Game of Thrones, Popular Television, and Power-feminism

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Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to critically interrogate the notion of power-feminism from a contemporary perspective, with a focus on the strong female characters in the television show, *Game of Thrones*. By examining how feminist discourses are both reproduced and subverted in the show, this essay argues that the labelling of contemporary media productions as feminist in response to the spread of feminist ideas belies the reactionary politics of power-feminist narratives, whose celebration of the empowerment of women often reinforces the gender dichotomy by encouraging the view that women should behave in more masculine ways.

Keywords: power-feminism, popular culture, popular media

1. The "Power-feminism"

The version of feminism promulgated in *Game of Thrones* can be understood in light of the development of "power-feminism" in the early 1990s and its entanglement with neoliberal conceptions of gender. Power-feminism contends that women should not assert their political goals from outside the political and cultural mainstream and that, instead, they should enact sweeping change from within it by drawing on "active agency and unfettered power" (Hains, 2009, pp. 89-90). The term 'power feminism' became increasingly common in the popular media of the 1990s after academics such as Naomi Wolf (1993) expressed concerns that feminism was 'out of touch' with ordinary women and thus had "failed to inspire" them (Hains, 2009, p. 89). At the same time, media producers began to develop an iconography of power-feminism, in a way that reconciled feminist critiques with neoliberal values and invited consumption by mass audiences.

As Hains points out, women began to identify far more with television shows with heroic characters, such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and Charmed (1998-2006) than with the radical versions of feminism that were dominant in left-wing and academic circles, and that were often associated with victimhood in the popular imagination (Hains, 2009, pp. 89-90; Roiphe, 1994). With its thematic focus on the acquisition of power and its prominent female characters, *Game of Thrones* arguably articulates this de-politicized form of feminism in a manner that embodies its socio-historical context.

2. "Power-feminism" in *Game of Thrones*

The show first aired in 2011, the precise point at which increasing numbers of high-profile women began to publicly self-identify as feminists and feminist ideas gained a significant foothold in popular culture (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 4). However, within this version of feminism, traditional feminist goals, such as liberation and social justice, became filtered through a new feminist vocabulary centred on notions of personal success and responsibility (Rottenberg, 2018, pp. 5-6). According to Catherine Rottenberg, this both reflected and reinforced the development of neoliberalism from a set of political policies and economic theories focused on privatization and market deregulation into a "normative form of reason" in which the notion of people as "individualized, entrepreneurial, and self-investing" agents of capital became an underlying social assumption (p. 7).

This combination of neoliberal values, the public assertion of feminism as a positive and empowering stance, and the depoliticization of feminism arguably coalesce in *Game of Thrones*. Although the show features scenes of female nudity, rape, and sexual violence, it has attracted a large female audience; almost half the show's audience is female (Frankel, 2014, p. 1). This is not, in some way surprising, given that several female characters increase their personal and political power over the course of the series. Daenerys, for example, is at first given as a present to Khal Drogo (leader of the Dothraki) but later becomes one of the contenders for the Iron Throne; Arya Stark trains to be the strongest warrior across the Westeros and seeks revenge for her family; and Cerci claims the throne after men (her husband, brother, and sons) fail her.

These powerful female characters reflect the increasing dissemination, first observed in the early 1990s, of power-feminist attitudes through the mainstream media (Stuart, 1990). However, they also embody the manner in which female empowerment has become embodied, individualized, and embedded within the discourse of commodity culture. As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2006) contend, in this context, 'loving one's own […] body is as much a promotion

of (post-) feminist values as staging a political protest' (p. 269). Although this consumerist logic has helped to increase the visibility of feminist issues by presenting empowering female images that appeal to broad audiences, the prevalence of the attitude that women can become empowered within the co-ordinates of mainstream culture threatens to elide feminism as a political stance and femininity as a constellation of definable characteristics. Female characters that were once extolled for breaking with traditional feminine stereotypes have become trapped in the new forms that media producers intentionally create to sell.

3. Popular television shows as "The Master's Tools"

A key feature of *Game of Thrones'* power-feminist iconography is its association of female empowerment with the elision of femininity. Unlike examples from the 1990s, such as Princess Xena, who wears costumes with plunging necklines, the strong women in *Game of Thrones* are frequently characterized through their appropriation of masculine traits, entailing a loss of femininity. For example, Brienne of Tarnath becomes one of the most successful knights by being more masculine and stronger even than the male knights, and Arya and Yara also reject their femininity by dressing as men.

This conscious, active, and often embittered rejection of femininity, however, of 'knitting by the fire while the men fight' ('Dragstone', 2017, 7:1) arguably extends to the elision of character as such, entailing a rejection of anything other than the brute acquisition of power. As Daenerys explains to Tyrion towards the end of Season 6, after Daario declares his love for her, she 'felt nothing' at parting from Daario, since she was '[j]ust impatient to get on with it' ('The Winds of Winter', 2016, 6:10). Daenerys' attitude embodies an implicit theme of the show: the rejection of male authority or companionship as a source of fulfillment ment also involves the rejection of social relations in themselves and the assertion, in their place, of the pursuit of personal power.

To apply Angela McRobbie's observation about the individualist shift implied by power-feminism, Daenerys is less interested in "emancipatory politics" than in 'life politics' (McRobbie, 2004, p. 260), in dismantling the structures that might prevent her from being able to "get on with it". Arguably, her character becomes so invested in the pursuit of power that it remains underdeveloped. As Valerie Frankel (2014) notes, the show's strong female characters 'are frequently written with no personality traits besides that strength' (p. 40). As a consequence, these characters have 'no gender at all. When women have power, they are treated as unusual exceptions to the gender divide. Thus the girl learns that being masculine is superior' (p. 43).

This logic is perhaps most visibly embodied by the fierce, short-haired, broad-shouldered Brienne who, when mocked by a man for being 'ugly' and referred to, accidentally, as a 'man', declares that she has 'been knocking men like [him] into the dust' all her life ('The Prince of Winterfell', 2012, 2: 8). The process through which women are empowered by throwing off their femininity and becoming physically like men involves a degree of acquiescence to the customs of patriarchal society, to female empowerment on masculine terms. Thus, *Game of Thrones* exemplifies female empowerment as a new potential form of disempowerment, where women acknowledge that abandoning their female identity is the only way to succeed.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, popular television shows such as *Game of Thrones* are important platforms that help feminist ideas gain visibility and reach mass audiences. However, when seen in the context of the development of power-feminism, which partly gave rise to feminist-friendly media production, the commoditization of feminist discourses threatens to undermine feminist identities and, thus, reinforce the gender dichotomy. Moreover, it reinforces a neoliberal form of subjectivity whose features apply across genders, particularly the unquestioning commitment to self-improvement and the acquisition of personal power at the expense of political change.

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