



LENA

SHE HAS NUMEROUS TATTOOS, SWEARS LIKE A SAILOR
AND TAKES ON "DARK, WEIRD STUFF THAT MAKES OTHER PEOPLE
SAY, 'EWW, I'D NEVER DO THAT.'" WELCOME TO THE GUTSY,
NO-REGRETS WORLD OF THE *GAME OF THRONES* STAR



HEADEY

IS WICKED GOOD

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LETTERED BY O'BANQUINHO



LENA HEADEY has a weakness for dogs. “It’s so hilarious,” says her friend Piper Perabo, who starred with Headey in *The Cave*, a 2005 sci-fi thriller shot in Transylvania. “She’ll go to a country and make a movie and come back with four rescue dogs and find them all homes.” At one point Headey had five of her own, including a Great Dane mix she found languishing at a Los Angeles shelter shortly after she discovered she was pregnant with her son, Wylie, now five. “The dog had one ear,” Headey recalls, making a tired flap with her hand in demonstration. “One tooth. He was 11. I don’t know what possessed me. I couldn’t not take him. He was majestic and broken.”

Headey, 41, mines that same complicated and compelling combination as the formidable and embattled Cersei Lannister on HBO’s massive hit *Game of Thrones*, which begins its fifth season this month. Belying her regal posture and biting dialogue, Cersei, Queen of Westeros, is a woman skittering on the verge. It’s hard to fully enjoy the perks of the palace when you’ve been married off to a Rabelaisian drinker who loved someone else, your twin brother is the father of your children, and your son has died a ghastly death before your eyes, after drinking from a chalice you believe was poisoned by your younger

brother—who shortly afterward killed your father. The incest, intrigue and villainy rampant in the Seven Kingdoms, the flaming sword battles and the blood-squirting decapitations all conspire to shatter a monarch’s serenity. Watching Headey’s Cersei navigate the treacherous landscape is one of *Thrones’* ongoing delights.

She first heard about the show through her friend Peter Dinklage, who plays that patricidal younger brother, Tyrion. The two were filming a wry indie comedy, *Pete Smalls Is Dead* (Headey’s a hoot as the girlfriend of a blonde-Afro-wigged Steve Buscemi), when she noticed Dinklage reading a script. “He said, ‘It’s this fucking great pilot—it’s insane!’” she remembers. “‘Right now I’m reading a scene where I get a blow job,’” he continued. “‘And there’s incest, and you’d be my sister.’” What could be better? After meeting with the show’s creators, David Benioff and Dan Weiss, Headey knew Cersei was her cup of tea: majestic and, as time went on, utterly broken. Falling-apart characters are more interesting to play, she says, admitting to a fondness for “dark, weird stuff, things other people would say, ‘Eww, I’d never do that.’ I don’t do what I do because I want to be pretty and drink Champagne.” »

VALENTINO silk dress with embroidered collar; **VALENTINO** .COM. PAGES 68–69: **NORMA KAMALI** chiffon dress; 212-957-9797. **KAMALIKULTURE** nylon one-piece; **ZAPPOS.COM**. **H.STERN** 18k gold ring with black and white diamonds; **HSTERN.NET**.



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BULGARI rose
gold bracelet with
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Benioff and Weiss based the series—HBO’s most popular ever, with 19 million viewers per episode—on George R.R. Martin’s best-selling books. Dozens of actresses who auditioned portrayed Cersei as “a haughty ice queen, a villainess,” the two show runners say in a joint email. “When we watched Lena’s audition, we were struck by the humor she brought to the role. We never imagined Cersei as particularly funny, but Lena makes us laugh in pretty much every scene.”

The humor she employs is bone dry and crackling with intelligence. “A lesser actress would play a wicked woman,” says Dinklage, “but Lena approaches it as a mother lion—maybe because she’s a mother herself. Cersei will do anything to protect her own.” Headey, who is divorced from Wylie’s dad, Irish musician Peter Loughran, nods when asked if her own ferocity matches her character’s. “Yes,” she says, “when it comes to my child.” That protectiveness may soon be compounded: Headey, who is pregnant, will most likely have another child by the time *Thrones* starts shooting again this summer. She won’t comment on the baby, and when asked about her romantic life, she demurs, saying only, “I like to keep my personal life private.”

On other topics, however, the British actress is light and easygoing, often self-effacing, with a lilting accent that makes the profanities that ride sidecar to much of her conversation sound like charming bons mots. Her sentences tend to be underscored with facial expressions and pantomimes, like live emoticons. Drinking from a to-go cup of coffee on the patio of a Studio City café, she looks decidedly un-Cersei in a boxy faux-fur coat that resembles a teddy bear pelt, a pair of jeans that balloons at the hips and a loose-fitting pink shirt that could be mistaken for a pajama top. Unlike Cersei’s Rapunzelesque tresses, her hair is dark and layered, pulled back with a pair of black-framed glasses acting as a headband. “Right now everyone knows her [as the queen] from *Game of Thrones*,” says Perabo. “But in real life, Lena’s so fun and relaxed and has this mellow rock-and-roll vibe. She’s got tattoos and half the time has her swimsuit on under her tank top—she’s just ready to hang out in the California sunshine.”

Those tattoos, which are strikingly feminine, epitomize the yin-yang dichotomy (she likes boxing *and* yoga) that makes Headey so fascinating to watch. They’re also something of an obsession. “I always want more,” she says. “It’s a terrible thing. I’ll be outside a tattoo shop and hear the needle and think, I could just get a little one that nobody would see . . .” Her right forearm is decorated with an open birdcage, her left with small birds in flight. “I don’t like closed doors,” she explains with a laugh. “If I go into a room,

the cupboards have to be open.” She enjoys the process of being tattooed as much as the result: “It’s something you can’t run from. You have to sit and find a way through [the discomfort]. I find a real calm, a real peace to it. When I try to meditate, I think, Oh, should I go to Ralph’s or Whole Foods? There’s interference. With this I go somewhere else.” The extravagant tattoos that cover her back, a lotus blossom and a whirl of peonies and swallows that flows up and around one shoulder, gave her plenty of time to get into the zone: from start to finish, about seven hours.

Headey was born in Bermuda, where her mother and father, both British police cadets, were stationed. When she was five, the family moved back to West Yorkshire, England. Growing up, she says, she was “a free spirit with ideals” who got into her share of trouble—“but I never went to jail!” she clarifies. “I’d do things like smoke cigarettes in the garage, pretending to be cool but feeling ill.” At 16, she and her classmates wrote and performed in *The Coca-Cola Dragon*, a musical about the Vietnam War. Headey makes light of it: “Teen girls holding rifles [she cradles an imaginary weapon], saying, ‘I was a soldier . . .’” But it was one of about nine plays selected for production in the National Theatre’s annual youth talent competition. “As a kid, it’s pretty amazing,” she says. “You go to London and work with a voice coach, and then one night you perform on one of their stages.” A casting director saw Headey’s photo in the Olivier Theatre foyer and arranged an audition. “‘There’s that strange face,’” jokes Headey. “‘Let’s use it!’”

They did: She landed her first movie role, playing the young version of Jeremy Irons’s wife in 1992’s *Waterland*. “I remember thinking, This is fucking amazing!” she says. “When you’re young, you don’t realize what’s at stake.” Her father, less enthusiastic, urged her to go to college. The idea of an acting career was alien to the rural village where Headey grew up, but she stuck with it, making her way with small parts in *The Remains of the Day*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Jungle Book*, among others. Her portrayal of Queen Gorgo in 2006’s *300*, a spectacularly gory epic in which she holds her own as a sword-wielding Spartan in a sea of trunk-thighed men, laid the groundwork for a slew of tough-chick parts, including the weapons-packing lead in the 2008–09 TV series *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*.

Off camera, she can seem as imposing as her characters. “Sometimes you’re in a room that feels incredibly male-centric, which is hard,” she says of Hollywood. “I can’t play that game”—she leans back in her chair and gives a good-ol’-boy wink—“and sometimes women can be

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misread if they have strong opinions. I can be very blunt. There are moments when I should *shh* myself. But I won't."

It's Headey's fearlessness that sets her apart as an actress, says Dinklage: "I'm jealous of it. She doesn't care what people think. She's drawn to what she's drawn to." She balances blockbuster action thrillers with quieter movies. Right after fighting giant man-eating creatures in *The Cave* ("based on fact," she deadpans), Headey and Perabo filmed *Imagine Me & You*, a sweet girl-meets-girl romance in which she's a lesbian florist who falls for Perabo's straight bride-to-be. Dinklage suggested her for last year's *Low Down*, a dark but luminous movie he'd been cast in about jazz pianist and heroin addict Joe Albany, costarring John Hawkes and Glenn Close.

"I remember Lena telling me, 'I have no vanity as an actor,'" says *Low Down* director Jeff Preiss. "There's no extent of ugliness that I'm not willing to go for." Nor was she looking for empty praise. "She always seemed to like criticism," he recalls noticing. "You don't get much response from Lena by saying, 'Bravo!' She'd rather me say what didn't work. That gives her creative energy to reinvent." Headey's performance as Albany's wife, a woman made cruel by disappointment and alcoholism, is haunting. Even her body language, a liquid movement that seems independent of muscle and bone, registers her descent into darkness.

Headey has acknowledged having had her own bouts of depression, starting in her midteens. But "I haven't had a spell in a long time," she says. "I think some people's brains are just wired that way if you're a thinker. People who never get anxious always amaze me. The world could be breaking up and they're saying, 'Everything's fine!' Getting older and having kids, you learn how to become less serious about it all."

Dinklage and Perabo agree that their friend is happiest when she's with Wylie. "There's a tomboy quality to Lena when they're together," says Perabo. "She jumps in the pool and swims with him. There are Cheerios all over everything."

Headey and her ex, who lives in L.A., share custody. "It's tough," she says of their split after six years of marriage. "There's a lot of hurt and sadness and disappointment. Grief. Massive grief. It's a mourning process, and yet nobody's died."

Between the *Thrones* set in Belfast, various film locations and her home in L.A., where she's in the throes of building a new "sweet and little" house, Headey travels a lot. When Wylie's not with her,

MORE words with Lena Headey

My number-one rule when
striving to achieve MORE is ...

Slow the fuck down.

What do you appreciate MORE
as you age?

Health. Sanity. Life!

I wish I had MORE time for ...

Leg shaving.

MORE women should ...

*I can't tell you what
to do. You're all grown up now.*

The world can use a little
MORE ...

Quiet.

filled street—Headey's future is looking bright. In the forthcoming movie *Zipper*, she plays "the missus," as she puts it, to Patrick Wilson's prosecutor, a politician addicted to call girls. After that comes *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, based on the 2009 adaptation of Jane Austen's classic, which finds her as an aristocratic Lady Catherine who dabbles in zombie investments—"as you do in *Pride and Prejudice*," Headey observes dryly. "It's rather camp and rather fabulous."

Despite the swell of work—she's also trying to develop a movie based on a British best seller, *H Is for Hawk*, which she hopes to act in and codirect—Headey isn't banking on her success. Not too long ago, she says, she'd look at her car and wonder if she could live in it. "Nothing is concrete," Headey explains. "Right now I'm having a very great moment, but it's a moment, and I always think, OK, worst-case scenario: Could I survive in my car? Would this be OK? My friends call it disaster thinking. I like to think of it as realism." ☉

MARGOT DOUGHERTY wrote about Diane Keaton for the May 2014 issue of *More*.

he stays with her parents in either West Yorkshire or L.A., or with his dad. When they're apart, Headey makes two-minute videos for him, one to say good morning and the other to say good night. Nonetheless, "it isn't easy," she says. "There's guilt." Wylie doesn't understand what Mom does for work, but he's on her side. Headey took him to the set of last year's *300* sequel, *Rise of an Empire*, thinking he'd enjoy a sword-fight scene. "Ninjas!" he yelled to her opponents when the action began. "Be gentle!"

Headey resists the idea that she's famous, despite having nearly a half million Twitter followers, to whom she's tweeted such musings as "Elf on a shelf. Just fucking creepy," referring to the popular kids' character. "I find it extraordinary," she says. "Sometimes people recognize me, and it's so bizarre. I think, How did you know?" Last winter, when she was out with her friend Pedro Pascal (*Thrones* enthusiasts lamented his all-too-brief story line as the charismatic Red Viper), some besotted fans asked her to take their picture with him. Pascal was on the verge of outing her as Cersei, but Headey stopped him in his tracks. "She manages it all with tremendous grace and is very generous with her fans," he says, "but I think she can take it or leave it as far as the attention goes."

While Cersei's fate hangs in the balance—the Twittersphere has been rife with chat about an upcoming scene that finds her being forced to walk naked down a throng-



ALEXANDER MCQUEEN
vintage dress.

HAIR: MARK TOWNSEND
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LANCÔME; MANICURE:
ASHLIE JOHNSON FOR
CHANEL LE VERNIS
AT THE WALL GROUP;
PROP STYLING:
OWL AND THE
ELEPHANT STUDIO