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**Shakespearean Echoes**  
**in the Characters of *Game of Thrones***

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B.A. in English Studies

2019/2020 Academic year

June 2020

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## Introduction

William Shakespeare is considered one of the most influential writers in English literature and is also one of the most quoted ones in history. His plays and characters have inspired many other authors and he is still being studied nowadays. Moreover, his work has been adapted numerous times, and has been used as source material for projects such as movies or TV shows, which keeps his stories alive for contemporary audiences. He was a very prolific writer: he wrote 39 plays, 154 sonnets and two long poems. Among his plays there are comedies, history plays and tragedies, and this thesis will focus on two of the latter: *Othello* (1603) and *Macbeth* (1606).

The American TV series *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) has been one of the greatest shows of the last decade. As Sarah Hughes states in an article for *The Guardian*, it “closed out the decade as the most popular show on earth, averaging more than 25 million viewers per episode”.<sup>1</sup> Its popularity comes from the depiction of a society filled with betrayal, plotting and court intrigue that resembles the historical period of the War of the Roses (1455-1487). It breaks with the idea of the invincible, good-hearted hero who defeats the villain in the end, because beloved characters die unexpectedly. This makes the audience realise that *Game of Thrones* has nothing to do with the expectations one may have for the fantasy genre.

The series is an adaptation of the book saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*, written by American author George R. R. Martin. He has stated on many occasions that he was inspired by many great authors when writing it, such as J. R. R. Tolkien, H. P. Lovecraft or even the previously mentioned William Shakespeare. He specifically talks about the War of the Roses and, considering that the Bard’s history plays mostly dealt with this period, it makes sense that he got inspiration from him. Christine Caparras states that “Martin explained that he drew inspiration from real historical events as well as fictional works that are also set in the medieval era. He dropped the name William Shakespeare, and said he finds *Richard III* a fascinating play. He says that it has played a part in influencing his own writing”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Hughes “Game of Thrones: How It Dominated the Decade – Then Lost Its Way,” *The Guardian*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/dec/30/game-of-thrones-best-tv-2010s>

<sup>2</sup> Christine Caparras “‘Game of Thrones’ Author George R.R. Martin Reveals the Inspiration Behind His Books Like ‘Winds of Winter’,” *International Business Times*, August 7, 2015.

In order to discuss the role that Shakespeare had in the TV show *Game of Thrones*, two characters from the series will be analysed here: Cersei Lannister and Petyr Baelish, also known as Littlefinger. These two villains present clear connections with two of Shakespeare's characters: *Macbeth's* Lady Macbeth and *Othello's* Iago, respectively. There are clear Shakespearean echoes in these two characters that will be discussed by comparing their actions and performing a close reading of their dialogues in their respective works. The similarities and the differences between them will be examined to provide a more extensive view in the characterisation of all of them.

To approach characters, it is necessary to define what they are and how they are perceived by the readers. Characters, "through the power of identification, through sympathy and antipathy, they can become part of how we conceive ourselves, a part of who we are".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, they tend to be as realistic as possible so the reader can relate to them more easily and see them as real entities with feelings and motives that resemble their own. Furthermore, both Shakespeare and Martin give more importance to their characters rather than to the plot. That is, the plot is shaped around the characters and how they are going to behave. They carry the weight of the story and shape the way it will turn out with their decisions and actions. Also, the four characters that will be analysed here have villainous tendencies, so the way both authors present villains and how they characterise them is worth noting.

Martin stated in an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald*: "I have always been a dark writer. If you look at the stuff I was writing before. I prefer the term realistic. I prefer to work with grey characters rather than black and white".<sup>4</sup> His characters are neither good nor bad. They all have different sides to them, which makes them very human-like. Therefore, it may be hard to discern whether they are villains or heroes, and it is up to the reader to decide what he or she perceives them to be. In turn, Shakespeare also created multi-layered and complex characters that come across as realistic, but their nature is not as difficult to define as those from Martin. They have an

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<https://www.ibtimes.com/game-thrones-author-george-rr-martin-reveals-inspiration-behind-his-books-winds-2043366>

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Bennet & Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 63.

<sup>4</sup> George R. R. Martin, "A Conversation with *Game of Thrones* Author George RR Martin," interview by The Geek, *The Sydney Morning Herald* August 1, 2011. <https://www.smh.com.au/technology/a-conversation-with-game-of-thrones-author-george-rr-martin-20110801-1i6wj.html>

either good or evil core that will motivate their every decision and action throughout the play. There are some characters that may be more difficult to pin down as heroes or villains and for which interpretation does make a difference. However, they mostly follow a delimited path and will face the end they are expected to: if a character has behaved wrongly, they will most surely pay for it.

Maurice Charney dedicates a whole book to this subject. He says that Shakespeare's villains "establish an elaborate network of evil – what constitutes the world of the play– in which the good characters must function"<sup>5</sup> and that sometimes they eclipse the main hero. Therefore, Charney puts a great emphasis into the villain's role, implying they have more agency than the heroes and that they shape the narrative and the fates of the other characters. Furthermore, this author proposes a list of features that most of Shakespeare's villains share: they are exceptional liars and manipulators, they consider committing murder or even do so, they act without taking into account the opinions of others, they follow their will and do as they desire to do without considering the consequences, they do not believe in a higher power, they desire to be believed and praised by the audience and they tend to be misogynistic.<sup>6</sup> There are exceptions to these characteristics, as they are purely generalisations that help readers understand where Shakespeare believed evil to reside. However, they do exemplify the way in which Shakespeare created his characters and how he aligned them with either heroic or villainous tendencies.

All in all, both authors create complex characters that resemble real people and that make audiences see them as more than mere parts of a work of literature. However, George R.R. Martin's characters fluctuate in the scale of good and evil, never being fully one or the other, whereas William Shakespeare's are more polarised although still realistic and relatable. This will be exemplified in the analysis of the previously mentioned characters from both authors that will take place in the following sections.

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<sup>5</sup> Maurice Charney, *Shakespeare's Villains* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

## 1. Female Empowerment, Agency and Evil: Lady Macbeth and Cersei Lannister

Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* deals with ambition and the consequences of attaining power through corrupt means. The nobleman Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, meets three witches who prophesy his rise to the position of King of Scotland. With the assistance of his wife Lady Macbeth, he plots the murder of King Duncan to reclaim the future they believe to be theirs. This unleashes chaos, madness, and a bloody ending, as it frequently happens in Shakespeare's tragedies. The character that will be analysed in this section is Macbeth's wife, who helps and motivates her husband into doing the sinful deed that will bring upon their downfall. As Charney says in his book *Shakespeare's Villains*, "Lady Macbeth is not a villain in her own right, but we need to think of her as the enabling factor in the murder of the King".<sup>7</sup> Therefore, she does not really have the characteristics or the importance in the play that a true villain would have, but she does have some evil traits that will make her the detonator of the murder.

Lady Macbeth is presented as the partner of the main character, the one to persuade him into the path of sin. She is an active figure during Act I and Act II, but after the murder of King Duncan her importance in the play lessens. However, her sleepwalking scene takes place during Act V and it is one of the most important moments in the play. Lady Macbeth is thought of as the epitome of the bad woman, the one to lead the man into temptation. Although she is not able to commit the murder herself, she is, however, responsible for manipulating her husband into doing it.

The witches' prophecy is crucial, as it sets the plot into motion. They tell Macbeth that he will become Thane of Cawdor and eventually King of Scotland, and they also tell Banquo that even though he will not be king, his children will. When Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor briefly after that, he believes the prophecy to be true, so he sends his wife a letter in which he informs her about this. In it, Macbeth refers to his wife as "my dearest partner of greatness",<sup>8</sup> making her an equal by his side and showing that his ambition is also hers. From the beginning, she is already positioned as a strong woman who shows a determination that is not expected of her sex and rank. She tosses aside the idea of the docile wife who serves her husband diligently, making herself the instigator of ambition and action for him. Charney also comments on this part of the

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<sup>7</sup> Charney, *Shakespeare's Villains*, 70.

<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, "Macbeth", in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Milton Creek Editorial Services, (New York: Quarto Publishing Group, 2014), I.5, 861-862.

play: “What is remarkable about Lady Macbeth’s long soliloquy in this scene is her uncanny insight into the mind of her husband. She fears that his compassionate temperament will prevent him from committing murder”.<sup>9</sup>

Said soliloquy takes place after Lady Macbeth has read her husband’s letter, in which he tells her about the prophecy. The moment she receives the news, she starts plotting and planning the path that they must follow to attain the crown. She already knows what must be done and she will do whatever is necessary to convince her husband of committing murder. She states: “that I may pour my spirits in thine ear; / and chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round, / which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem / to have thee crown’d withal”.<sup>10</sup> In this scene, she proves that she holds power over Macbeth. She exerts her own agency and she shows her own ambition, her wish to become queen. Munro dealt with this idea of her influence on her husband in the following way:

She knew his strength and weakness, his hopes and fears, and with a skill that is almost demoniac, and too horrible to conceive as existing in a woman, the weaker vessel and ministering angel, she played upon his nature with as much ease as if she were fingering the strings of her native harp.<sup>11</sup>

He makes it seem like her power is not proper for her sex, as if in being able to control a man, she has already sinned. Therefore, her villainy is not in her actions *per se*, but in the fact that it is a woman performing those actions, and not a man. There is, however, a part of her power that comes precisely from her being a woman, as she used Macbeth’s honour to convince him by contesting his masculinity. It seems that she is considered as bad as her husband and just as responsible for the murder even though she did not kill him.

Lady Macbeth believes that, in order to follow her plan, she has to leave her femininity behind and assume a masculine role to ensure she will have the cruelty and violence that is needed to murder the King. This can be seen when she says: “Come,

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<sup>9</sup> Charney, *Shakespeare’s Villains*, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare, “Macbeth”, I.5, 862.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Munro, “Lady Macbeth: A Psychological Sketch” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 21, 1 (1887): 31.

you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here; and fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood, stop up th'access and passage to remorse".<sup>12</sup> Here, she expresses that her female attributes will not let her fulfil the deed, so she requests that she is made stronger and more cruel so she can endure the consequences. She wishes to dispose of her conscience so she can continue with her life and enjoy being queen. However, she is not strong or cold-blooded enough to show no remorse and, eventually, guilt catches up with her.

In the end, as it is a Shakespearean play, Lady Macbeth pays for her actions. It may not be clear whether she is considered a villain or not, but she did act wrongly, and she will have to face the aftermath. Her guilt for taking part in the deed leads her to madness. This can be seen in Act V, when we encounter her most famous scene (the sleepwalking), in which she confesses her sins and the impossibility of redemption in her own eyes. She is already paying for her dark thoughts and her part in the murder, but this is only the beginning. She is talking to herself: "Here is the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand".<sup>13</sup> This implies that she will never be rid of her guilt and that no matter what she does, her conscience will not let her be free. That is why, in the end, it is implied that Lady Macbeth takes her own life.

We learn of this by a third person who explains what happened to her, which separates the audience from the action, but it is still heart-wrenching to know. Malcolm, in the last speech of the play, says "his fiend-like queen, / Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life".<sup>14</sup> By killing herself, she finally puts her conscience to rest and pays for her sins. Moreover, there is a clear change in her role next to Macbeth, as she started the play being his "dearest partner of greatness"<sup>15</sup> and now she is referred to as "his fiend-like queen".<sup>16</sup> Their relationship fluctuates throughout the play, as they go from being partners in search of the same objective, to being alienated by their guilt and suffering. R. S. White explains this in the following way:

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<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare, "Macbeth", I.5, 862.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., V.1, 880.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., V.8, 884.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., I.5, 861.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., V.8, 884.



We can see Lady Macbeth as wholeheartedly committing herself to the values which the play's language links with masculinity and violence. It is she who was steadfast throughout the murder night, and who gallantly covered up for her husband's erratic behaviour at the banquet. It seems all the sadder, then, that she becomes increasingly estranged from Macbeth, unconsulted by him, particularly since at the beginning they acted so cooperatively in a deadly but genuine team.<sup>17</sup>

Completely alone with her thoughts and her remorse and unable to harden herself as she had wished before, Lady Macbeth saw a way out of her pain, and she took it. However, she died dishonourably, suffering a far worse fate than her husband. It seems like she must pay for more than him, purely because she has exerted a power that was not hers. She was taking a more masculine role by controlling the one who supposedly had to control her.

The character from *Game of Thrones* that is compared here to Lady Macbeth is Cersei Lannister. They share many characteristics and go through similar paths throughout their storylines. To begin with, Cersei is the daughter of a powerful lord, Tywin Lannister. She, like Lady Macbeth, is part of the nobility of a society that follows medieval social norms. Therefore, even though she belongs to the powerful part of society, she is a woman and has little control over her life. This can be seen by the way her father treats her, as he betrothed her to Rhaegar Targaryen first, and then to Robert Baratheon when the former died. He used her to gain power and made her a pawn in his game without taking her opinion into account.

Cersei is the eldest daughter of the Lannister family and has two younger brothers: her twin Jamie and Tyrion, the imp. Her mother died giving birth to Tyrion, which made Cersei resent him profoundly and treat him as if he was not part of her family. Being the only female meant that she was the only one that could be used to create connections to other powerful families through marriage. She married king Robert Baratheon and birthed three children: Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen. However, even though she may seem to have complied with her father's and society's

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<sup>17</sup> R.S. White, *Ambivalent Macbeth*, (Australia: Sydney University Press, 2018), 93.

expectations of what a woman should be, these children are the result of an incestuous relationship with her twin brother Jamie. By doing so, she has reclaimed some sort of control over her life.

It is clear that Cersei always resented the role that she had to play purely because she had been born a woman, as she tells Sansa Stark during the siege of King's Landing: "When we were growing up, Jamie and I looked too alike, I never understood why we were raised differently".<sup>18</sup> Besides, she confronts her father when he forces her to marry Loras Tyrell, as she tells him she would "burn our house to the ground before I let that happen".<sup>19</sup> She is willing to sacrifice everything by telling the world about her incestuous relationship before being forced into a marriage that she does not want once again. Revealing this secret would mean that her children would be declared illegitimate and she would lose the throne, her reputation, and her power. However, she confronts her father and tells him she will not comply, straying away from her expected role once again.

In the book *Queenship and the Women of Westeros*, Cersei is described by Kavita Mudan Finnas "a woman fighting tooth and nail against a mercilessly patriarchal society that values her only for her beauty and fertility while simultaneously punishing her for using them to gain some semblance of agency".<sup>20</sup> This idea makes the audience see past Cersei's cruelty, discovering a woman that is trying to survive in a society that will always consider her inferior to the rest. She is punished and criticised for taking action into her own hands, for having power and using it to benefit herself and her family. However, if a man did what she did he would not have been hated as much.

As Marta Eidsvåg states in *Women of Ice and Fire*, "Cersei the Queen, may be a monster, but Cersei the Mother, is not. At worst she is incompetent, and incapable of controlling the true monster, her son, Joffrey".<sup>21</sup> Here a distinction between two parts of

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<sup>18</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 2, episode 9. "Blackwater", directed by Neil Marshall, aired on May 27, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 4, episode 10. "The Children", directed by Alex Graves, aired on June 15, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Kavita Mudan Finn, "Queen of Sad Mischance: Medievalism, 'Realism,' and the Case of Cersei Lannister" in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros. Female Agency and Advice in Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. Z. Rohr & L. Benz, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 31.

<sup>21</sup> Marta Eidsvåg "Maiden, Mother and Crone" in *Women of Ice and Fire* edited by Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schibart (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 154.

Cersei is made: a public image as a ruler and a private image as a mother. However, although it is true that her son Joffrey is extremely cruel and evil, she is no saint whatsoever and will also commit unspeakable acts. Cersei is a character that has suffered greatly throughout her life, which has shaped her into a woman who believes she cannot trust anyone who is not her family. Maybe not even her family, since she rejects Tyrion on many occasions because she does not consider him family in the end. Her actions always mean to benefit the House of Lannister and, terrible as they may be, spring from her wish of protecting those she loves. When asked about redemption for Cersei, Martin stated that

[s]he'll never be redeemed in the eyes of some. She's a character who's very protective of her children. You can argue, well, does she genuinely love her children, or does she just love them because they're her children? There's certainly a great level of narcissism in Cersei. She has an almost sociopathic view of the world and civilization.<sup>22</sup>

Both Cersei Lannister and Lady Macbeth are strong, determined, and ambitious characters who are expected to adhere to the patriarchal expectations of the society that they are living in. They have been moulded throughout their lives into the perfect image of a woman: a wife, a mother but never a powerful and conniving figure. They are subjugated to the power of the males who surround them and seen as villains because they are blamed for making the male figures fall from grace. They are temptresses, usurping the stereotypically male characteristics of being conniving, ambitious and powerful. They both exert an amount of power that is not common for their gender by persuading these male figures to act on their behalves and thus gain their own agency. R. S. White commented the following about Lady Macbeth, but it could also be applied to Cersei:

It may in a perverse way have been a “feminist” perception that the world blocks women who wish to be active, and the only way for her to achieve

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<sup>22</sup> George R. R. Martin, “George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview” interview by Mikal Gilmore, *Rolling Stone*, April 23, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-242487/>

any power is first through her husband's agency, and secondly by being prepared to embrace the ethics of war, individualism and murder instead of peace and domesticity.<sup>23</sup>

As women in a man's world, they cannot earn power for themselves; it comes from the closest male relative they have. For example, Cersei is married to Robert Baratheon, the ruler of the Seven Kingdoms, and when he dies, she is the Queen Mother to her son Joffrey. It takes time and the death of most of her family members for her to be queen on her own. Lady Macbeth is the wife of Macbeth, and she will rise to be queen only when he becomes king, which is why she is so insistent in persuading him to commit murder. Therefore, we will find a different set of mechanisms and schemes in these characters than in male villains, who can be upfront and claim their power by themselves.

Both Lady Macbeth and Cersei are blamed and shamed for exerting a power that is not supposed to be theirs. By adopting a masculine behaviour, they are exemplifying the worst that a woman can do. This idea is clearly depicted by Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun who, when discussing Cersei's role as a woman, says:

The power she exercised was never her own, but "stolen" from men who rightfully deserved it. Her attempts to act like a man are similarly discredited, which undermines the tactics of adopting a masculine leadership style by women. In her attempts to emulate hyper-masculine behaviour, Cersei has gained nothing but has instead exposed all the vices attributed to women by misogynists— shallowness, lust, irrationality, instability, jealousy, and petty vengefulness.<sup>24</sup>

Cersei Lannister has always coveted power. When her father made her marry Robert, she complied because that would make her queen, but Robert's unstoppable

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<sup>23</sup> R. S. White, *Ambivalent Macbeth*, 94-95.

<sup>24</sup> Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun, "Westerosi Queens: Medievalist Portrayal of Female Power and Authority in *A Song of Ice and Fire*," in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros. Female Agency and Advice in Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. Z. Rohr & L. Benz, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 59.

obsession with the dead Lyanna Stark and his disdain towards her made her resent him in every possible way. She expresses this in Season 1, when she confesses the truth of her children's parentage to Ned Stark:

Hated him? I worshipped him. Every girl in the Seven Kingdoms dreamed of him but he was mine by oath. And when I finally saw him on our wedding day in the Sept of Baelor, leaning fearless and black bearded, it was the happiest moment of my life. And that night he crawled on top of me stinking of wine and did what he did, what little he could do. And whispered in my ear "Lyanna". Your sister was a corpse and I was a living girl and he loved her more than me.<sup>25</sup>

Robert Baratheon treats Cersei with arrogance and disrespect. He believes her to be less than him, just a woman. He does not love her and is cruel towards her, which makes her resentful and drives her towards planning his murder multiple times until she finally succeeds. However, she does not subjugate to his power. She ridicules him in order to try and make him change his mind on several occasions. She stands up to him and maintains her agency throughout the abuse. For example, in Season 1, Episode 6, she tells her husband: "I should wear the armour, and you the gown", after which he hits her and she states: "I shall wear this as a badge of honour".<sup>26</sup> In this scene, she presents herself as a strong woman who will not be tamed and silenced. Even though he hits her, she still answers back telling him that whatever punishment she receives for stating her opinion will not bring her dishonour.

Cersei manages to maintain her agency through other means too. For example, by making Robert believe that their children are his when their real father is her twin brother. She finds freedom in this incestuous relationship and it gives her power, as no matter what, her blood and only hers will be on the Iron Throne whereas Robert's line will die with him and his bastards. When Eddard Stark confronts her about the true

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<sup>25</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 1, episode 7. "You Win or You Die", directed by Daniel Minahan, aired on May 29, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 1, episode 6. "A Golden Crown", directed by Daniel Minahan, aired on May 22, 2011.

parentage of her children, she shows no remorse, only gratitude to the Gods that they are not Robert's.

During this conversation in Season 1, Episode 7, Cersei utters one of the most important quotes of the show: "When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die".<sup>27</sup> This represents the way all the Lannisters think, but especially Cersei, who believes she must dispose of every one of her enemies if she wishes to succeed. This is also seen when she tells Joffrey: "everyone who isn't us is an enemy".<sup>28</sup> In a world where everyone can betray and backstab you at any given moment, she only trusts those who are part of her family, and she uses everyone else for the benefit of her house.

Sansa Stark plays a very interesting role in Cersei's characterisation, as Joffrey's supposed fiancée and future Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. It is Cersei's mission to teach the girl the harsh realities of life as a woman in a man's world. She speaks from experience. Her path is very much the same that Sansa is supposed to follow, as she will be married to a king who does not love her. She tells her that "[t]ears aren't a woman's only weapon. The best one's between your legs".<sup>29</sup> Something that she believes and applies, as she uses her sexuality many times to influence men, for example when she made her cousin Lancel, with whom she was having an affair, give Robert *strongwine* so he would die in the hunt. This had been one of many other failed assassination attempts planned by her, but she finally managed to get what she wanted. She also teaches Sansa another lesson that shows Cersei's opinion about love, showing another layer of motives for the way she acts in the show: her children. She states: "The more people you love, the weaker you are, you'll do things for them that you know you shouldn't do. You'll act the fool to keep them happy, to keep them safe. Love no one but your children, on that front a mother has no choice".<sup>30</sup>

For Cersei, her children are the only important thing, the only people that she truly loves. As she tells Tyrion, "[i]f it weren't for my children I would have thrown myself

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<sup>27</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 1, episode 7. "You Win or You Die", directed by Daniel Minahan, aired on May 29, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 1, episode 3. "Lord Snow", directed by Brian Kirk, aired on May 1, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 2, episode 9. "Blackwater", directed by Neil Marshall, aired on May 27, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 2, episode 7. "A Man Without Honor", directed by David Nutter, aired on May 13, 2012.

from the highest window in the Red Keep. They are the reason I'm alive".<sup>31</sup> She believes that the only way to be happy as a woman in a loveless marriage is to have children. Her own experience is such, as she was unhappy with Robert but found herself happy when she had her children, no matter what they did and how cruel they were. This is evidenced in Episode 5 of Season 4 when she tells Margaery Tyrell this about her son Joffrey: "You knew exactly what he was, I did too. You never love anything in the world the way you love your first child, doesn't matter what they do. And what he did, it shocked me. Do you think I'm easily shocked?"<sup>32</sup>

Like Cersei, Lady Macbeth also strays from her expected role as a docile and inherently good wife by leading her husband towards crime. She believes that he is too weak to do what is necessary and she will be the one to persuade him to kill King Duncan. When she confronts Macbeth, she appeals to his masculinity and calls him weak to provoke a reaction from him that will ensure his rise to power. This is very similar to the scene in which Cersei calls Robert weak, saying that she should wear the armour and he the dress. Both appeal to their husbands' ego to manipulate them into doing what they want them to. However, Lady Macbeth lacks the motherly sentiment that Cersei has, as seen in the following statement:

I have given suck, and know / how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluckt my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dasht the brains out, had I sworn as you  
Have done to this.<sup>33</sup>

She would deny her child the milk from her breasts, which is necessary for his nourishment, if she had to. She rejects the idea of women being nurturers, mothers who put their children above all else and who sacrifice their lives and bodies so as to ensure their offspring's safety. In *Ambivalent Macbeth*, White states that this speech "focuses

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<sup>31</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 3, episode 10. "Mysha", directed by David Nutter, aired on June 9, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 4, episode 5. "First of His Name", directed by Michelle MacLaren, aired on May 4, 2014, on HBO.

<sup>33</sup> Shakespeare, "Macbeth", I.7, 863.

the underlying ambivalence of the play, since Lady Macbeth, a woman, is here explicitly denying any construction of femininity which includes childrearing. She desires to be unsexed in order to perpetuate the dominant ethos of male destructiveness”.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, she believes that in order to attain her objective of becoming queen, she must rid herself of her feminine attributes and take on a male role that will enable her to be cruel, merciless and determined to achieve her goal.

Prophecies are a big part of both stories. It is what sets the action in *Macbeth*, and it is also a big part of Cersei’s journey in *Game of Thrones*. When she is a young girl, Cersei visits the witch Maggy the Frog and asks her about her future. The witch’s prophecy deeply influences Cersei’s future decisions. It haunts her all throughout her life, as she tries to discover the way to make sure it does not come true. The witch tells her:

You will never wed the Prince, you will wed the King. You’ll be Queen, for a time. Then comes another — younger, more beautiful— to cast you down and take all you hold dear... The King will have twenty children, and you will have three... Gold will be their crowns, gold their shrouds.<sup>35</sup>

In trying to prevent the prophecy from happening, Cersei brings her own downfall and eventually, everything comes true. Having already lost her firstborn in his wedding to Margaery Tyrell, and seeing her engaged to her second son, Tommen, Cersei believes the young lady to be the one who will overthrow her, so she decides to eliminate her. Moreover, having been imprisoned by the High Sparrow, she is full of avenging feelings and devises a plan that will dispose of all her enemies: blowing up the Sept of Baelor during her own trial. However, this makes Tommen decide to end his own life by throwing himself from a window of the Red Keep, which means that Cersei’s actions have led to another of her children being dead. Soon after that, Jamie returns from Dorne with their daughter Myrcella, who has been poisoned as revenge for the death of Oberyn Martell, prince of Dorne. With her daughter’s death, part of the prediction is

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<sup>34</sup> R.S. White, *Ambivalent Macbeth*, 89.

<sup>35</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 5, episode 1. “The Wars to Come”, directed by Michael Slovis, aired on April 12, 2015.



fulfilled as all her children have died, leaving her with only Jamie and the throne left. Considering that her father was murdered by Tyrion and her male children are dead, she is free from any male figure trying to control her. Her fate is finally on her own hands and she can be queen by herself.

In Shakespeare's work, Lady Macbeth is not the one who receives a prophecy; it is her husband who does. However, she knows his future and hers are intertwined, and if he becomes king as he is promised by the witches, she will be queen and have her ambition placated. Furthermore, she is the one who persuades Macbeth to murder Duncan instead of waiting for fate to take its course. She knows what must be done and is not willing to let fate decide. That way, she manages to exert her agency as a woman, persuading Macbeth to do her bidding. Thus, both Cersei and Lady Macbeth take part in the murder of a king, and their role in these regicides is quite similar, since both convince others to perform the deed. The latter talks her husband into slaying the king of Scotland, whereas the former plots to have her husband Robert killed in a hunting accident.

Both women take matters into their own hands to secure the throne for someone who will give them power. In the case of Cersei, she acquires the position of Queen Mother when her firstborn is crowned, and she expects to control him but that does not happen because Joffrey is extremely cruel and sadistic. In the case of Lady Macbeth, she becomes queen when her husband occupies the throne, and taking into account that he sees her as his equal, not a subjugated and docile figure, she has real power for once. However, both Cersei and Lady Macbeth establish a certain distance with the deed, as they do not kill the men with their own hands, but get others to do so. Through seduction and manipulation, Cersei convinces her cousin Lancel Lannister to give Robert *strongwine* during his hunt so he may be hurt more easily. In turn, Lady Macbeth appeals to Macbeth's cowardice to get him to act and murder Duncan, but she does not participate physically in the murder.

Even though both Cersei and Lady Macbeth expect to gain power through these actions, the consequences stray far from what they expected. Cersei believes that once she is free from Robert she will have freedom and power, but she does not realise that her son is a tyrant who will do as he pleases. Her punishment is clear: she must suffer seeing her own son bring hell to King's Landing and also how Margaery Tyrell takes

him away from her. She tells Tyrion: “Sometimes I wonder if this is the price to pay for our sins”,<sup>36</sup> meaning that Joffrey’s monstrous nature is somehow her punishment.

Lady Macbeth’s consequences come from a more psychological and intimate place, and her sleepwalking scene clearly presents her internal conflict as she is overcome by guilt:

Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene is a splendid demonstration of the fatal workings of evil upon a human mind. The sleepwalking shows that the murders weigh heavily upon her mind and allow her no rest, even in her sleep. Her conscience has become a source of torment to her, and she is afraid of darkness. The woman who had said that a little water would clear her and her husband of the deed of murder now says; “What, will these hands never be clean?”<sup>37</sup>

Her subconscious betrays her and presents to the audience her true feelings regarding the murder. Since she is feeling guilty, she is not able to enjoy the power that she has gained because of the way in which it was achieved. Her death is a clear reflection of the effects that such a sin can have on one’s mind, as she goes on to commit suicide to escape her conscience. As Munro states: “She had obtained the object of her desires, but it was, in the attainment of it, turned into fire and ashes on her lips”.<sup>38</sup> She is overcome with emotion, certain that she cannot be clean of sin ever again. This is something that she also shares with Cersei, who managed to be queen but, in the process, lost her children, the one thing she truly loved.

Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene and final suicide and Cersei’s walk of shame and eventual death in Season 8 represent their most vulnerable moments. During the walk of shame, Cersei is presented as a woman who has been tortured and humiliated and is suffering; she is no longer the hateful queen that plots and murders. Her death is one of the most human moments she has. Purely terrified and broken, she laments her imminent death and the loss of her unborn child, and she is finally reunited with her

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<sup>36</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 2, episode 7. “A Man Without Honor”, directed by David Nutter, aired on May 13, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Md Saiful Islam, “Nature of Evil in Macbeth,” *Arts Faculty Journal* 4 (2012): 190.

<sup>38</sup> Munro, 33.

brother Jamie moments before the Red Keep collapses on top of them during Daenerys' attack on King's Landing. When Cersei and Jamie are looking for a way out, she fears for her baby, which is a symbol of a new beginning, free from prophecies and other influences over her. A future in which she will raise that child and become a mother once again, being able to love someone once more. Her desperation is such that the audience cannot help but feel sorry for her and relate to her pain, even though she has committed atrocities throughout the series. She tells her brother Jamie: "I want our baby to live"<sup>39</sup> repeatedly, but after glancing at a possible happy future, it is taken away from her.

These women are considered villains for their immoral actions and the consequences these bring. They scheme, manipulate, and use the men around them as they please, exerting a typically male power that is not expected of them. But they both have scenes in which their humanity is shown and where the audience may understand their motives and feel pity for them. Lady Macbeth convinces her husband of killing a man, that is her only sin, but it is enough to make her restless and full of guilt. She pays for her evil motives, but in a way, also for taking on a role that was not supposed to be for her, as ambition belongs to men, not women.

Cersei's villainy goes further than Lady Macbeth's, as she orchestrates many more murders and tortures. She also shows a lesser amount of guilt and a cleaner conscience than the Shakespearean character. When she loses her children, she seems to discard her moral compass too, she has nothing left but the throne and she goes to any lengths necessary to keep it. Her conscience and the way she justifies her actions to herself can be seen when she confesses all her crimes to Septa Unella while torturing her:

I do things because they feel good. I drink because it feels good. I killed my husband because it felt good to be rid of him. I fuck my brother because it feels good to feel him inside me. I lie about fucking my brother because it feels good to keep our son safe from hateful hypocrites. I killed your High

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<sup>39</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 8, episode 5. "The Bells", directed by Miguel Sapochnik, aired on May 12, 2019.

Sparrow and all his little sparrows, all his septons, all his septas, all his filthy soldiers, because it felt good to watch them burn.<sup>40</sup>

In this scene, Cersei shows no regrets for her actions, which indicates that her walk of shame and imprisonment did not make her repentant, but more revengeful. She believes that her actions are justified, that she has been wronged many times and that gives her the right to make people pay for her losses. She has always thought that she deserved power, and that she had to do whatever was necessary to attain it. She may go through challenging times and she may have to face the consequences of her sins, but in the end, she is unrepentant and goes on to commit worse deeds than her Shakespearean counterpart. Therefore, Lady Macbeth may not be perceived as a purely evil woman. She may be understood, and the reader may feel compassion towards her. Conversely, Cersei's actions are so disturbing that no one can deny her villainous personality, motivated by greed and hatred and lacking any kind of moral code.

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<sup>40</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 6, episode 10. "The Winds of Winter", directed by Miguel Sapochnik, aired on June 26, 2016.

## 2. Jealousy, Revenge and Manipulation: Iago and Petyr “Littlefinger” Baelish

Lord Baelish, also known as Littlefinger, is one of the biggest villains in *Game of Thrones*, and Iago is one of the most famous evil figures in English literature to this day. Both of them are expert manipulators that are driven by hatred, jealousy, and revenge. In order to attain power, which they believe they deserve, they go to any lengths necessary without taking the consequences into account. They are moved by the wish to climb the social ladder, and they play with other people as if they were part of a chess game, gambling human lives with no remorse.

Shakespeare’s *Othello* begins with a conversation between Iago and Roderigo in which the former states his intentions concerning Othello: “I follow him to serve my turn upon him”.<sup>41</sup> From the beginning, the audience knows that Iago is waiting for an opportunity to make Othello pay for giving Cassio a promotion instead of him. He presents himself as an untrustworthy character that plans to betray the hero. Therefore, he establishes himself as a villain and as the main character’s enemy from the first scene. Moreover, he explicitly tells Roderigo that he is not what he seems to be: “But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at: I am not what I am”.<sup>42</sup> He tells the audience that he will deceive those around them, that he will present himself as a different person. All throughout the play he manages to do so, as everyone sees him as an honest man, but he is actually a liar.

Iago’s plan is simple: he will make Othello believe that Cassio and his wife Desdemona are having an affair, to make them pay for what they took from him. As it is said in “Apologia for Iago”: “Iago, after all, is fundamentally constituted by two traits— his preternatural ability to observe and the great pleasure he takes in shaping his world”.<sup>43</sup> He is a schemer, and through observing the way the other characters behave, he can manipulate them into doing whatever he wants them to. He aspires to create a world in which he has the power that had been taken from him, and he will do whatever he must to ensure his own rise.

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<sup>41</sup> William Shakespeare, “Othello”, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Milton Creek Editorial Services, (New York: Quarto Publishing Group, 2014), I.1, 818.

<sup>42</sup> Shakespeare, “Othello”, I.1, 818.

<sup>43</sup>Richard Raatzsch, “Apologia for Iago” in *The Apologetics of Evil: The Case of Iago*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 99.

In *Game of Thrones*, Petyr Baelish comes from a house with neither power nor a big holding. He was raised in Riverrun alongside Edmund, Catelyn and Lysa Tully. Lysa fell in love with him, but he was infatuated with Catelyn, who was betrothed to Brandon Stark, heir to Winterfell. When he heard about their engagement, Lord Baelish challenged Brandon to a duel, which he only survived thanks to Catelyn's pleading. Brandon died during Robert's rebellion, so Catelyn married his younger brother, Ned Stark. The duel marked a point in his life: he decided that to attain influence in Westeros, he had to change his strategy. He says so in episode 7 of season 1:

You know what I learnt losing that duel? I learnt that I'll never win. Not that way. That's their game, their rules. I'm not going to fight them. I'm going to fuck them. That's what I know, that's what I am, and only by admitting what we are can we get what we want.<sup>44</sup>

In this quote, he expresses his self-awareness: he knows that he does not have the influence that is necessary to fight those in power. By admitting that he is inferior to them in terms of resources and power, he can draft a different strategy that will allow him to get everything he ever wished for: Catelyn and the Iron Throne.

In episode 1 of season 2, Cersei Lannister and Lord Baelish have a conversation in which Littlefinger's sigil –a mockingbird– is explained. He admits that he created this symbol himself and Cersei says: "Appropriate, for a self-made man with so many songs to sing." To which Baelish answers: "Some people are fortunate enough to be born into the right family, others have to find their own way".<sup>45</sup> Here, he establishes himself as an outsider in the court. He has had to create a symbol for himself just like he had to build his power and influence on his own.

Even though he was born with no power, he has managed to become Master of Coin on Robert's Small Council, having amassed his wealth from owning a large number of brothels in King's Landing. In those establishments he satisfied every lord's deepest and darkest desires, such as amputated prostitutes, young children, and violent

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<sup>44</sup>*Game of Thrones*, season 1, episode 7. "You Win or You Die", directed by Daniel Minahan, aired on May 29, 2011.

<sup>45</sup>*Game of Thrones*, season 2, episode 1. "The North Remembers", directed by Alan Taylor, aired on April 1, 2012.

sexual performances. Furthermore, as he knew their secrets, he could control all the powerful people that used his services. Apart from that, Baelish also had a network of spies that rivalled that of Varys, the Master of Whispers, which made them archnemeses. As both men have spies, they already have the upper hand in the fight for the throne. This is something that is discussed by R. Shannon Duval:

The more complete a player's information, the stronger that player's strategy becomes. That is why in complex games like the game of thrones the strongest players may be those who are the best advised rather than the best armored, especially if one player has access to information that is unavailable to the other players.<sup>46</sup>

Varys' opinion of Littlefinger can be seen when he says: "But he would see this country burn if he could be king of the ashes".<sup>47</sup> He knows what kind of man he is and what he is capable of doing in order to obtain what he wants. He knows how dangerous he is and the amount of power that a network of spies can bring to a man, so he does not make the mistake of underestimating him. From the beginning, Varys understands Littlefinger's strategy, his plan to drive the realm into such a state of chaos that he could get the throne for himself. Moreover, a few episodes later, both men have a confrontation in which Baelish's worldview is explained in detail, and Varys' suspicions are proven to be true. Littlefinger says:

Chaos isn't a pit. Chaos is a ladder. Many who try to climb it fail and never get to try again. The fall breaks them. And some, are given a chance to climb. They refuse, they cling to the realm or the gods or love. Illusions. Only the ladder is real. The climb is all there is.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> R. Shannon Duval, "The Things I Do for Love: Sex, Lies and Game Theory" in *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords* ed. Henry Jacoby (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012), 257.

<sup>47</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 3, episode 4. "And Now His Watch Is Ended", directed by Alex Graves, aired on April 21, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 3, episode 6. "The Climb", directed by Alik Sakharov, aired on May 5, 2013.

Here we see that his motivations are purely a hunger for power and social rising. He does not believe in anything else, not the gods, not even love. He thinks that in order for him to reach the Iron Throne, the realm must be in complete chaos. If there is a stable option to rule over the Seven Kingdoms, he will dispose of it because then he will not be able to get the crown for himself. In *Game of Thrones and Philosophy*, Baelish is described as “one of the story’s most distinctly Machiavellian figures. He lacks any military power and is relatively poor compared to other lords but as the Master of Coin and the operator of an extensive network of spies, he holds great influence over the court”.<sup>49</sup>

To put his plan into motion, Littlefinger orders Lysa to kill her husband, Jon Arryn, and to tell her sister Catelyn that the Lannisters did it. That way, he creates a conflict between both houses, and ensures that Ned accepts the offer of becoming Hand of the King so he can protect his friend and investigate the murder. Petyr Baelish makes Ned believe he will help him in his search and tells him not to trust anyone. What he actually does is lead Ned into discovering Cersei’s and Jaime’s incest, knowing that this will ensure his refusal of Joffrey as the future King, and his execution for treason. That way, he leaves the kingdom in the hands of a non-legitimate heir that could be disposed of if it were necessary. Moreover, Joffrey will not be a beloved figure because of his cruelty, and there will not be any kind of stability in Westeros during his rule.

In season 2, episode 1, Littlefinger and Cersei have a conversation about power and what it entails. Here, much is revealed about both characters, but it is also one of the only instances in which Littlefinger appears to be scared. Cersei teases him by reminding him of his past with Catelyn, to which he answers:

When boys and girls live in the same home, awkward situations can arise. Sometimes, I’ve heard, even brothers and sisters develop certain affections. And when those affections become public knowledge, well... that is an

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<sup>49</sup> Marcus Schulzke, “Playing the Game of Thrones: Some Lessons from Machavelli,” in *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords*, ed. Henry Jacoby (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012), 42.



awkward situation, indeed, especially in a prominent family. Prominent families often forget a simple truth, I found.<sup>50</sup>

He alludes to the incestuous relationship between Cersei and her twin brother Jamie in order to threaten her and establish himself as an equal to her. Moreover, when she asks him what truth he is referring to, he answers: “Knowledge is power”.<sup>51</sup> He is positioning himself as a possible threat, showing that even though he does not have the same degree of influence that she has, he can still hurt her by using what he knows against her. However, Cersei does not let him intimidate her. She asks the guards to seize him, saying: “Cut his throat. Stop, wait, I’ve changed my mind. Let him go. Step back three paces. Turn around. Close your eyes.” After the guards have followed every single demand she made, she gets closer to Littlefinger and says: “*Power* is power”.<sup>52</sup>

In this scene, two worldviews are presented: on the one hand, Cersei has been born into a powerful family and knows that she can order people to do as she says with no consequences. On the other hand, Littlefinger believes that using secrets you can manipulate others into doing whatever you ask them to, and as he has never been able to order people around due to his family name, this is what he considers power. Moreover, Baelish’s way of influencing others can be clearly seen here: he threatens the queen with spreading her secret when she offends him, trying to have the upper hand in this discussion. However, he underestimates Cersei’s pride and strength, as she overruns his idea that knowledge will bring him victory over others with more influence and authority.

In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Iago also believes in the power that knowledge and words entail, as he lies and plots all throughout the play in order to make those around them act the way he wants them to. He designs a plan that uses manipulation and scheming, although it is far simpler than Baelish’s. He mainly makes Cassio lose his rank by making him get drunk and cause an altercation and then persuades Desdemona to ask her husband to give him his position back. That way, he can plant more doubts in Othello about the relationship between Cassio and Desdemona. He asks his wife Emilia

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<sup>50</sup>*Game of Thrones*, season 2, episode 1. “The North Remembers”, directed by Alan Taylor, aired on April 1, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

to give him a handkerchief that had been gifted to Desdemona by Othello. This will be the definite proof of their affair, as Iago plants it in Cassio's room to convince the Moorish general. He also decides to question Cassio about his affair with Bianca and to make it seem like they are talking about Desdemona while Othello watches them. Iago's manipulative skills can be clearly seen when he tells Othello: "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on".<sup>53</sup> This shows how twisted his mind is, as he has been trying to drive him to madness by making him jealous, yet he warns Othello of how dangerous this feeling can be. The Moor is completely convinced that they have a secret relationship, so he decides he will murder them both for offending him. Iago convinces Roderigo to murder Cassio, and while they fight, he stabs Cassio in his leg while hiding his identity. Ludovico and Gratiano hear the fight and Iago joins them as they assist Cassio, who tells them that Roderigo has attacked him. Iago, concerned about Roderigo revealing his plan, stabs him before he can speak.

Othello has strangled Desdemona in her bed, accusing her of adultery. Before dying, she defends her husband. Othello, convinced of his wife's sins, explains his motives and proof for murdering her. When she hears about the handkerchief, Emilia realises that it was all Iago's doing, and she exposes him as the villain that he is. Iago kills his wife and Othello stabs Iago but does not finish him. From that point on, Iago refuses to speak or explain why he did it all, saying: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: From this time forth I never will speak word".<sup>54</sup> He and Othello are detained for the murders, but the latter commits suicide due to the guilt of having murdered his innocent wife. Iago does not show remorse for his actions and the consequences that they brought. As Charney states in *Shakespeare's Villains*: "Iago is ruthless and sociopathic in his utter disregard for human life. Like most of Shakespeare's villains, he is a killer and only interested in his own success— his "gain"— even if it involves the deaths of Roderigo and Cassio".<sup>55</sup>

Unlike Iago, Littlefinger is not established as a villain from the beginning. The audience has no reason to see him as an enemy of the hero until he betrays Ned Stark,

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<sup>53</sup> Shakespeare, "Othello", III. 3, 836.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.. V. 2, 856.

<sup>55</sup> Charney, *Shakespeare's Villains*, 15.

telling him: “I did warn you not to trust me”.<sup>56</sup> He had promised him he would secure the City Watch for him, so he could be regent once he unveiled Joffrey’s true parentage. But in the end, he sides with Cersei Lannister and Ned is executed. This proves that Baelish is not to be trusted and that his loyalties fluctuate constantly, as he will side with those who will bring upon his rise to power. Marcus Schulzke says that “[w]hen Littlefinger must do something that might make him an enemy, he often uses someone else to do it for him, which gives him the power to deny his involvement or to mask it with the appearance of good will”.<sup>57</sup> That way he can maintain whatever façade he chooses to and align himself with both parts of a feud so he will always win. This is something that Iago also does, as he relies on Roderigo to act on his behalf and therefore manages to remain unscathed when the consequences arrive. He presents himself as Othello’s friend, convincing him that he is trying to help him while playing with his mind. All the characters are convinced of Iago’s honesty, as Charney states: “Iago is almost officially sealed as ‘honest Iago,’ an adjective that is repeated almost a dozen times without any irony, except for the audience”.<sup>58</sup>

Littlefinger’s lies and deceitful actions develop into a full-on war: The War of the Five Kings. By telling Catelyn that the dagger that was used to attempt to kill her son Bran belonged to Tyrion Lannister, he escalates the conflict and makes Tywin Lannister join the war because the Lady of Winterfell took his son captive. A war between the most prominent families of Westeros will ensure the chaos that Baelish wished for. Moreover, it will bring upon the deaths of many influential men that will no longer be an option for the Iron Throne, allowing an easier access to it for Lord Baelish.

When he takes Sansa Stark out of King’s Landing, he has a conversation with her about why he helped poison Joffrey during his wedding to Margaery Tyrell: “A man with no motive is a man no one suspects. Always keep your foes confused, if they don’t know who you are, what you want, they can’t know what you plan to do next”.<sup>59</sup> This exemplifies his way of thinking perfectly: he wants to remain unscathed by his acts in

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<sup>56</sup>*Game of Thrones*, season 1, episode 7. “You Win or You Die”, directed by Daniel Minahan, aired on May 29, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Marcus Schulzke, “Playing the Game of Thrones: Some Lessons from Machiavelli,” in *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords*, ed. Henry Jacoby (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012), 43.

<sup>58</sup> Charney, *Shakespeare’s Villains*, 17.

<sup>59</sup>*Game of Thrones*, season 4, episode 4. “Oathkeeper”, directed by Michelle MacLaren, aired on April 27, 2014.

order to enjoy the rewards and the only way to do so is to keep his real character, feelings and motives hidden away from everyone. Shortly after, he tells Sansa: “So many men, they risk so little. They spend their lives avoiding danger. And then they die. I’d risk everything to get what I want.” After which Sansa asks: “And what do you want?” And he answers: “Everything”.<sup>60</sup> Once again, his ambition is proven to be absolute. He wants everything he has been denied his whole life, and he will not stop until he gets it, risking whatever is necessary in order to achieve his goals. However, by telling Sansa his *modus operandi*, he is breaking his own idea of not showing anyone who you truly are. He is exposing himself as an ambitious and relentless man that is capable of murder in order to placate his desires.

Littlefinger works with both sides in every feud and backstabs people without a single shred of remorse. Eventually, his actions catch up with him and he loses Catelyn in the Red Wedding, but that does not stop him. He keeps plotting, and in search of the chaos that will most definitely bring upon his rising, he creates a feud between the Tyrells and the Lannisters. After helping Sansa Stark flee King’s Landing, he takes her to The Vale. That way he holds power over the North, and given that he has lost Catelyn, he finds a new fixation: her daughter. This proves that his love for Catelyn was not real, she was just something he had been denied as a child and he wished to have. In Season 4, episode 7, Sansa asks him why he killed Joffrey, to which he answers:

I loved your mother more than you could ever know. Given the opportunity, what do we do to those who’ve hurt the ones we love? In a better world, one where love could overcome strength and duty, you might have been my child. But we don’t live in that world. You’re more beautiful than she ever was.<sup>61</sup>

After this, Littlefinger asks Sansa to call him by his first name and kisses her. This would make Lysa try to kill Sansa due to jealousy, but she does not succeed because Littlefinger kills her first, saying: “I have only loved one woman, only one all my life,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 4, episode 7. “Mockingbird”, directed by Alik Sakharov, aired on May 18, 2014.

your sister”.<sup>62</sup> His lack of compassion for the woman that he manipulated for years shows how cold he is and how little he cares for others. Kissing Sansa may be understood as a continuation of his obsession with Catelyn, as he confesses his feelings towards the girl to Jon Snow in season 7: “I love Sansa, as I loved her mother”.<sup>63</sup> However, she is the Key to the North, the only way to control said territory is by marrying her. Therefore, this may be a political move that will ensure him some degree of power over the Kingdoms. He ends up selling Sansa to Ramsay Bolton, the man who took Winterfell from the Starks. He is a sadistic and violent man who treats her horribly, so she ends up fleeing and asking her half-brother Jon Snow for help in getting her home back. This leads to the Battle of the Bastards, in which Sansa asks Littlefinger for help as he has a full army now that Lysa is dead and, as he had married her, he is Lord Protector of the Vale. That way, he earns some of Sansa’s trust back in order to be able to manipulate her further.

Throughout *Game of Thrones*, Littlefinger executes his plan and remains untouched by playing both sides. However, his downfall comes from underestimating the one person that he believed to have completely under his control: Sansa. He has been teaching her how to advance in the power-hungry society of Westeros, showing her how he has managed to attain his power, but he does not realise that she has been using his lessons and advice against him. Just like Iago’s downfall, which comes from his wife, Emilia, who betrays him and exposes his every crime. It is only her testimony that manages to expose Iago as the villain that he is. Both men underestimated these women as they believed them to be under their control, but in the end, they outsmart them and reveal their true identity to the world. When Sansa manages to become Lady of Winterfell, she holds a lot of power that Baelish plans to use for his benefit. One of his lessons brings along a confession of his true motives for perpetrating chaos, as he confesses to her:

Every time I’m faced with a decision, I close my eyes and see the same picture. Whenever I consider a question, I ask myself “Will this action make this picture a reality?”, pull it out of my mind and into the world... and I

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 7, episode 2. “Stormborn”, directed by Mark Mylod, aired on July 23, 2017.

only act if the answer is yes. A picture of me on the Iron Throne, and you by my side.<sup>64</sup>

After Sansa is finally safe in Winterfell and she reunites with her siblings, Littlefinger plants doubts in her mind concerning them all. When Jon is crowned King of the North, Littlefinger tries to manipulate Sansa into taking said title for herself, so that she has more power that could eventually become his. He plans to isolate her from her family so she would rely completely on him, but he underestimates Sansa and the other Starks. He has been teaching her how to manipulate others, and in the end, she uses his own lessons against him, and he is executed for all his crimes.

Iago's downfall is brought by his wife Emilia, the one person he thought he controlled. However, she rebels and uses the information she has about Iago in order to condemn him. His plan had no fissures apart from her knowledge of him attaining the handkerchief. As Richard Raatzsch states, "[i]t is particularly ironic that Iago's scheme should be uncovered by Emilia, of all people, who seems so innocent, almost simpleminded, to Iago that he hardly notices her".<sup>65</sup> It is indeed ironic that, as an expert manipulator, it is the woman whom he overlooked all throughout the play that exposes his crimes and outsmarts him.

Both Shakespeare's and Martin's villains are manipulative and conniving, using schemes and lies to get what they want from those around them and generating chaos with their every move. Iago's motivation is revenge and ambition. He wants to get the position that he feels has been taken from him by Cassio, and he wishes to punish Othello for giving it to him. Lord Baelish is also motivated by ambition: he longs to be the most powerful man in Westeros and to claim the Iron Throne in order to attain those things that he could not have when he was young because he was not born into the right family. There is bitterness and resentment towards a society that positions power in the hands of people because of their family name, not because of their merits.

Iago does not desire chaos; he only wants revenge of those who took something from him that, just like Baelish, he believes he deserved. Iago makes Cassio and Othello pay for taking the promotion that he wanted away from him, so he devises a plan to

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<sup>64</sup> *Game of Thrones*, season 6, episode 10. "The Winds of Winter", directed by Miguel Sapochnik, aired on June 26, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Raatzsch, "Apologia for Iago", 105.

exert his revenge on them, but the consequences of his actions exceed what he believed they would be. However, he does act consciously towards Othello, trying to “destroy the very qualities he singles out to despise—Othello’s constancy (by making him alter his previous faith in Desdemona), his lovingness and his nobility (by reducing him to a brutal murderer), his free, trusting nature (by making him a monster of suspicion)”.<sup>66</sup>

Concerning revenge, one could say Littlefinger is trying to avenge his hurt feelings against Ned Stark for taking Catelyn from him, and that is why he orchestrates his detention and execution. When he talks about revenge, he says: “I have always found it to be the purest of motivations”.<sup>67</sup> However, his motives go beyond that, it is not only Catelyn he wants, it is power. Catelyn is a mere symbol of all that he could not have because of his lesser status and power, and his obsession for her is just him wanting to achieve that which he was not allowed to have when he was a child. His obsession with Sansa has more to do with the fact that she is the Key to the North because whoever marries her becomes the Lord of Winterfell. Therefore, his true desire is to be powerful, to be above everyone else and attain those things that could not be his because of his lesser status. Like Iago, something that he believed he deserved was taken from him, and that brought upon anger and a wish for revenge that moved him to act wrongly.

In *Othello*, Desdemona is a victim of Iago’s scheming, as even though she is innocent, she pays for what her husband has done to Iago. He uses her as a pawn to punish those who have offended him. In *Game of Thrones*, Catelyn plays a similar role: she dies because of the war that Littlefinger started. She is a victim of the scheming of others, losing most of her family along the way. Both women are collateral damage, they were not meant to be punished but ended suffering nonetheless. However, it is the lack of remorse that both villains show when faced with the consequences of their actions that makes them evil.

Their plans work perfectly until they involve others into them. Iago manages to silence Roderigo before he can expose him, but he forgets about Emilia and that is his fatal mistake. Littlefinger keeps quiet about his plan and manages to establish a distance

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<sup>66</sup>Millicent Bell, “Othello’s Jealousy” in *Shakespeare’s Tragic Skepticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 96.

<sup>67</sup>*Game of Thrones*, season 2, episode 5. “The Ghost of Harrenhal”, directed by David Petrarca, aired on April 29, 2012.

from the acts that are being committed due to his scheming. However, as he is trying to groom Sansa into becoming a great player of the game of thrones, he is exposing himself and his motives to her. Eventually, and thanks to Bran being the three-eyed raven who can see the past, everything he has done in order to be powerful is exposed.

To conclude, both characters share a desire to advance socially by scheming and using those in power to ensure their own benefit. Both Iago and Lord Baelish lack remorse and end up bringing their own demise to themselves. Overlooking the women around them, they deem themselves invincible and too smart to be caught. It is this egocentric nature that blinds them to their mistakes, which will ensure that they pay for their many crimes.



## Conclusion

This B A thesis has presented numerous examples of the Shakespearean influence on the selected characters from the show *Game of Thrones*. By comparing the interactions, the motives, and storylines of Lady Macbeth/Cersei and Iago/Littlefinger, many similarities have been found between the TV figures and their Shakespearean counterparts.

Cersei Lannister and Lady Macbeth share their status as strong, ambitious women that assume masculine traits to obtain power in a patriarchal society. It is this appropriation of male roles that makes them be perceived as villains by other characters and by audiences. Both make the best of the chances they are given. They try to exert their agency through the paths that are open to them, which are scarce. They manipulate the men that surround them into doing their bidding by appealing to their masculinity.

Iago and Littlefinger are two expert schemers and manipulators that play with everyone around them to ascend socially and attain everything they were denied in the past. They believe themselves to be superior to the rest, but their arrogance blinds them to the point that those they underestimated the most bring upon their downfall. Their lack of remorse or guilt and their selfishness presents them as clear examples of villains, as they cause the death of many innocent people and, although they know their actions are immoral and depraved, they do not feel shame or repentance.

All four characters have villainous traits, they are selfish and manipulative and are fuelled by ambition and a desire for vengeance. However, they are crucial parts of their works and they shape the action as much as, or even more than, the heroes. They do not exist purely to antagonise the main characters and challenge them to prove their goodness as many other villains do. They stand on their own account as real people with specific and human-like feelings, motives, and actions.

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- Game of Thrones*. Season 2, episode 5, "The Ghost of Harrenhal." Directed by David Petrarca. Aired April 29, 2012.

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<sup>68</sup> All the episodes of *Game of Thrones* were aired on HBO. I will not include this information in subsequent references to avoid unnecessary repetition.

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