

## *Borgen and House of Cards:* representations of politics in two women

Borgen y House of Cards:  
*representaciones de la política en dos mujeres*

Borgen e House of Cards:  
*representações da política em duas mulheres*

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This work intends to study the representations of politics in two female characters, Birgitte and Claire, in *Borgen* and *House of Cards*, respectively. The adopted perspective takes concepts elaborated in political theory: adversative politics and deliberative politics, and uses textual analysis to identify the type of representation, studying the characters and the narrative lines of public and private life. Birgitte and Claire embody contrasting conceptions of politics, while proposing models of politician women in tension with stereotypes.

**KEYWORDS:** representations of politics, television fiction, transnationalization, gender, *Borgen*, *House of Cards*.

*Este trabajo se propone estudiar las representaciones de la política en dos personajes femeninos, Birgitte y Claire, en las series de Borgen y House of Cards respectivamente. La perspectiva adoptada toma concepciones elaboradas en la teoría política: la política adversativa y la política deliberativa y utiliza el análisis textual para identificar el tipo de representación, estudiando los personajes y las líneas narrativas de la vida pública y la privada. Birgitte y Claire encarnan concepciones de la política contrastantes, a la vez que proponen modelos de mujer política en tensión con los estereotipos.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Representaciones de la política, ficción televisiva, transnacionalización, género, *Borgen*, *House of Cards*.

*Este trabalho tem como objetivo estudar as representações da política em duas personagens femininas, Birgitte e Claire, das séries Borgen e House of Cards respectivamente. A perspectiva adotada toma concepções elaboradas na teoria política: política adversativa e política deliberativa e utiliza a análise textual para identificar o tipo de representação, estudando os personagens e as linhas narrativas da vida pública e privada. Birgitte e Claire incorporam concepções contrastantes de política, ao mesmo tempo que propõem modelos de mulheres políticas em tensão com estereótipos.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Representações da política, ficção televisiva, transnacionalização, gênero, *Borgen*, *House of Cards*.

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## INTRODUCTION

This work intends to study the representations of politics in two series, *Borgen* (three seasons, between 2010-2013 and a fourth in 2022) and *House of Cards* (six seasons between 2013-2018), focusing the textual analysis on the characters of Birgitte Nyborg (Sidse Babett Knudsen) and Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) as politician women.

The adopted perspective takes as a starting point the identification of two political conceptions elaborated in-depth by political theory: adversative democracy and deliberative democracy. The central argument that I intend to develop is that both female characters constitute models of politician women in accordance with two political conceptions in which instrumental rationality and strategic action acquire different weight. The conceptions of politics that they embody cross their vital public and private projects.

The following pages will be devoted to a brief view of the political series and the women's role, to place Birgitte and Claire in that panorama, in order to explain later the theoretical and methodological perspective from which the results are derived.

### *The series and politics*

The presence of politics in television fiction might allow the distinction of the political series as a subclass. However, it is necessary to notice that, far from uniformity, under this expression there are very diverse fictions in which politics has different levels of centrality. Thus, in *24* (2001-2010) or in *Homeland* (2011-2020), the emphasis is placed on agencies such as the Counterterrorism Unit in the first, or CIA in the second. Both series have narratives linked to the international policy and security decisions deployed after the events of September 11, 2001, but the center of the fiction and its structure is constituted by the agents and their actions against terrorism. In other series, politics is the context where love affairs and professional conflicts develop, such as *The Good Wife* (2009-2016). The fictions that we will study are those in which the action of governing is central. The characters are politicians and their stories, conflicts, and places in which they develop are those where political life occurs: government houses, parliamentary settings

or other less public spaces, but that are scenery of political encounters and places where decisions with public impact are taken.

In this type of political fiction, *Tanner '88* (1988) was a milestone in two ways: it took the mockumentary to television, shaping the identity of the genre in that medium (Sánchez Vilela, 2019), but it also introduced the political character at the center of its narrative structure for the first time on American television (De la Torre, 2016, p. 414). Another milestone is *The West Wing* (1999-2006), characterized by an aspirational representation of politics<sup>2</sup> which reverse side would be later *House of Cards*. Also in 1988, the British television broadcast *A Very British Coup*, a three-chapter miniseries focused on the ups and downs of a union leader of the Labour Party that becomes Prime Minister. In the next decade, Andrew Davies adapted for the BBC Michael Dobbs' novel *House of Cards*. Dobbs served as Margaret Thatcher's chief cabinet in the final stage. Fiction was centered on the manipulations of Francis Urquhar, member of Parliament, and his attempts to become Prime Minister. This series is the origin of the 2013 American version.

### *Women in political series*

Since the end of the twentieth century, the female characters of television fiction have proposed relevant changes in the representation of women. There was an increase of the female characters who developed a professional career, not only because they worked outside their homes as a complementary dimension of their identity and their lives, but also of characters whose narrative arcs were focused on their profession, and this was an essential clue of their identity.

The characters of these series have been women lawyers (*Ally McBill*, 1997-2000), doctors (*Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* 1993-1998; or *ER*, 1994-2009), nurses or journalists. The transformation and range of gender representations has not stopped in the last three decades. However, the female role of politician woman has not been so frequent

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<sup>2</sup> Josiah Bartlet's character opposed real presidents such as Bill Clinton and Lewinsky scandal, and then George W. Bush and his oratory abilities and handling of topics.

(Tous-Rovirosa & Aran-Ramspott, 2017). By politician women I mean those who occupy relevant government positions; that is to say, they are characters for whom politics is the center of their professional development.

In political series, women usually play the role of wives or daughters and, when they play a more professional role, they are secretaries, advisors or responsible for communication and public relations.<sup>3</sup> As the XXI century progresses, the female role in political series intensifies. So, in *Political Animals* (2012) Sigourney Weaver played a divorced Secretary of State who had been First Lady and had to deal with professional and family challenges. Other cases of female political protagonists are *Madame Secretary* (2014) or *State of Affairs* (2014-2015) in which Charleston Tucker, an ex-CIA agent becomes adviser to the Presidency, a role occupied also by a woman who, in the fiction, is the first black woman president in the United States.

In a comedic tone, *Veep* (2012) cannot be forgotten, with a main character that occupies the Vice Presidency of the United States, quite relegated and without decision making power. But it is in *Commander in Chief* (2005-2006) where for the first time a woman occupying the United States Presidency is the main character of a series.<sup>4</sup> In the last decade, television fiction has given the characters Birgitte Nyborg and Claire Underwood, both politician women, the subject of analysis in this article.

In *Borgen*, the leading character, Birgitte Nyborg, is a wife, a mother and is defined from the beginning by her political vocation. She leads a small party in Denmark, the Party of Moderates, and faces an electoral

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<sup>3</sup> This is the case of emblematic series of the 1990s such as *Spin City* (1996-2002), a sitcom that included a secondary female character that is a campaign advisor, or *The West Wing* (1999-2006) where several female characters can be found, such as the White House Press Secretary, the National Security Advisor or the First Lady, among others. In both cases they are not the main characters.

<sup>4</sup> Even though *24* (2001-2010) incorporated in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> seasons a female character as president of the United States, Allison Taylor, it is Jack Bauer who completely occupies the leading role (Padilla Castillo & Sosa Sánchez, 2018).

instance in which she is not the favorite, but finally, in the fictional plot, she is the first woman to become Prime Minister of Denmark.<sup>5</sup>

In *House of Cards*, Claire is the co-protagonist and, at first glance, seems to correspond to the type of female character common in political series. She is the wife of Frank Underwood, and is usually out of the spotlight, but her ambition and career constitute her as a politician woman. She will be Second Lady, then First Lady and finally she will take office. Politics in Claire is not in addition to her status as a wife, from the beginning it is a personal project (in cooperation and in competition with Frank) that keeps growing with the narrative development through the six seasons.

The choice of these two fictions responds to the fact that they represent two conceptions of politics with a long tradition in political theory and present in contemporary debates about democracy and the quality of politics. They are also, each in its own way and with dramatic fictional mediation, the expression of very different systems of government: the American, a presidential one; the Danish, a parliamentary one.

On the other hand, the selection is also based on the fact that they are titles representative of a certain canon of American and European production that has been identified with the “third golden age” of television fiction (Agger, 2020; Cascajosa, 2016). The configuration of that canon is the result of a combination of factors: the evaluation of television critics, recognition in international festivals and global circulation capturing different audiences (Cascajosa, 2016, p. 152). Such is the case of both fictions that are an expression of the current processes of transnationalization of television products, with what that implies in terms of circulation of themes and representations among transnational audiences.

Agger (2020) highlights that “certain patterns can be traced in the cultural exchanges that take place when golden ages travel from one country to another” (p. 26). This often implies the reaffirmation of conceptions established in the receiving culture, but also the possibility

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<sup>5</sup> Helle Thorning-Schmidt, leader of the Social Democratic Party, was the first woman to serve as Denmark’s Prime Minister between 2011 and 2015. Later, Mette Frederiksen, also of the Social Democratic Party, became Denmark’s Prime Minister in 2019.

of questioning and challenging them in the light of representations coming from other cultural configurations. In the case of *House of Cards*, an extreme version of adversative politics is represented and, as Gilbert (2014) states, in popular series like this “parodic representations tend to reinforce, not challenge, the preconceived notions of contemporary political culture” (p. 392). However, in other studies (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019) they have pointed out that some political dramas have a prosocial function because they can promote changes in viewers, for example, regarding the representation of women by presenting non-stereotypical models.

*Borgen* is part of the phenomenon of internationalization of Danish fiction (Eichner & Mikos, 2016; Hochscherf & Philipsen, 2017; Saunders, 2019; Waade et al., 2020). It was initially produced for the Danish territory and its creators had no expectations that it would transcend beyond the Scandinavian context. However, its global circulation has promoted an idea of Danish democracy and a political culture that functions as a counterpoint to other realities in the world and proposes other models of political functioning (McCabe, 2020, p. 45).

#### THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The theoretical-methodological approach of this work combined theoretical dimensions from political theory with others from textual analysis and literary theory, specifically referring to the study of characters. The main concepts involved will be exposed in the next paragraphs.

##### *Two conceptions of politics*

The characters Birgitte and Claire embody politician women inscribed in representations of different conceptions of politics: deliberative and competitive. This work started from the reconstruction of both ideas in political theory and, although it is not possible to take here an exhaustive look at the two perspectives,<sup>6</sup> it is necessary to briefly define

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<sup>6</sup> A more exhaustive reconstruction of both conceptions and their discursive indicators can be found in Sánchez Vilela (2014).

them before advancing the analysis and putting them into play in the textual analysis.

*Adversative conception*

Competitive democracy understands politics as a struggle for power and its rationality is exclusively instrumental. Thus, Weber (1972) states: “Whoever does politics aspires to power; to power as a means to achieve other aims (idealistic or selfish) or to power ‘for the sake of power’” (p. 84). From this conception derives the idea of the State as “the domination of men over men that is sustained through legitimate violence” (p. 84).

Political action in this perspective is strategic, ruled by the maximization of profits and the calculation of costs-benefits, because what moves the actors are interests and not the common good. In that sense, the analogy between politics and business is developed (Weber, 1972, p. 122). This conception of democracy is close to the economic<sup>7</sup> theory of which Schumpeter (1996) is a reference. This author uses the metaphor of war and games:

If a bill is presented by the opposition, this means that it offers battle; such a procedure constitutes an attack that the government must dismantle by appropriating the controversial issue or by having the proposal rejected... Finally, the adoption of a measure through an agreement between the parties means an undecided battle or a battle avoided for strategic reasons (p. 356).

An idea about dissent is present here, but, above all, a way of conceiving “the other”, the adversary. It is a policy that is based on a system of internal and external rewards:

As an internal reward, the satisfaction of hatred and the desire for revenge... that is, it has to satisfy the need to defame the adversary and accuse him of heresy. As external means it has to offer adventure, triumph, loot, power and perks (Weber, 1972, p. 172).

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<sup>7</sup> The economic theory will have other developments that cannot be included here. See Elster (1997).

### *Deliberative conception*

Deliberative politics is mainly relational in search of the best decisions based on the exhaustive scrutiny of reasons and information. This idea of politics finds roots in the Aristotelian tradition that is central to Arendt's thought. Politics, says the author, "is about being together and with each other of the diverse" (Arendt, 1997, p. 45). Plurality is inherent to political life, and as a result, "the attempt to suppress such plurality is equivalent to the abolition of the public sphere itself" (Arendt, 1993, p. 241), which happens in tyrannies but can also happen in mass societies. There is a communicative conception of power here: power arises when subjects gather to act and dialogue (*praxis* and *lexis*) in concert; it doesn't belong to the individual but to the community (Arendt, 1970, p. 41).

Deliberation is only possible from the recognition of differences and its rationality is directed to understanding, promoting the consideration of the major breadth of voices (Elster, 2001; Gallardo, 2009; Ovejero Lucas, 2008). Habermas (1989, 1998) proposes communicative rationality as an alternative to instrumental rationality and they correspond to two different logics, communicative and strategic<sup>8</sup> action. In the deliberative conception they are treated as equals, not because of the equivalence of their interests, but because they offer "each other reasons that are mutually acceptable and accessible for everyone" (Guttman & Thompson, 2004, p. 28). The public character of the dialogic exchange is essential in this political conception that demands acting with civility; that is to say, "implies the willingness to listen to others" and modify the original attitude in light of new information and arguments (Rawls, 1996, p. 214).

In sum, adversative politics conceive politics as a struggle for power to achieve the triumph of certain interests over others. It is ruled by an instrumental rationality and understands the political action as strategic, fit for purposes. "The other" is a data to define the strategy, an object of analysis to identify weak flanks and calculate the necessary

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<sup>8</sup> In Habermas' (2005) proposal in "Three models of democracy", deliberation can combine dialogic and instrumental politics in a model of democracy that tends to rational results.



movement to defeat him, instead of being the recipient of listening in a dialogic relation for the building of a course of action, as is understood by deliberative politics. In the latter, it discourages the strategic action and instead proposes an action guided by communicative rationality, oriented towards understanding based on the arguments put forward by the actors and the willingness to transform their preferences.

### *Textual analysis*

Political theory has systematized and deepened each of these conceptions in its different dimensions based on the observation of politics in real regimes. It is clear that fiction implies an artifice operation with its own rules, its genre conventions and with dynamic connection with markets and audiences. The transference of analytical concepts from political theory to television fiction has that complexity. To approach it, the textual analysis was adopted as a methodological<sup>9</sup> perspective, and within it, character study was chosen. Following Larsen (2014), the notion of “human project” has been taken as the axis in the configuration of fictional narratives. Therefore, every story is the “textual presentation of a coherent series of events that spin around a human project” (p. 225). It dives into the concept of canonical story, in which the main narrative project and the object are clear since the beginning, and proposes two narrative lines with a single subject; one line is private and the other public, but the “two projects are often interwoven—textually—in such a way that the success of the ‘public’ project is a precondition for the completion of the personal project” (p. 226).

In the chosen series, these two narrative lines that constitute the respective human project of their protagonists are developed in parallel. For the characters Birgitte and Claire, the public project implies the exercise of politics and the private project involves the couple relationships and the home. We propose here that both projects are interconnected in such a way that the political conceptions that the characters embody manifests in the public dimension, but also

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<sup>9</sup> It is convenient to precise that, in this perspective, qualitative analysis was selected, with an interpretative nature inscribed in the tradition of literary and semiotic studies.

permeate their private worlds. In other words, the logics that guide their public lives are in tune with the ones that dominate their emotional and family life. On the other hand, the models of politician women that they propose show ruptures and continuities with the installed stereotypes in the fictional tradition that we have briefly reviewed in the previous section.

As a synthesis of the methodological perspective, the textual analysis of the characters will be addressed in the two constitutive lines of their respective human projects—public and private—considering three dimensions nourished from the political theory: the conception of politics and power; the logic that guides the action; the conception of the other.

The abstraction of theoretical notions will be translated into dialogues, gestures and corporeality of the characters, in their movement through the different spaces in which they develop. The analysis will begin from the study of the characters in the first season of each series. This decision responds to the fact that it is there where the narrative is set forth, the identities of the characters and the marks are set and on which the horizon of expectations of the spectators operates, even to contravene them in the following seasons. However, it will refer to moments of other seasons when necessary for the development of our plot.

### *The characters and representations of politics*

In *House of Cards*, politics embodies an extreme and caricatured version of competitive politics. Not only is it reduced to a struggle for power, but also power is constituted as an end in itself. Instrumental rationality in this series is not subject to achieving a collective decision in accordance with a conception of a good life and adjusted to the best solutions for the problems that a society has at hand, but is constrained to a single goal: obtaining all the power, understood as dominion of some over others (Weber, 1972, p. 84).

Frank Underwood, at the center of the character structure, is the crystallization of that representation of politics in which all action is strategic, guided by the calculation of costs and efficiency. The scene that begins the series is significant in that sense. On the street where

the Underwoods live, a dog has been hit by a car and lies badly injured; Frank approaches compassionately and, while breaking the fourth wall, gives the viewer the guiding motto to read his character and the entire series: “I have no patience for useless things. Moments like this need someone to do the unpleasant, the necessary” (E. 1, S. 1).

Claire completely aligns herself with this conception of politics and her trajectory; throughout the series it is nothing more than the consolidation in that way of doing politics until she occupies the Presidency of the United States, a place she reaches not as a means to develop her convictions, but as an end in itself. In the first season it is already outlined that her actions are guided by an instrumental logic. This is revealed when her environmental organization, Clean Water Initiative (CWI), uses Evelyn to fire 18 people and then fires her (E. 2, S. 1). Her pulse and voice did not tremble as she fired the person who had been her right hand for a long time. Claire surrounds herself with women, but the relationship is always utilitarian: they are pieces of her political strategy. Thus, she incorporates Gillian Cole (E. 3, S. 1) into her NGO after Evelyn leaves, but later, she will leave her without health insurance and access to the medication she needs to maintain her pregnancy (“I am willing to let your child wither and die inside you, if that’s what’s required”) in order to break down her will (E. 1, S. 2). Perhaps one of the most revealing moments of her attachment to strategic action and the way Claire conceives the other is when, after telling in a television interview that she has been raped<sup>10</sup> (E. 4, S. 2), she embraces a project against sexual abuse and uses another victim, Megan, but does not hesitate to leave that project for another more convenient for her, leaving the victim devastated.

In *Borgen*, politics is conceived as a collective<sup>11</sup> construction. Power does not have a value in itself, but rather as a function of carrying out convictions and principles, linked to projects and promises. Birgitte

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<sup>10</sup> We will return to this in the next section.

<sup>11</sup> It is clear that this responds to a democratic institutionality typical of a parliamentary system that obliges whoever holds the position of Prime Minister to build a government and to do so they will be forced to consider the perspective of their adversaries, to listen, negotiate and concede.

embodies this idea of politics, even if it puts her electoral chances at risk. Thus, she breaks the electoral alliance with Laugensen (Labour Party), when he changes his position three days before the elections and subscribes to an immigration policy opposed to her convictions and those of the Moderate Party (E. 1, S. 1).

Although it does not exclude competition or strategic action, the series represents a perspective of politics closer to deliberation, to the dialogic exchange among actors who recognize themselves as valid interlocutors, bearers of different perspectives that must be heard. A clear example of this is the approach to the issue of relations with Greenland. The fourth episode (S. 1) begins with Birgitte defining with her advisor, Kasper, the strategy to frame the balance of the first hundred days of government. At that moment, news of the illegal transfer of Afghan prisoners to American bases on Danish territory in Greenland was leaked to the press. It is in Birgitte's best interest to dilute the seriousness of the event, but she decides to apologize to Greenland and travel to that country. Although the starting point is to continue the type of treatment that previous Danish governments had with Greenland in terms of their participation in political decisions, Enock –Prime Minister of Greenland– wants to show her his point of view on inuit<sup>12</sup> problems and Birgitte agrees to stay one more day.

She embodies the willingness to listen to the reasons of the other, in this case Enock, as the bearer of valid reasons to be weighed, no matter how minor it is, nor how much his threatening power is, which in this case is minimal. Birgitte reviews her initial position in the light of the new information, makes an exercise to understand Enock's point of view, even if it costs her to miss the visit of the United States President, which was one of the milestones of her campaign for the hundred days. It is a political action that puts calculation in a second place and places her convictions above the strategy, contravening the recommendations of her advisor to whom she answers: "I make politics. You sell it".

In the same chapter, when she meets with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice and Defense, she places arguments linked to convictions

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<sup>12</sup> This is the term with which the inhabitants of Greenland name themselves.

above strategy. However, Birgitte does not discard either strategy or negotiation as ways of action, but rather carries out them in a virtuous combination. Thus, she knows how to act pragmatically by telling half the truth in a press interview or using information at a precise moment to distort a businessman's decision to withdraw from Denmark (E. 5, S. 1). But above all, throughout the first season, she is constantly seen sitting around a table, listening to others, weighing arguments and negotiating.

The last season, released in 2022, puts tension on the character, who becomes more strategic and in doing so also acquires some darker traits, to the point of using her son as part of her media strategy. Even so, the character recognizes her deviation and steps aside, abandoning the government.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, while in the first character the idea of power as loot and the destruction of the adversary predominates, in the second one the exchange of reasons in dialogic reciprocity is prioritized.

#### *The conjunction of the public and private project*

The human project that articulates each of these narratives has, as pointed out in the theoretical-methodological section, two narrative lines, the one that corresponds to the public project and the one that refers to the private one. The dialogic or strategic conceptions of politics are shown in both projects. In other words: emotional relationships, the family and what happens at home are also ruled by communicative or instrumental logics.

The Claire-Frank relationship is congruent with the representation of politics which, as we have noted, focuses on a logic of strategic

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<sup>13</sup> Between the third season in 2013 and the fourth, almost ten years passed and two women held the position of Prime Minister in Denmark. The incidence of externalities in the direction of fiction can explain the changes in the series. Also, in *House of Cards*, there are external elements, although of a different type, that influenced the development of the fictional plot: the accusations of abuse against Kevin Spacey caused to cancel the character that the actor played in the series and had an impact on the final drift of Claire's character.

action. The emotional bond between the two characters is associated with power. They are partners in that project: “we do things together”, says Claire (E. 1, S. 1). Unlike *Borgen*, this is a relationship in which one is instrumental to the other. Even when Claire has strong ties with some lover,<sup>14</sup> each step is assessed in relation to cost-benefit, with an eye on political advancement and efficiency.

In the first chapters of the first season, a narrative structure is repeated in which the predominant bond that unites the couple becomes evident. Although the order is not always the same, the formula is made up of: presentation of the objective, strategy to achieve it, control of the media narrative, review of the strategy with Claire and media control, announcement of the achieved objective. There is a deal that unites them, a joint project for which marriage is a means, hence the private project is not easily differentiated from the public one. That is why the house is a place where both come together.

In the first season, the house is the place where the Claire-Frank relationship is expressed outside the public eye. In some moments the image is that of the wife waiting at home when Frank arrives, but above all it is the area in which they become partners in their ambition. The Underwood house is the couple’s office, it is the place for designing strategies, where obstacles or setbacks are weighed to turn them into instruments. The most intimate moments take place at the window. There, the Underwoods sit to share a cigarette, in the shadows, while they talk about the status of their plan. The window is the place of intimacy that is repeated. They are not a couple whose narrative drift focuses on the romantic or the sexual –which remains in an area of uncertainty– but rather their affection is based on admiration for the other’s strategic capacity.

The narrative use of the window space is a wink to the literary reference of their relationship: the Macbeths and their clandestine meetings to plan the crime (Bronfen, 2020). This is where Claire usually pushes her husband into action, directs him, drives him, and her character, defined this way since the first season, has frequently been compared to that of Lady Macbeth (Bronfen, 2020; Tunç, 2020).

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<sup>14</sup> Allan, later Thom, appear and are discarded based on political convenience.

Indeed, both appear alongside their husbands, propelling their careers towards power. However, there are several differences from the Shakespearean drama. Frank does not present the moral limits that haunt Macbeth and, although Claire pushes and helps him, they are partners in a shared project that Frank never doubts.

As Bronfen (2020) has intensively studied, the presence of Shakespearean references in American television fiction of the XXI century has been very intense, but the author also points out that it is “a resurgence, a reanimation, a new visit” (p. 5), and uses the term *appropriations* to refer to this phenomenon, giving an account of a process of distant resignification of the fidelity that adaptations suppose (p. 84).

Lady Macbeth has been interpreted as the incarnation of evil, in one of its most common forms in tragedy, which is that of excessive passion: the ambition for power. But it is a sin that she pays with madness; she is a character tortured by the memory of the murder, rubbing her hands, that she keeps seeing bloody. Her strength is fleeting. Nothing similar happens to Claire, who in her career escalates through different strategic acts, even going as far as murder. There is no regret and –far from the tragedy– there is no punishment.

Lady Macbeth drives Macbeth out of her own ambition, without a doubt, but because she believes that this is her husband’s deep desire. She resorts to the enchantment to obtain the necessary strength, which is associated with giving up feminine traits: “Unsexme” calls out the forces of evil. Claire, on the other hand, has her own project and as the seasons progress she strengthens her vocation for power. Claire’s weakness occurs only in small moments of deviation into emotions that are quickly turned into instruments for her plans. The rape and abortion experienced by Claire constitute two events that appeal to her condition as a woman, but they quickly become absorbed in strategic logic. The fact that Claire has suffered rape places her as a victim and, as Siliman (2019) points out, rape is often a plot device to humanize a not entirely likable character and elicit sympathy for them.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the author points out, this use shows:

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<sup>15</sup> The author studies the cases of Mellie Grant in *Scandal* and Claire Underwood in *House of Cards* and points out how sympathy is not necessarily an

The public's discomfort with unsympathetic female figures both on and off television... It also affirms how many audience members have been trained to react to the topic of rape solely through the mechanism of sympathy. When this plot device is used, the "victim" status cancels out all other qualities or characteristics that might contradict this sympathetic victim (p. 141).

However, in the case of Claire, although it can serve as an explanation for the character's cruelty, her use of that fact dilutes the usual functioning of the topic and places the character in the realm of the "bad victim" (Siliman, 2019, p. 142). Claire unites two events that did occur, but at different times: she publicly denounces her rapist and justifies the abortion as a result of that rape. Political profit is its central objective and has no limits. This is one of the most intense moments of conjunction of private and public life: rape and abortion are publicly exposed on television and turned into instruments in the race for power.

Finally, Claire is a character who ends up identifying herself with the stereotype of evil, becoming a flat character (Ducrot & Todorov, 1985, p. 262) who develops only a dimension similar to the conventions of the cruel villain, leaving behind the complexities that she showed in the first seasons. This character trajectory is consistent with a caricatured representation of competitive politics.

In *Borgen*, the Birgitte-Philip relationship is based on a communicative logic, which considers the other as the recipient of listening. Thus, life is organized in terms of equality: they take care of the house and the children equally, and the professional development of each one is part of the living arrangements:

B. –We made a deal: five years of career for you and five for me... I proposed it to you. Pretty modern of me.

P. –Well, it means being able to put your career on pause every five years.

B. –We have achieved it.

P. –We have been lucky (E. 1, S. 1).

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appropriate response to the problem of sexual violence and warns that, by being overly careful about being politically correct and avoiding blaming the victim, many shows tend to block out all other character traits and turn them exclusively into recipients of compassion.



Eichner and Mikos (2016) emphasize that “the whole idea of Denmark as a Welfare State that has achieved gender equality is written in that scene” (p. 18). In this couple, love promoted a certain symmetry, they established rules of equality with the purpose of combining attention to family life<sup>16</sup> with professional development, so that neither had to give up one thing nor the other. However, for Birgitte to be Prime Minister, a break in that symmetry is now necessary: Philip’s resignation from his turn. The dialogic logic that governs this couple leads them to consider the needs of the other in terms of equity. Equality means distributing in equal parts, equity, on the other hand, means differential treatment, according to the needs and situation of the parties; equity is linked to justice. But defining what is fair for Birgitte and what is fair for Philip is not easy. Things are more complex than resorting to a rule that distributes in equal parts and that complexity is what is addressed in the representation that *Borgen* proposes, because the other is considered the bearer of valid reasons and not a piece in a game of power.

Philip agrees to postpone his turn for five years to support Birgitte’s career. From the beginning he functions as an auxiliary character. However, the relationship suffers when the balance that the agreement fostered is broken and the time devoted to the couple and the family is eroded: “we only count on you to sleep... We all work hard for you to be Prime Minister. We are both sacrificing our love and our sexual life. Not to mention my career... We need you here” (E. 7, S. 1) Philip’s resignation of the professional development of his career, support and admiration for Birgitte, are yielding to the need for a fulfilling life. Birgitte is sensitive to Philip’s situation and asks him: “Are you happy?... I want to know how you feel”. Phillip’s response is: “Good, good. Working hard. That’s how I feel. We’ll survive. I am going to survive” (E. 8, S. 1). But the main thing about this dialogue is that what Phillip wants most is a job, another job instead of teaching, he wants to occupy a management position in a company and when he receives a proposal, when someone thinks he would be good at it, then he feels happy.

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<sup>16</sup> It is part of the chosen family lifestyle, not to have housekeeping help –neither for cleaning nor for taking care of the children– and they did not want a boarding school regime either.

Birgitte also misses out on enjoying the moments of domestic life and the experiences of her children; work invades everything and agreements to preserve time for the family or for the couple<sup>17</sup> are systematically broken by the demands of political life. A repeated scene is Birgitte's return home in the entrance hall, on her way to the open doors of the living room, a family meeting place. Each return shows how the relationship with home and with Philip changes. In the first returns she is shown, in a long shot, received with a hug by the entire family (E. 5, S. 1). As time goes by, Birgitte enters the house alone, when everyone is already sleeping (E. 7), or there is no one at home (E. 8). Entering the domestic space expresses the idea that she is arriving at a life that continues without her and reveals what is being lost.

The bedroom is a place that is repeated, underlining the continuity of the narrative arc of the Birgitte-Philip relationship. In the first episodes, the bedroom, and especially the bed, reveal a relaxed domesticity, trust, complicity and collaboration. This is expressed by the proximity of the bodies while talking at the end of the day (E. 3, S. 1). Later, Birgitte's work invades the bed: she is on her cell phone or on the computer, while Philip looks at her annoyed (E. 4 and 5, S. 1) or she arrives late and the bed is occupied by a sleeping Philip along with their two children so she goes to sleep somewhere else (E. 7, S. 1).

As Eichner (2019) points out, one of the attractions of Scandinavian series is to represent strong women in their female characters, while at the same time they constitute characters full of ambiguities and nuances: "Sarah Lund (*Forbrydelsen*), Saga Norén (*Bron/Broen*) and Birgitte Nyborg (*Borgen*), female characters are central to the three most internationally successful series" (p. 18). They are characters who are in tension with their gender roles and in all three cases their emotional and family lives are affected or broken. Birgitte is located on that line and the private project disintegrates for the sake of the public project.

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<sup>17</sup> An entry is established on the agenda: "Tuesdays to have sex" (E. 4, S. 1), which is then not fulfilled.

### *Two models of politician women*

The representations of women in political series have been oriented towards two models: one is that of the politician woman characterized by sensitivity and emotionality, more inclined to deal with issues linked to childhood and a universe traditionally assigned to the feminine, while being more distant from other topics (international politics, military defense, etc.); in the other stereotype, the woman becomes masculinized; in other words, the woman who is strong gives up traits of her femininity.

The character of Birgitte Nyborg marks a milestone in breaking stereotypes of women in politics (Padilla Castillo & Sosa Sánchez, 2018). Emotional traits do not guide her actions. She deals with all issues: from Danish troops in Afghanistan to gender policies that ensure access to management positions. The dominant traits in her personality are strength, determination and independent judgment, as well as the flexibility to articulate her convictions with an essential amount of pragmatism. However, she must deal with sexism, which is present even in one of the most advanced societies in terms of gender equality, and becomes evident in the character's confrontation with a masculine political environment that acts based on those two stereotypes.<sup>18</sup>

As an illustration, let us remember two situations. Birgitte confronts the Ministers of Defense and Justice and ends the meeting by saying "The gentlemen's club is over" and one of them responds under his breath "Yes, mom" (E. 4, S. 1). When a woman sets limits, she is put into a mother's role, or if her action is energetic it is attributed to her masculinization: "What a masculine leadership!" (E. 5, S. 1). As for Claire, the character moves from the traditional sphere of a woman relegated to a second place, "wife of", towards the breaking of the stereotype and the proposal of a model of autonomy. This transition

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<sup>18</sup> The dialogue with Laugensen in the first chapter develops on the verge of ambiguity: "I have not stopped thinking about you... It seems like the beginning of a romance" says Laugensen. Birgitte formulates the breakup of the political alliance. Birgitte, playing along: "Laugensen would benefit from a marriage of convenience, but she is an old-fashioned girl and her answer is no" (E. 1, S. 1).

overlaps with two other canonical stereotypes, that of the strong woman –whose paradigmatic model is Lady Macbeth– and that of the requirement of a male counterpart for a promotion in the political career, with whom she is in a relationship of proximity and distance at the same time.

In an article about *House of Cards*, Hast (2018) refers to the choreography of bodies, pointing out that “the state is written/choreographed in a body or the body writes/choreographs the state” (p. 444), while emphasizing the masculinization and militarization of power. Claire’s body contrasts Birgitte’s body: stylized, elegant, always impeccably dressed, even if she is at home (always “dressed to go out”); the care Claire takes of her wardrobe<sup>19</sup> responds to the awareness of the strategic use of her image and her body. In Claire, the manifestation of emotionality is sometimes a trait associated with femininity and weakness, while power appears masculinized, for example, in the figures of Frank and Petrov in season three. However, it is throughout that season that Claire becomes stronger and overlaps her use of feminine and masculine gestures. One of her clearest expressions is when, in chapter five, she makes ambassador Alexi Moryakob enter the women’s toilet:

She has carefully chosen the location and planned her choreography in it. Claire asks, as she puts on her mascara, “Eyes?”, “Perfect”, Alexi responds. Claire replies, “It’s always good to have a man’s opinion”. Previously, Alexi had criticized her competence as an ambassador while complimenting her dress. Claire makes a more intimate bodily statement of shamelessness by entering the bathroom stall and urinating with the door open... To resist marginalization, Claire adopts a particular masculinized style of action, that is, urinating as a symbol of her strength of character (Hast, 2018, p. 452).

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<sup>19</sup> There are many scenes in which Claire stops in front of the mirror to choose the dress she will wear, assessing the effect she wants to produce. She also advises Frank on his wardrobe. The change in style and colors will mark the changes in the character in her political career.

On the other hand, masculinization is accompanied by a certain militarization in the image towards the end of the series when Claire wears a blue dress with metal buttons that resembles military uniforms.

In the apotheosis of Claire's power (S. 6), although she exhibits pregnancy –a sign of feminization– it functions as if Frank had been phagocytized: pregnancy is access to her legacy and the sum of total power, at the same time that Doug, the last thing that remains of Frank, dies against that same body.

The construction of the models of political women in Birgitte or Claire is in correspondence with the conceptions of politics they represent. The body of both characters is in the center. Claire opens the refrigerator to quell hot flashes, while at the same time she has a contained sexuality that is very much derived from her power strategy. Birgitte sweats, sleeps in the office, suffers a little, but not much, from being fat, in no case does sexuality appear as a resource of power.

One of the revealing moments of her conception of politics is that of the speech in the last electoral debate. Birgitte faces the demands of the image: her body on screen in the middle of her opponents. The choice of her wardrobe is not the result of a strategic decision. She wears the only dress that fits her: a lilac dress, with a certain shine, far from the neutral and classic black suit that she should wear. Her physical presence, in addition to her speech, proposes a rupture in the way of doing politics and that is the difference that will make her Prime Minister. The final speech that I partially transcribe contains elements of a deliberative vision of politics:

Here we all became very professional... And we do it because what matters is hitting the target. Right now my advisor must be insulting me for not following my speech. And he's upset because I didn't wear the clothes we agreed on. What happened is that I gained weight and it doesn't fit me anymore... We must admit when we are wrong and speak up when there is something we do not understand or know. I became a politician because I had ideas about how to organize the world and I still have them (E. 1, S. 1).

The spontaneity of the speech accompanies the formulation of some central postulates for a way of doing politics: the recognition

of error, the assumption that the knowledge that exists in others may be necessary, the abandonment of an exclusively strategic policy, which only thinks about “hitting the target”.

## CONCLUSIONS

The representation of politics in fiction shows how we are thinking about it and, therefore, acting in relation to it. Both series put into circulation two very different conceptions.

*House of Cards* takes instrumental logic to an extreme and proposes the worst version of adversative politics, to cartoonish limits. Perhaps for this reason, it can promote the viewer’s reflection, placing in front of their eyes something that does not seem desirable for the functioning of a society and politics.

*Borgen* proposes a representation in which elements of deliberation and competition are combined. It allows us to imagine a version of democratic politics that moves away from accusations of idealism or of being merely aspirational. Nyborg is not only a politician of principles, but she is also capable of calculation, strategic action and negotiation, in sum, it is not the representation of pure goodness and therefore her perspective tends to pose personal and political dilemmas in a more realistic, complex and nuanced way.

Both series embody opposite representations of politics in their female characters. They are configured through the traits of the characters, the various layers of narrative complexity, the double plot of public and private life, which have been analyzed here. We have pointed out that each character is inscribed in a different idea of power and politics, but in addition to the logic of a strategic or dialogic rationality, as well as the way of conceiving the other, are transferred to the sphere of the private project.

In *Borgen* and *House of Cards*, the canonical narrative model is transgressed. Firstly, because in the parameters of the canon the protagonists are not usually female characters; secondly, because there is no correspondence between the success of the public project and the fulfillment of the private project. In these two characters, for different reasons, the private project is destroyed, submitted or merged with the public project.

In the analytical outlook, we have proposed that these female characters present a certain rupture from narrative stereotypes in the representation of political women, but some continuities have also been made evident. Thus, the option to develop her political career leads Birgitte to lose her partner and her family life. But in any case, the series does not present it in terms of the oppression of patriarchal mandates, but in terms of the complexity of the challenges and emotional relationships.

Finally, the character will find a certain balance between the demands of motherhood and her political life, but when she achieves this she is late, having lost her partner. The two narrative lines—the private and the public—function as a reflective loop on the idea of a modern and egalitarian Danish society. This is what Bent’s reflection points out: “What a terrible contradiction. In Parliament we fight for the modern family and in *Borgen* marriages last if one stays at home” (E. 9, S. 1).

Claire proposes a fusion between the development of the private and public lines because the character’s objective is only one: to obtain power. All dimensions of the character’s life are submitted to that aim. This is how the nuances and complexities of the character are flattened until they are reduced to a single dimension. In this process, her figure is assimilated to that of the villain, reaffirming the stereotype of the powerful woman associated with evil and far from the tortured image of Lady Macbeth, without redemption from madness.

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## PROFILE

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