

“Shoot ‘Em . . . Politely”¹: Presentations of Gender, Violence, and Power in *Firefly*

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Introduction

[1] “If someone tries to kill you, you try to kill ‘em right back” (“Our Mrs. Reynolds” 1.6, 10:43-10:50). What Mal says to Saffron in “Our Mrs. Reynolds” sums up many of the violent encounters found in *Firefly* (2002). Main characters on *Firefly* rarely use violence in a sadistic or malevolent way; violence is usually a response to the actions of other characters who threaten, endanger, or injure the core group. The violence found within *Firefly* presents an opportunity to investigate the interactions between gender and violence in a mainstream television show created by a male feminist.² This article presents an investigation of the presence, prevalence, and use of violence by and towards women in *Firefly* in conjunction with an application of Maria Derosé’s work on the use of non-violent actions to demonstrate power and agency. Derosé discusses power in the context of female characters throughout her work as something that provides agency for a character to partake in actions or choose not to act, and for a character to form her identity. For the purposes of this article, I follow Derosé’s use of power as something that allows a female character to have agency not only to act, but not to act, and form/perform her identity. Feminine forms of empowerment require further explorations in academia because, as noted by Derosé,

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most discussions of powerful women in media can be distilled to women having masculine and violent tendencies to gain and maintain power. While the female characters in *Firefly* happen to use violence in certain situations, they also rely on activities traditionally identified as feminine to gain power.

[2] Before delving into the specifics of the research regarding gender and violence, a brief explanation of the show is in order. *Firefly*, a 2002 television show that was cut short before the end of one season, follows the crew of the spaceship *Serenity*, and is most often described as a space western (Hay 2). Set in the 26th century, after humanity had depleted all resources on “the earth that was,” *Firefly* details the adventures of the crew, who often complete jobs that are outside of the law on the outer planets, while avoiding the combined governmental superpowers of the Alliance planets, which have many characteristics of the United States of America and China (Cochran 149-50). The crew is comprised of five men and four women. The men are Captain Malcolm Reynolds (Mal), mercenary Jayne Cobb, pilot Hoban Washburn (Wash), Shepherd Derrial Book (Book), and doctor Simon Tam. The women of the show are Companion Inara Serra, second-in-command Zoe Alleyne Washburn, mechanic Kaywinnet Lee Frye (Kaylee), and River Tam, who was rescued from a government facility. The crew often interacts like family, even though the only familial relationships are River and Simon, who are siblings, and Wash and Zoe, who are married.

[3] Despite airing for a single season of fourteen episodes in 2002, *Firefly*, created by Joss Whedon, continues to have a fiercely loyal following. The intense fan base of the show, in combination with the popular culture praising of Whedon for his feminist stance and the strong female characters present in his productions (Wilcox et al.), led to my focus on *Firefly* as a case study to look at gender. This case study involves an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of *Firefly* to investigate presentations of violence, power, and inequalities experienced by characters based on gender. Whedon aims to create strong, fully developed female characters and considers himself a feminist (Avni 88-89). Because Whedon strives for feminist ideals to be represented in his work, it is appropriate to evaluate his work from a feminist perspective. Engaging with the work of Joss Whedon becomes important because, as

Dee Amy-Chinn, David Lavery, and Rhonda V. Wilcox et al. note, Whedon is lauded by fans and media for his “feminist” perspective and “we now hold him to higher standards of feminist sensibility” (Amy-Chinn 176); thoroughly investigating the feminist content found within Whedon’s work provides the opportunity to discuss gender roles within feminist-created media and mainstream media as a whole. I would like to note that in light of Kai Cole’s post about Whedon’s behavior being in direct contradiction of his self-proclaimed feminism, I am not trying to evaluate the claims about whether or not Whedon is a feminist. I am evaluating the content of *Firefly* rather than the input of one of its creators.

Literature

[4] Derosé investigates the connections between women and power in science fiction, with a particular focus on the use of non-violent characteristics as sources of power for women. Four out of nine main characters on *Firefly* are women, and they all use more than just violence to be empowered. Derosé focuses on storytelling, invisibility, and ecofeminism as examples of empowerment through non-violent means; this analysis focuses primarily on the use of intelligence and sexuality as non-violent means of female empowerment.

[5] Nancy Holder takes a different approach to the power dynamics of *Firefly* than the position used in this paper. She argues that power is primarily demonstrated through physical violence and is usually male or masculine in nature (144). Because *Firefly* is “fundamentally” a western, and westerns require taming of the land through violent means, Holder argues that women in westerns “wielded power, [but] it was not a power of equality” (144). Further, Holder argues “for *Firefly* to retain its integrity as a western, it had to conform to the basic requirements of western-ness” (144). Requirements of western-ness include the subordination of women particularly in terms of power dynamics. However, it seems that in this essay Holder adheres to traditional views of power in which power can only be gained through masculine means like violence. She also highlights that while women can have power, it is

not in the same realm as men, and as such is not equal. I argue that equal power does not necessitate power obtained through the same means for both men and women, and, like Derose, suggest that non-violent forms of power are just as valuable as the traditionally masculine.

[6] Amy-Chinn and Christina Rowley both conduct some analysis regarding the feminist, or lack thereof, portrayals of women with *Firefly*. Amy-Chinn focuses on how the portrayal of Inara and the work of Companions may superficially read as feminist or post-feminist, when Inara's character does not challenge existing expectations of gender, heterosexuality, and love. Further, Amy-Chinn states that *Firefly* "draws on a patriarchal and colonist discourse to reinscribe the body of a woman of colour as a site of white (predominantly male) hegemonic privilege" (175). Rowley discusses the gendering of bodies and space within *Firefly* to be an entirely more ambiguous interaction with feminism. *Firefly*'s portrayal of women, and gender in general, may prompt reflection of existing gender roles, but does nothing to question or challenge the "deeply entrenched" gender roles and expectations found in society (Rowley 324). Rowley notes the difficulties in sustaining a strong counter-hegemonic narrative as found in the gender representations in *Firefly* (324); additionally, it can be argued that the challenges to maintaining a counter-hegemonic narrative extend to all shows created for mainstream television networks that rely on advertising dollars for their production.

[7] While previous work on *Firefly* includes a strong focus on gender, there is a lack of research connecting violence with power and gender. Rowley briefly brings together the connection between gender and violence, as violence is typically coded male, and highlights the high level of violence found within the show (323). Rowley's inclusion of violence within her work is very important; however, a more thorough investigation of the connection between gender and violence is required, which is the aim of this project. In contrast to the arguments made by Amy-Chinn and Rowley, Robert B. Taylor discusses how the women of *Firefly* are "free to revel in their own sexuality" (132) and in particular cites the status of Companions, who are highly respected and educated sex trade workers, as something that demonstrates that sexuality is no longer a taboo subject in the 'verse³. Using Derose's work on

empowerment through non-violent actions and characteristics, my analysis shows that the frequent use of sexuality by characters, particularly Inara and Saffron, is one way the women of *Firefly* do not need to use violence to have power.

[8] Many studies take a primarily quantitative approach to the representations of gender and violence on television. One pertinent example is a study of the types of violence, consequences of violence, and the gender of both aggressors and victims focused on the content of Spanish television (Fernández-Villanueva et al.). The results of this study found that representations of gender and violence mimic real life, wherein men tend to be both the aggressors and the victims of crime more often than women (Fernández-Villanueva et al. 97). Further, the work of Concepción Fernández-Villanueva et al. is consistent with the results of studies of North American television whereby men experience more violence as aggressors and victims (Kelly; Gunter and Harrison).

[9] Studies that combine gender and violence within television programming offer the opportunity to investigate the connections between what is presented in fiction and what occurs in “real” life, even within the genre of science-fiction. Rowley notes that *Firefly* maintains traditionally-expected gender roles and structures in which men are often in positions of power, as most of the Alliance members, doctors, and leaders appearing within the show are men (322). Further, violence is considered a demonstration of power and as something “masculine.” Derosé concentrates on changing the ways we think about powerful women as being “tough,” violent, and therefore masculine, to seeing how power can be used/gained/maintained through non-violent means as a presentation within feminist science fiction. Even though *Firefly* contains much violence, the female characters do not rely solely on violence to demonstrate their power, as detailed below. Because violence is at the center of most discussions of power and this analysis focuses on the intersection of gender and violence, it is fitting to bring in illustrations of power *and* non-violent demonstrations of power into a discussion of *Firefly* as a work influenced by feminism.

Data and Methods

[10] Copies of the scripts from *Firefly*'s fourteen episodes were the data source for this project. These scripts are found in Joss Whedon's *Firefly: A Celebration*. The text provides dialogue, movement, expression, and some costuming notes. Further, additional viewings of the show allowed further insight into the scripts. While *Firefly* has a 2005 follow-up movie, *Serenity*, and a collection of graphic novels attached to the intellectual property, this dataset focuses solely on the television program for two major reasons. The first reason is to keep the study within a single medium, as the expectations for censorship/ratings, visuals, and complexity of storylines differ among television, film, and the graphic novel, making an investigation of *all* portions of the *Firefly* universe difficult and potentially unequal in treatment. The second reason echoes Sara Hays' notes regarding the change in crew and the changes in the gender politics and characterizations found in *Serenity*, which also extend to the graphic novels.

[11] This project employed a two-pronged approach to look at the connections between representations of violence and gender: a quantitative content analysis and an in-depth discourse analysis. The content analysis was completed by reading the scripts found in *Firefly: A Celebration* and coding individual interactions between characters. An interaction was defined as either a statement or conversation between at least two characters or a physical interaction, like a gun shot by one character at another. Interactions were coded to indicate the episode of the interaction, the characters involved, the "type of interaction" (M/M, M/F, or F/F), and what I have called the "level" of interaction." Some interactions contained more than two characters; in these instances, the coding was the same, except, to be part of the M/F category, the interaction required at least one male and one female character. A Likert scale that ranged from 1-7 was used to record the level of interaction as demonstrated in figure 1 below. While all "levels" of interaction were coded (including non-violent interactions), non-violent levels were used primarily as a counterpart to understand the extent of violent interactions found within *Firefly*.

Level of Interaction	Description
1	violence or threats of violence against women (includes death)
2	verbal abuse, insults, objectification of women
3	protection, caring for women, from a place of superiority/power
4	equality based interactions, genders are equal, care or support occurs, but one character does not have more power than another
5	protection, caring for men, from a place of superiority/power
6	verbal abuse, insults, objectification of men
7	violence or threats of violence against men (includes death)

Table 1. Differences between the levels of interactions

[12] Each episode was coded twice to ensure consistency within the coding process and entered into Excel. SPSS⁴ was used for the statistical analysis, including a variety of chi-square tests to examine relationships between different variables and to determine whether such relationships were statistically significant. The discourse analysis involved importing the textual shooting scripts of all fourteen episodes into *NVivo*, where I coded the episodes and scoured them for categories, which were eventually combined and developed into themes. The two major themes that emerged upon consolidation of categories were the adoption of masculine characteristics and the use of femininity to attain power. For example, all the women at points adopt characteristics traditionally seen as masculine, such as Zoe often using a gun and Kaylee being an engineer. In addition, female characters embrace actions traditionally seen as feminine to attain power, such as Inara, who uses her sexuality as a Companion and Saffron, who seduces Mal and others so that she can trick them into doing things for her.

[13] A mixed-methods approach allows for better understanding of the representations and treatment of women within *Firefly*, particularly for violent (verbal or physical) interactions. The quantitative data indicate the specific relationships between gender, violence, and general trends of the treatment of gender within *Firefly*. On the other hand, the qualitative analysis engages a deeper understanding of the relationships and the interactions coded for the content analysis and provides a more in-depth investigation of these interactions. Using mixed methods extends the analysis to include a knowledge of the general trends of

portrayal and treatment of women, as well as specific conversations within the show, and the resulting rich and nuanced data that does not lend itself to a pure quantitative analysis.

Data Analysis

[14] In total, 1401 individual interactions were coded from fourteen episodes of *Firefly*. Table 2, found below, provides the breakdown of the frequency of M/M, M/F, and F/F interactions.

Type of Interaction	Frequency	Percent of Interactions
M/F	801	57.2
F/F	84	6.0
M/M	516	36.8
Total	1401	100.0

Table 2 Frequency of types of interaction

Only 6% of all interactions within *Firefly* occurred between two women, while more than half of the interactions were between at least one man and one woman (57.2%), and the remainder were between at least two men. For a show with four of nine main characters who are women, I was surprised to see so few interactions between only women. In addition, fewer than 3% (39/1401) of the interactions found in *Firefly* occur between two main female characters. Because my work focuses on the portrayal of women in *Firefly*, I highlight the lack of female representation and integration throughout the show, noting that many of the female interactions do not even include two main cast members.

[15] Table 3, found below, provides a specific breakdown and the frequency of each level of interaction. As a reminder, level 1 indicates violent behaviors against a female character and level 7 violent behaviors against a male character. The intermediating levels decrease in the severity of unequal behavior as they approach level 4 from either end of the scale. Table 1 provides the specific definitions of each level.

Level of Interaction	Frequency	Percent of Interactions
1	60	4.3
2	183	13.1
3	186	13.3
4	301	21.5
5	180	12.8
6	301	21.5
7	190	13.6
Total	1401	100.0

Table 3 Frequency of each level of interaction

Of the 1401 interactions, 250 (17.8%) were violent encounters. Of the 250 violent interactions, only 24% were violent towards women, while the remaining 76% were violent towards men. A second chi-square test of independence looking at the relationship between type of interaction (M/M, M/F, and F/F) and the level of interaction, using only the 250 violent interactions (1 or 7), was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=250) = 90.585, p < 0.05$. The Cramer's V value of 0.602 signifies a strong statistical relationship between the type of interaction and the gender of the victim of violent behavior. This relationship is confirmed in that M/M interactions are more likely to result in violent actions towards a man (142/147 violent interactions between two men were aimed at men, while the remaining 5 were threats of violence towards women) and F/F interactions are more likely to be violent towards a woman (6/6 violent interactions between women were interactions directed at a woman). The relationship between type of interaction and the victim of violent behaviors is weakened in that M/F violent interactions directed at a woman occur in 49/97 interactions, while violence directed at a man occurs in 48/97 interactions; with M/F interactions, there is no clear indication regarding which gender might be impacted by violent behaviors.

[16] Figure 1, found below, provides a visualization of the breakdown of the frequency of interactions categorized based on both level of interaction and type of interaction.

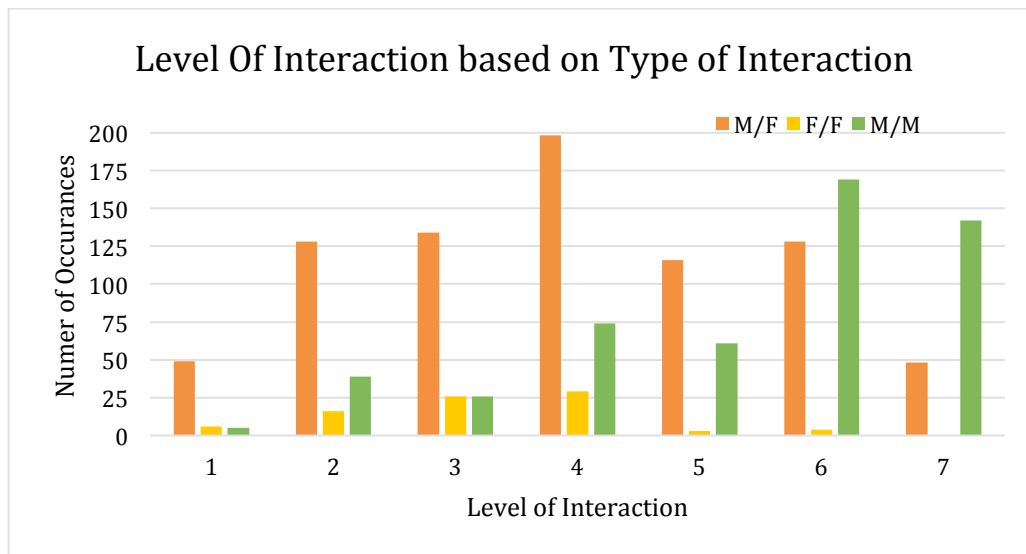


Figure 1 Bar Chart of Level of Interaction based on Type of Interaction

Figure 1 shows that interactions between two men result in greater amounts of violence in comparison to interactions between two women. In addition, interactions that contain at least one man and one woman have a near equal representation of violence towards men and women, with women facing violence in 49 interactions between men and women and men facing violence in 48 interactions between men and women. A chi-square test of independence was run on all 1401 interactions, whether they contained violence or threats of violence. Looking at the relationship between the type of interaction (M/M, M/F, and F/F) and the level of interaction (1-7), the result is statistically significant $\chi^2(2, N=1401) = 296.551, p < 0.05$. The effect size for this finding, Cramer's V, was weak-moderate, 0.325. This test indicates that there is a relationship between the type of interaction and the level of interaction; the relationship between type and level of interaction is shown in that interactions between two men are more likely to result in violence towards a man, than interactions that contain at least one man and one woman, or interactions between two women.

[17] These statistical tests reveal that gender is not treated equally in *Firefly*. Not only are women under-represented, but they are infrequently the aggressors in violent interactions. On the other hand, men are most likely to be violent towards both men and women. These

quantitative findings echo the work on Spanish television by Fernández-Villanueva et al., who found that men are both more frequently the aggressor and the victim of violent behavior. Further, these results reflect crime statistics found in the USA (where *Firefly* was created), which demonstrate that men are most often the offenders and victims of violent crimes, including homicide where 10058/12996 (77%) of murder victims were men and 9972/11047 (90%) of known offenders were men (FBI “Expanded Homicide Data Table 3”; FBI “Expanded Homicide Data Table 1”). In addition, women are continually featured less frequently in television shows (Fernández-Villanueva et al.). Lorna Jowett notes that science fiction provides the opportunity for shows to challenge gender representation; however, from a purely quantitative perspective, based on my research, *Firefly* fails to challenge existing relationships between gender and violence. That said, it is difficult to reduce the nuances of a television series to a set of numbers, and as such, a qualitative analysis of women on *Firefly* was completed to flesh out the investigation into the relationship between gender and violence. Further, some of the male characters in *Firefly* are feminist characters, particularly in the ways they buck traditional expectations of masculinity. While there is the need for an analysis of the male characters within *Firefly*, an analysis of attaining power through non-violent means by male characters is not within the scope of this analysis.

Qualitative Data Analysis

[18] As noted above, the major themes that emerged through the qualitative data analysis were female characters adopting masculine characteristics and female characters using their femininity to attain power. Zoe and Kaylee are two characters who rely on the adoption of masculine traits to have power and statuses comparable to male characters on *Firefly*. Zoe uses gun violence throughout the show and has a stoic, stern personality. In contrast, Kaylee’s adoption of masculine characteristics comes from her traditionally masculine role as the ship’s mechanic. Inara, River, and Saffron all use different conceptualizations of femininity to gain power. Inara has a very regal sense of femininity,

wherein she uses her status as Companion to have power, which can be contrasted with River, who, as a young adult, is very innocent, and Saffron, who is a femme fatale who uses power of seduction to lure men into her traps. The following sections detail the ways in which each of the female characters in *Firefly* attain and lose power through their femininity.

Zoe – “If it moves, shoot it.” (“War Stories” 1.10; 36:00-36:08)

[19] Zoe could be considered *Firefly*'s quintessential tough female character because she often portrays the masculine characteristics, particularly violent behavior, associated with the tough female character discussed by Derose. Zoe's power often comes from her physical stature, her fighting abilities, and her prowess with a gun. The audience is first introduced to Zoe as a soldier in the middle of a battle discussing strategy with Mal (“Serenity” 1.1). Subsequent interactions with Zoe see her dressed in a masculine manner, wearing fitted leather vests, military pants, hip holsters, and boots as if she were part of the “wild west” (Hays 8).

[20] Beyond her masculine costuming, Zoe has the most violent interactions of any female character, being the aggressor in sixteen interactions and the victim in two. In the first episode, “Serenity,” Zoe establishes her abilities with a gun in a firefight in which she shoots and presumably kills at least two men. When compared to other main female characters, Zoe frequently relies on violence or threats of violence. For example, when *Serenity* is taken over by a bounty hunter, Jubal Early, looking for River, Zoe's instant reaction is to grab guns to shoot the intruder; in contrast, River chooses to outwit Early and “beat” him in a non-violent manner (“Objects in Space” 1.14).

[21] Even though Zoe uses or resorts to violence more frequently than the other women on *Firefly*, her use of violence is discriminant in that Zoe is also a strategist who attempts to avoid violent actions altogether, and when she does engage in violence, it is to protect the crew or their interests. For example, in “War Stories,” Wash and Mal are kidnapped by Niska, and Zoe spearheads the rescue effort to save both

men. First, to purchase both men's freedom, Zoe gathers all of the money the crew has saved. When Niska only allows Zoe to choose one man to save, she instantly selects Wash, her husband. Superficially, it may appear that Zoe chooses Wash over Mal because Wash is her husband; however, I argue that her love for her husband is only a small part of her decision. Throughout the episode, Wash's interactions with Zoe after being saved show that Mal is stronger and more able to withstand the torture by Niska. It seems Zoe's plan is strategic in that she recognizes that to save both Mal and Wash, she must save Wash first, knowing that Mal could endure torture. Further, the moment that Zoe and Wash arrive back on *Serenity*, they begin to plan what is deemed a suicide mission to fight their way through Niska's ship to save Mal. "War Stories" is one of the more violent episodes in *Firefly*, in part due to the torture, but also because of the physical altercation that ensues when the crew (except for Inara, who is with a client) fights Niska's men to save Mal. The violence by all members of the crew in *War Stories* is less about exerting power or showing dominance over others and more about saving Mal and keeping their family safe.

[22] As noted by Derose, tough women who use violence, like the 1979 film *Alien*'s Ripley, and arguably Zoe, "are often theorized as being symbolically male" because of their use of violence, dress, and actions (2). The problem with tough and violent female characters is that when media rely on the use of violence to create powerful female characters, then the patriarchal binary that suggests "masculine = powerful / feminine = powerless" is reinforced, and other forms of power, particularly more feminine forms of power, are delegitimized (Derose 2). However, *Firefly* does not rely on Zoe and her more violent behaviors to be the representative of fully fleshed-out or powerful female characters.

**Kaylee – "There's nobody can help me." ("Objects in Space,"
21:01-21:05)**

[23] Kaylee is the female character who is least likely to be the aggressor in violent situations; Kaylee's only attempt at violent behavior appears in "War Stories" when Kaylee points a gun at and fails to shoot

Niska's men while the crew is rescuing Mal. While Kaylee does not participate in violent actions, she is the victim of multiple examples of violence. In "Serenity," Kaylee is shot in the torso and requires surgical interventions from Simon; in "The Message" (1.12), Kaylee is held at gun point and used as a hostage; and in "Objects in Space," Early threatens to rape Kaylee. Kaylee often ends up as the victim of the violent power demonstrated by men in *Firefly*. Based on the traditional train of thought in which violence is associated with masculinity and therefore power, Kaylee would be powerless. However, Kaylee has power in her intelligence and knowledge of mechanics. According to Derose, representations of powerful women who are *not* violent are integral to providing diversity and valuing "women as women" (4). A show like *Firefly*, which contains multiple fully-developed female characters, provides the opportunity to demonstrate different forms of power.

[24] In "Serenity," after being shot, Kaylee demonstrates strength, not through violence, but by saving the crew by directing Book and Jayne in how to fix the ship while she is unable to move post abdominal surgery. Kaylee is powerful in "Serenity" because she uses her knowledge and talent for fixing the ship to save the crew. Kaylee consistently uses her understanding of mechanics to save the day, making her extremely powerful as she ends up being in control of the safety of others. Kaylee does not need violence to be powerful, thus representing a feminist characterization. As Derose notes, non-violent presentations of power "can inspire people to see women's power in new ways," which in turn allows for more representations of powerful women that do not solely rely on violent behaviors to demonstrate their power (13).

[25] Kaylee is characterized as feminine in her personality and interactions with other characters, which is contrasted by the masculinity in her costuming and profession. Because Kaylee is involved in the traditionally masculine occupation of mechanic, her wardrobe "necessitates masculine coveralls, boots, and a smudged face" (Hays 9). In contrast, she longs for the glamor of Inara, and pretty, feminine dresses as demonstrated in "Shindig" (1.4), in which Kaylee wishes for the pink, ruffled dress in a shop window. Kaylee's trusting nature and

seeming innocence are both a source of power and the very things that make her powerless.

[26] In contrast to the power demonstrated by Kaylee's knowledge of mechanics, Kaylee requires saving, and her trusting nature is taken advantage of when she is shot, held hostage, and threatened with rape over the course of 14 episodes. In addition, Kaylee often relies on the encouragement of other characters, particularly Mal, to exert her knowledge and power. Kaylee, like all the major female characters on *Firefly*, both adheres to existing stereotypes regarding the expectations of women and breaks them. Kaylee counters the stereotypes placed on women that "indicate that female characters are more likely to have identifiable marital roles whereas male characters are more likely to have identifiable occupational roles" (Lauzen, Dozier and Horan 202) by both having a traditionally masculine occupation and by being single and open to casual sex, as shown in "Out of Gas" (1.8). While Kaylee presents some characteristics not typically associated with stereotypes of female characters, some aspects remain feminine, particularly when it comes to violence and protection. Because Kaylee requires the help and protection of the men around her, she adheres to traditional portrayals of women. However, having a fully fleshed-out and realized character with flaws, in addition to having other female representation on the show, demonstrates the attempt by the show creators to have realistic, well-rounded female characters.

**Inara – "That's the last time you call me whore." ("Out of Gas",
29:26-29:30)**

[27] Inara is the most regal and overtly feminine character within *Firefly*. However, in contrast to Kaylee, Inara is never portrayed with innocence, and can often be found firing off sharp lines of dialogue that put the male characters in their place. For example, in "Out of Gas," when Jayne suggests that Inara has "some funny whorin' stories" Inara responds by saying "Oh, do I ever. Funny and sexy. You have no idea. And you never will" (6:16-6:25). Inara is quick-witted and always has a response for anyone who insults her or her career as a Companion. Her

costuming shifts in nearly every scene and is composed of rich, high quality fabrics and deep colors. Her clothing also provides a foil to the rest of the crew, particularly the women, as Inara's clothing is exclusively feminine and provides an emphasis on the sensuality of the character (Hays 9).

[28] Despite the visual and occupational references to the feminine within Inara's character, she does not fall into the trap of being a non-violent, stereotypically powerless woman. Like Kaylee's, Inara's power comes not from the use of violence but more from her feminine qualities when she, as Amy-Chinn notes, focuses on providing emotional support for other characters, both crew and clients. For example, in "War Stories," Inara takes on a female client, which she notes is rare for her. The following conversation occurs between Inara and her client:

Councillor: There's no need for the show, Inara. I just need to relax with someone who's making no demands on me.

Inara: Most of my clientele is male. Do you know that?

Councillor: No.

Inara: (caressing Councillor) If I choose a woman, she tends to be extraordinary in some way. And the fact is, I occasionally have the exact same need you do. One cannot always be one's self in the company of men.

Councillor: (smiling) Never, actually.

Inara: So no show. Let's just ... enjoy ourselves. (15:24-16:27)

This scene is one example of how Inara's work as a companion is more than just providing sexual services to clients and is more about providing emotional support. One other pertinent detail about Inara's interaction with the Councillor is their conversation about gender, in which they explicitly note that they only feel safe to be themselves while in the company of other women.⁵ As Rowley highlights, while the main female characters of *Firefly* may enjoy some transgressive positions of power or

characteristics, the ‘verse remains dominated by men in positions of power, as all of the soldiers featured in the show, with the exception of Zoe, are male, as are most members of the Alliance (322).

[29] While Inara’s primary actions involve comfort, emotional support, and banter with Mal, she does participate in some violent behaviors. In “Trash” (1.11), Inara uses her intelligence *and* some violent actions to help the crew outwit Saffron while they are trying to steal an artifact from a wealthy man. Wit from a primarily feminine character like Inara may be expected, but Inara also subverts expectations not only by pointing a gun at Saffron, but also by trying to shoot the gun. I use “trying” to shoot the gun because, although Inara pulls the trigger on the gun, the antique gun fails to work. As part of her companion training, Inara seems to have learned swordsmanship, because when Mal inadvertently challenges a client to a duel, Inara sneaks off to help prepare Mal in “Shindig.” Further, Inara holds a knife to a man’s throat in “Heart of Gold” (1.13). Recent crime statistics show that women are far more likely to use knives than men (Britton 45), yet another example of how, while *Firefly* pushes many boundaries relating to gender representations, the use of violence within the show often is a reflection, intentional or not, of how crime works in “real” life.

River – “I can kill you with my brain.” (“Trash,” 41:58-42:04)

[30] River follows what some deem to be a consistent trope used by Whedon of the damaged, pretty girl, capable of extreme violence (Waggoner 229). While River’s violent abilities are not the focus of *Firefly*, the follow-up movie, *Serenity*, centers around the extreme violent actions that the government has programmed her to complete. The use of violence by River in *Firefly* hints at the actions to come in the 2005 movie *Serenity*, particularly in the episode “Ariel” (1.7), in which River attacks Jayne with a butcher knife because he is wearing a shirt that says “Blue Sun.” In the movie *Serenity* the audience eventually discovers why River was experimented on by the government and how powerful she is, but for all of *Firefly*, the audience only knows that River is special, able to pick up knowledge and abilities with extreme ease, has the capacity to be

incredibly violent, and is being hunted down by top level members of the Alliance.

[31] Most of the violence in *Firefly* occurs with the use of guns or fists, but two notable exceptions are Inara and River's use of knives to inflict damage, in "Heart of Gold" and "Ariel" respectively. As noted earlier, knives are more commonly used by women (Britton 45) and thus are associated with the feminine; it seems fitting that the two characters who are presented as the most feminine overall are the characters who use knives in their violent encounters. However, like Inara's, River's use of weapons is not limited to knives, and in "War Stories," when Kaylee is unable to shoot Niska's men, River picks up the gun, takes one look at where the men are located, and shoots three of them without even looking again at where she was aiming.

[32] As noted above, River is a character damaged by her experiences, yet she is exceptionally capable and powerful. Throughout the series, River experiences obvious mental distress from the government's experiments on her brain; simultaneously, River is extraordinarily intelligent and able to master anything from math and science to arts like dance, in a matter of minutes. Like Buffy in Whedon's most iconic show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and Echo from *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), River is not only damaged and vulnerable from her experiences but also exceedingly powerful. Whedon consistently creates female characters who experience great trauma, like Buffy, who dies twice; Echo, who has her memories and agency taken away to be used as a vessel through which people could purchase experiences; and River, who has her brain manipulated to the point where she is unable to process fear. Whedon regularly creates young, pretty, female characters who, on the surface, seem to be incapable of protecting themselves, but have extreme physical power; these characters are designed to counter the traditional trope of the damsel in distress. However, the idea of the not so helpless damsel, and the type of traumatic experiences she faces could be considered a trope in and of itself.

[33] River's physical power is rarely shown in *Firefly*; instead River's power is typically demonstrated by her immense intelligence and ability to read minds as shown in "Objects in Space." River is powerful

because she saves the crew of *Serenity* by out-maneuvering the bounty hunter sent to capture her. As noted by Derosé, power does not have to be physical, and she highlights the need to develop and acknowledge power alternatives to physical strength, particularly for female characters. River, as portrayed in *Firefly* rather than the movie *Serenity*, has immense power in her intelligence and ability to pick up skills. However, River's power is also mitigated and limited by the trauma and vulnerability she has, being mentally unstable because of the governmental experiments; this vulnerability leads to River's needing to be cared for, rescued, controlled, and looked after by her brother, Simon, which arguably disenfranchises the character. However, one of the reasons that the female characters in *Firefly* are feminist characters is that they are all well developed and realistic seeming characters because they have flaws. The characters, both male and female, are nuanced, and thus demonstrate strengths and weaknesses that make these characters relatable to the audience.

**Saffron/YoSaffBridge – “But face it hubby, I’m really hot.”
 (“Trash” 1.11, 6:35-6:40)**

[34] Saffron or “YoSaffBridge”⁶ as Mal refers to her in *Trash*, is one of the most intriguing characters in *Firefly* particularly because she only appears in two episodes (“Our Mrs. Reynolds” and “Trash”). The fascination with Saffron stems from what appears to be a very complicated back story, one to which the audience is never privy. Further, Saffron is a character who begins as a seemingly demure, naive, and virginal type and ends as a villainess, femme fatale over the course of “Our Mrs. Reynolds.” Saffron is a very powerful character, and most of her power stems from her ability to emotionally and sexually manipulate others, rather than demonstrations of her physical capabilities. In “Our Mrs. Reynolds,” Saffron starts off seeming to be the subservient inadvertent wife to Mal; Saffron adheres to traditional expectations of wifedom including cooking, cleaning, and making herself sexually available to her husband. The initial evaluation of Saffron appears to indicate that she is a non-feminist character *because* she only acts to serve her husband. About halfway through the episode, Saffron is

revealed as the villain of the week, and over the remainder of the two episodes in which she appears, it becomes obvious to the audience that she is more complex than initially thought.

[35] The revelation of Saffron as a master of emotional manipulation, mostly through her sex appeal and seduction of both men and women, demonstrates one more way in which woman can be powerful without relying on physical strength. While Inara also uses her femininity as a source of power, Inara is rarely as overtly sexual as Saffron and presents a more sensual form of power. Like Inara, Saffron is shown to be a skilled fighter, but her mind provides more power. However, Saffron's physical power can be viewed as a foil to Inara's. Saffron uses violence based on close hand-to-hand combat interspersed with guns, whereas Inara uses more traditionally feminine weapons such as blades, and in *Serenity*, the movie, uses a bow and arrow while the rest of the crew relies on guns.

[36] At the end of "Trash," Saffron out-maneuvers Mal and leaves him stranded in the desert, naked and alone. However, her victory is short-lived after she is out-manipulated by Inara and the rest of the crew's plans, as they anticipated that Saffron would betray them. Being one of two female villains in *Firefly*, Saffron provides an interesting foil to the main female characters, particularly to Inara, who provides emotional care to most of the crew, while Saffron emotionally manipulates the crew. Regardless of whether someone's power is used for good or for evil, acknowledging the power of female characters helps to demonstrate some of the different ways in which characters can be powerful without relying on violence.

Conclusions

[37] Derose highlighted the need to have and evaluate the power of female characters without relying on physical strength and violence as the *only* indication of power. However, as violence makes up a significant portion of *Firefly* as 250/1401, or 18%, of all interactions are violent, this article would be remiss to ignore the impact of violence based on gender boundaries when discussing gender representation and feminism within *Firefly*. For a show with 4/9 main characters who are women, the finding

that only 6% of interactions occur between two women and only 3% of interactions occur between two main, female characters is noteworthy. All characters present in *Firefly* are well-developed and no character appears to be completely stereotypical or wooden in nature, which helps to demonstrate that there are feminist aspects to *Firefly*. However, having such as low rate of interaction between women, and particularly between main female characters, is concerning.

[38] Regarding violent actions, when interacting with men, women faced violence in 49/97 interactions, while in these same types of interactions, violence was directed at a man in 48/97 interactions. In 16/48 cases between men and women where men experienced violence, Zoe was the aggressor, and in 13/48 cases, Saffron, a villain, was the aggressor. It is fitting that Zoe, the most physically powerful female character on *Firefly*, and Saffron, one of the villains on the show, would be the most violent towards men as demonstrations of their power; these statistics also reveal that the other women on *Firefly* rarely use physical power or violence towards men.

[39] While the statistics, particularly the revelation regarding the underrepresentation of female characters, indicate potential issues with characterizing *Firefly* as feminist science-fiction, a sentiment echoed by Amy-Chinn and Rowley, I would hesitate to write the show off as void of feminist characters. There are certainly issues with the portrayals of women in *Firefly*, including the representation issues noted above, the issues surrounding the Companions' Guild and development of Inara as explored by Amy-Chinn and the distinct lack of tertiary female characters in positions of power throughout the 'verse noted by Rowley. While *Firefly* has its flaws in its presentation of female characters, the show presents a variety of different ways in which female characters have power, particularly in non-violent ways. Characters like Kaylee and River gain power through their intelligence; Kaylee has her knowledge and abilities as a mechanic; and River has an ability to outsmart Jubal Early, the bounty hunter seen in "Objects in Space." In contrast to Kaylee and River, Inara and Saffron both use their femininity to gain power, Inara by providing emotional care and the status associated with the education and training of a Companion, and Saffron through sex appeal and an ability to emotionally manipulate men and women around

her. As highlighted above, there is a need to analyze the male characters within *Firefly* as feminist characters. Both Simon and Book attain power through non-violent, and arguably traditionally feminine acts such as healing and providing emotional comfort, which is an area of research that should be explored further in the future. Derosé highlights the need to re-value traits traditionally seen as feminine as traits of power, not to de-value physical strength, but as a way to re-value women in general. By providing well developed, complex female characters who become empowered through traditionally feminine traits, Whedon's *Firefly* becomes a site where the feminine is not inherently less than the masculine, but comparable to the masculine.

Notes

¹ Captain Mal Reynolds to second-in-command Zoe Alleyne Washburne in the pilot, "Serenity" (1.1).

² On August 20, 2017, Kai Cole, ex-wife of Joss Whedon, penned a blog post detailing her experiences as Joss Whedon's spouse (Cole). She states that he is a "hypocrite preaching feminist ideals" because while Joss Whedon is lauded for creating feminist television and movies, his reported behavior is inherently unfeminist by abusing the power he had as a show runner over actresses and other members of shows he produced (Cole). The resulting discussion has fueled ongoing debates about whether Joss Whedon is a feminist at all, based on his reported actions. This debate is an important discussion that is currently taking place; however, for this paper, I focused on the content of the show itself rather than the behavior of its creator.

³ The 'verse is the term used by characters in *Firefly* to describe their world.

⁴ SPSS is a statistical software package that enables one to run traditional statistical analyses on large datasets.

⁵ Editor's note: In "But She Was Naked! And All Articulate!," Cynthia Masson interprets Inara's words here as part of a broad rhetorical pattern applied equally by the Companion to men and women as a method of influencing behavior, suggesting that the seeming sincerity is an illusion (20-21).

⁶ Although Mal refers to Saffron as YoSaffBridge I choose to use the name Saffron to refer to the character throughout this essay as this is the name first used to introduce the character.

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