



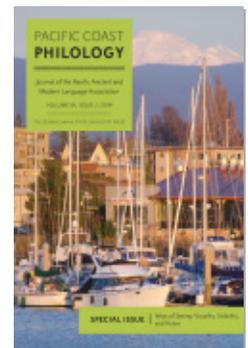
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Chloe Allmand

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“Boy, Girl, You Are a Sword”



Male Viewer to Female Character Cross-Gender Identification in *Game of Thrones*

CHLOE ALLMAND

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract: This article explores the idea of cross-gender viewer identification, the act of watching a film or television show, and imagining oneself as a character of the opposite gender. This idea counters common understandings of the “male gaze” as it relates to film. Specifically, with the rise of the girl hero and other non-sexualized heroines in film, male viewers can consciously imagine themselves as films’ heroines, not just as films’ heroes who possess the heroines, as Laura Mulvey argued in her essay “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema.” This article explores the possibilities for this type of identification through analysis of sisters Arya and Sansa Stark in the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, who represent two types of fantasy heroines: the warrior and the maiden. The article investigates the roles of stereotypical femininity and masculinity in constructing the “ideal” fantasy heroine, and ultimately finds that fantasy heroines today are not admirable for their “masculine” traits, but for their capabilities to operate outside of gender binaries.

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*, cross-gender viewer identification, fantasy heroine, Arya Stark, gender binary

Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace came out when I was six years old, and after many viewings, I was obsessed with Anakin Skywalker. Not because I was infatuated with him, but because I wanted to *be* him, and often imagined myself as him. Sixteen years later, I was a nanny for a two-year-old boy who, after watching Disney’s *Frozen*, did not profess his love for the ice queen Elsa

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but would dress himself up as her, point at himself and say “Elsa.” Our scopophilia began in its simplest form: pleasure in looking. In analyzing Freud’s conceptions of scopophilia, Laura Mulvey explains the activity in two forms: first as “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” and second “in its narcissistic aspect,” which “prepares the way for identification with others in the future” (2087). For my six-year-old self and the two-year-old boy, our scopophilia reflected this second conception, in that our pleasure in looking led us to pleasure in consciously identifying with and actively imagining ourselves as a film character of the opposite gender, a phenomenon referred to as cross-gender viewer identification. Importantly, in contrast to the patriarchal paradigm of the controlling, active male gaze cast upon a passive female, and identification for male or female viewers primarily with the male hero, we were able to cast our gazes upon characters of the opposite gender; not for sexual pleasure or control, but as Mulvey describes, by “identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator’s fascination with and recognition of his like” (2088). Here, “like” is not restricted only to characters of the viewers’ same gender.

Though these examples reference children in particular, cross-gender viewer identification is certainly possible for adults as well. In this essay, I analyze Arya and Sansa Stark in HBO’s *Game of Thrones* to examine how male viewers in particular can identify with film heroines, a departure from traditional conceptions of the male view of women in film. While some research has been conducted on how male players identify with female characters in video games (see Nathan Hook’s 2018 study, presented at the British Psychological Association’s annual conference), research on male viewer to female character cross-gender identification in film is lacking. Carol J. Clover notes in “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the the Slasher Film” that “To the extent that the possibility of cross-gender identification has been entertained, it has been in the direction female-with-male... The reverse question - whether men might not also, on occasion, elect to betray their sex and identify with screen females - has scarcely been asked” (206). As Clover goes on to explain, whether or not men identify with females in film has not been studied likely because men “are well served by the traditional patterns of cinematic representation” and traditionally, the heterosexual male gaze is privileged in film above the female gaze or the homosexual gaze (206).

In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey argues that a male viewer can feel pleasure in two ways when watching films: first, by imagining himself as the hero; second, by imagining himself possessing the heroine. Though Mulvey and Freud both explained scopophilia as a largely unconscious activity, I argue that the viewer can take a more active role in fantasy or identification, because viewers can consciously decide which

characters they aspire to. As Mulvey notes, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.” (2088). Though less so than the 1975 world Mulvey is describing, the world of 2019 is still one of “sexual imbalance”; however, more film now works against this imbalance, creating opportunities for viewers’ pleasure beyond this active male/passive female dichotomy. Mulvey describes the “female figure” in film as a landing zone for “the determining male gaze”: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (2088). While this description remains accurate for films that fail to cast women in roles that allow for more than being looked at, it cannot account for how films have progressed to include more heroines who operate outside of strict gender binaries, and who do not exist for the purpose of (heterosexual) male scopophilia.

Mulvey’s central arguments were true for films made pre-1975 when “Visual Pleasure” was published, and though the article remains a canonical text of film theory, Mulvey’s arguments are not as all-encompassing today. I imagine she would be thankful for this change, because it aligns with her claim that the “cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures . . . must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged” (2094). In “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility” Rosalind Gill claims a key difference between 1960s to 1980s media compared to modern media “is that feminism is now part of the cultural field. That is, feminist discourses are expressed within the media rather than simply being external, independent, critical voices” (161). Gill clarifies that “However, it would be entirely false to suggest that the media has somehow become feminist and has adopted unproblematically a feminist perspective. Instead it seems more accurate to argue that the media offers contradictory, but nevertheless patterned, constructions” (161). While *Game of Thrones* is guilty of perpetuating an active male gaze and passive female object in its early seasons especially (leading blogger and critic Myles McNutt to coin the term “sexposition” in reference to the scenes in *GOT* with “backdrops of sex and nudity” [Hann n.p.]), the show’s leading female characters do represent the break-down Mulvey hopes for.

I point to the possibility of cross-gender identification from male viewers with the caveat that it can happen only when three circumstances exist simultaneously: when the heroine is not a foil to a hero; when the male viewer lacks sexual attraction to the female character, allowing the male viewer to move beyond his desire to potentially possess the female character; and finally, when the female character acts outside of her gender’s norms. To clarify, by acting outside of gender norms, I do not mean that the heroine must be “masculine” and trade her assigned gender for maleness, but that she

resists gender norms altogether. Because the type of viewer identification I am pointing to has more to do with gender fluidity than sexual orientation, this form of fantasy can exist outside of a heteronormative paradigm. Therefore when I refer to male viewers, I do not necessarily mean only heterosexual male viewers, as implied by the active, controlling male gaze onto a passive female. While understanding how heterosexual male viewers can experience cross-gender identification is relevant to the move away from the controlling male/controlled female dichotomy in film, I do not mean to exclude homosexual or bisexual men from my analysis. In analyzing the male viewer's potential identification with female characters then, I am referring to male viewers who consider themselves "masculine" in their gender expression, regardless of their sexuality.

The potential for male viewers' cross-gender identification has become increasingly common with the rise of film heroines who exist outside of typical femininity, especially with the emergence of so many young, non-sexualized heroines: Hit Girl in *Kick Ass*, Eleven in *Stranger Things* (particularly season 1), Laura in *Logan*, and Arya Stark in HBO's *Game of Thrones*. As Jeffrey Brown observes in *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture*, "There has been a shift in action genres to younger and younger heroines who are every bit as lethal as their adult and/or male counterparts" (197). Because Arya is presented as devoid of femininity and sexual relationships, a male viewer can identify with her as he would a film hero, and imagine living as she does, fighting as she does, and killing her enemies as she does. The same cannot be said for the male view of Arya's older sister, Sansa Stark, who is highly feminine and desired sexually by several of the show's male characters. Importantly, I am not arguing an absolute, that any male viewer will see himself in Arya or other non-feminine film heroines, or that no male viewer could identify with stereotypically feminine characters like Sansa. I am also certainly not arguing that film heroines should be "masculine" so that male viewers can identify with them, an issue I will address in greater detail throughout this essay. I am arguing only for the possibility of male cross-gender identification in a lack of sexual attraction and a break from gender binaries. I will explore this possibility through close readings of the Stark sisters' difference in characteristics and sexualities, how they are viewed by the show's male characters, their individual successes at the conclusion of season 6, and finally, their ultimate triumph and unity against their common enemy: Lord Petyr "Littlefinger" Baelish. My argument serves two conjoined purposes: first, to expand conceptions of how male viewers process and enjoy modern film, beyond traditional understandings of the heterosexual male gaze and the "looked-at" female, or viewer identification with male heroes alone; second, to interrogate the role of stereotypical gender traits in film heroines.

The rise of heroines who are not solely the foil of the film's hero has allowed for a broadening perception of how gender plays into heroines' identities. In *Dangerous Curves*, Jeffrey Brown argues that "the strict categorization of traits as male or female dominating film theory ever since Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' . . . means that any atypical portrayals tend to be interpreted as cinematic transvestism" (44). Brown claims that the "sexy and tough" action heroine is not being feminine or masculine, but instead combining both feminine and masculine traits to exist outside "the very notion of stable gender identities" (45). It seems difficult to conceive of a self not tied to gender (whether confined to it, or working actively against it) but Brown's point is essential to understanding how Arya Stark's gender-bending does not simply make her "masculine." Even though Arya is not portrayed as sexy, Brown's argument still applies to her character, and to the evolution of film heroines on the whole. Recognizing that Arya exists outside of a typical gender binary makes it easier to understand how a male viewer could also break the binary by identifying with a heroine instead of a hero. Of course, much of Arya's behavior could be coded as "masculine"; however, Arya does not act as she does in an attempt to be "masculine," only to be herself, a self not represented by the stereotypical roles and behaviors of her sex. Furthermore, understanding Arya's binary-breaking nature and the tension between her and her ultra-feminine sister Sansa leads to the question of the role of stereotypical femininity in heroine construction, especially femininity aligned with objectification by a male gaze.

Considering which film heroines viewers identify with leads me to this question: are stereotypically feminine and/or sexualized heroines like DC's Wonder Woman, Marvel's Black Widow, or *Lord of the Rings'* Arwen less admirable, less feminist than "masculine" heroines like *Game of Thrones'* Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth? In considering Wonder Woman, perhaps the epitome of the strong yet sexualized heroine, Brown writes in *Beyond Bombshells* "... Wonder Woman represents an archetype of female strength but she is also burdened with an image as a sexualized male fantasy. Finding the balance between strength and eroticism is a difficult task for a live-action version of Wonder Woman or any other superheroine" (232). In "Postfeminist Media Culture" Gill examines this tension between female autonomy and strength on the one hand and stereotypical femininity and female sexuality performed for heterosexual men on the other within the postfeminist sensibility. Gill explains that "The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (153). In postfeminism, then, a central idea is that making one's own choices is what is feminist, not the choices themselves. Gill names Brazilian waxes and breast

augmentation surgeries as examples of “indicators of women ‘pleasing themselves’ and ‘using beauty’ to make themselves feel good” (153) but notes that the “pendulum shift to the notion that women just ‘please themselves’ will not do as a substitute” for the idea that women make choices related to their appearances for the benefit of heterosexual men alone (154). What is at stake then, if heroines are not stereotypically feminine? Is it a loss of the potential power of femininity, or a breakdown of the barrier between hero and heroine that rests upon a gender binary?

The Stark sisters make an apt pair for exploring these questions, as they represent two common heroine constructions: the feminine and the binary-breaking. Sansa and Arya inhabit a medieval fantasy world in *Game of Thrones*; both girls were born at their family’s stronghold Winterfell, where their father Lord Eddard Stark serves as Warden of the North under his long-time friend King Robert Baratheon. Sansa is the older Stark sister, beginning season 1 at age thirteen, making her around twenty by the most recent season 7 (at the time of writing). Arya is eleven in season 1, and around eighteen in season 7.

From the start of season 1, it is clear that male viewers can identify with Arya, who exhibits many “masculine” traits, much more easily than they can identify with Sansa. Again, I am not arguing that film heroines are “better” when male viewers identify with them; I am pursuing the idea that non-stereotypically gendered characters are expanding the film viewing experience, especially beyond Mulvey’s active male/passive female dichotomy. Arya breaks the gender binary in her first appearance in episode 1, “Winter is Coming,” when the viewer sees her sighing over an embroidery lesson. While the girls’ septa praises Sansa, Arya glowers at both of them. She then sneaks out to the yard where her brothers are practicing archery, and shoots a bull’s-eye right over her brother’s shoulder. At the surface level, the Stark sisters are presented as a “tomboy” versus “girly-girl” or warrior versus maiden dichotomy, constructed “types” that set up the friction in the sisters’ relationship. In “Not the Women They Were Before” Rhiannon Thomas examines how the show’s writers have constructed the female characters in comparison to their counterparts in the book series by George R. R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire*:

One of the strengths of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is its willingness to play with and subvert fantasy narrative tropes, especially with its female characters . . . *Game of Thrones*’ inability to understand this is one of its biggest flaws . . . Most particularly, the show seems determined to fit some of its more complicated female characters into one of two boxes: masculine or feminine. (n.p.)

Arya and Sansa are both significantly more nuanced than these “types” suggest, but their “types” do serve to demonstrate how a male viewer can identify with boyish Arya, but would be more likely to cast a controlling, possessive gaze on Sansa, whose beauty is indicative of “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Arya is tough where Sansa is sweet, rebellious where Sansa is demure, and most importantly, in terms of the male viewer’s potential cross-gender identification in a break from the gender binary, Arya resists feminine beauty while Sansa embraces it. Especially in the early seasons, Sansa wears fairy-tale-worthy gowns, styles her hair elaborately, and carries herself with a demeanor appropriate for a maiden of noble birth. By contrast, Arya wears simpler dresses or even boy’s clothing, shows little to no care for her appearance (an active choice, not passive negligence), and acts much more like her rambunctious brothers than like her composed sister. Looking closer, Arya’s character is much more dynamic than a pigeonholed “tom boy.” Although Arya resists acting “like a girl,” she is not trying to “be a boy” either. She is simply trying to be herself, uninhibited by gender norms and the clearly defined and limiting gender identities Brown points to in *Dangerous Curves*. I would not say that Arya is asexual or genderless, but that she resists her identity being constrained by typical femininity or masculinity, and adopts “masculine” traits as they suit her personality, not in a conscious attempt to be “manly.” As she becomes more lethal in the later seasons, Arya begins to use gender to manipulate her enemies.

In *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance*, Valerie Frankel places Arya among the series’ “warrior women” and names her as “second-wave feminism’s ideal: career-focused and completely independent without spouse or children, equal to ‘the boys,’ immune to love or softer emotions . . . [T]hese women have all cast aside all traces of femininity to compete with men and thrive in a man’s world” (48). Frankel is right to classify Arya as “second-wave feminism’s ideal,” but I take issue with the “ideal” itself. If a heroine is devoid of any feminine characteristics, then what is left is a woman trying to be a hero “in a man’s world,” and attempting to compete in a game she will never win, in a world in which she will never “thrive.” It is essential to note that Arya does not choose to eschew femininity just to compete with men, but because she sees no point to feminine pursuits like embroidery or dress-making, skills Sansa takes pride in.

The viewer watches Sansa in season 1 concerning herself with the latest fashions, songs of maidens rescued by handsome knights, and her new love, Prince Joffrey, to whom she has been promised. Meanwhile, Arya works to escape her destiny of being married off and producing heirs. When Arya receives her first sword as a gift from Jon Snow in episode 2, “The Kingsroad,” Arya says “Sansa can keep her sewing needles. I’ve got a needle of my own.”

The direct comparison between a sword and a sewing needle is representative of the tension between the “second wave feminism ideal” Frankel outlines and the postfeminist sensibility Gill articulates of power in choice to pursue and enjoy “feminine” activities. While running an enemy through with a sword sounds more “heroic” than sewing one’s own clothes as Sansa can, the valuation of swordplay over sewing names a “feminine” pursuit as less worthwhile, less compelling, than a masculine one. In season 1, episode 3 (“Lord Snow”) Arya begins studying swordsmanship under Syrio Forel, a master swordsman or “water dancer” from Braavos. His first words to Arya are “You’re late, boy.” When Arya attempts to correct him, he tells her “Boy, girl, you are a sword!” Here lies the central point to Arya as a binary-breaking character; she is not merely trading femininity for masculinity, but leaving binary gender behind in pursuit of a self not restricted by her own gender’s roles.

These first observations of the Arya/Sansa dichotomy aside, a main reason a male viewer can identify with Arya but not Sansa is the difference in the sisters’ sexualities, or lack thereof. If second-wave feminism’s heroines are, as Frankel describes “devoid of love or softer emotions” then Arya is certainly more “ideal” than Sansa. Mulvey argues in “Visual Pleasure” that a female film character “symbolises the castration threat by her real lack of a penis” (2084). It follows that the male viewer would fear loss of his masculinity if he were to identify with a stereotypically feminine character, like Sansa. Throughout the show’s seven seasons, the audience is never made particularly aware of the fact that Arya is a girl, except through her efforts not to be restrained by this truth. Arya never so much as kisses a boy, and only demonstrates potential romantic feelings for one boy, Gendry, who views Arya affectionately, but not romantically or sexually. No one could forget that Sansa is a girl, not only because of her ultra-femininity, but also because from season 1 through season 7, she is pursued by or married to one suitor or another. Sansa is promised to Prince Joffrey almost immediately in season 1, and is delighted at first, thinking her dreams are coming true. Sansa becomes disenchanted with Joffrey soon enough after discovering his true, sadistic nature, but she is still betrothed to him in season 2, episode 7 (“A Man Without Honor” when she gets her first period, and is therefore “ready” to be wed. The scene is not subtle; Sansa wake up from a fevered sleep, and she and the viewer see the blood on Sansa’s bed. In a panic, Sansa desperately tries to destroy the evidence by attacking her sheets and mattress with a knife to cut out the stain. Sansa’s tearful and frantic reaction could be read as stereotypically feminine, or even weak, but attempting to hide the evidence of her “womanhood” is actually a bold and brave attempt at self-preservation. Because Sansa is a prisoner to Joffrey and his family, she is not in command of whom she marries, and by extension, with whom she will have sex and children. By attempting to conceal her

ability to bear children, Sansa is defying Joffrey and his mother Cersei, the queen regent, which is an act of treason.

Sansa is fourteen when she “flowers,” and even though the series follows Arya until she is around eighteen, the viewer never sees her cross this bridge into womanhood. Regardless of why the viewer does not see Arya’s flowering as they see Sansa’s, Arya’s lack of “moonblood” makes it even easier for a male viewer to forget that Arya is, like Sansa, a young woman. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for a male viewer to identify with Sansa after witnessing her dramatic entrance into womanhood, but since Arya’s only bleeding is from scrapes and cuts earned by running through forests and engaging in sword fights, the male viewer can identify with her, and see her as an active character, rather than viewing her as passive, a receptacle for a sexual gaze. Arya’s “masculine” bravery may be considered “ideal” for a fantasy heroine, but Arya’s bravery is not so simply defined, and Sansa’s “feminine” bravery is underrated, perhaps especially from a postfeminist perspective.

While it is clearly important to consider how a male viewer sees female characters when considering the possibility of cross-gender viewer identification, it is also prudent to examine how a show’s male characters see the heroines. Mulvey explains “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator” (2089). If a heroine is constantly coveted by the male characters, and lives under a hungry, sexual male gaze, as Sansa does, a male viewer is unlikely to be able to, or want to imagine himself as her; the show’s writers are allowing her to remain a passive object for the male gaze, rather than an active driver of the plot. If a heroine has no sexual relationships, and instead has fatherly or brotherly men around her, then the male viewer again avoids the castration fear Mulvey outlines. After Joffrey has Arya and Sansa’s father executed in season 1, Sansa is trapped with her betrothed and the rest of the Lannisters in King’s Landing. Arya escapes, and with help from her father’s friend Yoren, is able to disguise herself as a boy and take the name Arry. In season 1, episode 10 (“Fire and Blood”), which begins immediately after Lord Eddard’s public execution, Yoren drags Arya away and says, “You’ll keep your mouth shut, boy,” to which Arya protests, “I’m not a boy!” Yoren responds with “You’re not a smart boy, is that what you’re trying to say? Do you want to live boy?” In this moment, it becomes clear that if Arya wants to live, and avoid imprisonment and potential rape, she not only needs to hide her identity as a Stark, but also hide that she is a girl.

Medievalist Jane Tolmie describes fantasy heroines as “at their best when rising above external conditions that are against them in gender-based ways. They dress up as men to escape restraints on their freedom, run away from abusive fathers, escape unwanted marriages, avoid, avert or survive rape,

or take up arms" (148). The only part of Tolmie's description that does not apply to Arya is the abusive father. Arya does escape potential forced marriages, avoids rape, and takes up arms. These attributes make Arya all the more "ideal" as a fantasy heroine as Frankel describes, and conducive to a male viewer's cross-gender identification. However, defining female characters as "at their best" only when they are able to somehow beat the patriarchal system to which they are victims fails to account for the realities of female characters' circumstances. Arya's escape from King's Landing is successful in part because of her own resilience, but also due to the help she receives along the way.

If Arya is "at her best" as a fantasy heroine for dressing as a boy and escaping potential rape, then Sansa must be a fantasy heroine at her worst. After Sansa is cast aside by Joffrey and instead forced to marry Joffrey's uncle Tyrion, she manages to escape from King's Landing only for Lord Petyr "Littlefinger" Baelish to coerce her into another marriage, to Northman Lord Bolton's illegitimate son, Ramsay Snow. Sansa is then forced into one of *Thrones'* most controversial scenes. In season 5, episode 6 ("Unbent, Unbowed, Unbroken"), Sansa's new husband rapes her on their wedding night, and forces Theon Greyjoy to watch. The viewer sees Ramsay rip Sansa's dress and force Sansa down onto the bed, then hears Sansa's sobs as the camera moves back to Theon, who is also crying. The scene is disturbing to watch, and elicited fan outrage and many articles questioning the purpose of any rape scenes in the show. Jill Pantozzi, then editor in chief of *The Mary Sue*, wrote, "Rape is not a necessary plot device," and announced the site would, as a protest, cease coverage of the show (Sacks n.p.). By contrast, Sophie Turner, who plays Sansa Stark, told *Entertainment Weekly*, "When I read that scene I kinda loved it. . . . I loved the way Ramsay had Theon watching. It was all so messed up" (Sacks n.p.). The episode's director Jeremy Podeswa responded to the backlash by saying, "The show depicts a brutal world where horrible things happen. . . . [producers and writers David Benioff and D. B. Weiss] did not want to be too overly influenced by that [criticism] but they did absorb and take it in and it did influence them in a way" (Sacks n.p.). Despite the controversy, the scene demonstrates that a male viewer is unlikely to imagine himself as Sansa, and could instead easily imagine possessing her, and violently so. Here, rather than scopophilia as a vehicle for identification, male viewers are presented with scopophilia as control over a female character, who the male character Ramsay claims as an object. As Theon watches and tears up, he feels obvious sympathy for Sansa, but cannot feel empathy for her, just as most male viewers cannot.

If Sansa had been "at her best," she would have dressed as a man, made a daring escape, and avoided being raped. Of course, given the circumstances, doing so would have been impossible. Unlike Arya, Sansa had no one to

help her escape, and at eighteen years old with very feminine features, Sansa would have had a much more difficult time passing for a man than Arya did passing for a boy when she was eleven. In considering the female characters on the show who are raped—Sansa, Cersei, and Daenerys—compared with those who are not—Arya, Brienne, and Yara—it seems that femininity is punished with gender-based violence and sexual assault. On the other hand, gender nonconformity in female characters is applauded and considered “ideal” through the second-wave feminism lens Frankel names. As Gill explains “In some instances feminism is set up as policeman, disallowing women the pleasures of traditional femininity” (162). In “In Defense of Sansa Stark” Thomas argues that Sansa is an essential character because she “shows how societal expectations of women completely screw them over”:

She believes in stories, and she believes that the greatest thing she can do is marry the prince (who will, of course, be chivalrous and honorable and handsome and kind) and have his children... Because people *want* her to be that way... even though women are told they are only “good” if they fit into this role, the role itself is seen as weak, manipulative, stupid and generally inferior... And so some “fans” of the series declare that they wish Sansa would get raped, a woman’s punishment for daring to act how she has been taught. For daring to act *feminine*, and making mistakes while doing so. (n.p.)

This “woman’s punishment” is inflicted upon only the female characters who agree to doing the duties they have been taught are theirs since they were children; those women who seek other duties (Arya as an assassin, Brienne as a sworn sword, and Yara as a captain) can still be “punished,” but not in ways dependent on their sex.

Not only did Sansa have no male figure to look out for her and save her as Arya did with Yoren, but Sansa’s mentor Littlefinger was the one who set up the marriage between Sansa and Ramsay. The way the Stark sisters are seen by their male mentors throughout the show is another way of understanding the possibility for the male viewer’s cross-gender identification. Immediately following Eddard’s execution, Sansa’s closest male mentor is Sandor “the Hound” Clegane, Joffrey’s sworn sword. The Hound does not openly offer Sansa guidance, but serves as her steadfast protector from Joffrey. In season one’s final episode, “Fire and Blood,” Joffrey forces Sansa to accompany him to the battlements, and look at her father’s head on a spike. Joffrey boasts that he is going to kill Sansa’s brother Robb, and bring Sansa his head as well. Sansa snaps back “Or perhaps he will bring me yours.” Joffrey then has his knight Ser Meryn Trant smack Sansa in the face. Joffrey turns, and Sansa sees an opportunity to push him from the battlements. She steps toward him, but the Hound subtly stops her, says “Come here, girl,” and in a rare moment of

tenderness, wipes the blood from Sansa's lip with his handkerchief. Again, Sansa is daring in this scene as she is in the bloody sheet scene, but her bravery is foiled by the Hound, if for her own protection. In season 2, episode 6 ("The Old Gods and the New"), the Hound saves Sansa from rape during a riot in King's Landing. He finds her in an alleyway, kills her three assailants, then picks Sansa up and carries her over his shoulder back to the castle. He leaves her with her handmaidens and says "The Little Bird is bleeding. Someone take her back to her cage." The Hound never names himself Sansa's defender, possibly because as Joffrey's sworn sword, to do so would be treasonous. However, the Hound comes to Sansa's rescue time and again while she is under the Lannister's control. Considering potential identification, the male viewer would likely not want to be seen the way the Hound sees Sansa, as a maiden to be protected. For a male viewer to see himself as a damsel in distress, as Sansa is so often depicted to be, would be a threat to the male viewer's masculinity. Sansa's vulnerability and need for a protector casts her in a negative light compared to the "ideal" fantasy heroine Arya. With that in mind, it is essential to consider that dismissing Sansa as weak is to dismiss the very real strength of the patriarchal system that forces a combination of femininity and weakness, so that masculinity can claim strength.

The male viewer would presumably prefer to be seen as the Hound sees Arya, perhaps not at the beginning of their journey together, but by the end. The Hound is one of the first to land himself on Arya's list of people she vows to kill, after he kills Arya's friend Mycah for being involved in a tussle with Prince Joffrey. After a battle in King's Landing, the Hound deserts his duty as a member of the Kingsguard, taking to the road. He encounters Arya, who is alone in the wilderness, still disguised as a boy. The Hound sees Arya as an opportunity, and captures her to take her to her aunt, Lysa of The Vale, with the hope that Arya's aunt will pay ransom for her niece. The Hound does not treat Arya with the same kindness that he treated Sansa, but he is not cruel to Arya either; rather, the Hound recognizes Arya as a fellow outcast, and comes to regard her almost as an equal, particularly when he learns of her skill with a sword. In season 4, episode 7 ("Mockingbird"), the Hound and Arya encounter a gravely injured farmer. As a mercy, the Hound runs the farmer through with a dagger, then turns to Arya and says "That's where the heart is. That's how you kill a man." While the Hound tried to help Sansa stay out of Joffrey's way and ease the suffering he knew he could not eradicate entirely, the Hound recognizes the fighter in Arya, and helps her hone her skills rather than discouraging her from the "masculine" pursuit of combat.

While he protected Sansa from Joffrey, the Hound was not there to keep her safe from the manipulative Littlefinger. It is very unlikely that any viewer would want to be looked at the way Littlefinger looks at Sansa. Littlefinger

serves on the King's Council as Master of Coin, and so is present in the show from the beginning, but has little to do with Sansa until season 4. Littlefinger grew up with Sansa's mother Lady Catelyn, and Catelyn's sister Lysa. After colluding in the murder of King Joffrey, Littlefinger takes Sansa with him and sails for the Vale, where he marries Lysa to gain control of her domain. Although Lysa loved Littlefinger when she was a girl, and desired to marry him instead of Jon Arryn, Littlefinger always loved Sansa's mother Catelyn. Since Catelyn was murdered in season 3, and since Sansa has grown up, Littlefinger's attention has turned to her. Although he is married to Lysa, Littlefinger kisses Sansa in the courtyard of the Vale in season 4, episode 7 ("Mockingbird"). While it would be unsettling for a heterosexual male viewer to picture himself as Sansa in the scene, being coveted and kissed by an older man, the kiss is especially disturbing given that it directly follows Littlefinger saying "In a better world, one where love can overcome strength and duty, you could have been my child." Littlefinger's words take the kiss beyond inappropriate to incestuous, but Sansa remains at the mercy of his favor, and therefore cannot resist. For viewers to imagine themselves as a hero or heroine, they have to first and foremost want to be that hero or heroine. Given how Sansa is used and looked at by men, especially Littlefinger, no one, especially not the male viewer, would want to be her.

By contrast, male viewers would very much want to be Arya if it means having her relationship with Jaqen H'ghar. The two first meet in season 1, when Jaqen is masquerading as a captured criminal. Jaqen is actually a member of an ancient order of assassins, the Faceless Men, who reside in the House of Black and White in Braavos. Jaqen takes an interest in Arya after she saves his life on the road, and offers to train her as his apprentice and help her leave behind her identity to become "no one," the "name" all Faceless Men take as they abandon their former identities. Arya goes to Braavos and begins her training to become one of the Faceless Men, who don others' faces to disguise themselves as they serve the Many-Faced God. Arya's time spent training with Jaqen is relevant to her manipulation of the gender binary, because the Faceless Men can gender-bend to best complete their assassination missions. Arya often achieves her triumphs through demonstrating "masculine" traits, but she also uses femininity to her advantage, particularly when her goal is to catch men by surprise, and murder them. In "Why Do We Still Root for Arya Stark?" Hillary Kelly examines "how Arya used her youth and gender to bait and kill her enemies":

When she caught sight of Meryn Trant — the Kingsguard knight who slayed her beloved sword-fighting teacher Syrio Forel — she abandoned murder for hire and returned to murder for personal satisfaction... As Trant demanded younger and

younger prostitutes in a Braavosi brothel, finally demanding that prepubescent girls service him, Arya slipped in wearing the disguise of an even younger girl than herself, waiting to lay waste to Trant ... she made sure Trant knew that one of those girls he'd considered so expendable was responsible for his death. (n.p.)

Arya's brutal killing of Trant demonstrates that rather than letting stereotypical femininity determine her personhood, Arya uses whatever gender traits will best aid her in her ultimate goal: crossing all the names off of her kill list.

By the end of season 6, it has become clear that Arya could never be "no one." Arya has her own agenda and values her identity as a Stark too much to abandon it. Even though she has sworn an oath to serve the Many-Faced God, Jaqen allows Arya to leave Braavos in season 6, episode 8 ("No One"). In their climactic scene together, Jaqen says to Arya, "Finally, a girl is no one," to which she responds, "A girl is Arya Stark of Winterfell, and I'm going home." Arya has her sword drawn on Jaqen, and a moment passes as he appraises her, but then he smiles just slightly, and nods. She has passed his test. As Sansa is either protected, manipulated, or lusted after by the men who serve as her mentors, Arya has opportunities to prove herself her mentors' equals. For the male viewer, imagining himself as Arya would be desirable because her relationships with her male mentors are similar to those of young heroes; not because Arya does exhibit "masculine" traits, but because her mentors treat her as an active subject rather than a passive object. Arya's relationships with her male mentors are vastly different from Sansa's, whose mentors treat her as a pawn or a "Little Bird" to be protected, not a powerful young woman.

Sansa finally has her revenge against her estranged husband Ramsay, and indeed her first real triumph after six seasons of adversity, in season 6, episode 9 ("Battle of the Bastards"). Ramsay and Sansa's "half-brother" Jon Snow are battling for the Starks' home, Winterfell. Jon's army is losing badly when the knights of the Vale ride in to their rescue at the last possible moment, defeating Ramsay's army. Sansa was able to secure assistance from the knights of the Vale through Littlefinger; without Sansa's help, Jon would have lost the battle, and lost Winterfell. Jon's army captures Ramsay, and Sansa faces him in the stable where Ramsay keeps his hunting dogs, who he had been starving for a week so they would be especially vicious. Ramsay tells Sansa "You can't kill me. I'm part of you now." Sansa replies "Your words will disappear, your name will disappear, your house will disappear. All memory of you will disappear." As Ramsay's hounds converge on him, eating him as he sits chained to a chair, Sansa remains long enough to be sure Ramsay is going to die. She then walks away, with just a trace

of a smile on her lips. Even though Sansa finally transcends her role as the show's whipping girl and emerges a true heroine, a male viewer is still unlikely to identify with her. Following her claim that *Game of Thrones'* showrunners cast the heroines into either "masculine" or "feminine" categories, Thomas notes the show's feminine characters "fight using smiles and kind words and manipulations" (n.p.). The strategies that led to Sansa's triumph were distinctly feminine; she used her sexual hold on Littlefinger to persuade him to come to Winterfell's aid, and while she lets Ramsay die a horrible death, she does not physically kill him herself. Again, Sansa is not a "worse" heroine than Arya because male viewers aren't likely to identify with Sansa; the point is that in keeping Sansa within a construct of "femininity," the showrunners play into the dichotomy Mulvey was concerned with, and thereby do not expand the possibilities for viewer identification as they do with Arya.

In the following episode, "The Winds of Winter," Arya is able to avenge the death of her mother and her brother Robb by killing Walder Frey, the man responsible for their murders at the Red wedding in season 3. Using her training from Jaqen, Arya disguises herself as a serving girl and sneaks into Walder's stronghold. Here Arya uses femininity to lure Walder into a false sense of security, as he would never suspect murder from a serving girl, and he is too distracted by her beauty to realize she is an intruder. Kelly notes Arya's "ability to use men's misogyny against them," so Arya successfully combines "feminine" trickery with "masculine" violence. She stands beside Walder as he eats, and he asks her to call his sons to him. Arya says that his sons are already here, and gestures to the pie Walder is eating; Arya has murdered Walder's sons and baked them into a pie, a reference to an old myth the Stark children heard from their nanny. Arya then removes her disguise and says to Walder, "My name is Arya Stark. I want you to know that the last thing you're going to see is a Stark smiling down at you as you die." Arya slits his throat and holds him as he bleeds to death. Arya's revenge is more "masculine" than Sansa's in two ways: first, Arya kills Walder with her own hands, instead of allowing him to die as Sansa allowed Ramsay to die; second, Arya kills Walder to avenge her family, while Sansa lets Ramsay die in part to avenge her family, because Ramsay had captured Winterfell, but moreover to avenge herself. Sansa seeks revenge on Ramsay in part because he raped and beat her; her revenge comes as a result of the gender-based violence the show's more feminine characters are victim to, while the less feminine female characters face other challenges, less related to their genders. Arya's desire to kill Walder has nothing to do with the fact that Arya is a girl, which makes it possible for male viewers to identify with her, and take more pleasure in killing Walder Frey than in killing Ramsay Snow.

Following these personal triumphs at the conclusion of season 6, the Stark sisters each emerge more powerful than ever in season 7. In their childhoods, the sisters were constantly at odds with one another, but years have passed since the two have seen each other. Sansa holds Winterfell while Jon has journeyed south, and her leadership mirrors that of her father's. In particular, Sansa's wardrobe has become emblematic of her new role. The viewer has seen Sansa's style become less overtly feminine leading up to season 7, with her wearing darker colors and plainer styles. As the leader of Winterfell though, her style serves two functions: emulating her father, and warding off Littlefinger. *Thrones* costume designer Michele Clapton explains that Sansa's cape "represents Ned and her desire to take on more of a leadership role at Winterfell" while she designed Sansa's belt "to wrap around over her side-laced dress to represent the absolute removal of any possible physical touch. Her dresses are also tightly-laced on, incredibly difficult to remove; it's a message to Littlefinger" (Morton n.p.). Notably, Sansa does not dress "masculinely"; she is still wearing dresses, and still wears her hair in a style, as Arya points out, similar to Cersei Lannister's. Though Sansa no longer wears archetypal fairytale maiden gowns, she has not abandoned femininity altogether, but has chosen to combine her femininity with symbols of strength: a cloak like her father's, and armor-like accessories. Through her wardrobe, Sansa expresses that she is no longer trapped in an identity defined by others, particularly a controlling male gaze. Rather, she expresses her identity as she defines it: a combination of the courage she learned from her father, and the resilience and cunning she has learned from her enemies.

By contrast, Arya's style has never been "feminine," but in season 7 she, like Sansa, has created a defined style that signals her identity as a Stark. Like Sansa's cape, Arya's quilted leather top is like her father's, and she wears her hair in the same short cut, half tied back style that Ned did. For Arya, her style is about function, not fashion: her pants allow her to move more agilely than a dress would, and she wears her sword and dagger just as many men in the show do. Of course, Arya does show a disdain for the stereotypically feminine, but she does not dress the way she does to appear more masculine, but to appear as her most genuine self. Both sisters appear in season 7 as the truest versions of themselves the viewer has yet seen.

In the season 7 finale "The Dragon and the Wolf," the Stark sisters come together to take Littlefinger by surprise, and execute him for his betrayals of the Stark family. Tracing all the way back to his conspiracy to murder Jon Arryn, Littlefinger is responsible for Ned's, Catelyn's, and Robb's deaths, and Sansa's repeated rape and imprisonment by Ramsay. Since Arya arrived at Winterfell, Littlefinger worked to turn the sisters against each other, exacerbating the tension between them to keep them from uniting, and becoming powerful

enough to keep him from his ultimate goal: the Iron Throne. To the viewer, it appears his manipulation has been successful; but the sisters, despite their differences, are not so easily divided.

Like the sisters' revenge scenes in season 6, Sansa uses cunning to lure Littlefinger into the trap she and Arya have laid together, while Arya uses physical prowess to carry out Sansa's sentence. Sansa gives the command, and Arya strikes, killing Littlefinger amidst his begging Sansa to show him mercy. Sansa quotes Littlefinger's own words back to him: "Sometimes, when I'm trying to understand a person's motives, I play a little game. I assume the worst." Sansa has now learned how to play the "game" of which she was a victim for so long. "Feminine" wiles and "masculine" violence work together in this scene to achieve the sisters' revenge over the man who wronged them and their family. By joining together to take down Littlefinger, the Stark sisters transcend the trope of jealous, backbiting sisters, and take down the recurring theme, or social construction, of women seeing one another as competition, rather than as allies. As I have shown, typical ideas of an "ideal" heroine would place Arya as the "better" heroine; however, femininity should not be seen as a weakness in female characters. As Sansa demonstrates, femininity can join with strength.

Ultimately, cross-gender identification from a male viewer is most possible when the heroine is not restricted by the gender binary, so that sexuality and gender norms can be forgotten. As I have argued, transcending the gender binary for a female character is not inherently equivalent to being less feminine and more masculine, but rather acting outside of gender norms, and manipulating the gender binary to serve one's own purposes, as Arya does. All the qualities that are admirable in Arya Stark are not merely "masculine," but are a resistance to stereotypical "femininity" so a male viewer can go beyond identifying with her to actually consciously imagining himself as her. Importantly, I am not arguing that male viewers' potential cross-gender identification should be a consideration in what makes an "ideal" heroine. Rather, given the rise of heroines who are not defined by their sexuality or performance of either feminine or masculine norms, heroines are no longer limited to being the object of the male gaze. Therefore, male viewers are no longer limited to imagining themselves as only male heroes; cross-gender identification from male viewers is a result of the rise of the binary-breaking heroine and leads to new possibilities in how viewers experience and take pleasure in film.

CHLOE ALLMAND is a PhD student in rhetoric and composition and a graduate teaching assistant at Florida State University. She has presented papers at the Western Regional Honors Conference 2014, the Western Washington University Graduate Student Symposium 2017, PAMLA 2017, and WWU's

Scholars Week 2018. Her creative work has appeared in *Manastash* and *Washington's Best Emerging Poets*. Her research interests include women and gender studies, composition pedagogy, and grounded theory.

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