binary deemed socially acceptable in Westeros. However, her boy disguise ensures her survival not only as Ned Stark's daughter but also despite the threat posed to her by the violent rapists with whom she has to flee as a part of the Night's Watch caravan that Yoren leads out of King's Landing. This assumed identity does not symbolize conscious resistance to the patriarchal values that have bound her to that point, although that does come later. Instead, it reflects on the resistance that females face when they seek to escape the subjugation imposed upon them. The fantasy storyworld provides that opportunity. As a girl, Arya cannot escape. As a boy, she can. In changing the dynamic, Arya's gender imitation acknowledges the inequality within Westerosi society and provides the first stage in her personal empowerment as she overcomes it. Her existence on the outside of Westerosi institutions and structures provides a clear pathway for her to negotiate gender and patriarchy, embracing performance as a mode of non-compliance. As Mimi Schippers (2007, 91) states, femininity is subordinated to masculinity where "femininity includes physical vulnerability, an inability to use violence effectively, and compliance." This does not apply to Arya. Her physical vulnerability is mitigated by her ability to employ violence effectively and general refusal to comply.

Arya's refusal to comply manifests in her aesthetic appearance and her performance simultaneously, inducing a sense of liminality that Yvonne Tasker and Lindsay Steenberg (2016, 184) identify through a series of contradictions that play out on her person: "a boyish girl and an adolescent woman, captive and yet free, searching for justice and also for vengeance, Arya is a complex, border-crossing figure." In straddling the border of the gender binary, Arya becomes a chameleon of sorts, adopting various gender identities to suit her situation and enhance either her prospects for survival or equip her to perform a given task. During her time in Braavos with the Faceless Men, a group of assassins for hire, for instance, she plays the role of Lanna, an oyster seller, to get close to and kill the Thin Man, an insurance salesman who is positioned firmly within hegemonic social structures ("Hardhome", 5:8). Arya embraces an unequivocal female identity in contrast to her identity as Arry. Here, Arya uses her body's transgressive potential to skirt the edge of society, rejecting the notion of fixed gendered identities and therefore challenging patriarchal authority. Reflecting back on Jackson's (1981, 1-2) assertion that fantasy interrogates physical, intellectual and attitudinal constraints, Arya remains out of the reach of Westerosi power players like Cersei physically while developing her own confidence, agency and skills to survive as a consequence of the opportunities provided by the fantastic in *Game of Thrones*. Her character arc necessarily interrogates patriarchal systems and structures because she consistently pushes against them, subverting what is expected of a high-born daughter and developing new social and cultural understandings as a consequence.

As Cersei sits on the Iron Throne in the final season and the Starks oppose her leadership, Arya remains on the margins, existing outside of the structures of hegemonic power and resisting the lingering gender expectations that remain under Lannister rule. Like Cersei, she retains her otherness by choice, demonstrating agency within the fantastic storyworld she traverses. There is a further point to make in relation to the distinction between existing within and outside of the patriarchy because, just as Cersei uses patriarchal norms to sustain her power, Arya paradoxically smashes a symbolic form of patriarchy while preserving Westerosi hegemonic power by killing the Night King, the leader of the Army of the Dead, in the final season of the show ("The Long Night", 8:3). Arya's conscious choice to dismantle a hegemonic threat to their collective freedom further reflects negatively

on the fact that Cersei did not choose to dismantle patriarchal structures from within, instead privileging her own freedoms. However, the juxtaposition of those two choices illustrates the importance of the fantastic in *Game of Thrones* insofar as it provides the freedom for individuals to challenge the gender binary that would otherwise have removed that choice altogether. Both Cersei and Arya, for better or worse, are masters of their own destinies.

Concluding Remarks

Referring back to Wood's (2002, 25) definition of otherness: "that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with [...] in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself." Wood noted a binary solution to what is perceived to be a binary problem – what to do with transgressive women regardless of whether they operate within and outside of the structures of power. You reject and annihilate the Other than remains a threat while accepting the Other that acquiesces to the dominant patriarchal order. Neither Cersei nor Arya acquiesce to the dominant patriarchal order and yet both are able to interrogate its gender-based expectations to the extent that they subvert and overcome them, forging their own paths in order to achieve their respective desired outcomes. The fantasy storyworld they coexist in makes this possible. In the context of the show, it is testament to how far Cersei and Arya break gender binaries and rework identities that the one who remains within the patriarchy and uses its structures to her advantage is ultimately annihilated, whereas the one who attacks the patriarchy and symbolically kills a version of it refuses to assimilate and is allowed to leave to pursue her own self-determined destiny. In effect, the patriarchal order remains fundamentally unchanged, standing firm against its challengers. It does not emerge completely unscathed though, as its weakness are revealed by fantasy's position outside of the realities and limitations of the human condition.

However, the wider significance of the close reading of Cersei and Arya's transgressive approaches to Westerosi gender expectations and roles performed here resides in the paths they forge against hegemonic patriarchal institutions. In claiming agency and reworking their identities as they see fit, they interrogate the possibilities for

women who refuse to conform beyond the pseudo-Medieval society depicted on screen. The fantastic storyworld built in *Game of Thrones* provides scope for alternative thinking, for a multiplicity of complex identities to emerge and for a deeper understanding of representational possibilities in television. The show provides opportunities for its female characters to push back against the forces that would contain them, providing a social, cultural and political landscape that facilitates the reworking of identities in line with the modern complexities of gender.

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