

Opinion

## Here Be Mother of Dragons

Emilia Clarke has conquered her health issues. Now will Daenerys conquer the Seven Kingdoms?

**By Maureen Dowd**

April 6, 2019

Women all over the world are riding the tiger.

Except Emilia Clarke.

She's riding the dragon.

The fire-and-ice fantasy world of HBO's "Game of Thrones" may be set in feudal times, but the heady whoosh of women leaders rising on the show, as it reaches its bloody conclusion, parallels the heady whoosh of women leaders rising around the globe in the last couple of years.

All eyes are now on the fierce four: Daenerys, Cersei, Sansa and Arya. Going into its eighth and final season, the show has offered a primer in how a female leader must act differently than a male leader in a world run predominantly by men — the double standards, the way an action can be perceived in very different ways depending on whether it's a man or a woman undertaking it.

"The whole show is just a discussion on power," Clarke tells me in an interview at the Mandarin Oriental before the premiere at Radio City Music Hall. "Because the Iron Throne is representative of complete and consuming power and what that does to someone. It's fascinating, what I've found about the sacrifices that you make and what you get out of it as a result. Ultimately, if you get on the throne, what are you really getting?"

She cites her beautiful and icy Lannister rival, Queen Cersei (played by Lena Headey), who has lost her three children to murder and suicide and driven off Jaime, her brother/lover, who grew disgusted by her rapaciousness.

"Cersei proves that you're not getting that much," Clarke says. "You're getting a lot of loneliness, pain, critiques."

She says that the cunning women of "Game of Thrones" have been shunted aside by fathers, husbands and brothers, and they're fed up with proving themselves over and over. "The fight becomes an identity battle: 'I'm doing this because I've got to be worth more than I was told I was.'"

Some have seen the show, [as The Washington Post put it](#), as a “revenge fantasy about what happens when women who have been brutalized and raped gain power. ... Rape or enslave or shame a woman on ‘Game of Thrones’ and she will plot your murder, curse your unborn child in your womb, burn your capital city, bomb your place of worship, let you be torn apart by starving dogs or leave you to be blinded and tortured by a zombie knight acting out a grotesque pantomime of your own victimization.”

Thrillingly, women at the top in 2019 have [thrown off hidebound expectations](#) about emulating the male model, in how they look (see Nancy Pelosi, who has slain a few dragons in her time, [armored in a fiery orange coat](#) to joust with President Trump), how they communicate (see Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [lancing hordes of Twitter trolls](#)) and how they govern ([New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern](#) entwining empathy, as she wore a head scarf after the mass shootings at two Christchurch mosques, and muscle, as she announced plans six days after the tragedy to ban semiautomatic rifles).

But in Westeros, as in Washington, women can match men when it comes to bollixing things up. Even though the Mother of Dragons, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, can walk through fire and is regarded as one of the most effective leaders in “Game of Thrones,” she has made mistakes. Forcing recalcitrant men to “bend the knee,” Daenerys torched a father and son — a decision that may haunt her in the new season, which starts next Sunday.

“There’s definitely a few Targaryen moments that she’s had, for want of a better word,” Clarke says slyly, alluding to the fact that Daenerys’s father, the Mad King, was a demented and sadistic ruler.

“The Targaryen in her — the bad leadership decisions — make her sometimes go: ‘I’ve got to have this power. I don’t care who I’m controlling or what I have to do to get it, because it’s intoxicating.’”

Cersei is narcissistic, sociopathic and driven by her obsessions. [Headey told Vulture](#) that Cersei “doesn’t really see the bigger consequence. It’s part of what I love about her. She’s not too savvy about things.”

Clarke, shaking her head when I ask about Theresa May, recalls attending a [march last month in London](#) to get a second Brexit vote. “[It’s so infuriating to watch](#),” the 32-year-old Brit says of the inept pols on both sides of the Groundhog Day battle. “It’s like, what are you, *children*?”

She says that she watched Cate Blanchett’s 1998 movie, “Elizabeth,” over and over to see how a woman in history plays a man’s game better than the men. Just as the Virgin Queen married herself to her country, steeling herself to be more gender neutral, more rigid in her costumes, so did Daenerys.

In lieu of children, Clarke says, Daenerys “has her dragons, which give her her mettle.” She proudly shows off three tiny dragons tattooed inside her right wrist.

She says it was only last season that she started to “bite back” at those who criticized the fact that she, and the other women in the show, had more nude scenes than the men.

She says that when she gets asked by feminists, “Why did you take off your clothes for television?” she can’t help but think, what the hell? “I just killed all the dudes!”

Clarke is so exquisite and glowing, it’s hard to fathom the ordeal she has endured. [In a harrowing essay in The New Yorker](#), she revealed that during the years that she was striking fear in the other tribes of Westeros, she was suffused with fear over her health. She says she is 100 percent now, after two aneurysms, and she is still able to joke that her brain surgery merely robbed her of her “good taste in men.”

“And I wonder why none of my exes have texted me,” she says, grinning. (She has started [a foundation called SameYou](#), a charity for young adults recovering from brain injuries and strokes.)

Now it’s time for Clarke to slip into a Valentino gray tulle, featuring a line of poetry across the bodice — “Leave your door open for me. I might sleepwalk into your arms.” As we leave, I ask: Given that the Targaryens are a mad, cruel dynasty, what does she make of our Trumpian “Game of Thrones”?

[“We need to read all the report](#), don’t we?” she says.

How long would Trump last in Westeros, I wonder.

“Annoyingly, probably quite a long time,” she replies, in a nod to his dark survival instincts. She adds mischievously, “And then I’d come along with my dragons.”