

Non-Normative Sex and Bodies in *Game of Thrones*: How 'Extreme' Bodies Question the Nature of Sex and Sexual Images

Rebecca Kaplan

The Television series portray sex as having a natural performance while in fact being a deliberate scripting of idealized sex. Bodies that do not fit into idealized constructions of healthy and beautiful are increasingly becoming featured on television programming, including HBO's *Game of Thrones* (GoT). But how these bodies are used – or not used – during sex scenes and how the show adapts cinematography and narrative to capture their sexuality can reveal much about society's relationship to sex and which bodies society is comfortable with having a sexuality. I intend to examine sex and non-normative bodies primarily by examining GoT's depictions of Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage), a character who, along with the actor, has dwarfism.¹

¹ I use non-normative bodies to refer to bodies that do not fit into an idealized image of an ableist, patriarchal society, especially in regards to romance and attraction, including extensive scarring, obesity, dwarfism, or paralysis. Though I still use disabled for variation or consistency with quotations, it is a problematic term as disabled is a hidden social construct which implies a body is at fault for not functioning in a constructed world. Additionally, the term non-normative body encompasses other types of physical difference, including gender and racial, of which variations of the same questions could be asked. I chose the terms 'little person' and 'dwarf' as the first is the official term taken by the organization, Little People of America, and the second

While the visibility of the sex lives of physically impaired people is slowly growing in film and television, GoT's representations help normalize the sexuality of and sexual attraction to characters with physical difference. Yet, despite a narrative that empowers Tyrion and cinematography that adapts to his stature, GoT does not treat Tyrion's sex scenes the same as other main characters'. While the sex scenes do not highlight fascinatingly repulsive excess, such as the freak show orgy on *American Horror Story* (AHS) that will be discussed later, they still limit how erotic the sex is. A consequence of this is to reveal the hypermediated nature of other screened sex and the uncertainty of sex that problematizes western society's historic desire to discover the truth of sex.

Linda Williams has previously analyzed representations of sex and disability in her brief look at *Coming Home* (USA 1978, R: Hal Ashby), in which Sally (Jane Fonda) achieves her first orgasm with a paraplegic, Luke (Jon Voight). Fonda notably wanted to portray non-penetrative sex, claiming that she was more interested in finding "a dramatic way to redefine manhood beyond the traditional goal-oriented reliance on the phallus"². During the scene, Luke tells Sally that she can do everything to him. Williams notes that "This invitation to do 'everything' implies a liberation from the usual temporality of a sex act that would progress through what [Pauline] Kael defined as a modernist "jabbing, thrusting eroticism" and predictably ends [...] with male orgasm presumed to signal the end of the female's pleasure as well. Without this usual telos, the trajectory of the encounter is up for grabs. We cannot assume what this sex will be [...] as the couple negotiates new ways of touching, feeling, and looking."³ Williams suggests that this scene could indicate a new paradigm of sex in which the traditional indicators of sex – force, movement and hardness – are no longer essential. While this discourse seems fitting for discussions on representations of disability and sex, Williams is focused on how female pleasure is depicted and effected by

is a term Dinklage himself has used in interviews.

² Linda Williams: *Screening Sex*. Durham 2008, pp. 174-175.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

this scene.⁴ She notes that Sally is regulated to a tool of remasculinization and that the challenge remains in questioning the orgasm as the “ultimate truth of sex”.⁵ I intend to apply this rethinking of sex and the toppling of the phallic domination of sex through a disability lens, instead of a feminist one, to see how *Game of Thrones*’s non-normative characters reject or reify normative standards of good sex.

GoT and Disability on Screen

In 2011, HBO adapted George R.R. Martin’s fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, into the television series, *Game of Thrones*. Taking place in the fictitious Westeros, GoT depicts the political machinations of different families who fight for the Iron Throne. The focus of this paper, Tyrion Lannister, comes from one such powerful family. He is brother to the ambitious and beautiful Queen, Cersei (Lena Headey) and her handsome, battle-proven twin brother. Over the first season, Cersei takes control by killing the king and putting her son Joffrey (Jack Gleeson) on the throne. Tensions rise as more people name themselves king or queen. Tyrion tries to find his own place in this world, having to face disdain and mockery from the public and his family, but with enough gold to buy swords and lovers. He meets his main love interest, Shae (Sibel Kekilli), a prostitute, in a battle camp and takes her on as his lover the night before he goes into a doomed battle. When unexpectedly successful, he brings her to court with him, against his father’s orders. The realities of court life challenge their relationship until Shae ultimately testifies against him when he is falsely accused of murdering Joffrey. Upon his escape, Tyrion ends Shae’s life by choking her with a gold chain he had once gifted her.

I wish to give a short introduction to the study of disability and its history on screen. Scholarship largely agrees that disability and ‘freakdom’ are socially constructed categories, rather than a biological essentialism. People are not inherently ‘freaks’ but are ‘enfreaked’ by virtue of how the majority views

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 174-176.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

them.⁶ The construction of the world they live in and the majority they are set against define what is Other, just as the Other acts as a measure to prove the norm.⁷ As Catherine Kudlick suggests, the socially privileged qualities of fitness and attractiveness are only prized when set against those who are not.⁸

Disability in early entertainment came in the forms of affliction melodramas, the freak show, and cult cinema. In the afflicted melodrama, a disabled person, typically deaf, mute, or blind, was a pitiable creature, meant to inspire charitable thoughts or evoke pathos. These were flat characters and often played by women, cementing the connection between disability and 'feminine weakness'.⁹ Per Laura Mulvey, the gaze can be gendered, specifically, as active/male and passive/female.¹⁰ This can be applied to the disabled body as well. Russell Meeuf connects disability to taking an active, masculine body and positioning it as a passive, feminized object of the gaze, something typical of "popular texts [which] use images of disability to represent emasculation, impotence, or feminization, revealing the intersection of disability and gender and the subordinate status of both disabled people and women in patriarchal culture."¹¹

Freak shows, in contrast, did not emphasize pity, but horror and fascination. The freak show's heyday was circa 1840 to 1930. During this time, people with 'extreme' bodies, whether born or self-made, were displayed for a

⁶ Cf. Robert Bogdan: *The Social Construction of Freaks*. In: Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.): *Freakery. Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York 1996, pp. 23-37, here p. 35.

⁷ Cf. Cindy Lacom: "The Time is Sick and out of Joint". *Physical Disability in Victorian England*. In: *PMLA*. Vol. 120 (2005), pp. 547-552, here p. 547; see also: Catherine J. Kudlick: *Disability History, Power, and Rethinking the Idea of "The Other"*. In: *PMLA* Vol. 120 (2005), pp. 557-561, here p. 558.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 560.

⁹ Cf. Sheila C. Moeschen: *Suffering Silences, Woeful Afflictions. Physical Disability, Melodrama, and the American Charity Movement*. In: *Comparative Drama*. Vol. 40 (2006), pp. 433-454, here pp. 435-436.

¹⁰ Cf. Laura Mulvey: *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In: Leo Braudy, Marshall Cohen (eds.): *Film Theories and Criticism. Introductory Readings*. New York 1999, pp. 833-44.

¹¹ Russell Meeuf: *John Wayne as "Supercrip". Disabled Bodies and the Construction of "Hard" Masculinity in "The Wings of Eagles"*. In: *Cinema Journal*. Vol. 48, No. 2 (2009), pp. 88-113, here pp. 96, 98.

gawking public.¹² The draw of the freak show lay in its ambivalence – the audience was at once repelled and attracted to the spectacle.¹³ Sideshows ended when a medical discourse rose to prominence, though this increased rhetoric of disability as something to be fixed or shamefully hidden away.¹⁴

In cult films, David Church argues, non-normative bodies are used as metaphors for transgression. It is the “enduring social stigma that visible physical difference equals social deviance” that Church claims attracts cultists and which historically Othered disabled characters.¹⁵ Beginning in the 1910s, mainstream productions began to prioritize narration over spectacle.¹⁶ It is this balance in spectacle vs. narrative which I believe plays a role in whether sex scenes are exploitative. As Church claims: “What separates the portrayal of freakery in cult films from freakery in non-cult films is [...] primarily a matter of stylistic excess”, whereas in mainstream films, shock is “subordinated to normalizing narrative demands.”¹⁷

In her article on sex and disability, Sally Nemeth examines the messages sent to young adults with disability about their own sexuality and the messages being construed by the public. She points to the role physicality plays in gender roles and how those gender roles help define sexuality.¹⁸ Boys “absorb the male myths of sexuality – that sex must always lead to orgasm; men should always be ready and anxious for sex; the penis is the primary instrument of sexuality; that males must be able to always perform and satisfy their partners; and that those who cannot perform are inadequate

¹² Cf. Bogdan, *Social Construction*, p. 23.

¹³ Cf. David Church: *Freakery, Cult Films, and the Problem of Ambivalence*. In: *Journal of Film and Video*. Vol. 63 (2011), pp. 3-17, here p. 4.

¹⁴ Cf. Alberto Brodesco: *Filming the Freak Show. Non-Normative Bodies on Screen*. In: *Journal of History of Medicine*. Vol. 26, No. 1 (2014), pp. 291-312, here pp. 294-295; see also: Rosemarie Garland Thompson: *Introduction*. In: id. (ed.): *Freakery. Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York 1996, pp. 1-19, here p. 2.

¹⁵ Church, *Freakery*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Cf. Sally Nemeth: *Society, Sexuality, and Disabled/Ablebodied Romantic Relationships*. In D.O. Brainwaite, T.L. Thomson (eds.): *Handbook of Communication and People with Disabilities*. Mahwah 2000, pp. 31-40, here pp. 31-33.

and unworthy of lovers [...]. Men who are disabled are commonly judged as sexual noncontenders because they may appear limited when observed through the lens of the traditional male gender role, which mandates self-sufficiency, competitiveness ... and physical strength.”¹⁹

As with other minority representations, disability and sex are often depicted in two extremes: hypersexuality and asexuality.²⁰ A non-normative body depicted on this binary is the overweight woman. As Sonya C. Brown finds, the overweight woman’s sexual appetite can be comedic through its grotesqueness or her body contained by its undesirability.²¹ Asexuality here refers not to an orientation, but rather an ignorance of a person’s ability to be a sexual being. Many times, disabled people are viewed as being incapable of having sex or incapable of consenting to sex. There is a false connection between physical and mental impairments which labels disabled people as innocent. If an able-bodied person is depicted as sexually or romantically interested in a disabled person, the former is often viewed suspiciously. This detracts from representations of a sexually desiring and desirable person who happens to have a physical impairment.²²

Contrarily, morality has a history of being written on the body and deviance from normalcy connected disabled individuals with moral corruption.²³ Sexuality, which is often seen as deviant, can therefore be connected to deviant bodies. This can still be seen today, even in programs that hype themselves as boundary-pushing, such as *American Horror Story*. The fourth season of AHS is set in a 1952 freak show. In the first episode, after barely being introduced to the freak show characters, particularly not those played by actors who share their characters’ condition, the audience sees the aftermath a young, rebellious girl, Penny (Grace Gummer), who was given

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 32-33.

²⁰ I wish to acknowledge that different disabilities have different cultural reactions, thus affecting their sexual representations.

²¹ Cf. Sonya C. Brown: Body Image, Gender, Social Class, and Ethnicity on “Glee”. In: *Studies in Popular Culture*. Vol. 36, No. 2 (2014), pp. 125-147, here pp. 134-138.

²² Cf. Nemeth, *Disabled/Ablebodied*, p. 34.

²³ Cf. Church, *Freakery*, p. 5.

opium and induced to create a video of an orgy she had with the freak show performers. Her eyes are glazed and her body listless. Not only does the camera work evoke hedonistic, psychotropic deviance, but the context condemns the sex. The lack of consent as Penny is given drugs in order to participate in this orgy, filmed without her knowledge, repeats the trope of the sex hygiene films of the 30s and 40s: an innocent young girl is ruined by the sexual deviance of an Other.²⁴ The show tries to mitigate this by later having Penny fall in love with one of the performers, but soon after, her father attacks and 'enfreaks' her body, and the couple is unceremoniously killed in the finale, along with every other character whose actor is disabled. So, while the characters are given a sexuality, it is first corrupted, then needs to be equally different, and finally written off as unimportant compared to the main, able-bodied stars. This greatly contrasts how GoT develops its non-normative love stories.

My article is not the first to address non-normative bodies and sex on television. Brown dissects *Glee*, a show with multiple people of physical difference. Her article mostly focuses on the characterizations and romances of overweight characters, with narrative as its primary means of interpretation.²⁵ I will focus on how film technique itself is used to support or undermine characters of 'extreme' physical difference and the balance between character and spectacle in scenes with sexual content. As GoT is an adult program, it can portray more graphic sex and thus a different angle of analysis opens.

Tyrion and the Prostitutes He Loved

As noted earlier, connotations of health connect impotence to impaired bodies.²⁶ GoT's love scenes reject this trope. In his first scene, Tyrion impresses a prostitute, Ros (Esmé Bianco), with his quick refractory period. A coyly asked, "Again?" suggests that he is virile and thus denies that

²⁴ Cf. *American Horror Story*, *Monsters Among Us*, Season 4, Episode 1 (USA 2014); Eric Schaefer: Of Hygiene and Hollywood. Origins of the Exploitation Film. In: *The Velvet Light Trap*. Vol. 30 (1992), pp. 34-47.

²⁵ Cf. Brown, *Body Image*.

²⁶ Cf. Meeuf, *Supercrip*, p. 98.

physical difference automatically equals impotence. The viewers see the end of one sex act and Tyrion's initiation of another and so can judge the virility themselves; however, the uncertainty in how impressive the feat is remains, as Ros is a prostitute who could be playing a part.²⁷ This complicates sexual certainty, which is not solely a question for those with a disability. Similar teasing occurs between the same prostitute and an abled bodied Theon Greyjoy (Alfie Allen).²⁸ Pleasure and sexuality are thus shown to be elusive and complex regardless of body.

With Tyrion introduced in a sex scene, he is associated with debauchery.²⁹ The scene opens on a medium close-up of Tyrion's face as he receives oral and the visceral sounds of gulping beer, slurping, and grunting. Without the muffle of non-diegetic music, these sounds are slightly disturbing, though realistic. The camera is not particularly invasive, often setting itself in wide shots. It presents the entire scene and the height difference, without exaggerating it, such as in distanced shots of Tyrion pulling Ros towards the bed, the actual climb onto the bed disguised by a wooden pole. By the camera not lingering on the image and the characters treating the act as ordinary, the show downplays any spectacle that might be gleaned.

Ros teases him, in a coy voice, saying she heard of the Imp who was a "drunken little lecher" inclined towards "all manner of perversions." Her voice becomes more natural as she admits to having been expecting him. It belies a falseness to those rumors. By acknowledging those stereotypes, the show challenges the viewer to read beyond that in its depiction of Tyrion. And yet, despite Tyrion being more than a perverse lecher, the pair lacks chemistry. Ros admires his handsome brother while lying in Tyrion's arms and Tyrion exaggerates his wit. The scene is not erotic and the sex somewhat over-the-top. Though the sounds are realistic, Tyrion's facial expression is a bit farcical. The costuming – a too long bed shirt and unattractive hairstyle – hint at the ridiculous. And the excess I noted in AHS comes into play with the

²⁷ Cf. *Game of Thrones*, Winter is Coming, Season 1, Episode 1 (USA 2011).

²⁸ Cf. *Game of Thrones*, The Wolf and the Lion, Season 1, Episode 5 (USA 2011).

²⁹ Cf. GoT, Winter is Coming.

overabundance of girls storming the room at the end. The women are commodified and he is given false assurance. That these hints of false happiness exist in such a scene could demean Tyrion's love life. Yet, with the serial format, layers are added as Tyrion grows as a leading man and begins his relationship with Shae.

By positioning Tyrion and Shae in universal relationship tropes, such as the jealous girlfriend or the staging of oral sex, GoT normalizes their relationship. In Season 3, Shae visits Tyrion in his bedroom and they argue over his affections.³⁰ In part to distract Tyrion, Shae performs oral sex on him. The connotations are different from the oral scene in the brothel because of their intimate relationship, and Tyrion's grunts and lolled head of appreciation are not as farcical. It is a classic shot of oral sex: a girl sinks to her knees which cuts to a reaction shot of the man's face contorting in pleasure. It connects Tyrion with all other male characters in this position, who enjoy female attention, regardless of their body. This also works to hide any awkward positioning that Shae might need to adapt to his height. While Shae is manipulating Tyrion, it is not maliciously or comically done, so it seems to be a manipulation between a couple rather than of an able-bodied person against a disabled person.

Tyrion's sex scenes tend to be oral, as this scene and the brothel scene are. While the differences between the scenes are striking, what remains the same is that this position minimizes the height difference, while focusing on Tyrion's pleasure, rather than mutual pleasure. Often, Tyrion and Shae are positioned in a way that downplays the height difference, such as Shae sitting on Tyrion's lap, lying on a bed in an upper body shot, or Shae half leaning against a table while Tyrion stands on raised flooring. Like Tyrion, Shae is introduced in a scene about sex.³¹ She is brought in as a camp girl for Tyrion. After some banter, Tyrion offers her a proposal: she will sleep only with him and in return she gets safety, his company, and gold. She accepts by removing her dress and straddling him. The camera first focuses on her

³⁰ Cf. *Game of Thrones*, Dark Wings, Dark Words, Season 3, Episode 2 (USA 2013).

³¹ Cf. *Game of Thrones*, Baelor, Season 1, Episode 9 (USA 2011).

body, a wide shot displaying her nude back as her body covers his. This switches to a medium shot from the side, which captures both of their upper bodies. From this angle, the height difference is negligible, since a woman on a man's lap is often taller. She grabs his face in a play of passion. The kiss is prolonged and the last moments focus up at her face, the top of Tyrion's head in the bottom left corner. It is passionate, though minimizes Tyrion's participation. Later kisses do not shy away from showing Tyrion's involvement, but are often shorter. This is one of their more sensual scenes, the last beat having the camera pan down her back, following the path of his hands. Later scenes are more emotional than erotic, in a way mimicking real-life: passion is stronger in the beginning, but with time intimacy grows.

This intimacy is shown in "Blackwater", in which Tyrion must lead the defense of King's Landing against invaders.³² Tyrion and Shae lie in bed the eve before the battle. The camera slowly pans from the billowing curtains to the couple in bed. A storm rages outside and the room is dark and filled with candles. Tyrion and Shae lie in bed with space between them, before Shae questions if he is afraid. With the tight shot of their faces, Tyrion on his back, Shae on her stomach with her face twisted to look at him, the camera catches their minute expressions. The distance remains between them as Tyrion admits his fear, reminding her this is not her war. The color palette is cold, bringing in the storm and the couple's distance. Shae's twisted position suggests vulnerability and enhances the determination with which she climbs on top of him. Her face backlit from the candles warms the scene as she declares her intention to stay with him. The shots reiterate the warmth and trust that is beginning to form between the two. It is an intimate scene with close camera shots and sweet, yet melancholic music. The switching between matching shots of their upper bodies and faces extends the moment of who is going to give in to the kiss first. It is not a long kiss, but they pull away and their lips rest above one another's, suggesting the

³² Cf. *Game of Thrones*, Blackwater, Season 2, Episode 9 (USA 2012).

potential for more but prolonging the tension. This prolongation exemplifies William's application of the itch and scratch model of sex to film.³³

This scene connects to Tyrion and Shae's first meeting. Shae directly mentions it, reminding him that when they first met he asked her "to make love to me like it's my last day on earth." Notably, she does not directly quote him, changing his "fuck me" to "make love to me." Similarly, her response to his claim that he might die has changed. After their first night together, he asks her to weep for him if he should die. She responds, "You'll be dead, how will you know?"³⁴ This night, after he admits that as a Lannister he is guaranteed to be a target, she declares, "I won't let them hurt you." Their love has grown and it is one of the definitive signs that Shae is authentic in her feelings towards Tyrion. It is an inversion of traditional gender roles and while some might claim that this line emasculates Tyrion, I instead think that it empowers their love story. While she says the line, Tyrion's hands are stroking her back, just at the edge of the frame. The mutual support of the relationship is subtly depicted in quiet lines and small physicality.

Gender, Hypermediated Sex, and the Importance of Penetration

Tyrion's sex scenes question the authenticity and mediated nature of sex. There is a distinct lack of traditional erotic cues in his love scenes. Particularly, the lack of non-diegetic music. In the brothel scene and during Tyrion and Shae's first kiss, there is no swelling music, nothing to disguise the sounds of sex from filling the air, which Williams sees as giving "the sex scenes [...] a more dramatically integrated status."³⁵ The camera does not often segment body parts or linger suggestively. There are few sweeping gestures from the camera and the actors do not suddenly begin to frantically tear each other's clothes off, as seen with other couples. That Tyrion's love scenes do not read as erotic, but instead authentic, reflects the hypermediated nature of the sex audiences are conditioned to watch.

³³ Cf. Williams, *Screening Sex*, p. 48. The itch and scratch model posits two forms of sexual arousal – the itch which prolongs the agony of the pleasure and the scratch which satisfies it.

³⁴ *GoT*, Baelor.

³⁵ Williams, *Screening Sex*, p. 178.

This is not to say there are no erotic elements to Tyrion's sex scenes. But they focus on the face and voice rather than the body. In the season 3 scene, in which Tyrion tries to calm a jealous Shae, he pushes up her skirt while remarking that he clearly likes her more than he liked Ros. His voice deepens to suggest sensuality. He is rejected by Shae who slaps his hands away, but it marks the beginning of the seduction the scene ultimately culminates in. When she begins undressing him and asks if she is cruel, Tyrion slightly gulps, and mutters "only if you stop." The soft gulp and the husky answer subtly invoke sexual tension. Likewise, in their first scene, Tyrion frankly asks if Shae accepts his proposal to become his mistress. His face is framed slightly from below, enhancing his jaw line and vocal power, as though he is issuing a challenge. The focus is on their emotions and their mouths, more so than their bodies. It avoids the spectacle of their sex, but equally ignores the realities of sex with physical difference.

Showing these realities would potentially have the effect of undermining patriarchal, penetration-based sex. In some ways, the primacy of oral sex scenes does suggest a love life that does not revolve around penetrative sex. However, without a counterpart showing female pleasure, the patriarchal emphasis on male orgasm is reiterated while not showing a mutually satisfying relationship with non-normative sex models. GoT hints at these non-penetrative sex lives through the Unsullied, a group of soldier-slaves who had been castrated as children. And while I caution about inflating one impairment or group for another, in this case, the castrated characters, such as Grey Worm (Jacob Anderson), an Unsullied captain, Varys (Conleth Hill), an asexual eunuch, and Theon, an emasculated torture victim, can tentatively be equated to modern ailments or orientations that remove the penis from the sexual equation. Varys' asexuality is not developed in a way to truly explore the dynamics of living as an asexual person. He is given no personal life and with his eastern background and dress, becomes almost mystical, evinced by fan theories that he is a Merman.³⁶

³⁶ Cf. <http://nerdist.com/the-crazy-game-of-thrones-theory-that-varys-is-a-mermaid/> (last viewed 25.11.2016).

Grey Worm, however, is given a romance. Grey Worm is caught staring at a nude Missandei (Nathalie Emmanuel), prompting a conversation between Queen Daenerys (Emilia Clarke) and Missandei in which the queen assumes none of the Unsullied are interested in women. When Missandei counters that she believes he was, Dany questions which parts had been taken from them as boys.³⁷ The flirtation between Missandei and Grey Worm culminates in a scene in which the soldier, having been injured in battle, admits that as he was stabbed he felt fear, fear that he would never see her again. Missandei climbs onto his bed, his muscular chest bared, and kisses him. The implication in their relationship is that it is possible to have a romance and sexual desire without the erect penis, which has become so centralized in sexual discourse. However, while narratively this is implied, visually it is not. The scene which speaks to Grey Worm's visual pleasure, his gaze upon Missandei's nude body, is very normative, the camera lingering and panning up her body as she is first unaware and then aware of his gaze. The kiss is just that, a kiss given to a muscular man in bed. There is no implication of how their actual sex life would progress or any visual physical interaction that is not normative. Likewise, by suggesting Grey Worm feels sexual arousal and leaving the extent of his physical condition unconfirmed, it avoids showing a romance without sex.³⁸

Sex norms are questioned on smaller scales as well. In her work on *Glee*, Brown connects male dominance as an ingredient in normative heterosexual romance.³⁹ Meuff also makes this connection, noting that films solve the 'problem' of a feminized, disabled man by "inscribing him within a nuclear family structure that subordinates female sexuality and affirms patriarchal values."⁴⁰ Love scenes between Tyrion and Shae are not based around this dominance. At times they are sweet and gentle, at other times they are playful. Mostly, Shae is the one shown initiating sex or being more physically

³⁷ Cf. *Game of Thrones*, The Mountain and the Viper, Season 4, Episode 8 (USA 2014).

³⁸ Cf. *Game of Thrones*, Kill the Boy, Season 5, Episode 5 (USA 2015).

³⁹ Cf. Brown, *Body Image*, p. 131.

⁴⁰ Meuff, *Supercrip*, p. 99.

active, grabbing his face, striding towards him. This does not rob Tyrion of his masculinity, but presents a different vision of sex.

In the season 3 scene discussed earlier, in which Shae is jealous and then performs oral sex on Tyrion, she takes on the dominant role. She pushes him in anger and is aggressive, as is typical of her fiery character. She grabs his face to talk down to him and mocks his complaints, moaning “Shae is so cruel to me.”⁴¹ This could connote infantilism, but Tyrion flips it into something sexual. He lowers the pitch of his voice and slows his words down. The tone changes when the shot is facing Tyrion. His face is framed and Shae appears more level with him. It lessens the effect of grabbing his face and looking down on him and instead becomes more sensual. Shae is in the dominant role in this exchange and Tyrion not only accepts it, but likes it. This leads to one of their more erotic kisses, in which Shae bites and pulls on Tyrion’s lower lip. Not only does it sensualize one of Tyrion’s features, but it accepts a woman in the dominant position without fetishizing it.

Yet female pleasure is still problematic in these scenes. Foucault links Western perceptions of sexuality to an investigation of the truth of sex often through confession.⁴² Media can offer messages about this truth, but fictional accounts are blocked by the very nature of their mediation, especially regarding the authenticity of female pleasure and orgasm. In some ways, Tyrion and Shae’s relationship epitomizes this searching for and ultimate failure to find the truth of sex. Inherent in her role as a prostitute, Shae’s motivations and feelings are ambiguous. Perhaps she loves Tyrion, perhaps she is in it for the money. The truth of her affections is searched for and hinted at, but never completely revealed. There are many scenes which suggest she cares for Tyrion more than the money, but her ultimate betrayal of him can shake that reading.

In their sex scenes, the show never depicts Shae’s pleasure, denying us that insight into her truth. The scenes solely focus on the male and his pleasure.

⁴¹ GoT, Dark Wings, Dark Words.

⁴² Cf. Michael Foucault, Lawrence E Winters: The West and the Truth of Sex. In: *SubStance*. Vol. 6/7, No. 20 (1978), pp. 5-8.

As Williams notes, the male orgasm acting as a substitute for female pleasure is common. And yet, the woman is often shown enjoying herself, as a balm for the male ego and object for male desire.⁴³ By never associating Shae and Tyrion's romance with her pleasure, the show does not fake female orgasm for the male ego. This could also suggest an unwillingness to depict a little person successfully pleasuring an abled body person by casting doubt on Tyrion's ability to provide such pleasure and by not linking the love Shae does feel for Tyrion to her desire. The relationship is not about Shae, it is about Tyrion, and thus undermines their reciprocity. While on the one hand, this shakes the foundation of how true Shae and Tyrion's love is and Tyrion's depiction as a desirable partner, on the other, it reveals an inherent uncertainty in love and sex that is downplayed in popular programming.

Conclusion

Game of Thrones is ambiguous in its desire to push boundaries in how it depicts sex and with what body types. This is one of the first programs that depicts a realistic relationship between a little person and an average sized person which hints at sensuality and explores intimacy. The show also breaks bonds with conventions of penetrative sex through its eunuch characters. However, the difference between Tyrion's love scenes and his costars' and the limited exploration of relationships without penetrative sex, reveal the hesitancy to push normative conventions too far. Yet, through these scenes, some truths about sex on television and the nature of sex itself are revealed. By limiting the erotic cues typical of passionate love, the stark difference between hypermediated and 'real' sex is apparent. Tyrion's love scenes do not tend to have traditional cues, such as passionate embraces, circling cameras, or swelling music. The unintended consequence is that it is easier to note these artificial additions to normative sex scenes. This exposes the uncertainty inherent in sex, thus calling into question our knowledge of the 'truth' of sex.

⁴³ Cf. Williams, *Screening Sex*, pp. 155-180.

Television styles the passion portrayed by couples and the enthusiasm of female orgasm around the erect penis. GoT shows non-penetrative pleasure, such as Tyrion's blow jobs, or, in Grey Worm's case, questions the importance of the erect penis; however, it falters at answering this question. Grey Worm and Missandei never reveal how they overcome his castration and Tyrion is not depicted reciprocating for his partner. This lack of female pleasure in Tyrion's scenes is problematic: it potentially denies the importance of female pleasure or perspective in the relationship and it indicates a limit to the show's willingness to depict a little person as a sexually desirable partner by dissociating Shae's love for Tyrion from her desire and refusing an image of Tyrion pleasuring a woman.

The ambiguity of Shae's feelings and the disregard for female pleasure undermines the rigidity with which sex can be approached and depicted. Traditionally, visual representation of female pleasure is assumed via vocal adulation and the male climax. By depicting female pleasure as unclear and not readily connected to male orgasm, sexual norms are destabilized. And if the 'truth' of male prowess and its unquestioned ability to induce female orgasm are under scrutiny, perhaps definitions of sex can be opened as well. So, while only a baby step in terms of realistic and erotic depictions of sex with non-normative bodies, GoT's love stories featuring Tyrion and Grey Worm, through the separation of male pleasure from female pleasure and the acknowledgment of different sexual possibilities, does allow us to question the phallus's position in sex.

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Author

Rebecca Kaplan earned her B.A. in Communications at the University of Pennsylvania and her M.A. in Films Studies at King's College before beginning her doctoral studies at the University of Bochum. This paper is inspired by her M.A.'s thesis on non-normative bodies in *Game of Thrones*.

Contact: rebecca.kaplan@rub.de