

Kaylee Frye: Slaying the Angel in the House

[1] Kaylee Frye couldn't kill a thing if her life depended on it (literally). But when sex is on the line, she grabs a gun, stares certain death in the face and says, "To hell with this, I'm gonna live!" (*Serenity*). Joss Whedon's television show, *Firefly*, and its accompanying film, *Serenity*, push the boundaries of depictions of gender and sexuality, challenging the ways in which traditional femininity and female empowerment interact. The adorable mechanic's active sexuality combines with elements of passive femininity to create a character that defies conventional gender expectations. The successful harmony of these traits challenges in particular the pervasive angel/monster dichotomy discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, as well as the limiting attributes of the Cult of True Womanhood. Kaylee can be defined as neither a purely feminine nor feminist character, providing an example of a compelling realistic creation through her ability to escape simplistic definitions.

[2] Joss Whedon has established a legacy of resisting the creation of both idealized characters and traditional gender depictions. In his most celebrated work, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, he set out to reverse the typical gender mores of horror films, wherein the helpless blonde girl dies in a dark alley, instead turning her into a mythic monster slayer. Lorna Jowett notes that throughout *Buffy*, characters work simultaneously with and against gender norms, including Buffy herself, who represents a model of masculine activity as the Slayer, yet is, at the same time, extremely feminine in appearance and lifestyle (23). Rather than aligning characters with imaged ideals, he chooses to create realistic characters; not a True Woman, for example, but a real woman. *Firefly* and *Serenity* follow the pattern established by *Buffy*. Whedon's intention in creating *Firefly* was to depict real

people undergoing relatable struggles, contrary to the disconnectedness commonly present in science fiction (“Here’s How It Was”). As such, the characters of *Firefly* and *Serenity* do not simply embody traditional gender ideals but interact with them in a more complex way.

[3] Likewise, Kaylee is neither the first nor only manifestation of the angel/monster dichotomy in the Whedonverse, as seen in characters from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly* and *Serenity*. The *Buffy* episode *Normal Again* (B6017) calls Buffy’s sanity into question, placing her in the role of the traditional madwoman, as discussed in Caitlin Peeling and Meaghan Scanlon’s essay “‘What’s more real? A Sick Girl in an Institution... Or Some Kind of Supergirl...’: The Question of Madness in ‘Normal Again,’ a Feminist Reading.” A demon poisons Buffy, causing her to experience hallucinations of being locked in an institution. She must decide which is easier to believe in, a schizophrenic girl or a powerful, demon-fighting young woman. Peeling and Scanlon point out the similarities between Buffy’s identity crisis and that of the silenced woman, the angel who is told she has no potential or power. Eventually, “Buffy overcomes the self-doubt caused by the patriarchal labelling [sic] of her as a monster-woman; she chooses... her life in Sunnydale, thus regaining authority over her own story” (6). At the end of the episode, however, it is left up to the viewer to decide which reality to favor. Later on in season 6 of *Buffy*, Willow grows to embody a type of madwoman or monster through her murderous rampage as Dark Willow. Jes Battis likens Willow’s growing magical power throughout season 6 to gaining masculine agency, the type denied to the passive angel in the house (4). In her grief at Tara’s death, Willow loses control over this new power, becoming the madwoman and threatening to destroy the world with her “unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts” (Gilbert and Gubar 29). In *Firefly* and *Serenity*,

these same classic gender depictions are seen in both Saffron and, to some extent, River. Saffron cons men by adopting the “guise of the ‘good wife’... the pose of submissive femininity,” a perfect angel in the house (Beadling 57). Her actions as the dutiful housewife, however, are simply a façade meant to distract her ‘husbands’ from whatever theft she plots before making a quick escape and moving onto the next man. As such, Saffron subverts, mocks, and serves to warn against the angel ideal. In contrast to Saffron’s depiction, River appears a textbook madwoman on the surface. This reading of her character, however, is challenged throughout the show, as discussed by Alyson Buckman in the essay “‘Much Madness is the Divinest Sense’: *Firefly*’s ‘Big Damn Heroes’ and Little Witches.” Rather than allowing herself to be objectified through male gaze and discourse, River subverts this and creates her own narrative. As a result, “the audience and then the crew gradually come to realize that River is not insane but gifted,” representing an alternative, wholly feminine form of logic and communication (45). In this instance, River intentionally resists the madwoman interpretation.

[4] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s seminal feminist work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, describes the imposition of patriarchal limitations upon the female mind. Male anxiety in regards to female authorship and self-assertion leads to the doubled images of the angel and monster, the former serving as the ideal of passive femininity, the latter as the nightmare of feminine activity. Although Gilbert and Gubar focus exclusively upon the creations of nineteenth-century women in their analysis, the pervasiveness and cohesion of the theories expressed within this work have enabled its application outside of this limited realm. In fact, implications abound throughout *Madwoman* pointing towards

the lasting power of the theory. Gilbert and Gubar explicitly state that “few women have definitely ‘killed’ either figure” (17). Anne Federico, in the introduction to *Gilbert and Gubar’s Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*, agrees, asserting that these artificially created patriarchal binaries are still at work and, as such are still an important element of feminist thought. She goes on to note that the issues discussed within *Madwoman* hold “surprising echoes” in the lives some feminist scholars (14). Although this tendency to universalize has since been critiqued as essentialism, the power of the madwoman image is widely felt within the academic feminist community and the text itself has certainly helped to shape feminist critique since its publication. Likewise, many have demonstrated the validity of reading contemporary texts through the lens of this theory. Danielle Russell, for example, has found that this theoretical dichotomy gains strength when applied to additional studies of otherness, such as race (136). Russell argues that, with very minor alterations, Gilbert and Gubar’s angel/monster framework applies well to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a modern work. Her analysis reveals distinct parallels between this novel and the titular piece of *Madwoman*, *Jane Eyre*, which was written 140 years earlier (137). Hila Shachar, another working to apply this theory to more recent creations, discusses how film adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* interact with the original analysis of the novel found in *Madwoman* (149). It has been well established that Gilbert and Gubar’s work, although not universally true in present times, has enough validity and staying power to be discussed and applied to modern creations more than thirty years after its original publication and well outside of the context of the nineteenth-century. As the power of this construct is well established both within and outside of nineteenth-century texts, one must consider why and how it still emerges in popular culture. Despite its older origins, this binary prevails within modern creations, perpetuating a limited view of female authorship and characters. From the

heavily debated representation of women in the popular television show *Mad Men*, to the classic sexualized madwomen in the recent film *Sucker Punch*, to the demonization and condemnation of female politicians for supposed excessive ambition or not spending sufficient time at home with their families, this binary is still readily drawn upon. Rather than simply follow this trend, Whedon has taken the trope and deconstructed it, challenging its relevance and yet again questioning the ways in which female characters are created.

[5] Kaylee exemplifies many of the traits of the angel in the house, as discussed in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. According to Gilbert and Gubar, “The ‘angel in the house’ is the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed,” serving as a model of the passive, virtuous female (20). The qualities of the angel align with traditional depictions of femininity further outlined in the Cult of True Womanhood of the nineteenth-century, which reflects women’s internalization of the pressure to become angels. The Cult of True Womanhood demands that women be pure, pious, submissive, and domestic (Welter 152). Although not exhibiting all of these traits, Kaylee does reveal the possession of normative gender qualities through her innocent, childlike disposition, submissiveness, compassion, and domesticity.

[6] The crew of *Serenity* acts as a kind of family unit, with Kaylee in the role of the loved and protected little sister. Her childlike innocence reflects a type of purity prized as integral to True Womanhood, the “perpetual childhood” of naivety and timidity (Welter 160). Her teddy bear patched clothing and the flowery decorations in her room speak to this childlike demeanor. The crew lovingly calls her “mei-mei,” which translates from the Mandarin as ‘little sister’ (Sullivan

232). As Simon notes in *The Message* (F1012), Kaylee seeks to point out the positive qualities in people, somewhat naïvely at times. Her childlike innocence makes even the most hard-hearted of crewmembers fiercely protective of her, including Jayne, the selfish, gun-wielding brawn of the crew. When Kaylee is shot in the pilot episode *Serenity* (F1001), his first reaction is an attempt to torture and kill the man responsible. Later on, he looks in on her with concern through the infirmary window. Jayne, the most unlikely of men, takes on the complimentary role of the big brother. Her gunshot wound in this episode and Simon's threat to let her die is all the more serious as a result of her role within the family as well. Captain Mal similarly enacts the part of the father, most often seen in his body language towards her, kissing her forehead or hugging her shoulders like a doting parent.

[7] This childlike innocence further corresponds to the submissiveness of the angelic True Woman. Kaylee, like a True Woman, is a “passive, submissive responder” and learns to follow men's wishes without question, or at least without too much assertion of freewill (Welter 159). Mal acts as the patriarch of the Serenity family and Kaylee demonstrates an unwavering faith in his ability to see the crew safely through any problem. It naturally follows that when Mal makes a command of her, she obeys, with very few exceptions. At one point, Mal insults her then demands her assistance with a job shortly thereafter (*Shindig* F1004). Although one initial attempt at defiance is shown—when she retorts, “I'm not speaking to you, Captain” and mocks him childishly—even in this instance she eventually concedes to his command.

[8] These submissive qualities cause trouble for Kaylee throughout the show and film as she

repeatedly lacks the ability to defend herself both verbally and physically. Her meekness makes her “weak and timid. She needs a protector” and, therefore, relies upon more assertive characters to come to her rescue (Welter 159). As Laura Beadling notes, Kaylee’s feminine traits inhibit her ability to defend herself (61). Verbally, she fails to do so when Jayne mocks her physical attraction to Simon in the episode *Serenity*, commenting, to her embarrassment, that she “wishes [Simon] was a gynecologist” rather than a surgeon. Kaylee is silenced by Jayne’s comments until Mal comes to her rescue, forcing him to leave. This same soft-spoken submission allows her to be insulted by the petty girls at the party in *Shindig*, causing her to once again stare at her feet in shame. In this instance, a stranger speaks up when Kaylee cannot, sending the girls away.

[9] Physically, she demonstrates a similar inability to defend herself and her loved ones. Her detestation of violence makes her incapable of taking the type of action typically expected of the crew of *Serenity*. She frequently acts as the hostage or damsel in distress, first for Badger in *Shindig*, then Tracy in *The Message* (F1012), and Jubal Early in *Objects in Space* (F1014). In none of these situations does she fight back of her own accord but accepts her captivity and relies on others to save her. When taken by Tracy, she stands helpless with her arms raised, acting as a human shield in front of him instead of taking action to free herself. In *Objects in Space*, when Jubal Early restrains her in the engine room, she internalizes his statement “there’s nobody can help me,” but never thinks to help herself. Her facial expression speaks of hopelessness until she hears River’s voice, which then gives her the strength to cut herself loose. Here Kaylee is able to free herself, but only after enabled by River, otherwise lacking the bravery and self-assertion.

[10] Her submissive helplessness is acknowledged as a part of her character and accepted by the crew as tied into those endearing, innocent qualities. In *War Stories* (F1010), when Mal is kidnapped and tortured by the mob boss Niska, every crewmember volunteers for the rescue party. Even Simon, who demonstrates little aptitude for firearms, dashes into the fray. Only Kaylee cannot wield a gun to save her own life or the lives of her crew and cowers, petrified behind cover until River yet again comes to her rescue. She admits to the Captain later on, “I didn’t make much account of myself...I got pinned down...I couldn’t...” to which Mal responds, “I got no problem with the notion of you not killing nobody” (*Objects in Space*). Kaylee’s weakness, a mark of traditional femininity, puts both herself and her family in danger, but nothing more is expected of her. Although the violent, assertive actions of the other crewmembers are generally assumed, her case is different. Mal and the rest of the crew accept this weakness as inextricably bound to her innocent, passively feminine character and enable, if not encourage it, as a result.

[11] In addition to being submissive, the True Woman and angel is compassionate to the point of selflessness. For Gilbert and Gubar, these supportive actions entail a lack of self-interest such that the self ceases to exist (25). This selflessness does not reach such an extreme in Kaylee, as will later be discussed, but she does possess related compassion and “devot[ion] to the good of others” (Gilbert and Gubar 24). Her impulse to care for others compels her to comfort Saffron, who is cruelly insulted by Mal, and hold Shepherd Book’s hand after he is shot (*Our Mrs. Reynolds* F1006; *Safe* F1005). Laura Beadling also points out that Kaylee frequently acts as the peacekeeper on the ship, ensuring that everyone is kind and polite so that no one is made uncomfortable (61). For the crew and even visitors, Kaylee provides comfort when it is most needed and demonstrates

compassion consistent with that expected of the angel.

[12] The angel's domain is unarguably the home, as is Kaylee's. Frequently in the works discussed in *Madwoman*, the angel is employed as a governess or housekeeper. Although maintaining the home takes a markedly different form for Kaylee than what is seen in nineteenth-century texts, her function on *Serenity* indicates her similarly domestic nature. If the crew of *Firefly* is a family, the ship, *Serenity*, acts as their home, and is repeatedly referred to as such. Kaylee, the mechanic, cares for the home, keeping it flying smoothly to the best of her ability. Her love for her home also surpasses the expectations of her job. She does not simply keep *Serenity* in the air, but makes it a more pleasant place to live. In the *Firefly* commentary "Serenity: The Tenth Character," creator Joss Whedon remarks that the floral designs painted in the kitchen are clearly Kaylee's handiwork. Likewise, as her domesticity commands, she rarely leaves the ship. The Captain usually limits Kaylee's role in his criminal activities to technical preparatory work meant to keep her out of harm's way. She prepares the crane to hoist Jayne over a train in *The Train Job* (F1002) but is in no way involved with the actual theft. Notably, she is the only one left on the ship during Simon's plot to rob a hospital on a heavily guarded central planet (*Ariel* F1009). According to the conventional restrictions of gender, however, it is for the best that she is left on the ship. Unlike the other crewmembers, she has demonstrated an inability to defend herself in the face of danger. By this logic, her relegation to domesticity serves her best interests in light of her previously exhibited feminine weakness.

[13] According to traditional gender depictions, when the angel loses any of these interconnected

traits, especially her virtue, she becomes the feared monster. The monster, the mirror image of the angel, is an active figure, manifesting male anxieties towards female self-assertion. These vile creatures are unhealthy, deformed, and wholly selfish (Gilbert and Gubar 29). Often, this transition from angel to monster is marked by sexual activity or the expression of sexual desires. In nineteenth-century literature, “the loss of purity . . . brought madness or death” in many cases, indicating that the most crucial attribute of the True Woman is her virtue (Welter 154). According to the angel/monster construct and the Cult of True Womanhood, an angel’s assertion of self and sexuality leads inevitably to her manifestation of the monstrous female, which lurks just beneath the surface of every angel.

[14] Kaylee violates this trend through her resistance to turning into the monster despite her unabashed sexual assertiveness. Her possession of this feminist sexual empowerment contradicts the elements of traditional femininity also seen in her; yet these two elements blend without resulting in a monster or madwoman, as would normally occur according to Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic*. Diverging from this theory, which “essentializes’ women’s creativity” by conflating “maternity, madness, and the female body,” Kaylee offers a uniquely positive approach to sexuality (Federico 9). In this way, she escapes persistent patriarchal limitations, providing an example of a powerful feminist character.

[15] Kaylee’s comfort with her own sexuality and that of others stands out as a defining part of her character. In “assert[ing] female sexuality openly, playfully, and boldly” Kaylee acts as a feminist figure, spiritedly expressing her sexual nature (Beadling 60). Unlike the angel/monster, she treats

her body as neither “her enemy” nor “the object of patriarchy,” but actively and cheerfully takes control of her sexual drives (Shachar 131). She makes her desires well known so that, despite her childlike aspects, there is not doubt that she is a sexually mature character. In *Firefly* and *Serenity*, she speaks openly of her own desires for intimacy and sees no problem in making complaints of having “nothin’ twixt [her] nethers weren’t run on batteries” (*Serenity*). Similarly, despite Simon’s ignorance towards the topic, those closest to Kaylee find it hard not to notice her affections for him and Inara even comments that she is hardly subtle about her desire to “take a bite out of” him (*Safe*). Jubal Early’s threat of rape in *Objects in Space* takes Kaylee sexuality, a central aspect of her character, and uses it as a threat against her. As Maggie Burns states, “he turn[s] our beloved Kaylee into an object,” threatening to enact “the worst crime you can commit” in the *Firefly* universe (23). This provides a stark contrast to Kaylee’s active control of her sexuality, underscoring its importance to her character.

[16] The comfort and openness Kaylee feels with her own sexuality extends further into curiosity regarding the sexual exploits of others. While most respect the privacy of Inara’s business as a companion and at times are even made uncomfortable by it, Kaylee’s acceptance and even jealousy of her sexual exploits is a recurring theme. Before Inara leaves for a visit with a client, Kaylee grants her wishes of “good sex” and each time she returns, is the first to ask how it went (*Jaynestown* F1007). She wistfully inquires about her clients, sexual experiences, and romantic propositions, never showing any sign of embarrassment, but simply open, accepting curiosity. Similarly, when placed in the overtly sexual environment of a whorehouse, this same trait can be seen. In *Heart of Gold* (F1013), she comments upon how “thoughtful” it is to have “boy whores.”

Although this is tinged with her own sexual frustration, it still indicates a general comfort with the sexual practices of others.

[17] In keeping with this trend, Kaylee enjoys the sensual things in life outside of the confines of the sexual. The pilot episode *Serenity* reveals this from the start. The simple act of eating a strawberry is sexualized and depicted as a source of pleasure for her. The camera lingers on a close-up of her face as her eyes flutter closed dreamily and she slowly savors the taste. The thought of “questioning” the buffet table in *Shindig* makes her face light up with joy and she shares her excitement over the “fancy...hot cheese” with a group of girls who seem markedly less impressed than she. Kaylee’s realistically fleshy body further reflects her sensuous nature, unlike the hard bodies of Zoe the warrior or River the assassin. Jewel Staite, the actress cast as Kaylee, was given the role with the instruction to gain twenty pounds in order to look like a real woman who enjoyed life rather than a waifish actress (“Here’s How It Was”). Even on sight, Kaylee is meant to look like a sensual character.

[18] Also differing from the angel, sex, not marriage, is Kaylee’s end goal. For the angel, marriage is the ultimate objective (Welter 154). According to Nancy Holder, Kaylee differs in that “she’s not hoping that Simon will marry her so that she can stop working and make strawberry pie and calico dresses” (152). When Simon is to leave the ship in *Serenity*, Kaylee does not lament the lost chance for a relationship, but the sex that could have been. In addition, only the promise of sex with Simon renews her hope of surviving the Reaver attack in *Serenity*. When Simon reveals that his biggest regret is not sleeping with Kaylee, she regains her courage, determined to live for this cause. This

same goal makes Kaylee resist the selfless impulse of the angel, which results from the angel's purity. She only asserts her desires above those of men when sex is involved. In *Jaynestown*, denying the Captain's request to go aboard the ship, she insists upon staying behind with Simon, who had finally begun to indicate interest in her. Her need for sex trumps any order he could give her.

[19] Likewise defying the expectations of an angel, Kaylee actively seeks out the object of her affection, especially later in the show and throughout the film. Rather than reacting passively, she takes control of her love life, flirting openly with Simon. In *Objects in Space*, she sits with her legs thrown over his lap, giggling at his stories and making jokes about imagining him naked, the epitome of a playful young woman attempting to ensnare her man. This is far from the ideal outlined in the Cult of True Womanhood, which celebrates "the coldest reserve" in women and includes no mention of their sexual urges, simply the importance of resisting those of men (Welter 155). Once again, her desires overcome her passive nature as she actively pursues Simon.

[20] Kaylee expresses resentment towards Simon's emphasis on propriety as a hindrance to the attainment of her desires and opposed to her playful, liberated nature. This further highlights the difference between the values prized by the angel and those emphasized by Kaylee. Throughout *Jaynestown*, Kaylee attempts to explain to Simon the novelty of acting inappropriately, which, in itself, can be rewarding. Despite a night of drunken flirting, Simon denies any sexual involvement with her, saying, "I would never. Not with Kaylee," causing her to angrily retort, "What do you mean 'not with' me?" She glares indignantly at him, clearly frustrated at his inability to

compromise his respectability for the sake of shared desire. Later that day, Kaylee asks, “What’s so damn important about being proper?” Unlike the angel who values such virtues, Kaylee sees them as obstacles standing between her and the attainment of her desires.

[21] In conjunction with her sexual empowerment, Kaylee takes on a traditionally masculine occupation, further emphasizing her place as a feminist creation. While she lacks the willingness and ability to fight physically, Kaylee compensates for this deficit with her mechanical skills. Although frozen and helpless in a firefight, she takes charge in the engine room, handing out directions to Shepherd Book and Jayne and pulling off a “Crazy Ivan” in order to escape a Reaver attack (*Serenity* F1001). In fact, the same ship part that Kaylee mentions needs replacing in the episode *Serenity* later malfunctions and causes an explosion, leaving them without power or life support in *Out of Gas* (F1008). This incident only further reflects the depth and importance of her expertise. Holder argues that Kaylee’s character could just as easily have been made male in keeping with the western genre, which is true strictly in terms of her job aboard the ship (151). Traditionally, mechanical work is relegated to men, rather than women, let alone those in pigtails and pink flowery shirts. Kaylee’s mechanical aptitude differs from that of the average male, however, in that it is closely associated with her body and female sexuality. *Shindig* provides an interesting example of the conflation of Kaylee’s sexuality with her mechanical knowledge. Shortly after arriving at the ball, she accumulates a group of flirtatious, adoring men who hang on her every word. These words, however, are about engines and the worth of various spacecraft models. In regards to *Serenity*, the connection she shares with the ship rivals that of Mal. She affectionately cares for it, like a living being, referring to it as “my good girl” in the pilot episode (*Serenity*).

Kaylee associates herself with Serenity, considering any insult to it as a personal slight; not even Simon is free from her wrath when he insults the ship. She deduces that, in doing so, he insults her as well (*Safe*). Her deep connection with and aptitude for mechanics is largely innate. When asked by Mal where she learned to fix engines, she replies, “I just do it, that’s all. My daddy says I got natural talent” (*Out of Gas*). She has no formal training and little experience, but knows Serenity’s workings better than any other.

[22] This “natural talent” is associated closely with Kaylee’s sexual drives and passions. She is “the beating heart of the show... tend[ing] the beating heart of *Serenity*” (Burns 19). The engine room, Kaylee’s domain, is purposefully painted in warm, rusty colors to match her sensual energy (“*Serenity: The Tenth Character*”). The beginning of her employ on Serenity, as shown in *Out of Gas*, reflects this connection best. Kaylee first comes aboard the ship to have sex with the mechanic employed before her and, inadvertently, ends up with his job. The previous mechanic explains to Mal, “She likes engines. They makes her hot,” once again indicating the connection between Kaylee’s sexual energy and that of the ship. Her sexual acts enhance her ability to repair Serenity during this first entrance as well. While having sex, she spots the broken part, correcting the previous mechanic’s misdiagnosis. Her active female sexuality, in fact, makes her a better mechanic than the man who precedes her. Kaylee not only avoids turning into a monster, but also benefits from her sexual empowerment, becoming extremely proficient in a traditionally male field.

[23] Throughout the show and film, Mal attempts, unsuccessfully, to simplify Kaylee’s complicated performance of gender. Rather than accepting her as simultaneously feminine and

sexually liberated, he prefers to see her in more basic terms. He first rejects her expression of traditional feminine desires, seeing her as nothing more than the ship's mechanic. In *Shindig*, Kaylee looks desirously at the frilly dresses in the shop windows, coveting the fluffiest, pinkest one on display. Mal, annoyed by her fascination, retorts, "What are you going to do in that rig, flounce around the engine room? You'd be like a sheep walkin' on its hind legs." Rather than accept that she can meet the demands of a traditionally male occupation while still enjoying her femininity, he insists that one negates the other. His attempts fail, nonetheless, and she attains her dress shortly thereafter, forcing even Mal to admit that she looks beautiful. Later on in the episode, basking in her victory, she mocks his own physical insecurities at donning formal wear, calling him "Captain Tightpants." Mal also demonstrates discomfort with Kaylee's sexual assertiveness. His reaction to her expression of sexual frustration is "I can't know that!" (*Serenity*). Her innocent little sister/daughter role, to Mal, does not mix with the sexually empowered woman and he simply chooses to ignore the latter. She refuses to back down, however, eventually winning the argument by pointing out the ways in which he fails in his own romantic assertiveness, reinforcing her expertise on the subject. In fact, Kaylee is able to speak extremely freely to the Captain. Her unique character grants her license to comment on matters that other crewmembers would not dare mention, such as his relationship with Inara. Likewise, she teases her way through his tough façade, responding to threats to "duct tape her mouth and dump her in the hold" with a kiss on the cheek and a cheerful smile rather than the respectful distance usually given him by the crew (*Serenity* F1001).

[24] Kaylee's distinctly playful approach to sexuality separates her from the other women on

Serenity. Susan Fraiman comments in regards to the theories of Gilbert and Gubar that “the readiness of early feminist criticism to generalize about women too often glossed over distinctions and inequities among them,” which, if allowed in this instance, would be a great disservice to Kaylee’s character (31). River, Zoe, and Inara are all, in their own ways, empowering female characters and, like Kaylee, defy the angel/monster binary; however, none of them demonstrates the same comfort with sexuality that Kaylee exhibits. River, at seventeen, is the youngest of the women, but could still acceptably take part in sexual activity according to popular television standards. However, in *Firefly*, she resists sexualization entirely, certainly setting her apart from Kaylee’s sexual liberation (Buckman 46). Zoe most often plays the part of the tough woman who could out-fight the men. Although she does enjoy sex with her husband, her hardness limits the expression of her sexuality. This can be seen in *Bushwhacked* (F1003), wherein her reserve demands that she keep her personal life to herself, in contrast to her husband Wash, who sees no problem with over-sharing information about their sex life while interrogated by an Alliance official. Inara, who makes a living from her sexuality, comes the closest to Kaylee’s sexual liberation. As a companion, her work grants her a significantly higher social status than anyone else aboard Serenity. However, even she repeatedly states that, in adherence to a strict code, she doesn’t “discuss her clients” (*Out of Gas*). None of these women match up to Kaylee’s uniquely open views of sexuality.

[25] Although an equal is not found within her own universe, Kaylee’s sexually liberated attitude reflects one of Joss Whedon’s earlier creations, Anya in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As Tamy Burnett demonstrates in her essay “Anya as a Feminist Model of Positive Female Sexuality,” Anya

provides a more varied depiction of female gender through her “irrepressible approach to sexuality” (119). Similar to Kaylee, Anya expresses both feminine desires and an empowered sense of sexual freedom. Her blunt sexual comments both dismay and entertain those around her, but, no matter the reaction, are never quelled. Similar to Kaylee, Anya’s sexual actions do not lessen her worth, or lead to negative repercussions. Kaylee, like Anya, “never visibly limits or represses her comments or attitudes towards sex” (137). While perhaps not as tactless as Anya, Kaylee draws upon this same sexually liberated speech and action.

[26] Kaylee Frye is the type of woman who wants an outrageously frilly dress and upon occasion needs to be told that she’s pretty, then can fix an engine better than any man could. Kaylee provides a complicated depiction of female gender which defies simplistic, patriarchal definitions. She exhibits both passive feminine and active feminist traits, refusing to adhere to just one and resisting forces that pressure her to. Through her ability to combine sexual assertiveness, with the normative feminine traits of Gilbert and Gubar’s angel in the house and the associated Cult of True Womanhood without turning into the monster, she challenges long-established binaries of female gender. Kaylee, like many Whedon creations who have come before her, is a realistic character undergoing a complex negotiation of female gender.

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