EVIL Matriarchs & Masculine Dramas

By

Sarah Helen Lancaster

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Approved by:

____________________________
Dr. Joshua Gleich
Department of Theatre, Film & Television
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Abstract

This thesis explores the characterization of evil matriarchs within quality television dramas. Contemporary serial dramas are often masculinized, which complicates the portrayals of female characters. The analysis focuses on motherhood, because mothers are simultaneously uplifted and disregarded by the male characters within these shows more so than other female characters. In contrast to the idealized depictions of motherhood found throughout television, this thesis focuses on matriarchs that resort to villainy in order to retain power for their families. The case studies examine Gemma Morrow from Sons of Anarchy and Cersei Lannister from Game of Thrones, as these shows are strong representations of contemporary masculine dramas. The research reveals that evil matriarchs desire masculine freedom and the power attached to it; however, their maternal love for their children prevents them from successfully dismantling gender hierarchies.
Evil Matriarchs & Masculine Dramas

Introduction

Her image displays bright upon the screen—teeth glistening white, hair nicely done, a warmth to her voice. She makes breakfast, cleans the house, sends her family off into the world as she begins her household duties. This idealized, domesticated mother dominated television screens for decades, shaping American notions of motherhood and offering one of the only representations of women in general. As the definitions of motherhood expand, television visually represents those changes, giving a face to the mothers of the present. From the classic June Cleavers of the past, to the tough, daring Cookie Lyons of the present, television has shown motherhood in various, complicated ways. While television mothers vary greatly, the vast majority of them are seen as honorable, loving people. Motherhood comes with a unique reverence, especially on TV, where the mom's most basic role is to be the family's moral compass. When the mother loses, or never has, a moral conscious, she clashes with the TV trope of motherhood being inherently benign. This fight between the maternal and the malicious creates female characters that are fascinatingly nurturing and vicious at the same time.

A television mother's traits depend largely upon what genre she exists within. This essay examines mothers within high-quality, masculinized dramas, a genre currently dominating the television landscape. Serialized dramas tend to explore the darker sides of humanity, featuring more sensationalized content and flawed characters. The mothers of these dramas tend to be more aggressive, stimulating, and are often struggling to conform to generic definitions of motherhood. These untidy portrayals make room for deeply problematic mothers, and in more drastic cases, evil matriarchs. Sons of Anarchy and Game
of Thrones both explore familial ties, the addictiveness of power, and how these aspects pressure TV mothers in a way unique to masculine dramas. Gemma Morrow and Cersei Lannister, evil matriarchs of the previously mentioned shows, both act as femme-appearing women fighting for absolute authority through demonstrations of masculinity. Their unwavering need for power is essential to their characterization. However, the masculinization of these shows causes the women’s identities, and their value as family members, to hinge completely on being a mother.

**Defining Quality Television Dramas**

The characters being analyzed in this thesis exist within “quality”, contemporary television. Furthermore, this paper examines quality television through an American lens, as other countries have different cultural definitions. As an artistic medium, television has undergone great changes since its inception. For many decades, television was seen as unsophisticated, generic, and mindlessly entertaining. While film carved out a space for itself as a serious art form, TV appeared to be a simple technology meant to comfort families in the home. Primetime shows were episodic and easy to comprehend—until the early 1980s when shows like Hill St. Blues and Cheers began employing serial storytelling (Mittell 32). The 1990s continued this trend with The X-Files and highly influential The Sopranos, a show Rolling Stone calls “the standard all ambitious TV inspires to meet” (Sheffield). As the 2000s became the 2010s, more and more serialized dramas premiered on television, these shows becoming revered works of art rather than simply TV shows. For the past few years, various culture critics and academics have declared television better than film. The large number of competing shows forces creators to push boundaries and
raise the artistic standard if they wish to be successful. While there are plenty of successful shows that are not considered high quality—shows like *The Big Bang Theory* closely resemble the basic sitcoms of TV's early years—many of the most discussed television falls under the category of excellence.

So, how does one define “quality” television? If art is subjective, how do critics determine which shows receive the coveted quality label? Gender plays a vital role in deciding which media society deems valuable. Men have more influence than women in most aspects of society, and this imbalance of authority transfers into judgments of television. As Charlotte Brunsdon states, “there are always issues of power at stake in notions of quality and judgment” (McCabe, Akass 2). In her work, Brunsdon discusses the gendering of television genres, specifically focusing on the soap opera and how said television genre reflects womanhood. Soap operas and quality serials have been analyzed for both their parallels and their dichotomies. Masculine dramas offer ideas of manhood, acting as an inverse of the soap opera in various ways. For example, masculine dramas focus on male protagonists in the same way soap operas focus on female leads. Where the soap opera exists in the safe, domestic sphere, the masculine drama shifts to the grittiness of the external world. Feminist academic analysis often highlights the use of melodrama within masculine drama, and how highly emotional storytelling is not seen as excessive when focused on the lives of men. The feminine aesthetic and viewership of soap operas prevents the genre from being taken seriously, causing the critical acclaim of many masculine dramas (shows that heavily feature melodrama) to appear bias.

Jason Mittell challenges the idea that quality, serial dramas are simply masculinized reiterations of soap operas. He claims that, “such incorporation of sentimental melodrama
and female characters into traditionally masculinist genres has worked to validate effeminate emotional experiences for male viewers, and help destabilize longstanding gender hierarchies” (Mittell, para. 30). While Mittell’s statement is not incorrect, the characters and viewers who benefit from this mix of gendered conventions are primarily men. While emotion in general is coded as female, the feelings of men—be it pain, sadness, or joy—are often validated in ways that women’s emotions are not. Furthermore, inserting female characters into masculine spaces does not necessarily challenge gender hierarchies, especially when many female characters are stereotypes or women written with predominantly masculine traits. Mittell later claims that the mixing of masculine and feminine genre conventions invites “viewers to cross-identify and embrace affective pleasures that are typically non-normative for their gender identity” (para. 43). Again, this claim has truth, but ignores that while quality dramas mix the feminine and masculine, they are mostly centered around men and reiterate the idea that hyper-masculine work has universal appeal and artistic value.

**Quality Television & Gender**

The rise of hyper-masculinity on quality television reflects a desire to channel male fantasies through an expansive and boundary-pushing medium. Television’s origins in the domestic sphere led to the medium’s label as feminine—entertainment that a family could easily enjoy. As television shows began to experiment, different genres became associated with different aesthetics. High production values, naturalistic performance styles, and innovative camerawork are commonly associated with quality TV. The subject matter pushes the boundaries of respectability, almost always employing sex, violence, and
substance abuse. This combination of striking aesthetics, excellent technical skill, and controversial content dominates the contemporary television landscape. The aesthetic and thematic divide between quality TV and more traditional TV strongly resembles the clash between masculinity and femininity. The broadcast TV melodrama is passive and inauthentic, while quality cable TV is resistant, innovative, strong-willed (Imre 392). These contemporary dramas are hyper masculine because mainstream television supposedly favors femininity and stifles the aggressive male realism that many viewers desire. However, while feminine descriptors are associated with the mainstream, women do not control mainstream TV—or mainstream society in general. In every social, economic, and artistic sense men dominate and actively oppress women. Shows like Sons of Anarchy, Mad Men, and Breaking Bad disrespect and degrade female characters constantly. While one could argue that these shows are merely offering a realistic portrayal of a society that devalues women, the shows often romanticize these actions rather than denounce them. Furthermore, the majority of quality dramas are told through the male perspective, reaffirming the idea that a man's view of the world is more complex, insightful, and relatable than a woman's.

Quality television often focuses on predominantly male casts, but even the most masculine dramas features at least one consistent female character who challenges the story. Not surprisingly, masculine dramas define women based on their relationships to the male characters. This proves to be very limiting in terms of characterization. The majority of female characters in these shows fall into one of these tropes: wife, mother, mistress. Not to say that these titles do not lend themselves to complex, interesting characters, but these classifications often prevent the character from developing to the same extent as the men.
Furthermore, these tropes come with their own fixed stereotypes. The wife is unwaveringly loyal and sacrificial. She is physically attractive and acts as the husband’s moral compass. The mistress acts as the embodiment of sexual desire—she is seductive, mysterious, and causes trouble. These women embody the Madonna-whore complex—the male characters respect the wife, but desire the mistress. The mother, being the only of the three that can exist outside of a sexual relationship with the male character, often receives the most reverence. Men employ sex as tool to exert dominance, and since the mother figure is not often seen as sexual, she undergoes less humiliation. Furthermore, the mother has the unique ability to remind male characters of their infancy, a time when they were utterly dependent and powerless. This allows the mother to be feared in a way that the mistress and wife cannot be. However, when these three tropes are combined, the female character becomes surprisingly human. Sometimes the character even becomes immoral. Enter the evil matriarch: a female character with the ability to simultaneously nurture and undermine, all while subverting societal ideals of motherhood.

*Sons of Anarchy* and *Games of Thrones* both feature evil matriarchs negotiating a love of family and power. Gemma Morrow and Cersei Lannister demonstrate the portrayal of motherhood through a hyper-masculine lens. Both women are complex, flawed, and divert from one-dimensional depictions of mothers often found on television. Their proximity to powerful, important men gives them an authoritative demeanor, and they both view themselves as formidable women (despite their power hinging completely on men). Cersei and Gemma operate within groups that place loyalty to family above all else. However, the two women are obsessed with keeping control over their communities in order to keep their families in power. The men around them also desire power and demand respect, so
the hawkish personalities of the women are not particularly out of place within these shows. However, both are manipulative and must hide their villainous ways in order to be successful. That is not to say that either character presents themselves as morally upright, but both women see their villainy as justifiable when it is most certainly not. The masculine energy of both Cersei and Gemma is only offset by their undying, maternal love for their children. In this sense, the characters become a masculine fantasy of “strong” women— their most useful traits mirroring men. In contrast, their ultimate weakness is motherhood. Their feminine love for their children prevents them from reaching their full capacity for evil. Through the lens of masculine television, Gemma and Cersei become failed villains due to their inability to imagine themselves outside of their motherhood.

**Character Study: Gemma Morrow in *Sons of Anarchy***

*Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014) explores the lives of a motorcycle gang, SAMCRO, in a small California town. SAMCRO is incredibly violent, constantly fighting with each other and outside forces, but operates with the idea that they are a loyal family. The show features a majority male cast, with two main female characters: Tara and Gemma. While both are mothers, only Gemma acts as the evil matriarch throughout the show. From the first season, the audience recognizes Gemma as a flawed mother who will cross all moral lines to protect her family. This analysis will mainly explore Gemma’s storyline in the second season, as her arc is more central than other seasons. Furthermore, the horrendous gang-rape Gemma endures in season two further highlights the relationship between sex, motherhood, and immorality. Gemma’s rape also serves as a means to gather empathy for a character previously established as power hungry. Essentially, the show insinuates that
Gemma’s evil is acceptable, setting up an unsuccessful rape and revenge storyline. Her ultimate revenge at the season’s end is less about the act of rape, and more about the consequences of threatening Gemma’s family and the power that they hold. Through this perspective, Gemma’s villainy remains unjustifiable.

To begin, Gemma’s physical appearance clearly separates her from conventional ideas of motherhood. She wears tight jeans, black leather jackets, heavy eye makeup, and sports heavily highlighted, teased hair. Her appearance matches perfectly with the biker aesthetic; as a result, Gemma’s rebellious, sexy presence never feels out of place within the show. Actual society may regard Gemma’s choice of dress as a joke, but within the show’s universe, she has an authoritative presence and purpose. Gemma’s character also subverts ageist beliefs regarding women. She is in her fifties, but is seen as physically attractive and desired by both younger and older men. Her appearance sets her up as an obvious femme fatale, alluring and bold. However, the series often focuses on framing Gemma in a more maternal light. The audience first sees her in her usual dress—black leather jacket, low-cut top—with her newborn grandson, Abel, in a baby carrier. Her sensual, dark look contrasts the powder blue onesie of the baby, but Gemma appears comfortable in her role as grandmother. There is no sense that she does not want to be with the baby, he brings her peace and lightness.

Gemma spends the majority of the first episode caring for Abel, emphasizing the importance she places on being a nurturing grandmother. However, the character continues to challenge stereotypical notions of motherhood, particularly in a scene featuring Gemma’s husband and SAMCRO president, Clay. During a playful moment, Gemma entices Clay into the back of the clubhouse to have sex, bringing Abel along. When
another club member accidentally walks in on Gemma and Clay having sex, Abel begins to cry, and the two start laughing. Gemma’s sexuality remains in full force, even when she must act as a grandmother. Instead of compartmentalizing her characteristics, Gemma’s complexity is on full display, making her more than a matriarch.

The first episode emphasizes Gemma’s admirable qualities—her loyalty, her love of family, her empathy and intuitiveness. The episode ends with Gemma’s kidnap and rape, so the writers are clearly establishing empathy for the character to a greater extent. Furthermore, Gemma’s maternal side causes her kidnapping. As Gemma pulls up to a stoplight, a woman runs up to her car, frantically asking for help because her baby is choking on something. When Gemma first hears the woman, she grabs her gun out of her purse. She is inherently skeptical and defensive, because life in SAMCRO requires ruthlessness. However, when she hears the phrase “my baby is choking” and sees a young mother crying, she drops her gun and runs to her aid. The woman, a member of a competing white supremacist gang, hits Gemma over the head and kidnaps her.

Motherhood causes Gemma to let her guard down. The aspect of her personality that makes her the most likeable, is also the aspect that places her in the most danger.

When Gemma awakens, her arms are bound and she is surrounded by three masked men. “Do you know what I could do to you?”, she screams before she violently kicks at them (2.01). Gemma has no desire to plead for mercy—that is not who she is. She threatens and fights back as hard as she can, until the men assault her. Before this moment, Gemma has a rather mundane, happy episode. The audience sees her soften, only to have her compassion used against her. The next episode begins with Gemma being found by sheriff and long-time friend, Wayne. Gemma rejects Wayne’s empathetic concerns, and she handles the
situation like a business deal—careful and calculating. She avoids the hospital, calling Tara instead, and commands Wayne and Tara to keep the assault completely secret. Her tough exterior acting as a guard she will never let down again.

Gemma handles trauma from the rape in ways both expected and surprising. She is clearly an unconventional woman in many ways, so a viewer might assume Gemma will treat her rape as just another horrible part of life she must get over. Gemma does this to an extent, but the writers also show Gemma being scared, despondent, and distant. As much as she wishes she could let the pain go—specifically so she can be a person stronger than the average woman, someone able to handle anything—she is deeply affected by the assault. She is restless and not sleeping in the same bed as her husband. In order to keep the assault secret, Gemma tells everyone she was in a car accident, so her skittish behavior confuses them. When Clay expresses concern, Gemma retaliates and resists. “Since when do you want to talk?”, she shouts at him (2.03). This scene establishes a recurring habit of Gemma’s throughout the season—responding to concern with either anger or quiet dismissal. Gemma views concern as pity, and as someone who prides herself as being more resilient than most, the pity of others threatens Gemma’s identity. Gemma is obviously traumatized by the rape—as anyone would be—but she is specifically terrified by the idea of her indestructible presence being undermined.

Gemma’s refusal to talk about her pain is stereotypically masculine. Women are meant to be open and more likely to ask for assistance, men swallow their pain and heal themselves independently. Quality TV dramas often portray their male characters in this light, their ability to disregard pain seen as admirable and complex. By projecting this characteristic onto Gemma, the writers emphasize her masculinity. More specifically
speaking, her desire for masculinity and the idealized freedom that follows. Gemma’s rape acts as a catalyst for this desire, because she regards her femininity, and how said femininity affects the masculinity of those around her, as the cause of her assault. The rival gang members choose to assault Gemma because her feminine demeanor brings the club comfort (as much comfort that can be found in an outlaw motorcycle club). Gemma cannot relinquish her feminine appearance, because the club has expectations of her, and she exists in a world created by and for men. In an attempt to counteract her feminine appearance, and avoid an attack like this from ever happening again, she relies on her masculine tendencies more and more.

Gemma’s struggle for masculine freedom comes into conflict with her feminine responsibilities. While Gemma does not wish to be held back by her femininity, as she currently is, she understands the usefulness of her feminine traits. After the rape, her clothing remains sexy and her makeup remains done. While the club members care for Gemma, and would worry if she displayed visible signs of PTSD, she understands that showing pain equals weakness. Members would regard her with less respect if she stopped taking care of herself and those around her, because she would not have anything to offer. Furthermore, by appearing as if nothing has happened, Gemma can foster her masculinity in secret. For example, Gemma receives a package containing the mask her rapists wore during the assault. Gemma is visibly frightened, but she wants to handle the threat on her own terms. Again, masculine freedom is more important to Gemma than feminine protection. She goes to the name of the store written on the package, runs into a man on the street, and recognizes his tattoo that she saw during the rape. The fact that Gemma went
searching for the senders of the package highlights her bravery, and her strong desire to keep the rape a secret. She retreats back to her car and watches the man from afar.

Gemma’s feminine, maternal side is defined by how she interacts with others, automatically hindering her independence and making choices that are best for those she loves. Gemma is undoubtedly headstrong, smart, and averse to being pushed around; however, Gemma does lack total autonomy. The level of respect other people show her hinges on her title as wife of the president, and mother of the vice president. In this scene, spying on a dangerous man in order to exact revenge, Gemma is autonomous. Her husband and son do not know of the man’s crime, so she does not need to worry about how this will affect them. She suffered the rape on her own, so she wants to receive justice on her own as well.

Gemma does eventually get some semblance of revenge in the series finale. While shopping, Gemma sees the young woman who knocked her unconscious and delivered her to the rapists. Gemma follows her, calm and collected, ready to kill her for what she has done. Tara begs her not to go through with the murder—“that rape would have destroyed most women, but it made you stronger, wiser” (2.13). Sons of Anarchy often reminds the viewer that Gemma is not an average woman. Her masculine traits make her more valuable than other women in the show, the exception being Tara. Gemma cannot completely step outside the bounds of femininity, and her being able to murder the young woman, but not any of her male rapists, highlights her limitations. She does not get direct revenge on her rapists. SAMCRO handles the punishment for the men who raped Gemma, placing her back into a dependent position. By allowing Gemma to only kill the female accomplice, the show reinforces the power differences between men and women. Of course Gemma can kill the
girl without hesitation—the series postures her as the superior female. She can combat, outsmart, and murder any women who crosses her. However, men must kill other men.

Try as she might, Gemma does not have the strength to directly kill men. Directly is emphasized here, because Gemma is indirectly responsible for the murder of various men through her clever, secretive manipulation. While this is certainly a way to exert power over men, this technique still forces Gemma to depend on men. When she has the opportunity to take matters into her own hands, she hesitates. In one episode, Gemma follows the man who led her gang rape and has a perfect opportunity to kill him discreetly. As she hears him talking on the phone to his son, she cannot bring herself to shoot, missing the perfect opportunity to kill her rapist. This scene complicates Gemma’s character for various reasons. First, the audience can infer that she hesitates due to the fact that the man was speaking to his young son. Her motherhood again making her more morally sound, but leading to her failure at the same time. Second, Gemma’s uncertainty reflects her fear about killing a man directly. Gemma is a noticeably plucky character, but she is overstepping the boundaries the men of SAMCRO have set. As much respect as everyone seems to have for her, she is still a woman, and woman do not control who lives and who dies.

All of Gemma’s close relationships are with men, the one exception being the tumultuous friendship she has with Tara, her daughter-in-law. Furthermore, Tara is the only other female character with a leading role in the show, and the two often fight for control over Jax. Throughout season two, Tara questions her place in an outlaw motorcycle club. She is an accomplished doctor and the wrongdoings of SAMCRO prevent her from fully committing to her work. Gemma senses this hesitation and treats Tara with quiet animosity; however, she sees the immense love Jax has for Tara and knows she cannot treat
Tara poorly. Instead, Gemma begins to guide Tara and ease her into the outlaw lifestyle—essentially, Gemma teaches Tara how to be Gemma. As an “old lady”, the respected girlfriend or wife of a club member, Tara must command respect from other women. She must be violent if necessary, and reprimand anyone who crosses her. However, an old lady remains unwaveringly loyal to her husband, allowing him to lead in all facets of life.

While Gemma subverts traditional feminine traits in various ways, she accepts that women are inherently unequal in this world. Her ideas of leadership and gender resemble a traditionalist more than they do a progressive. In a particularly heartbreaking discussion with Tara, Gemma reveals surprising thoughts regarding women, rape, and purity. “Clay is never gonna want to be inside something that’s been ripped up like me,” Gemma says to Tara after finally revealing the assault to Clay and Jax (2.11). Gemma places her value in her sexual inaccessibility to other men—when this inaccessibility is destroyed against her own will, she deems herself useless and disposable. For a character so confident and demanding of deference, Gemma remains trapped by a male-made value system. Tara assures Gemma that Clay loves her, she is more than a sex toy. Gemma responds with harshness—“men need to own their pussy”—and further emphasizes the unequal place she has within the club (2.11). This moment also serves as a stark awakening for Tara, who previously likened being an old lady with being an equal. The look of pain and exhaustion on Gemma’s face suggests that Gemma accepts this as a fact, but she does not necessarily believe the degradation of women to be right. Gemma’s life experiences have shown men to be a certain way, and she has no reason to believe that they would be try to be different. Always the realist, Gemma makes due with the limited power that she has, secretly desiring more.
Season two of *Sons of Anarchy* frequently depicts Gemma in church, the solace of faith soothing her trauma after the rape. Gemma goes to the hospital quite frequently to check on injured club members or speak with Tara, and at almost every visit she stops to pray in the hospital’s church. Wayne, the sheriff who discovered Gemma after the rape, often speaks with her in the church, and the audience sees a more vulnerable side of Gemma. This tiny, holy room becomes a safe space for Gemma, and its constant presence throughout the season emphasizes Gemma’s desire for answers. Her decision to turn to God for answers, rather than her husband or son, demonstrates a lack of confidence in SAMCRO and the criminal life she has chosen. By never speaking her prayers aloud, Gemma emphasizes the confusion she feels towards her desire for a different life. Her entire identity revolves around the motorcycle club, but said identity led her to being a victim of rape. Furthermore, she must keep her rape a secret in order to protect the club, when SAMCRO clearly could not protect her. Within these scenes, the audience sees a woman who has done terrible acts in order to keep everyone else, and herself, in a position of comfort. Gemma has always had a purpose, and now that purpose seems futile. In a later episode, Gemma takes her grandson, Abel, to an actual church, in order to ask a local businessman for bail money. A group of young choir girls are practicing, and she treats them with kindness. Faith and motherhood appear to be the only things that bring out the best in Gemma. A young girl guides Gemma through the baptism of Abel, and offers a subtle reminder of Gemma’s meaning in life—to protect and guide her children.

Abel’s baptism at the hands of Gemma represents his ability to live a life of decency due to Gemma’s criminality. The writers reiterate this point when Gemma asks a preacher if God forgives people for doing bad things. “God forgives absolutely. We’re the ones who
usually can’t,” he responds and indirectly gives Gemma the blessing to continue her destructive life (2.11). Gemma is not asking for redemption so she can be different. She just needs to know that her past transgressions, and her future wrongdoings, will be justified because God has led her down this path. She is not a product of the environment, but someone who understands that her world has consequences, and she is more prepared than ever to face them. Furthermore, Gemma no longer questions her loyalty to the men of the club. She reminds Tara that her son and husband are risking their lives to avenge Gemma, and she must follow them and accept her purpose. “God wants me to be a fierce mother”, Gemma proclaims (2.13). The season ends with her staunchly affirming her role as mother and supporter, her quiet desire for autonomy defeated.

**Character Study: Cersei Lannister in *Game of Thrones***

*Game of Thrones* (2011-Present) shows various families fighting for power in order to secure their place as ruler of the realm. The show, set in the fantasy world of Westeros, features a large cast, explicit content, and a remarkably high budget—quintessential quality television. Despite having an abundance of interesting female characters, *Game of Thrones* remains heavily masculinized and constantly employs the male gaze. For example, a conversation between two men in a brothel features noticeably long pauses on naked female bodies, despite the focus of the scene being what is said in the dialogue. Cersei Lannister, arguably the most hated villains on the show, begins season one as Queen of the Realm and wife to King Robert Baratheon. She is characterized as beautiful, intelligent, and cold. She is fiercely protective of her children, much like Gemma. “Everyone who isn’t us is the enemy”, she warns her son as he prepares to become king (1.03).
Whereas Gemma was a mother figure to many, Cersei’s motherhood stops at her children and her desire for power is much stronger than her desire to nurture. Due to the largeness of the cast and multiple storylines, this analysis focuses on seasons one through three rather than a single season. Cersei’s arc over these three seasons illustrates her longing to be a respected war-lord, her genuine love for her children, and how those two characteristics drastically clash.

The show initially establishes a small justification for why Cersei acts in such evil ways. Her husband, King Robert, is a disrespectful drunk who has never gotten over the murder of the woman he truly loved. Cersei admits to having worshipped Robert early in their marriage, becoming painfully miserable when she realized he would never reciprocate that same devotion. Furthermore, the viewer learns that Cersei lost her first child, resulting in incredibly deep sorrow. Cersei seems less villainous and more a despondent example of what can happen to a woman plagued with loss and martial rejection. From that perspective, the show asserts that female happiness is contingent on typical ideals such as securing a loving husband, happy children, and devoting oneself to them. Cersei is another example of what happens when a beautiful woman is denied love.

The series quickly complicates this somewhat empathetic view of Cersei. By the end of the first episode, the incestuous relationship between Cersei and her brother Jaime is revealed. All of Cersei’s children are understood to be Jaime’s instead of Robert’s, encouraging the audience view her with disgust. However, Cersei and Jaime’s love for each other is genuine and caring, even if it is morally repugnant. Cersei’s only chance at honest love is deemed immoral by society, adding another layer to her deep resentment. She lacks the warmth and forthrightness of Gemma Morrow, making Cersei’s brand of evil less comedic. Cersei
also lacks the respect and support of those around her, any sign of deference done out of obligation and fear rather than genuine admiration. No one adores Cersei, they only fear her.

Cersei constantly expresses her wish that she was born a man, not only so she could have autonomous power, but so she could adequately express her penchant for violence. The three most important men in Cersei’s life are all warriors in some sense. King Robert hunts often, stating that killing things brings him peace. Her brother Jaime is a skilled knight with many kills in his name. Cersei’s Father, Tywin, is a highly-respected, ruthless military commander. The men Cersei desperately wants approval from are all known for their ability to fight and destroy. By placing Cersei in close proximity to warriors, the show emphasizes her repressed love of viciousness. Women, especially noble women, are meant to despise bloodshed—women are pure and men fight so they remain pure. That being said, Cersei and other female characters act outside of Westeros’ moral expectations, but Cersei seems particularly trapped by these rules. She is the queen and must set the standard for all women.

Cersei has no desire to act morally, she admires the quest for power. However, the pursuit of power is one only men can walk straightforwardly. A woman who desires authority must do so in secret and through acts of manipulation, her influence unbeknownst to everyone but her. Manipulation and back-stabbing have long been gendered forms of behavior—men are honest about their hatred, while women lie in order to appear likeable. Cersei subverts this stereotype in the sense that she wants to be forthright with her brutality. During a gruesome battle, Cersei and various other women patiently wait for the outcome. Looking around with disgust, Cersei declares, “I should have
been born a man. I’d rather face a thousand swords then be shot up inside with this flock of frightened hens” (2.09). Cersei does not care if people know she is evil. She wishes to stab her enemies right in the heart rather than in the back. Cersei’s coldness and her acceptance of her vicious ways highlights her emotional difference from other women on the show. Other female characters scheme, and seem happy to do so, as long as they become powerful. Power is not enough for Cersei—she needs the world to acknowledge her strength and intelligence.

The mise-en-scéne of moments involving Cersei further highlights her manipulative tactics. Season one features a scene where Cersei and three male advisors intimidate Sansa for their own political gain. The scene begins with a wide shot of all five characters surrounding a desk. The three men stand behind Cersei, who is seated and occupies the center of the frame. Cersei’s seated position makes her appear less threatening and more empathetic, but placing her in the center reminds the audience who has ultimate authority. The framing postures the three advisors as the truly malicious people, while Cersei appears to be smart and compassionate enough to ignore their advice. Sansa sits across from Cersei at the same level, further creating a space where Sansa can speak without fear. The natural sunlight floods in through the window and gives the scene a jarring warmness due to the shameful manipulation taking place. Cersei is almost always bathed in sunlight, her inviting aesthetic contrasting her cold personality. The city in which Cersei lives, King’s Landing, has consistently sunny weather; however, the sunlight always seems to illuminate Cersei more so than other characters. Her golden hair glistens, giving her a faint halo as she looks upon Sansa with sympathetic eyes. As mentioned before, Cersei and the men are coercing Sansa into betraying her brother. This scene could have easily featured closed curtains,
making the room dark and ominous to match the tone. Instead, the sun floods the room and Cersei appears sincerer than ever.

This commitment to making Cersei’s outward appearance attractive and royal serves various purposes. The clash between her inner ugliness and outer beauty creates a contrast the audience can feel on a deeper level. One can imagine Cersei as a grotesque mother—another common trope regarding motherhood—her bitterness making her physically ugly. Cersei shares many traits of the ugly mother—a husband who resents and refuses to touch her, the majority of those around being terrified of her—but making her beautiful proves more effective for her characterization. Ultimately, Cersei’s beauty is meant to be seen as unimportant to her, because men are not concerned with their outward appearance. Men are known for their skills and accomplishments, and Cersei wants her competence acknowledged more than she wants to be attractive. By highlighting Cersei’s beauty through warm lighting and elaborate costumes, her inner resentment and discomfort becomes more obvious to the viewer.

The series deals with Cersei’s beauty and sexuality in a somewhat odd manner. The audience understands Cersei to be beautiful, especially by the standards of Westeros. She has long, blonde hair, fair skin, and dresses in lavish gowns. However, Cersei’s coldness and generally off-putting demeanor overpowers her attractiveness. No person expresses sexual interest in her, except Jaime who genuinely loves her, which seems peculiar for a world where women’s beauty is constantly commented on. Sansa Stark—the young girl betrothed to Cersei’s son—is referred to as a “pretty little thing” by almost everyone she meets. Her beauty becomes synonymous with her identity. In contrast, King Robert cannot even bear to touch Cersei because he loathes her so much, despite the fact that he is known for having
a ravenous sexual appetite. Cersei appears to be the only woman whose horrid personality taints her sexual appeal. As a result, her ability to use sex as a weapon is taken away.

There are multiple morally questionable women in *Game of Thrones* who are not only sexually enticing, but their allure is part of their identity. These women fall under the femme fatale trope, and while their characterizations are interesting, they are much less complex than Cersei’s. Her obvious beauty and powerful status makes Cersei an easy choice as a femme fatale—so why do the show’s creators veer away from doing so? Furthermore, making an attractive woman sexually repulsive seems ridiculous in the hypersexual landscape of television drama. In choosing between emphasizing Cersei’s sexuality and her motherhood, the show places her identity as a mother above all else. *Game of Thrones* features both femme fatales and mothers, but the show does not feature a female character who happens to be both. However, the series attempts to illustrate Cersei as a woman who does use her sexual prowess to her advantage. During season two, Cersei reminds Sansa that a woman’s best weapon is the one between her legs; however, the show gives no examples of Cersei actually using her sexuality as a political tool (Eidsvåg 163). There is never a scene where Cersei seduces a man, despite numerous scenes featuring other female characters offering themselves sexually.

This removal of sexual prowess causes Cersei to appear more loyal and chaste, especially for someone the audience regards as a villain. Cersei only has sex with Jaime, the man she loves. This relationship is incestuous, so outsiders still regard it as controversial and repulsing, but in Cersei’s mind she has a pure bond. Since Jaime is the real father to all of her children, Cersei has created her idea of a perfect, traditional family. While Cersei obviously desires power and control over Westeros, she wishes for her family to be
together more than anything. Cersei as a femme fatale would conflict with Cersei as a mother. Making Cersei sexually appealing would reduce the shock that arises from her heinously evil crimes, because using sexuality as a weapon is the expected behavior of “bad” women. The fact that Cersei is such a devoted mother makes her desire for power more reprehensible, especially through a masculine viewpoint. Simultaneously, Cersei’s identity remains centered around motherhood. If the series depicted Cersei seducing men for political gain, her loyalty to Jaime and her children would appear secondary to her quest for supremacy. Cersei may be evil, but she is a mother first and foremost.

Cersei’s relationship with her father, Tywin, and her eldest son, Joffrey, highlights her failures as both mother and woman. The viewer does not see Cersei and Tywin directly interact until the end of season two, but her father’s words often loom in Cersei’s psyche. Parallel scenes between Cersei and Tywin show that the two often share opinions. For example, both despise Tyrion, the other Lannister sibling. Tyrion is a dwarf, and therefore an embarrassment to the Lannister name—something Cersei and Tywin both regard with the utmost respect. In a lecture to his eldest son Jaime, Tywin reminds him that one day, when they are dead and rotting in the ground, “it is the family name that lives on, it is all the lives on” (1.07). The father and daughter duo also enjoy military strategizing. Tywin is a respected Army commander and Cersei illustrates her talent for strategy during a conversation with Joffrey. As the young prince describes how he would overthrow a rebel army, Cersei emphasizes that “a good king knows when to save his strength and when to destroy his enemies” (1.03). Tywin and Cersei both speak with a subdued, but threatening tone and their faces carry disappointment more often than not. However, Tywin regards Cersei as incapable because of her inability to control Joffrey. The audience learns of
Joffrey's sociopathic, violent tendencies early in the series. He orders the execution of Ned Stark—despite Cersei and the rest of his political council begging him to stop—simply so he can instill fear throughout the kingdom. Cersei cannot control him and Tywin blames her for the monster Joffrey becomes. Her love for her children and her desire to give them whatever they wish remains her greatest weakness. Cersei's, and every woman's, most important job is birthing and raising children that uphold the family name. She could not do that successfully, so her father labels her weak and inept.

While Cersei lacks positive feminine qualities, her negative characteristics are hyper-feminine. For example, she acts on her emotions, rather than using patience and intellect. Her irrationality can best be seen during her interactions with Margaery Tyrell in season three. Cersei feels threatened by Margaery after she realizes Margaery's unique brand of manipulation works on Joffrey. *Game of Thrones* paints Margaery as the antithesis to Cersei, or what Cersei could have been if she gave up her desire for manhood and bloodshed. Margaery has coquettish sex appeal, natural openness, and the ability to inspire others through kindness. Cersei operates off of fear, like many of the respected men do in Westeros, but her being a woman means people take her less seriously. The fear she instills hinges on her proximity to her father and son, whereas Margaery's benevolence is entirely hers. Margaery is much more than kindhearted; she is just as hungry for power as Cersei. However, Margaery does not need everyone to know how clever she is.

To Cersei, being known for having authority is just as, if not more important, than actually having it. Margaery becomes the only person who can sway Joffrey's opinion, causing him to make better decisions as king, and begins to raise Joffrey better than Cersei ever could. She may be Joffrey's future wife, but her guidance acts almost motherly—Cersei
appears more incompetent than ever. Despite Margaery’s influence over Joffrey being good for the entire kingdom of Westeros, Cersei begs her father to destroy Margaery. When Tywin calmly refuses, Cersei throws a fit, her emotions getting the better of her. In this regard, she differs greatly from her father. Tywin remains calm in all facets, even ones regarding his children, because fatherhood does not cause men to act irrationality (at least not on quality television). That is not to say the decisions fathers make on Game of Thrones are always intelligent, but they make their decisions with a levelheadedness and confidence not always awarded to Cersei. Season three ends with Cersei begging her father for more autonomy in her decision making, her normally astute and malevolent presence being reduced to an infantile state. Not only does she feel powerless in the political sense, but she no longer has control over her children, causing her value to the family dynasty to diminish greatly.

**Conclusion**

Gemma Morrow and Cersei Lannister both exists within shows that emphasize the importance of family, and how family can be used to secure power. Where normal mothers struggle for control over their immediate family, Gemma and Cersei attempt to extend their maternal influence over something much greater. Gemma and the members of the motorcycle gang fight to retain economic and political control over their small town for both monetary and emotional freedom. Cersei’s family desires power for physical protection and to enhance self-worth, their reputation more important than anything they actually accomplish. The mothers are meant to protect their family, but they are not immune to the allure of power and heinous acts people will commit to keep said power.
*Sons of Anarchy* and *Game of Thrones*, being masculinized serial dramas, focus on stereotypically masculine traits and how these traits cause and resolve problems. This favoring of the male perspective leads to projections of fantasies unto female characters, specifically mothers, who interact with men on a slightly more equal level than other women (wives, mistresses, daughters). Gemma and Cersei exemplify women who desire the freedom of masculinity, but respect masculine authority too much to ever challenge the hierarchies of their families. Furthermore, their identities center around being mothers, making every desire seem secondary to protecting their children. The characterization of Gemma and Cersei, while interesting and much more complex than common female TV tropes, remains limited by masculine perceptions of motherhood.
References


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