Daenerys Targaryen: A Cautionary Tale for Feminists

This article contains spoilers for Game of Thrones Season Eight.

Hands up if you've ever encountered some variant of the phrase "Yass, Queen! Slay!"

"Slaying," a term usually applied to bold, powerful, unapologetically ambitious feminist icons like Beyoncé and Rihanna, describes the activities of an independent woman who takes what she wants in life no matter whom it offends. Some even gain the coveted title of "Nasty Woman."

[via GIPHY](#)

At its most extreme, "slaying" takes on an antiheroic quality, as if women who behave with all the ruthlessness of Tony Montana from *Scarface* were icons of liberation. "Men have always gained power by being brutal and merciless," some feminists seem to say, "and now we can do the same."

This brand of feminism, instead of calling men and women alike to a high moral standard, encourages women to climb down into the gutter. After a recent episode of *Game of Thrones*, I hope such feminists will reconsider that attitude.

Starting with the show's first season in 2011, Daenerys Targaryen has always displayed many admirable qualities. At the beginning, she was treated as nothing more than a commodity for her brother to trade on the dynastic marriage market. Later, using nothing but her wits and her name, she was able to conquer cities, free slaves, and build an alliance capable of reclaiming her father's throne.

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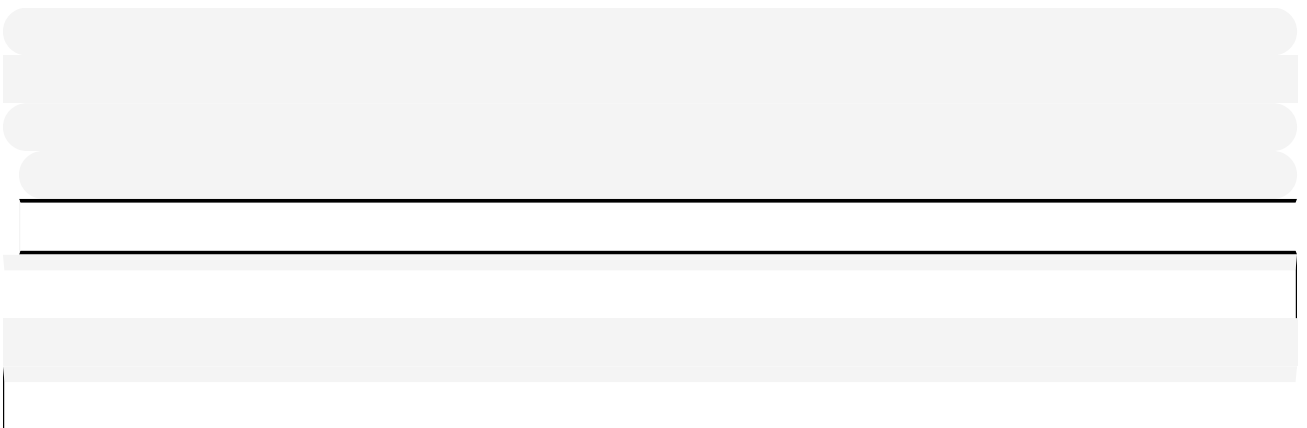
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To many viewers, it came as a shock when Daenerys, feeling crushed and isolated by the deaths and betrayals that had shaken her own inner circle, took to the skies on her sole remaining dragon's back to incinerate tens of thousands of innocent civilians in a city that was attempting to surrender.

For others, though, the [warning signs](#) had been there all along. In the course of her conquests, Daenerys has burned or crucified anyone who stood in her way, and only the pleading of her advisors restrained her from doing worse.

And yet, most viewers have consistently seen her as a symbol of female empowerment. Some still do. [Buzzfeed](#) asked several of the [more than 3,500 mothers](#) who named their children "Daenerys" or "Khaleesi" (one of Daenerys's royal titles) if they regretted that choice after seeing her turn into a murderous psychopath. The response (itself more than a little psychopathic) indicated that most of these mothers "seemed pretty unbothered," with one even excusing Daenerys's massacre on the grounds that, "She's going for what she wants."

These are the sorts of women who make Lady Macbeth into a feminist icon.

And, indeed, Daenerys is not without her own Lady Macbeth moment. Shakespeare's villainess [calls on demonic forces](#) to "Come to my woman's breasts, / And take my milk for gall," claiming that she would willingly murder her own infant child if it meant gaining power. At the end of the first season, with her husband Khal Drogo dying and her chances of regaining the throne slipping away, Daenerys makes a similar deal with the devil, enlisting [the witch Mirri Maz Duur](#) to save the man she both loves and needs. Mirri promises Khal Drogo will live, but tells Daenerys that the "blood magic" ritual will have a cost: "Only death can pay for life." The Khaleesi doesn't hesitate to order the ritual performed. When Daenerys learns

that Mirri's magic has killed her unborn child, she accepts that she "knew the cost" and seems to care only about whether her husband (and, with him, her hope of gaining the throne) has survived.

It might be fun and even empowering to watch Daenerys bend men to her will (especially when those men are slavers), but her willingness to kill her own baby in order to gain that power reveals the dark, literal side of "slaying." In [a 2010 article](), feminist Antonia Senior admitted that abortion kills a child, but insisted that the cause of feminism is so important that infanticide is the "lesser of two evils" and that women must be "prepared to kill" for their own liberation.

Underlying this attitude and its accompanying tendency to turn monstrous women into feminist heroines is the assumption of a zero sum game, the idea that men and women are such bitter enemies that women can only improve their lives by mistreating the people around them and disfiguring their own souls.

We can do better. Feminists and non-feminists alike ought to oppose this horrifying form of feminism, while at the same time making sure to be equally critical of ruthlessly ambitious behavior in both men and women.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel realizes that if she seizes the One Ring and makes herself a queen as "Fair as the Sea and the Sun" and as "Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning," she will commit unfathomable atrocities. The solution, she understands, is not for a woman to wield the reckless, amoral, self-aggrandizing power symbolized by the Ring, but for no one to wield it.

If only Daenerys had had the same wisdom.

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