Distorted Perception: Fantasy Fiction and Female Roles Across Media

The latest years of television have seen themselves plagued by productions playing upon the success of the female heroine as the focus of the story. From Buffy to the X-files’ Scully to Alien’s Ripley, just to name a few, these characters seem to have captivated the public’s attention, and the exploitation of the female role in fiction has seen itself exercised and diversified like never before on the small screen. But the thing is that, like almost everything that is ever shown in television, the phenomenon started with far more complex tales, those told in novels and short stories by authors of all nationalities and genres. That said, the purpose of this essay is to explore the differences of those female roles between visual and literary media. To do so, I will compare some of the main female characters in HBO’s Game of Thrones to their literary counterparts in George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire, with the aid of feminist theory. Due to the newness of the serialized small screen adaptation, I will be forced to constrain these comparisons to examples found within the first two novels in the series, A Game of Thrones (AGOT), and A Clash of Kings (ACOK), since there are no more episodes of the show, other than those of the two corresponding seasons, to compare to further texts, as of yet.

It has been called to my attention that being a so called “strong” female character in film and television, particularly in the fantasy genre, often means, when sticking to the norm rather than the occasional exception, one of two things: the character must be “either an extremely violent,
tomboyish heroine or a conniving seductress...[and] characteristics of empathy and intuition get pushed aside in an effort to develop a heroine who is...a replica of the man” (Clarke Stuart 4). By this, I do not aim to say that empathy and intuition are not present in female characters of the genre, only that they are characteristics more often than not relegated to characters that remain perpetually in the sidelines, to guest stars in a television show rather than its regular cast. This suggests that in order to create a successful female lead, one must extinguish the very same characteristics that denote that character as female. That feminine values and sensibilities are more a hindrance than an asset to a character in the center of the action, and must therefore be dismissed and avoided at all costs. By making the female a replica of the male so that she can succeed in her quest, I am being told that masculinity is, in some way, superior. Furthermore, these standards seem to ascertain that female characters are only of value as central to a piece when they serve as the “erotic object of the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (Mulvey 19). It is alright for a female character to be present and have importance in the action that is to take place, as long as she (a) is the romantic interest of the male hero, (b) is aiding that same hero in his quest, or (c) has embraced masculinity and has thus become the aforementioned heroic figure herself. She is, to put it simply, eye candy for the male counterpart or ruthless and emotionally unavailable, with no room for the human complexities and nuances that may come in between. In visual media, the woman is meant to give pleasure, to empower the man. In literature — place of beginnings for the fantasy genre as well as many others, though it is common to use female characters in this way, it is not necessarily the norm.

For the past two decades or so, *A Song of Ice and Fire* — the original body of text from
which the television show has been adapted — has been steadily rising to the top of the lists in
the fantasy genre, with its brutal portrayal of a morally ambiguous world. A world in which
magic is a fading vestige of ages past and better times, where seasons are extreme and can last
for years on end. This is the medieval world of Westeros and its Seven Kingdoms, seven distinct
regions that come together under the rule of the king on the Iron Throne and his many under-
lords, and where patriarchy is absolute and man revered. The series, both the text and its small
screen adaptation, opens during a period of relative peace. It is the end of a long summer, a
prosperous period for all kingdoms, filled with festivities and ballads in remembrance of heroic
deeds. The Baratheons, the Starks and the Lannisters, three of the plethora of noble houses
around which the series will develop, are almost immediately introduced and so is, shortly
thereafter, the looming threat to the lands they hold: “Winter Is Coming” (Martin, AGOT 19) say
the Stark words, and it is harsh, unforgiving, and above all, inescapable. Beauty and gallantry are
at an end, and it is time for death, both of the land and, apparently, of knightly ideals and values.
With winter come Dragons and the zombie-like White Walkers. With winter comes magic, and
Westeros is not prepared for its return. When described like that, it seems to be pretty much what
anyone would expect out of epic fantasy: another run-of-the-mill heroic journey with easy
distinctions between good and evil, where humanity is faced with monsters to defeat in order to
survive, but there is more depth to it than that. No character is unblemished and, against all genre
tradition, no morally upright action goes unpunished, evil deeds often bring factions to victory,
and magic is more a prop in background scenery than the center of the action. There is no single
hero but an ensemble of characters of all genders and beliefs that struggle with their virtues, their
flaws, and their morality (or lack thereof). All these while juggling with lives and power that no
one man, or woman, should have control over. By the end of AGOT, the king — a fat, violent
drank, and a fool— has died, the only honorable lord capable of keeping the realm together has
been decapitated, and the War of The Five Kings is well underway.

Westeros and the Seven Kingdoms are the epitome of the male dominated society, where
masculinity means power and success. Where being female means, regardless of nobility, being
nothing more than an asset to a House, a bartering chip to be exchanged for armies and
allegiances. Despite all this, in the midst of war it becomes clear rather fast that, in truth, “[t]he
women are the strong ones” (Martin, A Feast for Crows, location 4073, par.1) in this tale. They
are all fully realized characters, with skills, duties, desires and ambitions. Above all, they are
human, with everything that classification might imply, instead of two-dimensional characters set
in the background to aid the traditional male hero. It is the women who hold the forts and castles
when the men have gone out to fight, it is the women who manage the household and keep the
people from starving as war rages on, it is — with a few notable exceptions— the women who
come to control politics with intelligence and wit rather than violence. It is in this that Martin
excels: he understands the subtleties of human behavior, the intricacies of interrelations and
familial ties, and “by creating such diverse and fully rendered female characters and thrusting
them into this grim and bitter world, [he] has created a subversively feminist tale” (Spector 169 –
187). He unceremoniously shoves women into the forefront, and though much of the violence,
especially sexual, falls upon women, their importance lies well beyond that of simply pleasuring
men. Being these bartering chips between houses is denigrating, yes, but I have taken it as more
of a critic towards the undervalued position of women even today, rather than a sexist statement.
More importantly, this status makes female characters key figures in matters of state, privy to the
strategies and machinations of their husbands and their banner men. It makes them wells of information, the greatest currency anywhere, anytime.

What instigated this essay, though, was precisely the fact that it seemed to me that in the adaptation to the small screen, some of that richness of characterization appears to have been lost in translation. It seemed to me, watching the show, that these characters that I had grown to appreciate and see as complex individuals, as strong female characters in their own right, had lost some of that depth. They seemed flatter. Somehow, they seemed less. The reasons for this are plenty, some more obvious that the rest, like the fact that fantasy’s target audience has always been predominantly male, and by choosing a series of novels already established as prominent within the circles of fantasy fans, HBO probably hoped that “the expectation and respectability or popularity achieved in one medium might infect the work created in another” (Andrew 372 – 389), which would guarantee a stable core of audience. Regardless of the reasons for it, it cannot be denied that, here, that very process of adaptation plays a major part.

Umberto Eco states that “there are no complete synonyms in language” (9), there are no two sentences in two different languages that can transmit the exact same meaning. Approximate it enough to give the receiver a general idea of what is meant, perhaps, but never give a fully detailed account of the cultural implications lying behind every word. And what are books and television, if not two different languages seeking to accomplish the same thing (by which I mean, of course, to tell stories, to entertain)? It is only natural that some things would have to be sacrificed in order to make that leap from page to screen in the best possible way. Adaptation is, after all, merely another form of translation. Television’s way of telling stories relies much more on connotation, on the viewers preconceived ideas, than books do. Books rely on dialogue, on
inner monologues, they are “an essentially performative act, where directions given by the author are interpreted by the reader in a series of deeply personal, private, and unsharable acts of imagination” (Abraham 29 – 42). In a way, television takes that freedom and intimacy with the story away from the viewer, since it gives a visual standard of all that which was previously left to the imagination, simply due to the way the medium works. It need not be anyone’s fault.

Of the changes made, some of the most significant were upon the character of Cersei Lannister, queen of the Seven Kingdoms and a wretch of a woman. Outwardly, she is everything that is expected of her: she is polite and regal, beautiful still after three children. She seems “[t]he ideal female: wife and mother, perfect companion, the endlessly dependable mainstay of hearth and home” (Wood 593 – 601), but the illusion vanishes like a column of smoke in strong wind. It is quickly made clear that the queen is an adulteress, that the king’s children are not his own but the product of a long-standing incestuous relationship between the queen and Jaime Lannister, her twin brother. That she married with hopes of love, with the ideal of kingly courtesy and virtue, and was presented with a drunkard still obsessed with a woman lost and dead, and who did not even give her the time of day. These traits are preserved, as they are crucial to the plot’s further development and basis to her character, but much of her ruthlessness, and moreover, her agency, is taken away and given to her son, Crown Prince Joffrey. In the novels, it is Cersei who orders the immediate execution of all sixteen of her deceased husband’s bastard children, fathered in drunken hazes on prostitutes and noble women alike, all around the Kingdoms. In the series, this role is taken over by Joffrey, a cruel and immature boy who takes pleasure on inflicting pain to those he is supposed to protect as the crowned king on the Iron Throne. He does not even let her, the queen regent, know beforehand. It empowers him, instead
of her, because no matter how cruel, hateful and psychopathic the action, it is empowering. It is a choice, a command, a sign of power over lives not her own, one that was hers on the page and was taken away on the screen.

Catelyn Stark’s changes are less prominent, but no less significant. She, unlike Cersei, truly is the ideal woman…or tries to be. She is Ned Stark’s wife, the lady of Winterfell, the highest position of nobility in the North. She has five children she loves, a loving husband, a land to rule over. She does it well, but she is far from perfect. Catelyn can be vengeful, and rash, and does not forget a slight. She’s just a woman. Her situation changes, in both novel and series, when her husband is unjustly accused of treason and decapitated on Joffrey’s command, event that triggers what will come to be known as the War of the Five Kings, during which Robb, Ned’s oldest son, rallies the northern forces to make of the North an independent kingdom, outside the Iron Throne’s influence and control. The major change comes when Catelyn is turned from trusted counsellor and political advisor to a fifteen year old boy, who knows of war and battle strategy but not much of politics or what is expected from a king, into a simplistic matriarchal figure that is to be rebelled against and overpowered by a man grown in the television show, making it seem as if Robb’s rule “depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world” (Mulvey 14). As if his show of power over the authority figure of his childhood represented an achievement, a statement to his banner men that he is man enough to lead them, and he can make his own decisions. The aging up of the boy is understandable, from a production point of view. He is to be in the middle of a war, amidst violence and blood and chaos. There are many more actors fitting a role of those conditions in an age range above fifteen. It is also understood that it allows for a greater display of sexuality, and that shift in
dynamics with his mother, and that is bound to attract a greater viewership. That certainly can’t
hurt.

While Catelyn’s shift in relation to the novels is caused by age, it is indirect. It is her son who
is aged up, changing their relationship accordingly, and her essential character arc has not
differed, only the balance of power in it. Daenerys Targaryen is more directly involved in a
situation resembling this one. In the novels, Dany (as some characters call her affectionately)
starts off as a thirteen-year-old exiled princess, living as a beggar under the watchful eye of her
cruel and mad brother, Viserys, who routinely submits her to forms of psychological abuse, and
sells her off to a Horse-lord in exchange of an army to retake the Iron Throne, which was taken
from his family during Robert’s Rebellion, a war that happens pre-series but is referenced
throughout the tale, in which five of the noble families rebelled againsts Viserys and Daenerys’
father and ended the Targaryen dynasty. As Daniel Abraham points out, having “obscene visual
depiction[s] of a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct” (29 – 42) would be illegal under
the PROTECT Act of 2003, problem that had to be circumvented by the show-runners by casting
an actress of legal age. This then forced the writers to give more maturity to Dany’s character,
giving her more agency and short-cutting most the character development of the first sections of
the novels, where she changes from a naive little girl that is subject of constant abuse into
woman discovering her own power. The change still happens, it is just not as gradual.

The two characters that remain mostly unchanged are the Stark sisters, Sansa and Arya, as
different from each other as light and dark. Sansa is a prim little lady, elegant and “in love with
the central myth of her culture — that the king is kind and wise, that princes are noble and good,
that ladies must be beautiful and behave in a ladylike manner” (Spector 169 – 187). She’s also a
little insufferable, in the begging, especially to her sister. When looking back, she is very much the girl Cersei must have, before her hopes were destroyed by marrying the man she did. Arya is everything Sansa is not: willful, aggressive, more interested in swordplay than needle work, and never as pretty. She is the patented tomboy, medieval style. Their characters, and character arcs, remain practically the same (with a few minor exceptions not relevant to the purpose of this essay), perhaps because their ages — twelve and nine years old, respectively — and situations within the plot allows them a greater level of fidelity to the original text while still serving the television show’s particular plot lines.

Fact is that, regardless of the reasons behind it, visual media creates a psychological distance from the characters. It removes the audience from their thoughts, from their innermost compulsions, from the intricacies of each of these women’s plights that make them so easily relatable. When I read, it is not difficult for me to get to know who these women are, just by following the narrative. With the show, it takes a little more of reading — seeing would be a more apt word, perhaps — between the lines. Everyone has preferences, everyone has that character that they simply cannot stomach, that character they will cheer and defend to the bitter end, but I, for one, cannot say that there is one single personal history in these series, in both its formats, that has not moved me to some extent. It is natural to not sympathize with everybody and, in the end, that is A Song of Ice and Fire’s greatest accomplishment in any medium: these are human stories, expertly woven into the backdrop of a fantastical land, inhumane, at times, and thus entirely realistic.
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I wonder sometimes if this hate is due to how female characters are written and the roles they end up playing. I'm thinking of all the times in an action movie * where the hero's love interest either A: sat back and watched the fight or B: tried to help and so totally made things worse. I remember hating the living hell out of those characters, and thinking how much better the story would have been - and likewise, how much cooler the hero would have been - without the love interest around.