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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

"Family, Duty, Honor": The Influence of Motherhood on Catelyn Stark's Character in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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To my mother, for always trying to cheer me up with your strange smoothies, and to my father, for the many terrible nicknames you've come up with for me throughout the years.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how motherhood shapes Catelyn Stark's identity, political agency, and relationship with violence in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire.* Through close readings of *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), and *A Storm of Swords* (2000), it explores the extent to which motherhood functions as the driving force behind her actions within the context of medieval society and psychoanalytic theories of motherhood.

Through her contrasting relationships with Robb Stark and Jon Snow, Catelyn simultaneously embodies the traits of both a "good mother" and a "bad mother", demonstrating the complexity and contradictions of maternal identity. Furthermore, the dissertation examines how maternal protection gradually leads her to violence, culminating in her resurrection as Lady Stoneheart, whose existence represents the radicalization of her maternal identity through grief and vengeance. Ultimately, the study argues that Martin presents motherhood not as a passive domestic role but as a force capable of shaping political action, violence, and narrative development.

Keywords: Catelyn Stark, motherhood, violence, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, George R. R. Martin.

Resumen del trabajo

El presente Trabajo de Fin de Grado analiza el papel de la maternidad como influencia directa en la construcción del personaje de Catelyn Stark dentro de la saga *Una Canción de Hielo y Fuego* de George R. R. Martin. A través de la lectura de sus capítulos en *Un Juego de Tronos* (1996), *Choque de Reyes* (1998) y *Tormenta de Espadas* (2000), este trabajo examina cómo ser madre condiciona su identidad, posición política y relación con la violencia. Al mismo tiempo, se estudia cómo Martin utiliza la maternidad no solo como característica del personaje de Catelyn, sino como herramienta capaz de modificar la trayectoria narrativa.

La maternidad es uno de los temas más recurrentes en la obra de Martin, gran parte de los personajes femeninos están definidos por su relación con sus hijos. Entre ellas, Catelyn Stark destaca porque prácticamente todas sus decisiones parten de su identidad como madre, vinculadas a su deseo de proteger a sus hijos. Desde su primera aparición en la narración, su identidad se construye alrededor de su familia y sus responsabilidades como madre, participando más allá de la esfera privada y doméstica para incluirse en las decisiones políticas y militares.

Para desarrollar este trabajo, se han empleado diversos enfoques teóricos. En primer lugar, se ha realizado una lectura crítica de los capítulos narrados desde el punto de vista de Catelyn, complementada con teorías psicoanalíticas sobre la maternidad. Usando las propuestas de Melanie Klein acerca de lo que constituye una buena o mala madre, se ha intentado comprender la relación de Catelyn con los personajes de Robb Stark y Jon Snow. Asimismo, se recurre a perspectivas feministas como las ideas de Adrienne Rich sobre la maternidad como institución social, más que como instinto natural. A esto, se suman estudios de género en relación con el contexto medieval, modelo que inspira la saga, para entender las limitaciones y expectativas impuestas a Catelyn. Dentro de este

marco teórico, la maternidad se presenta en relación con la protección, el sacrificio y la perseverancia del linaje familiar. En la sociedad medieval, el prestigio social y el poder simbólico estaban estrechamente ligados a la habilidad reproductiva de la mujer, en particular a su capacidad para producir herederos varones.

La relación entre Catelyn y Robb Stark representa un ejemplo de maternidad idealizada. La posición de Robb como hijo mayor y heredero de la Casa Stark refuerza la posición social y política de su madre. Asimismo, Catelyn lo protege constantemente, incluso a costa de su propia autoridad, para reforzar su imagen pública como general y rey en el contexto de guerra. Su comportamiento corresponde al ideal de «buena madre» de Klein, caracterizado por la devoción absoluta a los hijos y la renuncia a los intereses propios en beneficio de ellos.

Su relación resulta especialmente relevante para demostrar cómo la maternidad puede convertirse en una vía indirecta de acceso al poder. La condición de Catelyn como madre del heredero le permite acceder a espacios tradicionalmente reservados al género masculino, como el consejo de guerra y el campamento de batalla. No obstante, esta influencia es limitada, ya que su autoridad depende de Robb, pues Catelyn mantiene su poder únicamente por el deber filial que Robb siente hacia ella. A medida que Robb asume más dominio al convertirse en rey, el poder de Catelyn disminuye, pues tienen prioridades diferentes: mientras Catelyn está centrada en recuperar a sus hijas tomadas como rehenes, Robb, como líder militar, se concentra en ganar la guerra. Esta tensión muestra hasta qué punto la maternidad condiciona su perspectiva del mundo, obligándola a traicionar a su hijo y, como consecuencia, a perder su poder.

En contraste, la dinámica entre Catelyn y Jon Snow representa, a primera vista, una aparente contradicción en la mentalidad de Catelyn, ya que muestra, con su actitud fría y crueldad emocional, características de la «mala madre» de Klein. Sin embargo, al analizar

el pensamiento interno de Catelyn, se concluye que su comportamiento no está motivado por los celos provocados por la infidelidad de su marido, sino por miedo legítimo a la usurpación de sus hijos y a su posible muerte. Temor intensificado tanto por el precedente histórico de la Rebelión Blackfyre como por el condicionamiento religioso de su sociedad. Así, en realidad, lo que determina su personalidad de «mala madre» es su capacidad para seguir siendo una «buena madre». Como consecuencia, y a pesar de mostrar indicios de culpa por sus acciones a lo largo de las tres novelas, Catelyn excluye deliberadamente de su esfera maternal a un niño inocente bajo su cuidado, mostrando una clara violencia emocional.

Sus interacciones con Robb Stark y Jon Snow crean una complejidad relevante para el personaje. Mientras que con Robb actúa como una madre protectora, sabia y sacrificada, con Jon adopta una actitud de rechazo constante. Esta contradicción indica que para Catelyn, la maternidad no se basa únicamente en el cuidado de los hijos, sino en vínculos de sangre, legitimidad y herencia. Esta cuestión invita a reflexionar sobre la capacidad excluyente de la maternidad y presenta una visión más ambigua del concepto, lo que permite cuestionar la idealización de la maternidad.

Además de definir su comportamiento en relación con su familia y posición política, la maternidad vincula a Catelyn con la violencia. Martin muestra en varias ocasiones cómo la protección materna justifica la violencia como un método necesario para la supervivencia de sus hijos. El primer ejemplo ocurre en el primer libro, cuando su hijo Bran es atacado por un desconocido que intenta asesinarlo. Al encontrarse sola, Catelyn se ve obligada a luchar físicamente contra el intruso, poniendo en riesgo su vida y sufriendo daño irreparable en su cuerpo. La defensa de Bran demuestra así que la violencia puede ser una extensión natural de la maternidad. Este acto se continúa, a lo largo de la segunda novela, con las fantasías de venganza de Catelyn, enfocadas en los

sujetos que causaron daño a sus hijos. Lo significativo de estos deseos es que la maternidad no solo los inspira, sino que también limita su ejecución. Al tener la oportunidad de matar a Jaime Lannister, Catelyn se abstiene de hacerlo en beneficio de sus hijas, quienes serían asesinadas como consecuencia y, en su lugar, lo libera, renunciando a sus deseos oscuros por ellas.

La culminación de la relación entre la violencia y Catelyn se observa en sus acciones durante la Boda Roja. Al principio, el mismo instinto maternal que la llevó a actuar en defensa de Bran la impulsa a tomar a Jinglebell como rehén cuando Robb es atacado por Walder Frey. Jinglebell, un niño con discapacidad intelectual, es una figura inocente en el conflicto presentado en la novela, pero se convierte en víctima cuando Catelyn lo asesina tras la muerte de su hijo. Este episodio marca la transformación definitiva de Catelyn, demostrando cómo la violencia deja de ser solo un acto de defensa para convertirse en consecuencia del duelo y la venganza.

La resurrección de Catelyn como Lady Stoneheart representa la radicalización de sus impulsos maternales. Antes de su muerte, la maternidad define cada una de sus decisiones y limita la violencia. Después de su muerte, Catelyn abandona su moral, pero mantiene la maternidad como eje central de su identidad, lo que condiciona su deseo de venganza. Las decisiones de Catelyn como Lady Stoneheart ya no están motivadas por el deseo de proteger a sus hijos, pues ella cree firmemente que están muertos o desaparecidos, sin posibilidad de recuperarlos. Lo único que permanece es el sentimiento de pérdida, que se transforma en rabia y deseo de venganza. Este cambio muestra cómo la moral ya no condiciona sus acciones, como se evidencia en su trato con Brienne de Tarth, su aliada, a quien desea ejecutar debido a su nueva visión retorcida de la justicia. Por este motivo, se debe entender a Lady Stoneheart no como la ruptura con los conceptos de la maternidad tradicional, sino como la distorsión provocada por el trauma de estos

mismos conceptos, para justificar la violencia infligida a cualquiera vinculado con su tragedia.

En conclusión, este trabajo demuestra que George R. R. Martin utiliza a Catelyn para explorar la complejidad inherente a la maternidad, mostrando su capacidad para justificar poder, abuso emocional y violencia extrema. A través de sus interacciones con Jon Snow y Robb Stark, el autor presenta en una misma mujer la encarnación tanto de la buena como de la mala madre. Al mismo tiempo, este concepto influye en la evolución del personaje de Catelyn, llevándola progresivamente hacia la violencia, culminando su desarrollo en Lady Stoneheart. Así, Martin presenta la maternidad no como un concepto pasivo y limitado a la esfera doméstica, sino como una herramienta capaz de transformar la narrativa. A través de Catelyn, muestra que la maternidad puede ser simultáneamente fuente de amor, exclusión y violencia, cuestionando las representaciones idealizadas de la maternidad.

Introduction

George R. R. Martin has slowly become one of the most important and influential fantasy writers of the current century. He is famous for receiving multiple Hugo Awards for *A Song for Lya* (1974), the novelette *Sandkings* (1979), and the short story *The Way of Cross & Dragon* (1979). He also wrote and won that same award for *Blood of the Dragon* (1996), a novella that he would expand upon until creating the saga of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, with its first book, *A Game of Thrones* (1996), winning the Ignotius Award for Best Foreign Novel of 2002.

The concept of motherhood is prominent throughout the books of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as many of the female characters are mothers: Daenerys Targaryen, referred to as *the Mother of Dragons;* Cersei Lannister, the Queen Mother; Princess Elia Martell, whose death and that of her children haunt the narrative; Lyanna Stark, the secret mother, and so on. This dissertation argues that motherhood functions as the central force shaping one of the protagonists of these novels by influencing Catelyn Stark's identity, granting her political agency, and motivating her acts of violence throughout the narrative.

The study will be divided into two central parts: the first examines the duality of Catelyn's motherhood, and how she can be a "good mother" and a "bad mother" at the same time through the characters of Robb Stark and Jon Snow, chosen specifically because they show the contrast in her behavior towards both of them. Robb was selected among her biological children as his role as a king initiates Catelyn's role as a counsellor, and his death is what drives her to become Lady Stoneheart. Jon Snow, on the other hand, was chosen as his relationship with Catelyn demonstrates the contradictions within her maternal identity.

The second part, divided into three sections, analyzes how her conception of motherhood not only pushes her to be a "bad mother" to her stepson but also increasingly

accustoms her to committing acts of violence. This will explore how her maternal identity justifies the decisions she makes during the events of *A Game of Thrones* and *A Clash of Kings*, and how that same maternal duty motivates her to commit morally questionable acts as Lady Stoneheart following her son's death. Through these divisions, this study will explore the relationship between power, violence, and motherhood in the characterization of Catelyn Stark.

1. Methodology

This dissertation aims to analyze Catelyn Stark's character through the lens of motherhood and how it both reinforces traditional maternal ideals and pushes her beyond the limits of such expectations within the medieval-inspired world of *A Song of Ice and Fire.* The study focuses primarily on the first three books of the saga: *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), and *A Storm of Swords* (2000), as they contain the entirety of Lady Catelyn's point-of-view narrative during the so-called *War of Five Kings.* This allows for a deeper analysis of the evolution of the character from a noble mother to a political advisor, and finally to a vengeful specter.

The analysis of this work will be conducted through a combination of psychoanalytic approaches to motherhood and studies of medieval gender expectations. Following a 2014 interview in which Martin claimed that his work was inspired by various moments in European history, rather than by a specific period ("*Evening"* 00:36:18), this study draws on a diverse range of sources in medieval gender studies from multiple historical periods and geographical contexts, aiming to contextualize Catelyn's actions within the social structures presented in the narrative. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Spanish-language sources will be my own.

This TFG will use close reading as its principal methodology, mainly through Catelyn's internal monologue, political decisions, and interactions with characters such as Robb Stark and Jon Snow. These two characters were selected due to their influence in shaping a contradiction within Catelyn's identity. Unlike her other biological children, with whom she interacts only in the first book, *A Game of Thrones* (1996), both Robb and Jon remain present in her thoughts and influence her decision-making.

With Robb, this study aims to understand the gendered expectations that limit Catelyn's power and how it is directly related to her devotion to him. Jon Snow, however, was chosen to analyze and understand Catelyn's behavior towards him, which greatly contradicts the maternal devotion and nurturing persona she presents in relation to her children. Both will be used to analyze her traditional perspective on motherhood, gender, power, and violence, and how it pushes her to participate in more commonly masculine roles, such as taking part in political negotiations, becoming a member of a military council, and intentionally committing acts of violence.

Catelyn Stark was chosen for this study because of the defining influence that motherhood has on her identity. While other characters like Cersei Lannister were considered for this analysis, as they also exert authority through motherhood, Catelyn's actions are constantly connected to her responsibilities as a mother. All her decisions, which will be analyzed in the following text, are linked to her children's well-being. Catelyn's character can therefore be used to understand motherhood as a concept that can both confine her to traditional maternal roles and push her beyond such expectations.

2. Traditional motherhood

In patriarchal society, motherhood has been traditionally regarded as an essential aspect of womanhood. What is considered good motherhood is defined by devotion to children, self-sacrifice, protection, domesticity, and, particularly significant in the medieval context, the continuation of the family lineage. These expectations not only determine a mother's role within her family but also influence the concept of femininity.

When considering this concept, Adrienne Rich argues that "experiences such as motherhood and sexuality have been directed to serve male interests" (88), as it is a notion structured around the selflessness of mothers and unconditional devotion to their children. Rather than understanding motherhood as an instinctive relationship, Rich presents it as a mechanism that encourages and modifies a mother's behavior in the best interest of her children. Using as an example the emotion of anger, Rich explicitly states that "maternal love must be constant and unconditional. Love and anger are incompatible. A mother's anger threatens the institution of motherhood." (93). Suggesting that idealized motherhood is free from any negative emotion that is not nurturing love, this ideal conforms to normative femininity, embodying patience and care.

Psychoanalytic theorists such as Melanie Klein, who considers the family to be a stable unit in which the woman is assigned the role of a mother, reinforce this conception. For Klein, one can be either a "good mother" or a "bad mother", but in both cases, the mother is more influential than the father in the child's psychic development. Within this framework, the good mother is expected to be "intensely devoted to the child" (Velasco Arias 139). Consequently, the internalization of what constitutes a "good mother" affects the woman's behavior, leading her to follow moral obligations that make her part of a standard used to judge women. Motherhood becomes more than a biological relationship, transformed to create a new moral that must be followed to be considered a good mother.

Traditional motherhood is also associated with protection and nurturing. As Carl Jung describes, the mother archetype can be associated with the following qualities: “all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility.” (87). For Jung, motherhood embodies care and emotional support, but it also includes darker aspects such as “secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons” (87). This negative side of the mother archetype makes the concept more complex than its idealized version. Jung's interpretation is relevant because it challenges the traditional one-dimensionality of motherhood as a role structured solely around kindness and the need to nurture, and explores its dark aspects, revealing a contradiction within the mother archetype. This especially applies to the study of Catelyn Stark, as her interactions with her children and the outside world embody both aspects of the maternal archetype identified by Jung.

Another trait linked to motherhood is domesticity and how, historically, it has contributed to the exclusion of women from the public sphere. The ideal mother was expected to care for and educate her children within the confines of her home, while the father was permitted to enter the public sphere to work and provide for the family. In medieval society, according to Clarissa Atkinson, the ideal woman was expected to be “the careful and energetic mistress of a household” (10), ensuring the continuation of her husband’s lineage. These dynastic concerns were particularly significant for noble women, for whom childbirth was not only about fulfilling the desire to nurture but also a requirement to establish their public position and maintain symbolic power, thus allowing motherhood to become a tool to secure political positions.

Traditional motherhood can therefore be understood not simply as the biological relationship between mother and child, but as a complex institution based on the idea of a devoted mother, sacrificing herself for her children, acting within the private sphere of

society, where she is committed to the domestic responsibilities associated with motherhood. In addition to this, within medieval noble society, motherhood was seen as pivotal for the continuation of the husband's lineage. Although some of these aspects are traditionally linked to femininity, they are shaped by culture to preserve the patriarchal model of society. Catelyn Stark embodies many of the traits mentioned in this section throughout *A Song of Ice and Fire*, however, as it will be demonstrated in the following text, Martin uses her character to not only challenge some aspects associated with motherhood, such as its domesticity, but also to embody to the extreme concepts like self-sacrifice and devotion.

2.1. Motherhood as a narrative device

Rather than presenting motherhood as a private and passive responsibility, George R. R. Martin explores its more destructive consequences within his narrative. He does so by presenting the events of *the War of the Five Kings* as the repercussions of two mothers, Queen Cersei and Lady Catelyn, and their desire to protect their children. It is the latter, however, who will be explored in the following pages, beginning with her first words in the novels:

> "Catelyn," he said. His voice was distant and formal. "Where are the children?"
>
> He would always ask her that. "In the kitchen, arguing about names for the wolf pups." (...) "Arya is already in love, and Sansa is charmed and gracious, but Rickon is not quite sure." (*Thrones* 35)

By making her first lines focus on her children, Martin establishes motherhood as a core characteristic of her identity, one that later influences both her political position and her role in the story. At the beginning of A *Game of Thrones* (1996), Catelyn is the biological mother of five children and the stepmother of a fourteen-year-old boy, Jon Snow, whom she does not mention when answering Ned's question, a subtle action that serves as an

example of his exclusion from her maternal sphere. The number of children she has, as well as the presence of a non-biological relationship, allows Martin to explore different aspects of motherhood, such as the contrast between the self-sacrificing mother she is with Robb and the emotional distance she maintains with Jon Snow.

The central conflict of the novels begins when Catelyn becomes convinced that the Lannister family, who had been guests at her castle, is connected to the attempt on her son's life. At this point, the narrative allows Catelyn two expressions of motherhood: she can either continue in the traditionally passive and feminine role of caregiver, allowing the men in her family to pursue justice, or take an active role in the story and pursue it herself. Martin chooses the latter. Rather than confining motherhood to the domestic sphere, he uses it as motivation for political action, allowing Catelyn to directly influence the narrative. Her decision to kidnap Tyrion Lannister not only stems from her belief that he was involved in Bran's attempted murder but also catalyzes the conflict between the Stark and Lannister families, with the latter retaliating by holding Catelyn's husband and daughters hostage.

Amid the war partially caused by her actions, Lady Catelyn must choose between her duty to her eldest son, Robb, who is leading an army to rescue his imprisoned father, and her youngest sons, Bran and Rickon, who need their mother at home. Catelyn once again abandons her domestic responsibilities, not out of resentment for her role as a noble wife, as Tyler Dean points out, "Catelyn Stark is one of the few female narrators who comfortably inhabits a traditionally feminine role in Westeros", but because she believes she can better fulfil her duty as a mother to Robb, who is alone and in immediate danger, than to her youngest children, who are protected within their castle.

Her role as his counsellor begins at this point, as motherhood grants her a position from which she holds significant political power. Although she is not a soldier, her status

as Robb Stark's mother justifies her authority and her presence in council meetings and diplomatic missions. This connection between motherhood and authority reflects historical understandings of the concept, as motherhood contributed to the rise of the "symbolic power" of queens and mothers in the eyes of their contemporaries (St. John 98). Through Pierre Bourdieu's framework, this symbolic power can be understood as the "ability that is automatically perceived or assumed, whether these abilities bear testing or not." (St. John 17). In her work, Lisa Benz St. John further argues that historically, queens could serve as intercessors to the king and transform this symbolic power into "achieved power" (47) to reinforce their position, but Catelyn, who holds symbolic power by virtue of being the mother of Eddard Stark's children, does not exploit that connection. Instead, after his death, Catelyn transfers her devotion and loyalty to her son, who grants her power on the implicit condition of her using it to benefit his war efforts.

The fragility of Catelyn's authority is shown when her interests differ from Robb's. Her decision to free Jaime Lannister, Robb's most valuable prisoner, arises from her belief that those around her are forcing her to neglect her maternal duties, as well as the added fear of losing Sansa and Arya. This incident can also be understood through Carol Gilligan's ethics of care, which emphasizes the moral importance of responsibilities towards others. Gilligan explains the existence of a gendered morality that expects "womanhood (to) imply a willingness to forgo rights for the sake of preserving relationships and keeping the peace" (51). This is shown in Catelyn's disposition to make peace with the Lannisters in exchange for her daughters, in contrast to Robb and his bannermen's insistence on receiving justice, an attribute traditionally associated with the "rational man" (51) within this framework.

From a military perspective, releasing Robb's most valuable hostage in the hopes of recovering Arya and Sansa Stark is disastrous; from a maternal perspective, however,

it is entirely understandable, as it shows that Catelyn desperately chooses motherhood over political advantage. This action costs Robb's trust, and so he decides to strip her of her agency and send her away from the war and politics, a place traditionally unsuitable for a woman, to be safe in a castle in the north.

Catelyn Stark, however, never returns to the North. Without Jaime, and with Robb's actions afterwards, the Starks' position becomes vulnerable enough for them to be betrayed and killed at a wedding organized by Lord Walder Frey. Martin deliberately employs this irony with her ending, as Catelyn's decisions, motivated by a need for maternal protection, are partly responsible for her family's downfall. As such, he consciously frames motherhood as the driving force behind Catelyn's decisions, and gives motherhood a decisive impact on the narrative, not confining it to the private sphere, but instead allowing maternal devotion to shape the war.

3. Mother and sons

Melanie Klein, as mentioned, discusses the concepts of the "good mother" and the "bad mother." The first, who breastfeeds her children, is the "epitome of inexhaustible maternal kindness, patience, and generosity" (Velasco Arias 138). Catelyn embodies these traits with Robb, showing kindness and patience even when the teenager disregards her counsel and advice. With him and the rest of her biological children, she shows the utmost love and comfort, sacrificing her voice, health, and self-respect to protect them. With her stepson Jon, ironically, she does not. To him, Catelyn is the "bad mother," the one who refrains from breastfeeding and thus "keeps for herself the milk, love, and care" and is capable of "abandoning, mistreating, or refusing to acknowledge their child" (Velasco Arias 138).

This juxtaposition will be explored in the following pages, comparing how her love for her son Robb leads to her own entrapment in the traditional roles of her society, and how that same love drives her to inflict cruelty on an innocent child.

3.1. Robb Stark

When discussing the historical psychoanalytic understanding of motherhood, Sara Velasco Arias argues that female fulfillment is traditionally linked to motherhood, particularly through the birth of a son. According to this traditionally Freudian perspective, the son symbolically functions as an equivalent to the "penis" that women are believed to lack:

> The equivalence between child and penis in women's psychic economy maintains that female fulfillment lies in having this equivalent—the child—making motherhood the primary path to female fulfillment" (137).

Within this framework, giving birth to a son brings women closer to masculine power, allowing them to achieve a form of symbolic fulfilment. This idea is reflected in Westerosi society, where women who bear sons are granted greater respect and status than those who bear daughters.

The narrative borrows this mentality from history, as "the roles of wife and mother (were what) provided routes to influence for a medieval queen" (Tingle 17). Although Lady Catelyn is not a queen, this statement applies to her as well, as she is both the wife of the Lord Paramount of the North and the mother of the King in the North. Louise Tingle further argues that a medieval noblewoman "could access power through influence by virtue of proximity," and her position was more secure after giving birth to a son (17).

Martin provides many examples that support this argument. Through the characters of Aemma Arryn and Alicent Hightower in *Fire and Blood* (2018), he demonstrates the lack of power, agency, and respect afforded to Queen Aemma due to

her inability to produce a male heir, especially in contrast to her successor, Alicent, who bore three sons, one of whom becomes king. While Aemma dies young in childbirth and is quickly forgotten by history, Alicent prospers at court and uses her son's gender to argue for his right to the throne, eventually orchestrating a coup to secure power for him and, by extension, herself.[1]

The same can be argued for Catelyn, as her power is tied to her family's male members. As a young girl in Riverrun, Lady Catelyn was allowed by her father, Lord Hoster, to manage the castle's responsibilities until her brother was born and became the heir. As the wife of Lord Eddard, Catelyn becomes the lady of the largest castle and kingdom in the realm, yet her power remains subordinate to his, as she dutifully obeys his commands.

> "Catelyn, you shall stay here in Winterfell." His words were like an icy draft through her heart.
> "No," she said, suddenly afraid. Was this to be her punishment? Never to see his face again, nor to feel his arms around her?
> "Yes," Ned said, in words that would brook no argument. "You must govern the north in my stead, while I run Robert's errands. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell. Robb is fourteen. Soon enough, he will be a man grown. He must learn to rule, and I will not be here for him. Make him part of your councils. He must be ready when his time comes." (*Thrones* 81)

Catelyn's counselling of Robb Stark begins at the request of her husband and lord, as does her ruling of Winterfell. After the deaths of both her husband and her father, Catelyn's power is tied to her eldest son; she is respected as his mother and the widow of Lord Stark. This is established more explicitly in the TV adaptation, during a confrontation with Lord Rickard Karstark, a northern lord sworn to Robb, about whether to execute

[1] Additional examples reinforce this pattern. Queen Cersei retains her position and authority despite being evidently hated by her husband because she has fulfilled her dynastic role by providing him with two sons. Similarly, despite being portrayed as mentally unstable, Lady Lysa Arryn rules the Vale as regent for her son, while Lady Olenna Tyrell's influence derives from her position as the mother of House Tyrell's lord.

Jaime Lannister. Karstark belittles and threatens Lady Catelyn, and she must remind him of her position.

> CATELYN: This man is our prisoner
> LORD KARSTARK: This monster killed my son.
> CATELYN: And crippled mine! He will answer for his crimes I promise you, but not here.
> LORD KARSTARK: I will have his head and if you try and stop me—
> CATELYN: Would you strike me down? Have you forgotten me, ser? I am the widow of your liege, Lord Eddard Stark. I am the mother of your king!
>
> (Season 2, Episode 7)

She uses the political positions of her male relatives to justify her authority, and Lord Karstark obeys her because of that connection. These patriarchal expectations are also reflected in Robb and Catelyn Stark's interactions, as they are based on filial duties and misogynistic norms.

3.1.1 Masculinity, perception, and motherhood

Rigid social expectations and medieval masculinity affect the relationship between Catelyn and Robb from the beginning. Robb's status as the eldest son of Lord Eddard Stark inherently positions him as the future lord of the largest and harshest kingdom in Westeros. Catelyn is keenly aware of how her son must be perceived to earn respect from his bannermen and adjusts her relationship with him to give him an advantage.

She consciously acts differently towards him depending on whether they are in public or private to protect his masculinity. Even in private, she is loving but stern, educating him to be a leader and not to be dependent on her. Reflecting on masculinity in the eleventh century, Clare A. Lees discusses aggression and domination as inherent traits of medieval masculinity. This was a response to the perceived uncontrollable lust of women, who required "brutal" men, and who, in turn, required women to be gentle" (11). This is echoed in Martin's work with Robb, who fulfils both the expectation of being a

warrior and marries a gentle and passive woman: Jeyne Westerling. Catelyn actively maintains that illusion, upholding traditional roles by refraining from showing her maternal authority and affection in public:

> "Mother?" he said, his voice thick with emotion.
> Catelyn wanted to run to him, to kiss his sweet brow, to wrap him in her arms and hold him so tightly that he would never come to harm . . . but here in front of his lords, she dared not. He was playing a man's part now, and she would not take that away from him. (*Thrones* 691)

Catelyn abstains from hugging her son, whom she has not seen in months, to protect his image in front of others; he is "playing a man's part" and is surrounded by men who must respect him. Robb, in turn, must act cold and dignified, rather than a boy who has not seen his mother in months and wishes to hug her. She waits until they are alone to hug him and scold his actions.

Motherhood, as a feminine trait, is seen as degrading when present in the masculine space of war and therefore must remain private. Catelyn is aware of this attitude, so her maternal devotion to her son leads her to uphold the very standards that discriminate against her to protect him. In private, Catelyn encourages him to maintain such masculinity, continually reminding him not to show weakness among his men, as they are his bannermen, not his friends, and their loyalty depends on their perception of him. Robb allows himself to show doubt only in front of her, and in response, Catelyn displays a stern character and rigorous questioning until he is confident in his actions. Only after she is sure of her son's choices does she soften and compliment him (*Thrones* 698).

3.1.2 Dynamics of power

Robb Stark and Catelyn Stark's relationship is deeply tied to power in their medieval world. As such, Catelyn's gender is a disadvantage in this society. At the beginning of *A Game of Thrones* (1996), Catelyn holds the higher position because of filial duty, which

Simon Keller explains as "direct duties to help, respect, please or benefit parents (...) to demonstrate gratitude" (259). In the domestic sphere of Winterfell, Robb, who has grown up under Catelyn's maternal authority, does not question his mother's requests. These dynamic changes, however, when they abandon the private sphere and enter the more masculine context of war.

The first indication of this change is displayed in the following excerpt, found in the first interaction between mother and son after the beginning of the war. In her absence from Winterfell, Robb has called the banners to retrieve his imprisoned father by means of war. The fourteen-year-old shows his age when he wonders if his mother will undermine his decisions and order him to go back home:

> "I know," he said, abashed. "Are you . . . are you sending me back to Winterfell?"
>
> Catelyn sighed. "I should. You ought never have left. Yet I dare not, not now. You have come too far. Someday these lords will look to you as their liege. If I pack you off now, like a child being sent to bed without his supper, they will remember, and laugh about it in their cups. The day will come when you need them to respect you, even fear you a little. Laughter is poison to fear. I will not do that to you, much as I might wish to keep you safe." (*Thrones* 694)

Continuing with the mentioned perception of masculinity, Catelyn renounces some of her authority to legitimize Robb's position as a commander, to maintain, as already argued, his masculine authority before the other nobles. As it is still the initial stages of the war, Robb remains hesitant to question his mother's authority; he is now a soldier and commander, but his father and lord is still alive, and he has not yet fought in any battle. Up to this point, in Catelyn's monologue in *A Game of Thrones* (1996), she still refers to him as 'son' (163), 'firstborn' (694), and 'child' (696); later, as their dynamic changes, so does that description.

Ana Isabel Carrasco Manchado explains that medieval power and society are structured around the so-called dominium, a system based on loyalty, kinship, and alliances (526). As such, when Eddard Stark dies, Catelyn Stark's obedience and loyalty

are transferred to her son and new lord. Him being crowned further reinforces that new relationship. During the events of *A Clash of Kings* (1998), Catelyn holds an intermediate power relationship with Robb; he is superior to her by virtue of being her king, while at the same time she is superior to him due to being his mother. The latter relationship is more fragile than the former, as all the power Catelyn has over her son is maintained only as long as her son allows it.

Robb's respect and trust in Catelyn, however, decrease as the book progresses, mainly because of the contrast in priorities between mother and son. While Lady Catelyn's objective is to retrieve her hostage daughters, Robb's goal is to win the war, and so he denies her request to trade them for Jaime Lannister. In blunt language, from Robb's perspective, he is acting as a general, whereas Catelyn is acting like a mother. Catelyn realises that as well, "Her son was looking down at her", she thinks, after another discussion about the exchange of hostages (*Clash* 113), and wonders whether it was the war or his position as king that made him grow up so fast that he does not listen to her anymore.

Antonella Liuzzo Scorpo argues that "relationships based on interpersonal, social and institutional trust (are) neither static nor immutable", as trust can "easily be threatened, especially in moments of crisis" (178). This is evident in Catelyn's actions at the end of *A Clash of Kings* (1998). Upon hearing news of her youngest sons' murders in the north, Catelyn resolves not to lose her daughters as well and, therefore, frees Jaime Lannister without her son's knowledge to secure their return. In doing so, she loses her son's trust and, consequently, her power.

When contextualizing the Middle Ages, Liuzzo Scorpo further argues that "trust was one of the leading factors determining women's access or exclusion from spheres of power, authority and social communication" (164). As Catelyn can no longer be trusted

by either her son or his advisors, she is excluded from all public spheres. This contrasts with her previous position, when she was permitted to leave camp and gather allies in her son's name; now, she is not even allowed to leave her father's castle.

From this betrayal onward, that is, the events of *A Storm of Swords* (2000), Catelyn stops referring to him only as 'child', 'son', and 'boy' to then talk about him in relation to his status:

> He is a boy no longer, she realized with a pang. He is sixteen now, a man grown. Just look at him. War had melted all the softness from his face and left him hard and lean. (...) On his head was the sword crown they had fashioned him of bronze and iron. He bears it more comfortably now. He bears it like a king. (*Storm* 156)

This clearly shows the change in dynamics between the two, as Catelyn is completely dependent on Robb's orders. He could punish her further for her actions or, what she fears most, never forgive her (*Storm* 156), and she would accept the punishment. Yet Robb does none of these things; in fact, he is harsher towards Lord Karstark, who murdered two hostages of no importance, than he is towards her, who arguably did more harm to his war effort by releasing Ser Jaime.

> "It was a mother's folly. Women are made that way."
> "A mother's folly?" Lord Karstark rounded on Lord Umber. "I name it treason."
> "Enough." (...) "If I could wish the Kingslayer back in chains I would. You freed him without my knowledge or consent . . . but what you did, I know you did for love. For Arya and Sansa, and out of grief for Bran and Rickon. Love's not always wise, I've learned. It can lead us to great folly, but we follow our hearts . . . wherever they take us. Don't we, Mother?" (*Storm* 158)

Robb, like many of the men around her, blames her actions on emotions, a 'mother's folly' and a 'mother's madness' (*Storm* 27). They reduce Catelyn's understanding of the political situation to an impulsive and foolish desire to retrieve her daughters. Consequently, Robb decides to exclude her from further participation in the war effort and orders her to go back to the North to resume her domestic role:

> "Your part is to stay safe. Our journey through the Neck will be dangerous, and naught but battle awaits us in the north. But Lord Mallister has kindly offered to keep you safe at Seagard until the war is done. You will be comfortable there, I know.

> Is this my punishment for opposing him about Jon Snow? Or for being a woman, and worse, a mother? (*Storm* 526)

He justifies it as a need for protection, as his political position is fragile after losing the support of Houses Karstark and Frey, but it is because the lost trust makes him see Catelyn as a 'woman' and 'mother', both roles no longer accepted in his council.

With Robb, Catelyn upholds the characteristics of a "good mother" to the extreme by allowing her dedication to him to overcome her power and position. Her maternal devotion causes her to uphold the system that discriminates against her, so it can give her son an advantage. She sacrifices her wish to go back to her home, her authority, and even her agency to protect him. Even her betrayal stems from her maternal love, thus being justified and forgiven by Robb. Motherhood is then shown as a form of self-sacrifice to benefit one's children.

3.2. Jon Snow

Jon Snow, the illegitimate son of Lord Eddard Stark and, by extension, Catelyn's stepson, serves as a foil to her relationship with her biological children. Their interactions reveal that motherhood, for Catelyn, is defined not only by biology but also by lineage, as the purpose of having children is to sustain the father's line. Catelyn emotionally mistreats Jon and refuses to acknowledge his existence in the castle, completely excluding him from any maternal love or comfort through no fault of his own. This behaviour aligns with the characteristics of Klein's "bad mother," yet it is entirely understandable within Westeros's framework, as Catelyn's mistreatment of Jon stems from her fear for her own children's safety.

3.2.1. Bastardy in Westeros

As Suzanne Desan argues, to be a bastard is to "hold outcast status in the eyes of society and the law" as they not only carry the "moral stigma of their parents" but are also viewed as "inherently impure and shameful" (197). This holds within the society of Westeros, where any illegitimate child automatically receives a surname marking their status: 'Water', 'Stone', 'Snow', and so on. Unlike the society of eighteenth-century France, which Desan references in her work, Westerosi society does not attach any shame to the father's actions regarding their child's conception. Fathers are free not to recognize their children and abandon them. This explains the puzzlement that Catelyn feels regarding her husband's relationship with Jon Snow. Having grown up in that society, she expects infidelity from her husband, as he has "man's needs" (*Thrones* 83), and is not particularly surprised when he is unfaithful early in their marriage. What surprises her is his insistence on raising him amongst her own legitimate children.

It is what stems the resentment she feels towards Jon Snow. Both the remaining jealousy from the affair and the continual disrespect towards her by allowing him to be raised amongst her own children, and so be perceived as legitimate, make her inherently dislike her stepson:

> Whoever Jon's mother had been, Ned must have loved her fiercely, for nothing Catelyn said would persuade him to send the boy away. It was the one thing she could never forgive him. She had come to love her husband with all her heart, but she had never found it in her to love Jon. She might have overlooked a dozen bastards for Ned's sake, so long as they were out of sight. Jon was never out of sight, and as he grew, he looked more like Ned than any of the trueborn sons she bore him. Somehow that made it worse. (*Thrones* 84)

When ruminating about Jon Snow, Lady Catelyn often thinks about the Blackfyre Rebellion, a historic war that began between King Daeron the Good and his illegitimate half-brother, Daemon Waters, for the Iron Throne. The historical context and her own religion, which teaches that bastards are envious by nature, add to the distrust.

Jon Snow was the only one of Lord Eddard's sons to inherit his brown hair and grey eyes, as Catelyn's sons all have the same bright red hair and blue eyes as her. This detail only adds to Catelyn's worry, as she fears that if the other northerners compare Jon Snow to his siblings, they will view him as more native to the North, and thus, more deserving of Winterfell. This would mean that Jon Snow might decide to try and usurp his brother's seat and, like Daemon Waters had tried centuries before, try to kill his brothers to ensure that. It is why she encourages sending him to the Night's Watch (*Thrones* 85), a penal colony of soldiers that vow celibacy and renounce any life they had before joining it.

The doctrine of the Faith of the Seven, which praised marriage and the children resulting from those unions as much as it condemned adultery, extramarital sex, and illegitimate children, combined with the historical precedent of the Blackfyre Rebellion and the symbolic physical appearance of her children, who look more native to her homeland than to the kingdom they were born into, could hypothetically create a legitimate basis to usurp her children's inheritance. Catelyn does not allow herself to see Jon Snow as an innocent child who had no say in the circumstances of his birth; instead, he is the embodiment of her deepest anxieties about lineage, inheritance, and the need for maternal protection. She is a bad mother to Jon because she is a good mother to her own children. This demonstrates a clear understanding and desire to prioritise the well-being of her own biological children over that of their bastard brother.

3.2.2 Cruelty and rejection

This fear contextualizes Catelyn's behaviour towards her stepson, by intentionally rejecting him from the Starks and trying to alienate her children from him. This manner of acting is emulated by her daughter, Sansa, who separates herself from Jon Snow using

the etiquette "half brother" (*Thrones* 88), trying to please her mother, while the rest of her siblings, on the other hand, all trust and love Jon.

The major instance in which Catelyn shows direct cruel behaviour can be found after Brandon's accident. As Jon Snow kisses his brother and begs him to wake up, Lady Catelyn repeatedly insults him and tells him to leave. Jon does not at first, and when he finally gets up to do so, Lady Catelyn stops him to say as follows:

> "Jon," she said. He should have kept going, but she had never called him by his name before. He turned to find her looking at his face, as if she were seeing it for the first time.
> "Yes?" he said.
> "It should have been you," she told him. Then she turned back to Bran and began to weep, her whole body shaking with the sobs. Jon had never seen her cry before. (*Thrones* 116)

The first time Catelyn acknowledges Jon's name is done to reject him and wish him harm. She intentionally excludes an innocent fourteen-year-old boy from the maternal sphere she created for her children due to fear. It is a great contrast to the abnegated, loving, and kind mother presented in relation to Robb Stark. Her unjust behaviour continues throughout the narrative. She continues to exclude him, both in her interior monologue, by referring to him as "Ned's bastard" (*Thrones* 430) and in her actions in *A Storm of Swords* (2000).

She excludes Jon Snow twice when talking about Eddard Stark's children. The first time is when she reminisces about the day they found stray Direwolves, the sigil of House Stark, in the woods (*Storm* 163), the second happens when discussing Robb's lack of heirs and who should inherit his throne after his death. On both occasions, her son Robb must remind her that his father "had four sons". Her answer is nevertheless unchanging: "A Snow is not a Stark." (*Storm* 521). This continues with the mentioned power struggle between them, with Robb overruling his mother once again. She concedes

to his demands but not before reminding him of the Blackfyre rebellion and its consequences, and how it can be repeated with him and Jon Snow:

> "I know you trust Jon. But can you trust his sons? Or their sons? (…) If you make Jon legitimate, there is no way to turn him bastard again. Should he wed and breed, any sons you may have by Jeyne will never be safe." (*Storm* 521)

Jon is a threat to Catelyn and her lineage, even if he does not rebel against his brother. She does not consider any of her daughter's descendants capable of usurping Robb's hypothetical descendants, even if Sansa is currently married to their enemy. But with Jon, betrayal is inevitable, because unlike Sansa, he carries dishonour in his blood by not being legitimate.

3.2.3 Guilt

Discussing Freud's work, Kathleen Woodward claims that guilt functions as both "inhibition of aggressivity and (...) gnawing punishment for aggression in fantasy" (84). This framework helps explain Catelyn's contradictory feelings towards Jon Snow, as Martin subverted the "evil stepmother" connotation by allowing her to feel guilt over her actions. Although the excerpt "It should have been you" is written in Jon Snow's point of view, Catelyn's remorse at her own cruel words is immediately revealed when she breaks down to cry (*Thrones* 116). The feeling is not a one-time anomaly. In her travel to the Vale, when encountering Mya Stone, a bastard girl who serves as her guide, Catelyn immediately associates her with Jon Snow due to their social status and feels both "angry and guilty" (*Thrones* 430). When her son Robb is in battle, Catelyn ruminates and empathises with Jon's unnamed mother, wondering if she was as worried about her child as she was about her own (*Clash* 653).

The most explicit portrayal of guilt, however, is not in any of the books of *A Song of Ice and Fire;* instead, it is in the TV adaptation, which again feels the need to make explicit Catelyn's actions and feelings. In a conversation between her and her daughter-

in-law, renamed Talisa Maegyr in HBO's adaptation, instead of Jeyne Westerling, Catelyn summarizes all her tragedies as a result of her own incapacity to love a "motherless child".

> CATELYN: When my husband brought that baby home from the war, I couldn't bear to look at him, didn't want to see those brown stranger's eyes staring at me. So I prayed to the gods "Take him away, make him die". He got the pox and I knew I was the worst woman who ever lived. A murderer. I'd condemned this poor, innocent child to a horrible death all because I was jealous of his mother, a woman he didn't even know! So I prayed to all Seven Gods "Let the boy live. Let him live and I'll love him. I'll be a mother to him. I'll beg my husband to give him a true name, to call him Stark and be done with it, to make him one of us".
>
> TALISA: And he lived?
>
> CATELYN: And he lived. And I couldn't keep my promise. And everything that's happened since then, all this horror that's come to my family...it's all because I couldn't love a motherless child.
>
> (Season 3, Episode 2)

The adaptation arguably softens Catelyn and links her mistreatment of Jon to simple jealousy, instead of legitimate fear of usurpation, and presents Catelyn as someone who torments herself over her treatment of Jon Snow. As Brigitte Biehl boldly claims, "In the series, Catelyn's logical reasoning from the novel is not realized, and she at times appears overly emotional, irrational, and weepy" (37).

Martin avoids such a connection; Catelyn's guilt does not overcome her reasoning like it does in the series. Although it is subtly present, it does not cloud her judgment, and she consciously decides to continue with her behaviour and exclude Jon Snow from any familial connection. Thus, he presents Catelyn's views of motherhood as restricted by blood and legitimacy. She is a loving mother to her own children because she gave birth to them, and because they were born within marriage, she considers them inherently superior to Jon Snow. By alienating her motherless stepson, desperate for maternal affection, she demonstrates a conscious type of cruelty.

4. Motherhood and violence

4.1. Violence and maternal protection

Martin presents motherhood not only as a source of nurture and love but also as a justification for cruelty, emotional abuse, and even violence. Using Catelyn, he explores how maternal devotion can explain actions that would be morally questionable, such as her treatment of Jon Snow, and how such violence can gradually increase until it is no longer justifiable, as shown in her actions as Lady Stoneheart.

Catelyn's first direct contact with violence happens during Brandon's assassination attempt. Facing an armoured stranger, she positions herself between him and her son, even stopping the blade with her own hand and permanently injuring herself, providing an example of what researcher Eric Steiner calls "maternal aggression" (1), which he explains as the concept of investing in a child to increase their chance of survival. According to his research, in this context, women are more invested in their children than fathers, as they are the ones who gestate and lactate them, and thus it "motivates behavior to protect that investment" (2).

Although she does not kill the assassin, her actions delay him long enough for help to arrive and for Bran to be saved. Martin uses the incident to forcibly return Catelyn to the narrative, obliging her to act to defend her son, and frames her actions as self-defence, so her fighting and biting the stranger is justified by the circumstances.

> "It's a mercy," he said. "He's dead already."
> "No," Catelyn said, louder now as she found her voice again. "No, you can't." She spun back toward the window to scream for help, but the man moved faster than she would have believed. (...) She reached up with both hands and grabbed the blade with all her strength, pulling it away from her throat. She heard him cursing into her ear. Her fingers were slippery with blood, but she would not let go of the dagger. (*Thrones* 159)

Catelyn's first instinct is not to fight, but to scream for help. Only once the stranger attacks her does she fight back. At this stage in the story, violence is depicted as something that

is done to Catelyn, not something she immediately falls into. This is reiterated in her relationship with Tyrion Lannister. Catelyn does not personally use physical force to arrest and kidnap Tyrion; instead, she relies on her political position and social relations to persuade the surrounding men to conduct the act. Similarly, during her journey to the Eyrie, she depends on the men around her to defend her, reflecting the expectations set on Westerosi noblewomen to be passive and non-violent.

Catelyn's acceptance of the traditional gender roles of her society leads her to believe that violence is an inherently masculine trait, rather than a feminine one. However, the attack on Bran shows the limitations of such expectations. When no one else is there to defend her son, Catelyn acts with disregard for society's expectations and becomes the sole barrier between the attacker and her son. This impulse to fight is only present in Bran's incident, proving that it is primarily maternal devotion that pushes Catelyn to engage in acts of violence.

Martin presents motherhood as a compatible trait to violence, not an opposite. As shown in the emotional mistreatment she shows towards Jon Snow and her physical fight with the intruder, maternal protection can both motivate and justify morally questionable actions. Catelyn does not regret her indirect implication in the attacker's death, even more, she shows genuine appreciation for the wolf that killed him (*Storm* 162). Proving that when the children are in danger, violence can be an extension of protection as well as a justification.

4.2 Fantasies and indirect violence

Following Ned Stark's death, Catelyn experiences intense stages of grief that fuel her desire for revenge. Before committing more acts of violence, she fantasises about avenging her family by harming her enemies, as shown when talking to Brienne of Tarth,

her sworn protector, about their shared desire for retribution. She admits that more than once she dreams of "wrapping (her) hands around Cersei Lannister's white throat and squeezing until her face turns black" (*Clash* 561). This private confession illustrates the contrast between gendered approaches to revenge. Whereas men are expected to show immediate explosive aggression to earn social approval, women are required to suppress their desires for vengeance to appease men and avoid being excluded from society or labelled "unfeminine, monstrous, or villainous" (Anil and Kishore 86). Brienne, a fellow noblewoman, is the only person to whom Catelyn confides such desires. Later, in the same chapter, she confesses to wanting all the rest of her enemies dead:

> "I want them all dead, Brienne. Theon Greyjoy first, then Jaime Lannister and Cersei and the Imp, every one, every one. But my girls . . . my girls will . . ." (*Clash* 786)

This excerpt is relevant because it shows how motherhood, although it drives her violent desires, also restrains them. Catelyn struggles with the selfish urge to kill those who have wronged her, while keenly understanding that doing so would only endanger her hostage daughters. This is why she never kills Jaime Lannister during their conversation (*Clash* 793), even though she fantasises about it as they speak. It was Jaime Lannister who threw her son Bran from the tower, an act that left him paralysed, but his position as Robb's prisoner is the only thing preventing the execution of Sansa and Arya. Thus, she prioritises her daughters' survival over her own desire for retribution. The narrative presents motherhood as the moral brake in this situation, guiding her every decision. This emphasis on care reflects on Sue Campbell's idea of gendered expectations placed on women, who are encouraged to express themselves through forms of nurturance that prioritise those closest to them (56).

Instead of killing Jaime Lannister, as she wishes, she frees him on the condition that she will have her daughters, Sansa and Arya, returned. Her decision demonstrates

that motherhood, in particular maternal duty, overrides her desire for violence. This act, however non-violent, has long-term violent repercussions, reflecting the recurring theme in George R. R. Martin's work that all actions have consequences. It leads to a notable parallel between Lady Catelyn Stark and Lord Rickard Karstark. The latter, a father whose two sons were murdered by Jaime Lannister, had to be physically restrained from killing him in revenge for his sons' deaths. Later, after discovering that Catelyn has freed his enemy, he impulsively breaks into the cells and murders two boys, innocent of any crime except being related to the Lannister family.

Previously, when Catelyn was scolded for her actions regarding Jaime Lannister's liberation, she defended herself by claiming she had "a mother's right" (*Storm* 34), a defence like that used by Karstark, claiming that "any man who steps between a father and his vengeance asks for death." (*Storm* 226). Both characters defend their actions through the argument of familial duty, yet the response they receive differs due to their gender. Whilst Karstark's anger is understood as an extension of paternal love and honour, Catelyn's political decisions are dismissed as the product of emotional excess and are labelled as a "mother's madness" (*Storm* 28). As Campbell argues, the "association of the feminine with feeling has been a long-standing historical ground on which to dismiss women" (49), a sentiment present within Westerosi society, which condemns maternal aggression but accepts paternal aggression as expected and understandable.

Karstark is executed not for his actions, but for wounding Robb's pride by insulting him when confronted over it. Catelyn is rejected by those around her, stripped of her agency, and relegated to the private sphere for her actions. She is even blamed for the deaths of the Lannister squires, with Karstark linking his actions to hers, claiming that she "slew them, as much as I." (*Storm* 227). These double standards reflect Campbell's

gendering of virtue terms, that is, "certain characteristics (that) can be promoted as virtues for one gender while condemned as vices for the other" (59). Karstark's anger is an understandable form of grief to Westerosi society, whereas Catelyn's is one more example of feminine instability.

Unlike Karstark, however, Catelyn's desire for violence remains largely restrained and intentional. In contrast to characters such as Tywin Lannister, leader of the forces opposing the Starks, and his sworn bannerman, Gregor Clegane, both of whom use violence indiscriminately, Catelyn chooses to abstain from such acts by consciously considering her children's survival. This does not mean her actions are without consequence, as shown by Lord Karstark's murders, but they are carried out solely for the sake of her children. Consequently, Motherhood is depicted as both the source of violent impulses and the restraint of them in the context of war.

4.3. Lady Stoneheart

The conclusion to Catelyn's relationship with violence arc is rooted in the infamous Red Wedding, a trap organised by Lord Walder Frey targeting Robb Stark, after Robb broke his marriage pact to his daughter. This chapter, the last one narrated by Catelyn, depicts the brutal massacre that befalls her allies and family, culminating in Robb Stark's murder in front of his mother. Amid this chaos, Catelyn commits her first lethal act of violence: the murder of Jinglebell, the disabled grandson of Lord Walder.

This act stems from the same impulse present in Bran's attack: maternal protection. When she realises they are being betrayed, she takes Aegon Frey, better known as Jinglebell, hostage, threatening to kill him if they harm her son. The act is not vengeful, but a final attempt to save her son, as illustrated in her threat to Lord Walder:

> They could do as they wished with her; imprison her, rape her, kill her, it made no matter. She had lived too long, and Ned was waiting. It was Robb she feared for.
> "On my honor as a Tully," she told Lord Walder, "on my honor as a Stark, I will trade your boy's life for Robb's. A son for a son." (*Storm* 582)

This section again follows the self-sacrificing nature of Catelyn's relationship with her children; she is not worried about herself. Despite considering the implications of her acts (being imprisoned, raped, or killed), she deems them less important than the survival of her son, just like she did when using her body to shield Bran.

The difference between her defence of Bran and Robb, however, lies in its moral implications. In the first instance, Catelyn's decision to fight the attacker is easily morally justified: she was alone with her son, who could not defend himself against a man willing to kill him. At the end of the physical struggle, it was not Catelyn who killed the attacker, but Bran's wolf. There is little moral dilemma in this situation, only a demonstration of the sacrifice a mother is willing to make. In Robb's defence, however, Catelyn willingly abandons her moral compass by threatening Jinglebell, an innocent, mentally disabled boy, for the survival of her son. Unlike her fantasies about killing the Lannisters, who held her daughters hostage, and Theon Greyjoy, who murdered her youngest sons, Jinglebell had no direct involvement in Catelyn's suffering and therefore offers no justification for her actions. He is simply her desperate attempt to save her son from certain death, hoping that Lord Walder loves his grandson enough to spare Robb.

The hope becomes null when it is clear Lord Walder does not care about his grandson, and Robb is murdered in front of her. Catelyn enters a dissociative state at the sight, which can be understood through Cathy Caruth's theory about trauma, as a form of latency in which an event is not fully experienced as it occurs (187). This state is shown in her last thoughts before dying: "*No, don't, don't cut my hair, Ned loves my hair*." (*Storm* 583, emphasis in original text), as she is fully detached from the traumatic event she is experiencing, believing that it will be her hair being cut, rather than her throat.

Jinglebell's murder, which Catelyn commits after Robb is already dead, is a thoroughly vengeful act, as it goes beyond being a justice-related response and instead is meant to restore the "esteem and control" (Strelan et al. 521) she loses after her son's death. The killing cannot be morally defended, as Catelyn is keenly aware that Jinglebell's death will not bring Robb back. Nevertheless, she commits to her word: "Robb had broken his word, but Catelyn kept hers" (*Storm* 583), she thinks, as she slits Jinglebell's throat. This illustrates Lesel Dawson's argument that revenge serves to transfer "the pain experienced onto another", which allows the victim, in this case Catelyn, to transform "from the passive sufferer into the active avenger" (4).

Jinglebell's demise points to the transition from violence committed in the name of protecting her children (Jon's abuse, Bran's attack, the liberation of Jaime Lannister, and its violent consequences) to violence committed as a result of grieving those same children. It is then the physical manifestation of the fantasies mentioned in the previous section, with the notable difference in its morality. Catelyn had previously felt justified in her hatred of Jaime, Cersei, and Theon, as they were the aggressors; that same justification cannot be transported to Jinglebell, who is completely innocent.

This lack of moral consideration continues when Lady Stoneheart emerges in the narrative, that is, the resurrected corpse that Catelyn becomes. Her transformation can be interpreted through the medieval Icelandic figure of the troll. This broad term refers, according to Ármann Jacobsson, to "witches, magicians, sorcerers, ghosts, zombies, and vampires" (33), among other conceptions of the undead, and is defined "less by what it is, but by what it does" (36). Lady Stoneheart, through her refusal to "take leave of (her) worldly possessions" (36), namely, her love for her children and her "bestial fury" (37) towards those who harmed them, serves as a modern reflection of a medieval troll within

the narrative of *A Song of Ice and Fire.* Like the troll figures described in Jacobsson's work, she "persecutes and haunts" her enemies and is "impossible to escape" (39).

With this new role, her earlier fantasies of vengeance become reality, as Catelyn abandons the fears and worries she held before her death to directly commit acts of violence typically associated with men. Rather than relying on the "indirect methods involving planning, calculated moves, manipulation, and psychological strategies" (Anil and Kishore 86) to influence the men around her to commit violence while herself remaining within the traditional limits expected of female vengeance, Catelyn assumes a role historically denied to women by directly engaging in the violence, ordering and witnessing the execution of anyone remotely connected to the Frey and Lannister families in the name of avenging her son (*Storm 924).*

As noted by Jonas Kellerman, the only physical object that Lady Stoneheart retains from before her death is Robb's crown (270). The item illustrates how her entire identity is now linked to the loss of her son. Just like it was motherhood that pushed her forward in life, driving her south to seek justice for Bran, positioning her as one of Robb's counsellors, forcing her to betray him to save Arya and Sansa, and so on, it is now the force behind her violent tendencies and vengeful acts in death. Lady Stoneheart functions, therefore, as the ultimate example of the connection between Catelyn's identity and motherhood.

Lady Stoneheart's anger can also be discussed in relation to Claudia García Pajín's observations on the recent emergence of female rage literature, where she argues that the #MeToo movement of 2017 has enabled texts to be written from a female perspective, presenting anger as a "response to pain" rather than associating it solely with madness and villainy (141). Martin, through his creation of Lady Stoneheart, precedes by decades this new wave of writing by exploring Catelyn's anger and violence as a response to her

suffering, framed within the narrative of vengeance. Catelyn's violence is no longer directed towards protecting her children, as she assumes she no longer has them. Instead, her anger is the result of her pain, which inspires a "corrupted sense of righteousness" (Kellermann 274) that strips her of nuance in assessing the actions of others. In an echo of her exclusion of Jon Snow, she divides the world into those who are Starks and those who aren't, and acts accordingly with extreme forms of violence.

This mentality results in indiscriminate murder, as shown in both Merrett Frey and Brienne of Tarth. The first, one of the many sons of Lord Walder Frey and a minor collaborator in the massacre of the Red Wedding. And the second, a genuine ally to Catelyn, who had no implication in it and whose objective during the saga is to retrieve Sansa and Arya to safety. Both are judged by Lady Stoneheart as guilty of treason, with her ordering Frey to be hanged, and threatening Brienne with doing the same. With Brienne in particular, the contrast between her previous mindset is clear. Before losing her children, Catelyn's maternal instincts were what motivated and restrained her actions, but after losing them, the justification for her hatred remains, now radicalised with Robb's death, whom she considered her "last son" (*Storm* 582), but the restraint disappears with them.

Ultimately, the tragedy of Lady Stoneheart lies in Catelyn's lack of closure. Traditional revenge tales, according to Kyle Wiggins, follow a simple premise: getting even by "settling accounts (...) and recovering lost currency. Sometimes that currency is monetary; other times it is symbolic (like eyes) or abstract (like honor)" (1). In Catelyn Stark's case, the currency she wishes to recover is her children, which she can never regain. As a result, and because her vengeance is inseparable from her identity as a mother, she will never get the resolution that revenge narratives traditionally promise.

5. Conclusions

This dissertation has shown that motherhood is the defining force behind Catelyn Stark's actions in George R.R Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, shaping her behaviour, political actions, and moral decisions. While motherhood reinforces traits such as devotion and self-sacrifice, it also drives Catelyn beyond the domestic sphere, leads her to act with cruelty, become politically involved, and commit acts of violence, culminating in her transformation into Lady Stoneheart, which represents the radicalisation of her maternal devotion.

The beginning of the dissertation explores the traditional traits associated with motherhood, followed by three sections that demonstrate that, except for domesticity, Catelyn does not break away from these traits, but instead profoundly internalises concepts such as self-sacrifice, devotion, and maternal protection to a destructive degree.

In the first section, which focuses on Robb, Catelyn is shown to embody traits from Melanie Klein's "good mother" by abandoning her own desires to her domestic life and instead taking on the role of counsellor to aid her son, as a natural progression of her nurturing role. In examining their relationship, this work explores how her devotion leads her not only to accept the misogynistic expectations of her society, but also to encourage her son to perpetuate traits of medieval masculinity, thus demonstrating Adrienne Rich's argument that motherhood functions as a social institution that can shape the mother's behaviour to serve male interests.

With Jon Snow, Catelyn does not so much contradict her good mother persona as exhibit maternal protectiveness to an extreme degree. Although many exploring the dynamic between them have concluded that Catelyn's hatred for Jon is rooted in bitter jealousy and fear of being an inadequate mother (Tegelman 62), this dissertation argues otherwise. It is Catelyn's fear for her children and her desire to protect their lives that

leads her to be cruel to her stepson. The fear of usurpation transforms the “good mother” archetype into Klein’s “bad mother”; the latter’s characteristics would not have been exhibited had Catelyn not embodied the maternal protection associated with traditional motherhood.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that motherhood is the force that intensifies Catelyn’s relationship with violence. Across the three novels, Catelyn moves from using violence as a form of defence, as shown during Bran’s assassination attempt, to experiencing justified desires for retribution against those who have harmed her family, before ultimately committing the most morally troubling act of violence examined in this study: the murder of an innocent child following the loss of her son. This progression illustrates how Catelyn embodies the characteristics of traditional protective motherhood beyond reasonable limits, with her character arc culminating in the identity she adopts after her death. Rather than representing a rupture with maternal ideals, Lady Stoneheart embodies the ultimate radicalisation of Catelyn's maternal instinct. Unable to protect her children anymore, she weaponizes her grief to justify the murder of both the guilty and the innocent.

Ultimately, Martin demonstrates through Catelyn that motherhood is not confined to nurturing and domesticity alone, but can also inspire cruelty, political manoeuvring, violence, and horror. By allowing Catelyn to present herself both as a loving mother and a vengeful spectre, Martin exposes the inherent contradictions within motherhood itself. Catelyn’s identity remains inseparable from her role as a mother in both life and death, demonstrating that motherhood is not merely a personal characteristic but one of the central forces driving both her development and, in a broader context, the narrative of *A Song of Ice and Fire.*

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