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"I Am No Man": Éowyn and Game of Thrones' Lyanna Mormont

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INTRODUCTION:

While some Tolkien fans have famously voiced rather vociferous reservations concerning what they deem to be uncanonical portrayals of female warriors in the Jackson film adaptations (in particular Tauriel and Arwen), the opposite is true of the fandom of *Game of Thrones*, the HBO adaptation of George R.R. Martin's ongoing novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. In particular, the character Lyanna Mormont – a prepubescent girl who has a single off-screen action in the novels as published (thus far) – became one of the most popular minor characters of the later seasons due in part to her unequaled ability to shame male characters several times her age into action through her strong example. Indeed, her heroic death in the largely panned final season of the series was deemed both true to the plotline and character, and emotionally engaging and satisfying for the viewer.

I argue that the success of the television series' portrayal of this character (as well as fan reception of Arya Stark's unexpected vanquishing of the dreaded Night King) was due in large part to the writers' ability to simultaneously capitalize on fan-favorite actions of Éowyn in Tolkien's source material while avoiding less popular aspects of Peter Jackson and company's depictions of both Éowyn and the original character Tauriel in their film adaptations.

ÉOWYN AND THE DANGERS OF ADAPTATION:

Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride (2007, 35) argue that Éowyn is "Tolkien's most complex female character." Indeed, as is evident in the various posthumously published drafts of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien experimented with a wide variety of possibilities for this character, including having her die at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields (*WoR* 355, 359, 365). It is no wonder, then, that this character has been much analyzed in the scholarly literature (e.g. Donovan, 2015; Enright, 2015; Fife, 2006; Fredrick and McBride, 2007; Linton, 2015; Rawls, 1984; Smith, 2015), and fans awaited Miranda Otto's portrayal in the Peter Jackson film trilogy adaptation with hopeful anticipation.

While theater audiences often broke out in enthusiastic cheering at her defeat of the Witch King, upon thoughtful reflection of the translation of the character to the big screen numerous critics and fans took issue with Jackson's vision for the White Lady of Rohan, including the highlighting of Éowyn's

unrequited romantic feelings for Aragorn. Blogger MerryK (n.d.) notes that despite Éowyn's expanded screen time in the adaptation, she comes across as

one of the most damaged characters in the adaptation.... In the book, she is the frozen lily, proud and cold and strong; in the movie, it's hard to imagine a more softened version. She's warm and friendly, blushing insecure, and the object of slapstick-ish humor at one point [her inability to cook].

Jared Canfield (2017) similarly opines that Jackson's "Reducing Éowyn to Rapunzel" is one of the "worst changes from the books to the movies." Specifically, he terms her mooning over Aragorn "a gross oversimplification of Éowyn's character. In the books, she briefly falls for Aragorn because he represents the antithesis of her dying uncle. He is a vision of strength and leadership, the kind of king she wishes her ailing uncle could be."

An example of an important change in dialogue from the book to film centers on Éowyn's questioning of Aragorn's decision to abandon the Muster of the Rohirrim and instead seek the Paths of the Dead. In the book Éowyn listens to Aragorn's rather vague explanation and asks to ride alongside him, being "weary of skulking in the hills, and wish[ing] to face peril and battle" (*ROTK* 57). Aragorn chides her, reminding her that her duty lies with her people, which she rejects, being "a shieldmaiden and not a dry-nurse" (*ROTK* 57). She laments her fate, asking if she will "always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return," reflecting stereotypical expectations of women in our Primary World as well as Tolkien's sub-creation (*ROTK* 57). Aragorn grimly warns her that if the men do not return from battle "there will be need of valour without renown, for none shall remember the deeds that are done in the last defense of your homes. Yet the deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised" (*ROTK* 58). In the words of Jared Canfield (2017), Éowyn immediately "has a conniption and essentially accuses him of being a sexist pig." Tolkien frames it somewhat more poetically, but no less emphatically:

All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death. (*ROTK* 58)

Mariah Huehner (2015) of *The Mary Sue* blog notes that Éowyn is not only

calling him out for sexism, she lays out *why* it's sexist and does a pretty damn fine job of distilling down the lot of women in this culture.... That's very powerful, especially in a series that deals a lot with the trappings of war and glory from a distinctly masculine point of view.... Because although she thinks she's in love with Aragorn she has no problem telling him he's completely full of shit. Full of sexist shit, in fact.

When pushed by Aragorn, Éowyn admits that instead she fears a “cage” and to “stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire” (*ROTK* 58). In Jackson's adaptation, much of the powerful dialogue is abandoned (the comment about the cage and references to “food and beds” moved to scenes in *The Two Towers*). Instead, film Éowyn is seen “pleading with him out of love, giving a lot of doe eyed looks, and generally being deferential instead of defiant. It undermines her character's strength and feminist bent” (Huehner, 2015).

A second important example is Éowyn's defeat of the Witch King. In the source material she is bold and fearless, to the point of astounding the hobbit Merry who only then learns the true identity of the Rohan fighter Dernhelm. Indeed, Éowyn laughs at the Nazgul with a voice like a “ring of steel” before she resolutely proclaims to her enemy “But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless!” (*ROTK* 116). Her helm falls from her head, revealing her golden hair, and when the Nazgûl's terrible pterodactyl-like steed attacks her, “she did not blench: maiden of the Rohirrim, child of kings, slender but as a steel-blade, fair yet terrible,” easily decapitating the fell beast (*ROTK* 117). She bravely faces down the menacing Witch King, “tall and threatening, towering above her,” and suffers a mighty mace blow that shatters her shield and her arm (*ROTK* 117). Although she stumbles to her knees, she keeps her wits about her, and when Merry calls out her name after stabbing the Witch King behind the knee, she musters her strength and delivers the fatal blow. It is interesting that in one of Tolkien's experimental revisions, the Witch King loses his power once his steed is destroyed, giving the victory completely to Éowyn (*WoR* 365).

In the film, Éowyn cleaves the head off the fell beast but is then caught by the throat by the Witch King (Lawrence Makoare), who chokes her until Merry (Dominic Monaghan) stabs him, the wound severe enough to make the Nazgûl drop to his knees. It is only after Merry's intervention that Éowyn reveals her identity to her enemy. She pulls off her helm, releasing her long golden hair, and simply offers “I am no man” before delivering the fatal blow (*The Return of the King*). Huebner (2015) observes that film Éowyn is “terrified, which is understandable,” but argues that Jackson gutted Éowyn's “amazing speech” from

the novel, again delivered without fear as she “stands up to only the second most awful creature in the series.... Grown men cower at the sound of his voice. He stabbed Frodo at Weathertop. He even freaks out Gandalf.... I think you lose a lot of important nuance by oversimplifying it to ‘I am no man’.”

MerryK (n.d.) agrees, describing Jackson’s Éowyn as “wide eyed and panicked, just managing to survive on nearly pure luck (once again stripped of any good lines).” Further frustration has been voiced by fans concerning the aftermath of the Witch King’s death in the extended edition of *The Return of the King*. Éowyn is seen crawling around the battlefield, searching for Merry, but is instead spotted herself by Gothmog (Lawrence Makoare), an orc lieutenant she had previously injured. She is only saved when Gimli (John Rhys-Davies) and Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) kill the orc without ever seeing Éowyn. Heuhner (2015) complains that the orc isn’t “even in the same category of terrifying as the Witch King. He’s completely beneath her as a foe at this point... he exists so that Aragorn can kill him and ‘save’ her, without actually knowing he did so.” The only apparent point of the scene is to reinforce Aragorn’s role as hero at the risk of undermining Éowyn’s tremendous victory. Canfield (2017) concurs, complaining that “Éowyn’s incredible accomplishment is needlessly blunted by a crawling competition.... the creature’s presence isn’t established to give Éowyn another heroic moment, but to allow Aragorn to kill him and save the day, along with the damsel who Peter Jackson himself put in distress.” Éowyn therefore serves as our archetypal example of how an adaptation of a strong female warrior from the printed page to visual media can disappoint fans if it is perceived to be watered down or softened.

Tauriel: Compounding the Errors

Yvonne Tasker and Lindsay Steenberg (2016, 181) argue that “the warrior woman avatar is a screen onto which the spectator/reader/player projects their desires and what the avatar suggests is a crystallization, perhaps a feminist one, for narrative power and visual presence.” They describe the “desire for the nostalgic woman warrior” as “pervasive and complex,” so much so that medievalist fantasy “almost requires her,” offering the original character of the elf warrior Tauriel (Evangeline Lilly) in Peter Jackson’s trilogy adaptation of *The Hobbit* as a prime example (Tasker and Steenberg, 2016, 181).

While the inclusion of a warrior woman might have been expected by the audience of any generic medievalist fantasy film, the Tolkien fandom was visibly polarized in their response to Tauriel. Surveys of film audiences by Carolyn Michelle and her collaborators revealed “a striking degree of animosity... hatred and loathing of Tauriel,” along with “Expressions of unveiled anger and intense disdain.... Tauriel was variously described as ‘horrible’, ‘a travesty’, ‘a fabricated

Mary Sue elf', 'the Jar-Jar Binks of *The Hobbit*', 'one of the worst invented characters – EVER', 'a mistake' and a 'train wreck of a character'" (2017, 209). Specific criticisms of the character centered around her being "poorly written, unnecessary, contrary to canon and a 'distraction' from the main story that 'destroyed' the plotlines of other main characters," including Kili (Aidan Turner), Legolas (Orlando Bloom), and Bilbo (Martin Freeman) (Michelle et al., 2017, 209). Robin Reid's analysis of style markers in fan responses to Tauriel include pejorative phrases such as "Mary Sue"¹ and "politically correct character" which "represent larger and ongoing debates in fandom that reflect the cultural debates over gender and representation (2015, 3).

It is undeniable that Tauriel (1) is not a canonical character and (2) was "inserted into an otherwise dominantly male group of characters" (Kartal, 2014, 172). Esma Kartal (2014, 172-73) opines that "Tauriel could have been included only as a warrior, and not as a romantic interest... the only provider of romantic relief in the film." She is particularly critical of Jackson's gender reversal of Kili as "the lad in distress.... It is almost as if Kili has been sacrificed so Tauriel can save his life – multiple times" (Kartal, 2014, 172-73). As unexpected fan interest in the minor original character in the original film trilogy dubbed Figwit (Bret McKenzie) by fans demonstrates, it is not simply the insertion of original characters that is the issue (Elvy, 2020). The problem here is that Jackson establishes the importance of his original character at the expense of the agency of the canonical characters. Emily (2018) adds in a post on *TolkienBlog* that Tauriel's "swooping in to save the Dwarves from the spiders also undermines Bilbo's heroism" by robbing Bilbo of this important signpost in his character development.

Blogger Rebeccakul (2016) also points out the stark contrast between Tauriel's own agency in the second and third films. In the former Tauriel is "a great warrior, a means through which to explore Elven racism, a woman motivated by curiosity about the world and desire to protect it" while in the latter she is solely "motivated by love of Kili" (Rebeccakul, 2016). She also criticizes the superficiality of the love story, noting that "Tauriel and Kili were not in love with each other. They were in love with the idea of each other.... These people

¹ Reid (2015, 3-4) defines "Mary Sue" as a "dismissive term in fandom for an original female character that is perceived as a self-insert in fan fiction, an implausibly perfect and beautiful character with whom the main male characters all fall in love and who is an idealized version of the fan writer." The online debate over Tauriel's identification as a "Mary Sue" is particularly vociferous. At the end of her third lengthy blog post on the topic, Becca Edney (2015) comes to the conclusion that "in all my years of literally studying these beasts, she is one of the worst examples I've ever seen." On the contrary, Angela Highland (2013) calls "bullshit on this, unless somebody can demonstrate to me that Tauriel bears a suspicious physical resemblance to either Bowens or Walsh, or unless you can support the idea that del Toro and Jackson are trying to express their inner redheaded elf warriors here."

had two short conversations. They did not walk through fire together, or fight side by side. They just didn't know each other" (Rebeccakul, 2016). She observes that the fundamental problem with the love story was "the way it took over Tauriel's plot.... In *The Desolation of Smaug*, she was cooler than Legolas. But in *The Battle of the Five Armies*, she's not cooler than anybody" (Rebeccakul, 2016).

While the invention of strong warrior women characters in *The Hobbit* films was already expected to satisfy the common trope, the paucity of female characters in Tolkien's source material makes it perhaps more urgent. Janet Brennan Croft (2015, 8) agrees with Robin Reid's interpretation of Tauriel as the "'moral center' of the film in reference to her opposition to the Elvenking's isolationist policy in the face of a broadening threat to all Middle-earth," but also calls her out as a "rather blatant ploy to attract a female audience," especially the creation of the Tauriel-Kili-Legolas love triangle. When asked about the "uproar from Tolkien purists" concerning Tauriel, Peter Jackson offered that the discussion should "forget hardcore Tolkien fans" and instead focus on the "nine-year-old girl who goes to the movie and she's delighted that there's a character she can relate to," admitting that this "was a very cold-blooded decision" (Suskind, 2017). Angela Highland (2013) argues for the importance of such representation, not for a "lifelong Tolkien nerd" but "a young, impressionable girl who might be on the verge of deciding that SF/F is really awesome."

It should be noted that the invention of Tauriel was not the first example of Jackson expanding women's roles in his films, a "form of revisionism for contemporary audiences" (Viars and Coker, 2015, 39). In addition to expanded screen time for Éowyn (although, as previously explained, at the expense of some of her most powerful book dialogue and overall agency) we have a controversial much-expanded role for Arwen. This includes co-opting the elf lord Glorfindel's role in rescuing an injured Frodo from the Ringwraiths. Arwen (Liv Tyler) was also planned to have taken an active combat role among the Elvish forces at the Battle of Helm's Deep, "before fan outcry necessitated her return offstage" (Viars and Coker, 2015, 39).

In their audience polls of *The Hobbit* films, Michelle et al. demonstrate the dangers of conflating audience expectation for strong women with a perceived need for romantic relief. In particular, when asked to "identify one change they would make if they could, 22.6% of DoS [*The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*] and 14.6% of BotFA [*The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*] respondents identified changes explicitly related to Tauriel and the love triangle" (Michelle et al., 2017 207-8). Evangeline Lilly acknowledged ahead of the release of *The Desolation of Smaug* that the fans' opinions of her character would range from excitement to utter rejection, but noted that in her opinion "Tauriel fits perfectly in that world" created by Jackson and co-writers Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens (Rottenberg, 2013). If this is true, then fan condemnation of Tauriel also speaks to

larger issues of overall dissatisfaction with the Jackson worldview of Middle-earth.

GRRM AND JRRT:

Another fantasy series adaptation that has been clothed in controversy is that of George R.R. Martin's ongoing novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. *ASoIaF* currently consists of five published novels – *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005), and *A Dance with Dragons* (2011) – and the long overdue planned volumes *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*, along with an ever-increasing library of prequels and other ancillary materials. The novels were adapted by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss for HBO as the hit series *Game of Thrones*, which aired for eight seasons in 2011-9. Martin has openly named Tolkien a “gigantic influence” on his writing, especially the shocking death of Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Pearson, 2019). The same is apparently true of Benioff and Weiss, given the ease with which Cooper Hood (2019) of ScreenRant compiled a list of “10 Times *Game of Thrones* Stole from *Lord of the Rings*.” These include parallels between Jon Snow's (Kit Harington) and Frodo's (Elijah Wood) wounds that do not completely heal, Samwise Gamgee (Sean Astin) and Samwell Tarly (John Bradley), the Iron Throne and the One Ring as dangerous physical manifestations of corrupting power that must be destroyed through fire, Jon's and Gandalf's (Ian McKellan) return from the dead, and Jon and Aragorn as foster sons whose true heritage must be kept secret.

While much has been written about the novel series and its HBO adaptation's inclusion of strong female characters, perhaps even more has been penned concerning stereotypically negative depictions of such women, including numerous instances of rape and attempted rape (Frankel, 2014; Gjelsvik and Schubart, 2016; Liedl, 2017). Among the most vociferous criticisms of the HBO adaptation's already controversial eighth and final season concerned the apparent descent of Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) into utter madness as she solidified her claim to the Iron Throne through the spilling of innocent blood.² Valerie Frankel (2014, 184) perhaps best sums up the depiction of women in Martin's universe as both “empowering” and “problematic.”

While Jackson and his collaborators were working with a completed primary text written by a deceased author, Benioff and Weiss were faced with an incomplete novel series and a living author who could both collaborate and complicate issues. Martin was initially confident that he could publish the sixth and seventh novels before the series covered the extant material: he was wrong. In

² See Barbara Yauss, 2020, for a detailed discussion.

what is perhaps the greatest understatement in popular culture, Martin admitted “I should have gotten the last two books out sooner” (Hibberd, 2020, 231). Faced with the reality of the situation, the showrunners received a crash-course in Martin’s vision for the fate of his major characters and set off to write the remaining seasons on their own.³ Canonicity is therefore a fluid concept in the Martin fandom.

D.B. Weiss admits that the “differences between the show and the books became difficult to track in parallel. It’s almost like George was in a weird science fiction movie trying to keep two similar-but-different universes in his mind at the same time” (Hibberd, 2020, 236). Some of the showrunners’ choices were certainly widely panned by fans, especially concerning the final season (some of which will perhaps be retconned by Martin’s future novels – assuming he completes them). However, the televisual adaptation of the ladies of House Mormont was simultaneously creative and true to the spirit of the source material.

THE LADIES OF HOUSE MORMONT:

In the *ASoIaF* novels Maege Mormont becomes the leader of Bear Island after her brother, Jeor Mormont, joins the Night’s Watch (becoming the Lord Commander on the Wall) and Jeor’s son, Jorah Mormont, flees Westeros and becomes a mercenary rather than face execution as a slave trader. Maege Mormont has five daughters – Dacey, Alysane, Lyra, Jorelle, and Lyanna – who all use her family’s name. The identity of their father is never revealed, nor is the father of Alysane’s son and daughter. Common lore (repeated by Jeor and Alysane) is that the Mormont women have taken bears as lovers (*ACoK* 103, 125; *ADwD* 608).

Maege is described as a “stout” and “hoary old snark, stubborn, short-tempered, and willful” (*AGoT* 574, 783) who has no trouble informing Robb Stark, to whom she has sworn her fealty, that he “was young enough to be her grandson, and had no business giving her commands” (*AGoT* 574). She and her four oldest daughters proudly serve in Robb Stark’s forces during his ill-fated attempt to attain the Iron Throne, described as not only “dressed in mail like a man” but as being “more comfortable, both as warriors and as women” than the far more famous woman warrior of Martin’s universe, Brienne of Tarth (*AGoT* 574; *ASoS* 623). As the leader of her people, Maege is part of Robb’s war council and offers advice alongside her male equals. When the lords pledge fealty to Robb rather than Renly or Stannis Baratheon (the brothers of the deceased King Robert, who themselves have claims on the Iron Throne), Maege is third to stand and

³ Martin ceased writing show scripts after season 4, citing a need to “focus on finishing his novels” (Hibberd, 2020, 234).

swear her allegiance to “The King of Winter!,” laying her spiked mace on the table (*AGoT* 796).

While Maegh and her four eldest daughters survive the battles of Robb’s campaign, Dacey, one of Robb’s personal guards, is killed in the infamous slaughter known as the Red Wedding. The “lanky six-footer who had been given a Morningstar at an age when most girls were given dolls” is killed by an ax to the stomach, dying alongside Robb, his mother, and many members of the northern Houses loyal to Robb (*AGoT* 697; *ASoS* 702). Although Dacey was certainly able to fight openly as a woman and win renown in her own right (as Éowyn desperately wished to do), there was little noble or meaningful about her death.

At present in the novel series the whereabouts of Maegh and her daughters Lyra and Jorelle is uncertain, apparently only known to the remaining members of the family (*ADwD* 608). Ten-year-old Lyanna is the regent of Bear Island. Her sole action in the novel series thus far has been to send (from off stage) a curt reply to Stannis Baratheon’s request for the Houses of the North to join him in a campaign to oust the Boltons after their takeover of the Stark family home, Winterfell: “*Bear Island knows no king but the King in the North, whose name is STARK*” (*ADwD* 58). However, House Mormont changes its tactic afterwards, as the “ferocious” She-Bear Alysane Mormont – “short, chunky, muscular” with “big thighs, big breasts, and big hands ridged with callus” who slept in her ringmail (*ADwD* 606) – leads a force on Stannis’s behalf from Bear Island in burning the invading Greyjoy ships of the Iron Islands and capturing another strong warrior woman, Asha Greyjoy (*ADwD* 516-17).

By all accounts, the women of House Mormont are depicted as brave, tough, and wily in the novel series. While the members of this family are perhaps exemplars of this trope, it is explained twice in the novels (*ASoS* 630; *ADwD* 608-9) that the women of Bear Island are generally well-versed in weapons and fighting, because they have needed to be: their island is vulnerable to attack from both the Iron Islands and the Wildlings, and the men are frequently away at sea fishing. Dacey proudly explains to Catelyn Stark that their home gate has a carving of a “woman in a bearskin, with a child in one arm suckling at her breast. In the other she holds a battleax” (*ASoS* 630). Alysane is less glib, explaining to Asha Greyjoy “What we are is what you made us. On Bear Island every child learns to fear krakens rising from the sea” (*ADwD* 609). This practicality echoes a scene in Peter Jackson’s *The Two Towers*, in which Aragorn comes upon Éowyn swinging a sword in private. He is both impressed and somewhat surprised at her skills. She grimly shares that the “women of this country learned long ago, those without swords can still die upon them.”

In summary, the three older women of House Mormont are fully-fleshed out minor characters in the novel series, while the youngest is only known by her grit at standing up to Stannis and the middle two are known by their names alone.

All represent examples of strong women warriors without a hint of romantic relief to be found. Faced with the mammoth page and character counts that are the hallmarks of Martin's series, it was necessary for Benioff and Weiss to eliminate and combine plotlines and minor characters. The Ladies of House Mormont are one such example.

LYANNA MORMONT, INTERNET SENSATION:

The roles of the six ladies of House Mormont are compacted down to two in the HBO adaptation, Lyanna and Maegh. Irish actress Elizabeth Barnett portrays Maegh Mormont in a non-speaking role in three episodes of Season 1, seen in the background of several scenes involving Robb Stark's (Richard Madden) failed campaign for the Iron Throne. Only the eagle-eyed novel fan would be aware of her presence. Her death in battle is confirmed in a statement by Lyanna (Bella Ramsey) in the first episode in which she appears, Season Six's "The Broken Man." D.B. Weiss admits that Lyanna was supposed to appear in a single scene, in which she would confirm the fealty of her House to House Stark, but once they had met actress Bella Ramsey they "realized that we would not be doing our jobs if we kept her as a one-scene character" (Gemmell, 2019). This is yet another vast understatement in the GoT universe, as Ramsey's powerful and nuanced portrayal of this "pint-sized powerhouse" (Daley, 2019) led this "10-year-old bundle of sass and badassery" (Guillaume, 2016) who "stole every single scene she was in" (Guillaume, "Lyanna 2017") being quickly and widely praised in social media (including countless memes). For example, she was crowned "the BADDEST BITCH IN THE SEVEN KINGDOMS (after Arya Stark)" (Guillaume, 2019) and "the new QUEEN OF THE NORTH" (Guillaume, 2016). Jenna Guillaume of *BuzzFeed* perhaps put it best when she enthusiastically proclaimed "If she had three dragons the war would already be over.... In short: Just make the whole damn show about Lyanna Mormont" (Guillaume, 2017).

Interestingly, Ramsey describes herself as being "petrified" when her first episodes were released, "expecting people to hate what I'd done and not like Lyanna.... I was very shocked people liked my performance" (Lawrence, 2019). Although she only appeared in eight episodes over Seasons 6-8 (along with being mentioned offscreen in Season Five when Stannis Baratheon (Stephen Dillane) receives the same bold refusal she had offered in the novels, plus as a corpse on a funeral pyre in another episode), Lyanna became an unequivocal fan favorite.⁴

Lyanna first appears in Season Six's "The Broken Man," in which Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner), Jon Snow, and Davos Seaworth (Liam Cunningham) visit the various Houses of the North trying to cobble together a coalition of troops to

⁴ See, for example, Katerina Daley, 2019.

first remove the Ramseys from Winterfell and then protect the North from the inevitable invasion by the White Walkers.⁵ The three adults enter Lyanna's receiving room and try to hide their shock over such a small girl sitting in a seat of power. She is flanked by her trusted advisors, including a wise maester (Louis Rolston). Jon and Sansa awkwardly attempt to win Lyanna over with small talk and flattery, but the Lady of Bear Island curtly cuts them off and wants to know why they have come to see her. Jon reminds Lyanna of her message to Stannis and asks for her House's allegiance now that Stannis is dead. Lyanna consults with her maester in whispers, as one would expect for such a momentous decision, but the irreverent sass of her reply (referencing Jon's bastardry and Sansa's two forced marriages) is nearly enough to make the viewer choke on their beverage: "As far as I understand, you're a Snow and Lady Sansa is a Bolton. Or is she a Lannister? I've heard conflicting reports" ("The Broken Man").

Having knocked her visitors off balance, Lyanna demonstrates wisdom beyond her apparent years, noting that the Starks actually seek the allegiance of her troops; after her mother's death, and the death of untold numbers of Bear Island warriors in Robb's failed campaign, Lyanna is completely justified in asking "why should I sacrifice one more Mormont life for someone else's war?" ("The Broken Man"). Both Jon and Sansa have no answer for this, but fortunately Ser Davos intervenes. Speaking to Lyanna plainly, honestly, and from the heart, Davos explains that the war against the White Walkers is everyone's problem. When her maester tries to whisper advice to her, Lyanna curtly waves him off with a simple raise of her small hand. She has come to her decision: House Mormont will continue to offer the same faith they have done for the past millennium (similar to the treaty of understanding between Rohan and Gondor). Indeed, she personally leads the sixty-two fighting men she has to offer to the muster site.

As described in the *Game of Thrones Wiki* (n.d.), "Despite her young age, Lyanna is shown to be a competent, effective, and intelligent leader, in sharp contrast to the psychopathic and sadistic Joffrey, [and] timid and passive Tommen." Lyanna demonstrates her savvy when she is one of the handful of lords to accompany Jon and Sansa to their parley with Ramsay Bolton (Iwan Rheon) in "Battle of the Bastards." Although Bella has no speaking lines in this scene, the scowl on her face directed towards Ramsey when he offers to pardon all the Northern lords if Jon surrenders is described by Michael Nordine (2016) of *Indie Wire* as a "stink eye" even more memorable than her introduction; indeed, it launched an avalanche of memes.⁶

⁵ The entire scene can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=541_5cz5fvA.

⁶ Examples include <https://imgflip.com/i/16x4sg> and <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/344243965259454751/>

Lyanna is not seen in the battle itself, and presumably stays behind at camp, helping to protect those who are not taking part in the battle. Such an action would parallel Éowyn remaining at Edoras in the novel when Théoden and his men leave for battle against the host of Isengard (and the resulting Battle at Helm's Deep). She is selected for this duty because she is trusted by the King, her uncle, as well as the people (*TT* 127-28). It would be logical for Jon Snow to make a similar tactical request of Lyanna Mormont, someone who could be trusted to protect those remaining at the camp with her very life, as well as engender the respect of any remaining citizens of the North should the battle turn against House Stark. One could also argue that the turning of the tide in the Battle of the Bastards in the Starks' favor with the unexpected arrival of troops from the Vale (thanks to Sansa's foresight) parallels the arrival of Gandalf and reinforcements at the Battle of Helm's Deep.

After the Battle of the Bastards Lyanna is among those present at Winterfell in the Season Six finale, "The Winds of Winter." The assembled men – including knights of the Vale, lords of the North, and free folk from beyond the Wall – squabble amongst themselves about how to proceed, until Lyanna rises and publicly dresses by name down three men two to three times her size and four to five times her age:

Your son was butchered at the Red Wedding, Lord Manderly, but you refused the call. You swore allegiance to House Stark, Lord Glover, but in their hour of greatest need, you refused the call. And you, Lord Cerwyn, your father was skinned alive by Ramsay Bolton. Still you refused the call. But House Mormont remembers. The North remembers. We know no king but the King in the North, whose name is Stark. I don't care if he's a bastard. Ned Stark's blood runs through his veins. He's my king from this day until his last day. ("The Winds of Winter")

Here Lyanna echoes the actions of her mother in the novels in supporting a Stark's claim to the throne of Westeros, but with the added gravitas of being the first, not the third, to so proclaim fealty, as well as supporting a (presumed) bastard heir to the rule of the North.⁷

In the Season Seven opener "Dragonstone" Lady Lyanna attends a meeting of Jon Snow's allied forces alongside the other House leaders. When Lord Robett Glover (Tim McInnerny) balks at Jon's orders that everyone over the age of ten be trained for combat, regardless of sex, Lyanna once again singles him out by name for a public scolding: "I don't plan on knitting by the fire while men

⁷ At this point in the series, viewers who had avoided widely circulated (correct) speculations on the Internet were unaware that Jon Snow was, indeed, not only a true-born Stark but a Targaryen as well.

fight for me. I might be small, Lord Glover, and I might be a girl, but I am every bit as much a Northerner as you.... And I don't need your permission to defend the North. We'll begin training every man, woman, boy and girl on Bear Island" ("Dragonstone"). Here we see similarities to Éowyn's speech in *The Return of the King* calling out Aragorn's sexist assumptions about the proper role for women in a time of war. But as we will observe in a later episode, she goes even further than Éowyn, firmly reminding those close to her of her right to openly fight alongside her people, for her people.⁸

When Jon is summoned south by Daenerys Targaryen regarding a potential alliance, Lyanna openly questions his decision to leave the North in this crucial time, as war with the undead White Walkers is nearly upon them. Jon responds that they need reinforcements if they are to succeed, and journeys with his trusted adviser Davos, leaving a Stark on the throne in his stead, his half-sister⁹ Sansa. The lords are troubled when Jon returns with Daenerys Targaryen in the Season Eight opener, "Winterfell," especially as it is clear that Jon has "bent the knee" to her and recognized her as his Queen. But once again it is only Lyanna who dares to openly question Jon:

Lyanna – Your grace. But you're not, are you? You left Winterfell a king and came back a – [she pauses, then her tone turns to clear disappointment] I'm not sure what you are now. [The assembled men murmur] A Lord? Nothing at all?

Jon – it's not important

L – Not important? We named you King in the North. [Men cheer]

J – You did, my lady. It was the honor of my life. I'll always be grateful for your faith. But when I left Winterfell I told you we need allies or we will die. [Lyanna sits down] I have brought those allies home to fight alongside us. I had a choice. Keep my crown or protect the North. I chose the North. ("Winterfell")

Lyanna's trademark sass once again made her the darling of social media (Tang, 2019). But more importantly, in her too public questioning of Jon's tactics we can see reflections of Éowyn's softer, more private, but no less earnest questioning of Aragorn's plan to take the Paths of the Dead.¹⁰

⁸ It is also notable that in Jackson's adaptation of *The Two Towers* it is only the boys and old men who are added to the fighting force at Helm's Deep, not women of any age.

⁹ Actually cousin.

¹⁰ The analogy is even stronger for fans of Martin's novels who are familiar with the prophecy of the Prince That Was Promised (a prophecy that was somewhat downplayed in the HBO adaptation) and its potential connection with Jon Snow; just as Aragorn alone has the blood-right

On the eve of the battle with the White Walkers Jorah Mormont (Iain Glen) argues with his much younger cousin Lyanna (who is also his legal ruler), trying to convince her to avoid the battle and instead shelter in the crypts below Winterfell because she is “the future of our house” (“A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms”). It is obvious that he (rightly) believes he will die in the battle, leaving Lyanna the sole heir of their House. Éowyn is in the same position if her brother Éomer should fall in battle. Again, in Tolkien’s source material Éowyn is intentionally left in charge at Edoras while her uncle King Théoden leads his forces against the army of Isengard; instead they fight from a defensive position at Helm’s Deep, with refugees from the Westfold naturally gathering in the protective caverns on their own.

In the film adaptation both Theoden’s seat at Edoras and the Westfold are purposefully emptied in favor of sheltering at Helm’s Deep, with Éowyn helping to gather the women and children. She protests to Aragorn that she is “to be sent with the women into the caves... to mind the children, to find food and bedding when the men return” (*The Two Towers*). While Aragorn sees honor in this, Éowyn does not; nevertheless, she relents and obeys the requests of her King and uncle to refrain from battle (but for the last time). Lyanna utterly rebukes her cousin’s suggestion that she cower in the crypts,¹¹ noting she has trained “my men, women, and children. I have fought before. I can fight again.... I will not hide underground. I pledged to fight for the North and I will fight.” Jorah nods, realizing that he cannot win this battle (“A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms”). Lyanna therefore leads her people openly in their final battle, given a station of honor defending the courtyard of Winterfell standing at the front of her troops.

In the novel, Éowyn leads the people of Rohan from Edoras (and elsewhere) to the Hold at Dunharrow, where they shelter in expectation of widespread war. The Muster of Rohan’s troops meets there as well before their final push to the aid of Gondor. Éowyn is expected to remain there as the regent of her people, and ultimately leader if the men should fall in battle. Instead, as blogger Darwin (2015) notes, we witness Éowyn “abandon her post and her duty by riding off to war in disguise. Great good (as well as sorrow) comes of it, as it [sic] sometimes the case when people do wrong.”¹² Of course, the greatest of these goods is her destruction of the Witch King. Lyanna manages a similar feat in her final stand in the Season Eight episode “The Long Night.”

to summon the Dead to his side, it is possible that Jon Snow is in a unique position to fight the undead White Walkers. See Kim Renfro, 2017, for more information.

¹¹ As the battle ultimately demonstrates, the crypts provide scant safety for the women and children sheltering there.

¹² The “Was Éowyn a deserter” thread on the Planet Tolkien message board takes up this discussion in detail (<https://www.planet-tolkien.com/board/13/2794/0/was-%C3%89owyn-a-deserter-.html>).

Among the undead forces that break through the Winterfell defenses is an immense wight giant (Ian Whyte). Lyanna holds her ground against the onslaught but is swatted aside by the beast like an inconsequential insect. She charges the behemoth, who crushes her in his hand like a malevolent King Kong, but she still manages to stab him in the eye with a dragonglass blade, killing him. Lyanna quickly succumbs to her wounds, but dies knowing she succeeded in taking down an enemy of supernatural power.¹³ Perhaps this would have been Éowyn's fate if Tolkien had decided to accept one of his many aforementioned rewrites of her character. With the death of Jorah Mormont in the same battle (dying in defense of his one true love, his Queen, Daenerys), House Mormont has come to an end, its honor (unlike its bloodline) intact.

Bella Ramsay was uncertain about how to play her death scene, whether Lyanna “would be really scared or just a slight bit scared.” Director Miguel Sapochnik offered to her that “It’s like someone removed her fear gene,” which was the direction the actress needed to deliver a fan-pleasing swansong for her character (Hibberd, 2020, 376).¹⁴ Again, compare Lyanna’s bravery in the face of certain death and novel Éowyn’s laughter of bravado against the Witch King with the criticized weaker depiction of film Éowyn. As noted by some fans (Celia, n.d.; Knoepfler, 2019), Lyanna’s death scene parallels Éowyn’s killing of the undead Witch King. But I argue that it is precisely the derivative nature of this scene¹⁵ (in a series already infamous for its not-so-subtle borrowings from Tolkien) that sets up the overwhelmingly positive fan response, despite the demise of a beloved character. Indeed, Esther Zuckerman (2019) goes so far as to term it the “most satisfying ‘Game of Thrones’ death ever,”¹⁶ making it an interesting example of borrowed canonicity. In the words of *The Telegraph*’s Rebecca Hawkes (2019), “Long live fighting like a girl.”

PROVING THE POINT: ARYA AND THE WITCH NIGHT KING

Lyanna’s noble death also prepared the audience for the climax of the episode. A final showdown between Jon Snow and the so-called Night King (Vladimir Furdik), the leader of the White Walkers, was all but given in “The Long Night,” especially in light of their previous run-ins. However, since the Night King is not a canonical character in Martin’s books, the showrunners of the HBO adaptation

¹³ The scene is the final piece of this “Greatest Hits” compilation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TQLEurtSFk>.

¹⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdSJA81mTP8> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mWXOLo-0Uc> for examples of audience reactions.

¹⁵ Sans the Tolkienian eucatastrophe.

¹⁶ See, for example, Tom Wood (2019).

had complete freedom to develop any plot twists they wished concerning his character (Hibberd, 2020, 377). Maisie Williams, who plays Arya Stark, and Kit Harington simultaneously discovered that it would be Arya Stark and not Jon Snow who would ultimately take down the Night King during the cast table read of the episode (Hibberd, 2019). According to Harington, when the readthrough reached the point where Arya saves Westeros by stabbing the supernatural enemy with the same Valyrian steel dagger that had been used to try and assassinate her brother, Bran (Isaac Hempstead Wright), back in Season One, and she herself had used to kill the dastardly Lord Littlefinger (Aidan Gillen) in Season Seven, “it got a huge f—king cheer” (Hibberd, 2019).

Showrunner David Benioff later explained that the dagger “had been set up from the very beginning.” Drawing upon a tag line that had been long associated with Arya, Benioff added “‘What do you say to the god of death?’ Well, the Night King is the closest embodiment to the god of death” (Hibberd, 2020, 377). There is also an interesting parallel between the supernaturally created Night King and the Witch King, who had been corrupted by Sauron using the rings of power. This parallel is even starker (no pun intended) in Season Eight, as the Night King rides an ice dragon (the zombified corpse of Viserion, one of Daenerys’ three dragons), similar to the Witch King and his winged fell beast steed.

Harington admits he was shocked that his character was not given the satisfaction of killing the Night King, but understood that it was in keeping with Arya’s training as an assassin over many seasons. Interestingly he opined that he thought it would “frustrate some in the audience that Jon’s hunting the Night King and you’re expecting this epic fight and it never happens.... There’s also something about it not being the person you expect. The young lady sticks it to the man” (Hibberd, 2019). This action of taking the presumedly deserved hero moment away from the leading male warrior is precisely what Rebeccakul (2016) wishes Peter Jackson would have done with Bolg (John Tui), the orc responsible for Kili’s death: “If Tauriel had killed Bolg in vengeance, it would have taken Legolas’s hero moment away—but I still wish the writers had made that decision instead.”

Although the plot twist was a well-deserved victory for Arya Stark, her portrayal initially fell into a pattern all-too-familiar to female academics (and others), imposter syndrome (Langford and Clance, 1993, 495). Williams became concerned with potential fan reactions; as she explains it “I immediately thought that everybody would hate it; that Arya doesn’t deserve it.... And then I told my boyfriend and he was like, ‘Mmm, should be Jon though really, shouldn’t it?’” (Hibberd, 2019). A full analysis of these gendered responses is beyond the scope of this paper; suffice it to say that the fandom’s response was, generally

speaking,¹⁷ the exact opposite of what Harington and Williams' boyfriend expected. Christina Tucker (2019) of *Elle* called it "the most badass kill we've seen on this show in a long while" with Mehera Bonner (2019) of *Cosmopolitan*¹⁸ succinctly describing it as "ARYA. SAVED. THE. DAMN. DAY." Christopher Rosa (2019), writing for *Glamour*, admitted "I have goose bumps." Bonner (2019) correctly noted that in response to the huge plot twist "the internet is fully committed to freaking out all night."¹⁹ Again, the Night King's unexpected death at the hand of a woman echoes Éowyn and the Witch King in palpable ways, connections the fans clearly picked up on it.²⁰ For example, an Imgur post by Sonam (2019) opining "I feel a lot of female characters in today's episode was inspired by Eowyn" includes screen caps of the deaths of the Witch King and Night King at the hands of women warriors. Sonam's comparison with film Éowyn is interesting. Indeed, there is much that is visually similar between the two scenes, including Éowyn being caught by the throat just as Arya had been. However, as we have argued, the film's adaptation of Éowyn is, in palpable ways, watered down from the books. A comparison between novel and adaptation fans in both fandoms therefore might reveal interesting trends concerning their reception of female warrior characters.

CONCLUSION: KINDRED SPIRITS

David Benioff of the HBO adaptation reflects that he and his staff

don't get bonus points for being strictly faithful to the books. It doesn't give us anything extra. For every decision, if there's a fork in the road and the fork to the left is strictly adhering to the books and to the right is

¹⁷ A hypothesis emerged on Reddit by user Applesoapp claiming that Jon actually deserves credit for the Night King's death because Jon distracted the Wight Dragon (https://www.reddit.com/r/gameofthrones/comments/birt01/spoilers_jon_screamed/). While Kat Stoeffel (n.d.) of *Elle* compared it to "another man getting outside credit for minimum effort on the group project," it actually parallels the Matilda Effect in science, where men routinely get credit for work done by women colleagues, associates, and assistants (Rossiter, 1993, 325).

¹⁸ It is interesting that many of the online articles cheering on both Lyanna Mormont and Arya's killing of the Night King appear on websites sponsored by magazines associated with a female audience (including *Elle*, *Teen Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Cosmopolitan*). See the References list for specific examples.

¹⁹ Many compilation videos of audiences at public viewing parties cheering Arya's victory can be found on YouTube, for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKnBEfDC2zU>.

²⁰ There are a number of memes online that crudely photoshop Arya and the Night King into the Witch King's death scene in the Jackson film. See, for example, <https://rapturefilms.tumblr.com/post/184529318100/arya-and-%C3%A9owyn-are-both-badass> and https://www.reddit.com/r/freefolk/comments/bimv4t/arya_stark_eowyn_confirmed/.

what's better for the series, we're always going to take that path to the right. (Hibberd, 2020, 230)

But in some instances both forks not only point in the same direction, but also align with well-loved aspects of Tolkien's universe. Such is the case with the strong women warriors of Lyanna Mormont and Arya Stark, who owe much to the path blazed by Éowyn. Indeed, Lyanna and Arya are 21st century versions of Éowyn. Tasker and Steenberg (2016, 175) praise the HBO adaptation of Martin's novel series in one regard, their "commitment to showing female characters as psychologically complex," and that "women warriors are framed as warriors and leaders, with varied skills and resources." Co-showrunner D.B. Weiss points out that in the Battle of Winterfell

we see Lyanna stand with her men right in front of the main gate of Winterfell so that they are the first point of contact should the White Walkers manage to breach the castle walls.... We knew that you can't give a big death to everybody who dies in this battle because it would have been too much.... But they also understood why we needed to give one of the strongest smaller people in the show a chance to go out taking down one of the strongest larger things we've ever seen in the show. (Gemmil, 2019)

When asked for her favorite aspects of Lyanna's character, actress Bella Ramsey offered "I like how strong she is — mentally, physically, personality-wise. I like how she sticks up for what she believes in, no matter the cost or the consequences. I really admire her confidence, how she can just stand up without flinching in front of all those people" (Paiella, 2019). She referred to Lyanna as a "kindred spirit" with the more classically stereotypical woman warrior in the series Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie). While they are worlds apart in physical prowess and strength, Ramsey explains that both of these women "are sticking up for what they believe in and proving that girls can be just as strong as boys, women can be just as strong as men" (Paiella, 2019). Ramsey offered that in completing her role on the series she will miss the "opportunity to stand up in front of a load of grown men and shame them" that Lyanna offered. More seriously, she reflected that "I think playing confident characters also helps with your own confidence. Say you're in a situation where you're feeling anxious or nervous — you can become a character and work through it that way" (Paiella, 2019). Perhaps this is the true enduring legacy of strong warrior women such as Lyanna Mormont, Arya Stark, and the novel version of Éowyn, and precisely why Tauriel and film Éowyn fell flat in the minds of some fans. There is something to be said for teaching women to be more like the former group of strong women,

and less like the latter group, in terms of self-reliance, belief in one's self, and what to do when others dare to question their strength.

Abbreviations:

ACoK: Martin, *A Clash of Kings*

ADwD: Martin, *A Dance with Dragons*

AGoT: Martin, *A Game of Thrones*

ASoS: Martin, *A Storm of Swords*

FotR: Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

TT: Tolkien, *The Two Towers*

WoR: Tolkien, *The War of the Ring*

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