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# A Song of Ivory and Steel: Suppressive Empowerment in Game of Thrones

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## Introduction

This paper examines George R. R. Martin's series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1993--), and its television adaptation, *A Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Using a feminist lens, I will be addressing how the adaptation figuratively strips agency from empowered female characters in the novel through portrayals of rape and blatant suppression of the characters, Daenerys Targaryen, Sansa Stark, and Catelyn Stark.

Throughout the few decades, the presence of female characters in media has been far more prominent than ever before. Several hit television series star an overwhelmingly female cast, such as *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present), *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), etc. While these series are highly rated and represent the roles of femininity in multiple forms, it is important to look at not only who is represented, but how. When exploring this concept of female portrayal, particularly the empowered female, one major series comes to mind. In 2011, *Game of Thrones* was released on HBO, resulting in an incredibly large fan base. From this point until the series finally in 2019, the show has stirred up a lot of talk. The show, adapted from George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present) series made up of five completed novels out of the seven

proposed, depicts a misogynistic medieval world fueled by power. However, Martin provides his readers with a more nuanced version of what medieval culture was like. His series not only depicts several prominent female characters, but female characters who wield even more power than the men.

When the show was released, Martin's fifth novel, *A Dance With Dragons* (2011) was released. With only five books on the market, the television adaptation quickly surpassed the novels, providing viewers with 8 total seasons. This created a need for the showrunners to not only deviate from the novels in ways that made sense for tv, but they also had to bring in new information to viewers that were not in the novels. While this allowed for the HBO series to end, it disrupted a lot of the story that was being told through Martin's vision.

*A Song of Ice and Fire* shows its readers a world where femineity is a force to be reckoned with. Martin represents strong females, such as Daenerys Targaryen, the dragon queen who rose from the ashes to take over the Iron Throne, Catelyn Stark, a mother and fierce protagonist who protects her family and does whatever she can to ensure their safety and Sansa Stark, Catelyn's daughter, who becomes a woman learned through her preservation through trauma. Even Cersei, the evil queen,

is an example of female empowerment, although she won't be thoroughly discussed throughout this essay. Martin ensures his female characters are represented in a way that evokes strength through femininity.

However, when viewing HBO's adaptation, *Game of Thrones*, it becomes clear that Martin's vision for his characters begins to shift. These powerful female characters, especially Sansa Stark, Daenerys Targaryen, and Catelyn Stark, are changed in such a way that is both subtle and extreme at the same time. Through various forms of repression, the show handles its characters in a way that both promotes strong female characters and simultaneously uses the illusion of female empowerment as a vessel to further patriarchal ideals.

Sansa Stark begins in both the novels and the show as a young, naïve girl who wishes for all the glory that comes with marriage and royalty. Her wish is to marry the king's son, Joffrey, which rather quickly becomes a seemingly inescapable nightmare. The show, however, spins Sansa's characters into a web of childish acts where she is consistently taken advantage of. A major change in her character's story arc is her marriage to Ramsey Bolton, which ultimately ends with a horrendous rape ("Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken"). This rape, in particular, was not in the novels and was instead a plot for another character who is not in the television series, Jeyne Poole. Her rape is to provide character development for another character, Theon Greyjoy, who ultimately ends up saving Jeyne from Ramsey Bolton in *A Dance with Dragons*. This complete divergence from Martin's Sansa Stark in *A Song of Ice and Fire* demonstrates how, "the treatment of rape [is] an infection at the social and cultural level rather than a series of disconnected dots, and the knowledge that rape is the product of a multifaceted complex of sexism

supported by benevolent as well as hostile ideologies" (Fraser 145). The use of Sansa's rape not only strips her character of her virginity but serves as a stepping stone for a male character to develop humanity and simultaneously contributes to Sansa's shift from a young girl to a woman.

Rape in both the novels and the show is nothing new, however, the implications that are made by having exceptionally powerful female characters built off of these rapes are symbols of the patriarchal power over women and their agency. To add to this example is Daenerys rape by her husband, Khal Drogo, which made it into the adaptation but was not from the books. While in the novels she is thirteen and being wed to a powerful Khal (king), her first sexual encounter with him is not violent. Her acceptance of her position and willingness to consummate their marriage is demonstrated in the novels, whereas in the series her wedding night depicts a violent rape while her husband continues reciting the word "no" ("Lord Snow"). However, rape on its own isn't the main issue I bring up in this essay. In the novels and the show, the relationship between Daenerys and Khal Drogo is portrayed as a pure romance. Their love for each other grows stronger throughout the first novel and season, where we see Khal Drogo protect and stand up for Daenerys. Yet, if we are to believe that Daenerys is a victim of rape by her husband, what are the implications of having her fall in love with her rapist? His devotion towards Daenerys depicts this idea that although he performed sexual violence on her, their budding relationship after and in turn, her coming to power is a benefit of that violation.

As mentioned earlier, though, the sexual violence in this series is not a surprise to anyone who has read

the novels. In an article titled, *Westeros to HBO*, when discussing an interview with Martin, they state that:

Martin has defended the sexual violence in the show on the same grounds as he has defended his books: accuracy to medieval social norms, particularly during wartime. He has also contended that the fantasy elements must be grounded in history if the narrative is to remain credible. This unfortunately suggests that a non-patriarchal society would be an inherently fantastical strain on audience credulity (Hynes 44).

Martin's novels contest this medieval-era portrayal of characters' actions, sexually and graphically, and are nothing new to fantasy. However, sexual violence isn't necessarily the problem with this series. It is more about how sexual violence on characters, notably Daenerys, and Sansa Stark are added to the series, providing no value to their characters arc's, other than to demonstrate a lack of agency in their characters.

This brings up Catelyn Stark, who, similar to the other women mentioned, has been stripped of her agency through the adaptation's portrayal of her. In her case, while not raped, her entire character arc in the novels is replaced by a shell of herself. Her scenes are few far and few between, whereas in the novels she has an abundance of chapters in *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), and *A Storm of Swords* (2000), submerging the reader in her perspective on the world of Westeros. Catelyn is not only an intelligent woman who demonstrates an understanding of war, men, and the political powers around her, but she provides a lens into the ongoing of the Starks war, particularly her son, King Robb.

The show, however, completely rids her character of any say or power, instead changing her lines and actions in the series with a male character's voice and eliminating other important features. In her chapter, I break down these different examples to show how her character has been watered down to place power in other roles, primarily the male characters. Through the drastic limitations placed on Catelyn's character and the rape and suppression of Daenerys and Sansa, the show demonstrates not only a misrepresentation of powerful women but the fatal actions of silencing women through media.

### **Daenerys: The Loss of Throne and Agency**

Daenerys Targaryen, the Unburnt, Breaker of Chains. Her character is prolific and loved in both *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* and has served as a grand representation of the strong, empowered female. Daenerys was sold to the Khalasar as a sex slave, wed to the great Khal Drogo, and ended up ruling as their Khaleesi (queen). She shed her innocence in the burning pyre that held her deceased husbands' body and rose from the ashes with three dragons. She led slaves to freedom and ruled through every land she passed through. Even though there is more left to her story in George R. R. Martin's, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, it is clear that her character's progression is leading toward her main quest: conquering the iron throne and taking back what is rightfully hers. However, when looking at her character's adaptation in *Game of Thrones*, there are several changes to her character from what is seen in the novels. Daenerys is not only raped by her husband in the show, which is an important change I will be arguing about throughout this chapter; her character also demonstrates a loss of

agency, similar to what is seen with Sansa and Catelyn.

One of the glaring differences between the novels and the show is the rape scene shown in “The Kingsroad” from season one. When Daenerys is sold to Khal Drogo by her brother, they are made to consummate their marriage. In her first sexual encounter with her husband in the novel, Daenerys gives him her consent to continue. His demeanor comes off as understanding and wanting to please his wife. As peculiar as it is, especially given her age, her ability to accept the terms of her marriage and take ownership of her circumstances began early. While she was forced into a marriage to a man she did not know, she finds enough strength, herself, to grow into a woman with power. The show adaptation, however, presents this consummation differently. Rather than have Daenerys be a willing participant in her first sexual encounter, she is instead forcibly raped by Khal Drogo. While this divergence from the novels could arguably seem more realistic than what is shown in the novel, its implications demonstrate a misogynistic approach when outlining her character for the series.

While her relationship with Khal Drogo remains the same in both the novels and the show, this specific change alters her story significantly. In the novels, Daenerys is thirteen years old, whereas in the show she is aged sixteen. This age difference is an important concept to look at, especially when arguing the differences between the show and novels:

The notion of selling a thirteen-year-old girl- in all modern sense, and most countries, a minor- into marriage would have become much more visceral when shown in images rather than conjured up by words, not to mention the fact that casting the role would have been very difficult and even might

have resulted in accusations of creating child porn (Larson 558).

Changing Daenerys’ age was necessary to prevent the exceptionally negative consequences of keeping her thirteen years old. However, in a way, it speaks to the ideology of society and the social standards, where thirteen is too young, but sixteen is somehow old enough to not cause an uproar. Her age, at this time, is still considered a child and a minor, so if already leaping, why not simply change her age to eighteen? This is a change that, while is understandable, is still flawed at best.

Another important aspect that is to be discussed, is that if we are to believe that her budding relationship with Khal Drogo is something to be admired, then it is peculiar that their marriage would begin with a traumatic rape. As stated by Andrea Lee Press in her book, *Media Ready Feminism*, “Daenerys was initially presented as a young, victimized girl, sold by her brother and raped by her new husband, notable in an incident absent from the books but inserted into the show as a particularly egregious example of its extreme sexual violence” (Press 24). Press highlights the fact that the show presents an overwhelming number of incidences of sexual violence that is arguably more than what is seen in the novels. This furthers the argument made earlier, that by shifting the scenes of characters, notably Daenerys, Sansa Stark, and even Cersei Lannister, and implementing violent rape, they are utilizing sexual violence as a plot device rather than making a direct distinction of how these matters and the implications that come with abuse. The sexual violence towards Daenerys is not a necessary plot element that needed to be added. If anything, it took away her sense of agency and instead replaced it with a traumatic scene representing her oppression that both disvalues her

relationship with her husband and promotes the idea that rape is a tool used to endorse female empowerment.

This concept further identifies a common device used in media that exemplifies rape culture. Courtney Fraser explains this concept in her essay, From *“Ladies First” to “Asking for It”: Benevolent Sexism in the Maintenance of Rape Culture*:

...rape culture, or the complexity of images and ideologies in society that normalize sexual violence, depends on chivalry for its existence. More precisely, it depends on the attendant ideologies that place women on a pedestal and strip them of agency in the process (Fraser 143).

Rape culture represents this concept that women in movies, tv shows, and even novels are subject to traumatic, violent sexual abuse to simultaneously demonstrate their ability to overcome oppression. However, this toxic idea that women need to be subjected to brutality to grow is a representation of patriarchal views. If we are to believe that empowered women are developed primarily through violent acts placed on them by men, then the message being sent is that women need men to abuse them to become stronger. It's a method of taking agency from women and giving it to men to both silence and oppress women, while simultaneously presenting women as liberated.

Considering how Daenerys' rape is transformed into a devoted love story, we can also reference Cersei's rape by Jaime Lannister (“Breaker of Chains”), which is never mentioned again in the show and is absent from the novels. Sansa's rape, mentioned in the next chapter, is only used to stimulate plot development and is later used as a way to promote her character's growth. This suggests that the action of rape on a female character is somehow

a positive contribution to that woman's story. The specific rape scenes of these characters are in no way situated in the plot as an exploration of real-world experience; they are never brought up, few emotional consequences ever come of them, particularly for Daenerys or Cersei, and are instead used as a way to promote female empowerment, as if rape is a way for a woman to come into her power.

From this first deviation from book to series, Daenerys's character exhibits differences, ultimately leading to her complete derailment at the end of the adaptation. One specific change is Daenerys's appearance after burning in the pyre. In the novel, Daenerys enters the pyre that is to burn the witch and her dead husband:

When the fire died at last and the ground became cool enough to walk upon, Ser Jorah Mormont found her amidst the ashes, surrounded by blackened logs and bits of glowing ember and the burnt bones of man and woman and stallion. She was naked, covered with soot, her clothes turned to ash, her beautiful hair all crisped away...yet she was unhurt (A Game of Thrones 806).

While this visual depiction of her arising from the ashes is on par with what is shown in the television series, there is one specific difference: in the novel her hair is burnt off. The visual of Daenerys burning in the pyre and rising from the ashes is meant as a representation of her breaking the chains placed on her by the patriarchy. Those who did not believe in her power to rule are now seeing her survive the unthinkable. The loss of her hair is a part of this rebirth, representing her shedding of what ties her to the femininity that allowed for her oppression. Not only this, but it also serves in opposition to the tradition of the Khal's long hair that represents his role as a great

warrior and his ability to rule a Khalasar. For Daenerys, her loss of hair demonstrates the reformation of the Khalasar themselves, who come to accept a woman as a ruler unlike they ever had before. In keeping her hair, adaptation is arguably minimizing her rebirth and instead, equating power to beauty and the visuality of what society deems as beautiful. Therefore, the show is taking her agency through the perception of beauty rather than the symbolism of the strength that is established through her loss of hair.

Daenerys' story throughout both the novels and the show demonstrates a strong and willful woman. She begins with nothing and quickly takes action to support her growth throughout the series. While the novels strongly emphasize her ability to achieve self-growth, the show taints this perception of her by building her up through a traumatic rape and promoting a loving marriage with her rapist, taking her agency while simultaneously promoting female empowerment through suppressive behavior.

### **From Stark to Stone: Empowered through Violence**

Sansa Stark is the beautiful daughter of Ned, the Warden of the North, and Catelyn Stark, his lady wife. Betrothed to the king's son, Joffrey Baratheon, she quickly discovers that her dreams of being queen were not quite what she anticipated. Not only does she witness her father's death at the hands of her betrothed, but she is also held captive by his family. Naïve and easily manipulated, Sansa is deemed a traitor's daughter and wed off to the brother of Queen Cersei Lannister. She is tortured, mentally and emotionally by her captors, but eventually escapes their restraints. In the novels, we

are left off with Sansa, hiding under the name Alayne Stone, a bastard of the Eyrie and growing every day as a woman. In the show, however, she is wed off to Ramsey Bolton, violently raped, and eventually escapes again only to eventually take back her family home as Queen of the North ("The Iron Throne"). While both series leaves us with an empowered Sansa, her journey to this point is exponentially different. Sansa's growth in the novels demonstrates pure perseverance and determination and embodies an empowered woman. The adaptation, however, uses the addition of violent rape to take Sansa's agency and suppress her within the story, figuratively and literally. Through this, the show uses rape culture as a means of equating a woman's empowerment to physical violence suggesting that they cannot become truly powerful unless they are subjected to violence at the hands of a man. That, without said violence, a woman's true nature, and fierceness can never be developed unless it stems from loss of innocence, anger, and humiliation.

When taking a close look at Sansa's character within *A Song of Ice and Fire*, it can be made clear that she represents the stereotypical role of a young girl whose dreams are wrapped up in ideals rather than truth. She wants nothing more than to marry a prince, become queen and have babies. Of course, Sansa occupies a rarefied space which means she actually could marry a prince. While her desires seemingly come to pass, her perception gradually begins to shift from fantasy to reality. And in both the novels and in the HBO adaptation, that reality is hardly pleasant:

...Sansa Stark seems a fundamentally passive character with virtually no control over her own destiny. From her betrothal to Joffrey, to her mistreatment at the hands of the Lannisters, to



her forced marriage to Tyrion, to her abduction by Littlefinger, the course of Sansa's story arc is shaped by those around her. (Napolitano and Johnston 909)

In this argument made by Marc Napolitano and Susan Johnson, the authors argue that Sansa seems as though she has no control over her life. It is important to note, then, that in the novel she does demonstrate many instances of resistance and has agency in her story. She is forced into two engagements and one marriage, and still, she shows both resistance and resilience in the face of her suppression. She can make logical decisions and rectify her situation, even if it's through accepting help from others. HBO's version of Sansa, instead, conducts this image of Sansa as someone unable to act against oppression until she is forced to.

In the novels, her continuous action, both internally and externally, help her guide herself through the course that others have set for her. Her decisions and actions, even in the smallest amounts, shape who she becomes by the end of *A Storm of Swords*. Yet, if we are to look at the show, alone, the Sansa portrayed there suggests that this author is arguing, that Sansa has no agency over her life until the very last season of *Game of Thrones*. Even in this instance, she gives credit to her trauma and those who abused her, rather than acknowledging her strength and willpower to escape.

With her father dead and the remaining family at war with her captors, Sansa is left with no one to save her but herself. Her character builds off of this instinct of survival with her deceased father's voice in her ear. Reborn from the young girl she once was, Sansa begins her transition into a woman empowered. Even in the face of grim truth, George R. R. Martin reveals that Sansa is

more than just a naïve little girl and instead expresses her character through her survival and resilience:

*A pure world, Sansa thought. I do not belong here. Yet she stepped out all the same... She could feel the snow on her lashes, taste it on her lips. It was the taste of Winterfell. The taste of innocence. The taste of dreams... Another new day. It was the old days she hungered for. Prayed for. But who could she pray to? The garden has been meant for a godswood once, she knew, but the soil was too thin and stony for a weirwood to take root. A godswood without gods, as empty as me. (A Storm of Swords 1100)*

Sansa's transition from naivety to strength in the novels is one of her key character developments. She recognizes her innocence and begins to shift out of the safe illusion of childhood dreams and discovers the harsh reality of the world of Westeros. Martin alludes to her shift, here, where she is safe in the Eyrie under the alias of Alayne. She can no longer pray to the godswood as she had when she believed in the illusion of safety. Like the soil for the godswood, Sansa is hardened by the veracity of the world. She can never revert to her childish dreams, and now she is empty without them.

Sansa's strength is a valuable aspect of her character in the novels. It comes from within, a voice in her head that pushes her through to the end, allowing her to save herself through her willpower. However, the show's representation of Sansa is on par with a common trope, "The Ingenue" ("The Ingenue") which marks her innocence and virginity as a vulnerability to prey upon by others who are willing to harm her. Her character in the show represents a different version, where the novels show her strength, but the series weakens her character



as a way of continuing her suppression. Rather than being her hero, she is simply a victim whose only growth comes from the trauma and torment she suffers.

When comparing Sansa's characters in both the novel and HBO's adaptation, it is important to first acknowledge a harmful addition to her character's story. In the novels, Sansa's virginity remains intact and is seemingly a representation of her armor throughout the story. Her betrothal to Joffrey never ends in marriage, her first marriage to Tyrion Lannister is never consummated, and in two other instances where others have attempted to rape her, she can escape unscathed. However, the television series not only takes her virginity, but in the episode "Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken", they also invent her first sexual encounter as a violent rape by her second husband, Ramsey Bolton. In the novels, this plot derives from another character's story, Jeyne Poole, who is forced to wed Ramsey Bolton under the disguise of Sansa's sister, Arya Stark. Therefore, it is not Sansa, but Jeyne, who is raped by Ramsey. The decision to change Sansa's story arc in such a damaging way becomes even more detrimental when combined with how the show portrays it, and what is done with it later.

During Sansa's wedding night, it is immediately made clear to viewers that Ramsey Bolton is dangerous. Before this episode, Ramsey had already established himself as a vial antagonist when he bound, tortured, and mutilated Theon Greyjoy, and forced him into slavery under the name "Reek". Therefore, it was no surprise that Sansa would also fall victim to Ramsey's twisted ways when it was discovered that she would wed him. Their wedding also signifies an important moment for both Sansa and Theon, who were raised in Winterfell together. Theon, who ultimately betrays the Stark family who raised

him, is now joined in confinement by Sansa.

While, like Theon, Sansa is also a victim of Ramsey Bolton, her rape somehow never really seems to be about her. In fact, the portrayal of her rape was more focused on Theon than Sansa at all. In *#METOO's First Horror Film: Male Hysteria and the New Final Girl in 2018's Revenge*, Time Posada addresses this issue, "...HBO series *Game of Thrones* employs a cutaway in season 5 when Sansa Stark is raped, but the male showrunners' decision to focus instead on another male character forced to watch removes the female victim's agency by emphasizing a male character's trauma instead" (Posada 196). Posada is bringing up an excellent argument, that by shifting the focus on Theon who is made to witness Sansa's violent rape, it not only takes away her traumatic moment by giving it to Theon, but it suggests that her rape isn't even about her and is further a way to progress Theon's story, since this is the moment where his character development begins and he can rectify his previous behavior through saving Sansa from the Boltons. By using Sansa's rape as a plot device to promote a male character, you are taking away both Sansa's trauma, but it also takes away her agency by having her rape, to begin with.

The violent acts placed on Sansa in this instance are more than just a change from the original series, it is a complete unraveling of her novel's character growth. In the novels, Sansa generates her strength through her captivity in Kings Landing, channeling her innate ability to read people and helping her eventually escape. The show, however, creates an illusion that without her trauma, she would never have become an empowered woman. In episode four of the final season, Sansa divulges her truth to Sandor Clegane, as her secret to becoming a woman was in the hands of her abusers:

Sandor: It used to be that you couldn't look at me.

Sansa: That was a long time ago. I've seen much worse than you since then.

Sandor: Yes, I heard. Heard you were broken in. Heard you were broken in rough.

Sansa: And he got what he deserved. I gave it to him.

Sandor: How?

Sansa: Hounds.

Sandor: You've changed little bird. None of that would have happened if you left King's Landing with me. No Littlefinger. No Ramsay. None of it.

Sansa: Without Littlefinger, Ramsay and the rest, I would have stayed a little bird my whole life ("The Last of the Starks").

This scene is telling, as it shows Sansa claiming that her ability to come of age as a woman was due to her traumatic rape. This only serves as another representation of how her character is losing agency throughout the show. In the novels, Sansa can grow and mature, without the need for a violent rape to prove that to herself. By not only including sexual violence in her story but justifying it through her growth as a character, the show exemplifies this need to strip women down to promote their version of an empowered female.

Taking away Sansa's virginity in the series only amplifies Sansa's loss of agency. However, there are several other instances where the show changed Sansa's character in ways that take her control. In the books we can see Sansa's perspective through her chapters, showing the reader her ability to not only think for herself but to take some control of what is being done to her. During her wedding to Tyrion, which was quickly and unexpectedly forced on her, Sansa's internal dialogue

shows her ability to take a stand:

As he moved behind her, Sansa felt a sharp tug on her skirt. *He wants me to kneel*, she realized, blushing. She was mortified. It was not supposed to be this way. She had dreamed of her wedding a thousand times, and always had pictured how her betrothed would stand behind her tall and strong, sweep the cloak of his protections over her shoulders, and tenderly kiss her cheek as he leaned forward to fasten the clasp.

She felt another tug at her skirt, more insistent. *I won't. Why should I spare his feelings when no one cares about mine?*" (*A Storm of Swords* 386)

Sansa's upbringing prompted her to the idea of how a true lady is to act. She had always played the part of the courteous little bird, reciting what her septa told her to. (*A Game of Thrones* 747) Now, we begin to see Sansa become surfeited by the consistent oppression she faces from the Lannisters. She was brought to King's Landing under the guise that she was to marry the prince of her dreams, only to then discover that her betrothed was fueled by his cruel fantasies. Sansa, who even after her father's murder was still tormented, emotionally and physically, by Joffrey was then traded off to Tyrion Lannister to be wed. Her resistance to kneeling represents her taking a stand against the patriarchal oppression placed on her by the Lannister family. While she is still being held captive and forced to marry against her will, her ability to both accept and take some action over this demonstrates Sansa's growing ability to reject suppression.

The show's take on this scene, however, does not reflect the same irrepressible Sansa seen in the novel. In episode eight of the third season, Sansa is

wed to Tyrion and kneels for him with no hesitation. This greatly contrasts with Sansa's refusal to kneel as a representation of her resistance in *A Storm of Swords*. While this could be seen as a level of compassion that Sansa shares for her newfound husband, I would argue that Sansa kneeling symbolizes less empathy and more passivity. In this instance, it symbolizes her acceptance of the Lannister power being wielded over her, whereas in the novel her refusal to kneel exemplifies the kind of woman she has become who will help manage her escape later in the novel.

Towards the end of *A Storm of Swords* and season five of *Game of Thrones*, Sansa finally can escape King's Landing. Not only is she able to void her marriage to Tyrion Lannister, but her abuser, King Joffrey, is dead. Her escape and the murder of the King were something that show viewers may not have anticipated. However, the novel depicts her escape very differently. Throughout, *A Clash of Kings* and *A Storm of Swords*, Sansa plans her escape with Ser Dontos. It is possible that the decision to leave out this arrangement in the television series was meant to provide another shock factor to the audience; however, the implications behind Sansa's sudden rescue fulfill the "ingenue trope" where Sansa is simply a victim who needs to be rescued. The novel instead uses Sansa's participation in her escape as a way to accentuate her ability to not only adapt to her surroundings but to show her growth into a woman who will take hold of her fate later in the series and eventually become, unmarried, Queen of the North.

Where Sansa's story is left off in the novels, it is made clear that she is no longer the little girl riddled with fantasies. Her resilience and growth show through her ability to fully adhere to her new role as Alayne Stone, the

bastard of the Eyrie. Sansa fully absorbs this new persona, so much so that her chapter titles change from "Sansa" to "Alayne". Through her new perspective, we begin to truly see the woman whom Sansa has become:

*Sansa Stark went up the mountain, but Alayne Stone is coming down. It was a strange thought. Coming up, Mya had warned her to keep her eyes on the path ahead, she remembered. "Look up, not down," she said... but that was not possible on the descent. I could close my eyes. The mule knows the way, he has no need of me. But that seemed more something Sansa would have done, that frightened girl. Alayne was an older woman, and bastard brave. (A Feast for Crows 882)*

If we are to compare Sansa in the novel to Sansa in the adaptation, I would argue that the Sansa we are presented with post-rape and the Sansa who emerged as Alayne are the same. Both women have been through trauma, yet Alayne is made up of her own will to survive. She is rectifying her situation by literally transforming into a stronger version of herself.

This new transformed version of Sansa is shown when she escapes King's Landing, before returning as Alayne Stone. When the plan is unfolding during the chaos of the King's death, Sansa's transformation begins to ensue, "She felt so numb and dreamy. *My skin has turned to porcelain, to ivory, to steel*" (*A Storm of Swords* 833). Sansa is finally able to free herself from the chains of the Lannisters, and in this, she can release herself of her innocence and metamorphose into a woman. Her shift from porcelain, ivory, and steel reflects the stages of her growth where she begins as a child, develops into a lady, and ends as her guardian. If we are to look at her

physical transformation from Lady Sansa to “bastard brave”, it aligns with her feelings as she is leaving her captors one and for all. She is no longer a little girl with unrealistic dreams, she is a strong, fierce woman who acts for herself.

In both *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*, we see a young Sansa Stark being coerced, abused, and violated. The novels both show Sansa’s ability to navigate these acts against her and are left off in her final chapter in *A Storm of Swords* as Alayne Stone, the brave bastard of the Eyrie. However, the show, while completing Sansa’s story as the unwed Queen of the North, shows a different journey for her. In the show, Sansa’s agency doesn’t come until after she is sold off, abused, raped, and creates an illusion that her survival is simply dependent on others, usually the same people who had a hand in her abuse, to begin with. The changes made here are unnecessary additions that evoke a notion that women can never escape the patriarchy, and that they can only grow through violent or traumatic abuse. The adaptation represents women as merely a product of oppression with no say in their lives and no drive to escape the confinements of the patriarchy, while simultaneously promoting them as empowered. Therefore, this portrayal of women serves as a message that a woman’s agency can only be given to her through the violent acts of patriarchal dominance.

### Catelyn: The Silent Mother

Catelyn Stark is shown in both, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and HBO’s *A Game of Thrones*, as a matriarchal figurehead who does all she can to protect her children. A woman born in the South, yet married to the North, who represents a fusion of ice and fire. She was wed to

Ned Stark after his brother, her betrothed, was burned to death by the Mad King Aerys. From there, she gave Ned five Stark children, Robb, Sansa, Bran, Arya, and Rickon. When Ned came home from war with a baby in his arms, claiming it to be his bastard, she did her best to care for him even though she resented everything about him. Her resilience is greatly pronounced in the series, yet the television adaptation shows a different version of what we see in the novels. Lady Stark is a complex woman, who is both political and intuitive. In the show, however, she is a watered-down version of what we see in the novels. This reduction in character is a demonstration of taking away Catelyn’s agency, in that her story is no longer being told and her strong empowering character is ultimately silenced in the process.

In George R. R. Martin’s novel, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Martin provides grand insight into his characters’ thoughts and movements throughout their chapters. Each character has their point of view, allowing the reader to understand who they are and how they think. Catelyn Stark is one of the main characters within these novels, provided that she has several chapters from her point of view. These perspectives are important for understanding the character’s motives. Especially for Catelyn, whose internal monologues detail her extensive experience with patriarchal limitations that are placed on her in Westeros.

These narratives advance her character to being more than a simple traditional mother and develop her as a woman with complex perspectives. Catelyn’s internal monologues provide the audience with insight into her experience with the men in her life:

“She was no stranger to waiting after all. Her men have always made her wait. ‘Watch for me, little cat,’ her father would always tell her, when

he rode off to court or fair or battle. And she would, standing patiently on the battlements of Riverrun as the waters of the Red Fork and the Tumblestone flowed by." (*A Game of Thrones* 695)

She reflects on her waiting for her father while continuing these memories as she remembers waiting for her former betrothed Brandon Stark, her husband Ned Stark, and now her son, the soon-to-be crowned King in the North. Through these recollections, Martin creates an understanding of the parallels between the traditional women and the oppressive society around her. While Catelyn identifies with the submissive female and recognizes that she is part of the patriarchal domination, this awareness allows Catelyn to wield more power in the world around her. She is not a submissive character; she is a survivalist.

It is important to note that these internal monologues would be a difficult task to accomplish within a television series. However, without a nod toward Catelyn's perspectives, the adaptation has instead presented her as the typical submissive mother trope, stripping her of her value and using her, instead, as a filler character whose perspectives are no longer relevant. With the novel providing the reader with chapters that demonstrate not only her internal dialogue but the entire story surrounding her son, Robb, we see a version of Catelyn that controls the narrative of what is being shown. Instead, the show limits her greatly and changes both her voice and her actions. This shift is addressed by Rhiannon Thomas:

In the books, Robb is a boy-king, out of his depth and somewhat reliant on his mother for help, while Catelyn is shrewd, intelligent, and vehemently anti-vengeance. In its attempt to make Robb into

more of a stereotypical 'sexy young king,' the show has stolen a lot of Cat's agency, allowing Robb to voice her idea (such as sending an envoy to Renly Baratheon), leaving her out of strategy meetings, and transforming her desire to help Robb into a desire to return home and be with her youngest sons. (Thomas)

The author, here, brings up the point that Catelyn's agency is lost to Robb's voice, which contrasts the novel greatly. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the only Robb we see is through Catelyn's perspective and her chapters. Instead, the show has essentially replaced Catelyn's voice with her son, demonstrating how the adaptation has taken someone who is known in the novels to be an extremely empowering woman, and instead limits her character to just a mother.

While Catelyn has many important roles in the novels, one especially important role is her intellect in understanding the politics of Westeros. When Ned is asked to attend King's Landing at the Hand of the King, he initially intends to refuse. Catelyn, however, understands the implications of that refusal, "He will not understand that. He is a king now, and kings are not like other men. If you refuse to serve him, he will wonder why, and sooner or later he will begin to suspect that you oppose him. Can't you see the danger that would put us in?" (*A Game of Thrones* 59) Catelyn convinces Ned to follow King Robert to King's Landing because she recognizes their fate if they do not accept the king's demands. She is determined to protect her family and her understanding of the patriarchal system allows her to do so. She is aware that her family would be at risk if they did not succumb to the rules and duty that is expected of them.

In the show, however, this scene is reversed. When

Ned is asked to join King Robert in King's Landing, Ned tells Catelyn that he must go, where Catelyn responds, "I won't let him take you... I'll say, listen fat man, you're not taking my husband anywhere. He belongs to me now" ("Winter is Coming"). The vast difference between these two scenes is detrimental to Catelyn's character. While in the novels we see Catelyn ordering Ned to go to King's Landing, suggesting her intuitive ability to understand the implications if he were to stay, the show has her begging him not to leave. This change once again takes from Catelyn's agency. Her ability to understand political consequences is diminished to her simply wanting her husband to stay for her, suggesting that a woman is expected to feel lost and incomplete without her husband. In addition to this, her failed plea to her husband in the show provides Catelyn with no say in the rule of her family, as he ends up going to King's Landing, regardless. It exaggerates the concept that women cannot live in society without their men. In Valerie Estel Frankel's essay, *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance*, she acknowledges this disparity, "In the first few episodes, her part in the story is as Bran's mother and Ned's wife, fighting to protect them both. Unfortunately, this reduces her to a stock character- the wife who ignores all political realities to beg her husband to stay with her" (Frankel 1267). Indeed, her character is extremely watered down in the series to the point that she is simply fulfilling the role of the emotional mother and wife. Yet, in the books, Catelyn ultimately decides for her husband and decides for him that he has to go. Catelyn is instructed to rule the North in Ned's stead, which coincides with this idea of marital equality. The unbalanced nature of their relationship in the show validates the idea that women are in a submissive role to their husbands further promoting

the societal expectations that women are to remain silent and let men make decisions for them.

This method of silencing Catelyn in a way that presents her character as just the wife illustrates a misogynistic view that relates to rape culture. According to Fraser, "benevolent sexism refers to 'characterizing women as pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported and adored and whose love is necessary to make a man complete.'" (Fraser 145) In this case, Catelyn is projected through the lens of this benevolent sexism, where the intense woman we see in the novels is diminished in the show as a method of highlighting the act of Ned, Robb, and the other men around her. By taking away the fierce voice that Martin provides us with in her chapters, we instead see a woman whose love is the cushion for men to land on. Her care and nurturing ability and her ability to step aside and let them take over is a method of silencing her to instead promote male advancement. Through this, the show is not only taking Catelyn's agency, but they are using her to enhance the male perspectives.

The HBO adaptation limits Catelyn's character in several other ways. While they continuously omit her thoughts and actions that are demonstrated in the novels, they also erase pivotal quotes and value her character holds in the plot. This phenomenon can be observed in season two's episode, "Garden of Bones" when she goes with Renly to meet his brother Stannis. During this scene, Catelyn simply sits on her horse, making little conversation. It is only when the two brothers are fighting that she says, "Listen to yourselves. If you were sons of mine, I would know your heads together and lock you in a bedchamber until you remembered that you were brothers" ("Garden of Bones"). In this scene,



the two brothers are fighting like children and Catelyn is placed in the role of being their mother. While Catelyn says this in the novels, as well, she also speaks for the political nuances taking place at the time. Instead, the show eliminates her voice by keeping her subordinate, only to speak out of hand by reprimanding the brothers as a mother would.

The novel, however, demonstrates an ardent version of Catelyn. While she does reprimand the brothers, she speaks up on behalf of the politics being discussed with wisdom and acknowledgment:

Lord Tywin sits at Harrenhal with twenty thousand swords. The remnants of the Kingslayer's army have regrouped at the Golden Tooth, another Lannister host gathers beneath the shadow of Casterly Rock, and Cersei and her son hold King's landing and your precious Iron Throne. You each name yourself king, yet the kingdom bleeds, and no one lifts a sword to defend it by my son (*A Clash of Kings* 475).

Catelyn has no problem speaking up to the men within this world and raising points that their egotistical negligence would prevent them from seeing. She opposes the views of men and uses her years of observations to identify their flaws and irrational views of war and wisdom. When looking at this same scene in the show compared to the novels, it is apparent how much her voice is silenced in the adaptation. Rather than showing Catelyn's intelligence, the show promotes her maternalism as a method of demonstrating the patriarchal notion that a woman's only strength comes from her ability to nurture. Whereas for Catelyn, her wisdom, intuition, and diplomatic understandings are a welcomed addition to her maternal character.

One of the most important aspects of Catelyn's character arc that is displayed in the novel is her rebirth as Lady Stoneheart. Lady Stoneheart is Catelyn, who is brought back to life after treacherous murder by the trusted Frey family, who hosted a wedding, known as the "Red Wedding", in their home for her brother. Catelyn and her son, Robb, were unaware of this betrayal, leaving both of them and their entire hoard of soldiers, dead. Lady Stoneheart is a direct parallel to Catelyn, as everything she embodies demonstrates a thirst for blood and revenge. This rage is shown strictly through violence, as she can no longer speak due to her throat being cut, "Lady Catelyn's fingers dug deep into her throat, and the words came rattling out, choked and broke, a stream as cold as ice." (*A Feast for Crows* 915) This imagery Martin presents shows a version of Catelyn, a woman silenced by the oppression of the society she is a part of. Lady Stoneheart is not only a reanimated corpse, but she is also a representation of a woman's ability to fight against the men who have taken everything from her, figuratively and literally.

Her slit throat and inability to speak represents the patriarchal silencing of women throughout the world of Westeros. Frankel makes note of Lady Stoneheart's character: Though formerly human, she is on a mission of vengeance, and ignores all pleas for mercy or attempts at reason. She is stonehearted in function as well as name. The lady who was once highborn, conformist, lovely, well-spoken, and proper has become her own shadow, a monster that lurks in the wild and subverts the patriarchy as a fearsome outlaw. (Frankel 2433)

Lady Stoneheart is thoughtless and careless; she serves



no other purpose other than to rid the world of those who killed her family and herself, and anyone who serves the Lannister's or Frey's. She is not just a cruel avenger; she is a woman who has been oppressed by the views of men and war. This concept is further satisfied by her attempted murder of Brienne of Tarth. The woman knight who once served as Catelyn's sword has now begun carrying a Lannister sword. When Brienne refuses to kill Jaime Lannister, the man whose family killed her husband, and son and imprisoned her daughter, Lady Stoneheart demands her to be hanged. Through her eyes, Brienne is a woman who has now been tainted by the control of men and like Lady Stoneheart, needed to die to surpass this. This character is an important addition to the novels, as she is finally and successfully able to destroy and break the chains of oppression she has faced from men in her lifetime. Yet, this character is completely omitted from the show. In doing so, the adaptation is further silencing a powerful woman from the ability to sequester the domination of men in society.

Through Catelyn's story in the adaptation, it is clear that there are many deviations in how she is portrayed, or not portrayed, in the novel. We can see that the truth of her character and her strength remains solely in the books. The show, however, takes a fierce woman and makes her fit into the patriarchal role of who a woman should be. Not only do they take away her agency, but they also take away her voice. This method of silencing an otherwise prominent figure demonstrates how the show would rather promote the empowerment of men, such as Robb, Ned, and the others around her, rather than use Catelyn's true story as a means of enlightening true feminine power.

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have looked at the female characters, primarily, Daenerys Targaryen, Sansa Stark, and Catelyn Stark, in both, *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the adaptation, *Game of Thrones*. Each female character's portrayal in the series demonstrates how the series has made an impeccable effort to showcase women through loss of agency. While this essay's focus was primarily on the three characters discussed, several other female characters also demonstrate the adaptations' elimination of the female voice and focus on sexual violence rather than empowerment. However, there are also characters, notably Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth, who can arguably be said to have the same or more agency in the show than in the novels. Yet, these characters only make the perception of the empowered female murky, as their character flaws and strengths come from more masculine features than femininity.

When looking at these series and acknowledging how the show has deviated so far from the novels, it leaves many unanswered questions. If we are to accept that this show demonstrates truly empowered women through the likes of Daenerys, Sansa, and Catelyn, then what does that mean for how we are defining female empowerment? If we are to believe that strong females are made through the loss of agency through men, then that subtracts from other characters in the series, like Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth, who both use their masculine characteristics to pave their path without the help of men.

With new series' emerging, namely *House of the Dragon* (2022-present), adapted from Martin's novel *Fire and Blood* (2018), it only further complicated how the *Game of Thrones* franchise is representing powerful women. In this new series, which takes place several

centuries before the pilot of *Game of Thrones*, the main protagonists are predominantly female, showcasing the importance of these roles in medieval culture. Sexism weighs heavily on the plot of this series as the main argument is whether a woman can sit on the Iron Throne. It will be interesting to see how this story, whose adaptation relies heavily on historical-based source material, will use this dispute to challenge the perception of femineity and what implications this popular franchise will ultimately have on how we define female empowerment.

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**Cassandra Couto**, a recent graduate of Bridgewater State University, holds a bachelor's degree in English with a concentration in Education. Throughout her academic journey, she displayed unwavering dedication and a profound passion for the English language, distinguishing herself as a departmental honors student. Her thirst for knowledge and commitment to excellence culminated in the completion of her Honors Thesis during the Spring of 2023, under the guidance of her mentor, Dr. Lee Torda. This pivotal experience not only pushed Cassandra beyond her comfort zone but also proved to her that she possesses the capability to achieve anything she sets her mind to.

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