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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Representation of Motherhood in Game of Thrones

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Abstract The social and cultural construction of motherhood places countless rules and regulations upon women for both those who have children and those who do not. This article analyses how motherhood is portrayed in the popular TV series *Game of Thrones (GoT)* (HBO, 2011-2019). Using the radical feminist texts *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Rich, 1986) and *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (Oakley, 1974), the article identifies three themes in the portrayal of motherhood: motherhood as duty, status, and ideal. *GoT* portrays motherhood as a duty that cannot, and should not, be evaded, but that simultaneously grants women unique power in the private sphere, all the while upholding the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' mothers. Ultimately, the portrayal of motherhood in *GoT* is multifaceted and at times critical of its social and cultural construction. But by depicting the punitive consequences of resistance, the series does not go far enough to challenge the construction itself.

Keywords
radical feminist theory, motherhood, representation, social constructionism, Game of Thrones

Introduction

Radical feminism strives to eradicate patriarchy: the unequal power structures in society that oppress women. The theory's main goal, thus, is to identify, understand, critique, and ultimately abolish the patriarchal social and cultural constructions designed to keep women submissive and men dominant. These structures are situated and operate in both the public and private sphere. Examples include rape culture (Brownmiller, 1975) and the beauty industry (Wolf, 1990), as well as the constructions of sexuality (MacKinnon, 1989) and motherhood (Oakley, 1974; Rich, 1986). The social construction of motherhood is the focus of this article.

At its core, social constructionism poses that knowledge, and many aspects of the world, are only real because they exist through social agreement (Burr, 1998). Any identity is linked to expected ways of behaviour, they are regularly reiterated and reinforced to maintain the identity's meaning. Actors involved in these processes are numerous, among them parents, teachers, peers, and mass media (Gonzalez-Mena, 2014). How motherhood is portrayed in fiction is an important contribution to the understanding of motherhood in reality,

> …not because such representations are an accurate reflection of reality but because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted familial relations, define sexual norms and provide 'common sense' understandings about motherhood and maternal behaviour for the contemporary audience. (Feasey, 2012: 9)

To examine the understanding of motherhood in reality, this paper will analyse how it is portrayed in the popular TV series *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. I selected *Game of Thrones* for its iconic status in modern pop culture. The series has won 59 Emmys and countless other awards and drew in roughly 33 million viewers in its final season. Set on the fictional continents Westeros and Essos, the series follows several noble families as they struggle for power and influence in the world. One of these families is House Lannister, whose daughter Cersei is married to King Robert Baratheon. Together, they have three children—officially. In truth, the children are the result of Cersei's near life-long incestuous affair with her twin brother Jaime. Throughout the wars, other noble houses' schemes, and Cersei's own unwise acts, eventually claim her children's lives; she descends further and further into madness and ultimately dies alongside her life-long partner/brother.

Drawing from key radical feminist texts on the construction of motherhood, I will discuss how the portrayal of Cersei is reflective of, and possibly influences, the social construction of motherhood in Western cultures. Cersei is of course not the only mother figure in *GoT*; I focus on her because her narrative parallels preconceived ideas of biological motherhood most clearly. Although radical feminist theory has been used in the past to critically analyse works of fiction and contemporary popular culture[1] research on the representation of motherhood in fiction that utilizes a radical feminist lens is scarce. This article will therefore become a valuable contribution to the discourse surrounding the portrayal of motherhood in works of fiction and its implications for the understanding of motherhood in reality.

Research consisted of a qualitative approach in the form of a thematic content analysis, which facilitates the application of multiple theories across a range of epistemologies, and allows for broad themes and contexts to emerge (Saldana, 2009). Three themes were then developed through iterative engagement between tropes of motherhood identified within radical feminist theory and the data itself.

The article is divided into four parts. After this introduction, I will review motherhood in radical feminist theory, focusing on the texts *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Rich, 1986) and *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (Oakley, 1974) and work out three key themes in the literature. In the following section, I will apply my findings to the portrayal of motherhood in *Game of Thrones* and discuss if and how Cersei Lannister is confined by patriarchal expectations regarding her motherhood, and if and how her characterization embodies, challenges, or rejects this construction of motherhood. The last section will conclude.

[1] See Downing, 2013; Heldman & Wade, 2010

Motherhood in radical feminist discourse

Of the numerous radical feminist writings on motherhood, this article will mainly draw from two sources. These are Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986) and Ann Oakley's *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (1974). *Of Woman Born's* impact on the debate surrounding motherhood cannot be overstated. Although over forty years old, the book is still debated and referenced in feminist discourse today, not least because 'Rich was the first feminist to articulate both the oppressive and potentially empowering components of maternity' (O'Brien Hallstein 2007: 269). In her book, Rich (1986: 13) argues that biological motherhood is divided in two, namely, 'the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control.'

Rich harshly criticises this institutionalised aspect of motherhood—and this aspect alone—throughout her book. She reasons that institutionalised biological motherhood is one of patriarchy's most successful methods for men to 'determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male' (1986: 57). According to Rich (1986: 276-277), institutionalised biological motherhood becomes apparent in numerous ways, such as:

> Marriage as economic dependence, as the guarantee to a man of 'his' children; the theft of childbirth from women; the concept of the 'illegitimacy' if a child if born out of wedlock; […] the denial that work done by women at home is a part of 'production'; the chaining of women in links of love and guilt; […] the solitary confinement of 'full-time motherhood'; the token nature of fatherhood, which gives a man rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility; the psychoanalytic castigation of the mother; the burden of emotional work borne by women in the family—all these are connecting fibres of this invisible institution, and they determine our relationships to our children whether we like it or not.

The inevitable outcome of institutionalised biological motherhood is that mothers are put on a metaphorical pedestal while simultaneously being under incessant scrutiny. Performing the unattainable role of selfless, fulfilled, full-time mother takes a toll on the mothers' personal well-being, which, Rich argues, is the desired effect of institutionalised motherhood: by keeping women confined to motherhood and domesticity and socialising them into believing motherhood is their calling; patriarchy can contain the perceived threat women's fertility poses. Institutionalised biological motherhood thus secures men's positions of power in society while at the same time ensuring their children's moral and emotional well-being.

Rich's suggested solution is to reject motherhood as an institution and embrace motherhood as an experience. Only by rearing children feminist-style, free of patriarchal rules and expectations, can women reshape and redefine motherhood: 'to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work.' (Rich, 1986: 280)

Rich encourages mothers to see the relationship to their children as something unique that is theirs to shape and build however they think is best. This relationship can and should not be the all-defining

aspect of a woman's life; her personality, her own needs and desires, and her life without her children deserve equal dedication and priority, because only a happy mother is a good mother.

Woman's Work (Oakley, 1974), albeit less present in contemporary feminist discourse, is a valuable second source in the context of this article. In her book, Ann Oakley makes no distinction between motherhood as an experience and an institution, instead she argues that biological motherhood in its entirety is a social and cultural construct. She explains that the myth of motherhood contains three popular assertions:

> The first is the most influential: that children need mothers. The second is the obverse of this: that mothers need their children. The third assertion is a generalization which holds that motherhood represents the greatest achievement of a woman's life: the sole true meaning of self-realization. Women, in other words, need to be mothers. (Oakley, 1974: 186)

These three beliefs are reinforced in both the public and private sphere and constrict women in much the same way as institutionalised biological motherhood according to Adrienne Rich. By reiterating the assertion that all children need their (biological) mothers, any mother who does not fully dedicate herself to raising her children within a confined 'one-to-one relationship' (Oakley 1974: 203) is easily branded a 'bad' mother. This assertion robs mothers of all independence enforcing the idea that all day, every day, their own needs must succumb to the needs of their children.

The second claim, that mothers need their children, is a necessary requirement to uphold the first assertion. Oakley explains under patriarchy, women are told that they all have a 'maternal instinct'. According to this myth, any 'real' woman and mother will desire to care for her children and prioritise their needs over her own. Oakley denies that a maternal instinct exists and instead argues that 'the desire for motherhood is culturally induced, and the ability to mother' is learned (1974: 201).

The third assertion, that all women need to be mothers, is more general, its symptoms are more widespread. Oakley poses that girls are socialised to desire becoming a mother from an early age: 'motherhood is the chief occupation for which females are reared' (1974: 190). Indeed, femininity under patriarchy is intricately interwoven with the desire to be a mother, and women who do not want children are seen as unfeminine. These three assertions, together, deny any woman personhood. A woman is reduced to a vessel that yearns to be filled, and every woman who does not desire motherhood is seen as abnormal, wicked, and just plain wrong.

Constructions of motherhood: duty, status, ideal

A synthesis of these key works reveals three themes. Firstly, that motherhood under patriarchy is duty. Rich's institutionalised biological motherhood and Oakley's three assertions all portray motherhood as every woman's highest calling. Women under the patriarchy are expected to want to become mothers.

This theme follows that mothers who adhere to their maternal duties under patriarchy have a higher status in society than childless women. Mothers, thus, hold maternal power. This theme features in several feminist writings, most notably Simone de Beauvoir's famous *The Second Sex* (2009: 630; first published 1949), where she theorises that children satisfy each women's desire to hold as much power and influence as men.

This power, however, is not to be abused for 'selfish' reasons—mothers are expected to prioritise their children's needs over their own. This brings forth the third theme: that there is a maternal ideal after which all mothers should strive, lest they be branded a 'bad' mother.

Motherhood in Game of Thrones

Motherhood under patriarchy: motherhood as duty

> When we think of the institution of motherhood, no symbolic architecture comes to mind, no visible embodiment of authority, power, or of potential or actual violence. […] We do not think of the laws which determine how we got [here], the penalties imposed on those of us who have tried to live our lives according to a different plan […], the experts—almost all male—who have told us how, as mothers, we should behave and feel. […] We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood. (Rich 1986: 275)

Institutionalised motherhood, concludes Rich, ensures women's submission by imposing strict duties upon them. Oakley agrees with Rich; she calls motherhood 'the most persuasive and the least questionable' rationale 'offered for women's presence in the home' (1974: 186).

Maternal duties are abundant in *GoT's* medieval society, where young boys dream of being kings, lords, and priests, and young girls dream of being their wife, and mother of their children. One such young girl was Cersei Lannister. Growing up with her twin brother Jaime, Cersei soon observed a difference in the way the two children were reared:

> Cersei: Jaime was taught to fight with sword and lance and mace, and I was taught to smile and sing and please. He was heir to Casterly Rock, and I was sold to some stranger like a horse to be ridden whenever he desired. (GoT 2.09, 2012)

According to Oakley, this serves a clear purpose: to condition young girls with 'standards which insist that anything less than domestic perfection is a crime against their own natures' (1974: 274). While Jaime was taught to assert himself, Cersei was taught to adapt to her surroundings, please others, and 'be ridden whenever [her husband] desired', regardless of her own desires. Cersei's marriage to Robert Baratheon, the King, is an unhappy one; Robert's intercourse with Cersei serves a purpose besides lust fulfilment: 'The fathers have of course demanded sons, as heirs [and] images and extensions of themselves; their immorality' (Rich 1986: 195). Cersei's duty is to ensure the continuity of the Baratheon dynasty.

Over the course of their marriage, Cersei thus gives birth to four children, three boys and one girl. But unbeknownst to everyone, only one of her children was fathered by Robert: a boy who died in infancy. Throughout the series, Cersei only mentions him twice; the first time in conversation with another mother. While the royal family is visiting Lord and Lady Stark in their fiefdom and staying in their castle, 10-year-old Bran Stark falls off a tower and into a coma. Over the following weeks, his mother Catelyn refuses to leave his side, not even to bathe or sleep. One day, Cersei finds Catelyn in Bran's room to express her sympathy and share the story of her son:

> Cersei: I lost my first boy, a little black-haired beauty. He was a fighter, too; tried to beat the fever that took him… Forgive me. It's the last thing you need to hear right now.
> Catelyn: I never knew.
> Cersei: It was years ago. […] The boy looked just like [Robert]. Such a little thing. […] They came to take his body away and Robert held me. I screamed and I battled, but he held me. (GoT 1.02, 2011)

This scene holds immense symbolic value. Cersei enters the chambers as queen: dressed in beautiful clothes, her posture perfectly elegant. Catelyn, on the other hand, is wearing a simple dress that hangs loosely from her shoulders. The women are presented as opposites: Cersei graceful and regal, Catelyn haggard and worried. But Cersei appears to take no offence; she understands a mother's grief. She has not come to meet one of her royal subjects, but another mother. When Cersei begins talking, she does not take her eyes off the little boy fighting for his life. She tells the story more to herself than to Catelyn. Soon, Cersei catches herself and even apologises, knowing it might have upset Catelyn further. Only then does Cersei look at Catelyn and speak to her. Cersei's story is constructed as a catharsis. She ends by promising Catelyn to pray to the Mother, one of the seven gods, daily. "Perhaps this time she'll listen," she adds sharply.

Yet one twist remains: before his fall, Bran caught Cersei and Jaime having sex. To keep their incestuous affair secret, Jaime caused Bran's fall. Cersei's fear of Bran waking up and exposing her secret is thus juxtaposed against her genuine grief and anger at her brother for his actions. Her experiences as a mother, it seems, have altered her personality, complicated her emotions—unlike Jaime, who seemingly cares little for Ban's fate. The scene portrays Cersei as still sad and angry over her son's death. She clearly loved her black-haired boy—regardless of the man who fathered him, because: 'mother-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the institution of motherhood' (Rich 1986: 46).

But soon, Cersei's anger is revealed. Several episodes later, Cersei has just been confronted by Lord Stark, who has deducted that her three surviving children are not Robert's, but the product of a near life-long incestuous affair of Cersei and her twin brother, Jaime.

> Eddard: [Your children] are all Jaime's.
> Cersei: Thank the gods. In the rare event that Robert leaves his whores for long enough to stumble drunk into my bed, I finish him off in other ways. (GoT 1.07, 2011)

Cersei admits that she does not love her children because they are her children—but because they are her children *with Jaime.* She loves them *conditionally*. This contradicts the assertion that all mothers need (all) their children.

Between the death of her son and now, much has put a strain on Cersei's marriage to Robert, not least his excessive drinking and the open contempt he holds for his wife. Divorce is not an option in the medieval society: their marriage cements a crucial political alliance (*GoT* 1.05, 2011). Cersei is stuck in her domestic role, a role that expects women to 'abdicate their personhood for the sake of maternity' (Oakley 1974: 68). In this role, Cersei is expected to love all her children unconditionally, and 'to be ridden' whenever Robert desires. But after years of physical and emotional abuse, Cersei refuses to comply with her duty to have children with the 'right' man and instead chooses the father of her children

herself, thus rebelling against her duty to be a 'good', loving mother to *all* children: Robert is 'finished off in other ways' to prevent a pregnancy while children from Jaime are loved. The black-haired boy seems to have faded in her memory because he was fathered by the wrong man. Even before the end of the first season, Cersei went from being a 'good' wife and mother to being vain, angry, and defying the institution of motherhood and the assertions that dictate women must love all their children unconditionally (Rich, 1986). Instead, Cersei has—as far as possible—embraced motherhood as an experience under her own terms. Nevertheless, her patriarchal surroundings force her to play the role of dutiful wife and mother to veil her secret.

Cersei's portrayal challenges the narrative that women have a 'maternal instinct' (Oakley, 1976) and illustrates that motherhood under patriarchy is an institution. Although Cersei quietly rebels against these enforced duties, she is not portrayed as a feminist heroine. *GoT* constructs maternal duties as just that: duties, not gladly-made choices. But by utilizing Cersei's lack of compliance to reflect her descent into evilness that is taking place over the course of the series, *GoT* ultimately conveys the message that motherhood includes duties that must not be evaded. As Cersei evolves into one of the main antagonists of the narrative, her failure to fulfil her maternal duties transforms her character from one that is sympathetic to one reviled. Cersei's character construction ultimately conveys one message: that any evil woman must be a bad mother, and any bad mother cannot be a good person.

Maternal power: motherhood as status

> The power of the mother has two aspects: the biological potential and the capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women. (Rich 1986: 13)

This 'magical power' is the subject of this section. Rich argues that it can be given voluntarily, by worshipping women for their fertility, or involuntarily, by being afraid of it. Because of this fear, women's power is heavily regulated under patriarchy, and restricted to motherhood, 'the one aspect in which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense—authority over and control of another' (Rich 1986: 67).

Cersei Lannister wields immense maternal power, first as queen (wife of King Robert) then after her husband's death, as queen regent (mother of King Joffrey). I include her status as wife in this analysis because:

> In the social image of a woman, the roles of wife and mother are not distinct from the role of a housewife. […] 'Housewife' can be an umbrella term for 'wife' and 'mother'. Women's expected role in society is to strive after perfection in all three roles. (Oakley, 1974: 9)

It is this reduction of wives and mothers to housewives that Cersei most disdains. She rejects the passivity associated with femininity (to 'smile and sing and please', *GoT* 2.09, 2012). In one episode, a battle is raging in the city. While the men are fighting the conqueror's army, Cersei and the other noble ladies are hiding in a safe location. Cersei is unhappy with this arrangement and laments, 'I should have been born a man. I'd rather face a thousand swords than be cooped up inside with this flock of frightened hens.' (GoT 2.09, 2012).

Cersei is clearly unfulfilled with her status as wife and mother; however, she does not criticise the construction of femininity as a whole—just that its rules apply to her as well. Cersei still associates femininity with weakness, but implies that she is 'better' than the other women. This internalised misogyny influences a lot of Cersei's decisions throughout the series. To prove her worth *despite her sex*, Cersei is continuously looking for ways to extend her power into the public, 'masculine' domain of politics: in season one, she is instrumental in orchestrating Robert's death and installing her son Joffrey as king. After Joffrey's murder, his brother Tommen succeeds him. As Tommen is only fourteen, Cersei is installed as queen regent, which grants her masculine, public power for the first time. Tommen soon marries Margaery Tyrell to ensure a political alliance, and his new wife proves very influential over the young man. To eliminate this threat to her power, Cersei kills her daughter-in-law and numerous other people who have wronged her. Her son Tommen, shocked by his mother's violence, then commits suicide, and Cersei seizes power by crowning herself queen.

Her regency, however, is characterized by war, rebellions, and invasions. Abandoned by all allies except one, Cersei is unable or unwilling to rule wisely as the country descends into chaos. Jaime, her lover, grows increasingly distant and eventually leaves Cersei just as she begins preparing the city for an invasion by a foreign queen. Although Cersei is pregnant with his child, his departure is not portrayed as cowardly or disloyal. On the contrary: Jaime walks away with his head held high, to triumphant music, and is then seen galloping away, conjuring up images of knighthood (*GoT* 7.07, 2017). It is made clear that Cersei is not to pity, instead, the scene frames Jaime as the hero finally emancipating himself from this mad woman. One season later, however, he returns to her, reasoning:

> Jaime: You think I'm a good man? I pushed a boy out of a tower window, crippled him for life. For Cersei. I strangled my cousin with my own hands just to get back to Cersei. I would have murdered every man, woman and child in Riverrun for Cersei. She's hateful. And so am I. (GoT 8.04, 2019)

The two reunite as the invader is destroying the city and they die in each other's arms, in the rubble of the castle collapsing around them. Cersei's arc demonstrates the punitive consequences for mothers striving for more than maternal power. Although Cersei loves her children very much, she longs for more than just fulfilment through motherhood. Adrienne Rich would applaud her for this desire to be herself and see motherhood as merely an extension, and not a definition, of her femininity. Cersei's push for individuality, however, is unsuccessful. Her desire to enter and dominate the masculine, public realm, cost her sanity, caused a cruel war in the realm, and claimed her and her family's lives.

> The doctrine that women belong in the home never carries more conviction than when it is allied with 'proof' that women's activities outside the home are detrimental to the health and welfare of themselves, their families, and their country as a whole. (Oakley, 1974: 47)

Maternal power in *GoT* is domestic power, power within the family, and within the rules of patriarchy. Cersei's arc upholds the divide between the feminine private domain and the masculine public domain, showing that any mother who longs to carve out an identity for herself beyond her motherhood, will hurt her children and face punishment. *GoT* enforces the belief that women's power should remain restricted to maternal power.

Good mother, bad mother: motherhood as an ideal

> It is all too easy to accept unconsciously the guilt so readily thrust upon any woman who is seeking to broaden and deepen her own existence, on the grounds that this must somehow damage her children. That guilt is one of the most powerful forms of social control over women; none of us can be entirely immune to it. (Rich, 1986: 206)

Maternal duties are tied to high expectations for the mother. 'Female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood' (Rich, 1986: 13). Mothers who hold on to their individuality are quickly labelled as a 'bad' mother. *GoT* mostly follows this pattern: Cersei is set against another mother figure, Catelyn Tully Stark, the woman whose son fell off a tower in the first season. The consequences of their different mothering styles are revealed throughout the series.

Although Cersei considers everyone who is not herself, or her children, 'an enemy' (*GoT* 1.03, 2011) and has several feuds and animosities; her relationship to Catelyn is constructed in most detail and results in numerous actions that are crucial to the plot. Despite the two women only talking to each other in two short scenes in season one, the series constructs them as each other's main opposite until Catelyn's death in season three. As outlined above, Cersei Lannister is constructed as a vain mother who rejects the maternal duties placed upon her under institutionalised motherhood and instead tries to mother under her own terms, while also reaching for patriarchal power in the public sphere.

In this aspect, Catelyn is Cersei's polar opposite, which is ingrained in her character from the very beginning. In Westeros, each noble family has 'house words', which point out the house's characteristics and serve as a moral compass. The Lannister words are 'Hear me Roar', and Cersei is trying to achieve just that throughout the series – to be heard and have her power recognised outside her family. The words of House Tully, on the other hand, are 'Family, Duty, Honour'—in this order (*GoT* 1.05, 2011). Throughout the series, Catelyn lives by these words, putting her family above all other duties (such as the duty to her king) or her honour. No action of Catelyn's is not motivated by her desire to fulfil her maternal duty to her family: after her husband is beheaded by the king and her son goes to war to avenge him, Catelyn dutifully remains by his side throughout the war, giving him council and forging important alliances. Until her death, Catelyn is the 'good', heroic mother in *GoT*—with one exception. When he returned from the last war sixteen years prior, her husband Eddard brought with him his illegitimate child, fathered during the war. The boy, whose maternity was unknown, grew up with Catelyn and Eddard's legitimate children. Not wanting to live with a painful reminder of her husband's infidelity, Catelyn treated Jon coldly until he left the castle.

This is the only aspect in which Catelyn and Cersei are similar, whereas Cersei prevents having a baby from the 'wrong' father, Catelyn refuses to love a baby from the 'wrong' mother. Unlike Cersei however, Catelyn feels remorse for her actions later, going as far as calling herself a 'murderer' for praying the boy would die. In a dialogue with her daughter-in-law, Catelyn concludes: 'And everything that's happened since then, all this horror that's come to my family, it's all because I couldn't love a motherless child' (GoT 3.02, 2013).

It seems doubtful that the war could have been avoided if only Catelyn had more maternal feelings towards Jon, but the series does not explore this claim further and instead leaves it up to the viewer to disagree with or blame Catelyn. In any case, Catelyn herself feels responsible for everything because,

like Cersei, she loved children *conditionally*. Any reasons she might have had for this are not brought up in this scene. Her trouble embracing her husband's bastard is constructed as evil, and Catelyn is portrayed as an imperfect mother. She has denied Jon a mother figure—herself—and thus defied the assertion 'all children need their mothers'. The scene, however, serves as Catelyn's repentance. By blaming herself for literally *everything*, Catelyn again becomes the angelic mother saviour: she shoulders all the blame, exonerating her husband and sons for all their transgressions (which have caused the war much more directly than she did). She accepts the guilt thrust upon her for failing her maternal duties so her remaining family can be guilt-free. This restores Catelyn's heroic persona, despite her alleged imperfections.

Cersei, of course, does no such thing throughout the series; she never apologises for defying any motherly rules because she does not accept that the rules apply to her. By carving out her own identity beyond her motherhood, she has wreaked havoc in the kingdom, which ultimately led to the deaths of her family members. To forge wartime alliances, her son Joffrey agreed to marry Margaery Tyrell and was poisoned by his new in-laws during his wedding because his new wife wanted the status, but not the abusive husband (she married Joffrey's kinder brother Tommen instead, who succeeded Joffrey to the throne). Cersei's daughter Myrcella was fostered with an insubordinate noble family in the hopes this would make them more loyal to the crown, but was murdered by them to avenge an old death. Her son Tommen killed himself because of her violent acts, and her lover Jaime was unable to free himself of her toxic hold of him and chose to die with her. Cersei's actions are a much more direct cause of her family's deaths than Catelyn's are of 'everything', yet Cersei refuses to see this or accept responsibility. Cersei, until the end, remains a 'bad', selfish mother—and this becomes even more apparent when compared to the heroic, ideal Catelyn.

The portrayal of motherhood in *GoT* upholds and consequently enforces this dichotomy of good mother, bad mother: although neither mother is portrayed as purely good or bad; the narrative nevertheless constructs one as the villain, the other as the saint of the story. What ultimately makes Catelyn so heroic is not that she is always 'good', but that she accepts her maternal duties and does her best to fulfil them. This reinforces the message that a woman's character is tied to her performance as a mother: mothers fulfilling their maternal duties are loved, while mothers defying them are disparaged and lose their children's, and everyone else's, respect. This negates women's personhood beyond their maternal role.

Conclusion

The construction of motherhood continues to place rules and regulations upon women. This article has analysed how the TV series *Game of Thrones* shapes, reinforces, and conveys narratives associated with the construction of motherhood under patriarchy. The discussion addressed the portrayal of Cersei Lannister and examined if and how the series' patriarchal societies influence the construction of motherhood, and if and how Cersei accepts or defies the resulting expectations placed upon her.

The article used a radical feminist lens to interpret the role of motherhood within *GoT*, drawing from the texts *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Rich, 1986) and *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (Oakley, 1974). Through iterative engagement between the texts and the series' raw data, I fleshed out three main themes that became the focus of the analysis: motherhood as duty, motherhood as status, and motherhood as an ideal.

The section *Motherhood under patriarchy* addressed the first theme. It analysed how Cersei adapts to the maternal duties placed upon her under patriarchy. The section found that *GoT* depicts duties and obligations associated with motherhood, which are regularly portrayed as restricting. Within the series, maternal duties are constructed by patriarchal structures and enforced via patriarchal agents through education, peer pressure, societal expectations, and brute force, consequently conveying the message that motherhood comes with duties that cannot, and should not, be evaded.

The second section, *Maternal power*, explored the status Cersei holds because of her motherhood, and asked if she holds more, less, or different power than men. The analysis found that, while Cersei does have unique, maternal power, this power exists solely within the private, feminine sphere—and it operates whether Cersei wants it or not. Attempting to reach into the public realm herself has fatal consequences not just for Cersei, but for her family as well, which ultimately reinforces the notion that a woman's place is in the household.

The third section, *Good mother, bad mother*, explored motherhood as an ideal. It found that *GoT* embraces this idea and forces its mother figures Cersei and Catelyn into one of these strict roles, thus upholding the dichotomy.

The way *GoT* portrays each of the three themes reflects and contributes to the understanding of motherhood in society as a finely entangled web of obligations, restrictions, and privileges that follows women throughout their lives, whether they have children or not. Motherhood on screen is thus portrayed as what Adrienne Rich would call an institution (1986), and the expectations placed upon mothers are reinforced through generalised assertions (Oakley, 1974). Cersei is regularly portrayed as rebelling against this confining construct, shining a light on the challenging aspects of motherhood and casting doubt on the patriarchal beliefs that motherhood comes natural to all women, that all women enjoy being mothers full-time, and that motherhood is all any woman needs to find fulfilment and accomplishment (Oakley, 1974). Many of Cersei's challenges are a direct result of the patriarchal structures under which she lives, and a consequence of the social and cultural construction of motherhood prevalent within her social environment. *GoT's* portrayal of motherhood, and Cersei's struggles with the construction, therefore illustrates the negative effects of a patriarchal understanding of the construction of motherhood.

However, *GoT* does not reward mothers who rebel against this construction. Cersei faces punitive consequences for her failure to comply with the rules and regulations placed upon her by the construction of motherhood. By portraying these punishments, the series ultimately conveys the message that the construction of motherhood, albeit flawed, must not be defied. Ultimately, the portrayal of motherhood in *GoT* thus acts as a patriarchal tool to reinforce women's subordination as it is asserted via constructed motherhood by limiting their power and possibilities and keeping them restricted to a life dedicated to childrearing.

Thanks to courageous women such as Adrienne Rich, Ann Oakley, and many more—many of them mothers themselves—the 'chaining of women in links of love and guilt' (Rich, 1986: 276) and 'the most persuasive and the least questionable' rationale 'offered for women's presence in the home' (Oakley, 1974: 186) have been identified, addressed, and included in radical feminist theory. By critically portraying this oppressive construction in pop culture, the producers and writers of popular TV series can make a small, but important, contribution to highlighting the negative effects of

institutionalised motherhood under patriarchy. Portraying feminist mothers on screen, thus, will be an important, and long overdue, contribution to feminism's efforts to dismantle oppressive patriarchal power structures influencing mothers and childfree women alike.

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