

A Song of Fantasy Traditions  
How *A Song of Ice and Fire* Subverts Traditions of Women in Tolkienesque Fantasy

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George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* consists of a planned seven books, of which five have been published, *A Game of Thrones* (AGoT), *A Clash of Kings* (ACoK), *A Storm of Swords* (ASoS), *A Feast for Crows* (AFfC), and *A Dance with Dragons* (ADwD). Women have often been pushed to the margins in the fantasy genre. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy stands as the foundation for a particular subgenre of fantasy, and a tradition of focussing almost exclusively on male characters begins with Tolkien as well. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series continues the fantasy genre in the mode of Tolkien and retains many of the same qualities, but differs in its portrayal of women. Martin has not only included female characters in his novels, but has made them integral to the plot, major protagonists, and dynamic characters. By examining three pairs of characters through the lens of feminist philosopher Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, it is possible to evaluate Martin's subversion of the Tolkienesque genre. The first pair is Jaime Lannister and Brienne of Tarth. These two characters form the primary examples of the traditional trope of the chivalric knight. Martin presents Jaime as the stereotypical knight in appearance, but not behaviour, while Brienne juxtaposes with Jaime as a proper knight in behaviour but not title, appearance, or gender. The second pair consists of the two queens, Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen. Both of these queens gain power through a patriarchal society, but subvert the system to their benefit despite obstruction from those around them. The final pair is Arya and Sansa Stark, two sisters who each undergo a traumatic event but react very differently. They both respond with an outward performance of gender, but while Arya outwardly performs as a male, Sansa takes her performance of her own

gender to a level that borders on parody. Through analysis of these three pairs of characters I will show how Martin is working against the tradition of marginalized female characters in the fantasy genre. Current scholarship on the fantasy genre is more focussed on defining the genre than on discussion of female characters<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it is important to analyse the way that the traditions of the genre are changing. Although traditionally in the fantasy genre women are frequently marginalized, Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series subverts the traditions of the genre by giving his female characters integral roles in the plot, and coupling this with an awareness of the complex rules that govern gender.

*A Song of Ice and Fire* mainly takes place on a continent called Westeros almost fourteen years after a rebellion by Robert Baratheon against the Targaryen dynasty. Westeros is made up of Seven Kingdoms, united under a single throne. Martin chronicles a civil war that occurs after the death of King Robert. The King's son Joffery inherits power and enjoys the support of his mother's family, the financially influential Lannisters. Other claims to the throne are made, including from the Starks in the North and King Robert's brothers, Renly and Stannis. A second overarching plot details the far North of Westeros, where mythical creatures called the Others threaten to invade the Seven Kingdoms. Finally, there is a third plot occurring across the Narrow Sea from Westeros, on the continent of Essos. On Essos, the remnants of the Targaryen dynasty live in exile. Daenerys gains power and is determined to regain the throne her father lost, and this plotline depicts her

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of the fantasy genre see Lucie Armitt, Brian Attebery, and Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn.

journey from exile to powerful ruler on Essos attempting to create an army powerful enough to invade Westeros.

Plots involving struggles for power are characteristic of the fantasy genre except that male characters often serve as the major protagonists in other fantasy works. This emphasis on males is especially apparent in famous works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These works are often considered foundation texts of the fantasy genre. Brian Attebery proposes in *Strategies of Fantasy* that "Genres may be approached as 'fuzzy sets,' meaning that they are defined not by boundaries, but a center" (12), and that in the fantasy genre "*The Lord of the Rings* stands in the bullseye" (14). As a result "Tolkien's form of fantasy, for readers in English, is our mental template ... One way to categorize the genre of fantasy is the set of texts that in some way or other resemble *The Lord of the Rings*" (14). The traditions of the fantasy genre are inextricably linked to Tolkien because as Attebery shows, Tolkien defines the form of fantasy, but when considering the traditions of a genre, it is important to establish a definition of that genre to ensure consistency of analysis. To properly understand the traditions Martin is working to subvert, it is integral to first understand the traditions as it applied to Tolkien. However, it is important to keep in mind Attebery's notion of a "fuzzy set" because no definition can completely encapsulate the writings within an entire genre. Martin is still writing within a certain type of fantasy, in the mode of Tolkien.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* and the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* Martin's work could fall into a few subgenres, including epic fantasy, heroic fantasy, sword and sorcery, history in fantasy, and high fantasy. John Clute defines

Epic Fantasy as “[a]ny fantasy tale written to a large scale which deals with the founding or definitive and lasting defense of a Land may be fairly called an E[pic] F[antasy]” (n.pag.). This definition accurately describes an overarching plot of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, where the world is threatened by the Others from the North, but for large parts of the novels this plot is not the central focus. In the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* Heroic Fantasy and Sword and Sorcery, are synonyms for a subgenre “featuring muscular Heroes in violent conflict with a variety of Villains... whose powers are... supernatural in origin” (Clute n.pag.). This definition is partly applicable to Martin’s novels, but not wholly as the plot is not concerned with the adventures of specific heroes against specific villains, and Martin’s novels do not follow a framework of a singular linear plot. Martin’s world does not feature obviously good or bad characters, but rather characters who exhibit attributes of both good and evil and who exhibit varying levels of morality. Similarly, many aspects of Martin’s novels can be classified as high fantasy, defines as “[f]antasies set in Otherworlds, specifically Secondary Worlds, and which deal with matters affecting the destiny of those worlds” (Clute n.pag.). Although this definition of High Fantasy is brief, it accurately describes the plot of *A Song of Ice and Fire* because Martin’s work is focussed on the fate of the entire world. Finally, within the definition for History in Fantasy there is a specific category within this subgenre for “[n]ovels which seek to create their own internal, coherent, invented history for an imaginary world or kingdom” (Maund n.pag.). Tolkien’s works on Middle-earth are a good example of this subgenre. Martin’s works are also especially relevant to this subgenre, especially the section of definition that says, “[i]maginary histories have

been created to make political points or to explore social and gender roles" (n.pag.). Politics and gender are central to *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the deep history that Martin has created lends credence to his imaginary world. This characterization of a complex imagined history is one of the defining features of the fantasy Tolkien wrote. Perhaps Martin himself says it best in his Introduction to *Meditations on Middle-earth*: "[i]t is sometimes called epic fantasy, sometimes high fantasy, but it ought to be called Tolkienesque fantasy" (3). Martin goes on to describe Tolkienesque fantasy as "a fully realized secondary universe, an entire world with its own geography and histories and legends, wholly unconnected to our own, yet somehow just as real" (3). This definition of Tolkienesque fantasy is applicable to Martin's own works as well. Martin creates the world of Westeros with a complex backstory, complex customs, and various nations and continents. In doing so his world gains aspects of verisimilitude while remaining within the fantasy genre. This verisimilitude results largely from Martin "draw[ing] extensively from both medieval and post-medieval texts and tropes, as does Tolkien" (Mayer 61). The elaborate creation of a secondary world is a definitive aspect that Martin and Tolkien's fantasy worlds both share and a major part of why they are both texts that fall within the Tolkienesque fantasy subgenre. It is this definition of Tolkienesque fantasy that Martin is writing within, but also subverting by incorporating women in major roles, in a way Tolkien did not.

Like Tolkien does with *The Lord of the Rings*, Martin creates a fully realized medieval-type world where a patriarchal society exists. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series takes this genre and subverts many of its conventions. Some medievalist

critics such as Lauren S. Mayer have called Martin's series a work of "fetish medievalism" (63). Martin uses aspects of medievalism, but then works against them when he "goes beyond this pattern and makes his way through the volumes gleefully smashing his own and other medievalist texts' attempts at world creation" (61). Tropes of medievalist Tolkienesque fantasy, are used and subverted by Martin as he works against the genre in his use and portrayal of women. Unlike Tolkien, Martin utilizes numerous female characters, and these characters play major roles in the development of the plot. Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride write that, "Many critics have noted that women do little of any importance in Middle-earth" and "it is not true to say there are no women in *The Lord of the Rings*, but there certainly are few" (31-32). The women in Tolkien are usually minor characters, even when they are intricately connected to the plot. This tradition in Tolkienesque fantasy leaves women underrepresented. Other critics, such as Charles Moseley, have argued that female characters are not present in *The Lord of the Rings* because "the Ring trilogy is a book about men united for a common purpose, to fight a common enemy. In other words, women are precluded from the story because it centers on war and the possibility of combat" (Fredrick and McBride 32). Martin takes this tradition and destabilises it by making his female characters dynamic and involved. War and combat are not merely a possibility in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but they are part of everyday life. Martin's work takes on similar world-changing events and not only includes women, but makes them integral parts of the story and vital players in the "game of thrones." This difference is especially apparent in his depictions of Arya

and Sansa Stark, Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen, and Brienne of Tarth, who are able to use the inherently patriarchal society of Westeros to their advantage.

Martin also uses narrative style to highlight the importance of women in his work. The books are narrated from a third-person limited point of view, which refers to the perspective from which a chapter is narrated, usually from one character per chapter. The narration is from a limited viewpoint, as only the thoughts of one character are presented in each chapter. The narrator does occasionally provide the thoughts of other characters as well, but this is not the norm throughout. When providing a character's direct thoughts, Martin uses italics to separate the thoughts from both narration and dialogue. Throughout the books Martin employs a focalization technique where each chapter is written from the perspective of a different character. According to Dinah Birch,

a focalized narrative constrains its perspective within the limited awareness available to a particular witness, to whom the thoughts of other characters remain opaque. As seeing differs from telling, such a focalizing observer is not necessarily the narrator of the story, but may be a character in an account given by a third-person narrator. (n.pag.)

Martin utilizes the technique of focalization with many different characters, allowing multiple viewpoints of the story and descriptions of events occurring far away from each other without the need for omniscient narration. There are many different point of view characters and throughout the five novels there are fourteen "major" point of view characters, of which eight are men and six are women. I have defined major point of view characters as those who are integral to the plot and



serve as protagonists while they maintain point of view. These characters may also be antagonising forces from another character's point of view. Chapters for major point of view characters almost exclusively headed with that character's name. Chapters from minor point of view characters given a descriptive title rather than the character's name and they do not function as protagonists. By having women serve as nearly half of the major protagonists in the novels, Martin emphasizes his female characters and allows them to present their thoughts to the reader, unlike other works in the tradition of the Tolkienesque fantasy genre.

Some major characters in Martin's work are women who gain power through the patriarchal system and then alter the system to work to their advantage. Martin's characters also become self-aware of the role of gender in their lives and how women are expected to behave in the patriarchal society. Proper behaviour for women is a social construct of the patriarchy, creating separate genders. Gender is not a biological component of identity, but rather a creation by a specific society. Butler contends that "gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (34). The regulatory practices of Westeros create a distinct social difference in men and women. Gender results from the continued repetition of certain actions and behaviours that are ingrained and function as a performance. This performance can either be a conscious or an unconscious functioning of social roles. Some characters are consciously aware of the performance of gender in their society, and use this to their advantage. Major female characters also perform in Martin's work as both males and females, and

when this cross-gender performance occurs there is a conscious awareness of the performance.

The performance of gender can be seen when Martin creates the unlikely pairing of Jaime Lannister and Brienne of Tarth. Both of these characters represent the figure of the chivalrous knight or warrior. Jaime and Brienne reluctantly end up travelling together through Westeros and juxtapose the differing figures of the knight. Jaime is depicted as the stereotypical knight, handsome, and a fierce warrior. One of the first descriptions of Jaime comes from Jon Snow who upon seeing Jaime juxtaposed next to the slovenly King Robert thinks, "*This is what a king should look like*" (Martin *AGoT* 51). Jaime is outwardly the finest knight in all of Westeros, and Sansa feels that he wins his victories in a tournament, "as easily as if he were riding at rings" (295). Though a great warrior and member of the Kingsguard, Jaime is not the chivalrous knight that Sansa, and others, imagine him to be. He is the best warrior, but he is an arrogant and pompous man.

Jaime is meant to evoke the sense of the traditional heroic knight. This trope is popular in the fantasy genre and often exemplifies the chivalric code, broadly defined by Richard W. Kaeuper as a series of "core beliefs — martial prowess winning honour, piety embodied in ideal knightly practice and expiatory suffering, [and] the mutual inspiration of piety and love" and "a quality of the heart rather than the body" (63; 65). Jaime's initial scenes make it seem that Martin could be employing the traditional trope from other works of Tolkienesque fantasy. However, this image is soon shattered. Jaime and his sister Cersei are found in the middle of an incestuous liaison by Bran Stark who climbs a tower and sees them

through a window, “[Jaime] looked over at [Cersei]. ‘The things I do for love,’ he said with loathing. He gave Bran a shove. Screaming, Bran went backward out the window into empty air” (Martin *AGoT* 85). The image of the perfect knight, brave, beautiful, and kind, is not associated with throwing children out of windows or with incestuous affairs. Jaime’s contempt for others is shown in Martin’s use of the word loathing. Jaime is at once loathing the inconvenience Cersei is causing him, and the need to throw Bran out of a window. He knows he is acting above the law, and he does not care. Jaime regards his duties as a knight as nothing more than an inconvenience:

So many vows ... they make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. But obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. Respect the gods. Obey the laws. It’s too much. No matter what you do, you’re forsaking one vow or the other. (Martin *ACoK* 796).

Jaime’s blatant disregard for his duties as a knight work to undermine the societal expectations placed on him. Those who do not know him view him as a heroic knight, but this idea is quickly dispelled when they come to know him. Jaime listens to no one and is only interested in himself and maintaining Cersei’s affections. The two have an incestuous relationship that causes Jaime to ignore many of his duties as a knight and Kingsguard to be with his sister. Though Kingsguard members are sworn to celibacy Jaime disregards his sacred vows to maintain his relationship with Cersei, not to mention simultaneously breaking the societal taboos against incest,

breaking Cersei's marriage vows to King Robert, and committing treason against the King.

Though Jaime is not the stereotypical heroic knight, he is still a very masculine figure in Westeros as a beautiful man and accomplished knight of the kingsguard, but he eventually finds himself emasculated and dependent on Brienne. He is beautiful and desired by many women at court, and often uses this desire to his advantage. His masculinity is exemplified in his abilities as a knight. Tournaments barely pose a challenge to him, and he is a great fighter in real battles. Despite this, Jaime is unable to stop a group of mercenaries from capturing him and Brienne. These mercenaries then further emasculate and embarrass the great warrior Jaime by cutting off his sword hand. The loss of his sword hand rips from Jaime much of his identity. His new captors mock him and Brienne by tying them together, face-to-face, on a horse. The men laugh and shout, "'Twould be cruel to separate the good knight and his lady... Ah, but which one is the knight and which one is the lady?" (Martin *ASoS* 413-414). In losing his ability to wield his phallic sword he has symbolically lost his masculinity. His loss of masculinity allows a role reversal where Jaime requires the protection of a stronger, more powerful figure, in this case Brienne, the female warrior. Having a woman as his protector increases his feelings of emasculation, as he is no longer able to be independent. This loss of masculinity causes him to re-evaluate how he treats others and to consider how Brienne acts. Instead of being an object of his ridicule, Brienne becomes an example for Jaime, showing him how a knight should behave. Jaime's honour system changes as he spends more time with Brienne and watches how she copes with the mocking

she has always endured. Jaime has never known anyone to mock him for anything other than an oathbreaker and kingslayer; thus, it is emasculating for him to be mocked as a poor fighter, and a poor fighter with no sword.

Westeros is an inherently patriarchal, sexualized, and violent society. The patriarchy relies on violence to maintain its power. Men in Westeros use violence to control others. This violence is seen in all aspects of life in Westeros and as Suzette Haden Elgin argues, "Violence is critical for the survival of patriarchy in the same way oxygen is critical for the survival of human beings. Without violence, patriarchy cannot exist" (117). Violence functions against everyone in Martin's novels and it works against everyone, including both men and women, and it is not a society that is exclusively violent towards women, as might be expected from a particularly violent patriarchy. The violence of Westeros is also channelled through women. The patriarchy in Westeros is an exceptionally violent one, but not all of the violence is in support of the patriarchy. Violence carried out by women against others can work to subvert the patriarchal system. Brienne is juxtaposed with the outwardly perfect knight Jaime. Brienne is a fearsome warrior and is known throughout Westeros. Her liminal status as a female warrior creates a difficult time for her in many instances. She is often mocked because of her physical appearance, but unlike the beautiful Jaime, Brienne maintains a chivalrous attitude and exemplifies the qualities of the knight, including courteousness, compassion, generosity, loyalty, and passion. Her skills in battle and immense loyalty prompt King Renly to make her a member of his Rainbow Kingsguard, and "when Renly cut away her torn cloak and fastened a rainbow in its place, Brienne of Tarth did not look unfortunate. Her smile lit up her

face, and her voice was strong and proud as she said, 'My life for yours, Your Grace. From this day on, I am your shield, I swear it by the old gods and the new'" (Martin *ACoK* 344). Brienne is not concerned with the attitudes and remarks of those around her, only with honour and loyalty and in keeping her beloved King safe. Unlike Jaime, who is known through the Kingdom as "Kingslayer," Brienne cares deeply about her duty as a member of a Kingsguard. Brienne does not use violence to gain money, power, or political gain, but rather she uses it to gain respect and because she wishes to take her fate into her own hands saying, "You don't feel so helpless when you fight. You have a sword and a horse, sometimes an axe. When you're armored it's hard for anyone to hurt you" (Martin *ACoK* 652). This attitude works against the belief that a woman must rely on others for protection. Brienne is not willing to let anyone tell her what to do, even her father. Her father attempts to match her for marriage, but she resists his need for her to marry, and eventually sets out on her own. In Westeros it is difficult for women to remain independent, and indeed it is often frowned upon in the patriarchal society. Brienne's independence is another way in which she subverts the patriarchy and manipulates it to suit her own needs.

Jaime and Brienne serve as foils for each other. Jaime has everything Brienne wants including status, power, and the proper gender for a knight. She looks upon him both with jealousy and anger, because he acts in ways that she views as morally reprehensible for a knight. Brienne wants what she cannot have, while Jaime does not want any of it. Jaime is thrust into the role of knight by his noble birth and skills on the battlefield, while Brienne chooses the path of a warrior against the wishes of

her father and against societal norms. In these two characters Martin takes the traditional trope of the historic knight and subverts it for his own needs, creating characters that are aware of the role of gender in their lives and how they must manipulate society to achieve their goals.

Unlike Brienne, Cersei does not wield a sword herself, but nevertheless she still manages to undermine the patriarchal system and gain power. Though she is constantly working against the patriarchal system, Cersei functions as one of the major antagonists in Martin's work. She becomes Queen Regent of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros when her son Joffery becomes King. Much of her power originally stems from marriage to a powerful man. Cersei is married to Robert Baratheon to secure an alliance between their two houses. The men who arrange the marriage use Cersei only as a tool to further their own goals, leaving her with no choice in the matter. Her marriage is not about her own individuality, but about the combination of her father's house with his ally. Therefore, Cersei's only purpose is to give birth to a son and heir. Cersei functions as a token of exchange between men and Butler writes, "As wives, women not only secure the reproduction of the *name* (the functional purpose), but effect a symbolic intercourse between clans of men" (53). The transfer of name is part of Cersei's marriage, but the true goal is for the two houses to become joined as one, and in order for the houses to be properly joined Cersei must produce a son. However, Cersei is unwilling to stand by and simply allow herself to be used as a pawn in the alliances of men, so she takes power back from the men by arranging her husband's murder. Cersei is able to subvert the power structure and use it to her own advantage. Some critics claim Cersei's power

is purely the result of the patriarchal system. David Steinweg argues that, “her political position is due to her son’s status of inheriting the kingdom, not her own accomplishments or lineage. In other words, Cersei’s rule is completely dependant on her son, and the absence of her father” (11-12; sic). However Steinweg fails to address the fact that her intentions and manipulations of the patriarchal system must be taken into account. The fact that her actions exist in a patriarchal context does not make them meaningless. By arranging for King Robert’s death, Cersei is able to elevate herself to the position of Queen Regent, acting in place of her son Joffery, and later her son Tommen. Her position allows her to rule over Westeros, albeit for a short amount of time. Her rule only lasts a short time as the patriarchal apparatus constantly works to remove Cersei from power. Although her rule is complicated because she is regent to the throne, she is able to use this system to her advantage. She takes control of the Small Council, and manipulates the other members into doing what she wants. Although she takes power within the confines of the patriarchal system, she is able to work the system to her advantage.

Cersei is aware of her role in the patriarchal society, and the role her gender entails. She realizes the gender difference at a young age and begins to think of how to use it to her advantage. She knows that “Men had been looking at her that way since her breasts began to bud” and she thinks, “*Because I was so beautiful, they said, but Jaime was beautiful as well, and they never looked at him that way*” (Martin AFfC 345). Though they are both attractive, Cersei is objectified because of her beauty. Cersei is able to take this objectification and subvert it, using it to her own advantage. After Jaime is sent away Cersei continues to use her body to achieve her



goals. When Cersei suspects that her son's wife Queen Margery is gaining too much power she begins plotting to have Margery discredited. She schemes with a knight of the Kingsguard, Osney Kettleblack, that he will seduce Queen Margery so she will be tried for adultery and treason against the King. Cersei promises Kettleblack that if he does so, she will sleep with him, saying, "I am warm." Cersei put her arms about his neck. 'Bed a girl ... I am yours'" (Martin *AFfC* 359). He agrees and she relishes in the power she holds over him, thinking, "*I was made for this...* It was the sheer elegance of it that pleased her most" (360). Cersei does not take a physical pleasure from the sexual acts she engages in for power, but rather she relishes in the feelings of control over others. The men become helpless in front of her, unable to clearly think about what they are doing, seduced by her beauty and the promise of more pleasure to come.

Despite having a large amount of power, she wishes often that she had been born a man, thinking, "*If I were a man I would be Jaime... If I were a man I could rule this realm in my own name in place of Tommen's*" (Martin *AFfC* 763). Cersei understands the limitations of her power in a patriarchal system. She believes the patriarchal message that women are inferior to men and, "She hated feeling weak. If the gods had given her the strength they gave Jaime and that swaggering oaf Robert, she could have made her own escape... She had a warrior's heart, but the gods in their blind malice had given her the feeble body of a woman" (Martin *ADwD* 719). Cersei's own resentment of her gender drives her to often embody masculine ideals and use her sexuality for power. She also has a strong sexual desire for her own twin, who is in her mind what she would be if she had been born a man. Much of this

desire stems from when she was young and “would sometimes don her brothers clothing as a lark. She was always startled by how differently men treated her when they thought she was Jaime. Even Lord Tywin himself...” (Martin *AFfC* 345).

However, as Cersei grows older her inability to be like her twin drives her to perform as a sexually charged woman. Her sexuality, and use of her sexuality, is a result of her close sexual relationship with her brother. Cersei and Jaime are similar in their appearance, and for much of their early childhood were raised the same way. It is through their upbringing that Cersei is treated differently, raised to be a lady, while Jaime becomes a knight. This close, but separate, upbringing creates in Cersei and Jaime a sexual desire that is initiated by their difference. Their similar early childhoods provoked in Cersei a resentment of her own gender, and an attempt to move beyond her prescribed gender role through sexual exploits. She controls Jaime through their sexual relationship, and drives him to give up his birthright as heir to the Lannister riches to join King Robert’s Kingsguard, thus keeping him close to his sister the Queen. Cersei’s manipulations ensure she always has Jaime’s support and affection.

The patriarchal society punishes her for her hyper-sexualisation, and her use of her female body for her own personal gain. Cersei faces the additional challenge of being punished by the patriarchy, but continues to work against it. As a noblewoman in Westeros, her sexual nature is not natural, because in a patriarchal society, sexual desire is a masculine domain. Patriarchal societies believe “The libido-as-masculine is the source from which all possible sexuality is presumed to come” (Butler 72). With this belief it is impossible for women to naturally have any

sexual desire. In Westeros, men view sexuality as a male domain because the libido resides in the masculine form, and not in the feminine, and the patriarchal system is revealed to be hypocritical in its treatment of women. While King Robert's penchant for adultery is viewed by the Westerosi court as a normal event, when Cersei is (rightfully) accused of "murders and fornications" she is imprisoned (Martin *AFfC* 935). Her power is stripped from her in an instant because she is a woman who is acting outside the realm of her gender. However, she is still able to continue using the patriarchal system to her advantage because of the carefully manipulated network she has created. She understands the system, and her role within it. From within her prison she continues scheming, sending messages to her trusted men, and working to craft her return to power. She confesses to her crimes and her punishment is to be completely shaved, and marched through the city naked. She endures crude taunts from the crowd— "'Whore' and 'sinner' were most common"—and it is not until the final moments of her march that she covers herself or tries to run from the crowd (Martin *ADwD* 856). Still, at the end of her march she is reunited with her ally Qyburn who has followed through on her orders, laying the groundwork for her revenge. At the end of her final point-of-view chapter in *A Dance With Dragons* she is optimistic that her honour and power will be restored and thinks to herself, "Yes, ... *Oh, yes*" (Martin 859). Even when faced with a seemingly insurmountable climb back to power, she seems poised to do so in the planned final two novels in the series. 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. Despite gaining her power in a patriarchal system, Cersei is in fact using her sexuality as a method of subversion.

Daenerys is Westerosi by birth, but her family was exiled across the Narrow Sea to Essos. She is married into a people called the Dothraki, who travel in large groups called *khalasars*. Daenerys is *Khalessi*, or Queen, of a *khalasar*, and becomes *Khalessi* after her marriage to *Khal* Drogo. However, Daenerys defies tradition by remaining as *Khalessi* after Drogo's death. In Dothraki tradition when a *Khal* dies his wife is taken to the city of Vaes Dothrak to live amongst the *Dosh Khaleen*, the group of former *Khaleesis* who serve as fortune-tellers for the Dothraki. When Drogo dies, Ser Jorah tells Daenerys, "They will take you to Vaes Dothrak, to the crones" (Martin *AGoT* 707). However, Daenerys does not agree to go, and this causes a rift in what had previously been a large *khalasar*. Many of Drogo's warriors leave, unwilling to follow the young *Khalessi*, but many also stay, willing to break tradition to follow their new young Queen. Unlike Cersei who uses her body and sexuality to manipulate and gain power over others, Daenerys is able to gain the respect and loyalty of her followers because they witness the birth of three dragons. Daenerys walks into her husband's burning funeral pyre with three fossilized dragon eggs and emerges unburned and with three live dragons. These dragons are symbolic because the sigil of House Targaryen is a three-headed dragon. These are the first dragons born for hundreds of years, and they help Daenerys gain her power (Martin *AGoT* 806-807). Steinweg argues that Daenerys only gains her power from this "fantastical moment" (13). However, to say that Daenerys only gain power because of her Dragons, as Steinweg seems to imply, is an overstatement. Daenerys is not alone at

the birth of the dragons; she is still surrounded by many of Drogo's warriors. These warriors could have easily dispatched Daenerys and taken the dragons for their own. Instead, many chose to follow her, and look upon her as their leader, and do not care about her gender. Those who enter her service are unconcerned that she is a girl of thirteen (Martin *AGoT* 28), and focus on her leadership qualities, though her commands often are met with confusion by those who are unused to them. When faced with her power for the first time men react accordingly: "The gap-toothed smile faded from the giant's broad brown face, replaced by a confused scowl. Men did not often threaten Belwas, it would seem, and less so girls a third his size. Dany gave him a smile, to take a bit of the sting from the rebuke" (Martin *ACoK* 883).

While most people in Westeros mistrust Cersei because of her power, Daenerys commands absolute respect in her followers. While Cersei is destabilizing the court from within, Daenerys instead creates a new type of society, moving away from traditions. While some of her followers dispute her right to rule, when she gives orders, "no word was raised against it. They had been Drogo's people, but they were hers now. *The Unburnt*, they called her, and *Mother of Dragons*. Her word was their law" (Martin *ACoK* 189). Daenerys has no right to lead, at least not under the Dothraki customs, but she does not care and works to change the system in her new *Khalasar*. The people are willing to follow her because she is a strong leader, and because she is the Mother of Dragons; they fear and respect her, and wherever they travel she is always met with curiosity, fear, and marriage requests. Her group of loyal Dothraki bloodriders, and her steadfast Queensguard, keep her out of danger

even as her control over the *khalasar* places her at odds with the patriarchal societies she moves through.

It is in these societies that she meets resistance to her rule. Despite this resistance Daenerys continues to gain power and eventually ends up in the slaving city of Astapor. While in the city she is able to exploit the attitudes surrounding her status as a leader. The leaders of the slavers often call her a whore and a slut, among other names, when they speak about her in High Valyrian (Martin *ASoS* 310-322). Unbeknownst to them, Daenerys can understand them, and knows of their schemes. In addition to insulting her behind her back, they do it to her face as well saying, “Woman, you bray like an ass, and make no more sense” to which she replies, “‘*Woman?*’ She chuckled. ‘Is that meant to insult me? I would return the slap, if I took you for a man’” (Martin *ASoS* 576). Daenerys is unaffected by the attitudes towards her rule. She has power and has no need for their opinions. The loyalty that she inspires in her *khalasar* means that she is safe from those who would try and remove her from power. She uses this attitude to her advantage, and tricks the slavers. As they appear poised to take a dragon from her in exchange for an army of slaves, she counters their plan of deception, and quickly overthrows the city’s rulers using her dragons and new army (Martin *ASoS* 379-381). Soon afterwards she frees her slave army and gives them the opportunity to join her as free men, and they do, inspired by her leadership and power. While she is seen as a woman, and often looked upon with desire by outsiders, Daenerys uses her gender to her own advantage, and inspires extreme loyalty from those who follow her.

Daenerys is made a widow late in *A Game of Thrones* (The first volume in *A Song of Ice and Fire*), and is still very young. At the beginning of the first novel she is thirteen, and probably fourteen when her husband dies, based on the fact that she becomes pregnant soon after her wedding and carries a child nearly to term (Martin *AGoT* 715). It is not until *A Dance with Dragons* that she takes another male lover (Martin *ADwD* 483); because she is haunted by a desire for *Khal* Drogo, she feels unable to seek pleasure from another. Her memory of the pleasure she experienced with Drogo disables her ability to attain pleasure elsewhere. Daenerys is never able to reach the same level of pleasure as her initial love with Drogo, and so she will always be left with desire. As Butler writes, “This full pleasure that haunts desire as that which it can never attain is the irrecoverable memory of pleasure” (106). The pleasure of her time with Drogo stays with her and informs her choices as she begins feeling a desire for a new lover. Unlike Cersei, Daenerys’ sexual desires are not tied to her power. Her sexuality and desire are presented as an integral part of her personality, but not as a method for control or power over others. Daenerys defies the continuous calls for her to remarry and instead she remains an unmarried Queen, violating the ideals of the patriarchy where power must stem from men. Still, her desire for Drogo remains after his death, and finally her desire reaches a peak and she gives into it:

Once, so tormented she could not sleep, Dany slid a hand down between her legs, and gasped... Still, the relief she wanted seemed to recede before her, until... Irri woke and saw what she was doing.

Dany knew her face was flushed, but in the darkness Irri surely could not tell. Wordless, the handmaid put a hand on her breast, then bent to take a nipple in her mouth. Her other hand drifted down across the soft curve of the belly, through the mound of fine silvery-gold hair, and went to work between Dany's thighs. It was no more than a few moments until her legs twisted and her breasts heaved and her whole body shuddered. She screamed then. (Martin *ASoS* 345)

Daenerys finds the release she needs in Irri, and it is a release that continues to defy the patriarchal society. By turning to her handmaid for sexual pleasure Dany rejects the notion that she needs a new husband. She is able to rule on her own, and she does not need a husband for sexual pleasure either. However, she is still haunted by her original memory of pleasure, "*It is Drogo I want, my sun-and-stars*, Dany reminded herself. *Not Irri... only Drogo*" (Martin *ASoS* 345). This desire for Drogo does not immediately drive her into the arms of a similar lover. She continues her dalliances with Irri, and seems to also enter into a sexual relationship with another handmaid, Missandei. The two comfort each other when they are unable to sleep, "Missandei hugged her tighter. 'Your Grace should sleep. Dawn will be here soon, and court.' 'We'll both sleep, and dream of sweeter days. Close your eyes.' When she did, Dany kissed her eyelids and made her giggle. Kisses came easier than sleep, however" (Martin *ADwD* 151). Daenerys continues to satisfy her sexual desires in a way that does not satisfy the patriarchy. As desire is meant to reside only in the masculine figure, Daenerys destabilizes this belief. Not only is she a woman, but she



also explores her desire with other women, subverting the patriarchal belief system governing female sexuality.

The patriarchal system of Westeros is also subverted by Arya and Sansa Stark, characters introduced early in Martin's epic. The two characters grow and evolve throughout the narrative and function as foils for each other. Although they are raised together, the two Stark girls have very different views on their gender. Their mother, and a religious woman, the Septa Mordane, raise them to be proper ladies. The concept of society influencing gender is demonstrated in Simone de Beauvoir's argument that, "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (qtd. in Butler 11). Therefore gender is not determined by biological sex, but by the social conditions of upbringing. The societal roles and treatments of the different sexes make up the basis of what becomes gender. Women are treated differently than men, and so they end up behaving differently. Individuals are shaped by their upbringing, and this upbringing changes based on biological sex, thereby creating the male/female gender binary. In Westeros the construction of woman, and of gender in general, is particularly evident when examining the two Stark girls. They must engage in needlework while their brothers learn swordplay in the yard. The gendered difference in the education of the Stark children creates an expectation for how they must act. It is Sansa, the older sister, who takes lessons to heart: she is entertained by tournaments, swoons at the romantic attention of the prince, and always "remembered her courtesies, and she was resolved to be a lady no matter what" (Martin *AGoT* 544). Sansa is, for most of *A Game of Thrones*, shown as wanting to be the ideal lady, but this desire diminishes in later volumes as she becomes

aware of her political surroundings. Arya is raised as a proper lady, but finds herself unhappy with the prescribed activities for women. While Septa Mordane describes Arya's hands as being unfit for needlework and because she has "the hands of a blacksmith" (*AGoT* 68), it is in swordplay that she truly shines. Arya is given a small sword by her bastard half-brother Jon Snow, which they dub Needle, a jest at her poor needlework. This gift pleases Arya because it defies the traditional notions of the skills needed by a girl. Arya's father recruits Syrio Forel, a Braavosi swordmaster, to train Arya in the intricate sword fighting style of Water Dancing (Martin *AGoT* 224-225). This style of swordfighting suits Arya because of her slender physical size, and because she is conveniently able to tell people she is taking dancing lessons. Her need to hide the true nature of her training from everyone, including her sister Sansa, indicates the entrenchment of gender norms in Westeros, and Arya's wish to move beyond them. She is not content to play the part of the proper lady. Through her training with Syrio Forel, he is uninterested in her gender saying, "Boy, girl... You are a sword, that is all" (Martin *AGoT* 224). 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. Her choice to move beyond her gender and act as she wishes leads to her identity constantly being mistaken, especially when she is seen outside her noble context of wearing fine dresses and jewellery. The young Prince and Princess, who know Arya as a noblewoman, do not recognize her when they see her roaming the castle and believe her to be a poor boy causing her to think to herself, "*They don't know me, Arya realized. They don't even know I'm a girl*" (*AGoT* 340). It is in this moment that Arya truly realizes that to the

outside world her gender is not always apparent. While Sansa had teased her about her inability to do proper needlework, she now begins to realize that her disconnect from her gender runs deeper. Her identity is not rooted in her gender and she is able to react fluidly and perform her gender to suit her needs.

Arya is faced with a traumatic experience of witnessing her father's execution at the orders of King Joffery. It is after this event that she is stopped by Yoren, a man of the Night's Watch, who cuts her hair off and insists on calling her "boy" (*AGoT* 727-8). This moment is the first time that she purposefully begins to act as a male consciously. Through her ability to outwardly perform as a male, she is able to escape the city, as the watchmen are looking for a young noblewoman, not a boy being taken by the Night's Watch. 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, which is Sansa's fate after Eddard Stark's execution. Instead of escaping the city like Arya, Sansa is quickly taken to a tower room and locked inside (*Martin AGoT* 741). Sansa remains betrothed to Joffery, and knowing her life is in danger, she relies on staying in favour with Joffery and Queen Cersei. Sansa, who had always embraced her lessons, works to convince her captors of her loyalty to them, renouncing her family as traitors. Even when Joffery has her beaten she "always remembered her courtesies" (*AGoT* 750). Sansa is always polite to the knights who are sent to beat her, even as her childhood ideals evaporate before her eyes. She consciously works to perform as a proper lady, and as a result overperforms her role. Her conscious choice to give her captors courtesy begins to border on a parody

of her gender performance. While her former life had been full of romanticized notions of the chivalry of knights, she sees how horribly the knights treat her while caring little that she is a woman. Her life becomes a performance as she works to convince her captors that she remains a proper lady, and as a result she goes beyond what is normal for women in her society. She becomes aware of this performance, and uses it to her advantage, thinking, "What was it Septa Mordane used to tell her? *A lady's armor is courtesy*, that was it. She donned her armor" (Martin *ACoK* 50). She uses this armour to her advantage, for as long as she pretends to be a proper lady her life, is not in danger. Her ability to move beyond an unconscious ability to perform her gender, and move into a conscious performance illustrates Sansa's knowledge of the patriarchal system and her subversion of the system for her own gain.

This performance does not convince everyone, and the King's uncle Tyrion Lannister, is able to spot her lies. However, he is kind to her and tells her, "Well, someone has taught you to lie well. You may be grateful for that one day, child" (*ACoK* 492). Sansa's conscious understanding of her performance causes her to become disillusioned with her life and with those who continue to unconsciously perform as proper ladies. Everything that she had ever believed, and ever been taught, is revealed to be false. She looks at the other ladies of the court and thinks, "They are children. They are silly little girls... They've never seen a battle, they've never seen a man die, they know nothing. Their dreams were full of songs and stories, the way hers had been before Joffrey cut her father's head off. Sansa pitied them. Sansa envied them" (Martin *ASoS* 222). Sansa is able to subvert the patriarchy

for her own needs, but still look at the other women's unconscious performance and realize how she has changed. Her worldview changes from an innocent young lady who believes in the glamour and chivalry of the system to the viewpoint of someone who understands the system.

Arya and Sansa are both able to subvert the system and use it to further their own goals, namely their survival despite the constant threat of death. Arya's gender-switching performance allows her to elude the capture of the forces that killed her father. She is able to exploit stereotypes and fool guards, knights, and her fellow Night's Watch recruits into believing she is a boy. Sansa also exploits stereotypes of gender, but instead of switching genders she performs her own gender to the extreme. By performing consciously as the proper lady she is able to hide in plain sight of a hostile court.

Therefore, 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. The tradition of male-dependant women begins with Tolkien, whose works contain very few female characters. Martin's continuation of the Tolkienesque genre includes many characters that work against the traditions. The figure of the traditional knight is shown to be false by having Jaime appear to be the chivalric knight, when he is in actuality an oathbreaker that cares little for others, while in contrast, Brienne is not a true knight, but is able to exemplify the chivalric code and set an example for Jaime

to follow after he is emasculated through the loss of his sword hand. Gender performance is used by both Arya and Sansa to survive after the death of their father. Arya disguises herself as a male and uses her ability to cross genders to evade capture and keep herself alive. Sansa uses gender performance to exaggerate her own gender and convince her captors that she is a proper lady. Their use of gender performance allows them to hide their true motives and stay alive. Martin's depictions of strong female characters give his fantasy series an element that is severely lacking in the foundation texts of the Tolkienesque fantasy genre. The use of female characters in Martin's series shows how the fantasy genre has changed and evolved since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954.

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