

# THE GAME OF LOVE

## Fan Fiction and the Reimagined Women of *Game of Thrones*<sup>1</sup>

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Fan fiction, defined as “stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a ‘canon’ of works” (B. Thomas 1), enables fan authors to create relationships, storylines, or settings for their favorite fictional characters that reflect their own desires, values, and beliefs. Fan fiction writers do not receive official recognition for their work and, in contrast to profic or “professional writing, done for money,” fanfic is “unpaid labor, done for love” (Pugh 11). On the other hand, fan fiction writers, unlike profic writers, are able to benefit from a community of readers and fellow writers who can provide instant feedback on their work by reviewing them and tagging their preferred stories as “favorites” or giving them “kudos.”

Fan fiction, however, is not simply an exercise in the imagination. It can also function as an interpretation or a critique of the canon—as the product of “readers’ frustration with a favorite piece of popular culture, a frustration so intense that they undertake writing on their own” (Gómez-Galisteo 124). Fan fiction both recycles and subverts elements of the canon, thereby allowing fans to

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“extend their experiences of a beloved work and demonstrate their own often complex analyses and responses to that work” (Day 29). The majority of fan fiction is written by women or people who identify online as female (Leavenworth Paratext 58, Jamison 18, Hellekson and Busse 75), and fan fiction scholars have demonstrated how it can be used to produce “feminist counterreadings of source material” (Leow) and to explore issues of desire, sexuality, and gender (Day 44, Hellekson and Busse 76). Fan fiction can thus provide a space wherein women writers and readers may critique the representations of characters in the canon, challenge the canon’s assumptions, and explore feminist ideas through reimagined storylines and characterizations (Leow).

Hellekson and Busse argue, however, that close readings of fan texts as literary texts might “obscure the complex intertextuality that tends to embed stories in an economy of collectively shared production, distribution, and reception that together create a more complex intertextual meaning” (24). Fan fiction is after all a communal activity in which its authors encourage and engage with their readers’ feedback. Readers’ comments and preferences often influence the directions a fan fiction text takes, and the fanfic author, unlike a conventional author, usually has a closer relationship with her readers. As Gómez-Galisteo states, fan fiction “is not so much an individual authorial product but the work of the reading community as a whole, a circumstance that readers appreciate” (125).

A useful approach to examining fan fiction, therefore, is to read it alongside its paratext, in particular its authorial comments and reviews. The third and current wave of fan fiction studies explores fans’ contributions to contemporary

culture as well as the various forms of fan engagement, and one project of third-wave theory is to examine “fandom’s paratexts” and “fan engagement as part of an ongoing experience” (B. Thomas 5). The paratext, as defined by Gerard Genette, consists of the “productions” that surround and extend a literary work, usually a book: “those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*), that mediate the book to the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords... also the elements in the public and private history of the book, its ‘epitext’... ‘public epitexts’ (from the author or publisher) as well as ‘private epitexts’ (authorial correspondence, oral confidences, diaries, and pre-texts)” (Macksey xviii).

The paratext of fan fiction differs considerably from that of a conventionally published book. As Leavenworth points out, the paratexts for works published online generally consist of “websites, online archives, fanfic-specific genres, categorizations, and tags...and a host of more or less descriptive labels attached to the work” (42). These provide visitors to the fan fiction sites with a preliminary idea of how to approach the fan fiction text. A fan fiction’s peritext usually consists of tags denoting, among other things, the genre of the fic, the major characters and relationships, the dates it was first published and most recently updated, and the number of “favorites” or “kudos” it has received. The peritext also includes summaries, epigraphs, and author notes (A/Ns). Its epitext, on the other hand, consists mainly of readers’ reviews and the author’s responses to these reviews written in A/Ns.

In two of the largest fan fiction websites, *FanFiction.net* and *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*, readers can write their

reviews after each chapter of the fanfic. Since many authors take time (from a few days to a year or more) to post new chapters, they presumably have enough time to read reviews and, if they so wish, to respond to these reviews. The paratext is particularly important in fan fiction because, as discussed earlier, the production of fan fiction is largely collaborative and communal. An examination of a fan fiction's paratext can reveal the extent to which readers have influenced the direction that a story takes as well as its characterization. Many fanfic authors take their readers' reviews very seriously and are willing to change their initial plans for storylines and character arcs if a large number of readers express their disapproval of them.

In this paper, I will discuss three fan-written novels based on George R.R. Martin's epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIAF) and on the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, an adaptation of the ASOIAF novels. ASOIAF tells the intertwined stories of several noble families fighting for power and survival in a dangerous, male-dominated fantasy world based on medieval Europe. The story also portrays strong, complex female characters who challenge a variety of gender stereotypes. *Game of Thrones* has received both widespread praise and criticism for its adaptations of these female characters to the small screen, with much of the criticism focusing on the show's constant depiction of gratuitous sex, nudity, and violence against women.<sup>1</sup>

Fan fiction writers have been writing their own versions of Martin's books as far back as 2007 on *FanFiction.net* and 2009 on *A03*. These fanfics range from

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these types of scenes do not appear in Martin's novels and are creations of the show's writers.

one-shots focusing on a single character or pairing to novel-length works with several chapters and characters and multiple storylines. By examining three representative fan-written texts, this paper will determine how fan writers engage with the representation of women in the *ASOIAF* novels and the HBO series, both of which function as the fanfics' "source texts" or "canon." Aside from doing a close reading of the three fan-written texts, I shall also examine selections from their paratexts, specifically, the author notes and reader reviews that discuss and debate the reimagined versions of female characters and their relationships.

The three fan-written texts to be discussed in this paper are *Frozen Fire* by rainonmonday, *Lady Stark* by Jpena, and *No Featherbed for Me* by lit\_chick08. *Frozen Fire* and *Lady Stark* currently have the highest and second highest number of favorites on *FanFiction.net*<sup>1</sup> while *No Featherbed for Me* has the fourth highest number of kudos<sup>2</sup> among the long fanfics on *A03*. These three stories were chosen not only for their popularity among readers but also for the three female characters whom their authors have chosen as protagonists: Daenerys Targaryen in *Frozen Fire*, Cersei Lannister in *Lady Stark*, and Arya Stark in *No Featherbed for Me*. These characters have prominent roles in the source texts and wield either considerable power or, in Arya's case, physical prowess. Stories written about them thus raise the interesting question of how fan writers would reimagine powerful, resourceful women who subvert many of the traditional roles for women in a medieval fantasy world.

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<sup>1</sup> 2,773 and 2,623 favorites, respectively, as of 10 June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> 2,828 kudos as of 10 June 2017.

## Daenerys Targaryen in *Frozen Fire*

In both the books and the TV series, Daenerys (Dany) Targaryen evolves from a timid, naïve girl used as a pawn by men, into a fierce, determined, powerful young woman who leads armies, conquers cities, and controls dragons. Rhiannon Thomas describes her as simultaneously “the ‘mother of dragons’ and the ‘daughter of death’: feminine, caring and protective, but also destructive, willing to burn the world to the ground to take what is owed to her.”

*Frozen Fire*, an ongoing 50-chapter story on *FanFiction.net* tagged as “Romance/Adventure,” reimagines Daenerys as having accepted an offer from Ned Stark of a safe return to Westeros in exchange for her agreement to marry his eldest son, Robb Stark. She secretly intends to manipulate Robb to help her retake the Iron Throne. The fanfic thus introduces a major change in Daenerys’s character and intentions: instead of leading an army of Dothraki herself to reclaim the throne, as she does in canon, she decides to achieve her goal indirectly, through her influence over her husband.

The story initially makes use of the Beauty and the Beast plot, showing how the lead characters’ relationship grows from distrust and hostility to passionate love. Although there are moments in the story when Dany retains the fierceness and ambition of her character in canon, her desire to retake the throne slowly diminishes as her love for Robb and the Stark family grows. Eventually she abandons her plan to manipulate Robb and they slowly begin to trust and depend on each other. Although she still believes she should be Queen of Westeros, she also wants Robb to be King at her side, and this victory is what they fight for and eventually win.

Many of the chapters of the story are also told from Robb's point of view, and the story gradually focuses on his own goals to avenge his father's death and to gain the throne. Daenerys's story arc is adjusted to fit his instead of the other way around.

However, the story adds an aspect of Dany's character that is not truly developed in canon: her longing for a family, which she finds in the Starks. While Dany's desire to reclaim the throne and her birthright is downplayed, her desire to protect her new family is emphasized. She literally becomes a mother in this story instead of the metaphorical mother of dragons and people that she is in canon. She gives birth to a son and, several chapters later, to a daughter.

*Frozen Fire* thus transforms Daenerys into a loving and protective mother. While she does not exactly give up her dream of becoming queen of Westeros, her concerns are now also balancing these goals with taking care of her son and her relationship with her husband; as she admits: "Playing the game of thrones and keeping a family and a relationship was nothing but hard work" (Chapter 24). Several scenes in the story show her playing with and taking care of her son. Dany comes to value her identity as a mother and as a wife to a future king more than her identity as a potential queen. This is driven home most forcefully in the "King in the North" scene that appears in both the books and the TV series. In *Frozen Fire's* version of this scene, Daenerys tells Robb: "You have been my king from the moment you claimed me... I answer to no other. You're my husband, my king, the father of my child. The dragon bows to you, King in the North" (Chapter 11).

To highlight the importance given to motherhood, Daenerys is depicted as developing a good relationship with Catelyn Stark (who does not die in this story). In fact,

Dany assumes and improves on Catelyn's role as a mother by caring for Bran and Rickon in Catelyn's absence. She also has Sansa rescued from King's Landing and returned safely to Winterfell, and later rescues Arya and her friends from the Brotherhood Without Banners.

A subplot of the story involves a secret romantic relationship that develops between Dany's bodyguard, Dacey Mormont, a minor character in the books, and Jaime Lannister, who becomes the Starks' prisoner and is brought to Winterfell (another deviation from canon). Their relationship results in a child, and Dacey is depicted as being a strong woman who can also take on the role of a loving mother.

Scenes depicting childbirth are given importance in *Frozen Fire*; one particularly dramatic example is the scene in which Dany gives birth to her son right after Robb has defeated the Ironborn who are invading Winterfell. Pregnancy, however, also is used in the story as a means of sidelining Dany from the main action. In the battle against the Ironborn at Winterfell, for instance, she is unable to fight and defend her family because she is about to give birth.

Fatherhood is also valued in the story. A number of scenes depict Robb simply spending time with Daenerys and their son. Jaime Lannister also is determined to be a faithful father and partner after the birth of his and Dacey's daughter: "Berit was the only person he could call his. His refuge and only redeeming action... I'll stay here. For her. For them" (Chapter 43).

A number of the reader reviews of *Frozen Fire* focus on how Daenerys has been depicted in the story. Some readers are unhappy with how her character has been changed in order to make her a more suitable, i.e. a more conventionally feminine, partner for Robb. Reviewer Luna-



Lovegood-175, for instance, criticizes the story for being “severely sexist,” pointing out how Daenerys is portrayed as “subservient to [Robb], as revering him... her entire life seems to revolve around Robb and "his" war. Would be great if you would give some more consideration to how you portray your female characters” (comments to Chapter 47). Another reviewer, 11h05, says:

I thought this was going to be about Daenerys fighting her way onto the Iron Throne with Robb by her side, not the other way around. There already are too many stories out there about women who only had great ambitions until they found out that they just wanted a husband and a baby. (comment to Chapter 16)

Robb’s portrayal is also subject to severe criticism, especially after Chapter 23 wherein he and Daenerys have a major argument that turns somewhat violent. A guest reviewer<sup>1</sup> says that Robb’s behavior “was way out of line, especially for someone who considers himself a king” and that he “generally lashed out like [a] rather impulsive sort of brat” (comment to Chapter 23). Other reviewers are more succinct, simply calling Robb an “assh\*le” (Liz86000’s comment to Chapter 23) and “a dick” (bvc17’s comment to Chapter 23). These negative reviews of Robb’s portrayal and of Daenerys’s portrayal as a weaker character prompted the story’s author, rainonmonday, to respond in a number of A/Ns in which she attempts to justify the two protagonists’ behavior:

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<sup>1</sup> If a reviewer on *FanFiction.net* has not registered with the website, this means s/he has no pseudonym, and so any comments that s/he makes will appear under the name “Guest.”

...believe me, the last thing I pretend [sic] is to make you hate Robb, because I really like him as character. You must also understand that even if these characters play important roles, they are still teenagers facing very difficult scenarios. Also, I apologize if you thought Robb's reaction was violent against Daenerys but you know this is set in a different universe and time... (A/N to Chapter 24)

Also, many of you have pointed out about the weakness you see in Dany but I don't see it as weakness. It is fear of the unknown. This is the first time she has a family that is caring and it's not her own; all of this can be overwhelming for her. It's building a new kind of strength for her, so this is only serving her to grow. (A/N to Chapter 26)

However, in subsequent chapters, there was a noticeable change in both Daenerys's and Robb's behavior, bringing them closer to how readers wanted them to be portrayed and indicating that their criticism had somehow influenced the story's author to develop the two characters according to her readers' wishes.

In any case, other readers are pleased with how the story gives both Daenerys and Robb traits that are not developed or evident in the source texts. Reviewer Pagan Witch, for instance, says that "Robb is a far more perceptive and strong king here than I felt he ever got to be in canon" while "Dany has gotten less vicious, more stable and seems to have developed a sense of peace within herself that can only make her stronger" (comments to Chapter 26). Others appreciate the dynamics of Robb and Dany's relationship, with reviewer Logan Quiller saying: "Many people make Daenerys out as weak and manipulative as well as unable to love, but how I have seen Robb and her grow, blossom and truly become loyal to each other makes me enjoy this

pairing even more” (comment to Chapter 50) and reviewer GeeImKate appreciating the pair’s imperfect relationship: “it wasn’t perfect and it’s beautiful like that. They fight then they make up and that made them stronger” (comment to Chapter 50).

### **Cersei Lannister in *Lady Stark***

Audiences tend to define Cersei Lannister by her villainous traits and actions: she is selfish, proud, and vindictive, and commits incest and murder without feeling any trace of guilt. She can be viewed as a more complex version of the archetypal Evil Queen and, in her treatment of Sansa Stark, the Evil Stepmother. Yet it is also possible to feel sympathy for Cersei: she has been used as a political pawn by her father and trapped in a loveless marriage with a boorish, philandering husband. Moreover, Cersei’s love for her children is also one of her defining qualities, and this aspect of her character is highlighted in the fanfic *Lady Stark*.

*Lady Stark* is an ongoing 74-chapter story on *FanFiction.net* tagged as “Romance/Drama.” The main characters tagged are Eddard (Ned) Stark and Cersei Lannister. Its author, using the pseudonym Jpena, reveals in her A/N to Chapter 1 that the story has elements of both the books and the TV version. The story is set some years before the major events of the first book, *A Game of Thrones*, and of Season 1 of the TV series.

Cersei is given an almost entirely new persona in *Lady Stark*. She is married off to Eddard “Ned” Stark instead of Robert Baratheon, resulting in her becoming the Lady of Winterfell instead of Queen of Westeros. They are initially cold towards each other and only make love in order to

produce children. Cersei's firstborn is named Joffrey, but he is a stillborn, and after this she has two more miscarriages. In this way, Jpena utilizes and fulfills a prophecy in both the books and the TV show, stating that Cersei would have three children who would all die ahead of her.

Once this prophecy has been dealt with, Jpena proceeds to provide Cersei with a more sympathetic character and a much better life than she has in canon. Like her canon counterpart Catelyn Stark, Cersei is asked by Ned to accept his bastard son Jon. Unlike Catelyn, however, Cersei comes to love Jon fiercely, seeing him as a substitute for the three children that she has lost:

The baby stopped crying and rooted for her teats. She cried and foolishly, very foolishly succumbed to her inner desires. She never knew how much she wanted to be a mother. It was the only thing she could do... this baby wasn't Joff, he wasn't even hers but he had no mother and she had no child. (Chapter 3)

The story depicts Cersei's love for Jon as the impetus for other acts that transform her into a conventionally "good" character, as opposed to her characters in canon. Her love for Jon results in Ned's gradually falling in love with her and spending more time with her and Jon. And when Jon nearly dies from a fall, Cersei vows to the gods that she will end her incestuous relationship with Jaime as long as Jon's life is spared. Her wish is granted and she keeps her promise. The fanfic thus uses Cersei's role as a mother as the main instrument of her transformation into a faithful and loving wife.

Since *Lady Stark* is tagged as a "romance" fic, a number of chapters are devoted to Ned and Cersei's relationship, showing how they gradually learn to trust and

respect one another. Cersei is depicted as becoming stronger and more confident largely because of Ned's love and support. The story emphasizes that much of her happiness comes from Ned's valuing her as an equal:

Her lord husband loved her and wanted to protect her but he trusted her too... He made sure she could run Winterfell in his absence. He asked her counsel and valued her insights... Ned saw her as his partner, an equal. [Her] father... thought her stupid. Ned believed in her." (Chapter 12)

Ned and Cersei maintain a passionate sexual relationship which is frequently described in detail. The story portrays their union as an almost perfect meeting of minds and bodies, which is not unusual in fan fiction with a strong romance element. As Catherine Driscoll points out, female fan fiction authors often produce "stories that privilege both the formulaic conventions of romance stories and the erotic descriptions of pornography" which "allow for and in fact celebrate the possibility that their work can embody both love and lust simultaneously" (qtd. in Day 35).

Another way *Lady Stark* reimagines and sanitizes Cersei's character is by making her reconcile with her brother Tyrion and develop a closer relationship with him, to the extent that she depends on him when Ned is away fighting the War of the Five Kings.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the story frequently portrays Cersei as emotionally fragile and dependent on the men in her life: "The woman cried more than she had since early in her marriage. All she had done

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<sup>1</sup> Ned Stark does not die in this story, unlike in the books and the TV series.

these past two months was cry. The beginning of her suffering was when Eddard left with the children" (Chapter 27). Thus when Ned is away fighting or is sent to King's Landing to serve as Hand of the King, Cersei turns to either Tyrion or Jon for support. Tyrion to a certain extent becomes a substitute for Ned, providing Cersei with advice and emotional support.

The story also gives importance to close relationships between women, a theme that is considerably lacking in canon. Cersei is initially on friendly terms with Queen Catelyn, and she maintains good relationships with her daughters and her sister-in-law Sansa (who, as in canon, marries Tyrion). Her daughters Arya (Catelyn Stark's daughter in canon) and Joanna (an OC or original character) overcome their sibling rivalry early on and become close allies and confidantes. Cersei, however, is depicted as being distrustful of her daughters-in-law: "Margaery was a snake she was sure, and Cassana would take away her Tommen" (Chapter 52).

Although Cersei does love her daughters, in this fic she values her sons more, especially Jon, and she is unhappy when they grow up and start living their own lives:

Cersei longed for the old days. She wanted her children to be kids again. It was all less complicated her boys were hers only. They only loved her. There were no mad love affairs with wildlings, volanteese nurses or pretty princesses taking her baby boys. (Chapter 61)

While Cersei's character in *Lady Stark* may be milder and more loving than her character in canon, she is no longer portrayed as a player in the game of thrones. She is instead relegated to the domestic space of Winterfell,

although she is portrayed as happy and thriving in this space, with her world centered on her husband and her children:

She closed her eyes and thought about her life. She was not queen, but she managed a large castle and the North. She ruled alongside with Ned who was kind, generous and most importantly did not underestimate her... she was happy. Her children were smart, handsome and healthy. Ned provided her with strength and resources. She lacked for nothing. Cersei Stark was content. (Chapter 17)

Several reviewers of Lady Stark say that they love the pairing of Cersei and Ned as well as Cersei's transformation into a "good" character. Some interpret Cersei's unhappiness and viciousness in canon as a consequence of her father's and her husband's treatment, and conclude that in a more supportive environment, she would be a different woman. "I really enjoy the idea of Ned and Cersei," says reviewer Helewisetran. "This Cersei is so different but I believe that [is] who she could be if she was loved and respected" (comments to Chapter 10). Reviewer elaine451 adds: "I've come to love this family you've drawn for us with such detail and heart. Seeing Cersei have such a revolution as a person, she's still a devoted mother but with all the healthy love and support she's become so much more...And it's because of Ned and her children" (comments to Chapter 21).

Other reviewers praise the portrayal of Ned and Cersei's relationship, but point out that the story has major flaws in its depictions of other well-loved characters, e.g. Jon and Arya (e.g. MicaelaJordan's comments to chapters 74 and a guest's comments to chapter 53). Some also complain that the plot has a tendency to stick too closely to canon (e.g.

Mudsaur's and Redery's comments to chapters 28). Reviews such as these reveal that the story's main strength is the depiction of Cersei's and Ned's relationship; the author's focus on this aspect, however, has weakened her development of other plot lines and character arcs, which many readers also happen to be interested in.

### **Arya Stark in No Featherbed for Me**

Unlike *Frozen Fire* and *Lady Stark*, *No Featherbed for Me* is a complete, 12-chapter story on *Archive of Our Own*. It is told solely from the point-of-view of its protagonist, Arya Stark.<sup>1</sup> Arya's story here is radically different from her story arc in both the books and the TV show. Instead of fleeing from King's Landing and becoming an assassin, she marries three different men (Edric Dayne, Renly Baratheon, and Aegon Targaryen) and eventually has six children. Throughout the story she shares a forbidden love with Gendry Baratheon, who is reimagined here as the legitimate son of Robert and Cersei Baratheon, the heir to the throne of Westeros, and the husband of Arya's sister Sansa. Arya and Gendry eventually give in to their passion and have an affair, which results in one child. The war for the Iron Throne and the later war against the White Walkers serve only as a backdrop in this fic, which focuses heavily on Arya's growth into womanhood and her relationships with the various men in her life, with her sister Sansa, and with her children.

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<sup>1</sup> Like the *ASOIAF* books, the fanfics *Frozen Fire* and *Lady Stark* are told from multiple perspectives, although their protagonists' points of view are used more frequently than those of the other characters.



Arya's character in this story is more passive, weaker, and less resourceful than her character in canon. She learns to control her rebellious impulses and to hide what she truly feels, making her somewhat similar to her sister Sansa in canon: "...if Arya had learned anything since being married, it was how to school her face to not reveal her actual thoughts. *Maybe I will end up a lady yet*, she thought..." (Chapter 3). She often longs to be a child back with her family again rather than grow up and face the difficulties of an arranged marriage. Instead of finding a way out of her problems, as she does in canon, she dreams of being taken care of by a man—"she longed for her family, to be...held in her father's lap, assured of the goodness and safety of the world by the man she trusted above all" (Chapter 12)—or being rescued by a man.

Arya's children, all of whom are OCs, dominate much of the action of the story rather than Arya herself. They bring about the birth of dragons (much of Daenerys's canon story arc is given to them), engage in incestuous relationships, go to war, and otherwise commit the transgressive and exciting acts that help move the plot forward. Arya's role is relegated to that of a concerned, often fearful mother. However, the subversiveness of her character lies in often unexpressed thoughts about her children. "When I saw the wildfire, when I saw the children *in* the fire... I've never been *scared* of our children before but I was. I *am*," she tells her third husband Aegon (Chapter 9); and later, she thinks: "Other days, however, she wanted to murder the children she *did* have, all so headstrong and certain they did not need their mother's counsel" (Chapter 9). Arya's feelings of resentment and unhappiness are due to the roles society has foisted upon her:

...mayhaps it was a terrible thing to confess, but Arya knew [being a wife and mother] never brought her true satisfaction. She loved her children, loved them fiercely and loved them well, but there was also resentment buried in her chest: towards Aegon and his long-ago desperation to get a child on her, towards herself for allowing herself to fall into the roles she raged against when she was younger, towards the children who kept her rooted in place. (Chapter 10)

Like *Frozen Fire* and *Lady Stark*, this story contains numerous scenes depicting pregnancy and childbirth, and caring for children. It also portrays women interacting with each other in different ways: as sisters, as mothers and daughters, as friends and rivals. While Arya also has significant dialogues with the men she marries, the scenes involving women stand out. Not surprisingly, some reviewers felt that *No Featherbed for Me* spoke to their own real-life fears and insecurities:

Many themes you explored in this story hit close to home regarding my own fears of the future (loving someone so passionately, only to hate them at the end; discovering one day that your children are different people; the fear of never getting to say goodbye, or for it to end without letting them know you loved them) and that scared me, but I'm glad I didn't stop reading. (delcatty's comment to Chapter 12)

Reviewer Embry Claire likewise says: "You've managed to create something that isn't just a straightforward love story. It has all the love, darkness, and indecision that constitute a real human being and that's what keeps me coming back" (comment to Chapter 6).

Some reviewers were critical of how Arya's character was depicted in the fanfic, with one of their main complaints being her adulterous affair with Gendry. Reviewer Haidermahfrendz says, "...you turned Arya into a whore, plain and simple. You can defend with arguments that she still was very much in love with Gendry but that doesn't make it any less wrong" (comment to Chapter 7). Another reviewer, Morgoth2005, calls Arya "...incredibly selfish. And somewhat immature" and states that she is not a good example of a "feminist" character:

Her lack of any self-control when it comes to men is not something to be admired...her constant flip-flopping with regards to romantic and sexual partners does nothing for women or their movement to be considered as rational actors in society. She seems not to be guided by rational thought but by some kind of vagina instinct. (Comment to Chapter 12)

Other reviewers are more interested in how Arya is depicted as a mother in the story. Reviewer candyvan says, "I just wish Arya could find a way to reign in her children and get them all to be loving toward each other equally...Court has softened her...it has changed her from the she-wolf she was to this thing that so readily lets her children run wild" (comment to Chapter 11). In contrast, reviewer Mona praises Arya's "tremendous strength" on behalf of her children: "She's set aside most of her stubborn and willful personality for their benefit and loves [them] fiercely" (comment to Chapter 10).

## Common Strands

*ASOIAF* and *Game of Thrones* portrays a number of female characters who subvert traditional fantasy tropes by taking on roles (and traits) traditionally associated with men, such as warriors, leaders, and assassins. My analysis of the three fan-written novels above, which are among the most popular with readers on *FanFiction.net* and *Archive of Our Own*, shows that these texts in turn subvert their source texts' depiction of female characters by reimagining the most subversive of them—Daenerys, Cersei, and Arya—in more traditional female roles. Daenerys and Cersei especially are depicted as valuing their roles as mothers and wives, and while Arya may sometimes express anxiety or dissatisfaction with being a wife and mother, she nevertheless does her best to fulfill her duties in these roles.

Marta Eidsvåg's comparison of Cersei's and Catelyn's portrayals in the books and the HBO TV series reveals that HBO's adaptation "regress[es] towards conservative stereotypes and mainstream depictions of motherhood" (164); as a result, those characters traits of Cersei and Catelyn in the books that are unrelated to their being mothers—their "coldness, cruelty, strategy, sexuality, selfishness" (Eidsvåg 166)—are diminished so that they will be more easily identified as "typical" mothers rather than complex women with motives and desires unrelated to motherhood. In contrast, in the three fanfics that I examined, the protagonists Daenerys, Cersei, and Arya are shown to be fully sexual beings who take pleasure in sexual relations with the men they love. At the same time, they do not neglect their roles as mothers; in Cersei's case, in fact, her love for her adopted son Jon is as great as her love for her husband and her natural-born children.

As mentioned earlier, all three stories frequently include scenes in which very little dramatic action takes place and the protagonists simply watch over or play with their children. Camille Bacon-Smith explains that this description of ordinary, non-dramatic events appeals to fans:

Fanwriters, like soap opera fans, want to see characters change and evolve, have families, and rise to the challenge of internal and external crises in a nonlinear, dense tapestry of experience. Whether because of innate qualities or socialization, women perceive their lives in this way, and they like to see that structure reproduced in their literature...It is living day-to-day that matters, not the single events that make up individual plots. (64)

*Frozen Fire*, in particular, attempts to balance Daenerys's quieter, domestic side with her passionate, ambitious one, while Cersei in *Lady Stark* comes to embrace her domestic role wholeheartedly, a total departure from her character in canon. Arya Stark's violence and thirst for vengeance in canon is transmuted into a strong desire to protect her children. When viewed in the context of other studies of fan fiction, however, the "toning down" of the violence, ambition, and rebelliousness of these three female protagonists makes some sense. For instance, in her analysis of *mpreg* (male pregnancy) slash fiction based on the TV series *Supernatural*, Berit Åström indicates that this very unconventional genre of fan fiction "has the potential to produce narratives that challenge our notions of gender, identity, sexual and social practices, [and] parenthood." She concludes, however, that the stories in her study focus on depicting family life, "with all its traditional trappings...

[they are] conventional stories set in a very unconventional universe.”

Similarly, the authors of the three stories that I have analyzed create more conventional narratives of marriage and motherhood out of the unconventional story arcs of the major female characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*. This indicates that while fan fiction readers can also enjoy fanfics that retain the unconventional traits of female characters, the most popular fanfics are apparently those which insert these characters into more conventional, and therefore familiar and reassuring, roles. Furthermore, by giving romantic relationships a central role in these female protagonists’ reimagined stories, the authors of these three fanfics also reinstate them into the conventional feminine roles expected of noblewomen in Westerosi society. This results in either acceptance of these roles as in Cersei’s story in *Lady Stark*, or a compromise between acceptance and resistance, as in Daenerys’s and Arya’s stories in *Frozen Fire* and *No Featherbed for Me* respectively.

The paratexts of these stories reveal that while some reviewers may be concerned about how the female protagonist’s strength and agency is diminished due to her romantic relationship (in *Frozen Fire*), they are also interested in how her story reflects issues that real-life, contemporary women are concerned with (in *No Featherbed for Me*), and also with how a stable, loving partner can help shape a woman’s attitude towards family and romantic relationships (in *Lady Stark*).

The three stories examined in this paper are of course not reflective of majority of the fanfics about Daenerys, Cersei, Arya, or other female characters of *ASOIAF* and/or *Game of Thrones*. A close look at the story descriptions on *FanFiction.net* and *Archive of Our Own* reveals that there are

numerous fanfics in which these female characters are very similar to their characters in canon, i.e. Cersei is still villainous, Daenerys is still ambitious, Arya is still vengeful. Nevertheless, the most popular fanfics can say something meaningful about the types of depictions that resonate with fans, and that they can value alongside the depictions in canon.

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