

## **Non-Conforming Femininity in Game of Thrones: An Analysis of Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth**

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**Abstract** The male gaze is a theory that was developed by Laura Mulvey (1975), addressing the objectification of women in classic Hollywood films. While the male gaze is highly criticized, it is still applicable today and is presented in the representation of women in current media, like the television show *Game of Thrones*. The power of the male gaze can be seen in the female character's nudity, the sexual violence directed towards female characters, and how women access political power through sexuality and fertility (Ferreday, 2015; Genz, 2016; Frankel, 2014). While women in *Game of Thrones* are not powerless, their access to power is through conforming to typical forms of femininity, which means that their access to power is restrained and controlled. However, not all female characters conform to gender ideals, like Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth. The objective of this paper is to examine how the male gaze can account for the treatment of non-gender-conforming female characters in *Game of Thrones*, using feminist qualitative content analysis. Looking at non-gender-conforming characters is critical to understanding the diverse ways the male gaze is used to punish female characters, coercing them into femininity. Based on the analysis undertaken as part of a MA thesis, this paper found that although non-gender-conforming female characters were given more liberties than female characters in *Game of Thrones*, they were still subjected to the control, coercion, and discipline of the male gaze, even if in non-sexual ways.

**Keywords:** The Male Gaze, Non-conforming Femininity, Media Studies

## Introduction

In 1975, Laura Mulvey developed the theory of the male gaze. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Mulvey (1975) states that women are objectified in classic Hollywood films. While the male gaze is highly criticized, it is still applicable today and is presented in the representation of women in current media, like the treatment of women in *Game of Thrones*.

*Game of Thrones* is a television show adapted from the bestselling fantasy series *A Song of Fire & Ice* by George R.R. Martin, by David Benioff and Daniel Brett Weiss (Tkale, Zilic & Recher, 2017). The cultural phenomenon of *Game of Thrones* started in 2011 when HBO released the first season, and it came to an end in May of 2019. The story of *Game of Thrones* takes place in Westeros and Essos with elements of neo-medievalism; the fantasy world created assimilates the medieval culture with contemporary features (Marques, 2019). The plot of the show revolves around the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms and the constant fighting between noble families to sit on the throne. It specifically focuses on Daenerys, who believes she is the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. Alongside her journey to return to Westeros, other battles and enemies arise.

The male gaze is a prevalent influence in the representation of women in *Game of Thrones*. The impact of the male gaze can be seen in the female character's nudity and sexual violence directed towards them (Frankel, 2014). The male gaze is also present in the way women in the show gain political power; women access the same power given to men, through marriage and by procreation (Genz, 2016; Frankel, 2014). While women in *Game of Thrones* are not powerless, their access to power is through conforming to typical forms of femininity, which means that their access to power is restrained and controlled.

As the cultural phenomenon of *Game of Thrones* comes to an end, it is essential to look at the cultural effect it had on the last eight years by examining characters from the show. This article will look at two female characters that do not conform to gender ideals, Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth. The current study will explore the question, how can the male gaze account for the treatment of non-gender-conforming characters in *Game of Thrones*? Looking at non-gender-conforming characters is critical to understanding the diverse ways the male gaze is used to punish female characters and coerce them into femininity.

## Literature Review

### *The Male Gaze and its Characteristics*

The feminist analysis of media is fueled by the need 'to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination, and oppression' (Gill, 2007: 7). When talking about women's representations in media, the male gaze is a critical theory because it describes women's objectification in classic Hollywood films. The male gaze was developed by Laura Mulvey in 1975 and states that women's depictions are designed by men, portraying a male point of view, for male pleasure (Mulvey, 1975). Classical Hollywood cinema is a style connected with fiction films produced under the Hollywood studio system between 1916 and 1960 (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). According to Mulvey (1975),

classical Hollywood cinema is also characterized by female characters being used as a display and audiences' identification with the male protagonist. Mulvey developed her account of the male gaze through an analysis of classical Hollywood cinema, but it is still relevant to contemporary media. While the cinematic world has changed – there are now more female protagonists, directors and writers – in *Game of Thrones* the camera still lingers over women's bodies, and 'places viewers in the mind of the male character and emphasize a woman as love or lust interest' (Frankel, 2014: 17).

The power of the male gaze is also used to discipline women characters to gender-conforming images and activities. An example of this is the treatment of Daenerys Targaryen and Cersei Lannister. Both women have political power, yet Cersei is depicted as evil, and Daenerys becomes power crazy. These representations are reminiscent of femme fatale in film noir (Cerny, Friedman & Smith, 2014). Femme fatale is a representation of non-conforming femininity - independent, unmarried, portrayed as evil, and punished or killed because of the threatened male subjects (Cerny, Friedman & Smith, 2014). Femme fatale are strong characters; however, they are not a result of feminism but rather a 'symptom of male fears about feminism' (Doane, 1991: 3).

Mulvey (1975) uses psychoanalysis to construct the male gaze. Scopophilia is the pleasure of looking (Mulvey, 1975) and films provide pleasure for audiences. Usually, these voyeuristic phantasies are related to the women; thus, the female body is traditionally represented in ways that visually pleasure men. Films can also develop scopophilia into narcissistic features (Mulvey, 1975). In films, audiences identify with the images that they see, and through this identification, the development of the ego occurs (Mulvey, 1975). However, the mirror-images in media intended for women are images desired by women, which leads to women's self-image dominated by discontent because images of women are imagined and constructed by men, for men (Coward, 2001).

Psychoanalysis and feminism have a complicated relationship. In the 1960s, feminists regarded psychoanalysis as their worst enemy, as some feminists thought Freud was responsible for the emergence of an anti-feminist movement (Chaudhuri, 2006). The critiques toward Freud's work extends to Mulvey's work. Studlar (1985), believes that the binary and oppositional nature of Freudian theory translates into a psychoanalytic analysis of cinematic pleasures. One of the limitations of this perspective is the heterosexual nature of the male gaze (Albertson, 2018). However, Mitchell (1990) proposes that Freud is relevant to feminism as he suggests that the unconscious is timeless. Mitchell (1990, cited in Chaudhuri, 2006: 18) suggests that 'psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society but an analysis of one'.

Mulvey's (1975) theory has been criticized for its heavy emphasis on the male audience. Mulvey (1981: 123) expands on the issue of the female audience in her 1981 essay, which focuses on female spectators and the protagonist that are 'unable to achieve a stable sexual identity,' which means that spectators and protagonists are torn between passive femininity and regressive masculinity. For women, trans-sex identification is a habit, and they do this when they want to be, or feel, active and in control. The female audience and the female characters get pleasure from identifying with the male characters and all the freedoms they have. Further, Mulvey (1981) suggests that women can only accomplish this by regressing before their phallic phase, where women succumb to repressing masculinity. The male gaze remains compelling and valuable for the analysis of women in cinema, and in the case of the current paper, of television shows.

### ***Femininity***

There are different ways of defining femininity. Simone De Beauvoir (1949) believed that femininity has no psychological, biological, or intellectual basis, but that instead, femininity and gender are produced by culture and society. Judith Butler (1988) agrees with de Beauvoir; however, she takes a post-structuralist approach towards gender. This means that Butler (1988), like Foucault (1978, cited in Butler, 1988), believes that there is conflict and power in the creation of meaning. Butler (1988: 520) defines gender identity as ‘a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo’.

Butler (1988) states that performance and performativity are two different things. While performing has individual freedoms to pick and choose when to act, performativity is the repetition of repressive and harmful gender norms that create a meaning for such norms. Further, Butler (1992) states that when a woman classifies herself as a woman, the identification is forced, cultivated, and patrolled. Whenever someone acts in a way that is inconsistent with their identified label, there is a punishment, which is usually linked with shame. Based on Butler’s definition of femininity, non-gender-conformity is when someone refuses to ‘do gender’ or gender performativity, despite the pain and punishment that is involved in breaking away from social, gendered expectations.

### ***Gender and Game of Thrones***

Television shows like *Game of Thrones* might seem trivial to study; shows are forgotten as their popularity decreases. Nevertheless, television shows, like films, are not ideologically neutral, but rather a ‘signifying system with its own representational legacies, established ropes, industrial constraints, and political baggage’ (Columpar, 2002: 26). Films and television shows have meaning, and this meaning is created by the cinematic world, which is controlled mostly by men. *Game of Thrones* is based on a book series written by a male author and adapted by two male writers and directors, who ultimately decided how women were represented in the show.

*Game of Thrones* has given rise to several debates concerning feminist discourse. One of the controversies is whether *Game of Thrones* is feminist or not. Some people believe that the show cannot be feminist, as female characters are subjected to sex, nudity, and violence in a way male characters are not (Ferreday, 2015; Frankel, 2014). Nevertheless, some fans state that the show is feminist, as female characters in *Game of Thrones* are more than sex objects, ‘they’re subjects of their own narrative’ (Morrissey, 2013, cited in Ferreday, 2015: 24). Women are strong characters that participate in political power, like Cersei and Daenerys, and yet, the representations of women exercising political power do not always challenge gender hierarchies (Clapton & Shepherd, 2017). In *Game of Thrones*, the male gender is represented as dominant, and women are portrayed as receiving their power from marrying men, having men's children, or allying with men (Genz, 2016; Frankel, 2014).

Cersei and Daenerys are women with immense power in the show. However, both characters are represented as spiraling into madness with power (Cerny, Friedman & Smith, 2014). These representations are reminiscent of femme fatale. Both characters are characterized as independent and powerful women, yet, their power is their downfall, and both characters die because of this in the last season (Cerny, Friedman & Smith, 2014).

Moreover, Genz (2016: 243) states that female characters having sex appears to take a 'male supremacist meaning'. For women, sex becomes a survival or negotiation tool. Cersei tells Sansa that a woman's best weapon is 'between her legs'. According to Genz (2012: 245), 'this "gotta fuck" agenda is defused and masked by being channeled through a hetero-constructive script of romance, marriage, and patriarchal kinship'. *Game of Thrones* tends to follow well-defined and traditional gender identity scripts, wherein the women are elevated for their reproductive function, and the men are celebrated as fighters (Genz, 2016).

In *Game of Thrones*, female characters have the power of their sexuality, but it is also a weakness as female characters are raped and threatened with sexual violence (Ferreday, 2015). Sexual violence in *Game of Thrones* is another source of controversy. People believe that the scenes depicted in *Game of Thrones* where women are raped and silenced resonates with the current rape-culture, where victims are too often silenced and ignored. Specific rape scenes, like when Ramsay rapes Sansa, are often criticized. Part of the controversy is that this scene does not happen to Sansa in the book series; it happens to another character. The directors argued that they decided to give Sansa that storyline because she needed more narrative in that season (Phillips, 2016).

There has been previous research on non-conforming characters in *Game of Thrones*. Hartinger (2012) states that there is a surprising number of protagonists who are non-conforming characters labeled 'social rejects', like Bran Stark who is disabled, like Samwell who is overweight, and like Jon Snow who is a 'bastard'. Additionally, Hartinger (2012: 155) asserts Arya and Brienne are fascinating because they are considered outsiders; they do not behave like 'ladies' even though they are women, and women are 'considered outsiders by mere virtue of their gender'. Further, Marques (2019) focuses her analysis on female non-gender-conforming characters such as, Brienne, Arya, and Yara. Marques's (2019) study does not address the treatment of non-gender-conforming characters with the use of the male gaze like the following paper will.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This research was conducted through feminist qualitative content analysis, the 'systematic study of texts and other cultural products' through a feminist lens (Hesser-Biber & Leavy, 2007: 227). Feminist qualitative content analysis was chosen because it allowed the study of cultural artifacts and the use of theoretical frameworks through a deductive approach. Using a feminist perspective is an advantage because feminist research can have a significant role in how culture is studied and comprehended. Cultural artifacts are part of the process by which ideas are produced, spread, and consumed; they are part of the process by which women and men are perceived (Hesser-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

While research is considered 'orderly, coherent, and clean,' the process of investigation is ideological as the researchers cannot detach themselves from their values and opinions (Letherby, 2003: 5). A way to address the researcher's positionality is through a brief statement of why the research topic was selected (Leavy, 2000). This research emerged from watching the show as a fan and rooting for the strong women in the show. However, it became harder to cast aside the critical evaluations of the show. Though there are

several strong women to look at, female non-gender-conforming characters were of interest for the researcher because their treatment was different.

Another limitation of the methods is that qualitative research is known to be subjective (Bryman, 2012). To be able to minimize a biased engagement with the data, a coding system was developed for the data to be observed and treated systematically. Finally, the findings of qualitative research are not generalizable because of the role the researcher plays in the study. However, research findings can be valued by placing the results of the research in a specific context, without claiming the findings tackle universal truths.

### ***Data Sampling and Data Analysis Procedure***

For the current study, the cultural artifacts sampled were episodes from the HBO series, *Game of Thrones*. *Game of Thrones* was chosen because the cultural phenomenon was coming to an end, and the fate of all the characters was decided. While other characters are not gender-conforming, Arya and Brienne, have an intriguing relationship with their femininity.

From the eight seasons and 73 episodes of *Game of Thrones*, six episodes were selected. Firstly, the show was observed from February to May 2019. By the end of May, HBO's Episode Guide (HBO, 2019) was used to take notes on all the episodes where Arya and Brienne appeared. Considering the theoretical framework selected, a coding system was developed. Coding is the process of 'identifying and recording' data items that 'exemplify the same theoretical or descriptive idea' (Gibbs, 2007: 38). The initial codes used to analyze the data were within the theoretical framework, meaning concept-driven coding. Therefore, the codes were developed from previous literature, in this case, from Mulvey (1975 & 1981) and Butler (1988). Then the episodes were re-watched, and notes were made with special attention to occurrences of Arya and Brienne being sexualized (male gaze), acting in non-gender-conforming ways (gender performativity), and whenever they appeared secondary to male characters (male gaze). However, new codes emerged as the data was analyzed, and the developing codes were connected to the theoretical framework. The new emerging codes look at Arya's and Brienne's rejection of their femininity (connected to gender conformity), men threatening characters because of their gender (male gaze), women's bodies as men's entertainment in a non-sexual way (male gaze), the characters stories serving as tales of caution (male gaze), and escape from the male gaze (female spectatorship theory). Once all the episodes were coded, episodes within the same thematic category were compared and contrasted to select the best representation of each code.

For the analysis of Arya, *Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things* (1.4) was chosen because Arya rejects her femininity, but Eddard expects Arya to eventually conform to classical femininity. *The Night Lands* (2.2) was selected as it demonstrates Arya escaping the male gaze by pretending to be a boy. *The Knight of the Seven Kingdoms* (8.2) was selected as Arya is subjected to the male gaze in a traditional, objectifying way.

For the analysis of Brienne, *The Walk of Punishment* (3.3) was selected as there were elements that signified the lack of Brienne's control over her own body. *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* (3.7) was also selected because it demonstrated the mockery of Brienne and her coercion into femininity by wearing a dress. *The Last of the Starks* (8.4) was selected because there was an element of power as Jaime initiates sex with Brienne: there is an element of punishment on the other side of the camera as the writers and directors decided Brienne would not end up with Jaime.

After the six episodes were selected, they were re-watched once more. Then a deductive approach was applied to the data, which means that the episodes were analyzed, and the data gathered was connected and examined through Mulvey's work (1975 & 1981).

## **Findings**

This section will provide a brief description of the episodes selected for the analysis. Following, a brief description of the episodes will be used as data and the findings gathered from each episode will be summarized. The findings will then be discussed in the subsequent section.

### ***Arya Stark***

#### *Season 1 Episode 4: Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things*

Eddard Stark (Arya's father) finds out that Arya has a sword and tells her that she can keep it only if she trains with Syrio Forel, a sword instructor. Arya asks her father if Bran (Arya's brother) will become a knight even though he is paralyzed. Eddard says that he will not be a knight, but instead could be a lord. Then Arya asks if she can be a lord too. Eddard laughs and tells her that she will marry a lord, rule his castle, and have children that will be knights, princesses, and lords. Arya responds that it will not happen as this is not her.

This is a short scene, but it is significant as it shows Eddard understands that Arya is very different from Sansa, Arya's older sister. However, Eddard expects Arya to eventually be a lady, like Sansa. So, Arya can 'play' around with masculinity and masculine things, like sword-fighting, but only while she is a child. Nevertheless, Arya is still expected to turn into a stereotypical woman, doing womanly things like marriage and birthing children.

#### *Season 2 Episode 2: The Night Lands*

Arya is traveling with a group of boys and men heading to 'The Wall', all the while, she is pretending to be a boy. Guards from King's Landing arrive at their camp, and Arya hides, telling Gendry (one of the boys) that they are looking for her. When the guards leave, Gendry asks Arya if they were looking for her because she is a girl. After making Gendry promise he will not disclose her secret to others, Arya finally confesses that she is Arya Stark. Gendry is very surprised, not because she is a girl, but because she is 'highborn'. Gendry starts calling Arya 'my lady', and Arya tries to explain that while her mother and sister are ladies, she is not. This episode shows how Arya uses masculinity as a protection mechanism. This episode also displays how at the beginning of their relationship, Gendry does not care that Arya is a girl.

#### *Season 8 Episode 2: The Knight of the Seven Kingdoms*

After some time, Gendry and Arya meet again. Gendry is in Winterfell building weapons for the fight against the Night King. Arya looks very impressed at Gendry's work and follows him with her gaze. Arya proceeds to take a dagger, while talking with Gendry, throwing it into a wooden pole. Gendry is captivated by Arya's skills.

Later, everyone is getting ready for the battle. Arya is practicing archery, and Gendry walks in with her new weapon. They start talking, and Arya tells Gendry that they are probably going to die soon and that

she wants to know what sex feels like. Arya kisses Gendry, and they start undressing each other. Gendry is lying, and the camera shows half of Arya's back as she takes her shirt off while Gendry is looking at her.

In this episode, the sexual side of Arya is displayed. Even when Arya is being sexualized for the first time, she is not passive about it. This sex scene is very true to Arya's character, where she is not the typical passive female character.

### ***Brienne of Tarth***

#### *Season 3 Episode 3: Walk of Punishment*

Brienne is tasked by Lady Catelyn Stark to escort Jaime Lannister to King's Landing in exchange for her daughters. After days of traveling, some men from House Bolton take them prisoners. Jaime argues that if he were not chained, he would have been able to fight and escape, yet Brienne does not agree.

Brienne tells Jaime that she was beating him in the fight even though she is a woman. Jaime gets mad and tells Brienne that when they make camp at nightfall, the Bolton men will rape her and she should let it happen. Jaime goes as far as to say, he would rather die than be a woman. As Jaime predicted, the men tried to rape Brienne. Nonetheless, Jaime convinces Locke, the head of the group, that Brienne's father would pay many sapphires to whoever returned his daughter. Brienne is shown to have no power at all to protect herself. Brienne's rape gets prevented by men negotiating; in this scene, all the men have the power over a woman's body.

#### *Season 3 Episode 7: The Bear and the Maiden Fair*

Jaime tells Brienne that she is to remain in Harrenhal as punishment for assisting treason, while Jaime will travel to King's Landing. Jaime finds out that Locke did not accept Lord Selwyn Tarth's offer for his daughter's safe return. Jaime goes back to Harrenhal and finds Brienne wearing a dress, fighting a bear with a wooden sword, while all of Locke's men are having fun watching. Jaime jumps into the pit and pulls her behind him. A man shoots an arrow at the bear, distracting him, allowing Brienne and Jaime to get out of the pit. While Brienne is depicted as independent and strong, she still needs Jaime to save her. Additionally, this episode demonstrates how, even if not in a conventional way, female bodies are used to entertain the male characters.

#### *Season 8 Episode 4: The Last of the Starks*

After the battle against the Night King and White Walkers, Jaime and Brienne are celebrating. Brienne and others were playing a drinking game, consisting of guessing things about people. Tyrion (Jaime's brother) guesses that Brienne is still a virgin. Brienne, rather than answer the question, stands up and leaves. Later that evening, Jaime knocks on Brienne's door, telling her she did not drink for the last statement. He walks in and pours her a drink. After talking, Jaime tries to take his shirt off, but Brienne must help him. Then Jaime kisses Brienne, and they have sex off-camera.

A few days after the battle against the Night King, Sansa tells Jaime that Cersei (Jaime's sister and lover) will not make it out alive. Jaime decided to try to save Cersei. Brienne begs Jaime to stay and tells him he is not like his sister. Jaime tells Brienne that he is as hateful as Cersei. Brienne is used to develop Jaime's



characters as a ‘good guy’ throughout the show and then to prove how Jamie has not changed. It also demonstrates how Brienne can have her career, but not love.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Arya and Brienne are women in *Game of Thrones* that do not get their power from their sexuality, marriage, or by birthing children. Brienne and Arya are not the representation of ideal or ‘normal’ womanhood, but both characters are stereotypical as ‘strong warrior women are coded masculine, while mothers and lovers are coded feminine’ (Frankel, 2014: 39). This is aligned with Mulvey’s (1981) theory regarding female spectatorship. Brienne and Arya are two non-gender-conforming female characters that are ‘unable to achieve a stable sexual identity’ (Mulvey, 1982: 123). This oscillation is the key to their power; their power comes from their interaction and access to masculinity.

Further, both stories are cautionary tales of the consequences of women, not following feminine scripts. While Arya is very good at ‘exploiting power’ whenever she can, Arya also carries an ‘emotional toll’ as she is focused on revenge (Spector, 2012: 178). Brienne is a romantic; however, she refuses to conform to female beauty and to accept that as a woman, her only role is to look beautiful. Brienne’s rejection of the traditional ideals of feminine beauty comes with a price. In the last season, Brienne got to be a knight in the King’s Guard but did not get to be with the man she loved.

#### ***Arya Stark***

Arya is a character that stays true to herself. While Gendry asks her to marry him, she decides to travel west and explore. While it is impressive that Arya gets to be herself, as her dad gives her liberties, her representation is sometimes stereotypical. Arya is stereotypical because she must give up her femininity and is subjected to the male gaze in the last season.

Arya’s escape from the male gaze might be, because she starts in the show as a young girl, and later on pretends to be a boy to protect herself. During the first season, Arya’s character is consistently shown to ignore and reject what is considered her female identity, and this is a choice. However, the threat of rape is always present, and it is used to discipline female characters (Spector, 2012). The coercive act of rape towards female characters demonstrates how femininity is a liability. Like female characters in some Hollywood films, Arya must acquire a male persona to be able to wield power and actively protect herself (Mulvey, 1981). For Arya, the rejection of femininity is no longer an exploration of gender, but rather a tool for survival.

Moreover, the lack of objectification and sexualization might be explained by the oscillation between femininity and regressive masculinity (Mulvey, 1981). According to Freud, femininity develops from a period that is masculine, or phallic, for both sexes (Mulvey, 1981). After the Phallic period, where both girls and boys have access to masculinity and its freedoms, ‘femininity sets in’ (Freud, 1964, cited in Mulvey, 1981). In Arya’s case, this means that while she is young, she gets to access masculinity and explore gender without repercussions.

However, eventually she is required to suppress her masculine side. Eddard makes it clear that eventually, Arya will be expected to marry and have children, just like her sister. This is an accurate representation of

how women are coerced into giving up their freedoms, expected to serve men. There is also a constant comparison between Arya and Sansa who is portrayed as the 'ideal women'. So, while Arya is represented as a new type of woman, she is still compared, highlighting how Arya's behavior and attitudes are not 'normal'.

While Arya escapes the gaze for most of the television show, she is subjected to objectification in the last season. When Arya is showing off her acquired skills by throwing daggers, Gendry looks at her. This shows that Arya is not like most female characters, but it also demonstrates that Arya is no longer a little girl, she is a woman. From this point on, Arya and Gendry exchange sexually-charged looks, and while Arya is not represented as powerless in their sex scene, she becomes like other female characters, where the male gaze is part of her representation.

In the sex scene between Arya and Gendry, there is a noteworthy power dynamic. Unlike other sex scenes on the show, this a consensual sex scene between young adults. Additionally, while at first Arya is being subjected to the power of the male gaze, she also takes control, showing a different female perspective. It could be argued that female spectators would identify with Arya as she initiates sex, and somewhat takes control by using the female gaze. Mulvey (1981) theorized that female audiences identify with oscillating characters as they have some of the power men have, and this happens with Arya.

Nevertheless, subjecting Arya to the male gaze is like giving up part of her childhood liberties and giving into femininity. While it is not a coercive act, Arya having sex with Gendry does conform to heteronormative rules. Butler (1988), states that gender and sex are controlled and policed through the institution of heterosexual marriage, as society constructs natural sex, from which gender is then based on, and later, natural attraction between opposing sex and gender is created, to maintain reproduction. The decision to make Arya heteronormative is attached to male spectators identifying with male characters. While the sex scene is different from others, it still follows the typical process of narcissism and ego ideals – involved in the male gaze – as the male audience can identify with Gendry (Mulvey, 1975). Further, it needs to be considered that Arya is given power and control over her body as a non-gender-conforming character that renounces her femininity. Her power still comes from masculinity.

### ***Brienne of Tarth***

Brienne is disciplined for her non-conforming nature much more than Arya. At the beginning of her relationship with Jaime, Jaime mocks Brienne's appearance, always targeting her gender or her lack of femininity. In the episode *Walk of Punishment*, Brienne insults Jaime's fencing skills. Jaime, with no 'comeback', tells Brienne that she is going to be raped at nightfall. This is a male character disciplining the female figure. Jaime goes as far as telling Brienne that she should let it happen, because she has so little power over her own body and protection. This retribution can be explained by comparing it to the treatment of femme fatale. While Brienne is not a femme fatale, she challenges the male gaze like one. Brienne's non-gender-conformity makes people label her as a deviant; thus, she is threatened with rape. When Jamie is caught off guard by Brienne's emasculating remark, Jamie 'puts her in her place' by threatening rape as an act of punishment, reminding her of her place in the world.

The fact that Jaime must negotiate and stop the rape from happening, shows how the male gaze is applied to Brienne. This scene revolves around Brienne's body, yet two men negotiate what should happen to her. Brienne is shown as a secondary character to all the male ones; her wants, needs, and her own body do not belong to her. This makes Brienne the 'bearer of meaning', meanwhile Jaime, Locke, and Lord Tarth are the 'makers of meaning' (Mulvey, 1975: 6). The fact that Brienne does not display any nudity does not mean that the power of the male gaze is not present, instead, the near-rape scene 'focuses more on the emotional pain of the ordeal' (Frankel, 2014: 13).

Another example of Brienne's lack of control over her own body is when Locke chooses to use Brienne as entertainment. Even with the absence of nudity and sexual connotations, there is still power in the gaze of the male characters, making Brienne seem less than human. The fact that Brienne is wearing a dress in the scene is humiliating to her, it is a punishment because Brienne refuses to be referred to as a lady. Brienne wearing the dress is a representation of being forced into femininity.

Further, both scenes help the development of Jaime as a character more than Brienne's. While Jaime is used as a comparison to Brienne, and it highlights Brienne's loyalty and honor, it also points out Brienne's denial of femininity (Marques, 2019). Jaime emphasizes how Brienne defies all rules of gender. Additionally, Brienne is used to highlight Jaime's character arc. His interactions with Brienne serve as proof that Jaime is becoming a 'good guy'.

Unlike Arya, Brienne appears to have less power in her sex scene. However, Brienne is shown to have interest in men romantically and sexually very early in her character arc. The sex scene with Jaime can be interpreted as character development. Yet, all this scene does is provide more insight into Jaime than Brienne because it shows how Jaime has not changed at all.

Time and time again, Brienne is regarded as a secondary character in service to men. Brienne is not represented as servicing men by an advantageous marriage or by having children. Nevertheless, she supports Jaime's role by providing him with chances to develop his 'soft' side and become better, supporting him when nobody else believed in him, and eventually having sex with him.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the research was to analyze the treatment of Arya and Brienne, non-gender-conforming female characters in *Game of Thrones*, through the male gaze. A feminist qualitative content analysis based on Mulvey's (1975 & 1981) and Butler's (1988) work was utilized to address the question of the article.

Both characters are not a conventional representation of womanhood as they do not get their power from their sexuality and fertility. However, they are stereotypical representations of warrior women, and they are coded masculine. The research found that both characters give up their femininity to access power not granted to female characters, meaning their power stems from their masculine traits and behavior. The study also found that although non-gender-conforming female characters were given more liberties than female characters, they were still subjected to the control, coercion, and discipline of the male gaze, even if in non-sexual ways.

Arya manages to escape the male gaze when she is a young girl, and she oscillates between 'active masculinity' and 'passive femininity', as part of the phallic stage (Mulvey, 1981). However, she is still expected to eventually fit into the ideal feminine role of marrying a lord and having his children. While Arya manages to remain un-conforming to gender ideals, she is subjected to the objectifying nature of the male gaze as soon as she is no longer considered a girl and becomes a woman. In the last season, Arya has sex with Gendry, and she exhibits power in this scene. However, the scene conforms to heteronormative parameters as the male perspective is emphasized, and the male audience can identify with Gendry.

Brienne is granted fewer freedoms and gets disciplined more through the threat of rape, mockery and belittling. Brienne is subjected to the gaze, as she is constantly reminded that she is a woman who does not look like a woman and is continually punished for it. She is used for the entertainment of men, and while she is not sexualized or objectified, the gaze is present as there is still control and discipline behind the act of looking. Further, Brienne is used to advance Jaime's character arc, and she is secondary to Jaime.

The findings of the research demonstrate that Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and female spectatorship (1975 & 1981) are still relevant and applicable to the television show *Game of Thrones*. Further, the findings demonstrated that two non-gender-conforming female characters in *Game of Thrones* are still subjected to the power, control, and discipline of the gaze. While it is not accurate to say that both characters are powerless, their avenues to power are through masculinity, so they are limited. Arya's and Brienne's masculine access to power comes with a price, and the price is their femininity. There seems to be an incapacity for femininity and power to co-exist.

While the findings of the research are noteworthy, their application is limited to the television show *Game of Thrones*. Future research could focus on the treatment of non-gender-conforming characters in a variety of television shows and other types of media. Further, it would also be interesting to investigate why female characters have to give up their femininity to receive respect and power – why is it so hard for femininity and power to co-exist?

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