

MAISIE WILLIAMS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
ANDY GOTTS

The wisdom of youth

Doctor Who Saturday 8.20pm BBC1

She's in *Game of Thrones*, *Doctor Who* and has a million Twitter followers. At just 18, Maisie Williams is fighting for change...

MAISIE WILLIAMS IS 18 years old now, but young – young in a way you've never been. Effortlessly, expansively, relentlessly young, despite a career spent growing up fast. The actress is best known as Arya Stark in *Game of Thrones*, her first ever role. A child in an incredibly adult series, Arya has been watched by fans growing from tomboy into assassin. Williams is now appearing in *Doctor Who* as Ashildr, a Viking child facing down an entire alien invasion – and the Doctor himself.

Why does Williams – the youngest of four siblings, and born two weeks before Tony Blair came to power – only play bad-asses?

"Well, strong female characters, I like to say."

But surely not every strong female will run you through with a sword?

"They're people that make decisions; I don't mean the murderous side of it. They're real women, and not just an idea of how a woman is or an accessory."

Coming off the *Who* set in Cardiff, she's still in costume, a jerkin and leather boots that make her look like a Lost Boy from *Peter Pan*. She is attentive and intelligent, but has a fidgety energy. Before auditioning for *Game of Thrones*, aged 12, she moved from Somerset to attend Bath Dance College and now, in a dreary backroom, she's always in motion: tucking her legs under her, teasing out a strand of hair, managing her hands. You only know you've been boring when you say something interesting, and she locks eyes and somehow talks even faster. Suddenly she's nibbling quickly on a biscuit.

Williams isn't a woman who is going to compromise. She is taking on the future at full force.

Her old friends are now going off to university, her mother used to work in academia and her elder brother wants to be a lecturer, but Williams has never wanted to go into higher education. Nevertheless, *Game of Thrones* has only a few series left to go – a graduation of sorts – and like most people her age, Williams is considering her future. She sees no reason to let her standards slip.

"I didn't realise when I was younger that women were written so badly," she says, "but going further into this career I realised there are a lot of really bad characters, that it's not common to come across females who aren't just 'the girlfriend'."

It's a discussion that has extended to the



'I hope to never have to play a character that is only there to benefit a male lead'



GIRL WARRIOR

In *Doctor Who*, Williams plays Ashildr the Viking to Peter Capaldi's Time Lord. Above, as tomboy Arya in *Game of Thrones*

set of *Doctor Who*, with Williams seeking out departing companion Jenna Coleman for advice. At the age of 29, Coleman is an old hand in the business.

"Me and Jenna were talking about it," Williams explains. "When you get a script they always include a sentence or two about the character, something like 'Jason: 36, strong, built, quick, witty' and a description of his personality."

"Then there's his girlfriend – 'Sarah: hot, blonde.' And that's it! Hot-looking but in a cute way. That's your character!"

Williams is incredulous.

"You can't pick and choose everything, but I hope to never have to play a character that is only there to benefit a male lead."

It's a big claim for someone under pressure to keep up the momentum of her career, but sitting across from her, you can believe it. People keep describing Williams as "outspoken", a patronising word, like calling a child "precocious". Williams isn't outspoken; she says things, and there are one million people on Twitter who are willing to listen.

WHETHER THEY'RE FOLLOWING her because they're interested in her opinions or are just fans of *Game of Thrones* is irrelevant. "Either way I've been given a voice and I want to try and do something with it. The young generation are very passionate, it's just that not very many of us are given a voice, and every time we are we're shut down by people who think we don't know anything."

She believes that, far from being lazy, the reason young people are disconnected from politics is because they're under so much pressure to score highly, go to university and "do something good with ourselves".

There follows a breathless, statistic-citing discussion, weighing the pros and cons of voting in general elections. "I think even if you don't want to vote," she decides, "you should go and spoil your ballot..."

Being an "outspoken" young woman has always been dangerous, but social media has only made it easier for misogynists and idiots to contact their targets. When Williams set up her Twitter account, her mum was given full access, but go and have a look at what >

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