Daenerys Targaryen and Feminist Theory in *Game of Thrones*

Lauren Humphreys

Dr. Sarah Wright

Duquesne University

Senior
Over the past several years, Western popular culture has seen an explosion in interest for the fantasy genre, erupting in 2011 when HBO premiered the television drama *Game of Thrones*. The drama series and the books it is based on have both been praised for their intricate weaving of many plotlines, genres, and thematic specialties. As with any popular culture phenomena, *Game of Thrones* was privileged enough to have their own creative platform from which to perform social critiques. While most of these criticisms are placed in a medieval and/or fantasy context, many lessons provided by *Thrones* are relevant to its twenty-first century fan base.

From its premier, the show has been admonished for its portrayal of women and its lack of feminist qualities. Sexism runs rampant in all of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, with most of the social norms and customs dependent upon (?) the inherent ‘trade value’ of the female population. No woman is safe from the predatory nature of Westerosi men. It is the transaction and exchange of women that makes life in Westeros, and its neighboring continent, Essos, possible. When looking at the series through this lens, it is easy to apply Luce Irigaray’s essay “Women on the Market” to the context of the female characters who inhabit that world. Irigaray’s essay presents the argument that women are just as easily exchanged by men as any other commodity. Her thesis is extremely evident within the world of *Game of Thrones*, where the functional nature of society is predicated on whether or not women can be exchanged and reproduce. This excerpt, taken from a larger research project that applies Irigaray’s essay to the world of *Game of Thrones*, will focus on the feminist theory surrounding exiled dynastic scion Daenerys Targaryen. How do men use the institution of marriage to exploit Daenerys for their own political and personal desires? Through what agency does she seek to liberate herself from the metaphorical market? This paper argues that Daenerys, although beginning the series as an exchanged commodity, ultimately upends the social establishment that permits the exchange of
women through her subversion of both societal and sexual gender roles. Although this paper will primarily examine events from the novels, incidents from television series will also be referenced.

Daenerys, as a central character, is introduced in the very first novel. Living on the other side of the Narrow Sea, she was exiled from Westeros after her father’s kingship was overthrown, travelling the vast continent of Essos with her brother Viserys, hoping to find people to help restore them to the Westerosi monarchy. At the beginning of *A Game of Thrones*, the Targaryens’ caretaker, Illyrio Mopatis, has arranged for Daenerys to marry the powerful Khal Drogo, who will supply his army to Viserys’ cause in exchange for a wife. Despite her young age, Daenerys is cognizant of the nature of the transaction, thinking to herself:

> Magister Illyrio was a dealer in spices, gemstones, dragonbone, and other, less savory things. He had friends in all of the Nine Free Cities, it was said, and even beyond, in Vaes Dothrak and the fabled lands beyond the Jade Sea. It was also said that he’d never had a friend he wouldn’t cheerfully sell for the right price. (*A Game of Thrones*, pg. 23)

Daenerys, although the one to be married, has no active voice in this arrangement. Illyrio and Viserys both view her as an object; a form of currency they can exploit in order to further their “less savory” desires. In a scene from the pilot episode, Viserys’ motivations are made clear, as he states to his sister, “I would let his whole tribe fuck you. All forty thousand men and their horses too if that’s what it took”. The entire situation proves Irigaray’s thesis—that men view women as another form of commodity. Irigaray writes: “It is thus not as ‘women’ that they are exchanged, but as women reduced to some common feature—their current price in gold, or phalluses—and of which they would represent a plus or minus quantity” (Irigaray 174).

Ultimately, Viserys’ plan never unfolds the way he desired, and his bargaining of his sister
eventually ends with his death. Although she was initially powerless in her situation, Daenerys emerges from the aftermath of her forced marriage stronger than ever, and with three baby dragons. Daenerys’ unique possession of her ‘children’ allow her to be analytically separated from other noble ladies in the series. Although, it is interesting to note that her power over the dragons comes with a gendered connotation, being known as their “mother” first and foremost. 

Since the conclusion of the first novel, Daenerys has been metaphorically “off the market”. The death of Khal Drogo and their child, alongside the birth of the dragons, finds her situated in an interesting position. Her possession of the dragons and symbolic status as their ‘mother’ indirectly remove her from the market. Through her position as the Dragon Queen, she is afforded powerful opportunities not available to other noblewomen. The dragons give her a stable identity, a sense of autonomy and power she would not have otherwise had. The mere existence of her children catapult her to a different realm, one that allows her to be extracted from the market. As Rikke Schubart notes: “In feminist theory, it is asserted that a female fantasy hero is but a dream” (105). Daenerys, through the dragons, is effectively placed in a god-like class of female fantasy hero that people in canon—mainly men—attempt to take advantage of. 

The fifth novel of the series, *A Dance with Dragons*, sees a myriad of male characters converging onto her. They all seek something from her—Tyrion Lannister desires revenge against his family, Victarion Greyjoy wants her hand in marriage, Euron Greyjoy aims to possess her dragons. In these situations, Daenerys is the one in power. They must bargain with her to get what they desire, rather than trying to use her as an instrument to leapfrog through society. Her

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1 “Her power is linked to her control over these dragons in explicitly gendered terms, as she becomes known as the ‘Mother of Dragons’” (Clapton and Shepherd 12).
dragons put her in her own tier, one not governed by the marriageability regulations suffered by other female characters.

Daenerys is not only removed from the market of marriage, but furthermore sets the tone of her subsequent sexual relationships with men. After her departure from the Dothraki khalasar, she begins a purely sexual relationship with the commander of the ‘sellsword’ army allegiant to her, Daario Naharis. This affair occurs both in the novels and the series; the novels depict her as a young, infatuated girl, while the television series emphasizes Daenerys’ control over their encounters. During(?) their first sexual tryst, Daenerys is seen sitting back coolly as Daario undresses, watching him as she sips wine. Her controlled demand for him to “take off his clothes” is a form of sexual boldness not permitted to the other female characters of the series. She ultimately breaks off their relationship before she departs to begin her invasion of Westeros. The aforementioned sex scene, as well as the entirety of her relationship with Daario, reinforce her autonomy over her own body; she gets to choose who she has sex with, the context in which it occurs, and when the relationship ends.

Her arrival in Westeros finds Daenerys placing herself back on the market in order to win allies in her fight for the Iron Throne. Daenerys’s termination of her affair with Daario is predicated on making herself marketable to potential suitors upon her arrival in the Seven Kingdoms. However, the way she markets herself is not through marriage, but rather through the sheer military prowess she boasts. She is acutely aware of her market potential and seeks to exploit the desires of men to her advantage. She does thusly with Jon Snow, who had been recently named king of Westeros’ northernmost kingdom. Although the two never marry, they do begin a relationship that is seemingly bent to Daenerys’ will. She plans to use Jon’s influence in his kingdom to support her in the war for the Iron Throne. His authority over the North,
alongside her providing military might in the war against the White Walkers, is enough, in her mind, to win the North’s allegiance. Instead of using marriage as a bargaining tool, she negotiates instead with her staggering military power. This is an interesting contrast to the use of marriage, as no other woman in the series has commanded as much brute militant force as Daenerys. Ultimately, she never achieves her singular goal, and finds herself murdered by Jon after she conquered King’s Landing. Her last remaining dragon, Drogon, destroys the Iron Throne in his grief, essentially destroying the grand social institution that allowed the marketing of women to be possible.

In an editorial piece written for The Guardian, journalist Abigail Chandler cites the downfall of the popular women of Game of Thrones, citing the controversial ending of the show, particularly its treatment of Daenerys’ eventual madness. Calling the television series anti-feminist due to the ending of one specific female character is a stretch, especially taking into considering that the end of Daenerys’ arc is the catalyst for the complete elimination of a social establishment. Although her invasion of Westeros is a failure, her presence and untimely death are ultimately the catalyst for the abolishment of the dynastic monarchy and the implementation of an elective one. The criticism that the show is too violent is valid, but it would be naïve to say that all of this violence stems from the acts of men; the most severe and widespread acts come from the will and decisions of its female characters, including Daenerys herself. As creator George R.R. Martin claims, both A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones are about “the human heart in conflict with itself”. A story such as this does not lend itself to one-dimensional female characters, as so many feminist critiques seem to desire. The appeal of Daenerys comes not from her gender, but rather from the steps she takes—justified or not—to overcome the oppressive system she was born into.
Works Cited


