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A Story We Agree to Tell Each Other Over and Over:
Gender and Disability Performance in *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract

Game of Thrones presents us with a wealth of fascinating characters, many of whom do not fit neatly into the particular roles ascribed to them by binary systems. As a result of their nonconformity, they are often ridiculed, spurned, “othered.” In this thesis, I will focus on gender and ability as performances—social constructions—rather than as natural fact, and I will utilize the literary and film theory of Laura Mulvey, Lennard Davis, and Judith Butler to explore *Game of Thrones* through this lens. I intend to analyze how certain characters perform gender or dis/ability (or both), along with the ways in which they have changed the narrative and subverted traditional ideologies and systems of power.

Keywords: Adolescent Education, English, *Game of Thrones*, gender, male gaze, binary, disability, normalcy, abled gaze, performance

Setting the Scene: An Introduction

Game of Thrones, the television show based on George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novel series, is arguably a cultural phenomenon. The show portrays kings and queens, dramatic rises to and tragic falls from power, tenuous times of peace and ghastly wars, and even the more supernatural aspects of fantasy—an undead army, magic, and dragons. Yet despite its fantastical elements, medieval setting, and a focus on the class of courtly nobility, I believe there lies within the show a reflection of our own contemporary world, of the systems of power that regulate what it means to be “normal.” I believe *Game of Thrones* then lends itself well to analysis not only under filmic but literary theory as well; I think there is great value to be gained in examining the highly popular media of our culture—in this case, for its portrayals of gender and disability. Utilizing the theories of Judith Butler, Laura Mulvey, and Lennard Davis, I will analyze key characters who do not fit neatly into the particular roles ascribed to them by binary systems, who alert us through their appearances, words, and actions that gender and disability are not natural fact, but rather performances. This character study structure is driven by a motivation to trace these characters' stories of identity and how (or if) their identities developed over the course of the series.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler's primary argument is that gender is not essential or automatically innate, but rather a performance of oneself, a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). Although gender is generally perceived through an inflexible binary lens, meaning that someone must be either man or woman, Butler troubles this notion by contending that gender is

actually created through one's repetitive execution of certain social rituals or behaviors to reify their identity as naturally a "man" or "woman." Indeed, I would argue even the idea that biological sex is inherent may be contested, since a person's "sex" is assigned based on their possession of particular genitalia, body parts which have had meaning imposed upon them. Butler poses that bodily sites are inscribed by cultural meanings and marked by taboos: "Any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies" (131). The hegemony—the dominant class that defines and enforces what is socially acceptable and "normal"—crafts the discourse which determines how certain body parts are to be used by men and women, and if these body parts are used in ways not prescribed by the hegemonic system of power, these people are deemed deviant and unnatural—beyond the appropriate limits that have been set.

Another foundational concept in *Gender Trouble* is that the enforcement of a binary system results not only in a mere two acceptable genders, but also in very specific and limited categories concerning what constitutes comprehensible romantic and sexual relationships. Butler states, "'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (17). I believe these "relations of coherence" in dominant societal thought are heteronormative in nature, meaning that anyone with a penis is a man, who desires and engages in sexual activity with a woman—the woman being the person with a vagina. This is, then, the supposed natural order of things. In the *Game of Thrones* universe in particular, perhaps one of the most significant pieces of this natural order is that the relationship between a man and a woman should result in children. The

continuity of the family line is of vital importance in a world where the social hierarchy consists of kings, queens, lords, and ladies—it is fundamental that they have heirs, preferably male, to inherit their land and titles, to carry the family name and legacy into the future. The job of men is to marry and impregnate women; wives are expected to be amenable to, or even pleased about, carrying and bearing children for their husbands. Relationships that do not mirror this expectation of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality, or men and women who do not perform in this way in *Game of Thrones*, are not “intelligible” under established gender norms.

Yet there are ways to subvert or buck the supposedly natural order of sex, gender, and desire that society insists upon, notably through alternative identities and performances such as drag. Butler suggests that such acts expose the fiction that biological sex automatically signals the external manifestation of an always-already gendered “soul” and that “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (137). When someone performs in drag, there is a distinction between their anatomy and the gender they are performing, illustrating that there is no proper way for a certain gender to act and there is no fixed sexual identity or orientation. Butler further explains that as opposed to upholding the aforementioned heterosexual coherence, drag allows us to “see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which [. . .] dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (138). I believe these alternative performances are disconcerting to some precisely because they shake the hegemonic foundation that asserts sex and gender are true and inherently connected, troubling dominant thought with the notion that gender is in actuality a constant impersonation, improvisation, imitation, which can shift and transform along a spectrum. Ultimately, according to Butler,

gender and sexual orientation are styles, ritualistic acts, which can be appropriated or rejected however one sees fit; if the binary is confining, one does not have to abide by it.

Just as Butler examines how sex and gender identity categories are determined by social rituals and practices, Laura Mulvey's analysis in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" considers the ways in which the portrayal of females in film is determined by and is an effect of the dominant patriarchy. Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach investigates the phallogocentric culture of film, which delineates the man, who bears the phallus, as the holder of power and maker of meaning. This dominant position depends upon the woman as the castrated and passive figure. Mulvey claims that film offers pleasure to the male viewer through scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, and at its extreme it involves "using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (10). This male gaze is satisfied by the stylization of women to be beautiful and, for lack of a better word, sexy. Mulvey argues that females in movies often "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*" (11). In essence, traditional female roles often demand little more than their ability to serve as a sexual object as opposed to a driving force in the film's narrative. Yet inherent to phallogocentrism is the threat of castration anxiety, evoked by the woman's lack of a phallus. Mulvey asserts that for the male voyeur, "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment" (14). Thus, the castration threat is circumvented or remedied by the male's fetishistic voyeurism and even sadism toward the female, in an effort to completely dominate her.

This male gaze not only demands subjugation of the female but also ego identification with a strong male lead, who is capable and active in advancing the narrative. Mulvey utilizes Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, which is based on the idea that as vulnerable infants, we perceive our bodies as fragmented or insufficient compared to the whole image of ourselves we see in the mirror, which looks more complete than we feel. There is, according to Lacan, a split in our identity: we feel that part of our subjectivity—our existence, our sense of “I”—lies here within us, while another part lies within that unattainable reflection. Throughout our lives, we then attempt to become that ideal unified self of our mirror image. Mulvey posits that, similar to the mirror stage process, a film viewer identifies with the male movie star: “The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor coordination” (12). Film allows the male gaze to be simultaneously satisfied by its erotic investment in the female object and its recognition of, and identification with, the ideal self they perceive in a dominant male character. Contrary to the traditional woman character, who does little to nothing to contribute to the story, the traditional male lead is authoritative, dynamic, and vitally important to driving the movie's events.

I feel it is significant to note that *Game of Thrones* has an undeniable tendency to cater to the type of male gaze Mulvey discusses, especially in its first few seasons. Female characters are seen partially or entirely naked much more often than male characters, and *Game of Thrones* has been highly critiqued for its portrayals of sexual violence against women. Sara David, a writer for *Vice* who counted every instance of death, rape, and nudity in seven out of eight seasons, claims, “When instances of gratuitous nudity and rape decreased, women characters suffered, highlighting the inability of showrunners to deploy other tactics to showcase complex character

development or invent convincing, creative plot lines for women characters.” I also think it is important to point out how many women may have had a role in creating and producing the show’s 73 episodes: *Game of Thrones*, out of its total of 19 directors, only ever employed one female director, who directed four episodes, and there were only two female writers, who penned a combined grand total of four episodes (McFarland). This means that more often than not, men were responsible for quite literally putting words in the characters’ mouths, for directing the performances in each scene. I cannot ignore the fact that the show is, essentially, controlled by male creators, perhaps inflicting and inserting the male gaze on set. Despite this, I am mostly inclined to disagree with David’s assertion that *Game of Thrones* does not demonstrate complex development of female characters; I believe, especially as the show continues into its later seasons, there are women characters portrayed in nuanced ways.

Fairly similar to Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze is disability studies theorist Lennard Davis’s notion of the “abled” gaze. In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Davis considers and examines the ways in which ability and disability are social constructions (much like gender). He asserts, “The ‘normal’ person (clinging to that title) has a network of traditional ableist assumptions and social supports that empowers the gaze and interaction” (128). Just as “male” and “female” are fictitious categories enforced by a binary system of power, society also enforces a hegemony of normalcy which divides the population into the “abled” and “disabled”—the abled being the normal and acceptable group. The gaze of the abled is thereby invested with dominance and power; people often “identify” disability through one’s appearance, which Davis calls a “specular moment. The power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol the disabled person is brought to the fore” (12). Davis believes that when the supposedly normal person looks upon

someone with a disability, they experience feelings of horror, fear, or repulsion. I would argue that this reflexive response to be repulsed is due to the castration that is threatened in a metaphorical sense: the person who is abled, ostensibly complete and unitary, sees the person with a disability as partial or deficient, which arouses within the normal person intense anxiety about their illusory wholeness.

I also believe that the state of being normal or abled is simply a performance easily facilitated both by societal standards and the material structures of the world. Davis points out, “[I]n an ableist society, the ‘normal’ people have constructed the world physically and cognitively to reward those with like abilities and handicap those with unlike abilities” (10). Ability is only real insofar as how society caters to particular qualities and identifies them as the norm. The world is built for people who can walk, people of a certain height, people who can hear and see, people with all of their limbs, allowing these people to assume a superior stance. They impose upon those with disabilities preconceived notions based upon their perceived lack. I feel, too, that the prefix “dis-” seems to leave a sour taste on the tongue and has an implicitly negative connotation, suggesting that something is missing, something has been diminished. The system of power that separates the abled from the disabled, and even those who fit neatly into the gender binary and those who do not, insists that there is a proper way for a body to exist in the world. However, it is not actually the states of people’s bodies or minds which impairs them, but rather the obstacles placed before them by society that are disabling.

Now comes what I feel is one of the main challenges of my project: to fuse these ideas, to consider these theorists’ concepts in tandem and at play with each other in a way that is meaningful and useful in examining *Game of Thrones*. Combining these pertinent theoretical

foundations, the ultimate regulatory system—which I believe is upheld both in *Game of Thrones* and in our society—is one that relies upon binary oppositions, which grants overt authority to the cisgender, straight, abled male, the bearer of the phallus and empowered gaze. It is not that those who abide by binary codes are inherently better and thus deserving of this power, but rather that they construct society to ensure that they are viewed as such, thereby “othering” anyone who remotely falls outside fabricated societal confines. Societal values *produce* the bodies which can be considered normal. A significant piece of the show which must be considered is its medieval setting—primarily set in the fictional country of Westeros—which causes particular cultural meanings to be ascribed to gender and to ability. To quote Butler, the “intelligible genders” and even, I believe, the “intelligible bodies” in the *Game of Thrones* universe are the strong, capable, virile men who train in fighting and wield heavy weapons, the demure, passive women in gowns who are to do needlepoint and interest themselves in fashion and gossip, the bodies that can walk and easily navigate the world.

I carefully chose the following six characters to focus on as a way to limit the scope of my analysis (an examination of the show as a whole would be many, many more pages) and because I feel they disrupt traditional societal boundaries in unique and fascinating ways; their performances are not fully “intelligible” under the established norm, especially within the TV series itself. They are not the stereotypical virile, battle-ready men or fancily ornamented women participating in the ostensibly natural order of lords and ladies. Their variations in gender and ability performance are threats to the precarious binarisms inherent to what it means to be part of the noble-born higher class. Brienne and Arya are female characters who subvert traditional female gender performances both in their appearances and actions, and they do not exist

comfortably in the role prescribed to them by society. Bran and Tyrion subvert ableist presuppositions in a world that often tries to incapacitate them. Varys and Theon present an intriguing intersection of gender and disability due to their castrated status, not partaking in compulsory heterosexuality or perceived as “whole” men. I believe that all of these characters, while not perpetually effective or subversive, do in some ways undermine empowered gazes and confront viewers with nonbinary performances of gender and disability.

Game of Thrones is rife with possibilities for analysis through these various lenses, but it is also deeply challenging. The show is by turns well-executed and problematic, compelling and disturbing. The characters I discuss are of course not always exemplary paradigms of subversion, and the show as a whole, I believe, does not always actively work to undo the restrictive standards of society; however, I think it is still incredibly meaningful to examine. According to Mulvey, the primary aim of film is “always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience” (17). The goal is to create verisimilitude so the film is effective, so we forget that what we are watching is not real. Often, I feel that we merely watch and absorb, fully immersed in the events onscreen. My intent is to step outside of this immersion, retain awareness that it is a fiction, and consider what insights may be gained by thinking critically about the media we consume. I feel *Game of Thrones* frequently makes viewers uncomfortable, in ways that are unfortunate, but perhaps, too, in ways that are valuable. Maybe it is when anxiety is aroused within us that we must pay the closest attention: why are we unsettled, and why do we cling to unspoken societal constructions? In the following critical analyses of the aforementioned characters, I consider their complexity of performances and how their identities

and development may trouble traditional ideologies surrounding gender and disability both within the fictional bounds of the show and in the “real” world.

Brienne of Tarth: Neither Knight Nor Lady

Perhaps one of the best representations in *Game of Thrones* of a person who troubles the traditional notion of “woman” is Brienne of Tarth, the capable female warrior. She embodies Butler’s notion that “the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms” (4), and her character demonstrates how gender is not necessarily confined to single or static definitions. Contrary to what the courtly society of Westeros demands of women, Brienne does not wear long gowns or needlepoint. She does not portray herself as gentle, docile, or demure, and she is far from being the passive female object easily subjugated. Her disruption of the hegemonic gender binary repeatedly disconcerts others, especially men who conform to a stereotypical idea of masculinity, often resulting in Brienne being ridiculed and rejected as something “other.”

Brienne quite visually and actively performs in a manner that is at odds with the preconceived notions attached to her female status. She first appears in the show during a tournament, both her and her opponent wielding weapons and fiercely fighting each other. To the tournament audience and to us, the show’s viewers, Brienne may initially be assumed to be a man by traditional physical standards and by her presentation of self: she fills out her armor, she is tall and broad, and she swings her ball-and-chain flail with undeniable strength. We may also assume she is a man simply because she is dressed as a knight; the *Game of Thrones* universe has established traditional gender roles, and rarely does the show portray women donning armor. When Brienne removes her helmet after her victory—having brutally tackled her opponent to the ground—the crowd gasps upon their realization that the adept warrior is a woman (*Game of Thrones* season 2, episode 3). Her role as a fighter, as a “knight,” troubles fixed gender

categories. Armor, heavy weapons, and helmets are all symbols of power which men in the *Game of Thrones* world, and even perhaps in our world, are supposed to identify with. Brienne, as a woman, is supposed to identify with the traditional passivity of a woman. The female hands are meant for sewing, cooking, and child-rearing, not for wielding longswords or battle axes, heaving shields, and striking down men in vicious or bloody battles.

Brienne does not fulfill the role of fetish object that Mulvey describes, therefore not allowing the male gaze to be satisfied either sexually or sadistically, since more often than not, Brienne is a dominant force who enacts violence upon men. Throughout the course of the show, Brienne's womanhood is perpetually questioned. She is called ugly, a beast, a freak of nature; men laugh when they realize that she is not the male they initially perceived her to be. She does not possess a phallus in a world largely dominated by males, yet far from being disempowered, Brienne is resolute, dangerous, and incredibly competent in her fighting skills. The constant barrage of insults she endures demonstrates that she clearly activates the anxieties inherent within phallogentrism. She tells Jaime Lannister, "All my life men like you have sneered at me, and all my life I've been knocking men like you into the dust" (2.8). She is highly aware of how she is viewed by others, of the threat she poses to the binary system of power, and her failure to properly serve the male gaze seems to result in perpetual efforts by men to diminish her and evade the castration threat.

Despite her obvious physical power and self-awareness, Brienne does struggle with her own perception of gender in relation to herself due to the conflict between her biological sex and her performance, which is "masculine." Butler discusses the meaning of terms such as "masculine" and "feminine," asserting, "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as

radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *women* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (10). However, Brienne does not live in a society so progressive as to deem her masculine performance acceptable for a woman. Not only does Brienne seem unable to detach such descriptors from particular gender categories, but she also associates particular qualities with what it means to be a noble lady. She tells Catelyn Stark, “If it please you, Brienne’s enough. I’m no lady” (2.3), a refrain she tells others, over and over again. “Lady,” in this interaction between two women, can be taken to mean gender, but I also think it may refer to the social performances expected of highborn women in *Game of Thrones*. Brienne does not comply with the rules of being that accompany the title of “Lady” in Westeros. However, it seems that she did once entertain the thought of being a noble lady: “Brienne is masculine in a way that does not seem connected to self-fashioning—before it dawned on her that other people saw her as ‘beastly,’ she enjoyed the idea of being considered beautiful” (Moyce 61). This becomes apparent when she tells her squire Podrick a story of dancing with boys at a ball when she was younger and being subsequently mocked as “Brienne the Beauty.” It was a joke that all of the boys had been in on, and the respect they had shown her and the compliments they had given her were all part of a farce (5.3). Her cruel treatment by others and the strictures of high society cause Brienne to be disturbed, even disgusted, by associating the way she performs with being a “lady.” Yet while she does not allow herself to be called a lady, she also does not accept being termed a knight. In this medieval universe, it seems that one cannot be both a beautiful woman and a strong knight; the two identities are mutually exclusive, perhaps even contradictory.

The hegemony of Westeros does not allow for performances of gender that do not “naturally” follow from one’s sex, so Brienne is troubling precisely because she is biologically female but performs most like a traditional Westerosi man. Butler states, “The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it” (10). Brienne, perhaps due to the restrictions of societal norms and the way she has been constantly scorned for being a female knight, has tethered the notion of gender to sex. She associates certain performances and presentations of the self with femininity and what it means to be a “woman.” She remarks to Catelyn Stark, “You have courage. Not battle courage, perhaps, but... I don’t know, a woman’s kind of courage” (2.5). Brienne likely perceives herself as having “battle courage,” as if there is a dichotomy between fighting prowess and womanhood. The culture she exists in makes it difficult, if not impossible, for her to associate bravery in battle with being physically female. She often deprecates women in general, such as when she mocks Jaime Lannister after they lock swords, saying, “I’m a *woman*. I was still beating you,” and again later, after he mourns the loss of his hand, telling him, “You sound like a bloody woman” (3.4). Brienne seems to scorn her own sex and often distances herself from other women, struggling to truly count herself among them. However, she is also not part of the community of men who scoff at her and taunt her; she occupies the ambiguous gray space between the supposedly fixed genders of “man” and “woman,” thus subverting the accepted binary of Westeros.

There are moments, too, when Brienne is portrayed in ways that show her wresting control away from the patriarchal gaze which attempts (and expects) to always prevail. In a particular scene in which Brienne and Jaime are bathing together, both of them naked, one might

expect—based on Mulvey’s discourse surrounding females in film—that the opportunity would be taken in this moment for Brienne to be fetishized, objectified, like so many other women in *Game of Thrones*. Yet when she defiantly stands up, exposing her naked body, there is no full-frontal shot of the kind that the show is so infamous for flaunting, and her breasts are strategically blocked. Jaime even averts his eyes rather than staring, and later in the scene, when Jaime collapses, Brienne catches him and practically cradles him in her arms (3.5). Not only is there a notable lack of Jaime’s erotic investment in the female in front of him, but viewers of the show are denied access to what Jaime sees, and the male gaze is thwarted. In addition, the traditional filmic “look” is even reversed in a sense: Jaime appears helpless by the end of the scene while Brienne literally gazes down at him and is much more in control. This scene disturbs the stability of supposed male dominance by refusing to display Brienne as an object and refusing to paint Jaime as the inherently strong male lead.

There are other moments that show Brienne not suffering from ostracization or being treated with disdain by men who seem to immediately associate her presence with castration. Over time, Brienne’s identity is continually affirmed by Jaime, even though he once derided and insulted her. After their arrival together in King’s Landing, Jaime gives Brienne a Valyrian steel sword, custom armor, and even a squire; he says, “I hope I got your measurements right” (4.4). While a clever quip, this statement also shows that he has viewed her body not as a fetish object but as a strong vessel, worthy of valuable armor. In this way, he acknowledges her desires and who she is, accepting and encouraging the gender performance which makes other men so uncomfortable. Brienne is also affirmed repeatedly by her loyal squire Podrick. Even when she attempts to turn down his services, he insists, “All knights have squires, my lady.” Podrick

continually recognizes her dual identity without question, respects her fighting skill, and believes she should be recognized as someone of noble birth. Yet Brienne is much less receptive to the affirmation of Tormund, a wildling; she rejects him even though he is attracted to her because of her physical size and strength, illustrating that she still clings to some desire to be considered traditionally beautiful and perhaps even “feminine” in the way that more stereotypical women in the series are seen.

Brienne’s eventual induction into knighthood pushes us to consider if she has truly redefined the notion of “woman” in the *Game of Thrones* universe. Incited by Tormund, who is baffled as to why women cannot be knights, Jaime knights Brienne as she kneels before him and then rises, overjoyed and emotional (8.2). Yet this induction, while seemingly a fulfillment of her character arc, is troubling because she is so willing to become part of an institution which has rejected her for so long by mere virtue of the fact that she does not have a penis. Brienne has put so much stock in the idea of being a knight even though most men have overlooked her courage, her loyalty, and her sense of duty in favor of mocking her gender performance which is contrary to what they expect from a woman. In the final episode of the show, Brienne finishes Jaime’s entry in the Book of Brothers, a tome that contains the achievements of all of the knights of Westeros, rather than creating an entry for herself, which is in itself a telling action.

Brienne’s character demonstrates that being a female and being a knight do not have to be mutually exclusive identities, but it is disconcerting that she still needs the permission of a man to become what she has always wanted. Men are still the true holders of (phallic) power in this world, the gatekeepers of supposed knighthood. I wonder if Brienne truly forged her own path, if traditions in Westeros concerning the relationship between gender and knighthood would

ever change with Brienne becoming a knight and a Kingsguard. Many questions persist, and with the show complete, they will remain unanswered. Some critics seem more inclined to believe that Brienne will never quite fit in: “This status as outsider plagues Brienne’s entire life; she’s an aberration who will never fit and who is forever denied access to both the feminine and masculine worlds” (Bro 70). However, I do not feel that her purpose as a character is to fit in, but to alert us to problematic standards concerning gender roles. The way Brienne is perceived by others reflects real-world anxieties when it comes to the meanings of “masculinity” and “femininity”; although women in our contemporary society may not be expected to do embroidery, those who are supposedly more “masculine” are certainly deemed less acceptable by rigid societal power structures. Ultimately, despite her own inability to detach gender from specific behaviors and conditions, I believe Brienne effectively deviates from the gender norms of the *Game of Thrones* universe and pushes back against the traditional female role as a sexual, passive object, while also illustrating the damage done to those who are othered by binary systems of power.

Arya Stark: Master of Transformations

The notion that fixed gender is natural and inherent to one's biological sex can be undermined through alternative acts. Accompanying Brienne in this nebulous role that exists between the rigid binary of "man" and "woman" is Arya Stark. Throughout *Game of Thrones*, Arya constantly demonstrates how seemingly fixed gender identities can be reinscribed through subversive performativity and self-styling much akin to drag. Her shifting between performing as a girl or as a boy reveals that gender is in actuality a repeated series of social rituals which can be put on or shed like a skin whenever an individual chooses to do so, and she, too, finds ways to frustrate and weaken the scopophilic element of a largely male-directed television show.

From the very beginning of the series, Arya insists that she will not partake in the compulsory reproductivity that Butler argues is created and enforced by a binary structure of power. Like Brienne, Arya refuses to be called a "lady." When her father Ned tells her in the first season, "Little ladies shouldn't play with swords," she responds to him, "I wasn't playing, and I don't want to be a lady" (1.3). Later on, after Ned predicts, "You will marry a high lord and rule his castle, and your sons shall be knights and princes and lords," she somberly tells him, "No. That's not me" (1.4). Although she is still a child, Arya is already aware that who she is and the way she performs may not properly fit in with the practices expected of her by the heteronormative hegemony and, more specifically, the Westerosi values and ideals concerning what it means to be a noble lady. She has no plans to marry a man or carry children in a world where furthering the family line is incredibly significant, marking the start of her refusal to yield to societal standards.

Butler's assertion that gender can become a "free-floating artifice" (10) is certainly exemplified by Arya, who is inclined to perform in more stereotypically masculine ways without disavowing her status as a woman. She is able to attach her "tomboy" behavior to being female, constantly insisting to others that she is a girl whenever she is mistaken for a boy. Arya does not share Brienne's tendency to immediately associate certain actions with a certain gender, as she engages in activities traditionally meant for boys yet also maintains her female identity. While Brienne does not seem to take any particular pride in being a woman and often actually deprecates women in general, Arya is defiant and persistent in her pursuit to be known as a girl. She is first introduced in a scene in which she glares at her sister Sansa while they do needlepoint; an older woman circulates and praises Sansa for her work, but scoffs at Arya's. Moments later, we see Arya hitting the bullseye in a target with an arrow, which her brother Bran had just been failing to do (1.1). The traditional behavior of a "lady" is juxtaposed with Arya's competent performance of a traditionally male activity. She is also ecstatic at receiving a sword from her brother Jon and tells him, "Sansa can keep her sewing needles. I've got a Needle of my own" (1.2), again illustrating her self-awareness as to what are deemed proper activities for a "lady" or a girl as opposed to performances expected of boys.

Arya engages in a variety of other acts which subvert traditional notions surrounding female and femininity, and she is an active and dynamic force who does not easily become subjugated. Her passion for and practice at swordplay constitute an alternative act which begins to reinscribe her gender identity. Her dancing master and fighting teacher, Syrio, informs her, "Boy, girl... you are a sword, that is all" (1.3). It seems that "Syrio is the first person to dismiss her gender as irrelevant to her goals; only training matters" (Frankel 49). He affirms Arya's ideal

image of herself as a master of fighting, as a warrior, and he does not imply that she will be weaker simply because she is a girl. When she must perform as the orphan boy “Arry” in the second season, although it is for survival, this is a subversive act comparable to drag. Yoren, the man of the Night’s Watch who attempts to bring her north, asks Arya, “Do you want to live, boy?” (1.10) and proceeds to roughly chop off her hair, thus stripping her—at least temporarily—of her identity not only as Arya Stark but as the girl she has thus far staunchly defended herself to be. Butler notes that society dictates gender to be “properly” performed for one to live successfully: “Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (139). This suggests that Arya would be punished for not acting as a typical female in Westeros, yet in this particular case, it is her imitation of a male which saves her, disturbing the idea that one must always act in accordance with unspoken rules of gendered existence. Being a woman in her circumstances, surrounded by a group of men consisting mostly of criminals who are headed to the Night’s Watch, would make her incredibly vulnerable; as the only female in their midst, she might become the erotic object for these men to gaze upon and attempt to dominate. She must then “become” a boy in order to survive. As long as Arya conducts herself in ways that are associated with being male and wears clothes perceived as masculine, she will be perceived as male, and in this way she also impedes any sadistic satisfaction of the male gaze.

Her subversive fluidity of gender identity is not always an “othering” factor, as she is affirmed by others as *Game of Thrones* progresses; there are characters who acknowledge, and may even be appreciative of, her non-traditional gender acts. Jaqen H’ghar, a Faceless Man who is trained in performance and transformation himself, is a keen observer of Arya’s performance.

He eventually tells her, “A boy becomes a girl [...] I was always aware. But the girl keeps secrets. It is not for a man to spoil them” (2.5). Jaqen understands the arbitrariness of fixed gender categories and even referred to Arya as a boy when she was forced to assume that role. He understands that gender exists on a varied spectrum, that it is an identity which can change and shift depending on the circumstances. Her penchant for fighting—one of her qualities which is most threatening to the traditional conception of “woman”—is encouraged by Sandor Clegane, the brutal knight known as “the Hound.” Although he takes Arya as a captive, he is one of the few people who accepts her for who she is and allows her to use a sword, to learn and engage in violence. When she halts their journey to kill a soldier who was bragging about mutilating her brother’s dead body, the Hound merely tells her to let him know ahead of time if she plans on doing it again (3.10). He does not treat her as if she should be weak or gentle, and he does not interfere when she engages in acts that are usually ascribed to men. Jaqen and the Hound do not subject her to the dominating male gaze that Mulvey theorizes. I believe this is a formative experience for Arya, as there is no one trying to prevent her from performing how she wants, and it reinforces her role as a driving female force in the narrative as opposed to a passive one.

Arya undermines traditional female stereotypes by training with the Faceless Men and learning to control her various transformations. I find it interesting that despite their ability to shift amongst genders and their apparent understanding that identity is not naturally occurring, they refer to themselves as Faceless *Men*; even they are steeped in limiting terminology. At the House of Black and White, Arya must become “No One” and undo her identity entirely, abandoning the confines of the binary. Jaqen H’ghar pushes her to leave behind the physical items that symbolize who she is: “Whose sword is that? It belongs to Arya Stark. Arya Stark’s

sword, Arya Stark's clothes, Arya Stark's stolen silver. A man wonders how it is that No One came to be surrounded by Arya Stark's things" (5.3). While she rids herself of most of her belongings, she cannot bring herself to dispose of Needle, the sword that was a gift from her brother Jon, which validated her and signified her identity as the "sword" which Syrio once told her she would be. When Arya plays the Game of Faces with Jaqen and alters parts of her life story, he bluntly calls out her lies. She yells at him, "I'm not playing this stupid game anymore," to which he responds, "We never stop playing" (5.6). This statement implies that identity itself, the stories of our lives, may even be a performance which we have to reinforce every day; we are always simply playing at being somebody. However, Arya does not truly become No One: "Ironically, the grueling training that she undergoes to join a group of assassins eventually strengthens, rather than erases, Arya's identity [. . .] No longer disguising herself for protection against those pursuing her, she herself becomes a pursuer with the sole goal of avenging the deaths of her loved ones" (Jamison 165). Perhaps her greatest subversive performance is that, ultimately, she fools even the Faceless Men that she is genuinely "No One" in order to apply what she has learned to her female identity as Arya Stark, to return to her former self when she chooses.

Her ability to transgress rigidly gendered boundaries is further demonstrated when she "becomes" Walder Frey in what can be likened to a very purposeful drag performance. She transforms into Frey entirely and possesses his face, his voice, his mannerisms; her outward performance is seemingly at odds with her biological anatomy, illustrating the falsity of the idea that certain body parts automatically signal one's gender. Although this transformation is a result of Arya's training and likely something inexplicably mystical about the process used by the

Faceless Men, it may also be recognized that Arya has truly stepped outside the bounds of fixed gender. In this way, she is also able to literally assume the male gaze, which essentially sabotages the male's supposed authority over the female; she even dominates all of the Frey men by presiding over them and posing as their lord, and subsequently poisoning and murdering them. The men, in this scene, become the passive and subjugated objects. Arya combines what she learned at the House of Black and White with the violence she learned from the Hound, creating a version of herself, of Arya Stark, that she has long desired to be: someone dangerous, a weapon, someone not to be reckoned with. These are qualities and acts which are opposed to the characteristics expected of a conventional and respectable lady in the *Game of Thrones* universe.

The fetishistic scopophilia that Mulvey discusses is most strongly undermined when Arya assumes control in a sexual pursuit. In the final season of the show, Arya initiates a sexual encounter with Gendry, who was one of her traveling companions when she was still a child. After telling him that she wants to know what "that" (presumably sex) feels like, Arya strips Gendry of his shirt and forcibly pushes him down; she then takes off her own clothes, and similarly to the previously discussed scene of Brienne and Jaime where one might expect there to be a shot of full-frontal nudity, there is none. There are simply hints of uncovered flesh, glimpses of the edges of certain body parts which upon exposure would mean she is truly "naked." Arya orders Gendry, "Take your own bloody pants off" (8.2). By not revealing all of her body, it is clear that this scene does not occur for the sole purpose of making Arya into a sexualized or fetish object, and the male in the scene is not authoritative over her, not subjugating her in any way. Not only is Arya arguably the dominant and driving force here, but even the actor herself

was given choice over how much of her naked body would be shown on screen. Maise Williams has explained in interviews that the showrunners, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, had her decide just how much she wanted to show on camera. She has stated, “‘David and Dan were like: ‘You can show as much or as little as you want.’ So I kept myself pretty private’” (Gonzales). This is a command and even reversal of the controlling male gaze on multiple levels: the actor has final say over what parts of her body are displayed, and the character is not portrayed as passive or overtly sexualized, but as assertive and in charge of the narrative events.

The binary system of power which dictates what a female must be and act like is certainly threatened by the intersection of Arya’s and Brienne’s storylines, a collision of “othered” characters. When Arya trains with Brienne for the first time, it is apparent that they identify with each other: two women who do not quite fit into their society and admire one another for it. They spar with each other with smiles on their faces, equally competent with their weapons. Neither woman is clothed in a dress or skirt but in garments visually disruptive of traditional female performance: Brienne wears her dark armor, while Arya dons a leather tunic and pants—an outfit not unlike the one commonly worn by her father during the show’s first season. Yet Sansa, who watches them fight, is visibly discomfited by how her sister is still so far from acting like a proper lady. She is further horrified and frightened when she discovers Arya’s bag of faces stolen from the House of Black and White, and Arya forcefully tells her, “The world doesn’t just let girls decide what they want to be. But I can now” (7.6). She knows that her society has tried to pigeonhole her as a lady, as a woman of noble birth and a stereotypical feminine delicateness, and she has discovered ways to subvert these societal standards. In the end, Sansa accepts how her sister has changed, and Arya is essentially the sword that Sansa wields to execute

Littlefinger, thus fulfilling the role Syrio ascribed to her, all those years ago. Arya's perpetual shapeshifting illuminates how gender is not innate, but rather a performance or style. Arry, cupbearer, assassin, executioner, young girl, old man, Arya Stark—she has inhabited and performed all of these roles and embodies the fluidity of gender and identity.

Brandon Stark: Constructing Identity Beyond the “Fallen Boy”

Similar to gender, disability is not only a social construct but a performance imposed upon certain people by a world that has normalized particular physical and neural qualities—the ostensibly able-bodied. Critics Chivers and Markotic argue, “Often, disabled bodies appear in order to shore up a sense of normalcy and strength in a presumed-to-be abled-bodied audience” (1); essentially, the presence of a person with a disability on screen is meant to reinforce the idea that there are only two types of bodies, the normal and the abnormal. The portrayal of disability in *Game of Thrones* is particularly interesting and striking, and it comes in many forms, shown by various characters. It is especially thought-provoking to examine this show and its characters with disabilities through this critical lens specifically due to the show’s medieval setting and its focus on the highborn, upper-class individuals. Brandon Stark, Arya’s brother, becomes a paraplegic, or rather, must perform as one. Over the course of his character arc throughout the show, we witness how disability and the abled gaze impacts his identity, his performance, and how he is perceived by others, but his portrayal also demonstrates how his presence in *Game of Thrones* may not be to simply fortify the existence of a binary of ability.

The concept of disability arouses anxiety, I believe, mainly due to its often visible nature, disturbing the abled gaze and a “normal” field of vision. Bran’s climbing of a tower in Winterfell in the very first episode of the series seems to be emphasized to make his subsequent accident and paralysis all the more tragic, contrasting his vigorous physical ability with the ensuing “dis”ability. Tobin Siebers, in *Disability Aesthetics*, discusses how Roland Barthes uses the word “punctum” to describe the sensitive points revealed by photography: “The punctum, then, is the

accidental cut, the disability that defines the photograph,” and the punctum can “lash, cut, and abrade a large visual field to make the image of difference appear” (128). I believe that this concept of the punctum is applicable to television and film visuals, as well. The scenes in which Bran appears, especially in early seasons, seem to highlight his limited mobility. He must be carried by Hodor, his inert legs dangling. When he is seated or lying down his legs are often covered by a blanket or heaps of furs, simultaneously hiding yet often also revealing the disability. I would call these the punctums, the disruptions of the visual field that draw attention to Bran’s paralysis.

Those who are “able-bodied” often feel that they are whole in a way that people with disabilities are not. Markotić asserts, “A conventional fantasy of disability [. . .] is that there was once a cohesive, able body that is now disabled and but a fragment of a former unified self” (98). Throughout the show, many characters say it would be a mercy for Bran to die, as if he has been so far removed from the person he was before becoming paralyzed, assuming that there must be a split between the “before” and “after” of his accident. He is subjected to the abled gaze, forced to become heavily dependent upon others because the world around him is not constructed for him to survive independently. Jaime Lannister tells Tyrion, “Even if the boy lives, he’ll be a cripple, grotesque. Give me a good clean death, any day” (1.2), illustrating the disdain the abled have for the lives of those with disabilities. Bran himself tells his brother Robb, “I’d rather be dead” (1.3). His body is now inscribed with meaning based upon what it cannot do. He is an object to be treated with pity and supposed mercy, and his appearance often alerts others to the disconcerting, unspoken reality of their own bodies: that ability is temporary and ideal wholeness is illusory.

Just as the gender binary can be subverted by alternative acts, the binarism of “abled” versus “disabled” can be subverted by the disabled person’s disposal of and disregard for ableist assumptions. Through the help of others, Bran does begin to understand that he is not entirely limited or confined to a life inside the castle. Tyrion, who expresses, “If you’re going to be a cripple, it’s better to be a rich cripple” (1.3), gives Bran the schematics for a saddle that will enable him to ride horses: “On horseback,” he tells Bran somberly, “you’ll be as tall as any of them” (1.4). Tyrion understands better than most that disability is only an obstacle to achieving one’s goals if he is not given the tools to function in the world like the “abled” do. When Bran says he will never shoot a bow and arrow again, Maester Luwin replies, “And where is that written?” (1.5). He pushes Bran to look past his own preconceived notions about disability and consider how his body, although altered, does not necessarily have to be diminished in the way that societal standards would have him believe.

However, being repeatedly subjected to the abled gaze and the force of pity and repulsion from the able-bodied can cause the person with a disability to internalize these negative, corruptive feelings, influencing their sense of self. Despite how he soon is able to move more easily in the world, Bran harshly rejects labels and tends to deny that he is a “cripple”; there is no reclamation of the language used to both define and diminish him. When wildlings ambush him in the forest while he is out riding, one asks him, “What’s wrong with you? Are you some kind of cripple?” Angered, Bran yells at them, “I’m Brandon Stark of Winterfell, and if you don’t let me be I’ll have you all killed!” (1.6). Bran feels he must wield his power and autonomy through his title, as his disability causes him to feel lesser or inferior to these people who can walk when he cannot. His reliance on his upper class status and noble birth maintains a presence throughout

the course of the show. Over time, his methods of movement evolve from being carried in Hodor's arms or in a harness on his back, to being pulled in a cart, to, ultimately, a wheelchair in the final couple of seasons. He eventually tells Tyrion that the wheelchair is a design of the Targaryens' that he liked (8.2), implying that there is a history of disability in this medieval universe which we, the audience, are not entirely privy to. I also believe we are left with the lingering impression that, for all the hardship Bran has faced, he is still privileged because he is from a noble family, with the access and wealth to have tools built for him that enable him to move around.

Lennard Davis, along with Mulvey, utilizes the theory of Lacan's mirror stage, arguing, "When the child points to an image in the mirror [. . .] the child recognizes (actually misrecognizes) that unified image as his or her self. That identification is really the donning of an identity, an 'armor' against the chaotic or fragmentary body" (139). This suggests a severing of identity between someone's true self—their physical body—and their ideal mirror self, and so the "normal" person puts on this armor of supposed wholeness to feel empowered. The disabled body then represents the lack of bodily unification that the normal person so fears, reminding them that in actuality, they are not as complete or unflawed as they would like to think. Just as Mulvey discusses how the male gaze demands identification with a strong male lead, I believe that when it comes to film and television, the abled gaze demands wholeness with which to identify, a competent and abled lead that they can recognize as their ideal self.

I think this cleavage of identity afflicts the person with a disability, too, as they exist in a society which insists that they are damaged and incomplete and which pushes them to believe that a stable version of bodily normalcy exists. The concept of the Three-Eyed Raven implies

that Bran has a split identity and compensates for a perceived lack. After his paralysis, I believe Bran thinks he must make up for the part of himself he feels is missing, attempting to return to the false notion of being whole. Bran tells the wildling Osha, “The raven’s been coming to me ever since I fell from that tower. He wants me to find him. I don’t have my legs anymore. This is what I have now [. . .] What if I fell from that tower for a reason?” (3.7). He attempts to ascribe meaning to the “tragedy” that has befallen him and comes to value the ability of his mind all the more. Although he comes to terms with his paralysis, he has somewhat of a fractured identity or self and perceives the raven in his dreams as another version of *himself*: specifically a bird, which is endlessly mobile, able to soar through the skies. I often wonder if it is a coincidence that it is a raven which Bran symbolically becomes.

Bran’s warging ability may be seen as the “armor” he dons to feel normal and unimpaired, an attempt to return to his “abled” state. When he wargs, he can enter the body of a wolf and run, he can become a bird and fly, and he can even utilize Hodor’s strength to walk and fight. At one point, he even wargs into Hodor’s body and uses the other man—who has a disability himself—to kill someone. Bran’s manipulation of Hodor is particularly problematic to me but it is certainly a site of interest, the seeming hierarchy of types of disability: physical, neural, mental, and how some people with disabilities, for all they are pitied or scorned, are still valued more than others. Jojen tells Bran that spending too much time in the body of his wolf Summer is dangerous. “Must be glorious, though,” he adds, “to run, to leap, to hunt. To be whole. I know that’s tempting” (4.2). We return to the implications of the word “whole,” here; it is only tempting to be a wolf because Bran’s society does not accept him without the use of his legs or make the world accessible for him.

Markotić asserts that film and literature often “invoke the disabled body as ubiquitous metaphor for all manners of a ‘fallen’ human being” (98), meaning that anyone with a disability is automatically seen as inherently wrong, lesser, unacceptable. Having literally “fallen,” ableist presumptions are imposed upon Bran, causing him to always feel reduced in some way. Bran’s newfound abilities as the Three-Eyed Raven imply that he is filling a void, making up for the lack others perceive in him and that he perceives in himself. The Raven tells Bran, “[Jojen] died so you could find what you have lost [. . .] you will never walk again. But you will fly” (4.10). This reaffirms the idea that Bran has lost something which must be made up for. Indeed, once Bran becomes the Three-Eyed Raven, he disavows his former self and no longer identifies himself as Bran; he is no longer the boy who fell from the tower. He only seems to “overcome” his disability once he sheds the skin of Brandon Stark and becomes somebody else. However, despite seemingly having come to terms with his ability and coming to possess enviable abilities as the Raven, the image of Bran’s body remains passive, powerless. He gives a Valyrian steel dagger to Arya, telling her it is wasted on a cripple—a label he used to vehemently reject (7.4). When the Night King comes to kill him, he merely sits in his wheelchair, looking up at the undead king; although theoretically Bran “knew,” as the Raven, that this was going to occur, his body appears immobile, inert, and helpless, despite the fact that viewers know he possesses immense power as the Raven.

In what I see as a deeply unfortunate moment for Bran and the series as a whole, it seems that his final naming as “Bran the Broken” in the last season reinforces the construction of normalcy, and the abled gaze is not thoroughly or successfully undermined. Although Bran ultimately becomes the King of Westeros, a position where he will likely possess a great deal of

power, his name serves as a kind of label. In the face of monumental adversity over the course of the show, Bran has managed to survive, but everyone in Westeros will always remember him for that singular moment in his life: the fall from the tower. He will always be “broken” in their eyes, never to be considered normal or intact. I find it problematic and disconcerting that Tyrion, who once demonstrated an understanding that Bran was not truly limited or diminished by a disability, is the one to give him this name. Sansa also helpfully points out that Bran cannot produce an heir, illustrating another way in which this imposed performance of disability excludes him from the norms of society and, in particular, the higher courtly class.

Despite the disappointing reality of the conclusion of Bran’s character arc, I feel it is valuable to consider what this character *does* offer. He achieves great power in a society that has othered him based on ability (or rather, an ascertained lack thereof), and climbs to a position of authority in which his disability threatens the ableist traditions of royalty that ascribe to a model of heterosexual reproductivity to further family lines and legacies. One might assume that Bran, as one of the disabled characters, may serve as a passive object, much like female characters become under the male gaze. Chivers and Markotić argue that this may be the case in conventional portrayals of disability: “Unlike normative filmic bodies that literally advance the plot, the disabled body often exists primarily as a metaphor for a body that is unable to do so” (2). Yet Bran is a capable protagonist and vital in pushing forth the action of the narrative, and he arguably possesses the most power and knowledge in *Game of Thrones* as the Three-Eyed Raven. I believe his struggle to survive and physically navigate the world reveals, too, that it is the material construction of the world combined with supposed norms of ability which hinder and disable him, not the condition of his body, raising an alternative way of thinking about the

“normal” and challenging whether or not people are ever inherently “abled.” Although lingering questions remain concerning whether the less privileged with disabilities are able to exist as successfully in this universe, Bran disturbs both the traditional male gaze and the abled gaze while still grappling with the negative presuppositions inflicted upon him by the hegemony of normalcy, illustrating the complex reality of what it means to be perceived as disabled.

Tyrion Lannister: Disability as Mythologized and Monstrous

Perhaps even more disruptive of Davis's concept of the abled gaze is Tyrion Lannister. When it comes to the portrayal of disability, I believe Tyrion is compelling, profound, and makes viewers aware of the injustices people with disabilities face. Markotić points out that disabled people are often depicted as “‘freaks’ of nature, as freaks of the ‘normal’ human form, as people who occupy societal fringes” (55). However, as a result of his Lannister family name and upper-class status, Tyrion is thrown into politics and cannot escape the seemingly endless game of thrones; as a dwarf, he is a “freak” living not on the fringes but directly in the midst of high society dictated by discriminatory ableist standards. Throughout the show, we witness Tyrion being constantly demeaned by others, grappling with his own identity, and maneuvering through various positions of authority even though the world he occupies attempts to exclude him from the “norm” and prevent him from ever becoming empowered.

One's deviation from the traditional binary is often signaled by the language (and insults) others utilize to refer to them. Before the audience even sees Tyrion on screen, his character—or at the very least, the way other characters perceive him—is established through language in the first episode when Arya refers to him as the “imp” and Cersei calls him a “little beast” (1.1). Throughout the series, Tyrion is constantly called “half-man,” “imp,” “grotesque,” “demon monkey,” “monster,” “little lion,” and even “the lowest of the Lannisters.” Lennard Davis discusses the anxieties that the disabled body activates in the supposedly abled:

The divisions whole/incomplete, able/disabled neatly cover up the frightening writing on the wall that reminds the hallucinated whole being that its wholeness is in fact a

hallucination, a developmental fiction. *Spaltung* creates the absolute categories of abled and disabled, with concomitant defenses against the repressed fragmented body. (130)

Essentially, the “spaltung,” the act of splitting one’s identity and splitting the idea of “ability” into two concrete categories, reassures those without disabilities that they are fully developed, unimpaired beings. Yet Tyrion’s appearance as a dwarf, similar to Bran’s appearance as he is carried or sits in a wheelchair, serves as a disruption of the visual field and ignites anxieties in the “abled” about their wholeness compared to Tyrion’s supposed brokenness. By degrading him through the aforementioned insults, other characters attempt to split themselves from him and reinforce their own unified bodies and thus, their inherent superiority on the spectrum of ability.

However, Tyrion subverts this belittling and dehumanizing use of language by reclaiming it and wielding it for his own purposes. Unlike Bran, Tyrion seems more readily accepting of the words others use to torment him. An early discussion with Jon Snow illustrates that, for him, reclaiming this language is a means of self-protection: “Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armor, and it cannot be used to hurt you [. . .] All dwarves are bastards in their father’s eyes” (1.1). When Tyrion leads the mountain tribesmen into battle, and later on Lannister soldiers, the other men all chant, “Half-man! Half-man!” (1.9). In these scenarios, his stature is not a source of amusement or mockery; Tyrion has shown bravery in fighting with these men and they celebrate him for it. (It is, of course, problematic that they immediately choose to refer to him in a way that reflects his size, as if that is all he is.)

It is also interesting to consider the connection, here, to gender, due to the naming of Tyrion as “half-man,” something he is called fairly often. In many ways, Tyrion performs as a stereotypical virile and sexually active male, especially throughout the first couple of seasons,

usually depicted in brothels or in scenes with prostitutes. It would seem that he fulfills the role of a man as dictated by Westerosi societal expectations, yet he is actually seen as “half” of a man simply due to his stature. This alerts viewers to the fact that one must be a very specific type of man—in particular, “abled”—in order for their body to be perceived as that of a whole man.

While “half-man” is most often meant to be an insult, it illustrates how Tyrion’s perceived disability may be seen as a threat to the rigid gender binary of just “man” and “woman,” and it reveals the ostracization and exclusion from the supposedly normal society that one experiences when they perform outside the binary. Tyrion’s status as a dwarf seems to always supersede his gendered status as a man, further revealing that the ideal man is not only someone with a phallus who desires and engages in sexual activity with women, but one who is of a certain normalized body type. I would argue that this notion is not exclusive to the fictional universe in *Game of Thrones* and that men with disabilities in our world are often always seen as their disability first.

Further leaning into his dehumanization and playing to the negative emotions, especially fear, that his stature seems to awaken in others, Tyrion seems to have a habit of claiming the name “monster” when it best serves him. When Joffrey calls him a “little monster,” Tyrion responds, “Oh, *I’m* a monster. Perhaps you should speak to me more softly, then. Monsters are dangerous, and just now kings are dying like flies” (3.10). For all that other characters demonstrate explicit disdain, disgust, and even hatred for Tyrion, I believe they all possess underlying dread and despair over what his body symbolizes to them: that their so-called ability is temporary, and perhaps not even real at all. The fear he arouses in others makes him a threat, something dangerous to their way of life. The term “monster,” constantly used as an insult, is

then manipulated by Tyrion to assert dominance and his knowledge that others are, on some level, afraid of him.

Of great interest are Tyrion's interactions with his sister Cersei and his father Tywin, who repeatedly subject Tyrion to the abled gaze and emphasize that his saving grace is that he is a member of the noble and wealthy Lannister family. Even more so than Bran, perhaps because Tyrion has always been a dwarf rather than someone who used to be "normal" and then became disabled, Tyrion is seen as a "transgressive and deviant figure" (Davis 5). Tyrion acknowledges that he would have been left in the woods to die if he was a peasant; he is well-aware of the privilege he has been afforded by being highborn. This is also one of the hints viewers get as to what happens to the "ordinary" or lower-born people who have disabilities in the *Game of Thrones* universe. Cersei's hatred for Tyrion is all-consuming, and it seems to hinge mostly, if not entirely, upon the fact that he is a dwarf. It becomes apparent that Cersei has always felt this way about Tyrion, revealed when Oberyn, the Prince of Dorne, tells him a heartbreaking story of when he visited Westeros when Tyrion was just a baby:

The whole way from Dorne, all anyone talked about was the monster that had been born to Tywin Lannister. a head twice the size of his body, a tail between his legs, claws, one red eye. The privates of both a girl and a boy [. . .] When we met your sister, she promised she would show you to us [. . .] Then she and your brother took us to your nursery, and she unveiled the freak. Your head was a bit large, your arms and legs were a bit small, but no claw. No red eye. No tail between your legs. Just a tiny pink cock. We didn't try to hide our disappointment. 'That's not a monster,' I told Cersei, 'that's just a baby.' And she said, 'He killed my mother.' And she pinched your little cock so hard, I

thought she might pull it off, until your brother made her stop. ‘It doesn't matter,’ she told us, ‘everyone says he will die soon. I hope they are right. He should not have lived this long.’ (4.7)

I believe that if Tyrion was not a dwarf, it is likely that Cersei would not place this blame upon him, but because he is not “normal,” he is easier to target, more worthy of hatred. The repeated use of the word “monster” to describe Tyrion, even when he was so young, illustrates how the conflation of disability and monstrous qualities builds the supposed abnormal into some kind of wild rumor, a strange and terrible myth. Oberyn was expecting some hideous, horrendous “other” being, only to see a baby before him, showing that one is not inherently disabled but rather that societal discourse and perception *creates* one’s disability.

Because he is not perceived as normal, Tyrion is also not seen as a valid or valuable member of society; he is automatically precluded from being worthy of carrying on his family name and legacy, at least in his father’s eyes. When Tyrion asks Tywin to give him Casterly Rock, Tywin says, “I would let myself be consumed by maggots before mocking the family name and making you heir to Casterly Rock” (3.1). Later, Tywin says of the day Tyrion was born, “I wanted to carry you into the sea and let the waves wash you away. Instead I let you live. And I brought you up as my son, because you’re a Lannister” (3.10). The wording here, that Tywin “let” Tyrion live, implies that because Tyrion is a dwarf, his right to live, to exist, was not a given; Tywin views him as inherently inferior, as less deserving of life than those who are born without disabilities. Tyrion’s dwarfism has made him disposable in his father’s eyes, and Tywin believes his son should be grateful that he did not kill him. A disabled person is constructed as “unwanted or pitiful other” (Markotic 99); many probably would have seen it as a mercy if

Tywin had killed Tyrion, just as they would have perceived Bran's death over having to live as a paraplegic. In their encounters, Tywin's supposed ability and Tyrion's supposed brokenness influence every moment; Tyrion is "turned into a disabled person by the Medusa-like gaze of the observer; paradoxically, the observer becomes disabled by his or her reaction to the disabled person" (Davis 12). For Tywin, who is deeply concerned with legacy and who is clearly aging—nearing the time in his life when he will become "impaired"—it seems that he defends against anxiety about his eventual lack of wholeness by constantly punishing Tyrion. I believe that Tyrion, for Tywin, is the punctum that "wounds" and, in a sense, disables him, a constant disruption of his visual field.

Those with disabilities are perpetually subjected to the "looks bad, is bad" mentality: "For those deemed a 'freak' of nature, the disability or disfigurement or extra limb or missing pigments become who they are and how they are perceived" (Markotić 62). Tyrion's identity is polarized to the extreme of "evil" based upon imposed notions of what it means to have a disability, to be an "other." He is the prime suspect in the murder of King Joffrey, and he spits at his father and the crowd gathered in the throne room, declaring his innocence in the case of the murder: "I'm guilty of a far more monstrous crime. I'm guilty of being a dwarf [. . .] I've been on trial for that my entire life [. . .] I wish I was the monster you think I am" (4.6). Tyrion is deeply aware of how others have always viewed him as a result of his dwarfism; in this case, it is as if being a "monster" is the performance constantly expected of him. When Tyrion speaks with his brother Jaime about how Tywin would love to "ship [him] off to Castle Black, out of sight at last, all so perfect" (4.7), it is clear that Tyrion knows that the mere sight of him brings about anxiety, disgust, and hatred. He knows how his height and appearance are a disturbance to the

field of vision for those who are “abled.” The persecution Tyrion suffers during the trial leads to him killing his father while Tywin is on a chamber pot. This choice of location has always been fascinating to me because it exposes the messy reality of Tywin, who up until this point has been portrayed as strong, unbending, imposing, and idealized: the perfect firm leader and warrior. Yet every single body is unstable, dirty, and porous; there are undeniable chinks in their illusory unified armor.

The existence of people with disabilities in a highly standardized society is incredibly complex, often leading to conflict within themselves. Literary critic Ato Quayson points out that people with disabilities often struggle to define their own sense of self: “Contradictory emotions arise precisely because the disabled are continually located within multiple and contradictory frames of significance within which they, on the one hand, are materially disadvantaged, and, on the other, have to cope with the culturally regulated gaze of the normate” (204). The “normate” refers to the allegedly nondisabled person who both feels burdened by encounters with the disabled and burdens the disabled with the idea that they are not normal. Interactions between the normate, who carries all manner of unspoken notions surrounding able-bodiedness, and the disabled, are brimming with tension and nervousness. The disabled person is left with the complicated endeavor of constructing their own identity in a world which would have them reduced to one attribute of their being; they must consider how to perform, and whether they should attempt to approximate the “normalcy” that society promotes and participate in a false hierarchical framework in an effort to be accepted, or continue to exist outside the binary and trouble the social and physical structures that put them at a disadvantage.

Tyrion himself struggles with these conflicting emotions and with preconceived notions about disability, particularly mental disabilities. Similar to how Bran manipulates Hodor, Tyrion discusses with Jaime how they used to make fun of a cousin of theirs who had a mental disability: “Laughing at another person was the only thing that made me feel like everyone else” (4.8). Thus, the “norm” is to mock the othered, a habit that Tyrion occasionally falls victim to in an attempt to fit in, to truly belong in society even though it clearly despises and tries to limit him. He even gives in to identifying the “disabled” *as* their disability when he names “Bran the Broken.” For all his awareness of the fact that his world is constructed primarily for members of the “norm,” Tyrion still exists in a place brimming with ableism. Either Tyrion realizes that the normates of Westeros will respond well to the “inspiring” story of Bran the Broken, who “overcame” his disability and survived against all odds to become king, or he gives in to the same systems of power which have oppressed him for so long and allows the conceptualization of what is normal and whole to be perpetuated.

Overall, I believe *Game of Thrones* is very attentive to portraying Tyrion as an incredibly complex character with many aspects aside from being a dwarf, yet it is also attentive to demonstrating how Tyrion is persecuted for being a dwarf. He attains great power at different times throughout the course of the show—Hand of the King, Master of Coin, Hand of the Queen—and he is clearly clever and capable, but he faces mockery and dehumanization at every turn. Sieber asserts, “It is not a matter of being able to view disabled people as representing works of art; it is a matter of being able to view works of art as representing disability” (44); people with disabilities should not be fetishized, but rather shown so commonly in art (or in this case, television) that the concept of disability is exposed for what it truly is: a performance

imposed upon those with differences by those who hold up systems of power which insist on making the distinction between ability and disability. Through his profound awareness of how he is perceived and the claiming of his identity as a dwarf even in a society that loathes him for this single aspect, Tyrion consistently undercuts the abled gaze, performs as a dynamic and multifaceted being, and makes both other characters and viewers of the show cognizant of the fact that wholeness is a fiction. It does not seem that Tyrion will ever live in a community that pays no mind to his stature, let alone one that acknowledges his differences in a positive way and ensures that the world is physically structured to allow him to easily move within it. While this is not incredibly empowering, it is, perhaps, the most realistic portrayal of disability and how it is treated in our own society.

Theon Greyjoy: The Castration Threat Realized

If we make the assumption that a penis makes someone a man and a vagina makes someone a woman, the binary is perhaps all the more disturbed by castration because it seemingly transforms a man into someone resembling a woman but who does not actually have a vagina. Unlike Varys, who was castrated offscreen long before we come to know him as a character, we see and get to know the character Theon Greyjoy in the show while he still has a penis and are also witnesses to how he changes in the aftermath of his castration. At the beginning of *Game of Thrones*, Theon is perhaps emblematic of the ideal abled male: he places a great deal of value upon his phallus, is cisgender and privileged, can produce an heir, and performs rather stereotypically. After he is castrated, Theon seems to become what the ideal abled male fears: lacking a phallus, no longer whole, and no longer able to be sexual in a traditional sense. The societal significance of a man's phallus, which enabled Theon to have the penetrative sex he so often desired and engaged in, seems incredibly important to maintaining a certain masculine identity, perhaps making the subsequent loss of Theon's penis all the more traumatizing and devastating to his sense of self. Yet despite how he is perceived by others, Theon never obviously discards his male identity and still performs as a man, albeit a bit differently than he did before he was castrated. In these ways, he exposes the supposedly natural binary as a falsehood.

Initially, Theon fits neatly into the stereotypical male role prescribed to him by Westeros, where there are obvious "links that exist between sex and masculine legitimacy within [*Game of Thrones*]'s social hierarchy" (Bartu 76). He is depicted as highly sexually active and even something of a womanizer. He may even be said to satisfy the ego identification that Mulvey

discusses, and he embodies confidence, dominance, even arrogance; he views himself as whole and powerful. Theon tells Bran and Maester Luwin that House Greyjoy is “famed for their skills at archery, navigation, and lovemaking” (1.5). Often, Theon is shown in scenes having sex with prostitutes, thus acting as the bearer of the empowered gaze subjugating the female fetish object. At one point, he even engages in disturbing sexual intimacy with a woman who he soon discovers is his estranged sister. His phallus gives him sexual prowess and pleasure, which contributes to the notion that the phallus gives a man power.

In relation to Roland Barthes’s concept of the punctum in photography, Siebers asserts, “All images picture bodies, but the most compelling images often summon visions of the human body, and of these the ones that picture wounds or markers of physical or mental difference are the most potent for the imagination” (125). These images are not always compelling in positive ways, but rather awaken within the ostensibly whole person the uneasiness and concern that they, too, can become “wounded” or made different. Their imagination of these types of images may perhaps nudge them toward the idea that they were never whole in the first place. Disability shown on or even off screen tends to create an aesthetic tension or apprehension, reactivating in “normal” people the distress that comes from having a split self, reminding them that they are never entirely in control of their bodies or perfect in their performances.

When Theon is violently tortured and castrated by Ramsay, his identity is clearly destabilized, even fractured. In a reversal of the actions of his former self, Theon is no longer the dominant lead that the male gaze can identify with, but a passive object that is subjected to sadism, much like the erotic female object. Ramsay recognizes the value Theon has placed upon his sexual organ: “Everyone knows you love girls,” he tells Theon, “I bet you always thought

they loved you back. Your famous cock must be very precious to you. Would you say it's your most precious part?" (3.7). Ramsay is obviously aware the removal of Theon's phallus will be a catastrophic blow to Theon's sense of self and his usual performance as a male. When Ramsay eats a sausage in front of Theon, it acts as one of those aforementioned images that Siebers describes, aggressively evocative of the castrated penis. The image serves to harm Theon's psyche but it also reminds the male viewer who still has a phallus that it can be forcibly severed, creating a profound anxiety. After making several jokes at Theon's expense, Ramsay sarcastically states, "Sorry. I shouldn't make jokes. My mother taught me not to throw stones at cripples... but my father taught me to aim for their head" (3.10). This statement illustrates both the pity that people with disabilities or differences elicit along with the disgust. The association of being castrated with being a "cripple" emphasizes how Theon is no longer seen as a unified being.

I would argue that traumatic castration makes it all the more difficult for someone to don the armor of their unitary, more controlled mirror-image self, especially when that ideal identity hinges upon a man's possession of a phallus. The loss or split of Theon's identity is further reinforced by being renamed. Ramsay begins to call the castrated Theon "Reek," who seems to be the complete opposite of Theon Greyjoy: meek, submissive, perpetually fearful. Once his "masculinity" or "manhood" has been torn away, it is as if he can no longer assume his former role of the traditionally strong and sexual male. It seems that his phallus was the primary aspect that made this stereotypical male performance possible, indicating how Theon has been ingrained with the ideal that a man must have a penis in order for him to hold power and be dominant.

Those who fall outside the bounds of gender or ability binaries tend to be othered, or seen as unfortunate or harmful anomalies. Siebers describes this type of categorization:

“Disqualification as a symbolic process removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings” (23). Theon’s “otherness” is then constructed in more than one way: Ramsay has “disqualified” Theon by removing his phallus, and he sends Theon’s “favorite toy” in a box to Balon and Yara Greyjoy. Theon is also consequently disowned by his father. Rather than being concerned for Theon or angry that his son has been tortured, Balon “disqualifies” Theon as well by highlighting, “He cannot further the Greyjoy line [. . .] He’s not a man anymore” (3.10). This statement makes it clear that in *Game of Thrones*, gender is inextricably attached to one’s sexual organs. Theon’s lack of a penis means an exclusion from the ranks of fertile men, and he now falls outside the bounds of being a “lord” because he cannot have children; he has disrupted the customs of the highborn.

Outside of Ramsay’s hold, when he no longer has to be “Reek” in order to survive, Theon struggles to discern who he truly is, haunted and perhaps weakened by the memory of his past performance as the traditionally strong male while attempting to regain agency over his identity. Bartu believes, “Theon the eunuch comes to associate sex with his own disfigurement” (72). It is clear that Theon has become deeply uncomfortable with sexual encounters; he is distressed by his sister’s physical intimacy with another woman and by their visit to a brothel. While this distress could certainly be attributed to the trauma he suffered at Ramsay’s hands, it is also likely that he no longer understands how to engage in intimacy with others without a phallus. He cannot conceive of sex in any other way; the society of Westeros does not necessarily allow for, or approve of, an understanding of sex besides the kind in which a man dominates a woman.

However, although he cannot act as a sexual being in the way he used to, Theon is not entirely without strength or competence. At one point, Theon is repeatedly kneed in the crotch by another Ironborn sailor in a fight (7.7), but this causes Theon no pain or discomfort as the other man expects. Although I suspect this may serve as a bit of dark comedy, I do also believe that from this moment we can glean something a bit more interesting and subversive: it is possible for the absence of a phallus to have its advantages, undermining its supposedly unequivocal worth to a man's identity. It also suggests the possibility that Theon can still be a capable character, thwarting the male and abled gaze in its attempt to legitimize and identify with only men who are, in a sense, intact.

Theon's journey illustrates the value placed upon a single part of the body and the meaning ascribed to this part of the body: how it can make one into an idealized man and how its loss causes one to become a threat to the gender and ability binaries. The portrayal of how his castration irreparably damages his identity demonstrates how the systems of power in Westeros and our own society assign meaning to bodies and the ways in which these bodies are supposed to perform. It may even be seen as "astounding" that Theon as a eunuch manages to survive at all, let alone begin to rebuild his sense of self, "given the challenge [his] very body poses to the normative structures of *Thrones*" (Bartu 77). While it seems that trauma and fear dictated much of his character in the wake of being castrated, I do not think Theon is entirely without value in this analysis. I would actually argue *Game of Thrones* had the opportunity to make him more empowering and compelling, more embracing of his status outside the binary and using it to his advantage, but this portrayal did not occur, which might most reflect our own normalized

collective aversion to, and trepidation toward, granting power to those who deviate from unspoken societal standards.

Varys: The Danger of Ambiguous Gender and Sexuality

Traditional performances of gender and disability are especially troubled by the eunuchs who seem to exist in the intersection. They are certainly members of the “othered” group of characters in *Game of Thrones*, teetering between the fixed categories of man and woman, abled and disabled. Varys, who is not of noble birth but who has achieved power and reached a significant position at court in Westeros, is highly aware of how his status as a eunuch is disturbing to others; he is a male whose phallus has been removed in world where the phallus is what the patriarchy and male and abled gazes depend on. Although the fact that he does not have a penis would suggest that he is “the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself” (Butler 10), at no point does Varys reject his identity as a man, threatening the notion that masculine gender performance must follow immediately from the possession of a phallus. In addition, under a strict hegemony of normalcy, the body of a man without a penis is particularly unintelligible and subversive.

Varys’s presence immediately triggers the castration anxiety in others—whether it be physical or metaphorical castration—and he also upsets the balance of the gender binary. He is both perversely sexualized and profoundly desexualized. Simply because he lacks a penis, he is often assumed to be homosexual (as well as a pedophile), and he is often taunted by Littlefinger: “You should visit my brothel tonight. First boy is on the house” (1.5). Varys then questions Littlefinger’s acts as the owner of a brothel, wondering how difficult it is, for example, to procure dead bodies for necrophiliacs. The two men have these types of exchanges quite often: “Varys and Littlefinger are often shown locked in a battle of wits as a display of supremacy. Typically, their one-on-one meetings devolve into Littlefinger questioning Varys’s body in an

attempt to exert masculine authority over him [. . .] Varys exposes others as perverse in order to normalize himself” (Askey). Varys often points to “abnormal” aspects of others’ identities to maintain his own power, whereas other characters usually stoop to insult his status as a eunuch, as if this single physical quality defines his entire identity, illustrating how normates tend to reduce the individuality of the supposedly disabled person down to their perceived disability.

The male and abled gazes are not satisfied by Varys’s character. The element of scopophilia that demands identification with an authoritative male lead is, I believe, overturned by the non-traditional performance of the eunuch. While he is not stereotypically strong or dominant, he is intelligent, manipulative, and influential. In Varys, the abled gaze does not see their ideal, whole mirror self, but the sheer amount of knowledge that Varys holds makes him undeniably powerful. Interestingly, Varys is always clothed in a thick, long robe with long sleeves which he neatly tucks his hands into. Often, the other characters and the audience only sees his head, as if he has no body at all, displaced from our sight, perhaps visually signaling his difference. Through his “mysteriousness, lack of sexuality, and temporally displaced castration” (Bartu 74), Varys is portrayed as a desexualized “other,” which goes against the idea that men must be virile and sexual; he redefines what it means to be an effective and capable male character.

The castration anxiety inherent to phallocentrism may also lead to abhorrence and disgust for the disabled. Davis points out that interactions between the abled and disabled bring about intense feelings of repulsion: “What is repulsion after all but the personal, internalized version of the desire to repel, repress, extroject, annihilate the object?” (13). Thus, normative characters, whether they realize it or not, have a desire to no longer see in their visual field—essentially to

be rid of—the incomplete being in an effort to bypass the double threat of castration and impairment. Varys’s phallus, or lack thereof, is a source of mockery but also very real fear for the other characters, similar to the receptions of Brienne and Arya’s gender performances and Bran and Tyrion’s presumed disabilities. When Littlefinger wonders if Varys simply has a gash where his penis once was, Varys replies, “Do you lie awake at night, fearing my gash?” (1.10). He is profoundly aware of the aesthetics of his castration and the revulsion it often activates in a society which highly values traditional male strength, virility, and the ability to further a family line. He often uses this to his advantage. This image or idea of the “gash” is the visual punctum Siebers discusses, which both likens Varys to a woman yet places him in an ambiguous gender category all his own.

Due to the fear he evokes in others, Varys is, on some level, someone who is not reliable or predictable, but rather a being who is frightening and threatening, much like how Tyrion is often perceived as monstrous. Littlefinger tells Cersei, “Myself, I have always had a hard time trusting eunuchs. Who knows what they want?” (2.1). This statement implies that Littlefinger believes a man’s penis determines his desires; the fact that Varys is lacking in this department makes him, in Littlefinger’s eyes, suspicious. Additionally, Cersei believes Varys is so dangerous *because* “he doesn’t have a cock” (2.8). Like Littlefinger, she thinks Varys’s castration makes him deceptive and untrustworthy, but she also sees him as a real danger. When the prostitute Ros gropes between Varys’s legs and pulls away, fearful, upon not finding anything there, Varys asks her, “You’re afraid. Why? Nothing dangerous down there” (2.10). The constant references to his loss of a phallus as a danger or as dangerous demonstrate just how valuable the possession of one is, a traditional notion of what it means to be a real and

dependable man profoundly ingrained within Westerosi society. I also find it interesting that Ros immediately recognizes who Varys is simply due to his lack of a penis, showing just how influential he has become and how he was worked his way into a system which scorns him for not being a true “man,” for not being “whole.” Varys exemplifies Siebers’s notion that “disability represents a marker of otherness that establishes differences between human beings not as acceptable or valuable variations but as dangerous deviations” (24). Diversity is little valued in *Game of Thrones*, and differences more often than not pose a threat to the “normal” way of life.

The idea of the “phallus” is physical in terms of placing men (who have them) at the top of social hierarchy, but it is also a metaphorical concept in the sense that it is invested with meanings concerning power and control. Varys’s phallic power then comes from him being exceptionally cunning and shrewd in politics, which has enabled him to climb the ranks of noble society and become a member of the King’s small council. He has carefully cultivated a network of spies, called his “little birds,” and he is often referred to as “The Spider.” Nicknaming him after an insect both emphasizes his mystery but also the fear and aversion he evokes, and it shows how he is dehumanized. When Prince Oberyn refers to Varys as a “lord,” Varys tells Oberyn to call him “only Varys. I’m not actually a nobleman. No one is under obligation to call me ‘Lord.’” Oberyn responds, “And yet everyone does” (4.6), at which Varys merely smirks, raises his eyebrows, shrugs. His spies provide him with knowledge, which he values above all else, and he knows how much influence this has given him, being the Master of Whispers.

Despite the seeming stability of his identity, Varys does experience conflicting emotions concerning his castration in a world that automatically privileges men with penises over

everyone else. Eventually, Varys tells Tyrion the story of how he was castrated and then reveals that he has managed to find and capture the sorcerer who mutilated him. In this scene, Varys reclaims power and wields his metaphorical phallus—his authority—over the man who removed his physical phallus. Although viewers are not privy to what, specifically, he does to the sorcerer, we can only assume it is something unpleasant, even terrible. Varys is able to reveal the story of his castration on his own terms: “The moment is indicative of the power of story as a tool through which one’s own identity, even after being fragmented or altered by external forces, can be accessed and reassumed” (Bartu 74). While Varys has clearly adapted to his life as a eunuch, it is still important to him that he takes back power from the man who made him this way in the first place, demonstrating the complexity of his character. He does not struggle as obviously as some with a split self or with overcompensatory attempts to be perceived as whole, but I believe the trauma he suffered when young does make it difficult to fully construct his identity as a castrated man in a society built to benefit normalcy.

The implication that Varys is asexual is yet another aspect of his character that challenges the binary system. Prince Oberyn, at one point, invites Varys to a brothel, emphasizing that there are boys there, as well, only to be quite surprised when Varys asserts that he does not “like” boys:

OBERYN: Really? I hope you won’t be offended when I say I never would have guessed.

VARYS: Not at all, but I was never interested in girls either.

OBERYN: What, then?

VARYS: Nothing.

OBERYN: Everybody is interested in something.

VARYS: Not me. When I see what desire does to people, what it's done to this country, I am very glad to have no part in it. Besides, the absence of desire leaves one free to pursue other things. (4.6)

By “other things,” Varys clearly means political power, and in this conversation he actually points out that sex and lust, although expected to be engaged in by men, can be disadvantages, obstacles to achieving what one truly wants. Prince Oberyn, who is openly bisexual—even though they may not have the language for this in the *Game of Thrones* world—seems utterly baffled by Varys's total lack of interest in sex and romance. His reaction illustrates once more how a man's desire to have sex, even if it is with both women and other men, is perceived as much more natural than to not be sexual at all. Sexuality and sexual prowess are highly valued, while to not participate in this as a man is seen as abnormal, an aberration, a threat to the norm.

Overall, I would argue that Varys is an incredibly effective character; his gender performance and bodily structure do not fit into the constructed normalcy or fixed genders that are upheld in *Game of Thrones*, as well as in our society. His implied asexuality, in a show that often seems to rely so heavily on portraying sexual encounters, threatens the idea that there is a natural order of sex, gender, and desire. Varys has a heightened awareness of how his castration affects how he is perceived, at one point telling Tyrion, “People follow leaders. And they will never follow us. They find us repulsive” (5.2). He understands that interactions with the supposedly abled are charged with particular negative emotions and assumptions about his identity, and he exists in a society that would preclude him from ever holding power; nonetheless, he has learned to operate from the shadows, to become a master of the game of

thrones without ever sitting in the throne himself. Varys often climbs to the top of social hierarchies by finding and utilizing power in ways that have little to nothing to do with the physical phallus, thus subverting the supposed need for the traditional male phallus and demonstrating that the strongest male characters are not necessarily the ones who perform as stereotypically masculine.

And Now My Analysis Has Ended: A Conclusion

There is, of course, much more to be said about these critical lenses and their applicability to *Game of Thrones*. I would say that there are a wealth of other characters to analyze in this manner: Cersei, the calculating and volatile queen; Daenerys, the fierce and capable dragon keeper; Jaime, who copes with loss of his hand; the Mountain, whose Frankenstein-esque transformation is an exceptionally fascinating configuration of the “other”; Grey Worm, another castrated man who may have even been more beneficial to discuss than Theon because, despite what society would expect of a man without a phallus, he has a successful sex life. Especially in a series with such a massive scope, I feel that the discourse is never over, never perfectly expressed, and the writing can never possibly be finished—only abandoned. Even the theoretical foundations are not unobjectionable or concrete, one of the main issues being that the concepts which seem so freeing are rather limited by language. Butler discusses how to disrupt the binary while still using the terms that represent the binary. If disability is simply a construct, then why is there a need to differentiate between ability and disability when essentially neither even exist? To me, the linguistic tools at hand occasionally felt too restrictive, too definitive in an analysis where everything exists on a spectrum.

With these tools I had available, my goal was then to closely examine the six characters I chose and consider what they may have to tell us about gender and disability as performances. I hoped (to attempt) to decide if they are truly subversive figures who, in some way, wrest back agency from a traditionally male hierarchical show and story structure. In the end, while they are far from perfect, I do believe these characters’ performances illustrate that what is perceived as the “real,” as immutable truth, is, in fact, social construction, that the empowerment of the gaze

in film and television rests on a very precarious, very fragile balance even in a largely male-directed series and can be rather easily sabotaged.

Mulvey acknowledges a particular and perhaps common perspective on critical analysis: “It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it” (8). I am inclined to disagree with this point of view. I do not think that examining media automatically damages the pleasure it gives us, the entertainment value we derive from it, but instead allows us to understand the complexity of it. There is much more to be gained in dissecting a cultural product than in merely letting it rest, in refusing to ask questions, in failing to recognize how it replicates the damaging binary structures we cling to every day without fully realizing we do so. We live in a society that is highly codified, and it is not necessarily all that different in *Game of Thrones*. Distinct attitudes and behaviors are expected from men and women, from the abled and the disabled. Certain objects are implicitly gendered: swords and armor for men, dresses and jewelry for women. Even the physical construction of the world is invested with meaning and especially catered toward those of “normal” ability. I would argue that the world-building of this medieval setting is actually modeled on our own world in a way we may not quite be comfortable admitting, and recognizing this is part of the importance in such an analysis.

In referring to the realm of Westeros and the Iron Throne, Littlefinger believes that these things are not actually real, but “a story we agree to tell each other over and over, until we forget that it’s a lie.” Although he is speaking more of the notion of power, I believe this idea may be applied to identity, as well. Who are any of us but a walking collection of the stories we tell ourselves and each other, a blend of the ideals and values we ascribe to and uphold? I feel that the characters who were studied—and many more who were not—are counter to the dominant

narratives surrounding gender and disability in ways that matter. While *Game of Thrones* does not show a society reworked into a utopia for all, it certainly shows a web of frameworks that can be manipulated and navigated, and these characters are representative of issues we see in contemporary culture. The portrayals and performances of these characters reflect our own individual and societal biases but also provide insights as to how our worldview may become more beneficially expansive once we step outside the comfortable box of the binary. Perhaps most of all they teach us that bodies alone do not really mean anything, and to paint identity as anything less than multifaceted and complex would be doing a disservice to the human condition; no one is ever simply one thing or the other, but an intricate accumulation of stories.

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