The Feminists are Coming: A Critical Analysis of Melisandre and Feminism in Game of Thrones

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to platforms for people to express their opinions, the internet is a magical place. These opinions become present when people are talking about things they are passionate about, such as popular culture. One popular culture outlet that attracts internet chatter is the HBO television show *Game of Thrones*. The internet users become especially passionate about *Game of Thrones* when the topic of feminism is discussed. BuzzFeed articles such as “9 Ways ‘Game of Thrones’ Is Actually Feminist” are found along side Huffington Post articles titled, “My Feminist Opinions Ruined ‘Game of Thrones’ for My Boyfriend.” These two opposing views found side by side give us a clue to the relationship between feminism and *Game of Thrones*, and that clue is: it’s complicated.

There are many individual characters in *Game of Thrones* that further complicate the construct of feminism portrayed within the show. All of these characters have different traits that the American population can latch onto, and reflect on in their own lives. A particularly complicated character in relation to feminism is Melisandre, more commonly known as the Red Witch, or Red Lady. Melisandre’s character drives the plot instead of being a one dimensional character. Some of the things that Melisandre does is required for the plot to develop, and she leaves the audience with impressions that last long after the show is over. She gains power by embracing femininity, especially by drawing power from the feminine parts of her body, which
would seem to encourage female viewers of the show to do the same. On the other hand, some of her most powerful acts are subjectively evil, and she performs most of these acts while nude including such acts as burning her adversaries at the stake. So the question stands, can you be a good feminist when you are evil and naked? Can Melisandre be a feminist icon if she is performing evil deeds, leaning on men for power, and seems to be written into the story to be just another woman who is there to expose herself for the male characters and the audience?

Unsurprisingly, the answer is also complicated. Melisandre can be read as an icon of empowered feminist spirituality in many ways because despite her evil acts, she challenges many of the usual characteristics about women in popular culture. She is a priestess, meaning she possesses a religious power, which many women do not usually have access to in both other popular culture realms and in many religions in the world. Furthermore, she changes the common trope written and believed about witches that depicts them as being anti religion and worth burning. Historically, women who were accused of witchcraft were burned at the stake, but Melisandre flips that image by burning other characters, both to gain power and punish those who have opposed her. Finally, as a character, she frequently drives the plot, and harnesses a lot of power throughout the show, including political power, religious power, and sexual power—all things that women are not usually allowed to acquire. These traits oppose the characteristics of other witches in popular culture, such as the White Witch from C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* who only serves to cause trouble that the young protagonists must overcome. This reversal seems to point to the idea that Melisandre truly is an icon of empowered feminist spirituality, but this can only be true within a framework of neoliberal feminism and spirituality as gender essentialism.
My project investigates these questions by looking at the religious influences on Melisandre’s character, and then delving deeper into the manifestation of feminism that Melisandre promotes. The ideas about religion that Melisandre’s character embodies stem from Neopaganism and specifically Wiccan practices. She even performs similar rituals to modern day practicing Wiccans in America, such as magical rituals that involve drawing power from human blood.\(^1\) However, my project also complicates these depictions of religion. A problematic element that is introduced by Neopagan belief is what Cynthia Eller calls, “the myth of the matriarchal prehistory”; this is the idea that before the history of the Abrahamic religions, humans lived in a matriarchal society. As this understanding goes, in an impending modern moment, women will rise up again to rule the world equally with men. This idea was popularized in the 1970’s by scholars like Merlin Stone who wrote the book *When God Was a Woman*. Eller calls this a myth because it is a simplified narrative told to explain something that seems inexplainable, namely the origins of sexism. Not only is the idea of a matriarchal prehistory seriously lacking in historical evidence, but it also oversimplifies an incredibly complicated history.

Furthermore, female empowerment can appear to be simple and obvious in *Game of Thrones* from the actions of Melisandre that I stated before. I argue however, that *Game of Thrones* is only a feminist show, if you look at it through gender essentialist spirituality, and if you believe in a neoliberal feminism. The fact that everything that Melisandre does is especially feminine, and “womanly” by traditional standards, excludes feminists who do not identify in this

way. Gender essentialism celebrates those supposedly natural female qualities that Melisandre embodies. Melisandre is also only feminist when looked at within a neoliberal feminism. Michaele L. Ferguson defines neoliberal feminism as a feminism that promotes the empowerment of individual freedom, voice, and autonomy. This sounds great on the surface, but by saying it is the responsibility of the individual to take ownership of their life and make decisions for their self, it does not allow for a critique on the systems that contribute to the oppression of a patriarchal society. Melisandre is contributing to neoliberal feminism in that on the surface she seems to be taking power over her life and her body, but in reality she is only able to do so through the systems that the patriarchal society of *Game of Thrones* was written in. She is a woman of elite status, who is only focused on promoting her priviledge, and she is only able to accomplish so through the men that she interacts with on the show. Television viewers who absorb Melisandre’s mix of feminist and spiritual values receive a complicated message. That message is a view of feminist and gender spirituality that was produced in a society for men and by men.

**HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Popular culture in America often seems like something that is simply consumed and then forgotten when we move on with our daily tasks. But in reality, it comes through and affects people in many different ways, which is why it is currently being studied so much. One scholar in particular wrote about the ways in which cinema specifically is making people process fictional narratives as real. According to Diana Walsh Pasulka in the article “The Fairy Tale is

True”: Social Technologies of the Religious Supernatural in Film and New Media,” film is a social technology that informs our religious and supernatural religious beliefs. She explains:

Current research in cognitive science reveals that even as spectators are consciously aware that they are watching a movie, unconsciously they are not. Unconsciously, they are making memories that they will fuse with memories from their own lives, and they will have a difficult time separating history from its re-presentation and from fictionalized versions of historical events.³

This idea of film operating as a social technology that leaves memories and permanently affects viewers lives in an important assumption of this essay. Game of Thrones is a show that is watched by millions of people, and it is important to acknowledge that the plot and characters absolutely have a real world effect on people’s lives. This is also important when trying to conceptualize Melisandre’s affect on viewers. In order to make any kind of argument about her feminist values, we must first assume that she does have an effect on the people that watch her on television. HBO’s Game of Thrones is itself a social technology because it has a definite power over the people watching it, and this concept is imperative to arguing the rest of this essay.

BACKGROUND: GAME OF THRONES

The television series Game of Thrones on HBO’s network is based on the book series titled A Song of Ice and Fire written by George R.R. Martin. The first book was published in 1996 and the final book has yet to be released. Throughout the relationship of the book series and the television series, the show has produced seasons faster than George R.R. Martin has written books, but Martin has still been apart of the writing process and direction of the show. The

seventh and final series of the show will be released in summer of 2017, and it is difficult to project when the final book will be released.

George R.R. Martin drew on historical events such as War of the Roses, the Norman Conquest, and the Mongol expansion to create the twisting plot of Game of Thrones. The storyline follows an overarching battle over the rule of the country Westeros and the Iron Throne. There are many characters who believe to have claim to the Iron Throne, and the show follows each of their successes, and failures, toward that ultimate goal of reign. Along with this larger narrative comes many personal stories, with over 30 different characters that are followed closely throughout the series. George R.R. Martin depicted three different religions in this story-world. The first, and most popular is the polytheistic religion of the Seven Kingdoms, which centers around seven archetypal gods and a powerful priesthood that is supported by the state. In contrast to the religion of the Seven Kingdoms is the Old Religion. Seven Kingdoms was introduced later in the history of Westeros, and replaced the Old Religion in all areas except the North. Some have equated the relationship between Seven Kingdoms and the Old Religion as that between Christianity and Paganism in the Medieval Europe. The third and final religion is introduced in Season Two with the character Melisandre. It is called the cult of R’hilor, or the Lord of Light. The Lord of Light is the God that she worships, and who she prays to, but he never manifests himself in human form, or is ever seen by characters and viewers alike. Melisandre is a priestess for the Lord of Light, who grants her has magical abilities such as prophecy. She spends the series after her introduction in Season 2 proselytizing R’hilor, and the constant battle between

light and dark. All of the religions in *Game of Thrones* have fascinating real world parallels that could be deeply analyzed, but the way that Melisandre is portrayed as both priestess and witch is especially interesting in the objective of this essay.

In the TV show, Melisandre is played by actress Carice van Houten, and the character has many different names, including Melisandre of Asshai, Lady Melisandre, The Red Woman, The Red Priestess, and The Red Witch. As stated above, she is first introduced in Season Two of the show when she arrives on Stannis Baratheon’s land to preach her faith. She successfully converts Stannis who has a claim to be King of Westeros, and its subjects. The relationship between Stannis and Melisandre is the main incentivizing force for both of the characters until season six.

Melisandre continues to preach her faith of R’hilor, the Lord of Light throughout the entire series. She aligns herself with Stannis, following him and advising him as he attempts to win the Iron Throne. One of Melisandre’s first magical acts results in the death of Stannis’s brother Renly, which gives Stannis the army needed to advance his mission to overtake and ascend the Iron Throne. Through her acts of magic, and of devout faith, Melisandre gets Stannis closer and closer to the Iron Throne, which reinforces his faith in her, as well as in the Lord of Light. Melisandre becomes someone that Stannis does not question, and cannot live without.

**NEOPAGANISM AND WICCA**

There has been an increase in both portrayls of Celtic spirituality in the media, and in American religious identities. We see many different Celtic spiritualities portrayed in American popular culture, such as the Disney movie *Brave*, and the television show *Outlander*. The most popular portrayls of Celtic spirituality are through witches that either perform similar rituals to those of modern day practicing witches in America, or witches that seem to have power rooted
in nature. While they seem to be written with similar ideas or practices to Neopagans, popular culture writings of these identities never seem to accurately portray them. Representations of witches in popular culture are usually misguided and misinformed due to the long history of Paganism that is usually ignored. Melisandre’s character was informed by these Neopagan identities, which makes them important to look at in order to understand how she effects the modern day American audience.

When looking at Celtic spirituality in America, and Celtic spirituality in American popular culture, there are many expressions to sort through. To narrow this research within the New Age and Neopagan religions, some history and theology of these movements is needed. One difficult part in studying these religious movements is that there is no single doctrine or written word that describes what the practices or beliefs are. In fact, there is an emphasis within these religious systems on not having one way to think or practice. If someone identifies as within the Neopagan movement, then by claiming said affiliation, they simply are considered a Neopagan. For example, within Wicca (which is just one branch of Neopaganism) it is most common for someone to grow up outside of the movement, and then to eventually identify as a practitioner of witchcraft. This is to say, they join the religion of Wicca after they find it fits with their witch identity. Generally, the Neopagan movement is suitable for people that feel a strong connection with the Earth, and the powers that it can extend. It is rooted in Celtic spiritual practices, such as Paganism, but adapted to the modern day needs of practitioners.

Wicca is especially important to consider in relation to the character of Melisandre because those who practice Wicca, specifically identify as being a witch—something that is not true with all of the branches of the Neopagan movement. When discussing those who identify as a witch within the Wicca movement, Joanne Pearson in a chapter titled “Witches and Wicca,” from the book *Belief Beyond Boundairies*, wrote:

> Wicca has reclaimed the witch as the guardian of the secret powers of nature and of woman, as the priestess of the Goddess, as the herbalist, and as the practitioner of magic, thus offering a critical synthesis of the polarities and ambiguities of the witch figure to produce a ‘witch’ who is both modern and timeless.\(^6\)

Even this definition of a modern witch is very broad. However, it does bring out a few key words that deserve our attention. First, like Melisandre, those who practice Wicca are both priestesses and practitioners of magic. This is important because there is a common belief that magic and religion are inherently separate. Magic and religion, witches and priests, have always been seen as opposites. The mass execution of women in medieval Europe was a war on women and magic that was orchestrated by the Christian church. In a similar fashion, the Salem witch trials in New England morphed into accusations of women working with the devil, and therefore against the Puritan church. According to S. Zohreh Kermani in the book *Pagan Family Values: Childhood and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary American Paganism*, Emile Durkheim, a religious studies scholar, wrote about how religion and magic clash. She says, “Durkheim’s assertion that ‘there is no Church of magic’ reflects a similar understanding of magic as a private act rather than the ‘collective effervescence’ that characterizes religion.”\(^7\) This

\(^6\) Ibid. pg. 167

idea that religion and magic are positioned against each other comes from Christian tradition and Durkheim, however this has been obviously countered with the resurgence of Neopaganism in America. This movement is a collective of religious groups that are all centered around performing magical practices together as the main form of religious practices.

One place in particular that Melisandre seems to stray from typical Neopagan practices is expression through her lack of connection to nature. Being connected to and drawing power from the Earth is a theme that appears repeatedly in literature on Neopanism and Wiccan practices. For example, in Kermani’s book, she looks at many different families and how they view themselves within the movement. After asking a question about respecting earth, nature, and other living things, Kermani found three different answers among Pagan parents:

“That all life is sacred and should be treated with respect.” (Pagan parent of two)

“I want my children to have respect for others and for all life and the Earth Herself.” (Wiccan mother of three).

“I believe that children today need to learn to respect nature since as a society we are so separated from it [but] we still need it to survive. I teach my children the importance of recycling and cleaning up after yourselves at the park and not to litter. (Wiccan mother of three).

Beyond the typical eco-conscious values a mother may try to instill in a child in America today, these quotes highlight the emphasis Neopagans place on the environment. These all seem to be a typical response that we might hear from any other mom trying to raise their child in America today, however, there seems to be very little connection to the Earth for Melisandre’s character.

8 ibid.
9 ibid
10 ibid
Wicca is the most popularly recognized group of neopagans in America today. Wicca was founded in 1939 in England by a man named Gerald Gardner. He was an anthropologist who found a group of pagans in England practicing what they believed to be ancient rituals. After observing these rituals performed by a secret group of witches, he was initiated and then later he wrote a book on the practices. According to Kermani:

Histories of the religion generally acknowledge that Gardner constructed the basic elements of modern Wicca with inspiration from Masonic and Rosicrucian sources as well as from Charles Leland and Margaret Murray’s claims to have ‘discovered’ surviving witch cults in the nineteenth century. The beliefs and practices Gardner developed led to the modern form of Wicca that bears his name: a coven-based initiatory practice emphasizing balance, duality, and the Goddess and God in equal partnership.  

Then, in the 1970s, with the rise of feminism came of the growth of Wicca in America. Even though Wicca and feminism are closely linked, feminism is not the most important aspect of Wicca. There is also a strong emphasis on nature and the environment, and Wicca can be just as empowering for men as women because of the equal worshipping of both a goddess and god. Beyond this, Wicca is hard to characterize fully because it has so many different elements to it. There is no centralized, institutional structure, and there are only a few principles that Wiccans adhere to. According to the Joanne Pearson in the section titled “Wicca” from the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “These include the Wiccan Rede or Law—‘Do what thou wilt an it harm none’—and the Law of Threefold Return, which states that whatever a person does, for good or ill, will return to them threefold.” Melisandre certainly does not subscribe to the idea of not doing harm to others, as we see when she kills people in an effort to accomplish her goals.

11 ibid. pg. 5

There are also some problems that stem from not having a central organizational structure. According to Pearson, “…allows for an enormous level of variety, and Wicca at the beginning of the twenty-first century looks likely to retain its complexity and differentiate further as it continues to spread and grow.” Because of this wide range of practices and practitioners, it makes sense that Melisandre’s character does not completely fit into the Wicca construct. Again, what is significant to point out is that she is simultaneously a priestess and a witch; someone who practices magic for religious purposes, just like Wiccans and those in the greater Neopagan movement do.

**MELISANDRE**

In episodes one and two of Season Two, and episode eight of Season Three in *Game of Thrones*, Melisandre subverts the usual depiction of witches in popular culture. Episode one in season two is titled, “The North Remembers,” and it is the first time the audience sees Melisandre. In Melisandre’s introduction to the series, she performs a ritual for the Lord of Light. She is preaching to a crowd on a beach at night, with statues of the seven gods from the Seven Kingdoms religion burning in the background as a sacrifice to the Lord of Light. The dark night, accompanied by the burning wood in the background, creates the perfect light to emphasize Melisandre’s red dress, red hair, and red necklace, all of which contribute to her nicknames (the Red Lady, Red Priestess, or Red Witch). In this scene, she prophesies the coming winter, and speaks of Stannis Baratheon as the Warrior of Light, and his sword that he must draw from the fire, named “Light Bringer”. The ritual ends with the congregation chanting, “Lord cast your light upon us,” and Melisandre and Stannis responding with, “For the night is dark and full of

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13 ibid.
This scene is particularly striking because of the intense fire, and Melisandre’s control over the fire. Melisandre takes power over fire many times in the series and it is especially impactful because of the usual association with burning witches at the stake. Instead of Melisandre being burned, she burns other characters and objects as sacrifices to make light, and burns other people as punishment. She is using fire and burning as a way to express her religion, and facilitate her magical powers, instead of fire being used against her for practicing magic.

In Episode two of Season two, titled “The Night Lands,” Melisandre uses her religion as a way to gain political power. She does this by reassuring Stannis of his triumph in the conquest for the Iron Throne. Melisandre says to Stannis:

Melisandre- I have seen the path to victory in the flames, but first you must give yourself to the Lord of Light.
Stannis- I’ve said the words damn you! I’ve burnt the idols.
Melisandre- while dropping her robe to reveal her nude body You must give all of yourself.

She then convinces Stannis to put all of his trust in her, with the promise of bearing him a son. This is a crucial scene because Stannis is doubting her and the Lord of Light’s power to give him the Throne, but ultimately, this is the turning point after which he no longer doubts her. This is cemented in the act of Stannis and Melisandre having sex, which results in the betrayal of his wife as well as other political advisors. This acts grants Melisandre a power over him that is of a sexual nature, political nature, and spiritual nature. She advises Stannis throughout the rest of “The North Remembers,” Game of Thrones. HBO. 12 April 2012. Television.

15 There is an association with witches being burned at the stake, even though that depiction is historically inaccurate. There were no witches burned in the Salem Witch Trials of Colonial New England, all those who were found guilty of witch craft were hanged.
their relationship, he never advises her. She has the power in the relationship which is something that women do not usually have in both story-worlds and the real world.

The final episode in which Melisandre invalidates a common witch trope is her magical practices with human blood. She uses human blood in her magic which makes blood seem powerful instead of unclean. Blood is often seen as unclean when used by women because the blood is associated with a woman’s menstrual cycle. This can be seen in Episode eight of Season three, titled, “Second Sons.” Melisandre seduces Gendry, the illegitimate child of the former King, Robert Baratheon, and ties him up so she can extract his blood by using leaches. After the blood is taken from Gendry, Stannis enters the room to throw each of the three leaches into a fire. This magical ritual is performed to help Stannis take the Throne, by ensuring the killing of those that also have a claim the Throne. Before he throws each leach into the fire, he says the name of a person that he wants to die, including Robb Stark, Balon Greyjoy, and Joffrey Baratheon. Each of these people do die, in the order that Stannis named them, soon after the ritual was performed. Blood is a very powerful substance to harness, and Melisandre uses it in a way that changes the usual association that comes with women and blood: as being dirty from a menstrual cycle.

In these few scenes from Seasons two and three of Game of Thrones, Melisandre is able to supersede many different tropes that come with portrayals of witches. She is religious in everything she does, yet very magical and powerful, which is not usual of a typical “religious” woman. She also inverts the usual portrayal of women being punished for witchcraft by being burned alive, by burning others as sacrifices and punishments for standing in Stannis’s way, or by going against the Lord of Light. She also takes power from blood, subverting the usual association with women and blood coming from the menstrual cycle. Furthermore, Melisandre is
unapologetically female. She does not try to accomplish tasks by taking on manly tasks. In fact, she takes on many of the characteristics that are usually associated with ‘natural’ womanhood. She uses blood, she has a magical child, and she takes complete ownership over her sexuality, all with the result of subverting common witch and women tropes that have been historically damaging. Because of this, after critiquing Melisandre’s character on *Game of Thrones*, it would seem obvious that she is a true icon of female empowerment.

Among Wiccan practitioners, there is a belief that before the patriarchal society came to exist, humans participated in a matriarchal society. The narrative that goes along with this idea is that before written records, society was centered around women. This was due to their ability to give birth, which was seen as the magical power of life, and they worshiped a goddess. Then, a shift in power happened, and society came to be controlled by men. This is the start of the patriarchy that we live in today. At some point in the future, women will rise back up to help establish an egalitarian society.\(^\text{16}\) This seems to be a neat way to explain how we have come to where we are currently in society. It also follows a similar narrative to broader Neopagan traditions. There was originally spiritually active groups who worshiped some form of goddesses, who were wiped away with the introduction of the male empowering religion of Christianity. Currently, Neopaganism is experiencing a resurgence, and is seen as a spiritual way in which women can reclaim their femininity.

To reiterate, femininity within Wicca is especially important. There is a group within the Wicca movement called Dianic Wicca, who only worship female goddesses as opposed to other

Wiccan groups that worship both male and female gods. In the book *Re-riting Woman: Dianic Wicca and the Feminine Divine* by Kristy S. Coleman, the author is contributing to this same belief. When looking at witches within the Dianic Wicca tradition, she finds that, “…the Dianics create an alternative symbolic structure in their rituals that affects a shift in the interpretive lens of reality and in particular re(w)rites the valuation and meaning of woman,” Coleman argues that by participating in Dianic Wicca, women are able to be surrounded by other women, complete rituals that empower other women, worship women, and that leads to a re-(w)riting of womanhood. All of this is possible because of original Pagan practices, and original Pagan emphasis on the woman. This emphasis on an inherent female quality that all women have can be read in Melisandre’s character. She fits many modern day standards of beauty, with a slim yet curvy body, long hair, and a youthful face. She even fits “womanly” fashion standards of wearing dresses, and jewelry. More importantly, Melisandre performs the most inherently “woman” act possible: she gives birth. Not only is Melisandre’s spiritual practices informed by Wiccan practices, but her femininity is as well.

Similarly, scholar Merlin Stone wrote the book *When God Was a Woman*, that contributed to these ideas. Stone is grappling with questions that many modern day women have, such as: when did men gain control of society? Why do men have all of the power? She does this by looking at the rise of Abrahamic religions, and how detrimental they were to the image of women. She argues that, “Archaeological, mythological and historical evidence all believe that the female religion, far from naturally fading away, was the victim of centuries of continual

persecution and suppression by the advocates of the newer religions which held male deities as supreme.”

She specifically uses the creation myth of Adam and Eve to make her argument, and how Eve was depicted as the great temptress that caused the fall of humanity. This idea was taken and manipulated by the new religions to make women seem inferior to men. Stone takes the matriarchal prehistory as fact, citing facts like, “In prehistoric and early historic periods of human development, religions existed in which people revered their supreme creator as female. The Great Goddess—the Divine Ancestress—had been worshiped from the beginnings of the Neolithic periods of 7000 BC until the closing of the last Goddess temples, about AD 500.”

This matriarchal prehistory seems to also be written into Melisandre’s character because she was given a position of power within her religion, something that women in the Abrahamic religions have not been given until recently.

One of the most interesting parts of her book is the chapter titled, “The Sacred Sexual Customs” which can be put in conversation with the *Game of Thrones* Character Melisandre. In the show, Melisandre takes control of her sexuality many times, using it as a power to accomplish her goals. She has sex with many partners, seduces men, and becomes the lover of the man she is trying to make king. This is very similar to the narrative that Stone creates. Stone writes about the temples that women used to stay in to have sex with men when the men came to honor the Goddess. Furthermore, the Goddess was revered as the patron deity of sexual love.

Stone also comments on the strange nature of the intersection of religion and sex. She says:

> People today, raised and programmed on the ‘morality’ of the contemporary male religions, may find the ancient sexual attitudes and customs disturbing, shocking or even

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19 ibid. xii.
sacrilegious. Yet we should consider the likelihood that such judgments or reactions are present in our society, which are themselves based on the ideologies of those who initially and repetitively condemned the sexual customs of the Goddess.20

Here, Stone does make a good point, but not in the same way she intends. When looking at the character Melisandre, she may seem very anti-religion, based on her actions, especially her sexual actions. This character was written in a time when sex on television is very entertaining, and the show was picked up by a network that is know for their sexual content. HBO has countless shows that almost all have overt sexual scenes in every single episode. HBO can do this because it is a premium cable television channel, so they do not have to follow Federal Communications Commissions (FCC) rules and regulations.21 Sex and religion do not need to be separated just because we have this Christian view of the place of sex within religion. Melisandre is able to reclaim that sexuality and generate power from it, and she is constructed in a way that is meant to affirm the matriarchy prehistory narrative.

Reflecting on everything that has already been discussed in this paper, Melisandre seems to be an icon of female empowerment. By this, I mean that those who watch Game of Thrones may walk away after the show, feeling especially in touch with their powerful feminine side, encouraged to gain power in the same way that Melisandre does. She gains power through her spirituality, her sexuality, and seems to be fighting the many stereotypes that are placed on women within the story and in the real world. These perceptions, however, are not as simple as they seem. Once the character is analyzed on a deeper level, Melisandre’s positive feminist

20 ibid. 154.

qualities come into question. The first way that Melisandre complicates her feminist identity is through the matriarchal prehistory.

This idea of the matriarchal pre-history seems very attractive, especially for the modern day feminist. It’s nice to believe that originally women ruled the world, and that women will rise again to power. However, Eller complicates this idea, and even goes so far as to call it a myth. When talking about why she see’s the matriarchal pre-history as a myth, Eller says, “…this narrative of matriarchal utopia and patriarchal takeover was surely a myth, at least in the scholarly sense: it was a tale told repeatedly and reverently, explaining things (namely, the origin of sexism) otherwise thought to be painfully inexplicable.”

Eller goes on to say that it was not that difficult from the beginning of her studies, to determine a serious lack of historical evidence to prove the matriarchal prehistory theory. This myth of the matriarchal prehistory is important to acknowledge because just like it is informing Wiccan and Neopagan practices, it is informing Melisandre’s character. It is problematic for feminism to believe in this matriarchal prehistory because it makes an incredibly complicated history simplistic. There is a reason that the origin of sexism is painfully inexplicable, and by believing in the matriarchal prehistory, the opportunity to critique the systems that brought women to the society that we live in today, is taken away. Melisandre is contributing to that by being written with this prehistory informing her character.

Next, Melisandre completes many tasks through actions that are very feminine. Often times, these characteristics and actions seem to be “naturally” womanly. She is very sexualized, performs rituals with blood, and even gives birth. However, by making her ultra feminine, she is adhering to an idea of gender essentialism. Gender essentialism is the idea that there are

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supposedly natural female qualities that all women have. According to the “Gender
Essentialism” entry in the Dictionary of Media and Communication (2 ed), gender essentialism
is, “The belief that males and females are born with distinctively different natures, determined
biologically rather than culturally. This involves an equation of gender and sex.”\textsuperscript{23} In general,
gender essentialism is problematic for many reasons. First, by assuming that there are natural
qualities of being a woman not determined by culture, this view ignores the differences among
people and the differences between cultural expressions. By writing Melisandre with these
supposedly natural feminine qualities, her character excludes feminists that do not identify with a
gender binary. Furthermore, by reducing Melisandre and locating her within the gender
essentialist view point, she becomes a one-dimensional character that has to rely on her
femininity to gain power. All of the ways that she seems to be gaining power, is only through a
patriarchal system that reinforces the “dichotomy” between male and female, and continues to
put men in charge, and women in places of inferiority.

Finally, the kind of feminism that Melisandre advocates is one of self motivation and
personal empowerment. This is called neoliberal feminism, which was defined earlier in this
essay by Ferguson as, “…a political ideology grounded in a view shared by many liberal
feminists: that women are liberated when they are free to make their own choices—about career,
reproduction, sexuality, politics and so on.”\textsuperscript{24} Ferguson goes on to say that neoliberalism is, “in

\textsuperscript{23} Chandler, Daniel, and Rod Munday. "gender essentialism." A Dictionary of Media and
2017

\textsuperscript{24} Michaele L. Ferguson, “Trump is a Feminist, and Other Cautionary Tales for Our Neoliberal
Age”, 59.
short, a feminism that is comfortable,” due to the extreme emphasis on a nonjudgmental and conflict free environment. This is problematic because by focusing on an individual being comfortable, the opportunity to critique the oppressive structures in our society is lost.

This can be seen in Melisandre’s interactions with Stannis Baratheon to gain power. Throughout Melisandre and Stannis’s relationship, she seems to be continuing to gain more power over him. She becomes a political, spiritual, and sexual advisor to him throughout the story, and also becomes his most trusted counsellor. However, what can be detected when analyzed closely is that Melisandre is actually leaning on Stannis for the power. Instead of rising up to just take the Throne for herself, she must cooperate within the patriarchal system that dictates Stannis is in line to receive the Throne. This is further cemented later in the series when Stannis dies. Instead of his death freeing her to fight for claim over the Throne herself, Melisandre finds another man that she can put her support behind in his claim for the Iron Throne.

Similarly, Melisandre seems to be very powerful in her spiritual capabilities. She performs magic and is able to affect real change that helps her and the men that she supports. However, she is only allowed access to this spiritual power through the subject of her worship, the Lord of Light. While the viewer never actually sees the Lord of Light, the gender is still made clear because she often refers to him as a man and with male pronouns. This would mean that Melisandre doesn’t have spiritual power either, because she is once again operating under the commands and power of another male.

\[25\] ibid. 59.
Finally, Melisandre has power through her sexuality. But this is also brought into question when analyzing her through a neoliberal feminism lens. Melisandre’s constant nudity and sex scenes are seen as her taking power over her body, and should not be judged since she is making her own choices. However, in actuality, she isn’t autonomous because she is still a character written by a man. George R. R. Martin, author of *A Song of Fire and Ice* wrote a lot of sex, nudity, and sexual assault into his novels perhaps even more so than is depicted in the HBO series. When addressing the sexual assault that Martin wrote in the novels that was then only partially translated into the television show, he said:

> And then there’s the whole issue of sexual violence, which I’ve been criticized for as well. I’m writing about war, which [is] what almost all epic fantasy is about. But if you’re going to write about war, and you just want to include all the cool battles and heroes killing a lot of orcs and things like that and you don’t portray [sexual violence], then there’s something fundamentally dishonest about that. Rape, unfortunately, is still a part of war today. It’s not a strong testament to the human race, but I don’t think we should pretend it doesn’t exist. I want to portray struggle. Drama comes out of conflict. If you portray a utopia, then you probably wrote a pretty boring book.  

While Melisandre was never a victim of sexual assault in the novel or the TV show, she was still written by a man who purposefully wrote women into a patriarchal story-world with an overwhelming amount of violence enacted towards women. Furthermore, the novels that Martin wrote were picked up by a television network that could explicitly show violence towards women, and female nudity in almost every single episode. Therefore, Melisandre can’t actually be taking control over her body and her sexuality because her sexual actions were written by a man with the purpose of entertaining an audience, and within a world that perpetuates violence towards women.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the relationship between Melisandre and feminism is very complicated. Melisandre can be read as a positive icon of female empowerment and feminist values if you only watch the show once. However, after a close critique, it becomes apparent that Melisandre is a positive feminist icon if the viewer adheres to gender essentialism, and if the viewer is a neoliberal feminist. We know that TV shows have an affect on viewers, and that the audience is going to be left with an impression that they take from the story-world to the real world. This is why it is important to analyze if that impression will be positive or negative, especially when it comes to the greater feminist movement. For a person that identifies as being in the feminist movement, their lives can be changed by characters from popular television shows like Game of Thrones. These changes can be big or small, and positive or negative, but either way, those changes will translate into the movement. It is hard to say from the current research exactly how those changes will come about, how much they affect the people in the feminist movement, and how the movement as a whole will change because of the effect that popular culture has on people. Once that research is done, it will be easier for authors to write characters into TV shows that make helpful contributions to peoples lives instead of harmful contributions. Until then, it is paramount to continue to critique the characters we consume in popular culture to better inform ourselves and the people around us of the ways in which we can be changed.


Ferguson, Michaele L., “Trump is a Feminist, and Other Cautionary Tales for Our Neoliberal Age” Theory & Event, Volume 20, Number 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.


