

# BREAKING

# THE

# WHEEL

With fantasy kingdoms, dragons, and enthralling plotlines full of political intrigue, *Game of Thrones* has become a blockbuster cultural phenomenon. Its explicit scenes of sexual violence, however, have left the series open to accusations of misogyny – so how do female viewers continue to enjoy the show? *By Renyi Lim*

If, like me, you start cheering when the month of April rolls around every year, I'm guessing you're one of several million people eagerly awaiting the newest season of HBO's vastly successful *Game of Thrones* television series, with its twists and turns, compelling characters, and razor-sharp dialogue.

So popular has this adaptation of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels proved that 8.11 million Americans tuned in to watch this year's final episode of Season 5—the show's largest audience so far

—while in terms of illegal downloads, it's been the most pirated TV show over the past three years (torrents of *Mother's Mercy* were estimated to have hit the 10 million mark).

It's not a series for the faint of heart: when *Game of Thrones* was first launched, it was marketed as Tolkien-esque fantasy with added sex and violence, and the show has continued to deliver on that promise, to the point that explicit content has almost become a trademark of the series. Personally, I don't mind the odd sword fight or nude courtesan —heck, I whooped like a Dothraki



Cersei's rape and downfall was the subject of many feminist observations.

when Daario Naharis dropped trou in Season 4 – but as a female viewer, there’ve been moments when I’ve shifted uncomfortably in my seat, namely due to the show’s portrayal of sexual assault.

There is, I should point out, an awful lot of rape that takes place throughout the labyrinthine storyline – so much so that one fan made a statistical breakdown of the number of acts of sexual violence in

both the TV series and the books. In five television seasons, she counted 50 rapes and 29 rape victims, while the books have so far amassed a staggering 214 rape acts and 117 victims.

It’s worth noting that every rape victim in the TV series has been female, with only one male character – Theon Greyjoy – ever experiencing the threat of sexual assault. No one ever said that the show was going to



Daenerys is one of the strongest female protagonists in the series

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be a Disney cartoon – George R.R. Martin’s fictional world is a brutal, frightening one where no character’s safety is ever guaranteed – but it seems that in the game of thrones, you win or you die... And if you’re a woman, there’s a chance you’ll be raped as well.

### **UNBENT, UNBROKEN?**

“Everywhere in the world, they hurt little girls,” were Cersei Lannister’s words in Season 4 – a statement that reverberated throughout this year’s episodes, in which we witnessed (warning: here be spoilers) Shireen Baratheon being burnt at the stake by her father, Myrcella Baratheon’s poisoning, Gilly’s near-rape at the hands of two men of the Night’s Watch, Ser Meryn Trant’s physical and sexual abuse of underage girls at a Braavosi brothel, and perhaps

most controversially, Sansa Stark being raped by her sadistic new husband, Ramsay Bolton. Although there was (sensibly) no nudity involved and the camera focused entirely on Theon’s face as he looked on in horror, you could still hear Sansa’s moans of fear and pain.

**T**o many viewers, it was the season’s most flagrant cheap thrill, designed to shock and outrage its audience. The backlash following the episode honed in on the fact that Sansa’s story is entirely different in the books (by rights, she should have remained safely by Petyr Baelish’s side in the Vale), with some fans accusing the series’ writers of using rape to spice up the plotline of a major female character – and not for the first time, either. “I wish that ‘deviating from the books’ didn’t translate to ‘find excuses to sexually assault all the women’. Shame,” wrote one viewer, while another asked, “What purpose does constantly raping or threatening to rape the female characters *Game of Thrones* serve? It’s lazy writing and disgusting.”

“I do not think that rape is used to develop character arcs for women on *Game of Thrones*. Rather, they appear more to develop the character arcs of men,” says Professor Valerie L. Garver, Director of Undergraduate Studies and Associate Professor for

the Department of History at Northern Illinois University, where she teaches the honors course on *Game of Thrones*, Television and Medieval History.

“**S**ansa’s rape appeared more to advance Theon’s character development. The way the camera cut to Theon at the end of the scene made it seem as though the point of the rape was to start the transformation of Reek back into Theon. For this reason, I found it the most egregious rape in the series so far, and I think the show overstepped boundaries in the ways it depicted this rape and its aftermath. Using the rape of a woman solely to advance male character development is repugnant, in my opinion.”

## WALK OF PUNISHMENT

Stepping in to defend the series shortly after Sansa’s rape scene was aired, George R.R. Martin reasoned, “If you’re going to write about war... 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.”

It could be argued, however, that *Game of Thrones* does its job a little too well in that regard by highlighting sexual violence against women so often that it tends to lapse into

more than once appeared to capitalise on its boundary-pushing reputation by displaying the humiliation and degradation of women onscreen.

“Part of HBO’s brand is to depict sexual and violent content that American viewers would rarely see elsewhere on television, so it makes sense that the show runners depict some of Martin’s brutality quite

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prurience, rather than depicting rape for the sake of showing how destructive and damaging it is. Quite the opposite of denying the existence of sexual violence, the series has

graphically,” states Professor Garver. “That said, I do think they went too far in a few cases, letting the camera linger too long on scenes of sexual violence in ways that made them seem voyeuristic and not only included to advance plot and character development.”

In five years, we’ve watched Brienne of Tarth coming close to being raped by Roose Bolton’s men, the repeated assault of the women at Craster’s Keep by men of the Night’s Watch (with the extremely questionable decision to include full female nudity in the scene), the semi-nude corpse of the prostitute Ros following her torture and death by crossbow, and one of Ramsay Bolton’s paramours being hunted down and torn apart by a pack of dogs.

**M**ost tellingly of all, Cersei’s walk of penance – an excruciating four-minute scene in Season 5’s finale where her character is shaved, stripped naked, and forced to walk through King’s Landing while



Cersei’s walk of penance was excruciating to watch

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being mocked and spat on by a jeering crowd – tiptoed the increasingly fine line between a faithful dramatisation of the books and shock-jock style television.

The other issue at hand is that *Game of Thrones* has made a habit of changing consensual sex scenes into ones that involve rape, most notably during Season 4, when it depicted the rape of Cersei by her twin brother, Jaime. In *A Storm of Swords*, the passage has Cersei enthusiastically taking part in the liaison, whereas the series shows her pleading with her brother to stop, while Jaime repeatedly tells her, “I don’t care.”

It begs the question: what is there to be gained from creating additional rape scenes? Or, for that matter, what does the repetition of so many scenes of sexual violence achieve? It’s completely understandable that viewers are becoming increasingly tired of rape being revisited again and again. When sexual assault seems like an almost inevitable fate for any female *Game of Thrones* character, it’s not only unpleasant – it’s frustrating and reductive.

## THE WARS TO COME

So why, then, is it worth watching the series if it approaches sexual violence from such questionable angles? What appeals to me most, personally, is how fascinating it is to see how every female character manages to survive in the deeply patriarchal societies of Westeros and the lands around it. Within systems that favour male-preference primogeniture and largely insist on rigid gender roles, there are rebels like Arya Stark, Brienne, and Yara



Even Sansa Stark was not left unscathed in this brutal saga

Greyjoy who work hard for their independence.

**C**lever, witty Margaery Tyrell and her formidable grandmother Olenna are wonderfully adept at working a biased system to their advantage. Daenerys Targaryen grows in strength as she embraces her role as a ruler and a leader, asserting both her sexual and political agency as she progresses. Sansa – in the face of Ramsay’s abuse – also refuses to remain a victim, throwing herself from Moat Cailin as a final act of resistance. *Game of Thrones*’ women are by turns flawed,

brilliant, complex, and above all, many actively defy the assumptions and expectations placed upon them.

With the end of Season 5, we step off the precipice of the books and into as-of-yet unwritten territory, where book readers and television viewers have no idea what fate befalls each character next. This is a chance for series’ writers to take its female characters in plenty of exciting new directions, with plotlines that are far more worth engaging in than the sordid tactic of ‘too hot for TV’ rape. I’ll be watching next year – and I’ll be hoping that the cycle of sexual violence for entertainment’s sake will have ground to a halt by then. **mc**