Abstract

This article contributes to existing literature on the connections between gender, International Relations, power, and Game of Thrones. Scholars have demonstrated that there is a clear relationship between power, gender and political authority. Politics and world pop culture relate to one another. The arts have been an indicated as being a catalyst for societal change, showing that some forms of fictional and factual politics have a relationship with one another. This article uses existing scholarship on the gendered dimensions of political power in International Relations to show that Sansa Stark won Game of Thrones by repeatedly rejecting masculine power. Instead, Sansa adopts a policy rooted in feminine power (letter-writing, collaboration, patience and strategy) that win The Battle of the Bastards, and, ultimately, the North’s independence. By doing so, this article shows that the coronation of Sansa Stark represents the triumph of feminine-coded power and policy, and that the rise of such power in the fictional world of Westeros can be mapped onto the non-fictional political world in a number of different examples. In our real world, Sansa’s non-fictional counterparts stand out in stark contrast to a political landscape littered with political ‘strongmen’, who could be read as sabre-rattling pseudo-Targaryens.

Introduction

This article argues that policy and power gendered or coded as feminine won Game of Thrones via the coronation of Queen Sansa Stark; this can be connected to the non-fictional political world through politicians who lead without resorting to masculine codified traits of leadership or power.¹ The majority of society often learns about global politics not from formal teaching (such as an International Relations course) but from news media and popular culture.² Television series such as Game of Thrones are consumed by more individuals globally than the
testing International Relations (IR) theories by utilising popular culture adds socially-constructed texts to our understanding of real-world politics.\textsuperscript{3} Jack Holland argued that \textquote{Game of Thrones} is (nearly) everyone\textquotecolon{s} \textquote{favourite political analogy}\.\textsuperscript{4} Daniel Drezner describes Westeros as a \textquote{zero-sum}, \textquote{harsh relative gains world}, riddled with \textquote{realpolitik}.\textsuperscript{5} George R.R. Martin, the author of the books from which \textit{Game of Thrones} is derived, notes that his fictional world is constructed from the real politics of the Middle Ages, the Crusades, the War of the Roses, and the Hundred Years\textquotecolon{s} War.\textsuperscript{6} And, as Holland notes, this may be why political theories developed by Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes are applicable to Westeros. Martin has also compared President Trump to a \textquote{grownup King Joffrey [Lannister]}, demonstrating how popular culture might help us make sense of the world, including female leadership.\textsuperscript{7} There is an abundance of academic work on the use of the arts as a catalyst for societal change that exceeds the scope of this article, but it is nonetheless clear that some forms of fictional and factual politics have a relationship with one another.\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Game of Thrones} has been the subject of multiple scholarly studies, considering aspects ranging from fan phenomena to geopolitics.\textsuperscript{9}

This article supports and builds upon the work of William Clapton and Laura J. Shepherd on Daenerys, concentrating on Sansa Stark to undertake a close reading of her as the winner of \textit{Game of Thrones} and to examine female leaders in the real world. My argument expands upon Clapton and Shepherd\textquotecolon{s} thesis of \textit{Game of Thrones} as a vernacular IR text, while supporting their use of the series as a way to unpack thinking in IR. My article is also an extension of Holland\textquotecolon{s} 2019 work on how pop culture and world politics relate to one another.\textsuperscript{10} Finally, in addressing whiteness, I am also broadening the scope of Clapton and Shepherd\textquotecolon{s} work, who mention race only once.\textsuperscript{11}

Clapton and Shepherd connect \textit{Game of Thrones} to how people learn about gender and power, highlighting \textquote{the disciplinary positioning of feminist scholarship} and \textquote{the marginalisation of feminist knowledge about power and authority}.\textsuperscript{12} They suggest that the real-world relationships between gender, state power, and masculinity are part of IR, and that Westeros may allow both scholars and students of IR to \textquote{make different connections between political practices}, producing \textquote{different kinds of knowledge in and about I/international R/relations}.\textsuperscript{13} They also argue that the relationship between gender and power is clear, and that the show is a valid visual representation of \textquote{gendered dimensions of the exercise of power and political authority that generally is not captured within the major IR textbooks}.\textsuperscript{14} In early series, Clapton and Shepherd posited that \textquote{war is represented as the exclusive province of men}.\textsuperscript{15} Men are visible political actors, making strategic and political decisions and exercising authority.\textsuperscript{16} In the beginning of the final series of \textit{Game of
Thrones, power has a distinctly feminine face: both the current ruler of Westeros (Cersei Lannister) and the claimant to the throne (Daenerys Targaryen) are women. Female characters such as Daenerys Targaryen, Arya Stark, and Brienne of Tarth are also featured in battle scenes, raining down destruction as effectively as any of their male counterparts. But this representation of war fails to acknowledge players such as Sansa, who often combines her visibility as a public actor with subtler work behind the scenes.

Sansa Stark represents the triumph of feminine-coded power and policy, and the rise of such power in the fictional world of Westeros can be mapped onto the non-fictional political world, standing out against a political landscape littered with ‘strongmen’ who could be read as sabre-rattling pseudo-Targaryens. For example, the Prime Minister of Finland Sanna Marin took time to become established in the political world, beginning her political career at age twenty (Johanna Kantola noted that Marin ‘doesn’t come out of nowhere’). This is comparable to Sansa as a well-established political player in Westeros at the beginning of Series Eight. Like Sansa, Marin took on a leadership role ‘at a volatile, polarized time in Finnish politics’, in which Marin’s party narrowly won a victory over the right-wing populist Finns Party. Like the woman-dominated endgame of Game of Thrones, Marin ascended into a coalition government with five women in top spots, while earlier in the year, Finnish women won a record 93 seats in Finnish parliament (47%). This stands in sharp contrast to the United States of America (US): while women also won a record number of Congressional seats in 2018, women still make up only 23.6% of Congress, and female presidential candidates are still required to be ‘likeable’ to the electorate.

Even in ‘progressive’ countries like Finland, women still suffer under patriarchy. Immigrant women and Sami women in Finland both face discrimination, and immigrant women are less likely to be employed than women born in Finland. There is also a lack of rights for transgender women (e.g., forcing those seeking to change their legal gender to undergo enforced sterilisation). However, Marin’s more progressive and collaborative leadership style correlates with early studies showing that female leaders are more likely to govern in this way. Journalists have noted that ‘at a time when the political life of so many nations (e.g., Brazil, India, Hungary) is being reshaped by leaders in a strongman mould’, Finland shows that there are alternative styles of leadership. The same can be said of Sansa Stark’s ascendency in the North.

Columnists also note that although Finland is a small country of five and a half million people, ‘it punches above its weight in terms of soft power—the egalitarianism, family benefits, and forward-thinking environmentalism that Marin embodies’. Marin is a part of a growing global cohort of women leaders focused on the collective rather than
the individual. For example, Belinda Luscombe summarises Jacinda Ardern’s leadership of New Zealand during and after the terrorist attack in Christchurch:

during a crisis it is possible to lead without telegraphing aggression or playing on anxieties [...]. She made a plausible case that kindness was a strength, compassion was actionable, and inclusion was possible.\(^{27}\)

Luscombe noted Ardern’s ‘ability to articulate a form of leadership that embodies strength and sanity, while also pushing an agenda of compassion and community’ and suggests that she has filled New Zealand with ‘a new kind of soft power,’ quoting political science and IR scholar Professor Bronwyn Hayward:

When you have particular individuals who can harness the moral voice with authenticity and sincerity, that becomes a very powerful moment. Other countries want to be associated with what she represents. [...] it’s helpful for other leaders to be associated with her.\(^{28}\)

Like Sansa, Ardern and Marin emphasise compassion and collaboration, which makes it appealing for other leaders to support her. This stands in opposition to Daenerys and other leaders who opt to burn the doors down before claiming the contents of the room as their own. Perhaps other nations should turn to leaders who lead collaboratively and administer their territories based on feminine-coded policy and power. If, then, ‘propagating constructivist accounts to our understanding of world politics is important’, the victory of Sansa Stark could also encourage viewers to recognise and accept alternatives to masculine power.\(^{29}\)

Just as the election of Barack Obama as President did not negate centuries of racism in the US, the coronation of fictional female leaders, or the election of non-fictional female leaders does not mean that patriarchy is defeated.\(^{30}\) The recent failed presidential bids of Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris, and Elizabeth Warren, and the gender politics surrounding them show that misogyny is far from vanquished in either the West or Westeros (as Clapton and Shepherd concede).\(^{31}\) Additionally, being a ‘feminine’ leader is not limited to being a woman: Obama was called ‘the first female president’ by Dana Milbank in 2012.\(^{32}\) He combined both masculine and feminine leadership to create a unique leadership style.\(^{33}\) Whereas his main opponent during the 2008 primary season, Hillary Clinton, was deemed ‘intimidating’, and to some scholars, adapted a ‘masculine’ leadership style to prove she could be President, which, as this article will show, is similar to Daenerys Targaryen (and, like Daenerys, was Clinton’s undoing).\(^{34}\)
'I Will Take What Is Mine, With Fire and Blood': A Primer on Power in Westeros

Westeros is a continent divided between seven different administrative regions, each ruled by a different noble house. Prior to the conquest and unification of Westeros by the Targaryen dynasty, these regions were independent states. After unification, noble houses retained a significant amount of political influence. The ultimate ruler at the beginning of *Game of Thrones*, who upholds and reinforces the regional power of the noble houses, is the monarch on the Iron Throne in the capital, King’s Landing. At the beginning of *Game of Thrones*, no woman had ever ruled uncontested, something that has clear implications for notions of gender and power in the world-building.

Much academic work has been done on heads of state, and their use of masculinity to perpetuate and maintain power. Supporting Shepherd’s assertion, J. Ann Tickner, in an analysis of Hans Morgenthau’s work, suggests a long association between masculinity and politics, noting that characteristics associated with ‘manliness’ (such as toughness, courage, power, independence, physical strength, violence, and use of force), have consistently been among the most valued and valorised traits in international politics. Tickner goes on to argue that this type of masculinity excludes feminine attributes associated with relationality, contextualism and emotion. In a pioneering work on masculine power in IR, Carol Cohn also notes how the state itself can be coded as male in international politics: ‘[t]he United States frequently appeared in discussions about international politics as [a] “father,” sometimes coercive, sometimes benevolent, but always knowing best’. Like Tickner, Cohn identifies masculinity as a set of attributes (e.g., aggression, risk-taking, action, etc.) that are societally coded as being ‘masculine’ and therefore preferable. Traits that are not deemed ‘masculine’ are then coded as ‘feminine’ by default and discarded as ineffectual. For instance, Cohn posed questions without technical jargon (correlated with aggression), such as ‘escalation dominance’, ‘pre-emptive strikes’, and ‘sub-holocaust engagements’. This was seen as ‘feminine’ and Cohn as ‘ignorant, simpleminded, or both’. Jean Bethke Elshtain has similar findings, and notes how merits that are coded as masculine sustain war and power structures in which masculinity trumps femininity.

Feminine power in international relations is often tied to qualities coded as ‘feminine’ in Western society, such as intuition, empathy, vulnerability, passivity and cooperation. Tickner states:

The most dangerous threat to both a man and a state is to be like a woman because women are weak, fearful, indecisive, and dependent... Characteristics associated
with femininity are considered a liability when dealing with the realities of international politics.  

V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan say that even when a woman wins political office, or has political success, she loses. Women in political office are often accused of supporting the status quo if they align themselves with masculine agendas, or else of reinforcing ‘traditional woman’ stereotypes if they focus on soft issues. As Charlotte Hooper states, such theories essentialise both masculinity and femininity. Olesker discusses Daenerys in the context of how identity and norms are utilised in alliance formation and power transition. I focus on this article for the sake of Olesker’s views on gender, power, and the ‘Other’ in Game of Thrones. A discussion of gender and how it relates to these fields is conspicuously absent in Olesker’s article, which argues that gender ‘is not a feature of alliance formation and thus does not inform the discussion here on transitions of power.’ I disagree: in Series Seven, which Olesker analyses, gender is referenced many times. For instance, Cersei’s alliance with Euron Greyjoy hinges on agreeing to marry him once the war is won. Olesker claims that Daenerys rules by utilising consent (as opposed to Cersei, who rules by command), tying both leaders to John Ikenberry’s work on the differences between a liberal hegemony (Daenerys) and a dictatorship (Cersei), as well as Lake’s work on the importance of legitimacy in sustaining hegemonic order. Olesker writes that while Daenerys is able to force individuals to yield to her power with her dragons, the majority of her allies ‘choose her by explicit consent to rule’. Olesker admits that Targaryen rule by explicit consent is short lived, as ‘Daenerys ultimately abandons the legitimacy of ruling by consent, betraying the norms she previously champions’, a decision which leads to her untimely death by the hands of her allies. Whereas it is clear that Olesker knows International Relations, it is also evident that Olesker does not understand Game of Thrones. It is a tenuous argument to claim that Daenerys Targaryen had, at any point, ruled by explicit consent. The majority of the Dothraki submit only after Daenerys burns the main temple in their capital city to the ground, killing the majority of the Dothraki leadership and making it clear that she controls dragons that can easily kill them all. As other scholars and I have already suggested, dragons are analogous to weapons of mass destruction in Westeros and the Targaryens both identify as and rely upon dragons. This also ties to how masculine identities in IR have concrete effects, such as the perpetuation of nuclear deterrence and war.

Similarly, arguing that the Unsullied ‘consent’ to Daenerys’ rule is comparable to arguing that sharecropping was a resounding success for emancipated slaves in the American South during Reconstruction, when in fact the white planters often attempted to simulate slave conditions.
with their workers whenever they could (such as putting labourers in old
slave quarters, and prohibiting conversation or leaving the plantation
without permission). There is little evidence that Daenerys pays
the Unsullied, something that would differentiate their labour from
enslavement. *Game of Thrones* often shows a Small Council of advisors to
the monarch discussing the minutiae of governance, including the pay of
soldiers and similar forces: one of Lord Eddard Stark’s first policy moves
is to ask for funding to strengthen the Gold Cloaks (the City Watch of
King’s Landing), a pseudo-police force sworn to the Iron Throne and the
books note that there are sometimes difficulties in ensuring that those
employed by the City Watch receive their wages. In comparison, wages
for the Unsullied are hardly mentioned in either medium.

In Series Eight, Daenerys moves her armies to a new continent
without adequate supplies and it is established early on that she expects
to take what she wishes because of her ‘nuclear deterrent’ dragons. In
one notable scene, Sansa expresses frustration at the thousands of
additional human mouths she must feed, as well as two dragons, at a
public council meeting. Exasperated, Sansa asks, ‘what do dragons eat,
anyway?’ Daenerys retorts, ‘whatever they like’. This exchange shows
Daenerys, dragon-like, feeling both entitled and able to take whatever she
wants, while the pack-leader Sansa frets over the masses for which she is
responsible. Notably, Daenerys also identifies as a mother (the ‘Mother
of Dragons’), but attempts to combine feminine motherhood with
masculine power. The people of Winterfell cower at the sight of Daenerys’s
dragons at the beginning of Series Eight, something Daenerys enjoys,
but fails to see as a potentially dangerous reaction. A similar incident
occurred during the 2008 US Presidential Campaign: an attack ad on
Obama’s lack of experience by the Clinton campaign intended to combine
the ‘mother’ image with the ‘the more masculine commander-in-chief’.
The ad showed children sleeping, followed by a mother checking in on her
child. The voiceover then asked who viewers wanted answering the phone
in the White House at 3AM and cut to a professionally dressed Clinton
in reading glasses (intended to ‘emphasise Clinton’s understanding of
mothers and their concern for their children’s well-being’). The ad was
lambasted in the media, with commentators claiming that the ad scared
them and that the last thing the US needed was ‘that woman anywhere
near the phone’. Like Clinton, Daenerys Targaryen also struggled to
connect with the people of Westeros, noting that ‘I don’t have love here
[in Westeros]. I only have fear’. Many contemporary leaders do not
hesitate to terrify the masses with sabre-rattling. For example, speaking
from his golf course in New Jersey, President Trump responded to Kim
Jong-un’s threats by saying:

> North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like
It is not a stretch to imagine Trump uttering lines originally spoken by Daenerys (such as, ‘I will take what is mine. With fire and blood, I will take it’)." As Nick Hilton has stated in a review of ‘Eastwatch’ (Series Seven), Daenerys Targaryen is the Trump doppelgänger of Game of Thrones, noting that both Trump and Targaryen have the same reliance on ‘fire and fury,’ and that ‘Dracarys’ (a command for her dragon to breathe fire) has become the Westeros equivalent of ‘You’re fired’. After watching Daenerys execute unarmed Westerosi prisoners of War, Hilton writes: ‘[Eastwatch] shows how an unfancied outsider can become a confident, charismatic and controversial leader once they have their finger on the nuclear, or more draconic, option’. Hilton neglects to mention the bodies of people of colour that Daenerys left in her wake in order to get to Westeros. The mass slaughter of the various people of Essos from dragonfire relates to issues regarding whiteness and privilege surrounding Daenerys.

Another example of Daenerys’s separateness from her people is shown in the use of ‘of’ in her formal title: ‘Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals and the First Men, Protector of the Seven Kingdoms, the Mother of Dragons, the Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Unburnt, the Breaker of Chains’. Note that Sansa is called the ‘Queen in the North’, showing that, at least symbolically, Sansa stands with, not above, her people. This prioritisation of the masses and lack of bellicose statements again aligns Sansa with Sanna Marin, who is focused on governing the collective, saying, ‘I want to build a society where every child can become anything and every person can live and grow in dignity’. Marin focuses on tackling climate change, equality, and social welfare. Ferocity, aggression, and a willingness to use force are not the cornerstones of leadership style or policy for Marin or Ardern. In a press conference after the Christchurch terrorist attack, Ardern did not respond with violent rhetoric, instead saying:

We were chosen for the very fact that we... represent diversity, kindness, compassion, a home for those that share our values, a refuge for those who need it. And those values, I can assure you, will not and cannot be shaken by this attack.

Compassion is the centre of Ardern’s narrative, and there is a notable lack of reference to feats of arms.

Sansa possesses the life skills necessary for running a complex logistical operation due to her privileged position in society. In contrast, the Unsullied have no family connections or life skills with which to leave mercenary work and so may well stay ‘loyal’ to Daenerys out of necessity.
This is evident when Daenerys ‘frees’ the Unsullied: shortly after her dragon burns a slaveowner alive, she holds onto the whip that forces the Unsullied to do her bidding and commands the slaves to kill their masters, only promising the Unsullied their freedom after her enemies are dead. As Nylah Burton states:

Her actions encapsulate the essence of white saviourism, and she continues this pattern as she travels through Valyria, “freeing” slaves, and even though she is portrayed by the writers as a liberatory figure, she is nothing more than a colonial power. [...] Her ‘kind heart,’ as Jorah refers to it, is ultimately self-serving.

Olesker notes that Cersei falsely paints Daenerys as an ‘other’, stating ‘Daenerys’ enemies consider her a foreigner even though she was born in Westeros and is the daughter of the former king’. Here, Olesker conveniently forgets that the Targaryens are originally from Essos. Being a conqueror is different from being an immigrant; the implications are broader and more dire. The Targaryen Conquest brought fire and blood to Westeros (a prominent battle is called ‘The Field of Fire’), before plunging the realm into chaos for hundreds of years. Thus, we can see that the Targaryens, their dragons, and the masculine power they represent can conquer, but cannot rule.

Daenerys proudly declares that she is from Essos when it suits her; for example, when she goes to purchase the Unsullied. The majority of the transaction occurs in Valyrian, a language established as foreign and unintelligible to many people in Westeros. The slave trader complains in Valyrian that Drogon, the dragon given as payment, will not come to him. Before the complaint can be translated, Daenerys responds, in perfect Valyrian, that ‘a dragon is not a slave’. She goes on, ‘I am Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, of the blood of Old Valyria [a ruined city in Essos]. Valyrian is my mother tongue’, and then commands the dragon in Valyrian with the word dracarys (translated as dragonfire). There is no doubt that in some sense Daenerys’s power is derived from her ancestral homeland. As Burton notes, Daenerys is also a white woman whose homeland is populated by people of colour. I will return to issues of race, privilege, and power in Westeros in relation to Sansa below.

In the early series of Game of Thrones, Daenerys lies between masculine and feminine power; by the end of the final season, Daenerys has perpetuated and personified masculine power. She loses her timidity as she emerges from her first husband’s funeral pyre with three newly-hatched dragons gripping her body. Daenerys notes that after the apparent extinction of the last living dragon in the reign of King Aegon ‘Dragonbane’ Targaryen III, the Targaryens suffered. She states:
[Dragons] were terrifying. Extraordinary. They filled people with wonder and awe, and we locked them in here. They wasted away. Grew very small. And we grew small as well. [...] We were just like everyone else.86

Soaring into this scene on a dragon, Daenerys identifies herself as extraordinary and worthy of rule. However, her rise to power is not extraordinary: her reliance on dragons and prowess in war reinforces and upholds the gendered foundations of political authority in Westeros. Her willingness to use tremendous force simply cannot be matched by any of her competitors.87 Clapton and Shepherd suggest that ‘[…] The development of Daenerys’ authority and her growth as a ruler and leader both depend on her internalisation and exhibition of masculinised traits’.88 Daenerys claimed that she wanted to ‘break the wheel’ of structural power in Westeros, but as Clapton and Shepherd note, Daenerys does not accomplish much.89 By the end of Game of Thrones, Daenerys has become ‘a part of the system of patriarchy and gendered authority that exists in Game of Thrones’.90 Some feminist scholars may claim that an individual can be subversive and still use the language and tools of empire, privilege, and power. For example, feminists may use masculine, warlike, or military language to critique patriarchy.91 For example, Charli Carpenter argues that Daenerys was strategically limited by patriarchal culture to adopt masculine archetypes in order to gain legitimacy and authority, before she could use these exact archetypes as a means to subvert them, fighting ‘fire with fire’.92 However, I am more inclined to agree with Audre Lorde:

The master’s tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.93

Daenerys uses the sun to 'hide' her dragon from sight, subsequently swooping down to torch the Greyjoy fleet, a tactic utilised by her ancestor Aegon the Conqueror when he burned the castle and people of Harrenhal as part of the conquest of Westeros.94 By using the master’s tools, Daenerys is dooming her reign to be short – and it is. In the thousands of years that encompasses the history of Westeros, the Targaryen dynasty lasted only three centuries, compared to the Starks, who, pre-conquest, ruled the North for eight thousand years.95 Although Daenerys attempts to be a ‘different’ leader, she is like the Targaryen Westerosi rulers before her, using the same masculine tactics and tools to
cultivate and preserve her authority and thus present herself as a warrior and conqueror.\textsuperscript{96}

Both Carpenter’s and Clapton and Shepherd’s articles were published before the final series aired, but in Series Eight, Daenerys speaks several times of her preference for ruling with masculine power, speaking of how she thrives on the Westerosi people’s fear.\textsuperscript{97} Daenerys is confronted by Jon Snow after burning down King’s Landing – a decision that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians – and orders the Unsullied soldiers to execute unarmed Lannister prisoners of war in the street. Daenerys retorts that these deaths are ‘necessary’, and that it is impossible to ‘hide behind small mercies’.\textsuperscript{98} This brings to mind sentiments attributed to both US military policy in the Vietnam War – ‘it became necessary to destroy the town to save it’ – and Joseph Stalin: ‘one death is a tragedy; a million deaths, a statistic’, placing Daenerys’s use of fictional masculine power alongside real examples.\textsuperscript{99}

Daenerys’s attempt to rule through accepted structural distributions of mass power – the aforementioned traits of confidence, ferocity, aggression and a willingness to use force – ultimately backfire on both her and the audience: the fans who cheered Daenerys as she unleashed her dragons upon Meereen (a city in Essos) were horrified when she did the same at King’s Landing.\textsuperscript{100} This could be partly because of the way Meereen is consistently ‘othered’ in \textit{Game of Thrones}. Meereen is mostly populated by people of colour, with an official language that is a dialect of Valyrian (a language that, as mentioned, many people in Westeros do not speak). Much like Debra Ferreday’s argument about rape scenes only impacting the audience if the victim is white, and if the scene ‘disrupts the pleasurable narrative of a white character’s redemption’, fan backlash against Daenerys burning King’s Landing to the ground is in very much the same vein.\textsuperscript{101}

Many women mentioned by name in this article, whether fictional or non-fictional, are white. As in the real world, in Westeros whiteness operates as a default. Helen Young has discussed whiteness in both the fandom of \textit{Game of Thrones} and in fantasy literature.\textsuperscript{102} She notes that the roots of the lack of racial diversity in fantasy are deep and widespread, and that lack of diversity is perpetuated by Martin.\textsuperscript{103} Many of the common responses to criticisms of racial representations in the world of \textit{Game of Thrones} on the online forum Westeros.org are based on the assumption that medieval Europe was white, so therefore the fictionalised world of Westeros should be white. As Young notes, this is far from the case. Europe in the Middle Ages was not populated exclusively with varieties of white people.\textsuperscript{104} Young’s study on fans who criticised the racial composition of Westeros notes that they were seen as ‘troublesome for its eponymous online fan community [Westeros.org]’.\textsuperscript{105} Fan voices critiquing whiteness in Westeros ‘are suppressed using tactics which strongly reflect discourses which support white privilege
in modern western society by normalizing it'. Sansa could be seen as a vessel for whiteness and privilege, particularly in the context of her conversations with Daenerys in Series Eight. Burton states:

> When Sansa remains dedicated to the North […] the show allows us to see her as a hero standing up to a bully, but every non-white society Dany conquered was forced to give up their sovereignty in service of her moral superiority. The implicit message here is that brown indigeneity is purpose-less and morally depraved, but white representations of indigeneity are bold, honourable, ungovernable, and possessing the right of self-determination.  

Many of the people of colour fighting against Daenerys’ colonising rule, such as Mirri Maz Duur of the Lhazareen, are depicted with far less sympathy than Sansa. Sansa has also been criticised by some scholars as an example of ‘fetishized whiteness’, whose attempted rape during a riot against the royal family in Series Two is ‘depicted both as the natural result of her beauty and as the action of literal peasants in the palace, outsiders waging war on privileged, vulnerable white femininity’. This stands in opposition to, for example, how sexual violence against people of colour is depicted in the series, and whether the perpetrator is a white, titled nobleman that the audience is supposed to root for, such as Jamie Lannister. There is voluminous scholarship on sexual violence in *Game of Thrones*, and while that subject is not the focus of this article, it is relevant here as both Sansa and the women of colour who are survivors of sexual assault are used as symbols. Even when white women are victims in *Game of Thrones*, they are still, in some senses, experiencing a form of privilege in being named and seen as sympathetic, as opposed to the numerous un-named and un-mourned women of colour raped by Drogo’s khalasar, for example. Ferreday finds that:

> In fantasy as in life, the rape is intelligible when it happens to ‘Others’; further, it is presented as cathartic, even pleasurable, when we get to see the rapist punished or the heroine rescued. What is more problematic is when it happens to a privileged white woman and—crucially—when it disrupts the pleasurable narrative of a white man’s redemption, spoiling his transition to a better future.

Women who rule Westeros using masculine power were viewed as authoritarian rather than legitimate. There are two examples of this:
Cersei Lannister, who is killed in the conquest of the Westeros capital, and Daenerys Targaryen, who is assassinated as a result of that conquest, which killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. As Cersei says in Series One, ‘when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground’. By Cersei’s own standards, therefore, both she and Daenerys lose the game, while Sansa wins, having rejected ‘hard’ or masculine power.

The Queen in the North: How Feminine Power Won The Game of Thrones

Like Daenerys, who defers to her brother for the first few episodes, Sansa is compliant with the men around her for the majority of the first series. She is betrothed to the heir of the Iron Throne, Joffrey Baratheon. Sansa wants nothing more than to be a mother to Joffrey’s sons. Recalling this paper’s earlier mention of white privilege, she expresses this as, ‘he’ll be the greatest king there ever was, a golden lion, and I’ll give him sons with beautiful blond hair’. Trouble begins for Sansa after Joffrey’s false testimony causes King Robert to demand the execution of Sansa’s pet direwolf, Lady. After the death of King Robert, Joffrey is further revealed as a monster who abuses Sansa and executes her father. While Sansa’s sister Arya successfully escapes, Sansa remains, a political prisoner.

Sansa still, in some ways, offers a masculinised version of power over her subjects as regent. Can anyone be truly free when non-dominant genders are under silent subjugation? As Hooper states, ‘swapping female for male bodies in traditionally masculine arenas does little to disrupt either the symbolism or practices of the gender order.’ Hooper also argues that ‘the importation of feminine characteristics’ does not ‘automatically redress the gender imbalance, especially if women themselves are still underrepresented in positions of power’. While this is true, I suggest that having a woman in a position of power is still a victory on a show whose fan-favourites include rapists and murderers.

Sansa comes to power without being a warrior in the traditional sense, and every intervention she makes aims to preserve and improve her people’s lives. At a meeting with Bolton leaders and bannermen, Sansa does not join the sabre-rattling, like her rapist Ramsay Bolton (who gloats that he is starving his hounds in anticipation of feeding them Starks), nor does she ask that Bolton face her in ‘mano-a-mano’ combat, like her brother, King in the North Jon Snow – note how Bolton and Snow’s escalation here, in some regards, mirrors the antagonistic statements made by Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump mentioned earlier. Instead, Sansa remains calm and icy, commenting only that, ‘you’re going to die tomorrow, Lord Bolton. Sleep well’. Sansa’s self-control stuns the showboating Bolton into silence, something Snow fails to do. Notably, in
the reclamation of the North from the Boltons, it is Sansa who writes to rally the Knights of the Vale to her cause, who arrive at a pivotal moment in the battle. Another example (discussed later) is Sansa obtaining independence for the North post-Targaryen conquest, via diplomacy.

In contrast, there is no doubt that Snow is a man of action, a quality often praised in male actors in IR. Snow is a reluctant leader who maintains his authority in masculine ways: the fact that his men follow him into battle willingly, regardless of the odds, is a strength mentioned by both Snow’s allies and opponents. After Snow sees his unarmed prisoner of war brother Rickon killed, he abandons the pre-planned battle strategy and charges across the field. Prior to this strategic error, Snow dismissed Sansa’s advice. In this conversation, which takes place in a tent by the battleground, Sansa remarks that Snow and his advisors are planning to defeat a man that they do not know. Sansa has a deep understanding of how his mind works, and comments that, ‘I know how he likes to hurt people. Did it ever once occur to you that I might have some insight?’ Later on in the conversation, Sansa once again reminds Snow that he has never asked for her advice regarding military strategy; if he had, she would have told him to wait until Stark forces had grown in size before attacking. Snow does not listen to Sansa because he believes his military experience both supersedes and negates Sansa’s personal experiences of their mutual enemy. In doing so, Snow also dismisses rape as a weapon of war: in some senses, Sansa has fought as many harrowing battles as Snow. While, on the surface, the show shows a preference for masculine power, which is associated with aggression and impulsive action, a deeper reading shows this strategy ultimately leads to disaster. After Snow’s charge forces Stark soldiers out of position, thousands of Northmen die in the ensuing battle. Indeed, prior to the arrival of the Knights of the Vale, Stark forces were surrounded, crushed between walls of corpses. It is the ‘feminine’ power of Sansa (e.g., letter-writing, collaboration, patience and strategy) that wins the day, much as Sansa’s ‘feminine power’ ultimately wins the North’s independence. Sansa’s multiple triumphs illustrate that there is merit to her approach.

However, in line with Peterson and Runyan, even after one of Sansa’s greatest political successes, she loses in many ways. Shortly after Sansa’s victory in reclaiming Winterfell, she faces both suspicion and homicidal ideation originating from her sister, Arya. This is because a letter written by Sansa, begging the previous King in the North, Robb Stark, to bend the knee to Joffrey Lannister, was unearthed by Arya shortly after her return to Winterfell. Sansa explains to Arya that it was written in an attempt to save their father, when she (Sansa) was a hostage in King’s Landing. Arya disregards this, saying that she (Arya) would have rather died than betray her family. Arya notes that Sansa never participated in feats of arms such as archery because she was ‘inside knitting’, deliberately contrasting male and female pursuits.
Finally, Arya comments on Sansa’s sartorial choices on the day that their father was supposed to be pardoned, mentioning the beauty of her dress and hair (we return to Sansa’s clothing below).

However, Sansa is not the reason that Eddard Stark is dead: her pleas for mercy were dismissed as ‘soft’. This relates to Tickner’s notion that ‘the most dangerous threat to both a man and a state is to be like a woman because women are weak, fearful, indecisive, and dependent’. The public, violent execution of Eddard plunged the realm into disarray, under a ruler that believed legitimacy lies in ‘masculine’ power.

Although Arya insults Sansa on multiple grounds, Sansa focuses on reconciliation. Throughout their conversation, Sansa keeps her temper. Sansa focuses on collaborating and strengthening bonds, noting that internal conflict is exactly what Cersei (their shared enemy) wants and highlighting the merit of remaining calm – ‘sometimes anger makes people do unfortunate things’ – a distinctive trait of feminine power that once again distinguishes her from other powerful women in the series.

As mentioned, after escaping King’s Landing, Sansa suffers compounding traumas, including her attempted murder, rape, the deaths of various family members, and the dead attacking Winterfell. Trauma is often used to give female characters a ‘reason’ to be tough and resourceful. Here, Sansa is tested, ‘earning’ the throne in a way that perhaps a man would not need to. This includes her marriage to Bolton, as a means for the Bolton family (the new Wardens of the North under Baratheon/Lannister rule) to gain political legitimacy.

Marriage as a means to gain political legitimacy has been studied extensively, and Duran Bell has indicated that, in cases like that of Sansa and Ramsay, the men in the relationship take a dominant position and legitimacy is revealed as a ‘political strategy of dominant groups’. In this marriage, Sansa appears to hold the power when in fact she has none. She is raped violently on her wedding night by Bolton.

In fact, it is notable that all the queen regents in Game of Thrones are survivors of rapes at the hands of intimate partners: Cersei Lannister, for example, was raped by both her husband and her brother/lover. Daenerys Targaryen suggests that her own traumas (which also includes a rape and a political marriage) add to her power. She says:

I have been sold like a broodmare. I’ve been chained and betrayed, raped and defiled. Do you know what kept me standing, through all those years in exile? Faith. Not in any god, not in myths and legends. In myself... I was born to rule the Seven Kingdoms, and I will.

Rape is about power. IR scholars note that rape is routinely used as a weapon of war and conquest. Are the powerful queens and would-be queens of Westeros being undermined with rape, then, or is
something more subtle and political being suggested? While Daenerys believes she has transformed her victimisation into victory, Cersei has a very different attitude. After being told that little girls are not hurt in Dorne (one of the Seven Kingdoms), Cersei bitterly replies, ‘everywhere in the world, they hurt little girls’.\(^{134}\) Sansa echoes this in her conversation with Snow just prior to the battle to reclaim Winterfell: each queen provides a fatalistic but truthful depiction of the dangers faced by women under patriarchy. In Series Eight, after Sandor Clegane (the Hound) tells Sansa that he ‘heard [she was] broken in rough’, Sansa simply comments that her rapist (Ramsay) ‘got what he deserved’. However, she goes on to say something more problematic: ‘without Littlefinger and Ramsay and the rest, I would have stayed a little bird all my life’.\(^{135}\) Sonia Saraiya, in a piece written for *Vanity Fair*, rightly pointed out that this quote inaccurately represents sexual trauma (forgiving abusers is different than declaring being raped made you stronger), before saying:

> But what really makes no sense is that while Sansa apparently agrees that she was ‘broken in’, transformed from a little bird into a queen through the brutalization of men, in this conversation, she exerts no power of her own. She doesn’t tell the Hound [Sandor Clegane] to fuck off with his metaphor... She just sits there and takes it.\(^{136}\)

By having all three female rulers as survivors of sexual assault, the writers may also be suggesting that this is the only way in which a woman can acquire strength. Notably, the ways that Saraiya expects Sansa to show her power and rage (shouting and swearing) are inherently masculine and disregard the fact that Sansa had killed two of her many abusers (again, in cold blood, with calmness and thought).

When Sansa expresses a capacity to use force, she tends to do so in private, subtle ways, avoiding the stirring eve-of-battle speeches of Daenerys or feats of arms like Arya or Brienne, though she does depute both of these women to bear arms on her behalf. At the end of Series Seven, Arya Stark publicly executes Lord Protector of the Vale Petyr Baelish [Littlefinger], the man who orchestrated Sansa’s marriage to Bolton, on Sansa’s icy command (Sansa did not express satisfaction before or after sentencing Littlefinger to death). Notably, when Arya asks Sansa before the execution of Petyr Baelish if she truly wants him to die, Sansa says, ‘it’s not what I want, it’s what honour demands... That I defend my family from those who would harm us. That I defend the North from those who would betray us’.\(^{137}\) Instinctively, Sansa recoils from executing Baelish in front of the whole court but does so because he represents a danger to the North as a whole. Here, Sansa asserts herself publicly to protect the sovereignty and safety of her territory.\(^{138}\) If we
compare this to other moments in which such executions are carried out behind closed doors, Sansa’s sound political instincts and ability to adapt are clear: she is able to do something that repulses her because she realises it is strategically necessary. In other words, Sansa sees that this is an instance in which ‘the master’s tools’ are the right ones for the task at hand, per Lorde’s analogy; moreover, she is able to reach for this option without becoming habituated or limited in her ability to ‘dismantle the house’. When Sansa feeds Ramsay to his own hounds, she again remains calm and controlled. As Ramsay is devoured, she turns away and allows herself a smile. This smile, and Sansa chuckling with Sandor Clegane after informing him that she had done so in Series Eight, lead Saraiya to say, ‘it’s very *Game of Thrones* to see characters only express satisfaction when their power has been achieved through brutal, irrevocable violence’, but I argue that Sansa’s power is better understood in terms of how she behaves as well as what she does. Acts such as securing the support of the Knights of the Vale and silencing Bolton during the meeting prior to the Battle of the Bastards are public events that cement her loyalty to the North and her people, whereas Bolton’s death and how she brings it about is something known to only a few people. While rapists and murders remain fan favourites, it is cool-headed Sansa that is disliked by fans, perhaps because the ways Sansa expresses her power are not relatable to the male-majority fan-base.

This sense of privacy and self-containment is important: Sansa differentiates herself from both Daenerys and Cersei, whose vengeance is both public and masculinised. In the final season of *Game of Thrones*, the world knows that Daenerys has executed unarmed prisoners of war who would not recognise her sovereignty (the Tarlys), and that Cersei had no qualms about executing her political opponents (such as the detonation of the Great Sept of Baelor, which not only killed her rivals but a good portion of the population of King’s Landing). Sansa is no less ruthless, but her acts of aggression are quiet and concealed: more public demonstrations of strength and cruelty would likely provoke a violent response from her rivals and perhaps an ‘arms race’ of aggression and brinkmanship. Sansa’s calm demeanour and caution sets her apart from these other female rulers.

Unlike Daenerys, in Series Eight, Sansa does not breathe verbal or dragon fire. Instead, she is calm, even icy (individuals from other regions of Westeros joke that Starks melt if they travel too far south). Sansa has clearly embraced and embodied this family trait. A more typical display of Sansa’s disgruntlement can be seen in her greeting to Daenerys and Snow when they arrive at Winterfell. While it is clear from her tone that she is unhappy at the arrival of Targaryen forces at Winterfell, she speaks the same line with which her father greeted King Robert in the very first episode of *Game of Thrones* – ‘Winterfell is yours, Your Grace’. Again, Sansa chose to wait and see, acknowledging the security of her
territories and people as her first priority.

Nevertheless, the notion that ‘without Littlefinger and Ramsay and the rest, I would have stayed a little bird all my life’ remains problematic in many ways, and is perhaps tied to the lack of female writers and directors in the final season of Game of Thrones. Across all eight series, only one female director (eighteen male) and two female writers (seven male) were employed. While several of the main female characters were written as ‘women defying prescribed gender roles by operating in primarily male arenas’, this does not negate the male gaze of the show, presenting women as sexual objects for the male viewer, whether that viewer is a character, behind the camera, or watching at home. Anything Sansa does, from a feminist perspective, is necessarily marred by the dominance and ubiquity of the male gaze in popular entertainment.

Sansa’s corporeal styling in the final series suggests a rejection of femininity, rather than a victory of female power. Certainly, Sansa sets aside soft pastel-coloured clothing as the series progresses, and the series ends with her clad in black and leather, reflecting her internal transformation. Sansa is a skilled seamstress, making her own clothing, and therefore in total control of how she presents herself. Her clothes are a way for her to ‘give voice to her feelings ... she knows she can’t confide in anyone’. Her costuming in earlier seasons, laden with pastels and embroidered dragonflies trapped in elaborate circles, shows the influence of the colour palette of Cersei and her courtiers and illustrates how stifled Sansa is feeling. When Sansa escapes the Lannisters, she reinvents herself and is seen for the first time in the dark colours that dominate her clothing for the remainder of the series. Game of Thrones costume designer Michelle Clapton notes:

...To communicate this profound change in her nature, I designed a look that symbolised the death of ‘victim Sansa’...I paired the costume with a powerful necklace, a circle through which Sansa threads her sewing needle. An unbroken circle symbolises strength. This is a symbolic statement that Sansa is ready to fight. It is also a reference to her sister, Arya, who carries a sword named Needle.

The shift in Sansa’s clothing, which some viewers might view as an attempt at masculinisation, is in fact laden with subtle messages of feminine fortitude. A sewing or knitting needle is considered less threatening than a sword, but it is no less powerful: knowing how to construct and make warm, robust garments in the North is just as vital a skill for survival in harsh winters as military prowess. The padded fabric and leather strapping of Sansa’s gowns in later seasons refer to traditional
Like her other costumes, Sansa’s coronation gown at the end of the series refers to both her family (with elements representing her parents, siblings, and Winterfell) and her friends (the murdered Margaery Tyrell, and her dead direwolf Lady), which Clapton notes is true to the woman Sansa has become. Even Sansa’s crown features ‘two direwolf heads supporting each other’, very similar to a clasp worn by Robb when he died at the Red Wedding. The crown also expresses the queen Sansa has become: one with a focus on collaboration and feminine power.

Series Eight shows Sansa has grown into a woman who has no qualms about questioning male authority. This is shown when Sansa asks Snow (who had bent the knee to Daenerys, giving away the North’s independence and sovereignty), ‘did you bend the knee to save the North, or because you love her?’ This moment coincides with Sansa’s growth as a character: since her mid-teens, Sansa has consistently placed the interests of Winterfell and the North above all others. This also shows that Sansa has transformed from a girl who yielded to masculine authority and her own interests, to a woman who openly challenges the decisions of male leadership at the behest of her people’s interests. Sansa effectively governs the North as the Lady of Winterfell; she is the only person concerned with logistics. Sansa also has legitimate reasons for challenging Daenerys’s plan to hurry south to face the Lannister forces after the armies of Daenerys and the North emerge victorious from their battle with the dead, suggesting instead that the armies should recover before attacking King’s Landing. Although Sansa lacks the ferocity and aggression of masculine-coded power, she has feminine-coded resourcefulness and a focus on collaborative rule instead. Sophie Turner, who plays Sansa Stark, noted the disparity between Sansa’s use of power, and that of her sister Arya (played by Maisie Williams):

In the beginning, I was jealous of Maisie, because she got to do all these sword fights and be the badass. I was like, 'I know my character is very powerful.' Sansa adapts better than Arya. If Arya was in Sansa’s situation at the beginning, she would have had her head cut off.

This also shows Sansa’s adaptability, a trait commonly associated with women and leadership. Like several non-fictional female politicians, Sansa reinvents herself several times throughout *Game of Thrones*. Turner also notes Sansa’s power and the internalised misogyny that comes with an initial reading of what society deems ‘badass’ (sword fights). Rather than an elite warrior like Arya who wields steel, Sansa becomes the steel herself.

Turner is correct that her character is powerful. In the final episode of the final series, Sansa finally gains sovereignty for the North
when the nobles of Westeros, as well as Daenerys’s proxy Grey Worm, convene to discuss the fates of the two individuals who orchestrated her assassination: Tyrion Lannister and Jon Snow. Lannister suggests that the future monarchs of Westeros be chosen by a council meeting of all the noble houses leading Westeros’s seven different administrative regions. The nobles present agree. Lannister then nominates Bran Stark, Sansa’s brother, as King of Westeros. Again, all the nobles present agree, except Sansa. She says:

[T]ens of thousands of Northmen fell in the Great War defending all of Westeros. And those who survived have seen too much and fought too hard ever to kneel again. The North will remain an independent kingdom, as it was for thousands of years.¹⁵⁹

Stark accepts both his kingship and the North’s independence and thus Sansa achieves through diplomacy what her brother Robb through battle could not: an independent and sovereign North, with a Stark as monarch. The last words of the show are the cries of the people of the North at Sansa’s coronation (“The Queen in the North!”), reminding the viewer who the true winner in the game of thrones is.¹⁶⁰

The only other ruler in Westeros established at the end of Game of Thrones is Bran Stark. Stark is confined to a wheelchair, and his injuries are assumed to prevent him from reproducing, indicating that he does not adhere to a traditional cisgender, heterosexual trajectory in yet another rejection of hegemonic masculine power.¹⁶¹ Stark does not adhere to other qualities associated with ‘masculine’ leaders, often sitting quietly in council meetings, only speaking when absolutely necessary, thinking abstractly (as opposed to concretely), and saying things that could easily be perceived as irrational. Most notably, because of his life-altering injuries, Stark is entirely dependent on those around him. Each of these traits has been coded as ‘feminine’ in the West.¹⁶² Stark, though not the focus of this article, supports its thesis: ultimately, Westeros rewards those who excel at an approach to policy that could be coded as feminine.

Clapton and Shepherd say that gender, as a category of analysis in relation to power, has not been the point of analysis and critique by influential scholars in IR, although they concede that feminist scholarship has often studied the subject.¹⁶³ While it can be said that IR specifically lacks this type of scholarship, feminist scholarly discussions on the gendering of power or policy, as well as rethinking power from a feminist perspective, have been undertaken in great detail.¹⁶⁴ Studies on women in relation to the context in which they lead (or seek to lead) have had relatively consistent findings.¹⁶⁵ Female leaders are task-oriented problem-solvers who hold themselves and others to high standards, and when research turns to images of women as leaders, these women are
often described as ‘collaborative, caring, courageous, and reflective’. Sansa exhibits all of these qualities. Sansa does not pursue an aggressive foreign policy unless the North or its leaders are directly threatened. In Series Seven, Sansa underscores this: ‘I’m sure cutting off heads is very satisfying, but that’s not the way you get people to work together’. While Sansa has, in fact, ordered the execution of two of her abusers, this display of power and violence is not typical of Sansa. This is reinforced later in the episode, when Arya and Sansa are discussing Sansa’s status as Lady of Winterfell. Arya has let go of her anger, and remarks, ‘I never could have survived what you survived’. Soon after, Sansa recalls Eddard’s words: ‘when the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives’. Sansa’s power lies with the collective North, as in a pack of wolves. Notably, the term ‘alpha male’ referring to the power structure of a pack of wolves has persisted in mainstream pop culture and the media, despite scientists having long debunked this as a myth. In the wild, there is no such thing as an ‘alpha male’ or ‘alpha female’, but rather packs follow one male and one female wolf because they are the mother and father of the rest of the pack. Much as House Targaryen identifies with dragons, House Stark identifies with direwolves and Sansa aspires to lead her people as a cooperative unit.

There is also the argument that a feminine ruler who rose to power via feminine-coded power does not resist the patriarchal system in Westeros. Another ruler who uses feminine-coded power in Westeros is Sansa’s maternal aunt, Lady Lysa Arryn. Academic study of Lysa has been limited to her parenting style, deemed overprotective and indulgent. Arryn’s leadership, at first, seems to be akin to Sansa’s: Arryn appears motivated by protecting her family and people, fleeing to the Vale with her son Robin shortly after her husband’s suspicious death, and again when Arryn becomes furious that her sister Catelyn has brought Tyrion Lannister to the Vale as a prisoner, exposing the whole area to the Lannisters’ wrath. However, Arryn lacks Sansa’s coolness and is quick to lash out. Additionally, Arryn’s motivations appear to be solely based in fulfilling her own, individual goals, as opposed to the overall good of her people or the realm. This is shown when Arryn reveals that she poisoned her husband Jon Arryn (not the Lannisters, as she previously claimed) in order to prove her love to Baelish, the man who later murders her.

‘I’m a slow learner, it's true. But I learn’: Conclusion

Female politicians who lead without turning to masculine codified traits of leadership or power can be victorious in both Westeros and our non-fictional political world. Adaptability is commonly
associated with female leaders and Sansa makes regular references to her ability to learn (slowly, but well) from those around her. This article distinguished between female leaders and leaders utilising strategies considered feminine. As in all countries (fictional or non-fictional), a female leader is no guarantee that a country or a political party has a progressive outlook or is subversive in its distribution of power or policy. As both Cersei Lannister and Margaret Thatcher show, female politicians who rise to power via a system created by and designed to reward men are not necessarily more liberal, more focused on social issues or more likely to support other women than male leaders. I have expanded upon Clapton and Shepherd’s ideas by including discussions surrounding corporeal styling, race, and sexual violence. Additionally, the only king on the throne in Westeros (Bran Stark) is positioned as an example of non-traditional masculinity, furthering the failure of masculine power in Westeros. Having seen Sansa win the Game of Thrones, viewers may more easily receive and appreciate women (such as Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin) in leadership positions. Moreover, viewers might also pause when listening to an impassioned speech by a ‘strongman’. A progressive woman in power, whether she is under a fictional direwolf banner, or a non-fictional head of state, is certainly on the path towards the destruction of patriarchy, and potentially other oppressive power structures. Perhaps nations should turn to leaders who lead collaboratively, based on feminine coded policy and power. The coronation of Sansa Stark in Game of Thrones not only makes it easier for viewers to accept and understand female leadership: it also helps viewers to see the flaws in ‘strongmen’, be they Trump or Targaryen.

Notes


6 While, if appropriate (such as when discussing elements of Westerosi history) literary sources are used, this analysis is focused solely on the television series. Martin famously quipped that the endings of the books and the show were akin to how many children Scarlett O’Hara had in the novel and film versions of *Gone With the Wind*. While Scarlett had three children in the novelisation version of *Gone With the Wind*, and one in the film version, both film and novel end the same way in that Scarlett O’Hara is abandoned by Rhett Butler, and then resolves to go back to Tara, believing that one day Butler will return to her. Thus, while showrunners made critical decisions that deviated from Martin’s novels, the broad brushstrokes are the same in both texts.


13 Ibid., 6.

14 Ibid., 11.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
28 Ibid.


39 Ibid.


41 Ibid., 688-690.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.


46 Hooper, *Manly States*, 44.

47 Tickner, *Gender in International Relations*, 7-8.


49 Peterson and Runyan, *Global Gender Issues*.

50 Hooper, *Manly States*.

51 Olesker, “Chaos is a Ladder,” 47–64.

52 Ibid., 61.

53 Olesker, “Chaos is a Ladder,” 54.

54 Ibid., 54.

55 Ibid., 59.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.


61 Wesley Allen Riddle, “The Origins of Black Sharecropping,” *The Mississippi


Ibid.

Carlin and Winfrey, “‘Have you come a long way, baby?’,” 335.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Specia, “Who is Sanna Marin?”


Olesker, “Chaos is a Ladder,” 56.


Burton, “Daenerys was Always a Narcissistic, Power-Hungry Colonizer.”


88 Ibid., 13.


94 Martin, *Fire and Blood*.

95 Martin, Garcia, and Antonsson, *The World of Ice & Fire*.


100 Ibid., 13.


103 Young, “Race in Online Fantasy Fandom,” 738.

104 Ibid., 741.
106 Ibid., 738.
107 Ibid.
108 Burton, “Daenerys Was Always a Narcissistic, Power-Hungry Colonizer.”
111 Ferreday, “Game of Thrones, Rape Culture,” 31.
117 Hooper, Manly States, 50.
118 Ibid., 50.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
125 Tickner, Gender in International Relations, 61.
126 Game of Thrones, “Beyond the Wall.”


133 Ferreday, “Game of Thrones, Rape Culture,” 24.


139 Saraiya, “Why Game of Thrones’s Sansa—the Hound Scene Rang So False”.


141 Saraiya, “Why Game of Thrones’s Sansa—the Hound Scene Rang So False”.


146 Ibid.


149 Ibid., 21.


176 Ibid.
