

DECONSTRUCTING CLARA WHO. A FEMALE DOCTOR MADE POSSIBLE BY AN IMPOSSIBLE GIRL

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which the role of the Doctor Who companion has been historically shaped by precedents that dictate the ways that female characters function within the narrative, and how these traits were

self-reflexively critiqued by recent companion Clara Oswald. The companion is traditionally relegated to the role of a sidekick, with normative ideals perpetuated by the serial nature of the long-running series. These dictate the characterization of the companion, along with the expression of their sexuality and agency, thus restrictively defining the exclusive space in which female characters are allowed to occupy within Doctor Who. Where other characters had been unsuccessful, Clara succeeds in challenging this role by operating within the hegemonies of the companion narrative to deconstruct them, claiming agency where other companions were unable to, and departing the show having essentially become the Doctor herself – paving the way for the casting of Jodie Whittaker as the first female incarnation of the Time Lord.

In the introduction to a 1986 illustrated book published as promotional material for the twenty-third season of *Doctor Who* (1963-1989, 2005-), then-producer John Nathan-Turner writes

It used to be claimed that there were just two requirements to be a ‘companion’ in *Doctor Who*, the world’s longest-running science-fiction TV series:

(1) To be able to scream and run at the same time!

(2) To be able to say ‘What do we do next, Doctor?’ with conviction!! (Nathan-Turner 1986: 4)

While Nathan-Turner may be writing this in the past-tense, not to mention with a certain cheeky tone, in a book that does not aim to be very critically engaged, his words reflect an attitude that has framed the treatment of female characters in *Doctor Who* throughout the series’ history. *Doctor Who* is a series with a fundamental paradox at its center, simultaneously demonstrating a commitment to consistent reinvention, challenging the notion that there are fixed, tangible qualities that make *Doctor Who* what it is, yet also demonstrating a habit of falling back on these qualities, often defaulting to narrative or textual structures that are easy, familiar, or nostalgic. As a result, the series maintains an intimate link with its own history and internal perception of what qualities make up its own complex textual identity, yet also codifies itself as prepared to break with these at any moment. A particularly dramatic example occurred early in the original 1963 season, a period of the show characterized by an initial intention for *Doctor Who* to be an educational programme designed to teach children about science and history. In the serial *The Daleks* (1.5-11) this educational element was shunted to the background for seven episodes as the show concentrated on developing its own form of the campy, science fiction monsters to which executive producer Sydney Newman had been vocally opposed (Marcus). The success of this serial and the popularity of the Daleks, however, resulted in the show adopting this model as precedent, one that continues to influence its narrative structure 54 years later. This internal dependency upon precedents has come to dictate how the show operates narratively, structurally, and thematically, and in many cases can be seen as a strength for *Doctor Who*, but it can also be limiting. The narrative structure of the “Bug-Eyed Monster”, as Newman referred to them, has served the series well, but as the show has evolved and begun to more explicitly explore a potential for genre-bending,

the overreliance upon monsters can arguably become repetitive and tiresome. It is this same sort of problem that has occurred in the role of the companion.

The ‘companion’ within *Doctor Who* is a character as central to the premise of the show as the Doctor himself. The companion is the point of identification for the viewer, typically young, female, and human, who the alien Doctor invites with him to travel the universe. At the core of the role is the potential for an inherently feminist assumption – that despite being the title character, the Doctor is not the ‘main’ character of the series, but that instead we as viewers are seeing the events of the show through the perspective of our female protagonist. However, because this is a series committed to maintaining a connection to its roots, the conventions of the *Doctor Who* companion are therefore rooted in 50-year-old attitudes that have shaped what, for a long time, was the only recurrent narrative space in which female characters were able to operate within the show. This creates normative precedents around the companion’s sexuality, function, and role within the narrative that have been nearly impossible for the series to break out of. Clara Oswald, the main companion of the televised series from 2012-2015, is not the first character to challenge these hegemonies, but she does so in a new and arguably more interesting way. The characterisation of Clara redefined the space for women in *Doctor Who*, not by rejecting the conventions that shaped the companion, but by working within them to deconstruct these attitudes from the inside. In the three seasons that Clara spent in this central role of the *Doctor Who* narrative, the character worked within a self-reflexive space to perform subversive critiques of the way she functioned as a product of the series’ history and the limiting role she was obligated to fulfill as the companion. What Clara represents is a unique form of feminist filmmaking praxis that thus far has gone underutilized. It is not uncommon for female characters to be assigned restrictive, hegemonic roles within genre spaces, and while the traditional mode of response to this is merely to correct it, this does not offer the same opportunity for critique. Clara uses the inevitable assumptions and expectations directed towards her as a companion, not only to exercise self-awareness of her role within the traditional narrative of *Doctor Who*, and to critique both its present and historical function, but also to claim agency in places where it has been traditionally denied to these female characters. This allows her to take her place within a larger shift in how female characters on *Doctor Who* are presented, helping to craft a space for women to function in roles outside the companion, making the casting of Jodie

Whittaker as a female Doctor two years after her departure not only possible, but an inevitability.

This paper has been written with an awareness of the discourse surrounding gender politics in Steven Moffat's writing of *Doctor Who*, and while it does respond to some of it in a way, it is not intended to engage with it directly. While much of how Clara functions as a self-critical companion *can* be attributed to lead writer and showrunner of her era Steven Moffat, to give credit for Clara to a singular patriarchal auteur would be problematic, as there are many other creative forces who have been key to the development of her character. Just as how during the Russell T Davies era, scripts by Moffat were read as "signature" or influential devices (Hills 2010), scripts in the Steven Moffat era by writers such as Jamie Matheson can be read with similar unique authorial qualities – particularly those like "Flatline" (8.9) which were key to the development of Clara's character. Other episodes key to Clara's development, such as "Death in Heaven" (8.12) or "Hell Bent" (9.12), while written by Moffat, took on more complex authorial readings as many fans read them as simultaneous author-products with director Rachel Talalay. While there is a long history of reading authorship in *Doctor Who*, one which has been heightened by the relatively new role of the 'showrunner' in Davies, Moffat, and soon to be Chibnall, and while there are certainly interesting and valuable arguments to be made around the role of authorship in this series and its relationship to the representation of female characters, that is a topic for a different paper. The focus here will be on what Clara *does*, and I intend to examine this while keeping in the background of my argument the reliance upon patriarchal notions of auteur theory that are often central to feminist discourse surrounding *Doctor Who*. I will be exploring the impact Clara has had on the history and future of the series as she operates as a fictional, constructed agent to redefine the restrictive space women have been forced to occupy within this show. There may be an unconventional quality to assigning so much theoretical agency to a fictional character, particularly one written largely by men, and the impact of male writers on Clara's resulting persona should not be ignored, despite the presence of other female writers, female directors, and a female actor who aided in her construction. As a female character, however, she is still functioning representationally within a fictional mode of femininity, producing a theoretical tension in which it is difficult to pin down a strictly gendered criticism of her intentionality. This too could be an entirely different paper however, so for the sake of argument we will discuss Clara's character in terms of how

she reads, and less so in terms of pinpointing the intention behind that reading.

Also for the purposes of this paper, *Doctor Who* will also be described as a single entity – despite the cancellation in 1989. While an argument can be made that *Doctor Who* is composed of more than one entity, most notably the distinction between a "classic" series and a "new" series, recent seasons have made an increasing attempt to codify each as being inextricably connected to the other, culminating in the recent Christmas special featuring a re-cast First Doctor. Despite this, it may be argued that the divide between the classic and new series is demonstrated by a dramatic shift in tone, style, and format between the two series. However, the show has undergone many of these (including notable examples in 1970, 1980, and 2010) making it equally possible to talk about the series as five, twelve, or many more different entities depending on how one wanted to split it up. It would be equally unproductive to talk about it as two. As Paul Booth put it:

To determine the entity known as '*Doctor Who*', we must articulate the binary between continuity and fragmentation; we must see *Doctor Who* as *both* a continuous program split into fragmented parts *and* as a series of fragments cohered to a whole at the same time. (Booth 2014: 197)

This is therefore how *Doctor Who* will be engaged with in this paper, as the patterns of influence carry over beyond the distinction between 'eras', and yet these eras also carry with them unique intentionalities that define these distinctions, making it valuable to describe them individually at least on some level yet also valuable to discuss them as a whole on another. This paper will deal with the way a particular 'era' of the show serves to critique elements of those which came before it, and thus I will be attempting to walk a line between reading the series as a single entity with an ongoing pattern of influence, yet also recognizing the inevitable impulse towards periodization and the way these patterns of influence are shaped as a result.

The structure of *Doctor Who* as a serial narrative results in an internal dependency on precedents, requiring the show to maintain a certain degree of continuity with its own past. While this awareness of its history is often exhibited in a manner that is transparently palimpsestic through the constant rewriting of its own canon (Britton 2011), this palimpsest is also articulated through explicit rebranding efforts of the series, codifying new 'eras' with a new look and style (Hills

2014) as if they were a different show. Despite this, the serial nature of the programme produces a dependency upon the intertextual link between these established texts inside of the larger narrative of *Doctor Who*. After so many decades of building upon past developments, contradicting other developments, and building off of those contradictions, the few elements of the series that remain constant for more than a few seasons begin to ferment into inescapable expectations that the series is required to fulfill. Nearly every aspect of current *Doctor Who* has been impacted by this serial trap, from the common narrative structures of individual stories to the fundamental building blocks that make up the show's identity. The iconographic significance of the TARDIS or the Sonic Screwdriver, the narrative role of the monsters, or the dynamic between the Doctor and companion are all examples of elements that are considered key to what the series fundamentally is, yet all of these are rules which have been broken at least once. The TARDIS has appeared as something other than a police box, the Sonic Screwdriver has been replaced with sunglasses, monsters have taken on roles as recurring or sympathetic characters (such as Strax or Rusty the Dalek), and the companion has operated outside their established gender-based role, but these deviations from the norm have almost always been performed with the implicit expectation that they will eventually revert back to the base state of normality, only serving to reinforce these as elements key to what *Doctor Who* is. These can become a limiting factor for *Doctor Who*, as they eventually become accepted universally not only as a feature of how audiences understand the show but are also expected as a matter of brand identity (Britton 2011), acting as organizational functions that aid in the production and distribution of the series (Johnson 2014). These precedents form a set of qualities that define what *Doctor Who* must be, qualities which can become difficult for the series to meaningfully evolve beyond.

In the context of the companion, the precedents established by these serial expectations therefore function to keep these characters confined within a recurring, familiar, yet largely patriarchal narrative. Precedents left over from the beginning of the series' inception dictate that at any point in time at least one sidekick will join the Doctor on his adventures. The original female companions were Susan and Barbara, who carried with them arcs of ongoing mental maturity and rebelliousness towards the Doctor (Tulloch and Alvarado 1983). These characters set out the show to begin its run on a positive representational note, but when conceiving of replacements for them, some of the least empow-

ering elements of their personas were carried over to their immediate successors, as characters like Vicki, Dodo, and Jo Grant solidified the assumption that the companion should be young, female, infantilized, and dependent on the Doctor.

Various different approaches at reframing the *Doctor Who* companion have taken place; a list that includes Liz Shaw, Sarah Jane, or Romana, but each became undermined by the structure of the narrative they were attempting to redefine. These characters were perceived as less successful as companions by production staff, specifically because they violated established patterns of the show. This is something dramatically emphasized in the departure of Liz Shaw – a character codified by the text as the Doctor's scientific equal, but replaced with Jo Grant after one season and without a proper departure scene specifically because her advanced scientific mind did not fit the established dynamic (Jowett 2014). Characters like these were interspersed throughout the original run of the show, but even those like Ace who successfully found a new space for the companion to function within became deviations from the norm rather than redefining that norm in the first place, as they were almost always followed by characters who would function within the traditional role of the companion. This essentially sent the message that the Doctor/companion dynamic can be experimented with, but the format of the series requires that the companion must inevitably return to the patriarchal nature of its initial function.

Where this becomes limiting for *Doctor Who* is in the way that the companion forms the exclusive space that recurring female characters are expected to occupy. There have been many male companions, including characters like Ian, Harry, Adric, or Rory – but the companion is not the *exclusive* space for recurring male characters. The Master, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, Sergeant Benton, or Professor Edward Travers all made recurring appearances over more than one serial without taking on the role of a companion. There have been many side characters who are female, but rarely do they actually remain on the show for more than the length of a single serial – unless they function within the role of the companion and accept the hegemonic implications that come with doing so. This was present throughout the entire original run of the series, with the first non-companion recurring female characters not introduced until the revival. Jackie Tyler, despite marking the first step to carve out a new space on the show for recurring female characters, was not allowed many opportunities to make decisions that would impact the plot or demonstrate narrative agency in the same way that someone like the Brigadier could. Jackie Tyler essentially broke

down this barrier only insofar as she carved out a space for established companions to have recurring mother characters, a pattern that would be repeated with Francine Jones and Sylvia Noble. Harriet Jones was a recurring female character not related to an existing companion and also demonstrates progress as such, but would often exist in the background of most stories with only a handful of defining moments that had little impact on the rest of the narrative. *Doctor Who* would not successfully create a space for recurring female non-companion characters with an ability to consistently have an effect on the narrative until the introduction of River Song. There is a feminist significance to River's presence over series five and six. Although her power as a character comes largely from her sexual desirability (Amy-Chinn 2014), coding her within a postfeminist lens of autonomous hypersexuality (Gill 2007), and despite also being presented through a narrative mediated by her role as enigmatic love interest to the Doctor, this marks the first time that a recurring female character operating outside the conventions of the companion was afforded the narrative agency and prominence allowed to the degree it was to River Song. River was instrumental in demonstrating that female characters can function within key narrative roles that are central to the plot, paving the way for characters such as Madame Vastra, Jenny Flint, Kate Lethbridge-Stewart or Missy who were able to do so with a much more significant independence from the Doctor. These characters both hold more explicit functions, as Sherlock Holmes-esque Victorian detectives, a head of UNIT, and a villain, respectively, all filling specific, traditionally masculine roles, allowing the space for female characters within the *Doctor Who* formula to further expand.

With this in mind, the reason why many of the attempts at merely producing a new companion character who functions better on a representational level have not been sufficient is because said character will always be functioning within the highly patriarchal narrative space of the companion, a prescribed role for female characters defined by their status as the innocent female character acting as subservient to the all-knowing Doctor. Despite this, Clara succeeds, not as a result of a radical deviation from the norms of the companion, but instead in the way that she accepts these hegemonic precedents in order to perform self-reflexive critiques upon them. Clara can be read as holding a certain degree of self-awareness of her diegetic role within the narrative, and serves to claim agency over this prescribed function and introduce a normative space in which future characters, when faced with the inescapable problematic norms established by

their predecessors, can draw attention to their own existence as a construct of outdated narratives. Clara sets a precedent that could allow the role of the companion to not only act as a self-reflexive critique of itself, but even work to repair itself organically over time.

There is an advantage to specifically using self-reflexivity to tackle filmmaking practices that have historically rooted themselves in existing social power structures. To present a fictional character who is female, non-white, neurodivergent, or queer as self-aware of their function within a kyriarchal space, and of how they will be read in relation to tropes associated with that function, allows an opportunity to draw implicit textual attention towards these tropes if not to actively subvert them. This can also be argued as a more practical form of radical engagement within filmmaking as an institution. In order to be successful financially, feminist filmmaking must be executed within the patriarchal space of established film language, one that is grounded in a history of misogynistic devices and tropes that traditionally present female characters within the ideological frameworks of what these women mean to men. These linguistic conventions must be challenged by feminist filmmaking, as traditional forms of constructing meaning have served to reproduce cinematic mechanisms that consistently reinforce sexism through the language of film (Erens 1990). Most forms of feminist filmmaking perform narrative rather than stylistic reframings of cinematic convention, leading feminist film production to exist on a kind of spectrum between casually feminist films and actively feminist films. Most feminist filmmaking leans towards the former, producing a largely conventional narrative within traditional genre spaces, but will place women in central roles typically reserved for men. Some texts that can be considered casually feminist include *Johnny Guitar* (1954), or the rebooted *Ghostbusters* (2016). To call these films casually feminist is not intended to undermine their significance as feminist texts, as attempting to produce arbitrary rankings of what films are the 'most feminist' would be counterproductive, but merely to highlight the ways they uncritically subscribe to a preexisting language of cinematic patriarchy in order to achieve their feminist goals. Actively feminist texts are less common, often being more self-reflexive or experimental by nature, usually performing the aforementioned act of placing women within a central narrative role, but doing so with a highly self-reflexive attitude towards spaces that women are allowed to function within, making explicit use of the subversion of familiar tropes and occasionally engaging with or emphasizing misogyny within the narrative. Actively

feminist texts have the potential to exist anywhere within the cultural landscape and across the high/low cultural divide. They can include anything from highly influential experimental films such as Laura Mulvey's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), which provokes Mulvey's theories around patriarchal cinematic language, to more recent texts such as *Steven Universe* (2012-), an animated cartoon intended for children which uses positive subversions to reject tropes within the animated children's action genre through a consistently lighthearted and optimistic lens, deconstructing these conventions in a way that is accessible to a younger viewership while often functioning within them. This spectrum between 'active' and 'casual' forms of feminist filmmaking is not intended to provide a definitive framework for categorizing a film as 'feminist' or 'not feminist', as this largely depends on forms of interpretation. Defining a 'feminist' film as a form of filmmaking that functions to deconstruct existing patriarchal power structures on some level is, while somewhat vague, more practical. I intend to demonstrate how such feminist filmmaking can be executed in multiple ways, using *Doctor Who* as a particularly potent example of the way in which feminist texts of the present can construct themselves through an implicit textual response to the past.

Doctor Who has made attempts to redefine the role of the companion through a feminist lens in the past, and different eras can be seen taking on both active and casually feminist approaches to the companion narrative. Ace is perhaps the only companion aside from Clara who produces actively feminist engagements within her era of the televised series, existing within the generic context of an explosive 1980s action sci-fi series but taking on the role of the 1980s machismo action hero in place of the Seventh Doctor. Ace's placement as the last companion before the cancellation of the series in 1989 however, made it difficult for the character to properly redefine precedents around the companion, with only the focus on her life apart from the Doctor carried into the revival in 2005. Despite this, there have been many attempts within *Doctor Who*'s history to produce casually feminist companions. Sarah Jane Smith was a response to the feminist climate of the time, and to criticisms of how female characters were traditionally constructed on *Doctor Who* (Tulloch and Alvarado 1983). She was intended to serve as "the first of a new breed of companions for *Doctor Who*" (O'Neill 1983: 28), as a 'strong' character who would identify as a feminist. Sarah Jane's articulation of her feminism was still operating in a mode which was apolitically coded and flawed, resulting in a critical engagement that reads as a reductive and limit-

ed understanding of second wave feminism at best (Hamad 2015), or as a parody of feminism at worst (Dodson 2015), while still failing to provide a significant change to the narrative structure of the companion (Tulloch and Alvarado 1983).

Leela followed Sarah Jane as a companion designed to further break these stereotypes through a far more violent and assertive persona, yet Leela was also dressed in explicitly sexualized clothing meant to claim the attention of adult male viewers. On top of this, Leela was codified as Indigenous, originating from the Sevateem tribe on an unnamed planet, leaving Leela to often be confused or mystified by technology and other "civilized" (Western) values. Leela is allowed the ability to challenge the submissive nature of the companion's role only insofar as the threat of this challenge is mediated by the power of the camera's "gaze" and the colonial authority exerted over her by the text. Perhaps the most notable attempt to reject the precedent of the companion as subservient to the Doctor was Romana, a character conceived of as a Time Lady and therefore as the Doctor's intellectual and scientific equal. While Romana would take on a position of authority with side characters more consistently than other companions, when placed next to the Doctor she would continue to demonstrate a degree of subservience and comparative naïveté, codified less through the lens of her being an unscientific human woman and more through the way her theoretical understanding of the universe was demonstrated as secondary to the Doctor's practical, hands-on experience (Britton 2011). Mary Tamm's "ice goddess" take on Romana was also met with a similar fate to Liz Shaw at the beginning of the decade. However, instead of being deemed too intelligent to function narratively as a companion by the production staff, it was Mary Tamm's dissatisfaction with the writing of her character as a "damsel in distress" that, after only one season, led to her regeneration into a far more innocent, far more feminine incarnation played by Lalla Ward (*There's Something About Mary*). As James Chapman summarizes, "For all these valiant attempts to offer more positive female roles, however, most companions eventually slipped back into the traditional mould of 'screamers'" (Chapman 2013: 7).

These trends clearly emerge as a limiting factor for *Doctor Who* to the extent that they are demonstrably not the result of naïveté. The show's production staff have historically been aware of the nature of the companion role, but have rarely been successful in correcting it, if not demonstrating complacency towards its problematic nature. As Grahame Williams, the producer from 1977-1979 (Campbell 2010), put it "The function of the companion I'm sad to say, is and always has

been, a stereotype...the companion is a story-telling device. That is not being cynical, it's a fact" (Tulloch And Alvarado 1983: 209). Williams is not the only *Doctor Who* producer to express concern over the problematic nature of the companion's narrative role, with Barry Letts and John Nathan-Turner expressing similar critiques of the companion. Yet through their own work on the show, neither was able to break the female characters they helped to develop out of this mold. Even while trying to read the show outside of the confines of authorship, these producers (many of whom were assigned authorial status within fandom) were certainly in the most prominent position to correct this. Given that production staff have been aware of this problem since as early as the 1970s, it is curious why it has never been permanently corrected. When the series was revived, there were further attempts to address this, with Russell T Davies likening his take on the companion to a "Buffy-style female sidekick" (Lyon 2005: 72), though it has been argued that this was ultimately unsuccessful (Amy-Chinn 2008).

This is because the companion serves a central function to the plot of a traditional *Doctor Who* episode that must be fulfilled, asking questions about what is happening at any given moment in order to provide the Doctor with a diegetic excuse to deliver exposition concerning the complex and typically bizarre universe of the show to the viewer. The convention of female characters asking questions that male characters answer is part of a larger trope within popular television narrative, and creates a representational convention in which women are shown to lack knowledge that men possess, reinforcing ideological codes of cultural patriarchy and working "to organize the other codes into producing a congruent and coherent set of meanings that constitute the *common sense* of a society" (Fiske 1987: 6).

When the series was rebooted, the use of the companion for the purposes of narrative function took on a different form. The companion was still required to forward the narrative of individual episodes by asking the Doctor questions, but as multi-episode arcs were introduced as a more regular component of the seasonal structure of the show, the companion became responsible for providing narrative resolution – a role that would be empowering if it were not consistently mediated by the Doctor. When Rose becomes the Bad Wolf, for example, the Doctor is narratively required to take this away from her in the next scene; when Martha saves Earth from the Master, she does so by travelling the planet teaching humanity how to idolize the Doctor as a god-like being; and when Donna saves the universe from the Daleks, she can

only do so by becoming part-Doctor, a part that the Doctor must forcibly strip away from her at the end of the episode. As Piers Britton critiques in relation to companions early in the revived series:

Excitement, freedom, power and knowledge are accessible to women only via masculine patronage, in this case offered by the Doctor. When he thinks it best to remove this freedom, they have no choice but to accept the role he assigns them, usually within the bosom of the nuclear family. (Britton 2011: 133).

The Matt Smith 'era' marked the beginnings of an effort to critique the removal of companion agency. In mirroring arcs between River Song and Amy Pond, both characters begin their story with their agency taken away from them. In the case of River, this agency is stolen by the Silence – who brainwash her to kill the Doctor – and for Amy this agency is stolen by the Doctor, who imprints upon her from an early age, influencing her to become dependent on him. As each of these arcs progressed, both characters made the independent choice to reclaim this agency, as Amy distanced herself from the Doctor by developing a life and career on Earth, and River pursuing research in the field of archaeology to form knowledge that is neither limited or controlled by anyone, including the Doctor (Burrows 2015). At the culminating moment of each of these arcs, both characters make a conscious decision to reject the force controlling them, yet in both cases this culminates in the choice of domesticity, with River ultimately choosing to marry the Doctor and Amy choosing to live in 1920s New York with Rory. This feeds into tropes around the de-politicization of motherhood and domesticity, reframing them as choices rather than inevitabilities, yet placing female characters in domestic roles regardless (Amy-Chinn 2014).

This is the point at which Clara enters the series, and the arc of her first season is in line with the rest of the female characters of the Matt Smith era, but with a notable adaptation. Where River's agency was stolen by the Silence and Amy's was stolen by the Doctor, Clara has her agency stolen by the narrative of the show itself. From the episodes before her first real appearance, Clara is treated as a mystery, with her actual character buried within the narrative framework of a common trope in the revived *Doctor Who*, the "Woman-as-Mystery" (Mulvey 1990: 35). It is a convention that by this point would be intimately familiar to *Doctor Who* viewers from the similar arcs explored with characters Rose, Donna,

and River Song. This is the source of the common reading that Clara was lacking in character for most of this season, as any significant moments that would establish this character are overshadowed by the Doctor musing on her enigmatic nature in subsequent scenes. The resolution of the Impossible Girl arc allows Clara a far more appropriate form in which to reclaim agency than her predecessors, as she solves the mystery herself, by being herself, to determine simply that there never was a mystery to begin with, rendering any contribution by the Doctor entirely unnecessary.

This subversion of Clara as a plot device is carried further one season later, as the plot becomes used as Clara's character device. At least half of the episodes in series eight place the plot as secondary to how these events impact Clara's character within the context of her arc. The character traits of a companion have rarely been explored or developed textually throughout the history of *Doctor Who*, as the result of an attitude that this would interfere with the plot. Particularly revealing is how up-front past producers of the series have been about these anxieties, demonstrated by the inclusion of this passage by John Nathan-Turner in an entirely non-critical fluff book that was intended exclusively as promotional material:

development of character takes airtime and this reduces the amount of dramatization airtime [...]. So, slowly but surely, writers and script editors and producers decide to play down the character development of the companion [...] and concentrate on the drama of the story (Nathan-Turner 1986: 5)

This hesitancy to focus on the character of the companion has been present in the revived series as well. Amy Pond has often been read as a companion who was not neurotypical, yet her mental health and abandonment issues were only ever explored in the subtext of a handful of episodes including "The Girl Who Waited" (6.10) and "Asylum of the Daleks" (7.1), treating her character arc in these stories as secondary to the narrative focus of the plot. Meanwhile, in episodes like "The Caretaker" (8.6), the central threat of the episode functions exclusively as a means to push Clara in a specific way and reveal things about her relationship with Danny and with the Doctor, leaving the traditional format of the monster of the week to function as secondary to Clara's own development.

While other companions had dominated the narrative in the past, they had not done so in a way that consistently prioritized their own development within the episode, let alone

the season. In "Survival" (26.12-14), while we receive what at the time was an unprecedented glimpse into Ace's personal life, the focus of the episode was still on the Master's alliance with the Cheetah People. In "Father's Day" (1.8), while we receive another then-unprecedented glimpse into Rose's character and family history, the focus of the episode still turns towards the Reapers and the creation and resolution of a time paradox. Meanwhile, the central arc of series eight was around the development of Clara's character and the exploration of her complex relationship to the Doctor. This emphasis on Clara as the driving force of the narrative has been judged as excessive, leading to controversy within fan communities as many repeat the reactionary colloquialism that they would rather be watching *Doctor Who* than 'Clara Who', a position argued in YouTube fan videos like *Doctor Who or Clara Who?? // Problem of the last two seasons* (Öztanyel 2016), or in fan articles such as 'Doctor Who' or 'Clara Who' (Johnston 2014). This was a criticism that permeated throughout Clara's era since series eight, and while it may have also been levelled at other companions who also took unprecedented centrality within their narratives for the time, such as Rose or Ace, it is the first to which the series responded, giving Jenna Coleman first billing in the opening credits to the episode "Death in Heaven" (8.12). This space has been used to credit the Doctor since 2005, as if to cheekily confirm that the series indeed *had* become 'Clara Who'.

While Clara serves to critique the traditional use of the companion as subservient to the plot by becoming more interesting than the plot itself, the way that Clara serves to divert focus from the plot stems primarily from her development as a complex character. Academic writing on characterisation is relatively rare in relation to analyses that understand a text within larger cultural frameworks. This means that in order to explore the features of Clara's character outlined above, I will be largely be drawing on fan writing, most notably Caitlin Smith's contributions to the fan publication "101 Claras To See". Doing so will help me to demonstrate how Clara's characterization is presented differently from that of her predecessors, and how certain fan responses have interpreted that presentation. Clara Oswald presents a character who is flawed, and not in a way that is two-dimensional or pushed to the subtext of the narrative as previous companions have been, but in a deliberate, unavoidable way, that consistently hurts other characters around her. Clara demonstrates a persona which is ruthless, controlling, and maintains an unhealthy obsession with the way she is perceived – but more important than this is how Clara is deeply ashamed

of these qualities and seeks desperately to hide them from others, particularly in series seven (Smith 2015b). In her debut season, Clara is a highly internal character, and it is not uncommon for viewers to fail to recognize many of the character traits that come more explicitly to the surface later in series eight and nine. In series seven, Clara reads as almost frustratingly perfect to many viewers, and this is not an accident – it is a construction of Clara’s own design. As argued by Smith, Clara is a character who wants to be perceived as perfect, and therefore conceals the parts of herself that she believes to be flawed until she is forced to reveal them, such as in “Hide” (7.10), in which Clara demonstrates her ruthlessness by demanding that the side-character Emma place herself in both danger and physical pain to save the Doctor (Smith 2015a).

In series eight, however, these ‘flawed’ traits become more difficult to repress as she is faced with an incarnation of the Doctor with whom she feels far less comfortable. She can be seen visibly unravelling throughout the entirety of stories like “The Caretaker” (8.6), demonstrating addictive behaviors in her attitude towards time travel in “Mummy on the Orient Express” (8.8), and ruthlessly threatening the Doctor in “Dark Water” (8.11). What has been read as empowering about the treatment of Clara’s flaws however, is that she is never punished for them. Clara’s development is framed around a character arc about self-acceptance, in which she learns to embrace the parts of herself that she views as imperfect and use them to her advantage (Smith 2015b). By series nine, Clara does exactly this, using her ruthlessness to relate to Missy in “The Witch’s Familiar” (9.2), and using her awareness of the Doctor’s dependency on her to manipulate him into breaking his own rules in “Before the Flood” (9.4).

This co-dependency between the Twelfth Doctor and Clara is a major focus of her last two seasons as well. Where the Matt Smith ‘era’ took the form of a post-*Lost* mystery-driven fairy tale, Peter Capaldi’s first two seasons direct their focus more towards the two leads to delve into a compelling character study, pushing these characters to reveal and highlight the worst in each other and using them to explore the anti-heroic textual space the Doctor occupies, as well as the unhealthy dynamic that comes from his relationship to Clara as the companion. There have been Doctor/companion dynamics in the past that had been unhealthy, but they were typically not provided with narrative condemnation the same way that they are in the Twelfth Doctor’s era. The Doctor and Rose, for example, had a similar co-dependent relationship, but this dynamic was romanticized – both

literally and thematically – much more than is the case with the Twelfth Doctor and Clara. In the case of Peri Brown in the mid-1980s, the Sixth Doctor was physically abusive towards her, attempting to strangle her in his first episode, and while Peri was clearly distraught by this in the moment, its impact on their relationship is largely ignored in future stories.

While Clara’s Doctor may not be physically violent towards her, Clara is met with plenty of moments of emotional abuse from the Twelfth Doctor who consistently treats her in a way that is rude, authoritative, or generally condescending. Clara succeeds within this dynamic where past companions had not, deliberately calling out the Doctor in these moments, allowing the narrative to explicitly condemn them. In “Listen” (8.4), for example, Clara is authoritatively told by an impatient Doctor to “do as you are told” – by which the audience can see she has been hurt. Clara stands up to the Doctor, however, by repeating this line back to him later in the episode. Clara achieves this by flipping the Doctor’s own behaviour as a challenge to him, daring him to argue that his actions were necessitated by the intensity of the situation, and not the result of his own propensity to view Clara as his subordinate – a challenge the Doctor accepts by following Clara’s order and doing exactly as he is told. “Kill the Moon” (8.7) ends with Clara confronting the Doctor with the patronizing way he had treated her throughout that story. Their heated exchange ends with Clara asserting her own agency by leaving the TARDIS and stating that she will no longer travel with the Doctor, a direct consequence of his disrespectful treatment of her. He is only invited back on her terms. These moments are significant, not only as forms of narrative condemnation of the Doctor’s behavior, but also because while Clara is given moments of heroism where she is able to be clever and save the day, she is also not codified as overly perfect and lacking in complexity as a result. In equal measure, she is granted moments of insecurity, weakness, and vulnerability at pivotal points in the narrative, all of which make her later strength more empowering and never interfere with her ability to succeed within heroic narrative frameworks later on.

The companion has traditionally been forced to occupy narrative spaces that have often served to reinforce heteronormative values. This heteronormativity has always been prescribed to the role of the companion, not only in terms of the highly patriarchal dynamic of an all-knowing male figure and his female sidekick, but also in regard to the degree that companions have tended to be sexualized. The companion is often described as providing “something for the dads”

(Chapman 2013: 8). Characters like Leela or Peri were dressed in highly sexualized clothing meant to play up their “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Britton 2011: 122). Tegan’s sexuality was consistently emphasized in interviews and promotional material, yet within the series itself this was comparatively repressed (Tulloch and Alvarado 1983). This precedent of prescribed heteronormativity was dramatically reinforced, however, at the beginning of the revived series as Rose and the Tenth Doctor displayed a heightened sexual tension and a more explicit romantic undertone to their relationship than had been seen in a Doctor/companion dynamic before. Rose exists in a powerful position to set precedents for how *Doctor Who* is understood to function. As not only the first companion of the revived series, but also of what continues to be the most logical “jumping on” point for new viewers, Rose has an unmatched capacity to establish a standard by which all future *Doctor Who* companion will be measured (Britton 2011). Rose is independent without challenging the Doctor’s authority, strong in a way that rarely troubles gender norms (Britton 2011), compassionate in a way that creates rather than resolves narrative conflict (Amy-Chinn 2008), and bubbly in a way that consistently emphasizes her sexual tension with David Tennant’s Doctor.

This is not helped by the rest of the Tennant era, in which the majority of female characters – not exclusively companions but side characters as well – were defined primarily in terms of the Doctor’s sexual desirability (Britton 2011), positioning these female characters at a disadvantage, and allowing the Doctor to appear notably more superior and in control (Jowett 2017). Even Donna, while never engaging romantically with the Doctor, must consistently restate this for the viewer, as though the exclusively platonic nature of their friendship were something unusual. Jack Harkness presents a queer twist on this pattern, performing his sexual interest in the Doctor within a larger subversion of the hypermasculine sexual conquest trope that is prominent in many popular science fiction texts such as *Star Trek* (1966-1969). While Captain Jack is critical of this trope in the ways his sexual conquests are not restricted by contemporary heteronormative values, he is still allowed to exhibit an aggressive sexual assertiveness that is not afforded to female characters of the Tennant era (Britton 2011). The precedent of concentrating on the Doctor’s sexual desirability is one that likely would have been irreversible if Catherine Tate had not returned as the companion in series four; in his memoir, Russell T Davies details the contingency plan to create a new companion, Penny, and have her enter into an explicit romantic relationship with

the Doctor (Davies 2010). This form of heterosexual romance, one that would continue throughout the revived series, is mediated on some level by a rejection of normative heterosexual “social practice” such as settling down or child-rearing (Jowett 2014: 81), but still serves to define the companion’s role within a heterosexual context.

While Clara does eventually reject these heteronormative tropes, in her first season she can be read as deliberately playing into them, particularly the conventions of the post-Rose companion. In series seven, Clara is cute, bubbly, clever, and flirts with the Doctor extensively. Rose has established a standard of expectations for the companion, and Clara is introduced with an innate awareness of this. Clara spends most of her first season functioning within the framework of what viewers expect from a companion, but does so *too* perfectly, *too* conventionally, and ultimately becomes more of a post-Rose companion than Rose Tyler herself. Clara’s compulsory sexual tension with the Eleventh Doctor is emphasized explicitly by a narrative that occasionally reads as unsettling, yet the text rarely condemns this as such. To determine which elements of Clara’s series seven characterization function as critique, and which function as uncritical descents into the conventions of the established companion narrative, therefore depends on interpretation. And when read separately from her two following seasons, this season seven arc tends to read as purely uncritical. Much of Clara’s initial characterization suffers as a result of this, meaning that her subversions of the heteronormative role of the companion tend to remain submerged until series eight.

Clara’s second season, however, does not suffer from this same issue of execution. The romantic history of this Doctor/companion dynamic is rejected by the Capaldi era from as early as the first episode, and the Doctor’s asexual persona reestablished. The Twelfth Doctor and Clara proceed to form a more intimate relationship based on a deep platonic bond rather than a mutual sexual desirability. Meanwhile, Clara begins to stray further from the heteronormative expectations established by her predecessors by exhibiting an increased queer presence within the show. In series eight, the narrative allows Clara to exhibit traits of celebrated imperfection. In this way, she can function within a space of queered failure, a narrative device which, as Jack Halberstam (2011) argues, symbolises a rejection of conformity within the hegemonic structures of prescribed heterosexual normality. Her implied off-screen relationship with Jane Austen further suggests a bisexual identity (one that should not be undermined by her more prominent relationship with Danny Pink in the previous

season), and is strengthened by her decision to depart the show by leaving to travel with Ashildr. This a queer reading is reinforced by the fact that this scene is mirrored one season later in “The Doctor Falls” (10.12), when Bill, an established lesbian, also leaves the TARDIS by choosing to travel the universe with an immortal woman with whom she has a romantic history.

The way that Clara chooses her ending speaks to another way in which she challenges the space of the traditional companion in terms of agency. Precedents for this convention date back as early as Susan, the original companion and first to depart from the show. Susan spends her time within the series consistently infantilized by the narrative and portrayed as subordinate to the Doctor, but in her final moments, the Doctor tasks himself with explicitly claiming ownership of her agency. At the end of the serial *The Dalek Invasion of Earth*, Susan is married off to a male character that she met in that same story, and stays behind in the year 2051 to live with him. This is troubling in two ways. First, a number of companions left the show in ways that took inspiration from this departure; notably, Vicki, Jo, and Leela’s exits from *Doctor Who* followed the same fundamental beats of the character meeting a man, getting married, and departing the show, often all in the same episode. Second, and more disturbingly, is the way the Doctor is shown to almost force this decision upon Susan, locking the doors to the TARDIS and telling her, despite her protests:

You’re still my grandchild and always will be, but now you’re a woman too. I want you to belong somewhere, to have roots of your own. With David you will be able to find those roots. Believe me my dear, your future lies with David, and not with a silly old buffer like me.

(*The Dalek Invasion of Earth*, 2.9 “Flashpoint”, 1965)

The Doctor thus asserts that he not only knows what is best for Susan, but has the right to make decisions relating to her body and her future on her behalf. This solidifies a precedent of infantilization that comes to be performed the many companions who follow Susan, establishing as a norm the Doctor’s paternalistic authority over his infantilized companions.

Within the revived series, companions are allowed more control over their role within the narrative, but only insofar as these moments of agency are framed within a context of

self-sacrifice in favour of, or in obedience towards, institutional expectation (Britton, 2011). In the 2005 Christmas special “The Christmas Invasion” (2.X), for example, the Doctor is removed from the action and Rose is forced to drive the narrative herself, but still spends the duration of the episode struggling to function without him and largely serving to act as a caregiver protecting his unconscious body. Despite attempts to correct the role of agency within the companion, there have still been notable moments in which this agency is forcibly denied. At the end of the episode “Journey’s End” (4.13) the Doctor ‘saves’ Donna by nonconsensually erasing all the memories she has of her travels with him as she states explicitly that she would rather die. The Doctor ignores Donna’s claim of bodily autonomy, depositing her on the doorstep of her mother and grandparents who only re-affirm the good of his actions. The implication of this scene is that the Doctor, as the ultimate figure of patriarchal authority, is more ethically qualified to decide what choices Donna can make in relation to her body than she is, and that while his decision may have been tragic, the greatest loss was the grief and pain that it caused *him*.

Throughout her run as companion, Clara seeks to claim this agency in ways that previous companions had not been afforded. Clara’s most radical claim of agency, however, is in the way that she rejects her obligatory narrative space as the companion and instead essentially becomes the Doctor. This process begins in the episode “Flatline” (8.9), a story with which many parallels can be drawn to “The Christmas Invasion” (2.X) nearly a decade earlier, as both stories begin with an incapacitated Doctor leaving the companion to function in his absence. Where in 2005 this episode was centered around the issue of how to get the Doctor back, the 2014 episode reframes the same fundamental conflict in a way that sees Clara slide effortlessly into the Doctor’s narrative role. She quickly dons the iconographically charged tools of the Sonic Screwdriver and the Psychic Paper, adopts a companion of her own in the form of Rigby, and investigates the threat of the episode just as the Doctor would. Where Rose in this situation was portrayed as dependent on the Doctor and unable to function without him, Clara is able to function entirely independently from the Doctor.

It is episodes like “Flatline” that make Clara’s normalization of a female Doctor more significant than those performed by characters such as Missy or Kate Lethbridge-Stewart. While these characters normalize the process of a cross-gender recasting of traditionally male characters, they are still taking on roles which are *parallel* to the Doctor,

whereas Clara in “Flatline” explicitly (as stated many times throughout the episode) is acting in place of the Doctor. As the tension of the episode builds, she becomes increasingly confident within this narrative role, asking herself things like “what would the Doctor do – no, what will I do”, or rescuing her companion using unnecessarily witty, quickly delivered dialogue about her hairband while the Twelfth Doctor’s heroic theme plays in the background. Following this episode, Clara begins to take on more of the Doctor’s qualities, increasing the ongoing thematic parallel between the two characters. This continues until “Face the Raven” (9.10), in which she reunites with her companion Rigby and sacrifices herself to save him, spreading her arms in an outstretched body language that serves as an iconographic mirror to that of the Doctor’s own regenerations in the revived series. This sets up the show to subvert a trope that has become increasingly common in contemporary media – “Women in Refrigerators”, a term coined by comic book writer Gail Simone (1999), to refer to female characters who are killed off specifically to further the arc of a male character, often motivating this man into a revenge narrative in her name. Within the episode, Clara addresses this as explicitly as she can: by *ordering* the Doctor not to insult her memory by taking revenge, claiming agency over her own death and making the scene about what it means for *her*, as opposed to how it affects the Doctor.

Two episodes later, in “Hell Bent” (9.12), however, the story sets itself up for the Doctor to ignore Clara’s instruction and take revenge anyway. He arrives at his home planet Gallifrey, confronting soldiers with epic music accompanying his grief-ridden pursuit of justice. Despite this narrative setup of a revenge-based plot following Clara’s death, the Doctor takes down Gallifrey swiftly in about twenty minutes with no notable action scenes, and reaches his actual goal of using Time Lord technology to extract Clara from the moment before her death, making the remaining forty minutes of the episode about her. The Doctor intends to ‘save’ Clara the same way he did with Donna – to return her to a normal life and a ‘happy’ ending by nonconsensually wiping her memory. Where Donna was not allowed the narrative space to stand up to this form of violation, however, Clara has been slowly claiming this agency over the past three seasons. Clara rejects the Doctor’s assumption that he has the right to erase her memory, not only delivering a speech explicitly articulating the importance of her own bodily autonomy, but turning the Doctor’s claim of ownership over her body back around at him, and erasing his memory of her instead. She specifically refers to this process as “reversing the polarity” on

the memory-wipe device – an iconic choice of words that has been repeated by the Doctor through multiple incarnations since 1972. Clara follows this up by depositing the Doctor’s unconscious body and adopting a new companion in recurring character Ashildr from earlier in the season, before stealing her own TARDIS and running away. There is not a single more iconographically appropriate way to draw parallels between Clara and the Doctor than for her to steal a TARDIS and run away, as it forms a direct mirror to the Doctor’s own backstory, leaving this moment to be presented as a textual argument that a future incarnation of the Doctor could be female without disrupting the narrative function of either character. “Hell Bent” functions within this as an especially actively feminist episode of *Doctor Who*, also serving to present the first on-screen cross-gender (and cross-race) regeneration of the General to further situate the possibility of a female Doctor within the canon of the show. The General was not the only example of a side character who aided Clara in furthering the argument in favour of a female Doctor prior to the casting of Jodie Whittaker. In the context of Kate Lethbridge-Stewart and Missy especially, these characters serve as successors to male characters who were prominent in the series during the early 1970s. By both literally and figuratively ‘regenerating’ the characters of the Master and Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart into female incarnations, the series further normalizes the process of cross-gender recasting of iconic male roles, and demonstrates that the functions of these characters can still be executed through a feminine context.

Doctor Who depends upon both the acknowledgement of its own history and the setting of precedents to be built upon, forming expectations around branding and viewership that, in cases like the companion, can become recurring hegemonies that are nearly impossible to truly break away from. What Clara Oswald has done within this structure is not only redefine the way these hegemonies are engaged with to produce new spaces for women to occupy within *Doctor Who*, but also set the series on a trajectory where it can become a progressive tool to perform sophisticated critiques, both of its own past and also of tropes within the science fiction genre at large. Clara Oswald provided the series with a compelling argument for a female Doctor. Her role formed a powerful precedent not only because it allowed for a woman to take on a role with the degree of confidence, power and narrative authority that comes with being the Doctor, but also completely reframed the narrative space for women within the *Doctor Who* format. Furthermore, in series seven, Clara demonstrated a subversive critique of the woman-as-mystery

trope, presented within a narrative that deliberately mistreats her, but also gives her the space to reject this. In series eight, Clara is placed at the forefront of the narrative, concentrating on her complex and flawed persona rather than her traditional companion role of serving expositional functions that benefit the narrative, instead using the narrative as a tool to function for her. Finally, in series nine, Clara presented a highly self-reflexive critique of past companion departures through a rejection of the Women in Refrigerators trope and nonconsensual memory wipes, achieving a departure that was not only fitting for her character but also emphasizes her Doctor-like qualities in a way that deliberately paved the way for Jodie Whittaker to be cast as the Thirteenth Doctor. Overall, however, Clara consistently demonstrated a self-critical attitude towards her own function within the traditional narrative that female characters have been forced to occupy within the *Doctor Who* formula, a form of engagement with patriarchal textual structures that can be extended to other genres beyond science fiction. Female characters are still read by audiences through established patriarchal frameworks. While much feminist filmmaking chooses to reject this outright, there is value in both production and scholarship that develops or critically engages with characters who themselves critique their narrative while also conforming to it. For *Doctor Who*, it may take a few more decades for the role of the companion to truly escape from the hegemonic precedents of the roles which came before it, but Clara Oswald has opened up new narrative spaces for female characters on this show to occupy. The post-Clara companion can now be the driver of their own plot rather than only an expositional tool, and may serve as a self-reflexive critique both of their own history and narrative role. But, perhaps most importantly, they can be a Doctor.

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