

**[Review of] Reading Joss Whedon. Rhonda V. Wilcox, Tanya R. Cochran, Cynthea Masson, and David Lavery, eds. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014**

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*Article begins on next page*

Freud, in a largely non-sexual way, is on Leahy's side. (This reviewer regrets his position, for Leahy refers to the two Mythopoeic Press volumes on Sayers with appreciation.)

—Joe R. Christopher

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**READING JOSS WHEDON.** Rhonda V. Wilcox, Tanya R. Cochran, Cynthia Masson, and David Lavery, eds. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014. 9780815610380. 461 p. \$29.95; also available for Kindle.

THIS BEFTY VOLUME COVERS WHEDON'S television, film, and comic book output through the 2013 release of *Much Ado About Nothing*. The table of contents offers two ways to approach the included essays: first, by the title of the production that is the main focus of the essay (*Buffy*, *Dollhouse*, *Cabin in the Woods*, etc.) and secondly, by theme (Narrative, Character, Gender, etc.). This makes it easy for the reader to concentrate on the essays grouped under, for example, "Myth and Intertext," "Symbolism," or "Heroism," three areas which might be of particular interest to readers of *Mythlore*.

Two essays in particular stand out for me, both dealing with the mythic structures underlying different Whedon series. For readers interested in modern uses of mythic material, Janet K. Halfyard's "Hero's Journey, Heroine's Return? Buffy, Eurydice, and the Orpheus Myth" alone is worth the price of admission. Halfyard brilliantly analyzes how Buffy lives out the Orpheus myth—at times as Eurydice, the girl who needs to be rescued; at times as Orpheus, "repeatedly venturing into the underworld and returning with the boon of safety from evil and apocalypse" (41); and sometimes playing both roles at once, the self-rescuing princess, embodying her own central conflict between girl and hero. Willow also "takes on the role of Orpheus to a variety of Eurydices" (47)—Angel, Tara, and especially Buffy multiple times; and I would argue, also plays Eurydice to Xander's Orpheus in "Grave" (6.22). Halfyard traces the Orphic elements of four pivotal episodes in particular: "Prophecy Girl" (1.12), "Anne" (3.1), "Once More With Feeling" (6.7), and

"Normal Again" (6.17). The essay also briefly touches on the Orpheus myth in *Angel* (an episode is named for the myth, 4.15) and *Dollhouse*, the premise of which "inverts the fundamental Orphic gesture" (51) so that we follow the Eurydice-like Dolls through trials in the sunlit world above.

K. Dale Koontz uses a different myth to understand *Dollhouse* in "Reflections in the Pool: Echo, Narcissus, and the Male Gaze in *Dollhouse*." *Dollhouse* has been critiqued as a betrayal of Whedon's championing of the strong, self-aware female character, with its central premise of beautiful, mindless "Dolls" programmed to suit the desires of the clients who purchase their services (though there are both male and female Dolls, their resting state of passivity leads the viewer to read them all as coded female). But Whedon's apt choice of code name for the main character, "Echo," offers us a clue as to how to read its mythic underpinnings. Like her namesake nymph, Echo/Caroline "loses her ability to speak as a punishment for challenging the prevailing power structure" (205) and attempting to expose the truth behind Rossum Corporation, inverting the myth in which Echo is punished by Juno for distracting her from Jupiter's philanderings. In this structure, the Rossum Corporation is Jupiter and Adelle DeWitt, who runs the Dollhouse, the Juno-figure. *Dollhouse* also mirrors the later portions of Echo's story; the rogue Doll Alpha represents Narcissus, and there is a thematic focus on the male gaze and recurring visual imagery of unreliable reflective surfaces. Issues of the self-reflective gaze and isolationist narcissistic behavior come to a head in Alpha's obsession with making over Echo in his image as host-body to a multiplicity of personalities; here we also see Whedon's overarching concern with community, created family, and connection with others as moral goods.

Two other essays, not quite as strongly mythic, are also interesting for their interpretations of monstrous and non-human characters. In "What the Hell? *Angel's* 'The Girl in Question,'" Cynthia Masson makes a case for what some have called "the worst episode of *Angel* ever" (134-135) as an essential incident of existentialist drama leading directly to the final two episodes, "Power Play" and "Not Fade Away" (5.21 and 22). She points out echoes of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Sartre's *No Exit* in structure and dialogue and states that "[i]mmortality without forward movement or change" is thus revealed as "the hell represented in 'The Girl in Question'" (137)—a hell in which *Angel* and Spike obsess over Buffy, blame The Immortal for all their woes, and fail to fulfill their actual mission. This whole episode revolves around the importance not just of freedom of choice, but of freely making choices as the only way to escape from the stasis in which *Angel* and Spike are tempted to remain, a trap made worse by their immortality.

I found Ananya Mukherjea's "'It's Like Some Primal, Some Animal Force . . . That Used to Be Us': Animality, Humanity, and Moral Careers in the

Buffyverse” somewhat less focused than I expected from the title; while it deals with the moral implications of animal elements in human characters, such as Oz’s werewolf component, the author includes monsters and perceptions about race in her broad definition of animality; the definition almost becomes too broad to be useful, and doesn’t even touch on episodes like “The Pack” (1.6, where Xander and other Sunnydale students are possessed by the spirits of demon hyenas). But the observation that the “wildness” in characters like Angel and Oz is “tempered by the attachments these men have with their friends” (61) is sound; for Whedon, the goal is to “tame, not eradicate” (62) the monster within and aim for synthesis rather than dichotomy (67)—again, that emphasis on community and connection so vital to his oeuvre.

The rest of the book should certainly not be neglected, because it is full of worthwhile insights. For example, Rhonda Wilcox’s “Introduction” shows how *Much Ado About Nothing* references and builds on themes in Whedon’s earlier work; David Kociemba’s “From Beneath You, It Foreshadows” demonstrates how the critically neglected (and even reviled) first season of *Buffy* contains all the themes of the series in miniature; and Kristopher Karl Woofter’s “Watchers in the Woods” dissects the meta-layers of *Cabin in the Woods*’s critique of horror movies and reality television, as well as its inter-textual references to *Dollhouse*. Particularly meaty is Gregory Erickson’s “From Old Heresies to Future Paradigms,” on the question of the soul in Whedon’s works: the tensions between “what we do and who we are, between action and being, [...] memory and reality” (341) that complicate and enrich characters that fascinate us, like Spike, Illyria, and Echo, or terrify us, like the Reavers. Those interested in Whedon’s work in general and not just in the mythological aspects I’ve touched on in this review will find the whole a worthwhile collection.

—Janet Brennan Croft

