



Afb. 1: Joan of Arc. Bron: Wikimedia Commons, <http://bitly.ws/HRdG>.

Women's roles in Game of Thrones: fantasy or reality? Observing the depiction of women in Game of Thrones through a historical lens

Warning: This article contains spoilers about the HBO series *Game of Thrones*

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"I'm no ordinary woman. My dreams come true." This is a quote by Daenerys Targaryen, the Queen of Dragons. She is one of the most important characters in *Game of Thrones*. The fantasy show depicts a variety of female characters, such as queens, warriors, prostitutes, and noblewomen. It is based on the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin. Several families from different areas are all fighting for the Iron Throne. The most important families include the Targaryens, Starks, Lannisters, and the Tyrells. The events are set in the fictional continents of Essos and Westeros from the year 298 A.C. to 305 A.C. The dating is based on Aegon Targaryen's conquest, thus explaining the acronym A.C., as it stands for 'After Conquest'. Aegon, the first Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, conquered the

throne in 1 A.C. According to 'our' calendar, the show is estimated to take place in the middle to the last part of the fifteenth century.

While the fictitious world depicts dragons, prophetic visions, and an army of the dead, it draws inspiration from real-world history and attempts to reflect the social and political structures of the Middle Ages. George R.R. Martin has stated that parts of the series are inspired by the English War of the Roses of the fifteenth century.¹ The show portrays several influential female characters and the fictive continent of Westeros displays various medieval

¹ Charley Reed and Nolan Searl, "A Game of Thrones, a War of Roses," University of Nebraska Omaha, January 23, 2018, <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2016/06/a-game-of-thrones-a-war-of-roses.php>.

European characteristics. Therefore, I will examine how historically accurate *Game of Thrones* portrayed women's roles compared to medieval European society. I will analyze this by focusing on female agency and political influence women had.

Women who choose their own path

In medieval Europe, noblewomen were used by their families to form alliances through marriage. A woman could only decide not to marry if she had an extraordinarily powerful status. An example of this exception is Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1558 until her death in 1603.² She chose not to marry in order to preserve and expand her power. In *Game of Thrones*, Cersei, Margaery, and Daenerys were all women who were born into families of high nobility. At some point, they all had to marry men they did not love to further the political interests of their families. They met societal expectations by becoming wives and mothers. This aligns with the

expectations medieval European society had for (noble)women.

Furthermore, Cersei and Daenerys were both widows and mothers, which gave them a certain level of independence, and their high class empowered them to maintain this. So, even though they were forced into marriages, they did withhold certain forms of privileges in the series that most European medieval women did not have.

Moreover, in the European Middle Ages, women of lower nobility had slightly more freedom than women way up in the ranks. They were still often married off, but were able to exercise more independence. In *Game of Thrones*, these women and their self-determination are represented by Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth. Arya was able to go on adventures around the fictional world by herself, while Brienne of Tarth departed on a journey of vengeance. By being women as well as

fanatic fighters, Brienne and Arya challenged gender norms and societal expectations. Additionally, they both wore armor, and Arya was disguised as a boy for part of the series. Likewise, a number of medieval European women used gender 'disguises' as a way to expand their opportunities. Like Arya and Brienne, these real-life women wore men's clothing and pursued traditionally male paths. A historical example of a woman pursuing a traditionally male path is Christine de Pizan. She was a Renaissance writer and was born into a prominent Venetian family; her father was King Charles V's physician and astrologer. Christine lived to become a court writer for various dukes and eventually for the French court of King Charles VI. She is most well-known for being a leading voice in the Renaissance debate about the nature, sexuality, and education of women.³

Additionally, there are several similarities between the famous Joan of Arc and Brienne and Arya. Joan of Arc led the national French army into victory during the Hundred Years' War in the fifteenth century. She was dressed in men's armor. Brienne is often compared to Joan of Arc in popular culture, because they were both warrior women who wore men's armor. Some argue that even their names are alike.⁴ Brienne of Tarth and Arya Stark demonstrate the potential for female agency in a male-dominated society.

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The show also depicts women who have a lower status in society and thus face more limited options. Consider the example of Shae, who was not originally from Westeros. She had dreams of power and freedom. Shae was Sansa Stark's handmaiden, and became Tyrion Lannister's mistress and companion. Tyrion was from a powerful family and was closely related to the ruling monarch throughout the entirety of the show. It can be argued that Shae used sex and sexuality to her benefit and therefore exercised her agency. However, the fact that she felt as though this was her only way to survive in Westerosi society speaks volumes. She did not have promising opportunities to move up in society, and thus did it the way she knew how to. This reflects historical realities in European medieval society, where women had restricted roles and were often restrained in their agency.⁵

Political influence and maneuvering

The series depicts several women exerting political influence. For instance, Olenna Tyrell was known for her diplomacy and maneuvering behind the scenes. She played an important role in the rise of House Tyrell and the murder of King Joffrey.⁶ Additionally, Cersei Lannister engaged in alliances and consolidations of power to maintain her control over the Iron Throne.⁷ Her

⁵ S. Schroeder, *Women in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶ Vicky Green, "Olenna Tyrell: Agency, Feminism, and Power in *Game of Thrones*", *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2019, pp. 962-77.

⁷ Tim De Forest, "Women and Power in Westeros: Female Characters and Claimants in *Game of Thrones*", *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 18, no. 6, 2018, pp. 996-1011.



Afb. 2: *Game of Thrones* tapestry. Bron: Wikimedia Commons, <http://bitly.ws/HRiz>.

² Carole Levin, *The Reign of Elizabeth 1* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

³ Brian Alexander Pavlac, *Game of Thrones versus History: Written in Blood* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017).

⁴ Haley Cowans, "A Woman Dressed as a Man Dressed as a Woman": The Non-Binary Gender of Joan of Arc" (pdf, 2015), 37.

character arc showed that women could exert political influence in Westeros. Women like Daenerys Targaryen and Sansa Stark make important military and political decisions as well.

In real-world history, Isabelle of France exercised political influence during the reign of her husband, Edward II of England.⁸ She led armies and negotiated with allies during the early stages of the Hundred Years' War.⁹ Furthermore, Matilda of Tuscany played an essential role in the Investiture Controversy, where she supported the papacy and provided military assistance to Pope Gregory VII, which contributed to the resolution of the conflict and the triumph of the papacy.¹⁰ Moreover, Margaret of Anjou's marriage to Henry VI in the fifteenth century made peace between England and France. Margaret ruled England when her husband went "insane". These are cases of real-life women exercising political authority and influencing the course of action, which can be compared to the depiction of lead female characters within *Game of Thrones*.

Daenerys Targaryen, as one of the most important characters in the show, also exerted substantial political influence and tactics. She recognized the importance of forming alliances to achieve her political goals.¹¹ Throughout the series, she showed her diplomatic skills by collaborating with the Unsullied,



Afb. 3: The Iron Throne, Bron: Wikimedia Commons, <http://bitly.ws/HRhS>.

the Dothraki, and the Second Sons. Daenerys captured cities and expanded her territories, until she arrived at her ultimate destination: King's Landing in Westeros. Again, the comparison with Joan of Arc comes to light. Daenerys' depiction as a selfless liberator and symbol of hope can be compared to Joan of Arc during the Hundred Years' War.¹² Both women were seen as leaders who inspired loyalty and a large following, and battled against oppressive forces. However, this is only one historical figure to compare Daenerys to. Generally speaking, her actions and position in society were not realistic for women during medieval times, as she basically conquered an entire continent. While her character draws inspiration from historical figures, such as Joan of Arc, it is important to emphasize that great creative liberties have been taken here.

⁸ R.C. Regan, "Medieval Politics and Modern *Game of Thrones*", *Réflexions Historiques*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2013, pp. 70-87.

⁹ Ian Mortimer, *The Perfect Queen: The Life of Isabella of France, Wife of Edward II* (Vintage Books, 2006).

¹⁰ Peter Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹¹ James Arnt Aune, et al., "Female Leadership in the *Game of Thrones*", *Journal of Communication and Religion*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2020, pp. 48-69.

Conclusion

Game of Thrones is very obviously a fantasy show. It depicts magic, dragons, and prophetic visions. However, there are some realistic elements to it. Throughout the series, inspiration is drawn from European medieval history. To a certain extent, this can be seen in women's positions. Some characters in the show have similarities to real-life women who influenced the course of history, exercised their agency and made political decisions. For example, Brienne of Tarth can be compared to Joan of Arc, as can Daenerys Targaryen. Cersei Lannister and Olenna Tyrell were both cunning women who clearly influenced political decisions behind the scenes, which can be compared to several women throughout history such as Isabelle of France, Margaret of Anjou and Matilda of Tuscany. Moreover, Shae is a representation of women who were not born into nobility and had scarcer options. In conclusion, *Game of Thrones* is a clear fantasy show with some historical elements, of which some are accurate and some are not. Female agency and political influence are represented somewhat accurately, but the fictional element is obviously present in these areas as well. It is very dramatized, yet in some ways empowering. Lastly, I would like to end this article by once again citing Daenerys Targaryen: "Woman? Is that meant to insult me? I would return the slap if I took you for a man."

¹² Regine Pernoud, *Joan of Arc: Her Story* (St. Martin's Press, 1998).