Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Feminism of Brienne of Tarth: Fighting Like a Girl with a Heart of Gold

Andreea Voicu · Wednesday, June 19th, 2019

With her trustworthy armor and sword discouraging any sort of interaction, aggressive fighting style, and pragmatic and reserved demeanor, it's easy to fall into the temptation of putting Brienne of Tarth in a box and keeping her there—Brienne the Warrior, Brienne the Maid of Tarth, Brienne the Beauty. Luckily, *Game of Thrones* doesn't, for the most part, isolate her in that box and thus we, the viewers, witness the birth of one of the most inspiring, original female characters on the small screen.

Brienne of Tarth is Lord Selwyn Tarth's only daughter. She was once part of King Renly Baratheon's Kingsguard, a sworn sword to Lady Catelyn Stark, then a protector of her daughter, Sansa. Throughout her adventures, Brienne is constantly framed as a noble, loyal warrior. She would rather cut off her own hand than betray the person she's sworn to.

That's most (but not all) that we see of her during the first couple of seasons, and while this may seem terribly one-dimensional, there is much more to Brienne than meets the eye. There is complexity to the layers that inform her character, and the importance of having female characters like her who are also feminist icons grace our screens is not to be scoffed at.

Brienne's life hasn't been easy. She never seemed to fit it, neither as a lady nor as a knight, and she has spent her entire life somewhat in limbo but still under her own circumstances. She was made fun of for not being feminine enough, so she suppressed that part of her. When she did so, she was still criticized for not having what it takes (let that read "a penis") to be a true warrior, let alone a knight. Her biggest dream, that of being knighted, has always seemed out of reach.

via GIPHY

There's a duality in Brienne that I find quite fascinating: the woman vs the knight. For a while, she doesn't know which one she wants more because she is not "qualified" for either, too "ugly" to be a desirable woman and too "woman" to be a knight. She is mocked no matter what she chooses, so she chooses to be unapologetically herself: a mixture of both but with a strong inclination toward the latter.

But who is Brienne of Tarth? She is fiercely loyal, honorable, stubborn, both caring and ruthless, a skilled swordswoman and an introvert, and ultimately one of the few, if not the only, character in Game of Thrones you can truly root for without remorse.

While her dream of being a knight is clearly always at the back of her mind, I argue that the way she chooses to live her life is not at all informed by that. She doesn't think a knighthood is possible for her, but she lives her life as a knight nonetheless. And when she finally gets the knighthood, what does she do? She continues to embody the same ideals that made us fall in love with her in the first place. The only difference is that she finally gets the recognition she deserves, and that's a very important difference that is further emphasized by the fact that she's the first female knight in history and that she is knighted in front of men who clearly admire and respect her.

Speaking of men, season 8 sees Brienne in a love triangle of sorts. I'm weary calling it that because she doesn't manifest any kind of interest in the wildling Tormund Giantsbane, but that doesn't deter him from showering her with his attention. I'm also conflicted about the kind of attention he bestows on her, because while I want to cringe at the fact that he's basically fetishizing her because of her stature (always asking about the "big woman"), I also like the fact that this instant physical attraction that he feels toward her is honest, raw, and shows that it is completely natural for a man to lust after her despite her not being traditionally feminine.

via GIPHY

The other side of the triangle, Jaime Lannister, is a bit more complicated than that. They go from enemies to reluctant companions, to friends, to something more, to finally lovers. Their relationship is the slow burn of all slow burns and whether you're one of the people who didn't want them to hook up or you're team "Braime" all the way, there's no denying their incredible chemistry and deep feelings for each other. They're both attracted to one another and they decide to act on it as equals. Even if she's a virgin, Brienne meets him halfway, and it's clearly a decision she is fully in control of.

via GIPHY

Which brings me to a pretty controversial scene in episode 4, the one in which Jaime leaves her in the middle of the night and we see her begging him to stay, sobbing in her nightgown. Many people were terribly disappointed by that for multiple reasons, some of which I understand. Needless to say that if you think the scene was un-feminist simply because Brienne was crying, then you don't understand what feminism is.

If you think the reaction was uncharacteristic of Brienne, I agree, but only partially because we did get to see the softer side of Brienne this season and because I think the reason Brienne was crying was misunderstood by many. She was not some distressed damsel begging her boyfriend not to leave her for another woman. She was crying because she knew the man standing in front of her was riding to his death and because she felt she couldn't save him from himself. Remember her words to Pod back in season 5?

It's clear that this moment triggered her past trauma of not being able to save the person she loves, and that's a completely legitimate reason to break down. Moreover, I think people forget (or want to forget) that Brienne is not devoid of emotion. We see that when she gets knighted and gives us the first real smile we've ever seen from her, we see that when she celebrates the victory against the army of the dead with her friends, and we particularly see that in her relationship with her

squire, Pod.

via GIPHY

Their bond is strong and unique. It's clear that she's a mother figure to him and that she loves him like a son. While she may be intransigent and tough most of the time, everything from her little proud smile when she sees how skilled of a swordsman Pod has become to his small nod of encouragement being the thing that convinces her to stand up and be knighted point to Brienne being a caring person with a heart of gold, even if that heart is covered in thick layers of armor.

I want to take a moment to talk about her armor in fact, because I think it's extremely relevant that her most vulnerable moment is also one of the few moments when we see her without her armor on. Her armor clearly serves as more than one type of protection. It protects her from physical harm but it also protects her from being different.

In that final scene with Jaime, she has been stripped of all of her protections and the walls she put up trying to avoid getting hurt, and I can understand how that might be enraging, but it's also powerful. In this scene, she is not Brienne the Knight, she is Brienne the Woman, a side of her that she dared explore only recently. As a side note, I like how Gwendoline Christie, the actress playing Brienne, is the character's biggest champion and was as excited as we were to see more of Brienne the Woman in season 8.

Her two sides can co-exist, even if she has been told her entire life that they can't, and she is starting to learn that. She can love a man, have sex, enjoy life, be a mother figure, and also be a knight, a skilled swordswoman, a great army leader, and a commander of the Kingsguard. Her fighting style deserves a special mention because it's unapologetically raw, brutal, and loud. She uses brute force, deafening screams, and her stature to defeat her enemies. She takes up space (you quite literally can't miss her) and that makes many of the men who interact with her very insecure, which is why they choose to lash out and call her names.

via GIPHY

Brienne's ending left a sour taste in my mouth. While I enjoyed most of her journey throughout season 8, even scenes that other people have fiercely critiqued, the ending was not quite it for me. It's not that she became Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. I'm pretty sure she loves that position. It's not even that they chose to have her one solo scene in the last episode be mostly about Jaime rather than herself. It's what the ending suggests that bothers me.

We know that as part of the Kingsguard, Brienne can't have a partner or a child. She may want these things or not, the fact that the show doesn't even give her the option to is the real problem. After they've spent an entire season developing her character and exploring both her side as a warrior and her side as a woman, the mind boggles to think why they would bring her back to square one.

Mind you, I don't think this means her character development has been invalidated by that. I choose to think she will always be the Brienne we've seen in season 8, equal parts badass and heart, but it would have been nice to actually see that on screen.

Regardless, no one can take Brienne the feminist icon away from me and from the I’m sure thousands of women who have felt more acknowledged, more represented, and more celebrated because she exists. She has taught me that you can be both tough and in touch with your emotions, that you can negotiate your own identity even when everyone is trying to put you into a box, and that you can stay true to yourself in the face of adversity. I can only hope that George R. R. Martin gives her a more befitting ending, but even if he doesn’t, the fact remains that Brienne of Tarth is one of the most complex, empowering, feminist, badass female characters of all time.

Top image: Gwendoline Christie as Brienne of Tarth/Courtesy HBO.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, June 19th, 2019 at 3:58 pm and is filed under TV
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.