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Daenerys Targaryen: Mad or Madly Ended? A Feminist Analysis of Her Downfall

[S]he that is incapable of living in society is a god or a beast -Aristotle

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Abstract

The release of the final episodes of *Game of Thrones* was met with uproar, particularly in response to David Benioff and Weiss's ending for the beloved Daenerys Targaryen, played by Emilia Clarke. Her descent into madness has sparked controversy over whether she deserved this fate, with the unexplained slaughter of Kings Landing being yet another example of the showrunners rushing through the eighth and final season. Popular belief agrees either way that Dany's downfall is attributed to the madness that runs through Targaryen bloodlines. I argue, however, that it is patriarchal impositions that lead to her demise. Jon Snow, as a male, is privileged in that his Targaryen roots enable him a claim to the throne, without any of the negative Targaryen associations being attached to him; society easily transfers the negative traits, such as being prone to madness, onto Daenerys, though, because women are already believed to harbor these characteristics. Despite the profuse evidence that counters Dany fitting into the stereotypes of Targaryens and women, society (both Westeros's and ours) pushes her into them. Westeros and the show-runners frame Daenerys as yet another woman turned mad in order to justify her permanent removal from power.

Introduction

Daenerys is one of the most iconic empowered female characters in literature and film, or at least she was before Season 8 of *Game of Thrones*. The audience met Daenerys when she was a teenager under the abusive control of her brother, but from there she grew, first by establishing that she is not a possession to men, like Khal Drogo, then mothering three dragons, and by the final season, having the most powerful army in her world. In the second to last episode, "The Bells," after King's Landing surrenders quickly to her siege, she "snaps," for some unknown reason and uses her dragon to burn the city, destroying the audience's respect for her with it.

I have found, with the support of feminist theory, that Daenerys could never win the “game of thrones,” not because she succumbed to the Targaryen madness, as is popularly believed, but because of her place in the patriarchy as a woman. Daenerys’ authority is constantly questioned, because she is a woman and a Targaryen, so as soon as a male option to the throne – Jon Snow – is presented, he is considered the better prospect. His claim to the throne comes from one of the most important reveals on the show. Jon is not, in fact, the only bastard son of Ned Stark; his parents are actually Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen, making him the next Targaryen in line after the Mad King. Even though Jon explicitly states that he does not want the position, people insist on promoting him as the ruler of the seven kingdoms, now that his Targaryen descent is known. Meanwhile, not a single character worries about Jon harboring the negative Targaryen associations that are so readily applied to Daenerys.

The Targaryen stereotypes are easily transferred to Dany because of her status as a woman; historically in Western culture, mirrored by Westerosi culture, these traits, including madness, ambition, and destructiveness, are already imposed onto women by the patriarchy. The danger Daenerys poses to civilization as the “dragon,” the embodiment of Targaryen traits, stems from the fear of the danger a powerful woman poses to the patriarchy. A woman yielding power threatens the structure created by the patriarchy where men are situated on top. Women are supposed to be weak so that men can maintain power over them. Once a woman has power, she discredits the paradigm that women cannot be powerful, and it is feared that she will restructure society to not just benefit the white, heterosexual men who currently hold power in society.

Literature Review: How Society Views Women

This fear of a woman in power is directly linked to the stereotypes held against women. In order to keep the patriarchal structure in place and men in power, powerful women are stripped of their power by being framed under stereotypes that make them seem irrational, selfish, mad, and ultimately, dangerous. The fear feeds into these stereotypes and, in turn, the stereotypes feed back into the fear.

In order to understand the stereotypes, it is important to first understand how “othering” is applied to women, since othering makes it easier for stereotypes to be applied. Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, and feminist, in her book *Powers of Horror*, explains a form of othering she calls abjection. She defines the abject as that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Barbara Creed, in her book *Monstrous Femininities*, adds that “Analysis of the abject centers on ways in which the ‘clean and proper self’ is constructed. The abject is that which must be expelled or excluded in the construction of that self” (Creed 37). Bodily excrements, such as blood, spit, and feces, are considered abject because they threaten the boundaries of human bodies; they inspire disgust because they break the inside-outside barrier, thus threatening the rigid “self” that is constructed (Kristeva 53). They must be cast aside, labelled “not I,” so that “I” can be defined (Kristeva 232).

Abjection also occurs with women. Kristeva explains that the maternal figure must become abject, in order for the child to establish its own borders apart from her body (Kristeva 13). Creed adds to this by arguing that *all* women, not just mothers, are situated on the side of the abject, under a patriarchal society. Barbara Creed asserts that “the abject is placed on the side of the feminine: it exists in opposition to the paternal symbolic, which is governed by rules and

laws” (37). Since the societal “self” is defined as man and by man, woman, as the perceived opposite, is turned into the “not-self” or “other,” so that man can maintain his identity as independent and in control of his life.

Being placed on the side of the abject means that women are aligned with everything else that is deemed “other” and “inferior,” in the fracture that runs through Western society. Val Plumwood, Australian philosopher and ecofeminist, in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, discusses the dualisms in Western society. She explains that this divide can be traced back to ancient Greece, with the rise of rationalism (Plumwood 72.) Rationalism purports that rationality and logic are superior to nature, allowing for the argument that humans are superior to nature because of their ability to reason. Creed adds that “[a woman’s] ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and to the great cycle of birth, decay, and death” and that

“Menstruation and childbirth are seen as the two events in woman’s life which have placed her on the side of the abject. It is woman’s fertilizable body which aligns her with nature and threatens the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order. . . . While the male body signifies form and integrity, and is clearly differentiated from the world” (Creed 47-50).

In other words, because women’s bodies are less closed off than men’s and they undergo more obvious functions in the cycle of nature, like giving birth, women are more connected to nature, thus, more connected to inferiority. Also, humans’ link to nature “remind[s] man of his mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order” (Creed 47). Therefore, men in the attempt to maintain their image of immortality and order, separate themselves from nature. They feel the need to have control over themselves and over the earth, rather than accepting the reality of them being subjected by nature.

This divide, between reason and nature, is only part of a larger set. Plumwood provides a list of contrasting pairs:

culture	/	nature
reason	/	nature
male	/	female
mind	/	body (nature)
master	/	slave
reason	/	matter (physicality)
rationality	/	animality (nature)
reason	/	emotion (nature)
mind, spirit	/	nature
freedom	/	necessity (nature)
universal	/	particular
human	/	nature (non-human)
civilised	/	primitive (nature)
production	/	reproduction (nature)
public	/	private
subject	/	object
self	/	other

Fig. 1 *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (42).

Virtually everything on the “superior” side can be traced back to reason, while virtually everything on the “inferior” side can be represented as forms of nature; it is also important to note that men are found on the superior side with reason over women who are situated on the bottom, alongside nature (Plumwood 44). Plumwood stresses that the gendered reason/ nature contrast has many nuances and overlap within each side (44). She adds:

“The structure of reason/nature dualism and its variants is the perspective of power; it represents, as Nancy Hartsock notes, ‘a way of looking at the world characteristic of the dominant, white, male Eurocentric ruling class, a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the centre and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities’ (Hartsock 1990:161)” (Plumwood 44).

This means that the division has everything to do with the assertion of power. She argues that dualisms are not just free floating ideas; they are, rather, derived from the desire for “domination

and accumulation” and are used as justification for carrying through with that domination; the values of the other are then systematically depicted as inferior (Plumwood 42). For example, any traits that are attributed to nature are deemed inferior, while “manly” things like reason are idealized.

Since reason is deemed superior to nature, it naturally follows that the brain is superior to the body. Western culture has insisted on separating the body from the mind, placing priority on the latter. Men then assume the higher symbolic position of the brain, considering themselves rational and in control and associate women with the inferior body, mutable, untrustworthy, and something to be conquered by the brain. Both the body and women are deemed abject.

Women symbolically occupying the body in the mind-body dichotomy results in the correlating stereotype of them being governed by emotions and irrationality, since men take the throne of the rational, unemotional mind. Because women are linked with the body, it is believed that their minds, and therefore their choices, are controlled by their emotions. Madness, especially, has been attributed to women:

“to be a woman, visibly, physically, is to be predisposed to a heightened emotional nature which can turn to madness. Indeed, the word ‘hysteria,’ which has always been seen by the medical and psychiatric professions as a woman’s disease, comes from the Greek word for ‘uterus’” (Cranny-Francis et al. 144).

Kristeva’s theory supports this too since “the definition of sin/abjection as something which comes from within opens up the way to position woman as deceptively treacherous. She may appear pure and beautiful on the outside but evil may, nevertheless, reside within” (42).

Shahd Alshammari begins her book *Literary Madness in British, Postcolonial, and Bedouin Women's Writing* by prefacing that women have always been identified with emotions

and the body (1). She continues into the point that “women who aim to break down cultural, ideological, and social structures are labelled as ‘mad’” (Alshammari 3). What is considered mad often is simply symptoms of trauma or depression and not being believed, all of which are made worse by how madness was treated (Chesler 35-36). This is extremely significant, because it supports that the diagnosis of madness is subjectively applied and used to discredit women if they try to change the oppressive system.

The Madwoman in the Attic, written by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, also supports madness as something associated with women. Scholars Gilbert and Gubar explain the prevalence of the angel/monster dichotomy in society, where a woman is placed into one of two categories, as either a passive and unambitious angel or an ambitious and, therefore, destructive “whore” (18). Regardless of which role a woman falls under, she still has no place in society; she is either pedestalled as a divine being above society or as a monster who lives beneath it. The ambition of *any* woman is what threatens to turn her into a “monster” that poses a threat to men. Since civilization *is* men, as aforementioned, women are then also threats to civilization as a whole.

Even more importantly, Gilbert and Gubar state that **patriarchal socialization itself makes women sick** (53). Phyllis Chesler furthers this by explaining that women are driven mad by the fact that, because of their biology, they will never be able to take part in “cultural supremacy;” rather, they are expected to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of society (91). The role for a woman is also designed to be lonely: she is isolated from society at home, with only her children for company, who will eventually grow up and leave her (Chesler 325.) This patriarchal-induced isolation surely feeds into madness, as well. Chesler, in stressing the importance of perspective, includes Thomas Szasz who states “If the observer sympathizes with

the victim, then the *oppressor* is mad” (160). While these roles for women have been largely abandoned in western societies, they are still prevalent enough for the depiction of women as emotional/mad to continue.

Violence also plays into the madness ascribed to women. Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, in *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, share how when a woman uses violence, she is perceived as ‘bad’ or ‘mad,’ though when a man exhibits violent behavior, it is considered commonplace, since violence and physical strength are components of masculinity (Gentry and Sjoberg 94). A violent woman is bad at being a woman, and is therefore considered bad for society (Gentry and Sjoberg 3). Also, violence committed by a woman is seen as more threatening than a man’s violence (Gentry and Sjoberg 94). A woman’s violence is often attributed to her motherly instinct, which, in theory, is wholly self-sacrificing, therefore more dangerous (Gentry and Sjoberg 71). Violent women are portrayed as monstrous, stripped of their humanity and rationality, since the violence supposedly derives from madness and madness must be caused by some biological flaw (Gentry and Sjoberg 94-95).

All of these theories support that a woman in power is a threat to the social order. Women are seen as the other, as the inferior body, as selfish, irrational, all that men are not. A woman reaching for power threatens the border of the collective “self” of men who are already holding the power. It is important to note that stereotypes are created by people who are in a position to spread their ideas, meaning they already hold power (men in this case); breaking or attempting to reverse a stereotype simply results in a new stereotype being applied (Cranny-Francis et al. 149). For instance, a woman trying to break free from her passive role takes on more masculine attributes like ruthlessness, only to be met with the stereotype of the mad woman.

Analysis: How Female and Targaryen Stereotypes Overlap

Game of Thrones is an HBO series that follows that plot of George RR Martin's series *A Song of Ice and Fire* in which noble families fight over control of Westeros, a continent in a fictional world. At the start of the series, House Baratheon is in power, but after the assassination of the Baratheon king, House Lannister takes over. The Lannister control is contested in the eighth and final season by Daenerys Targaryen, who believes she is the rightful heir to the throne, since her father the 'Mad' King was deposed. Daenerys's story begins with her as a young girl sold by her brother to the Dothraki in exchange for their military support. From there, she grows into the most powerful character, alongside her three dragons, the only dragons remaining.

Targaryens, like women, are seen as a threat to society. Many stereotypes held against Targaryens overlap with the stereotypes of women. Targaryens are, in the first place, feminized in appearance¹. Even the men are thin and pale with long silver hair and no facial hair. Jon (played by Kit Harrington), on the other hand, fits the masculine standard when it comes to appearance: he is muscular, tall, and has shorter hair, along with facial hair. So even though he carries Targaryen blood, he is physically unmarked as a Targaryen. Him looking the part of the masculine assists in his acceptance as Westerosi (specifically a Stark) and him being placed on the superior side of the binaries.

¹ Brilliantly brought to light by Professor Willis



Figure 2. Comparison of Dany and Jon showing he is unmarked by the Targaryen silver hair “The Queen’s Justice.” (00:11:03-00:12:27)

Targaryens not having originated from Westeros, the *Game of Thrones* equivalent to the West, also contributes to this feminization, since those who are not from the West are deemed “other” and often depicted as feminine, both being on the “inferior” side of the divide. All of the not-quite-human species and non-white characters, including but not limited to, the Dothraki, the Dornish, the wildlings, and the slaves of Astapor, all reside outside of Westeros. The non-westerosi races are depicted wearing less clothes (or tattered clothes for the wildlings), being more attached to the land (often wandering), and following strange customs, such as the Dothraki custom of eating horse hearts, all of which nudge the notion of savagery and otherness.

Beyond appearances, Targaryens are known for being driven by emotion and selfish ambition, again two things that are stereotypically feminine. Daenerys’ brother Viserys, for example, is extremely temperamental and selfish, willing to do anything for power, including selling Daenerys in exchange for the allegiance of Khal Drogo’s army (the Dothraki Horde). While Viserys possesses no dragons, he still uses the claim of him as “the dragon” to terrorize

Dany into obeying him. This emotion and ambition in Targaryens, throughout their history, has descended into madness, making madness an infamous component of the Targaryen bloodline. It is commonly believed that the in-breeding within the family explains this propensity for madness. The most prominent example of Targaryen madness is with Daenerys' father Aerys the Second, more commonly known as "the Mad King." The Targaryens had ruled Westeros until Daenerys' father grew paranoid of traitors and fell into madness and cruelty; he had reserves of wildfire hidden beneath the city, so in the event that a usurper came to dethrone him, he could burn the whole city. (Though, before enacting this murderous plan, "the Mad King" was killed by Jaime Lannister.)

Jon is also juxtaposed in this regard. Despite both Jon and Dany having descended from the "Mad King," Jon is still considered a Stark - what he was raised as. House Stark values rationality, loyalty, truth, and morality above all, all of which are considered masculine and superior. It is, in essence, a rule-abiding House that aligns with the values of society. Starks often take a Utilitarian approach, sacrificing what is best for them and their families for what is best for the greater good. For example, Ned Stark deciding to leave his family to take on the arduous (and deadly) job as Hand of the King. Jon's uncle left Winterfell to serve as a Brother in Black, protecting the realm from outside threats all north of the Wall. Jon even loses his (first) life "manning the Wall" as they call it. Unlike the Targaryen motto "Fire and Blood," which bears the underlying threat to anyone beyond the family parameters, the Stark motto "Winter is Coming" is concerned with the safety of the entire realm, warning them of the danger that is to come.

The Targaryen house sigil, a three-headed dragon, further ties Targaryens to monstrosity and destruction. Dragons are the only creatures on the show that are truly a threat to society, with just

one having the same destructive potential as a nuclear bomb in our world. Hughes-Hallett writes in *Heroes*:

A dragon is a solitary predator, the enemy of all settlements and civil communities . . .

Dragons represented the wild: they emerged from horrid mires or sinister caves or dark mysterious forests. They were the embodiments of disorder and bestial, untamed energy (51).

Not only do dragons make it to the “inferior” side for being a part of nature, but they epitomize beastliness and are the ultimate threat to civilization. These animals are “unrestrained by law” and have no morality (Chen 151). The dragon is a symbol of evil, too, often representing the devil in Christianity and functioning as the grand obstacle in fairytales.

Targaryens, similarly, are depicted as chaotic, untamed, and evil and oftentimes isolated. Rikke Schubart, in *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements* mentions that “Dragons are heavily invested with meaning. In Western mythology, they are monsters to be slain. . .” (119). Transferring this connotation to Targaryens and Daenerys is dangerous, since it justifies them being deserving of death. In fairy tales, especially, dragons are used as an obstacle that the prince needs to slay in order to save the princess, which makes the dragon a mere means in the plot to the prince achieving his goal, not dissimilar to how women are viewed as a means to male pleasure under the patriarchy and how Daenerys is a means to saving civilization and an obstacle in the way of a man ruling. Dragons are also depicted as gold-hoarders, meaning that they not only cause destruction to civilization, but they take from it, as well, magnifying their selfishness. These associations with dragons exacerbate the negative Targaryen traits such as the perceptions of them as irrational, immoral, and uncontrollable monsters to be slain. These negative dragon and Targaryen stereotypes are

applied to Daenerys, but not Jon, because women are already expected to fit these expectations in the “inferior” side of the Western dualisms and because Jon is mysteriously exempt from the defining Targaryen features. Dragons, like Targaryens and women, are considered hot-tempered, selfish, inherently destructive and, ultimately, the greatest threat to civilization.

The dragon, House Targaryen’s sigil, can then be juxtaposed with that of the Starks (at least in the show). The animal symbolic of the Stark House is a direwolf, something that works well in a pack and plans - a form of logic - to pursue its prey. Direwolves can be tamed and coexist with civilization, as is evident with the Starks’ direwolves which were permitted to stay in Winterfell and caused harm only in response to imminent threats, like Joffrey threatening Arya with his sword. The Starks’ direwolves are considerably less threatening than dragons, certainly not being able to undo a whole city in one episode. Unlike direwolves and Starks, dragons (which symbolize Targaryens) are perilous to society, particularly because of their bestial nature that does not need to be prompted in order to destroy. This too is easily transferable onto women under the patriarchy, since, as either angel or monster, they are perceived as a threat to civilization and, thus, have no place in society.

Furthermore, dragons are being pitted against iron, in the show, which emphasizes the belief that dragons, thus Targaryens, are inherently at odds with civilization. Iron is deeply symbolic for civilization and the conquest of nature: humans being able to element tools and swords from the earth shows their intelligence and enables them to act on the philosophy that nature exists to be conquered by humans. Iron weapons are the most formidable threat to a dragon, and dragon fire is the most menacing threat to iron weapons. This opposition is evident even in the history of this fictional world: when Aegon the Conqueror, a Targaryen, took over Westeros, he forged the iron throne by directing dragon fire onto the swords of his enemies,

signaling his conquest of civilization. This sets up the tacit rule that a Targaryen cannot rule Westeros, because Targaryens, like dragons, are born enemies of civilization. When these bars against a Targaryen in power combine with the barriers that keep women from power, a social impermissibility is created. Women, like Cersei, and male Targaryens, like The Mad King, were met with opposition but still allowed to rule; the prospect of a female Targaryen ruling, however, crosses too many boundaries to be allowed.

Because of the feminization of Targaryens and their place as Other in this world, the negative Targaryen associations are easily imposed onto Daenerys, who is already othered as a woman, while evading Jon Snow. Similar to how women cannot escape the stereotypes they are born into, Daenerys is wholly defined by her genes that mark her as a woman and a Targaryen. Biology is her destiny, in this show (and being treated as such *does* create her destiny). Jon Snow, on the other hand, is permitted the constructivist approach, where gender and identity is created by experience and external factors, rather than being something one is born into. Westeros accepts Jon as a Stark because he was raised by Starks in the West, and they choose to overlook his Targaryen-ness, despite the name being the one reason he is being pushed toward the throne. The environment that shaped her and her choices are not taken into account, whereas Jon's parentage and choices *are*. If constructionism were considered for Daenerys, it would be hard to pin Targaryen associations onto her, even though she looks the part, because she was not even raised in Targaryen culture. Daenerys was raised in exile, in Essos, without parents or a community, since her and her brother are the last of the Targaryen line (before the truth of Jon's parentage is revealed); if anything, she was raised by Master Illyrio, who is not a Targaryen, meaning that Daenerys was only linked to House Targaryen through her genes and stories, which would be the same connection Jon has to Targaryen-ness, minus him not having grown up with a

Targaryen brother. Nurture over nature was not considered for her, though, pointing to one of the main culprits in the tragedy of Dany's demise: Jon's privilege as a man.

How Daenerys Defies the Stereotypes

From the first season, Daenerys has been trying to fight against the stereotypes that she was born into that define her as emotional, selfish, dangerous, something that should only exist quietly in the periphery. Daenerys defies these stereotypes even in her title, literally placing emphasis on her own definition of herself: "Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of Meereen, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons." Jokes are often made from the length of this title, as shown in the meme below, but it actually carries significant weight. The length comments on how she has to work much harder than male rulers at establishing and reinforcing her power. Jon's introductory title, for instance, in "The Queen's Justice" is juxtaposed with hers as only "King of the North." The audience response was that Dany is more egotistical, a traditional female stereotype, rather than understanding that she has to put more energy into being recognized.



Figure 3. A meme of Daenerys's title being cut off (by Lyanna Mormont).

Daenerys' insistence on being called the "Mother of Dragons," whereas all the other Targaryen rulers were just called "The Dragon," is also important: this choice puts the connotation of creation *before* that of destruction, potentially supporting that she does not want to be seen as a threat to the realm.

Her actions further support her attempt to redefine what it means to be a woman and a Targaryen in power regarding morality. Even when Dany only has power as the wife of the Khal, she uses it to protect the slaves of the Khalasar, like Mirri Maz Durr, from violence and rape by the Dothraki. She uses her dragons from the beginning only for what is deemed objectively moral, such as freeing all the slaves of Slaver's Bay, in Season Three, and burning the slave masters. Even though Dany does free slaves to advance her purpose of building an army (most of her army by the final season is comprised of Unsullied soldiers whom she freed), she could have built her power on unethical means, like most usurpers do.

Dany's actions also prove that her ambition is not blindly selfish nor destructive, which is automatically assumed for Targaryens and women. Despite wanting the throne more than anything, she does not kill everyone who gets in her way. For instance, the rising support for Jon was one of the largest obstacles that came between her and the throne. But she did not kill the people who spread "the secret" of Jon's parentage, despite this betraying their support for her. Most other rulers have killed for much less, like Robert Baratheon ordering the assassination of infant Daenerys and her brother so that they never take back the throne and (spoiler) Joffrey killing Ned Stark for no reason other than to display power. Unlike these men, Daenerys consults with her advisor Tyrion giving him another chance. She never harms or even threatens Jon Snow, further confirming that she is not inherently selfish or destructive and that female ambition does not equate with selfishness and the fall of civilization.

In addition to not killing anyone who gets in her way, she actually goes very far out of her way to *save* civilization. Her original plan was to head to King's Landing after bringing her armies across the sea to Westeros, but she decided to fight alongside Jon in the battle against the dead. This not only threatened her life, but decimated her forces, with the majority of her Dothraki army being killed immediately. While her dragons were not consequential to winning the Battle of Winterfell, other than defeating the ice dragon, Westeros would have no living people if she had not previously saved Jon.

Daenerys discovered, much earlier in Season Seven, that Jon was faced with imminent death during his quest north of the wall, so she quickly took off on her dragon to find him. Saving Jon and his men was very much against her interest, but she derailed regardless. In doing so, Daenerys tragically lost one of her three dragons to the Night King, which also weakened her military strength. Her action indirectly led to civilization as a whole being saved, in addition to Jon: the men she saved were able to fulfill their quest of bringing back a live white walker to prove to all the leaders that the army of the dead *is* real and is marching towards the wall, which protects civilization.

All of these examples of selflessness also demonstrate how rational Dany is. She is clearly able to make decisions based in careful thought. Oftentimes, she even makes better decisions than her advisor Tyrion Lannister, who is supposedly the most intelligent character of the show. For instance, towards the end, Tyrion continues to advise Dany to not directly kill Cersei, the current ruler of the Seven Kingdoms, who happens to be Tyrion's sister, meaning he is letting his emotional connection to her overrule reason. Daenerys, on the other hand, hardly ever displays the capricious nature that is expected of Targaryens and women. Advocates of Jon

as ruler often point out how selfless he is, but as shown, Daenerys is equally capable, if not more so, of putting her own interests and emotions aside for the protection of the masses.

How Daenerys is Ultimately Defined

By Westeros

Despite Daenerys' efforts in redefining herself, society prevails in imposing their own definition of a Targaryen and woman onto her. This is done most obviously by Varys, the "Master of Whispers." In the beginning of "The Bells," he asks one of his child-spies if Daenerys has eaten, and follows it with "we'll try again later," which means "Varys is either trying to feed her, or feed her poison," as David Chen jokes in "A Cast of Kings" (50:33). The latter is implied, meaning Daenerys is *not* paranoid (yet): people really are plotting to kill her, because they believe Jon would be the better ruler and her existence is barring him from the opportunity. Varys also tries to persuade Jon personally into being king by arguing "They say every time a Targaryen is born, the gods toss a coin and the world holds its breath," insinuating that there is a high probability of Daenerys having been born with madness and evil within her ("The Bells" 00:06:18). Varys also adds onto that later with the powerful line, "Men decide where power resides, whether or not they know it" which supports my thesis that the patriarchy is more at play in Dany's downfall than the "inherited" madness ("The Bells" 00:06:36). Varys, here, in saying that men decide who has power, hints at it already having been decided that Daenerys, a woman, will not be "gifted" power anymore. The men in power, like Varys, decide that Dany does not deserve power, even before she "goes mad" and obliterates King's Landing. Even when she was just an infant when her father was murdered, the new king sent assassins to kill Daenerys and her brother in their cribs. In the first season, too, before Dany has dragons or power or "madness," there is another attempt on her life: in Episode Seven "You Win or You Die," we see a street

vender trying to poison her. With further evidence, however, it is clear that the orders were sent from the King - after the King vocalized his dying will to Ned Stark, Ned tells Varys, "His Grace has had a change of heart concerning Daenerys Targaryen. Whatever arrangements you made, unmake them. At once." to which Varys replies "I'm afraid those birds have flown. The girl is likely dead already" (27:53-28:10). This means that Varys has now tried poisoning her at least twice, with the first attempt having nothing to do with madness, but both having everything to do with fear of her potential power.

In addition to this, the truth of Jon's lineage continues to be spread, despite Daenerys directly ordering Jon not to tell anyone. Jon tells Sansa who then tells Tyrion, knowing he will pass it on to Varys, who, with this new information, will want Dany dead. Daenerys is betrayed by pretty much all of the people closest to her. (She still does not kill all of them, though: only Varys is burned for actually plotting her death.) She has been betrayed her whole life, starting with Robert Baratheon trying to assassinate her in her crib and with her brother treating her as an object. On top of all the betrayal and threats to her life, she lost her second dragon and her closest friend, Missandei, which would not have happened if it were not for Tyrion's advice, and then Jon Snow abandoned their love once he realized it was incestuous.

All of these are results of the patriarchal society, driving her into paranoia, and then blaming her "madness" on some inherent flaw. The patriarchal system in place that gave Viserys a claim to the throne is what made him feel entitled to mistreat Dany and what led to assassination attempts on their lives. Dany is betrayed by Mirri Maz Durr, losing her husband and child as a result, in the witch's attempt to get back at the patriarchy. Tyrion's advice leads to several of Dany's losses, including her second dragon and Missandei, but when she does not take his advice (to surrender to the bells), he caves to his suspicion that she is, in fact, mad. He starts

doubting her sanity and leadership, incidentally, the first time she does not listen to him - when he argues that she should not burn the Tullys. So perhaps what Tyrion considers madness really has more to do with Dany not fitting into the patriarchal ideal of the man having more power and the woman being obedient.

Furthermore, Jon Snow's betrayal of her is directly linked to the knowledge of his lineage being released by Bran. Having the ability to see the past, present, and future, Bran knew what the outcome would be for Daenerys, and did not try to mitigate the damage. He actually catalyzed her downfall by releasing the information of Jon's parentage, knowing that he and the Starks would benefit from it. Out of all the things Bran's knowledge could have done in the final season (such as helping Jon and Dani with their horrendous battle plan against the dead,) it was used only to bring down a powerful woman. Going back to what Varys said, "Men decide where power resides, whether or not they know it." Bran, knowingly, decided where power would reside and it was not with Daenerys.

The opinion of the masses also contributed to her isolation and paranoia: Westeros was extremely unwelcoming of her arrival, despite her having saved all of them. She is not welcomed with the praise and warmth she deserved, but rather, the masses in the North just look on her with skepticism. This happens too when she lays siege on King's Landing. Once the bells ring in surrender, the people do not cheer or praise Daenerys for her freeing them from the tyranny of Cersei, who had previously blown up a whole cathedral of people. In Essos, in the east, when Dany freed slaves, she was literally raised up by them to the chants of "Mhysa," "mother" in their language. But Westeros does not see her as a mother, or a god, who has come to save them; rather, they receive her as a beast - more specifically a dragon - from a different part of the world who has come to conquer them.

And even when it appears Dany *has* gone mad, her “madness” really makes more sense as anger. She has lost everyone dear to her. But, going back to Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg’s theory, women are not allowed to be angry nor violent, so her outburst is conveniently categorized under madness. Using this bit of theory could also be useful in understanding why Dany was not allowed to rule Westeros while Cersei was: yes, Cersei-a villain- blew up the Sept of Baelor (similar to a cathedral) and was responsible for a kid being pushed out the window of a tower, *but* she was subtle with her violence: she used other people, poison, and scheming, most of all, none of which can be easily traced back to her malicious means of remaining in power. Daenerys, on the other hand, could not get any more blatant with her displays of violence. There is no room for argument, after she burns a whole city, that she does not have the capacity to be violent; therefore, under the patriarchy’s guidelines, she is not the passive, angelic woman and can thus be one other thing: monstrous. Cersei was surely considered less threatening than Daenerys, because Cersei still tried to present herself as a woman who followed the rules.

The patriarchal belief that a woman and Targaryen will turn to madness is what led to so many of the people around Daenerys distrusting her or plotting her murder, in turn, actually giving her good reason to be paranoid. Unfortunately, her warranted paranoia confirmed their suspicions and was then perceived as the onset of madness. All of the betrayals fueled by patriarchal beliefs drive her into isolation and madness, pushing her even further into the definition of a dragon, a Targaryen, and a woman.

By the Showrunners

Much of the defining and pushing into boxes is done at the show-runner level. The Ringer podcast on the fifth episode (“The Bells”) of the final season of Game of Thrones spends a great deal of time on this. “The Bells” is the pivotal episode where Dany lays siege on and

burns Kings Landing, despite the bells signaling surrender, ultimately confirming the suspicions of her madness. The podcast hosts Mal and Jason agree that the truncated manner of this twist is problematic in that there is simply not enough information to justify what happens: all the audience can gather from this episode is a woman who snaps (1:20:00 -1:23:00). First, the showrunners David Benioff and David Weiss keep the camera on the ground for most of the duration of the burning of Kings Landing. They say in an interview that they made this decision to capture the chaos and to humanize the victims, who are peasants - people who normally are not given a perspective; however, in doing this, the audience loses the perspective of Daenerys when they need it the most; the podcast hosts state: “And that’s what they’re trying to do here, is turn Dany, in a moment, into the enemy, by taking away any opportunity for you to feel empathy for what she’s going through, showing all of the devastation and none of her perspective” (1:26:30-1:27:00). No one can say with confidence what exactly triggered Daenerys, because there is not enough evidence; Daenerys burns thousands of innocent people rather than Cersei, the tyrant she is dethroning, and yet there is only the face Daenerys makes once the bells ring, signaling surrender, which can be seen below.



Figure 4. Daenerys’ face quivers in rage before she burns Kings Landing. “The Bells” (00:45:45-00:45:51).

Nevertheless, the producers continued to not cue the audience into her thoughts, and even frame her as a faceless enemy, the other, in the following scenes: she is only identifiable in the distance by the dragon she is riding on, conflating her with the beast.



Figure 5. Daenerys burning Kings Landing from the perspective of the victims. “The Bells.”
(00:46:48).

The creators of the show furthered Daenerys as “other” by paralleling her with her father, the Mad King, *and* the Night King. Her father’s presence lingers in the stores of dragonfire he had planted, which Dany ignites in this scene. This leads to the implication that Daenerys is picking up where her father’s madness left off, despite so much of her character arc having been built on her defending that she is *not* her father. On top of that, she is made to resemble the Night King. The Night King, when in possession of a dragon (Dany’s that he killed and converted to the side of the dead), was able to bring down the Wall, which has stood for ages. This wall is what separated the dangerous unknown from the safety and order of civilization in Westeros, making the Night King the highest order of Other, since he also threatens the boundaries between life and death (he is something in-between).

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and the
(1:18:58).



Figure 6.
King
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Wall.
Dragon
Wolf’



Figure 7. Daenerys burning through the gates of Kings Landing. “The Bells” (00:37:17-
00:37:33)

Dani, in her siege on Kings Landing, is framed similarly, again with being the faceless enemy on a dragon, but also with her burning through a wall that was previously considered impenetrable. It is important to note the parallel between the fortification of Kings Landing and the Wall. The show makes clear that Kings Landing is impenetrable, with Cersei even in this episode stating “The Red Keep has never fallen” (“The Bells” 00: 41:0). Similarly, the Wall was expected to never fall, with it being hundreds of feet tall and composed of ice and magic, but the Night King, atop one of Daenerys’ (undead) dragons, *was* able to destroy this wall in his attempt

to conquer Westeros. Thus, when Dany breaks through the gates of Kings Landing to dethrone Cersei, also on top of a dragon, she parallels the Night King having broken through the Wall, strengthening the portrayal of her as the Other who has come to destroy life and borders.

All of the scenes featuring Dany after her “snap” continue to depict her as the “other” and as a danger to society. Benioff and Weiss frame Daenerys as “The Dragon,” in the final episode when she is about to address her army, by having Drogon expand his wings behind her so that the wings appear to be her own.



Figure 8. Drogon conveniently expands his wings behind Dany. “The Iron Throne” (00:14:28-00:14:30).

This framing reaffirms the perception of her as a beast, *the* beast that is most dangerous to civilization, contrasted greatly with how Dany was framed in previous seasons as a godlike figure, being raised up by the hands of gracious people whom she had freed. Not only is she now marked physically as a beast, with metaphorical dragon wings, but she is made to sound beastly and unfamiliar when she addresses her army in their native tongue. This furthers her as “the other” since her words are now coded with mystery and potential threat. The audience then

feels excluded, like the Westerosi characters who do not understand what Dany is saying, ultimately leading to the perception that Dany is invading, rather than saving.

Not only does her “snap” in “The Bells” mark the start of her inevitable downfall, but her emotional connection to Jon is what enables him to kill her. Right before Daenerys sits in the Iron Throne for the first time, Jon interrupts her for a discussion, symbolic of Jon being in the way of her attaining the power she has always wanted. While embracing Dany, and after assuring her “you are my queen. Now, and always,” he stabs her. He used her emotional connection to him to get close enough to her to destroy her. If the motif in Western Literature of knights slaying the dragon to save the princess is applied, having Jon kill Dany, who has now “unleashed the dragon,” sends the message that Dany, who is also the princess, is dangerous even to herself and needs a prince to “save” her from the dragon within. Jon slaying Dany also furthers the Knight King parallel, since the Night King was defeated by a Stark (Aria) with a dagger for the purpose of protecting the greater good, the same justification used for killing Daenerys.

Additionally, Benioff and Weiss allowed room for sexist interpretations for what triggered Daenerys, one of which being that if she just had not been rejected sexually by Jon, she would not have killed millions. This conversation ensues in “The Bells,” before Dany’s siege, in which Jon refuses her advances:

Daenerys: Far more people in Westeros love you than love me. I don’t have love here. I only have fear.

Jon: I love you. And you will always be my queen.

Daenerys: Is that all I am to you? Your queen? [She kisses him. He does not reciprocate.]

Daenerys: All right, then. Let it be fear (00:16:50-00:18:06).

This is the last time the audience hears Dany's thoughts before she burns a whole city, so it certainly could lead to the conclusion that a woman not being wanted by a man can trigger madness (though, losing his love did contribute to her isolation).

This situation also turns her into the *femme fatale*: Daenerys wants to continue the intimate relationship with Jon after learning that he is a Targaryen, making her his aunt. Because of being raised by Starks, Jon considers incest immoral, making Daenerys a temptation. Another explanation for what catalyzed Daenerys's "madness" is that she could not handle the death of her handmaiden and closest friend Missandei, who was killed off by the showrunners, with no other purpose than to "motivate" Dany (and Greyworm). Joanna Robinson calls it "a two-fer for fridging," in the Cast of Kings podcast (minute 58). In addition to the fridging, this interpretation depicts her as emotionally unstable, again.

The stereotypes are even imposed onto Dany at the audience level. It is unavoidable for podcasts and articles tackling the last two episodes to talk about Daenerys' fall. Unfortunately, most of them, in trying to understand why she snapped, automatically search for instances of her letting emotions control her decisions, like when she burned the Tarlys (which any ruler would have done to traitors). Many use such instances as support for her "snap," rather than highlighting the abundance of evidence for her rationality and contributions to society, claiming it is foreshadowing. As strongly emphasized on the podcast A Cast of Kings, "foreshadowing in itself is not character development!" (122).

Conclusion

Daenerys's madness, as mentioned, is problematic for several reasons, the most obvious being that there simply was not enough evidence for it to be believable. Another problem is that the fear of inherent madness was not also directed to Jon Snow. More importantly, her

“madness” conveniently justifies her permanent removal from power, not a rare occurrence when a threat to the patriarchy is perceived. Giving consideration to the role of the patriarchy in Daenerys’ tragedy surfaces new connections and illuminates new questions: How does Daenerys’ role as a “mother” contribute to her motivations, reception, and downfall (something I would have included in my thesis had there been more time)? Is our society really as progressive as it claims it is, if showrunners cannot have a woman be powerful *and* sane? Most importantly, what will it take to break out of representing women in the same degrading stereotypes? Daenerys is only one of the many female characters on the show, who, in being adapted from the books, were pushed into stereotypical roles. Perhaps some of these issues could have been avoided if more women were included in making the last seasons of the show, which were written mainly by Benioff and Weiss. There is only one woman named as a producer out of a list of nineteen, and only two of nine contributing writers. Including more women will not be the only answer, however, because women are still capable of perpetuating patriarchal ideals, as seen most famously with Phyllis Schlafly.

In the midst of all these questions, what *is* clear is that the treatment of Daenerys’ ending is more mad and maddening than any supposed madness in Daenerys. The rushed eighth season undid all of Daenerys’ character building as a powerful woman and role-model, not just in denying her the throne, but in pushing her into stereotypes that have always oppressed women. Daenerys fought oppression her whole life, only to be ended by the stereotype of a mad woman that needs to be abjected from society. It is promising, however, that the world was and *is* still outraged at Dany’s ending². There is hope, too, in Martin finishing *Winds of Winter*, where Dany may meet her end with more dignity and less sexist stereotypes.

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² As brilliantly pointed out by Dr. Savage

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