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Lady Killer: Death of the Feminized Body in the Whedonverse

Slayage
The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association

[1] Joss Whedon is infamous among long-time fans of his work for the surprising, devastating ways in which he kills beloved characters. With any new project, the prevailing attitude is that it's not a question of *whether* major characters die, but *when*. In response to the 2009 premiere of Whedon's television series *Dollhouse* (2009-10), Fandomania blogger Celeste Monsour created a list of the 16 most painful Joss Whedon deaths and introduced the list with: "How long till one of the characters [of *Dollhouse*] is killed in some heartbreaking and horrifying way? Only time can tell" (par. 1). According to TV Tropes, one of the definitions of being "Jossed" is to be a major character in a romantic relationship who dies ("Jossed").

[2] This paper considers three characters who have been famously Jossed in this sense of the word: Wash from *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Tara from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Penny from *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. Whedonverse franchises include many shocking character deaths, such as those of Joyce Summers and Jenny Calendar from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "Fred" Burkle from *Angel*, and Shepherd from *Firefly*, among many, many more. Their traumatic deaths are portrayed and revealed in a variety of ways. However, the three specific characters analyzed in this paper share distinct patterns in the representations of their gendering and deaths that raise troubling interpretations. Each of the three appear in different types of texts, and the fates of all three characters position the feminized body as a vulnerable body to the point that it is unprotectable. Neither the audience nor the super-human or near-super-human heroes of the respective texts are able to predict or prevent these deaths, thus positioning the dying characters in problematic cultural views of the female body as endangered, punishable, and silent.

THE FEMINIZED BODY

[3] The characters considered here represent both genders, yet all three bodies are feminized by their characterization, their treatment in the

ensemble, and their casting. All three are the more feminine or feminized partner in a dualistic romantic relationship within the text. This characteristic goes beyond the physical sex of the characters, as Wash is male and Tara is in a lesbian relationship. Both of these characters are in relationships with women, but those partners are women who have numerous masculine characteristics in contrast to Wash and Tara. All three characters, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, are "feminized" in important aspects of their portrayal and characterization.

[4] While Wash is male and possesses qualities often considered masculine, such as his mastery as a pilot and his occasional attempts to gain more power in the crew, he is the more feminized partner of his romantic relationship in *Firefly*. He is married to Zoe, a stoic veteran soldier who dresses in earth tones and masculine clothing. In Dee Amy-Chinn's consideration of Inara as a pre-feminist figure in the show, she contrasts the hyper-feminine Inara with Kaylee and Zoe, "who embody the gains of second-wave feminism and whose dress and behavior reflect the universal valorization of masculinity associated with this" (178). Amy-Chinn recognizes that Zoe is portrayed and accepted as a talented soldier, masterful in combat, and she is an equal to Mal in courage and fighting prowess. Wash, on the other hand, wears flamboyant Hawaiian shirts and talks excessively, displaying a wide range of emotion and responsiveness, including moments of self-consciousness and emotional vulnerability, which are often coded as feminine. The *Firefly* episode "War Stories," in which the plot revolves around Wash's desire to assert himself as the primary man in Zoe's life, includes a high-tension scene where Mal tells Wash to stop talking, seeking a masculine response to high emotion and dangerous situations, and Wash cannot help regaling his captain with his exploits at being terse, or once in flight school, laconic ("War Stories"). Wash often serves as comic relief in both the television show and the film in contrast to Zoe's role as the voice of reason, and in his display of emotions, lack of mastery over weapons, and tendency to be controlled by other characters, he is portrayed as being more feminine than his stoic, soldierly, authoritative wife. Amy-Chinn similarly addresses this when she defines Wash as "coded as less traditionally masculine than the other two core male crew members Mal and Jayne, both of whom are soldiers" (185). If Mal and Jayne, as soldiers, are traditionally

masculine, then Zoe's identity as a soldier also places her within this construction of masculinity and excludes Wash. Though Amy-Chinn briefly argues that Zoe is a racialized portrayal of a woman of color with an insatiable sexual appetite, this view of Zoe and her relationship with Wash is complicated by the elements that characterize her as masculine and Wash as more feminine. If we accept this gendering of the characters, then Zoe becomes the desirous "husband" figure who seeks sexual intimacy with the "wife" figure of Wash.

[5] This consideration of gendering becomes more complicated in discussing Tara and Willow's lesbian relationship in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as both characters dress femininely and speak in soft, demure voices. However, Tara is characterized as the feminized partner in this relationship. In the *Salon* article ruminating on the finale of Season Six, in which Willow turns to evil witchcraft in grief and rage over Tara's death, Stephanie Zacharek describes Tara as often functioning in the group as a peacemaker. Tara is "one of the show's gentlest and most sensible characters" and possesses a "soft, pearlescent voice and shy, doelike eyes," and Zacharek describes these feminine characteristics as Tara's main sources of influence in the series (par. 11). By contrast, Willow is closer to certain constructions of masculinity, both in her mastery over magic and in portrayals of her role in the couple's sexual relationship. Willow is a much more powerful witch than Tara, and she can control her lover. In the episode "Tabula Rasa," Willow uses a forgetfulness spell to end a conflict between herself and Tara, which she is able to accomplish without Tara being able to stop her or even realize she is being magically manipulated. In her discussion of Willow's masculine use of magic as a tool for power and dominion in Season Six, Rhonda Wilcox compares this mental intrusion to a rape, because "by controlling Tara's mind, Willow also controls her body" (100). This comparison to rape is especially important when considering Laura Kipnis' ideas about rape as a gendering tool that feminizes the victim, which is discussed in more detail later in this essay. During the portrayal of the pair's sexual relationship in the episode "Once More with Feeling," Willow is the giver of pleasure who penetrates Tara, making Tara the recipient of pleasure and the feminine role in the encounter. Tara's lesser mastery over

magic, her control by Willow, and her place in the sexual relationship serve to feminize her in contrast to her lover.

[6] The third dead character, Penny, is physically female and a site of competition between two male characters: Captain Hammer and Dr. Horrible (or Billy Buddy). She is also actively feminized by the casting of the physically slight, gentle-voiced Felicia Day and in the web serial's characterization of her as naive, hopeful, and nurturing. In her first speaking part of the text, Penny is seeking signatures for a petition to start a new homeless shelter, yet her soft voice and timid demeanor are easy for the self-absorbed pedestrians around her to ignore, and this trend of dismissal continues throughout the web series. Her costuming also feminizes her with its flower patterns, girlish capped sleeves, and soft blues, pinks, and purples.

[7] In contrast, her two romantic interests are both physiologically male and concerned with actively performing their masculinity, as seen in the "A Man's Gotta Do What a Man's Gotta Do" sequence, where "all that matters, taking matters / into your own hands" (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*). Billy, both in his physicality and his personality, is contrasted against the muscular, confident, oblivious Captain Hammer. This contrast at least partially fuels Billy's desire to act and be perceived as a man, particularly by Penny. He wants her to see "the evil me/ not a joke, not a dork, not a failure" (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*). By actively attempting to perform masculinity, Billy separates himself from Penny and her perceived femininity, and as Billy comes closer to achieving his goal of success and masculinization, he grows further from Penny, whom he leaves eating frozen yogurt alone in the Laundromat. Billy's quest for masculinity in distancing himself from Penny fits into Susan Fraiman's ideas that "coolness" is seen in modern society as a "strenuous alienation from the maternal" in terms of individuality and emotional aloofness (xii). Penny is a nurturer with the optimistic outlook that "even in the darkness, every color can be found" in "Penny's Song" (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*). In the third act of the three-part narrative, Billy contrasts himself against Penny's sense of hope and care by dedicating himself to his work and mentally steeling himself to kill Captain Hammer, singing "It's gonna be bloody, head up Billy Buddy, it's no time for mercy. Here goes no mercy" (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*). In

his desire to be masculine, Billy separates himself from the feminine, merciful Penny in hopes of ultimately winning her as a romantic, rather than maternal, figure in his life.

[8] Both male characters in *Dr. Horrible* also position Penny in submissive, traditionally feminine roles. Billy desires to provide for and protect her when he "hands her the keys to a shiny new Australia," removing any need for her to act or take care of herself once he successfully takes over the world (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*). While Billy sees Penny as an idealized woman whom he will provide for, Captain Hammer sees her as a sexual object. He initially treats sex with her as yet another tool for humiliating Billy, and he always refers to Penny and sex together in dialogue. The audience early on sees Penny taking an active, though ineffective, role in her petition for the new homeless shelter, but Captain Hammer both ends and trivializes her actions when he says, "Turns out the only signature the mayor needed was my fist" (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*). Both characters place her in a submissive role to themselves; one sees her as a docile body in need of protection and care, the other sees her as a sexual body available for conquest. Both characters have feminized her in the traditional sense of limiting women to idealized roles, in this case either a helpless domestic or a sexual convenience (Gledhill).

[9] All three characters are portrayed as being feminized characters relative to their respective casts, particularly their romantic partners. But while these characters may be damsels, Whedon takes great pains to prevent the other characters, and the audience, from realizing they are in distress until it is too late.

IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT, IMPOSSIBLE TO PROTECT

[10] In a 2000 interview with NPR, Whedon said that he kills characters in order to defy audience expectations of safety. Whedon said he purposefully kills characters the audience has engaged with emotionally, and "I do it because I want to keep people afraid; I want to keep people in suspense. I want them to understand that not everyone is perfectly safe. . . . Every now and then you have to make the statement that nothing is safe" (Whedon).

[11] And Whedon's strategies work—in Anouk Lang's analysis of online discussion responses to the staggered releases of the three parts of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, she catalogs online posts of sadness, anger, and a sense that Whedon, despite his infamous tendency to kill characters, still manages to shock. One forum participant, Batman1016, wrote "Everyone who was surprised that she died: HOW? It's the same trick he pulled in Serenity. And three times in the last season of Angel. And how many times in Buffy! I would have been surprised if everyone LIVED…pleasantly surprised!" (qtd. in Lang 370). While this fan criticizes others for being surprised at Penny's death, he himself expressed that, prior to the airing of the final act, he hoped everyone would live and the web series would have a happy ending. Lang's study chronicles how fans struggled to respond to and make sense of Penny's death, and a similar process of mourning occurred with Tara and Wash. This attention to audience emotional connection and subsequent shock comes into play not only in the character's positioning in the narrative as major, romantically-involved characters, but also in the construction and techniques of the individual death scenes.

[12] All three characters considered here are killed by random debris—none are specifically the target of violence, but all become collateral damage to primary conflicts in their respective texts. In addition to the seeming randomness of each of the three deaths, audience expectations, timing, editing, and sound consciously manipulate the concepts of safe and unsafe space and make the deaths shocking, unpredictable, and unpreventable, thus reinforcing the cultural view that feminized bodies are bodies that are constantly under threat, even when the threat is not yet visible.

[13] When watching a film or television episode, the audience often expects death to be preceded by certain elements, such as threat and injury. In her article "Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths," Margaret Gibson considers the idea of performance and death in the faces of characters, but she also pays attention to the performance of the body in terms of injury. Gibson says that "death scenes and representations of facing death work within established filmic or literary-based genres which have particular character formulas or stereotypes, visual techniques, and sound-based cues which the audience has been socialized to anticipate and expect," and one of these cues is injury to the body (311). Gibson interprets visible

injury to a hero or heroine as serving a two-fold purpose: remind the audience of the characters' mortality and make the eventual triumph over evil and death that much more meaningful, since that victory was portrayed as being in jeopardy (311). If we reverse this concept, then the absence of injury to a character's body indicates safety and invulnerability. A media-savvy audience anticipates injury and tension preceding a character's death, particularly an important character. However, in the deaths of Tara, Wash, and Penny, their bodies are unharmed and whole up until the moment of the fatal wound. Each is killed by a single, mortal blow, leaving the rest of the body unmarked. Tara falls to a stray bullet through the heart, Wash is impaled by a Reaver projectile, and Penny is struck by shrapnel from the exploding Death Ray. Prior to their deaths, the bodies sustain no smaller, non-mortal injuries that alert viewers to the danger of death or remind them of the mortality of the character; all three characters' lives are snuffed out in a single, unexpected moment. This lack of injury contributes to the creation of a safe space and enhances the viewer's shock when that safe space is violated.

[14] Richard Maltby explains the idea of safe and unsafe space in terms of the capacity for elements to unexpectedly enter and leave the frame and in terms of the audience's ability to predict what may or may not occur onscreen. Maltby argues that slasher films in particular make use of unsafe space to shock viewers, and this idea also operates in the three deaths discussed here when projectiles abruptly demonstrate to the audience that "the frame can be violently penetrated by a murderous implement, at any moment and from any angle" (356). Wash is struck by a Reaver projectile that enters through the windshield, Tara by a bullet entering through a window, and Penny by shrapnel that violently bursts outward from the scene, crossing the boundaries of the frame from the inside and striking Penny while she is off camera. Maltby also discusses how audiences of slasher films anticipate these penetrations and utilize strategies such as pre-emptive laughter to protect themselves from the shock of the frame's unpredictable violation (356). However, Whedon's works are not in genres known for expected, inevitable deaths of major characters to the same extent as slasher films, so the viewer has not raised the same barriers, thus allowing Whedon's other techniques to disrupt cinematic safe spaces against

the audience's expectations. The audience believes each character inhabits a safe space up until the moment of the fatal wound. For these characters, each of whom possesses a feminized body, no space is safe, and there is never a time that their feminized bodies are not fragile and vulnerable.

[15] Tara's death comes in the last few minutes of the episode "Seeing Red," which plays on viewers' expectation that the episode will draw to a neat conclusion. Buffy has defeated the "big bads" of this segment of the series—a trio of inept nerds who seem more likely to bicker than to be an actual threat. The closing minutes of the episode show Tara and Willow joking about being back in clothes after engaging in make-up sex for the majority of the episode, and then Tara notices Buffy and Xander outside. The scene then cuts to the backyard with Buffy and Xander, and Tara and Willow are seemingly forgotten as the viewer is absorbed in the resolution of Buffy and Xander's inter-personal conflict in a two-minute shot reverse-shot sequence of their conversation, largely composed of jokes, self-effacement, and hugs ("Seeing Red").

[16] The viewers' expectations of closure in the episode and safety in the yard are first disrupted by the entrance of Warren, who threatens Buffy and pulls out a gun. He shoots her, then fires a random shot into the air as he turns to flee. The camera abruptly cuts to a shot of Tara standing in front of the window upstairs. A small red stain appears on her sweater, and then an eye-line match cuts to Willow sprayed in red. Up until the appearance of Warren, the viewer expects this to be the tidy conclusion to the episode. Even when Warren invades the safe space of the fenced back yard and introduces an unexpected threat, the scene of Buffy and Xander conversing, at two full minutes, purposefully gives the viewer time to forget that Willow and Tara are nearby. The couple is also physically separated by being on the second story inside Buffy's house, further removing from the scene and from the viewer's thoughts. The viewer expects the closing of the episode to be both a safe space within the denouement of the narrative and a safe space within the physical boundaries of the scene, particularly for Willow and Tara inside the house, and these expectations shatter along with the bedroom window as Maltby's "murderous implement" enters from an unexpected angle to kill Tara's suddenly fragile body (356).

[17] Similarly, Wash's death scene takes advantage of both timing and editing techniques to first create, then destroy, cinematic safe space. In the film's narrative, Wash has just completed a harrowing crash landing. The scene fades in from darkness to the red-lit cabin and a sequence of rapid eye-line matches between the three characters: Wash looks at Zoe and then Mal, who looks at Zoe, who also looks at Mal, who looks back at Wash. They have assured themselves, and the viewer, that everyone has come safely through the crash. All momentarily relax in this knowledge. Wash's body is whole and unhurt, and the audience makes the mistake of no longer viewing it as imperiled or vulnerable. In a seven-second shot, Wash is looking away from the other characters and begins speaking. In the final second of the shot, Wash looks back toward Mal, which signals to the viewer that the scene is about to resume the eyeline-match sequence; the viewer expects the next shot to be of Mal, at whom Wash is looking.

[18] Instead, the shot cuts to a series of rapid visual disruptions to this expectation. Rather than Mal, the viewer sees a black screen which is then disrupted by vivid blue and white lines of the windshield cracking, a dramatic contrast to the dominant reds and blacks of the cockpit thus far in the scene. The black background and bright cracks are then disrupted again by a bright red substance, then disrupted again by the entry of the Reaver projectile into and across the frame before continuing via action-match into the next shot and Wash's body, all of which occurs in less than a second. Once the audience's expectations of seeing an eyeline-match to Mal are destroyed, it has no time to adjust to the massive, action-matched visual disruptions that ultimately kill Wash. Like the characters, the viewer is confused and unsure what is happening until it is clear that Wash has not survived and the space has become irreparably unsafe, which is proven when another projectile nearly strikes Zoe as she panics over the body of her husband.

[19] In Penny's death, both timing and diegetic sound function to establish, and then destroy, a safe space within the scene. Following the explosion of the Death Ray, which has made the space unsafe, sound and editing choices work to reestablish the auditorium as a safe space. The primary diegetic sound is Captain Hammer sobbing on the floor. He is melodramatic, loudly communicating his pain and calling out for "someone

maternal" before fleeing the room (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*). The diegetic sound is funny, relieving the tension of the exploding Death Ray. Captain Hammer's cries are combined with almost leisurely shots of Billy standing up and surveying the room, noting that no one seems to be hurt but that everyone is afraid, eliciting a tiny, devious smile from the amateur villain. These techniques lead the viewer to anticipate that the threat of the Death Ray has been neutralized and the space has once again become safe. Billy reacts as though the scene is safe, and so does the viewer. Then Billy's glance freezes, his smile disappears, and only then does the camera cut in an eye-line match to Penny: collapsed on the ground, impaled with shrapnel, and breathing raggedly. Captain Hammer has left the room, so non-diegetic soft piano chords rapidly shift the mood to one of mourning. Billy rushes to Penny's side, but just as he was unable to predict her death (he did not think she was present), he is unable to do anything to help her other than bear her fragile, vulnerable body to a waiting ambulance stretcher.

[20] The carefully crafted transformations between safe and unsafe space in these scenes make the deaths of the three characters unpredictable and, therefore, unpreventable. All three characters are surrounded by friends and allies with super-human, or seemingly super-human, abilities to fight and survive, yet the powerful characters can only watch helplessly as the people they care about die. Wash, Tara, and Penny are not the specific targets of the violence that kills them, so neither the other characters, nor the audience, can predict or prevent their deaths, which has troubling implications regarding their feminized bodies.

IMPLICATIONS

[21] The common pattern of these three deaths is that the texts first feminize the characters and then cut them down in moments of safety. While Whedon indicates the shock was intentional, this pattern also reinforces the cultural view that the female body is a vulnerable body, one that is fragile and in need of protection. Part of Whedon's strategy in eliciting an emotional response from the audience is choosing the deaths of characters carefully, focusing on sympathetic characters in particular. As he told NPR, "If somebody objects, if somebody says 'How could you kill that character?' . . . I know I've done the right thing" (Whedon). Wash, Penny, and Tara become

apt targets for this goal, not only because they are likeable characters engaged in important relationships, but also because they are feminized characters. The audience does not immediately view these characters as endangered in their respective death scenes, but if bodily risk were consciously imminent, the audience would want to protect them. Whedon effectively evokes shock and grief among his viewers by tapping into a specific, and problematic, construction of the female body as an endangered, punishable, and silent object.

[22] In writing about female vulnerability, Laura Kipnis argues that cultural value and treatment of the female body places it in the position of being constantly under threat of victimization. The female body is valuable in society, and an object with value can be stolen or destroyed, particularly in terms of sexual value and boundaries. According to Kipnis, rape then functions as "one of culture's ways of *feminizing* women," though this idea can be applied more broadly to any unwanted penetration of any part of the body, not just the vagina (126). This construction that Kipnis elucidates implies that merely possessing a female body places a person in constant danger, whether or not that danger is apparent, and such is the case with Wash, Tara, and Penny. While one could argue that the penetration and destruction of the three bodies feminizes them, these bodies have already been feminized by narrative, characterization, and casting, thus generating larger implications that these deaths represent a specific cultural construction of the female body. These deaths also at least partially rely on this construction for their emotional impact on the audience. If these characters are viewed as fragile, submissive, and less powerful than their friends or romantic partners and thus unable to defend themselves, then their deaths are seen as far more tragic.

[23] In considering vulnerability, it is also valuable to note the significant backlash from fans against the death of Tara, particularly due to her additionally vulnerable status in society as a lesbian. Fans and scholars have equated her death and Willow's subsequent rage as falling into a stereotypical pop culture portrayal of lesbians as becoming either dead or evil, incapable of carrying on a happy, healthy relationship without punishment. In Brandy Ryan's essay "'It's Complicated … Because of Tara': History, Identity Politics, and the Straight White Male Author of *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer," she details this discussion in her arguments against reading their relationship as a stereotypically doomed one. While determining the accuracy of such a reading is outside the scope of this paper, it is important that in the dead/evil "cliché" of lesbian relationships that the episode's critics denounce, it is Tara, the feminized partner, who is killed, and it is Willow, who conforms to certain constructions of masculinity, who becomes evil, strong and dangerous in her great grief and rage. If the feminized body is the vulnerable, valuable one, then Tara becomes the logical target for violence and destruction within the cliché because of her feminized position.

[24] All three deaths considered here could also be read as representations of the historical cinematic need to punish those who possess sexualized, feminized bodies, regardless of sexual orientation. Part of the argument regarding the death of Tara is that she is punished for pursuing a healthy, sexually active lesbian relationship, and throughout the episode, including minutes prior to her death, she and Willow were engaged in sexual activity, now healthy and consensual because it is free of magical influence. Penny has also recently begun a sexual relationship with Captain Hammer, as he announces to the crowd at the dedication of the homeless shelter, and Wash is also portrayed in an active sexual relationship with his wife. Wash's relationship to punishment is the most complicated of the three, as, unlike Tara and Penny, he is in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage, a social role that we would expect would avoid punishment. However, his positioning as a feminized man is perhaps sufficient to make him worthy of punishment because he rarely takes on a dominant, masculine role in relating to his wife. Certainly the sexual relationships of the characters also serve to enhance the emotional connection between these characters and their romantic partners, and this is likely intended to strengthen their emotional connection with the audience as well. However, regardless of the intent, it is difficult to escape the historical precedent for this conception and treatment of women in film as either "fetishistic idealization or voyeuristic punishment," of which these characters can be read as the latter (Gledhill 167).

[25] Other interpretations of these texts do push against the idea of punishment, such as Penny's death as interpreted by Alyson Buckman in her article "'Go ahead! Run away! Say it was Horrible!': *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* as Resistant Text." Buckman reads Penny's death as a continuation of

Whedon's horrified, public response to the recorded and distributed video of the stoning death of 17-year-old Dua Khalil Aswad in an "honor killing" in 2007 as well as his stand against the torture-porn film *Captivity*. Buckman notes that in *Dr. Horrible*, the camera purposefully looks away from the moment Penny's body is pierced, only showing her to Billy, and the audience, once the damage has already been done and her body, specifically devoid of glorification or romance, has slumped to the floor. Buckman argues that Penny's death is differentiated from a voyeuristic one in the film-maker's choices in format and style that keep viewers conscious of their status as an audience of the text and conscious of their possible complicity in Penny's fate as collateral damage in "the patriarchal discourse" between Captain Hammer and Billy (1). This argument highlights how the three deaths considered here differentiate in details, such as the camera's failure to capture the moment of penetration in Penny's body in the same way it captures Wash and Tara's injuries, and Buckman makes a compelling case for reading Penny's death as a statement against voyeuristic, anti-female violence. However, the extended view the audience has of Penny's wounded, and then dead, body, is voyeuristic toward the damaged female body, even if it is not voyeuristic toward the moment of violence itself. And, despite this cinematic differentiation between the deaths of Penny, Wash, and Tara, all three deaths still share a number of similarities that emphasize vulnerability and unpredictable death, contributing to a troubling portrayal of the feminized body.

[26] The female body features prominently in film theory as an object to view and desire, and a male body presented as an object to be looked upon with desire is considered to be feminized by the lingering gaze of the camera. Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" details the function of women as bodies presented on the screen to be looked at and desired by the masculine gazes of protagonists and audience members. In considering the purpose and impacts of these gazes, she quotes Budd Boetticher as saying, "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. . . . In herself the woman has not the slightest importance" (qtd. in Mulvey 63). Whedon has and does switch the gendered expectations of this gaze, such as in the case of Angel. In Allison McCracken's essay "At Stake: Angel's Body, Fantasy Masculinity, and

Queer Desire in Teen Television," she argues that his is a feminized body, desired and acted upon, and that he presents "reversals and recodings of conventional constructions of gender" (119). While Angel is feminized in different ways than Wash, Tara, and Penny, his feminization illustrates Whedon's tendency to work with gendered portrayals that contrast with physical gender or sexual orientation. In film portrayal of the female or the feminized body, as in McCracken's discussion of Angel, the emphasis lies on what is done to that body.

[27] In the consideration of Wash, Tara, and Penny, Whedon's feminized characters have some agency, but they have far less than the more masculinized characters of the texts, such as their romantic partners Willow, Zoe, and Billy. The three dead characters operate as bodies riveting the gaze of the masculinized characters and the audience. In their deaths, these three characters impact the narrative, not through any words or actions of their own choosing, but through their bodies and what happens to their bodies that is beyond their control. Each of their deaths causes significant change, whether in Zoe's suicidal attitude, Willow's total embrace of evil magic, or Billy's acceptance to the Evil League of Evil, but, to reiterate, it is the events that happens to their bodies that causes these changes, not any agency of their own.

[28] In the representations of these deaths, the body is the only performance that the audience can access. Wash, Penny, and Tara are positioned as bodies: objects of spectacle without agency. All three are either denied final words or are denied understanding of their impending deaths as they die. Wash groans and collapses. Tara frowns and says "Your shirt" before she, too, collapses. Penny, while able to recognize Billy, cannot recognize her situation and ironically believes that Captain Hammer will save the day. While their respective texts have feminized them in life, the moments preceding these characters' deaths reduce them to silent, vulnerable bodies. The deaths are significant to their respective plots, but this change in the narrative is brought about by these characters' bodies and what happens *to* them, not the characters' own actions or responses. As Ryan writes, Tara's death serves as evidence that "events in the Buffyverse are intricately . . . connected, and this scene emphasizes how Tara's death is the consequence of actions *beyond her control*" (62, emphasis added).

While Ryan uses this as an argument against the view that Tara is being punished, this also supports the idea that Tara's body is being enacted upon and that Tara herself has no control or possible response other than to die. The same is true for Wash and Penny, whose deaths overtake them without the slightest chance that they might fight back or even say goodbye, thus removing any agency they might have had in preventing, or simply responding to or acknowledging, their own deaths. This follows Boetticher's statement that female (or in this case, feminized) characters only matter in how they inspire or move the masculinized protagonists to action. In themselves, they have no capacity for power or choice of any kind as they face their own deaths.

CONCLUSION

[29] Whedon has been lauded and recognized for his position as a feminist film-maker and his commitment to strong, complicated, important female characters in his works (including the works mentioned here). The intention of this article is not to denigrate Whedon's achievements, but rather to ensure that these works, like the works of any artist, continue to be viewed with a critical eye toward how such works speak to and shape societal values, priorities, and responses.

[30] The three characters discussed here are portrayed as bodies that are first feminized, then victimized, then silenced, thus offering a problematic representation of sexualized bodies gendered as feminine. This article has explored a number of possible cultural readings of this sequence of events, and as Sharon Smith says in her survey of the history of women's representations in films, "there exists a very large possibility that media now *shape* cultural attitudes, as well as reflect them" (14). While Smith is specifically speaking of common portrayals of women's societal and occupational roles, this idea is just as applicable to representations of the feminized body. While women certainly should not be immune to danger and death in film and television narratives, which would still construct women as vulnerable objects in need of protection by writers and directors, it is troubling that a particular pattern of feminization, victimization, and silencing emerges in these three deaths, which are among the most emotionally haunting death scenes of Whedon's work. While certainly there

are clear, arguable narrative and emotional reasons for these characters to die in the manner that they do, these texts exist in a cultural context that goes beyond their original intentions and can both shape and reinforce problematic representations of female and feminized bodies.

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