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To cite this article: Debra Ferreday (2015) Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom, Australian Feminist Studies, 30:83, 21-36, DOI: [10.1080/08164649.2014.998453](https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.998453)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.998453>



Published online: 28 Apr 2015.



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GAME OF THRONES, RAPE CULTURE AND FEMINIST FANDOM

Debra Ferreday

Abstract Throughout its run, HBO's adaptation of George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series, retitled *Game of Thrones* (GoT), has attracted controversy for its depiction of nudity and graphic sex and violence. But a particular recent scene, in which a brother rapes his sister, caused outrage in media and fan commentary. This article considers the scene in question, and feminist responses to it, in the context of wider cultural debates about rape culture and the media representation of sexual violence. Following Sarah Projansky's argument that rape is a 'particularly versatile narrative element' that 'often addresses any number of social themes and issues', I read *GoT* and its online fan responses alongside literary theories of the fantastic, to examine how dominant rape culture discourses are both reproduced and challenged in fan communities. In particular I argue that fan narratives both reproduce discourses of masculinity and futurity that contribute to rape culture, but also provide a potential space for change through speaking out about silenced experiences of trauma.

Introduction: *Game of Thrones* and Rape Culture

In April 2014, a single scene in the popular fantasy series *Game of Thrones* (GoT) became the subject of widespread controversy. In it, the corrupt knight and fan favourite Jaime Lannister, returned from a long quest, greets his sister Cersei, with whom he is in an incestuous relationship. Cersei is in mourning for their murdered son, the psychopathic King Joffrey; they meet in his funeral chamber. Cersei turns to Jaime in her grief, weeping 'my baby boy ... our son'. At first Jaime appears to comfort her, holding her and stroking her hair, but then there is a shift in tone; he turns on her, saying 'you're a hateful woman; why have the Gods made me love a hateful woman' and then, before she can reply, grabs her, throws her first onto the funeral bier and then to the ground and, to the sound of her weeping protests and cries of 'no', rapes her (SE04E9).¹

In understanding why this scene—in what is after all a notoriously violent and sexually explicit TV programme, attracted such widespread concern—we need to place the current outpouring of feminist reaction to media texts depicting sexual violence in the context of wider debates about rape culture and its relation to social and mainstream media that have grown up in response to highly publicised cases. In August 2012, the Steubenville rape case became the occasion of feminist rage, protest and activism. A female high school student was repeatedly sexually assaulted by several of her classmates while unconscious, the assault filmed and shared on social media and through emails and text messages. Despite this unprecedented body of evidence, including comments from the perpetrators and their contacts which made it clear that they saw

what they were doing as rape, only two men were convicted, both of whom were given derisory sentences, of one year' and two years' imprisonment respectively. Despite this, commentators and news outlets seemed sympathetic with the rapists, especially in respect to the effect on the 'promising' futures denied to them by a criminal record. CNN reporter Poppy Harlow infamously stated that it was 'Incredibly difficult ... to watch what happened as these two young men that had such promising futures, star football players, very good students, literally watched as they believed their lives fell apart'. This narrative of bright male futures interrupted by a cruel justice system—and by the implied vindictiveness of the victim—has been repeated in other cases since, notably that of Adam Hulin, a British A-Level student convicted of repeatedly assaulting and raping a 12-year-old girl. Sentencing Hulin to just 100 hours community service and a fine of GBP60, the judge stated in his summing up that

This defendant is 19 and there is much to be said in his favour. He has clear prospects for the future and he is pursuing these at this time ... I certainly wouldn't want to do anything which would prejudice his future career. (Jones 2014)

Examples like these demonstrate the extent to which the Internet and media has become a site of struggle over sexual violence, both in reproducing rape culture and in resisting it. The question of whose stories are told, whose future is at stake, and how rape culture is discursively constructed is an urgent one for feminist cultural studies. The very term 'rape culture' indicates the need to understand rape *as* culture; as a complex social phenomenon that is not limited to discrete criminal acts perpetrated by a few violent individuals but is the product of gendered, raced and classed social relations that are central to patriarchal and heterosexist culture. In examining men's motivations for rape, adherence to normative gender roles stands out as one of the few key points of commonality: as Diane Herman's foundational study showed, rape is 'an indication of how widely held are traditional views of appropriate male and female behaviour, and of how strongly enforced those views are' (Herman 1984, 52). The term 'rape culture', which Buchwald et al. sum up as a social reality where it is assumed that 'sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes' (1993, vii), has been widely adopted in studies of social and mediated spaces, particularly in educational settings (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 1993; Burnett et al. 2009; Klaw et al. 2005; Ringrose and Renold 2011). The ways in which rape culture narratives circulate in social institutions was first raised by Mary Koss in her 1980's study of 32 US university campuses, which found that one in four college women had been raped, usually by an acquaintance (Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987; Koss and Cheryl 1982). From a self-identified feminist public figure like Whoopi Goldberg making a clumsy distinction between 'rape' and 'real rape' to Republican senatorial candidate Todd Akins declaring that a woman cannot become pregnant if she does not consent to sex since 'the body has ways of shutting that whole thing down', the last few years have seen a tragicomical display of stupidity around this subject, with every week seeming to bring new examples. If there is a positive side to all this, it is that the sheer scale of the problem has tended to galvanise a feminist response. The question of what constitutes rape culture and especially of how it is constructed and perpetuated through media has been foregrounded, along with questions of how to bring about social change through resistance and education.

The stories we tell about rape are important, and feminist scholarship shows that rape as a mode of storytelling has a long history. As Sarah Projansky (2001) argues, rape as a topic is 'virtually timeless, functioning as a key aspect of storytelling throughout Western history'. Nevertheless, she points out, the form of rape narratives varies according to cultural and historical context. Rape, she argues, is a 'particularly versatile narrative element' that 'often addresses any number of social themes and issues' (2001, 5). The stories we tell 'about' rape, in other words, are slippery: they tell us a great deal about society's attitude to gender, sexuality, violence, property and family relationships. It is particularly productive to analyse the relationship between 'real' rape and representations of rape at the current historical moment, when media representations are deeply enmeshed with cultural practices through which we make sense of everyday lives and of lived experience, including the experience of living in societies where the ever-present threat of sexual violence is lived alongside a proliferation of media images of violated female bodies. This mediatisation of culture has expanded the possibilities for telling stories about rape, constructing new spaces in which violent rape myths circulate, but also offering new possibilities for challenging rape culture and producing new, more emancipatory feminist interventions, both in the form of sharing critique of dominant media representations and producing DIY media to make positive feminist interventions. It is significant that the mediatisation of culture has brought fan and feminist communities into dialogue, since these communities have historically been defined through the use of DIY media praxis as well as by an intense engagement with media. Like fans, feminists are intimately invested in practices of remediation and in the creation of transformative works. As Red Chidgey's (2012) work on Riot Grrrl and memory shows us, for example, this has always been an important part of grassroots feminist activist praxis. Through zines and later blogs, videos and podcasts, feminists have used low-budget resources and drawn on political ideas and practices drawn from sources as diverse as anarchism, the animal rights movement and Riot Grrrl to create participatory counter-cultures (Chidgey 2012, 87–88). *GoT* is a significant case study in this regard, then, since it brings together fan discourses and feminist critique in the same digital spaces, and indeed reveals that fan and feminist identities are not separate, that they coexist and intertwine. As a fantastic text about rape, it is a particularly rich case study, since the fantastic as a genre is historically a space in which possible (emancipatory or violent) futures are proposed, explored and brought into tension with one another. In this article, I discuss the ways in which a work of fantastic genre fiction became a focus of these debates: a case which, I argue, precisely speaks to feminist concerns about the ways in which rape narratives are gendered, raced and classed: to the way that the distinction between 'real' and unreal rape involves silencing some women's experiences in order to preserve (privileged) male futures.

Feminist Responses to *GoT*: Empowerment and Objectification

Throughout its run, HBO's adaptation of George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series, retitled *GoT*, has attracted controversy for its depiction of nudity and graphic sex and violence. The show is a vast, sprawling epic, a global production noted for its narrative complexity and for its daring breaks with narrative and generic convention: characters are depicted as morally ambivalent rather than wholly good or evil; major protagonists are killed off in shocking and unexpected ways; familiar fantasy tropes are subtly subverted or overturned entirely. It is also noted for its extremely graphic depiction

of violence, including sexual violence. A video compilation made by Huffington Post, showing all the show's nude and sex scenes, illustrates this. The film runs to 15 minutes and features multiple acts of sexual violence: one scene in particular, in which the 14-year-old Daenerys Targaryen is groped by her brother, makes the viewer uncomfortably complicit in this act of violation as the actor Emilia Clarke's disembodied breast fills the screen. Although there is a tender consensual scene between Daenerys and her husband, this occurs only after he has repeatedly, graphically raped her and she has learned seduction techniques in order to take back control. The vast majority of consensual acts between heterosexuals involve sex workers: money, power and social advancement, not pleasure, are the dominant reasons for a woman to consent to sex² (Huffington Post Video 2014).

It is unsurprising, then, that the series has been the subject of much discussion in online feminist spaces. What is more surprising is that many have seen it *as* feminist, especially since it has a large female audience, including a vocal Internet fandom whose members often self-identity as feminists: a fact discovered by Gina Bellafante of the *New York Times*, who claimed that the series would appeal only to male nerds:

While I do not doubt that there are women in the world who read books like Mr. Martin's, I can honestly say that I have never met a single woman who has stood up in indignation at her book club and refused to read the latest from Lorrie Moore unless everyone agreed to 'The Hobbit' first. [GoT] is boy fiction patronizingly turned out to reach the population's other half. (Bellafante 2011)

The claim that women have no interest in the fantastic not only ignored decades of rich feminist engagement with the fantastic as a site of imagined feminist futurities ranging from Mary Shelley to Margaret Atwood, it was simply inaccurate, as the immediate fan backlash demonstrated. Indeed feminist media critic, blogger and fan Alyssa Rosenberg pointed out that fantasy has always been linked to feminism: since it is concerned with power, it allows women to imagine possible futures, to dream of 'claiming forms of power that were previously off-limits to them' (Rosenberg 2011).

Discussions of the show display, then, a certain confusion about what feminism is, and how we 'know' if a given media representation is anti-feminist; *GoT* seems to invoke particularly polarised claims that it either *is* a feminist text, or that it is extremely anti-feminist and oppressive to women (Frankel 2014). To add to the confusion over *GoT*'s gender politics, Martin has himself publicly identified as a feminist and has stated that the series is meant to show gender as socially constructed (Frankel 2014, 2). This led some bloggers to defend it as a realistic, if superficially fantastical, depiction of patriarchy. For example Tracey Egan Morrissey of Jezebel writes:

Despite how boob-y its small screen adaptation has become, those who've read the five books in George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series—on which *GoT* is based—know that the real meat isn't on the female characters' chests, but in their stories. HBO sex scenes be damned, the women of Westeros are more than sex objects—they're subjects of their own narratives. And it's something that Martin, as a 'feminist at heart', did deliberately. (Morrissey 2013)

Other feminist commentators on *GoT* argue that the show can only be understood in the context of real-life rape culture. This analysis reveals uncanny resonances between fans' reactions to the Lannister rape, and real-life narratives that work to silence victims' experiences. Jessica Valenti (2014) argued, for example, a popular series like *GoT* needs to be discussed in the context of a wider culture where women's accounts of rape are routinely silenced, and where there is a pervasive institutionalised 'squeamishness' about using the words 'rape' and 'rape culture'; whereas she argues, 'colleges across the country are replacing the word "rape" in their sexual assault policies with "non-consensual sex" because schools don't want to "label" students "rapists"' (Valenti 2014). To call a rapist what he is to deny a future to particular kinds of privileged male subjects, usually white and middle class. The stories we tell about rape, who gets to speak, and which acts can be named are thus of central importance in understanding rape culture. Despite this, rape culture is under-theorised in contemporary media and cultural studies. An essay on rape culture by Sharon Marcus (2002) suggests intriguing disciplinary reasons why feminist media scholars might be reluctant to take on this topic. Some feminist scholars, writes Marcus, are fearful that the effect of critical theory's influence on feminism will be to render positive political change impossible. This stance distinguishes between an empiricist, epistemological view of rape and a textual, postmodern view that foregrounds 'rape's indeterminacy as an event' and hence makes it impossible to fix the culpability of the rapist and the innocence of the victim (2002, 167). As an example Marcus cites Mary Hawkesworth (1989) who, she says, refutes this notion of 'rape-as-text' by making three assertions: 'that rape is real; that to be real means to be fixed, determined and transparent to understanding; and that feminist politics must understand rape as one of the real, clear facts of women's lives' (cited in Marcus 2002, 166): In contrast, she argues to analyse rape through concepts of storytelling and textuality is to risk merely reproducing the he-said she-said dynamic of the court case and thus reinforcing the very discursive practices through which victims are denied justice.

This fear that theorising about rape will only end up with a dystopian scenario in which attempts to gain justice for raped women dissolve into a *Rashomon*-like vision of mere competing textual narratives in which the victim's account is simply one story among many, is one barrier to feminist analysis of the role media might play in reproducing rape culture (another, I would argue, is the fear of appearing naive or pro-censorship). But Marcus (2002) takes issue with this reluctance to discuss the 'culture' in rape culture, arguing that critical theory precisely reinforces 'one of feminism's most powerful contentions about rape—that rape is a question of language, interpretation and subjectivity'. The question of language has been central to feminist interventions into cultures of sexual violence: feminists have asked whose words count, whose 'no' means 'no' and whose doesn't; how men's misinterpretations of women's words are normalised and reproduced through legal institutions; how rape trials 'consolidate men's subjective accounts into objective 'norms of truth' and deprive women's subjective accounts of cognitive value' (Marcus 2002, 168). Feminists have insisted on naming rape as a crime of violence, and on encouraging victims of rape to speak out about their experiences and questioning the contexts in which their stories can and cannot be heard.

The importance of regimes of language, speaking and silencing in breaking through rape culture is borne out in empirical research; for example, Burnett et al. (2009) found that a key component of rape culture on campus was the production of female students as 'muted subjects' through complex social and cultural processes of silencing. These

processes neither originate from the media, nor do media simply reflect social values: instead, the silencing of women is intimately bound up in the lived, embodied and affective experience of women as mediated subjects in late capitalist culture. Women 'have been muted in a multitude of ways, including the methods in which women tell stories, through male-controlled media, in ways women's bodies are portrayed and analysed, and through censorship of women's voices' (Burnett et al. 2009, 469). A meaningful feminist intervention must therefore involve 'language strategies' not simply to overcome this muteness, but to speak out about the experience of being muted. As Marcus argues:

Though some of these theorists might explicitly assert that rape is real, their emphasis on recounting rape suggests that ... actions and experiences cannot be said to exist in politically real and useful ways unless they are perceptible and representable. A feminist politics which would fight rape cannot exist without developing a language about rape nor ... without understanding rape to *be* a language. (Marcus 2002, 168, emphasis added)

To see rape as a language, Marcus concludes, implies an awareness that language is not simply a 'tool that we pre-exist and can manipulate', but that 'we only come to exist through our emergence into a pre-existing language, into a social set of meanings which scripts us but does not exhaustively determine our selves' (Marcus 2002, 172).

Fantasy and Feminism: The Limits of Subversion

GoT is particularly well placed to negotiate questions of the relationship between media and real life, and between representations, lived experience and possible futures, since it is a fantasy text. Fantasy, in LaPlanche and Pontalis' (1986) terms, does not entail a distinction between the imaginary and the material or Real; instead we can think of fantasy in terms of 'psychical reality'; that is, a 'third term' which emerges from the deconstruction of the imaginary/real binary and which is hence not an end in itself, but rather queers those categories. Reading through fantasy means acknowledging the materiality of imaginaries and the imaginarity of 'the real'. As Sara Ahmed (1998) argues:

as the term psychical reality cannot 'resolve' the problematic tension between imaginary and real: rather it traces the problem of how the relation between the 'inner' psychic field and the 'outer' external field comes to be determined as a site of instability and crisis. (1998, 71)

For this reason, the boundary between fantasy and the literary fantastic as genre is slippery: the fantastic elides and confuses our sense of what is 'real' and what is 'imaginary'. As Ahmed suggests, what fascinates is that which cannot be simply placed as inside or outside us, she argues: 'Reading "fascination" in terms of phantasy can lead us from simply being fascinated by the text: instead we may ask, how does fascination (with the other) constitute the implication, rather than the separation, of phantasy and becoming?' (Ahmed 1998, 72). Phantasy 'links the question of the other, with an excess of affect and desire, which causes ripples and movement' (Ahmed 1998, 72).

In reading *GoT* through rape culture and as a site of feminist fascination, then, I am not using fantasy simply to mean texts which are clearly fantastic—that is, that concern dragons. In fact, the literary fantastic has historically spoken to relations of power in specific ways, as I shall show. But it should also be noted that the fantastic as genre merely makes more visible the ways in which *all* images potentially become invested with ‘excesses of affect and desire’. The literary fantastic thus implies a crystallising of the ways in which all texts speak to collective and social structures and simultaneously to structures of power that are experienced as personal and individualised, that are not simply imaginary but that have the potential to reproduce material relations of inequality. This is a central theme in feminist theories of the fantastic in particular. For Rosemary Jackson, any serious approach to the sociopolitical aspects of fantasy must incorporate psychoanalytic theory, since fantasy ‘deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material’ (1981, 6). To use psychoanalysis in this way is no mere literary ‘game’: whilst it allows us to resist reductive ideological interpretation, this does not mean that it cannot reach conclusions that are political. Reading through fantasy enables us to understand what is repressed in culture, and how it returns through the affective engagements, conversations and communities that emerge from our engagement with texts.

In her influential study of the literary fantastic, Rosemary Jackson (1981) addresses the question of fantasy’s relationship to regimes of power. Jackson notes that fantasy is a difficult term to pin down, precisely because of its slippery relationship to the real: in a sense, all imaginative activity is fantastic, since it is through imagination that we experience and explore possibilities that are at once grounded in and materially constitutive of the real. Yet imagination also allows us to go beyond the boundaries of what is materially possible, and it is this aspect of imaginative activity that, for Jackson, unites the loose collection of genres that fall into the category of the fantastic. In this sense, the critical term ‘fantasy’ can be applied to ‘any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation’ (Jackson 1981, 13; although the question of what constitutes ‘priority’ is a problematic one, as I shall discuss). The fantastic is characterised by an ‘obdurate refusal of prevailing definitions of the “real” or “possible”, a refusal amounting at times to violent opposition ... a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility’ (Jackson 1981, 14). Whilst this is not in itself subversive, in the sense of constituting a transformative social politics—as she notes, ‘it would be naïve to equate fantasy with either anarchic or revolutionary politics’, Jackson nevertheless sees an inherent subversive potential in the fanatic’s ‘violation of dominant assumptions’ which, she argues, ‘threatens to ... overturn, upset, undermine rules and conventions taken to be normative’ (1981, 14).

To support this view of fantasy as subversive, Jackson draws on Bakhtin (1973) and especially on the concept of the *menippea* which ‘broke the demands of historical realism or probability’ and whose satirical power—satire here is conflated with subversion—lay in its conflation of past, present and future, its distinctive spatiality (moving between the ‘real’ world, the underworld and the ‘upper’ world), and its use of ‘states of hallucination, dream, insanity, eccentric behaviour and speech’ to speak truths that could not be expressed through conventions of realism (Jackson 1981, 14–15; Bakhtin 1973, 94–96). Bakhtin traces this genre from classical drama, especially the *Satyricon*, to the modern works of Rabelais and others which draw—as *GoT* does—on what we might see as classically ‘transgressive’ themes: descents into figurative as well as literal underworlds in the form of the socially marginalised spaces of the brothel, the prison and the madhouse,

themes of abjection, *grotesquerie* and disgust, and depictions of transgressive sex, criminality, violence and death are all typical (Bakhtin 1973). Given the graphic nature of this literature, it is not surprising that menippean themes can be identified in much of contemporary visual culture: as Robert Rawdon Wilson (2002) sums up, 'The power of very physical images to satirize, or otherwise comment upon, ideas lies at the heart of Menippean satire' (Rawdon Wilson 2002, 308).

While literary theory has tended to see the fantastic as inherently subversive (and feminist) in that it violates prevailing social norms, threatening social order, this subversiveness does not necessarily translate into a transformative politics; indeed, it can be a way of adjusting oneself, through closure, to what might feel like the exhausting impossibility of the egalitarian futures imagined by feminist politics. What is more, what is imagined as subversive is too often revealed, when seen through the lens of intersectional feminist politics, to be reactionary in the extreme. This gives fantasy an ambivalent relationship to feminism: the 'brothel, prison and madhouse' (Bakhtin 1973) are clearly gendered, raced and classed spaces; the question of what is deemed to be abject in a given context is thus a deeply political one. So, too, is the question of how bodies inhabit those spaces: whose body gets to engage in pleasurable and enlightening slumming, and whose does not. In fantasy worlds, as in reality, subversion is often achieved at the expense of the objectification and violation of the female and raced body. Again, this resonates with media discourses about *GoT* as well as about 'real' rape, in which it is the victim's body that is permanently marked, permanently transformed. Traditional fantasy texts propose a space of transgression in which one is free to explore violent sexual urges, but in which social order is finally and reassuringly. In this sense, the notion of 'spoiled' male futures can be read as a moment of rupture in which the expected restoration of the normative heteropatriarchal order fails to materialise: the comforting trope of harmless youthful experimentation, followed by a return to the straight and narrow and to future privilege (albeit leaving a broken woman behind him), is disrupted. The rage and bafflement displayed by some commentators on Steubenville and other cases, and which has its symbolic mirror image in fan disappointment on seeing their favourite character exposed as a rapist, is hence a symptom of the deviation from the expected script that occurs when the sheer weight of publicly available evidence and of outraged feminist voices make it impossible for the reality of rape to be silenced.

'Dragons, Incest and Zombies' or 'but ... the Dark Ages!' Reproducing Rape Culture through Narratives of Un/realness

The scene in question concerns the knight Jaime Lannister, officially the uncle of the king but really his father through an incestuous liaison with his sister Cersei, former wife of the king and now widow and Queen Dowager. At the beginning of Season 1, their incestuous and adulterous relationship (her husband is still alive at this point) is revealed when they are witnessed having sex in a tower by a young boy, Bran Stark: the scene establishes them as corrupt through a grotesquely comic denouement in which Jaime throws the boy from the window with the classically villainous one-liner, 'the things I do for love!' Although he fits the idealised image of the knight/hero, being white, blonde, classically attractive, Jaime is revealed to be a violent coward: we learn that his nickname is 'kingslayer' since he murdered the former king by stabbing him in the back, a classic cinematic trope of anti-heroic failed masculinity. In the world of the series, he is

considered to be a failure, in contrast to his supposedly heroic ancestors: this is exemplified in Season 5, directly before the rape scene, where his son/nephew Joffrey shows him an illuminated manuscript depicting the adventures of the knights of Westeros: whilst the hagiographies of his ancestors take up many pages, his own consists of just half a page of text followed by blank space. As Joffrey puts it, 'somebody forgot to write down all your great deeds' (S04E01). Typically for a Martin storyline, though, the development of this character does not follow the expected trajectory of the fantasy villain. In the books, he is instead put through a lengthy ordeal in which he is kidnapped twice, mutilated (his hand is severed by a kidnapper), and rescued and then is rescued with the help of the female knight Brienne of Tarth, a woman of honour, visually coded as lesbian, who, while she is repeatedly ridiculed as an inappropriate woman, is ironically shown as far more worthy than he of the armour they both wear. Tropes of symbolic castration are an important part of his redemption: first the amputation of his sword hand, and then again when he learns to fight with his left hand, is given a rare and powerful sword, but gives it to Brienne as the worthier knight. His transition from apparently 'evil' killer and attempted murderer of children became the subject of many transformative fanworks, very often focusing on a 'shipping' romance between Jaime and Brienne which centre on his emerging respect for women.

All this was ruined for fans, especially feminist fans, by the inclusion of a particular scene which in a few short minutes turned the character from hero to rapist. As a fan blog published on Slate website summarised:

GoT spent all last season carefully redeeming Jaime Lannister, turning the once villain into something of a hero. Sunday night, director Alex Graves threw that all away. (Marcotte 2014)

The outrage at the perceived violation of readers' expectations, and what was widely perceived as a crystallisation of the show's sexism, was only exacerbated by showrunners' responses. In response to fan demand, the episode's director Alex Graves gave an interview to Denise Martin of *Vulture* (Martin 2014), which was widely circulated online, and in which he appeared at best confused about what contemporary audiences might consider to constitute consent. Claiming that the sex 'becomes consensual by the end', he elaborates:

It's a very, very complicated scene. The thing about it is that Jaime has come home and is trying to convince himself that things are the same: that he and Cersei are a unit, they're in love, they have sex, everything comes out of that bond. ...The consensual part of it was that she wraps her legs around him, and she's holding on to the table, clearly not to escape but to get some grounding in what's going on. And also, the other thing that I think is clear before they hit the ground is she starts to make out with him. The big things to us that were so important, and that hopefully were not missed, is that before he rips her undergarment, she's way into kissing him back. She's kissing him aplenty. (Martin 2014)

As an assurance of consensuality, this is troubling. Graves' explanation of the scene he directed seems nonsensical since to overlook the question of whether a sexual act that begins non-consensually can ever 'become consensual', let alone when one partner is

already physically overpowered. The use of terms like 'stupid' and 'complicated', again, echo the language often used to trivialise rape in contemporary society: boys will be boys.

Discussion of the scene, and Graves' defence of it, quickly became polarised. Defences fell into two categories centring on questions of realness and unrealness, often in the same breath. Some insisted that since *GoT* is clearly fantasy, nothing on-screen should be taken as in any way related to actual reality. Others took what blogger Katherine Don, writing for *In These Times*, called the 'But ... the Dark Ages!' line, 'hiding behind Westeros' as a means of feeling distanced from the show's violence and misogyny (Don 2014). As an example, she cites one fan who claimed, 'this is a fantasy world inspired by medieval times, where the stuff we get offended at now were [sic] commonplace' (Don 2014), suggesting that the events depicted on-screen *are* real, but that they belong to the distant past and are no longer relevant to off-screen experience. Because rape 'would not have been offensive at the time', this reading acknowledges no contradiction in a rapist continuing on the path of redemption (Don 2014).

Paradoxically, others suggested that the rape scene was justified not because it would have happened in an 'authentic' past, but because the series as a whole is clearly unreal. This defence is often a reaction against feminist readings, which are imagined as failing to distinguish between fantasy and reality and are framed purely in terms of offence, as in the following fan comment:

The story as Martin wrote it, is a fictional, fantasy world. It doesn't exist at all! Unlike many shows set in our current world, or the United States. Also, the directors and actors are tasked with bringing to the screen very subtle things that readers can comprehend from the book (Cersei WAS ambivalent about the act), that may be portrayed more forcefully onscreen. You can disagree with how the director interpreted Martin's writing. But to make it about current rape culture is a huge stretch. (Comment posted at Thinkprogress, 21 April 2014)

What is interesting about the reaction to the Lannister rape scene is that there is no question as to whether the imagined world Martin creates in the series is a rape culture: it 'just is'. Certainly rape in the series is 'as taken for granted as death and taxes' (and much more so than the latter). In this exotic world, all forms of criminality are commonplace: gangs of 'rapers'—Martin's curiously whimsical term for rapists in itself implies a sense of distanciation—roam the countryside and the dark alleys of the city, ready to fall upon unwary female travellers. The fate of a high-born woman relies largely on the character of her husband, a dicey proposition in a society where arranged dynastic marriages are the norm. What is more, the conflicting nature of responses to images of rape and incest is demonstrated in the contrast between the Lannister scene, and a subplot depicting the mass abuse and rape of poor women. In this storyline, a homestead of women who have previously been repeatedly sexually abused and impregnated by their now-deceased father and seen their sons murdered, are held captive by a sadistic, lawless band of mutineers who repeatedly rape them. In this scene, the 'mutiny at Craster's keep', the mutineers express the intention to—as their leader puts it—'fuck them till they're dead' (S04E04). But these storylines, which show rape as the act of obviously depraved individuals, mutineers and rebels, have been much less controversial. Sansa's near-rape is shown as the natural consequence of a high-born and beautiful woman who suddenly lacks the protection of a man: the attempted rape is depicted both as the natural result of

her beauty and as the action of literal peasants in the palace, outsiders waging war on privileged, vulnerable white femininity. The Craster women are coded as poor, abused, existing on the edges of society. Rape is overtly classed and implicitly raced, thorough the extreme fetishized whiteness of Sansa, for example. While they are presented as grittily real, then—as integral to the show's claim to historical accuracy in representing the 'Dark Ages'—these scenes work as stories through reproducing the dominant association of rape with the Other, to exotic, foreign and primitive spaces in rapes are committed by socially marginal outcasts, strangers lurking in the dark. The perpetrators are themselves socially marginal figures with no illustrious futures to spoil; indeed, rape is portrayed as the natural consequence of male resentment at *being* socially marginalised. This is fantasy operating at the Bakhtinian level, 'allowing' the audience to wallow in scenes of violence which we would expect to see shut down.³ In fantasy as in life, the rape is intelligible when it happens to 'Others'; further, it is presented as cathartic, even pleasurable, when we get to see the rapist punished or the heroine rescued. What is more problematic is when it happens to a privileged white woman and—crucially—when it disrupts the pleasurable narrative of a white man's redemption, spoiling his transition to a better future. Our enjoyment is spoiled when the 'obviously unreal' spectacle we are seeing comes too close to home, as I would argue the Lannister scene does.

For all the scene's Gothic trappings—the poisoned king, the funeral bier, the guards in suits of fantastical armour—Cersei is raped in her own home, by a family member, and in circumstances where it is possible for both parties to subsequently deny that the rape really happened, where the victim's sexuality is already the subject of censorious gossip (and hence any claim to have been raped is unlikely to be believed) and where justice is unlikely (and in fact where 'book reading' fans already know there will be no justice in the future, assuming that the TV series continues to follow the narrative trajectory established in the books). And it is perpetrated by a likeable character, a man with a future, not just of privilege, but of almost spiritual evolution into a better man. The scene represents a moment of rupture in which the defence of the real, 'of what really happened' in the book, is disrupted by an event that is imagined as 'not really happening' but which is paradoxically seen as shocking precisely because it speaks to a reality of lived experience that is always already in the process of being denied and silenced. This confusion over consent is also played out in accounts of the production process. Stars, showrunners, writers made to account for the scene. It is telling that the actor who plays the victim on-screen, Lena Headey, is made to account for audiences' discomfort. This is most evident in a video interview with Headey, where the word 'rape' is never actually mentioned but only alluded to through euphemism and hints:

GoldDerby: There was a massive scene that *GoT* a lot of talk, not last night but last week on *GoT* involving you and your brother. I guess King Joffrey was around, his cold body was around ... I just wanted to ask, for that scene with Nikolaj, what was your reaction to that scene? When you *GoT* it I read online that you had mixed feelings about that scene. Whether that's true or not I guess you can clear up for us. How did you find, how was your reaction to that scene?

Headey: I think, you know, I don't know if I'd describe it as mixed feelings, that sounds kind of a bit blasé but I ... you know, it's very important to me and I love

Cersei and I...you know, **David [Benioff]** and **Dan [Weiss]** write beautifully for us and **Brian [Cogman]**, and ... there's my phone. (Pantozzi 2014)

The interview continues along these lines, with Headey finally suggesting her character has 'bigger problems going on than the ones everyone's talking about' before concluding that 'I also think, you know, without being too much of a twat about it, we're talking about a show with dragons, incest, babies taken by zombies, you know' (Pantozzi 2014). The 'obvious unrealness' of the fantastic—that is, of fantasy *as genre*—is made to shut down discussion of the scene's relation to off-screen rape culture: feminist readings are by implication conflated with the stereotypical image of both fan and feminist as having excessive negative attachments to texts, of 'reading too much into' what is obviously intended as entertainment. As in 'real life', rape becomes 'that scene': something which is at once dismissed as un-traumatic ('there are worse problems') and yet which cannot be named.

In discussions around this scene, the question of competing notions of the real and unreal, and of what realities get to be represented, is continually posed. Here, the notion of 'real rape' re-emerges and is positioned in opposition to a vision of fantasy as imaginary: either of the text as 'just fantasy' (imagined as 'not real'), but also as a vision of the possible (i.e. as a site of possible utopian feminist futures). This complex interplay between what is seen as imaginary, and the troubling ways in which it is haunted by the real, is troubled still further by what appears to be a widespread confusion as to what actually counts as rape. Most troubling are the comments from some fans that seem to speak to hidden histories of violence. In particular, the notion that a woman might start out by refusing sex but 'eventually' give in and consent seems pervasive, as the following representative comments suggest:

I don't know about you, but I've found that happens sometimes in long-term relationships, ya know? I mean, not what happened in the show, just times where one person is ready and the other's not AT FIRST and it ends up being okay

Exactly! That's why the scene is so realistic to how a majority of rapes occur in our society especially between couples. I mean for years people didn't think it was rape if a husband/boyfriend raped his wife/girlfriend, but a lack of consent is rape and Cersei did not give consent. I think the biggest problem with this scene is the editing and pacing. If the scene had more dialogue from Cersei, showing her becoming more ardent, expressing that it wasn't that she didn't want him, but that she feared being seen, but then finally giving in to her desires the scene would not have been rape.

In these fan comments, other stories briefly surface, gesturing to worrying lived realities in which non-consensual sex is a daily reality which must be negotiated, explained and defended in order not to disappoint or anger a male partner. In this exchange, the idea that it is normal for one partner to essentially badger the other into sex is worryingly taken for granted. Here, sex in a relationship is seen as something one partner demands; the other might 'give in' and 'grant' consent. Male desire is described as overwhelming and uncontrollable: consent consists of giving in. Despite these narratives of real trauma and real suffering, though, other commentators continued to insist that any link between the

events on-screen and real-life violence was purely fanciful, an overreaction attributed to the failure to see fantasy as 'just not real'. In this discourse, enlightened spectatorship consists of a recognition that what is seen on-screen is unreal—both in terms of the production itself as a constructed spectacle, and of the events on-screen as either fantastical (and hence obviously unreal), or authentic but safely located in a past which is assumed to be almost literally 'another country' and which is imagined, optimistically, as neither continuous with nor influencing our present reality.

It is significant, in this context, that *GoT*'s controversial scene concerns not only rape, but specifically incestuous rape. As the literary scholar Elizabeth Barnes points out, the incest taboo is not universal but is socially determined, 'relative to time and culture' (2002, 1). As such, it represents 'the mysterious, vexing, sometimes ungovernable but always undeniable power of kinship ties and their widespread ramifications for individuals and society' (2002, 1); historically, changes in the social status of incest have coincided with debates over patriarchal power, and specifically over the control of women's bodies (2002, 6–7). As such, it is an abiding theme in literature and has been an important focus for feminist scholars whose works focus on the cultural meaning of trauma. Feminist psychoanalytic theory turns to literature as well as lived experience as a way of understanding trauma, since 'literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing' (Caruth 1996, 3). Like trauma itself, which becomes available only through 'discursive practices of testimony', literature 'eschews "truth" in favour of a symbolic representation of experience': literature (a term which I understand to encompass media texts and fan works) at once reveals traumatic experience, and conceals it: it 'tells without telling' (Barnes 2002, 2). The literary study of incest sharpens our awareness of trauma as a social and cultural, as well as a personal, experience: representations of incest function like traumatic memory: by displacing the traumatic experience in the form of myths and stories, they 'tell without telling' (2002, 2), embodying a culture of silencing in which women's experience of incest, having been made unreal and thus unspeakable, must 'speak' through figurative language, through 'the politics and poetics of euphemism' (2002, 7). Further, victims are frequently portrayed as being aware of the painful and destructive consequences of truth-telling just as to speak out about rape is to risk stigmatisation and victim-blaming (for spoiling a man's good name and annihilating his future), to speak out about incest is to risk being held responsible for the destruction of the family: a dilemma that is heightened in *GoT* where power is reproduced through dynastic privilege. As with rape itself, it is this silenced trauma that, I would argue, is made to speak precisely through the elaborately distancing visual language of fantasy.

Conclusion

Following Sarah Projansky's argument about the function of stories we tell about rape, I have argued that the complex and interconnected feminist and fan responses to sexual violence that circulate in mediated social spaces need to be read as constructing and emerging out of individual and social psychic realities. By placing a single media representation of rape in the context of a wider mediated and material set of feminist debates, I have examined the expectations and investments that fans place in fantasy texts, in particular the expectations we place on fantasy texts, and the potential for debate that emerges when these generic expectations are refused. The *GoT* rape represents a

potential rupture in the text on-screen, but also in the wider metatext that is rape culture. In puncturing the reassuring fantasy that the people of Westeros are 'not real' and 'not like us'. The series' depiction of incest and rape, I have argued, cannot be separated from a wider contemporary culture in which debates around media representations of sexual violence and issues of consent and rape culture are the subject of massive popular debate, and which has also, not coincidentally, seen unprecedented speaking out about historical sexual abuse in institutions, including media institutions. At the same time, they are coded in a way that speaks back to heroic and romanticised narratives of consensual incest: that is, they are at once located as wholly fantasy figures (their incest is 'symbolic' and has nothing to do with contemporary discourses of abuse, trauma and harm), *and at the same time* (since they are popular television characters and not figures from myth) located in present-day feminist debates about the media depiction of rape as well as a wider cultural understanding of the violence involved in silencing subjects of abuse in institutions, including the family. Jaime's characterisation seems incidentally to speak powerfully to the limits of the symbolic in transforming real conditions of gendered power; in this sense, his symbolic castration functions as a 'representation within the representation': whilst it might usher in a personal transformation in that the character 'feels like a changed man', this inner change does nothing to destabilise what remains a deeply patriarchal society, nor even to prevent him becoming (or perhaps continuing to be) a rapist. Jaime's war and castration trauma, which finds its outlet in the form of introjection through his rape of his sister (when they 'become one'), opens a space of potential speaking out which is immediately subject to silencing. But this textual silencing is overturned by the immediate outpouring of debate, critique, intervention and speaking out that followed. In reading *GoT*—by which I mean not just the 'finished' text on-screen but a metatext in progress—as fantasy text then, I am arguing that the series becomes a site of struggle; a space of potential opening up of feminist debate, but also of violence, backlash and closure. In all this, the constant agonising over whether *GoT* is feminist or anti-feminist feels like the wrong question. Since media and culture are so entangled, I have argued that it is more productive to think about the ways in which feminist interventions might be made into the violent discourse that constitute rape culture and rape myths, as well as about the possibilities for silenced voices and bodies to speak and be heard. This is not to suggest that digital media are necessarily liberatory; indeed, my analysis has shown that they have just as often provided a space for rape myths to circulate more aggressively and more widely than ever. But feminist responses to popular culture are now a highly visible part of the story. Aside from the question of whether this particular show is feminist or sexist, then, the most enduring liberatory fantasy offered by *GoT* originates not in the text itself but in the responses to it: the dream of a future without rape. Like all truly subversive fantasy, this is not simply an unreal fairy tale, but an image of a potential future which, with collective investment and organisation, may yet become reality.

NOTES

1. A clip of the scene can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msFQLHdkmt0>. Note that this is entitled 'Jaime forces Cersei into sex'—the 'r word' is not used.

2. Although belief in this form of social mobility usually turns out to be misguided: both main characters who make their living in this way are later murdered: one is strangled by her lover, the other brutally tortured to death.
3. In fact, this closure is exactly what happens; both scenes end with the arrival of heroic male rescuers. Sansa is rescued by the knight Sandor Clegane, and Karl is wounded by one of his victims but the death blow is dealt the heroic Jon Snow, who stabs him through the back of the head with his sword: although we know that stabbing in the back is considered anti-heroic in the *GoT* universe (in fact Jaime is seen as villainous precisely because he has used his symbolic phallus in this deviant way, penetrating the mad king in the back), Snow is coded throughout as a character to root for: Karl, we are encouraged to think, has *GoT* what he deserved (a reading which resonates with another common trope in contemporary rape culture, the notion that the rapist will himself be raped in prison—penetrated from behind against his will—and that this somehow constitutes justice).

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