"Fantasy . . . Is Their Business, But That Is Not Their Purpose": Introduction to the *Slayage* Special Issue on *Dollhouse*

[1] London, 1380-1400, Geoffrey Chaucer writes his poetic masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*. Paris, 1844, Karl Marx composes his philosophy of economics, published posthumously as *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.* Copenhagen, 1879, Henrik Ibsen's naturalist play *A Doll's House* premieres. Prague, 1921, Karel Čapek's science fiction play *R.U.R.* premieres. Rome, 1921, Luigi Pirandello's absurdist play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* premieres. New York, 1957, Frederik Pohl publishes his science fiction short story "The Haunted Corpse." New York, 1984, William Gibson publishes his cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*. New York, 1995, P. J. Hilts publishes his poignant account of memory loss in *Memory's Ghost: The Nature of Memory and the Strange Tale of Mr. M.* New York, 1996, Robert Coover publishes his reworking of the classic fairy tale in his novel *Briar Rose*. Stanford, 1997, Judith Butler publishes her theoretical treatise *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Sunnydale, 2001, the manmade robot version of Buffy (aka "Buffybot") is featured on Joss Whedon's television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ("Intervention" 5.18). Fox Television Network, 2009, Joss Whedon's controversial television series *Dollhouse* begins.

Slayage
The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association

[2] The fictional and theoretical texts of the preceding timeline are diverse—they span centuries, continents, genres, movements, and media. Yet, as illustrated in the essays we have chosen for this special issue of *Slayage*, Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* provides a point for their intersection. Some of these historical texts are referenced explicitly within the show (as illustrated, for example, in the articles by Koontz and Masson); others are cited by scholars in the collection as influential to the political and philosophical themes of the series (as illustrated, for example, in the articles by Davis and Hawk). What each of the works in our collection illustrates is that *Dollhouse*, despite its short run on network television, is worthy of study and exploration.

[3] Back in February 2009, fans and scholars alike eagerly awaited the premiere episode of *Dollhouse*. What would Joss Whedon and his creative team present to us? For

some, the first episode and, indeed, the first season proved to be a disappointment. Early responses, to say the least, were not uniformly favorable. Eric Goldman, in his review of "Ghost" (1.1), noted the lack of Whedon's "trademark wit" and, in his review of Season One, described "Stage Fright" (1.3) as "delivering an extremely silly story filled with poor acting, plot holes and corny dialogue." The more vehement line of criticism accused *Dollhouse* of glorifying prostitution and human trafficking. One blogger asks, "[I]s noted feminist auteur Joss Whedon aware that he is making a show about forced prostitution and rape?" (Sady). Yet as the series and the plot progressed, as *Dollhouse* began not only to critique its own premise and politics but also to examine the human condition (in episodes such as "Man on the Street" [1.6] and "Omega" [1.12]), admiration for the show increased. Thus, Robert Moore, in an online review entitled "*Dollhouse* (Briefly) The Best Show on Television," writes, "Despite a slow beginning *Dollhouse* has become an absolutely brilliant series." And by the day of its last episode, *The New York Post*'s Jarett Wieselman had asserted, "In the back half of season two, 'Dollhouse' has transformed from an aimless hourlong drama into the best series anywhere on television."

[4] In her essay "Who Painted the Lion?—A Gloss on *Dollhouse*'s 'Belle Chose,'" Cynthea Masson focuses on the use of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* to argue that *Dollhouse* invites its audience to gloss or interpret the text. The contributors to this first collection of scholarly articles on *Dollhouse* have accepted that invitation. They are, as Masson concludes in her paper, "among the glossators of the Whedonverses" (par. 14). Over the next few paragraphs, we offer you brief glimpses into the varied, creative, and provocative glosses in this special issue of *Slayage*.

[5] In "Czech Mate: Whedon, Čapek and the Foundations of the *Dollhouse*," K. Dale Koontz masterfully illuminates the intersection of technology and humanity in both *Dollhouse* and Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* [Rossum's Universal Robots]. Whedon may well owe more than merely the name of the Rossum Corporation to Čapek. In "'The Drama Is In Us': Pirandellian Echoes in *Dollhouse*," Hugh H. Davis likewise posits the influence of a playwright on the series when he explores the complexities of consciousness, awareness, and the human condition as portrayed in both *Dollhouse* and Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* Renee St. Louis and Miriam Riggs delve into the realm of fairytales (*Briar Rose*, in particular) in "'A Painful, Bleeding Sleep': Sleeping Beauty in the Dollhouse" to argue not only that *Dollhouse* is "a story ideally suited to expression in fairy tale form," but that the show "becomes a kind of fairy tale" (par. 6). Exploring yet another fictional genre in "Mind, Body, Imprint: Cyberpunk Echoes in the Dollhouse," Bronwen Calvert draws on tropes from the often "unproblematically technophilic" world of cyberpunk

to explore both the positive and negative conjunction of embodiment and technology in *Dollhouse* (par. 3). Each of these papers illustrates the extent to which literature has influenced the series.

[6] Other papers in the collection demonstrate the influence of established theory on the show. Tom Connelly and Shelley S. Rees calculate the economic politics of the Dollhouse in "Alienation and the Dialectics of History in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*" to argue that Season One dramatizes Karl Marx's theory of "alienation." In "Hacking the Read-Only File: Collaborative Narrative as Ontological Construction in *Dollhouse*," Julie L. Hawk (via Judith Butler and others) offers a fascinating and theoretically sophisticated exploration of the parallels between the construction of the human psyche and the construction of narrative in the series. Through the lenses of neurological theory and cognitive psychology, Sherry Ginn critiques Dollhouse's memory tampering in "Memory, Mind, and Mayhem: Neurological Tampering and Manipulation in *Dollhouse*." Together these papers illuminate the complex theoretical underpinnings of *Dollhouse*.

[7] In her unique voice and perspective, Madeline Muntersbjorn challenges us in "Disgust, Difference, and Displacement in the *Dollhouse*" to accept that, as viewers of *Dollhouse*, we too are "programmable perverts" (par. 21). Rhonda V. Wilcox likewise acknowledges audience complicity and, in addition, a conscious theme of authorial complicity in the show's more problematic aspects in "Echoes of Complicity: Reflexivity and Identity in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*." Both Muntersbjorn and Wilcox offer emotionally poignant perspectives and ask us to examine our own humanity as we interpret the characters of *Dollhouse*. And finally, Lisa K. Perdigao in "'This One's Broken': Rebuilding Whedonbots and Reprogramming the Whedonverse" examines the role of the "bot" (or robot) in the Whedonverses, with particular attention to the ways in which programming in *Dollhouse* affects both identity and narrative.

[8] We hope that our fellow Whedon fans and scholars will find this collection both enjoyable and intellectually engaging. As Whedon wrote in "Man on the Street," "The Dollhouse deals in fantasy. That is their business, but that is not their purpose" (1.6). These essays explore some of the possible purposes of *Dollhouse*—for its creators and its audience. Perhaps some of you who have questioned the place of *Dollhouse* within the canon of Whedon's work will come to a new appreciation of the show's complexity and significance. Thank you to all the authors who submitted essays for this collection—not only those we chose for the special issue but also those we hope to see in future issues of *Slayage*. You have each contributed to securing the place of *Dollhouse* in Whedon Studies.

So, gentle viewer, pour yourself a cup of tea and unwrap an item from your "drawer of inappropriate starches" ("Echoes" 1.7); it's time to explore another sector of the Whedonverses.

Cynthea Masson and Rhonda V. Wilcox

Co-editors of the *Slayage* Special Issue on *Dollhouse*

Works Cited

Goldman, Eric. "*Dollhouse*: 'Ghost' Review." *IGN TV*. 13 Feb. 2009. Web. 19 July 2010. <http://tv.ign.com/articles/940/940128p1.html>.

---. "*Dollhouse*: Season 1 Review." *IGN TV*. 20 May. 2009. Web. 19 July 2010. <http://tv.ign.com/articles/984/984841p1.html>.

Moore, Robert. "Dollhouse (Briefly) The Best Show on Television." *PopMatters*. 18 Jan. 2010. Web. 19 July 2010. <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/post/118725-dollhouse-briefly-the-best-show-on-television/>.

Sady. "Dollhouse, Joss Whedon, and the Strange and Difficult Path of Feminist Dudes: Some Thoughts." *Tiger Beatdown Ladybusiness*. 20 April 2009. Web. 19 July 2010. <http://tigerbeatdown.blogspot.com/2009/04/dollhouse-joss-whedon-and-strange-and.html>.

Wieselman, Jarett. "5 Things I'll Miss About 'Dollhouse.'" *The New York Post.Com.* 29 Jan. 2010. Web. 26 July 2010. <http://www.nypost.com/p/blogs/popwrap/things_ll_miss_about_dollhouse_rylGNIezA8dmxGHxSw7KmJ>.