

River Tam: The Oracle of *Serenity*

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[1] River Tam is *Serenity's* psychic genius super warrior with a fragmented mind. She is cryptic and highly in tune with something supernatural. At times, she guides the crew of the *Serenity* through their journey and often predicts their destinies. This behavior resembles the Pythia from Greek mythology, also known as the Oracle of Delphi. Although it is not evident that Joss Whedon actively sought to reimagine the Oracle's tale, River's story has many parallels with the myth of the Oracle of Apollo's temple at Delphi. By looking at the Oracle, we can better understand a past where women were sometimes violently manipulated and controlled by patriarchal society. Through the character of River, Joss Whedon shows us that this disregard of feminine agency will likely continue long into the future. River's story, however, also gives us hope that women can escape and overcome oppression.

[2] There is evidence that both the Pythia and River lived in patriarchal societies. The women of Athens in ancient Greece were mostly restrained to the roles of wife and mother. They rarely received schooling or could read and write. They were completely divorced from political and intellectual life (O'Neal 116-117). Because of this, we only hear what men expected of them, which was that they be obedient, chaste homemakers. While it is suggested the women of other Greek city-states may have had more freedoms and access to education than those in Athens, the city-states were male-dominated. The role of women is certainly far more expansive than this in the *Firefly* Universe. For example, though we see women in leadership positions, such as the councilor Inara services in "War Stories" (F1009), men appear to make up the majority of the Alliance. People within the Alliance that threaten River are mostly male, including Lawrence Dobson, the Hands of Blue and the Operative.

[3] The residents of Delphi chose the Oracle, just as residents of the Union of Allied Planets for The Academy chose River. While some sources have said that the Pythia could be any woman "old or young, rich or poor, well-educated or illiterate" (Spiller 67), other sources disagree. They claim the priestesses of Apollo's temple chose the Oracle. These women were usually from a high social class. They were often well-educated and well-read (Jones). As the daughter of a rich family who made even her gifted older brother "look like an idiot child" (F1001), River matches this description of the Oracles as well. The challenging government academy she was selected for would have been a great honor, just as being selected as the Oracle would have been a great honor for the Pythia. It is suggested multiple people were accepted into this program and likewise, there have been times when there have been multiple Oracles. At the peak of the Oracles' popularity, there were three oracles answering questions at Delphi (Nevins).

These roles were both likely impossible to refuse. River was unable to escape once she found out the Academy was not what she expected. Another similarity between River and the role of the Pythia was that they were required to give up their old lives. The Academy isolated River from her family and only allowed her to communicate with letters (though these were screened). The Oracle was required to give up all her familial duties when she accepted the role (Jones). Both of these women have their family ties broken by the patriarchal societies they are required to serve.

[4] The Oracles and River were given what appeared to be supernatural powers through processes done to them by patriarchal organizations. Thus, they become nothing more than tools. The Oracles had the ability to pass on the guidance of the god Apollo and predict the future. The Oracle was kept in a special underground chamber called the *adyton*. She sat on top of a tripod above a chasm, which extruded fumes. The sweet-smelling fumes caused the Oracle to go into a trance where she would answer the questions petitioned to her (Jones). The fumes were called the *pnuema*. Modern science has determined this chasm was actually a crack where two fault lines collided. This unique natural formation caused a gas called ethylene, which is known to result in a trance-like state when inhaled at the right concentration. It also has a sweet odor, consistent with ancient accounts of the *pnuema* (Stiller 71-73). This manipulation would be dangerous to the Pythia. According to the Dow Chemical Company, risks associated with inhaling high levels of ethylene include headaches, anesthesia and even death from asphyxiation (“Product Safety Assessment: Ethylene”). One account claims a Pythia was killed this way. She was made to go into the *adyton* on an inauspicious day. She began thrashing about violently and eventually rushed at the door. She then collapsed and died a few days later (Spiller 69). To create her special powers, River was also subjected to dangerous treatments by her captors that altered her mind. Though the full extent of what the doctors did to River is not clear, Simon discovers they damaged her amygdala: “The only reason to make an incision in someone's brain is to lobotomize them -- you go in to remove damaged tissue. Why someone would cut into a healthy brain...” (F1008). This violent trauma may have enhanced River’s already uncanny abilities. Not only does she have amazing fighting skills, but she can also read minds. Both of these women were weaponized by a patriarchal society without regard to their health or safety (Marano 37).

[5] As a result, both have been rendered unstable by the powers that were thrust upon them. River exhibits symptoms similar to schizophrenia. In “Ariel” (F1008), Simon explains that “She feels everything. She can’t not.” Sometimes she sees things differently than they actually are and Simon has done his best to try to medicate her enough for her to be comfortable. She has behaved in a way that endangers others before, such as when she attacks Jayne with a knife (though we later learn that this is because of the blue sun shirt he is wearing). Likewise, the Oracles’ predictions were often ambiguous and sometimes had to be translated to be understood (Logotheti and Zhang). Others say her words were intelligible but she spoke in an altered voice, using chants or word play. River’s prophecies, like those of the Pythia, often need interpretation. In *Safe* (F1005), she quits dancing around the maypole and becomes erratic when Book is shot.

While we as the viewers have the benefit of the juxtaposition of the two scenes, Simon has no idea what River has seen to upset her. Her behavior to untrained eyes may appear mercurial, but she actually is reacting to a vision.

[6] While often they are unable to control themselves, serving as objects of control was a part of the everyday lives of both the Oracles and River. Male priests chose the Oracles and trained them in their duties. They were the only people allowed to directly question the Oracles and interpret their predictions (Logotheti and Zhang). Likewise, the male-dominated Alliance kept River against her will until Simon rescued her. If he had not done so, the Alliance would have continued to keep her as a human weapon, at least until they decided she was a liability. Both the Oracle and River belonged to societies that have no respect for their agency.

[7] A major aspect of patriarchal control is the control of a woman's sexuality and that is evident with both the Pythia and River. The Oracles were required to remain chaste. Otherwise, the gods would become jealous (Gibson, Morden and Rowbotham). The Pythia were possessions rather than people with their own wills. River was kept from expressing her sexuality as well. While on board, most people on *Serenity* either slept with someone else, showed interest in someone else or had taken a vow of chastity over the course of the series. They are in charge of their sexuality. Conversely, River is never shown engaged in any of these behaviors, probably because she is alienated from others by her mental illness. She was taken by the Alliance as a child and was not able to grow up and experience her sexuality in a normal way. This may be why she acts like a child at times, which further infantilizes her. Her brother Simon also treats her as a child, which does not help. This over-protectiveness is commonly reported by schizophrenics and, unfortunately, the people who are most likely to infantilize them are caregivers, such as Simon (González-Torres, Miguel Angel, et al. 18). It seems likely River's captors would have treated her similarly. Though she has not been capable of expressing her sexuality that does not mean it does not exist. In "Objects in Space" (F1010), she observes Wash and Zoe while they are engaged in amorous behavior. Because she can read their minds, she experience some of what they are feeling and she clearly enjoys it. We also see her head pop out from the ceiling as Kaylee and Simon are consummating their relationship in *Serenity*, probably for the same reason. Though she is still plagued by the damage she endured at the hands of the Alliance, perhaps one day she will recover and express herself sexually.

[8] The violence and control exerted on the Pythia and River is all so they can be used as guides. The role of the Oracle in Greek mythology is the guide to various heroes. She appears in many myths and plays, either giving the hero's quest her blessing or warning him of potential consequences. Often she was asked whether to carry out an act of colonization and, if these quests were successful, to spread the Greek religion in these new colonies (Nevins).

[9] While most heroes seem to have a certain amount of respect for the Oracle, Alexander the Great abuses the Pythia in one instance. Alexander goes to her to try to find out how soon he would conquer the ancient world. She refused to comment and asked him to come back later.

Instead, he came into her chamber and dragged her by her hair until she finally screamed “Let go of me; you’re unbeatable” (Logotheti and Zhang). In comparison, River Tam was extremely gifted and could have been a great boon to the Alliance as she was. Instead, they tortured and manipulated her to try to get more from her. The Alliance was not yet done with her when Simon rescued her, suggesting the Alliance intended to further abuse River for their gain.

[10] The story of River Tam takes a turn we have no parallel for in the story of the Oracle. Unlike the Oracles, River is rescued from her oppressors with her powers intact. She gets a freedom the Oracles of Delphi never had: the power to guide whomever she chooses. The Oracles were simply directed by the priests. The priests chose who had given a large enough sacrifice to receive her knowledge, not the girls (Gibson, Morden and Rowbotham). River once freed from the Alliance was able to choose who to help. The more time she spends on *Serenity*, the more she trusts the crew. Only then does she open her powers to them.

[11] The first important incident when River guides the crew out of danger is in “Ariel” (F1008). While Simon and Jayne are squabbling, River senses the men with the blue gloves and runs in the direction neither of them wanted to go. Jayne complains that he “has no intention of running around like a rat in a maze ‘til we’re dead” but Simon says there must be something this way, suggesting he is beginning to realize River knows things others do not. Jayne decides to follow when he hears screaming from the room they just exited. Sure enough, River has led them to Mal and Zoe just in time for them to avoid getting caught by the men with the blue gloves.

[12] River’s shining moment as guide to the crew occurs during “Objects in Space” (F1010). When bounty hunter Jubal Early takes over the ship, River is the only one who can organize the crew to stop him from hurting them and kidnapping her. This happens when the crew is worried that she is a liability to them. They discuss that she may be a psychic and Book states the Alliance could certainly have use for one. They postpone any decision to expel River until later. Of course, then Early arrives.

[13] River only begins to guide the crew after each has fallen to Early individually. Thus, she appears at the moment of need. In organizing the crew, River shows incredible aptitude as a guide. She realizes every crewmember’s abilities and uses them in just the right way. In this she not only saves herself, but also the crew.

[14] Early, who wants to use River for her bounty, thinks of himself as a philosopher or great thinker. Similarly, a philosopher once occupied the ranks of Oracle’s priests. Plutarch served as a priest of the Oracle of Delphi between the 1st and early 2nd centuries A.D. These “philosophers” poked, prodded and examined both River and the Pythia who were part of the mechanism that used and controlled the Pythia. For the Oracle, it was in Plutarch’s writing. For River, it was in their mental struggle for her fate. The Pythia achieved no great triumph over Plutarch, but River is able to use her skills against Early. Just when he thinks he has control over her, she reveals she is in fact the one with the power.

[15] In *Serenity*, River not only guides the crew on a bank heist, but also leads them to an abandoned planet. The Alliance had been hiding this planet because they had killed most of the population during a chemical experiment. This was River's big secret, the reason the Alliance was after her. River gives the crew this great knowledge which could undermine the Alliance Zoe and Mal fought against for so many years. The crew makes it its mission to bring this truth to the world. While we do not know what followed the dissemination, we do know that River worked wonders as an oracular figure. She led not only the crew to the truth; she led the whole 'verse there.

[16] The group she chose to guide is far less male-dominated than that of the Pythia. The crew of the *Serenity* involves a nearly balanced number of men and women. These women are not weak, unimportant characters, either. Zoe is the first mate, Inara is a respected companion and the only person on the ship working in a legitimate industry, and Kaylee is the ship's mechanic. Not one is a damsel in distress looking for saving. Given such factors these characters still have to deal with patriarchal expectations. They regularly disregard, however, these factors for the better of the whole crew. For example, when Mal loses the duel for Inara's honor in "Shindig" (F1006), Inara agrees to give herself as Atherton Wing's personal companion to save him. She also extracts herself from the situation and threatens to punish Atherton by giving him a black mark on the companion's registry. When Wash tries to assert himself in a more masculine role in "War Stories," it nearly gets both him and Mal killed. Fortunately, his wife Zoe leads the rest of the crew, the majority of which are female, to rescue them. The men of the *Serenity* are not perfect feminists (especially Jayne) but they seem to be learning to behave in a more egalitarian way. The women of the *Serenity* are capable partners to the men, creating a far different relationship than what seems to exist in the Alliance.

[17] When we first see River Tam, she appears as nothing more than a scared, confused girl. Many of the Oracles started the same way. Both were changed by others to become tools for patriarchal societies. River, however, received an opportunity the Oracles never did. She escaped. The Oracles, unfortunately, never got to be the hero of their stories but River became the truth-bringer to the whole 'verse. Joss Whedon allows this Oracle to be more than simply a guide in his story. He portrays her as the genius that makes everything possible.

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