

**Tough and Tender, Buff and Brainy:
A New Breed of Female Television Action Hero Blurs the Boundaries of
Gender**

Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Cinderella taught generations of girls that being female meant waiting: for the right man to kiss her awake or to "fit" her into the right shoe (place) in order to begin her "real" life of marriage and, it is assumed, eventual motherhood. To be female meant being sweet and nice at all costs, being helpful and domestic, and, never, under any circumstances, being too curious, demanding, or aggressive, or dire consequences ensued. Joyce Carol Oates comments in her essay, "In Olden Times, When Wishing Was Having: Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales": "All 'good' heroines accept their fates passively, unquestioningly. To express even normal distress at being viciously mistreated would be in violation of the narrow strictures of fairy tale 'goodness'" (251). Oates's comment echoes what Carol Gilligan states in her now classic 1982 *In a Different Voice*, that traditional fairy tales show a passive pattern of identity development for women:

Since the adolescent heroines awake from their sleep, not to conquer the world, but to marry the prince, their identity is inwardly and interpersonally defined. . . .The sex differences depicted in the world of fairy tales. . . .indicate repeatedly that active adventure is a male activity, and that if a woman is to embark on such endeavors, she must at least dress like a man. (13)

This "rule" of disguise is not limited to the world of fairy tales, however, as Viola in *Twelfth Night*, one of Shakespeare's most memorable characters, adopts a male disguise to achieve her goal. Joan of Arc was history's most famous, but not only, cross-dresser, convicted and burned at the stake, ultimately, for wearing men's clothing, and not, technically, because of her "witchcraft." In two recent contemporary films, the ploy has been used to both great comedic and dramatic effect: Gwyneth Paltrow's Oscar-winning turn in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), and Hilary Swank's best actress performance as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999).

On the other end of the spectrum, there are the strong women who hide their strength by adopting more traditional and stereotypical personae. Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope state in their 1981 look at a female heroic pattern, *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*:

The difference between the female and the male heroic pattern usually results from the cultural assumption that strong women are deviant and should be punished. [These characters] have to be strong, wise, and courageous to survive in the world. . . .[but] have to disguise these qualities because, to win the treasure of love and social position, they have to play the role of the passive, dependent, innocent young thing. (10)

Literary characters like Moll Flanders and Scarlett O'Hara play the dependent, innocent, vacuous, flirty, "I'm-just-a-woman" role when they know it will help them achieve their objectives. Queen Elizabeth I used this tactic often, to great effect,

during her long reign, as Antonia Fraser shows in her 1988 book *The Warrior Queens* (203-225). This kind of disguise - one of behavior - is the premise of the 2000 comedy *Miss Congeniality*, in which Sandra Bullock, an FBI agent, must transform herself into the supreme example of the "perfect" woman, a beauty pageant contestant.

These two "traditional" forms of gender "disguise" make their appearance in updated forms in four recent television series that feature strong female protagonists who share interesting similarities and both comply with and subvert the two forms of "gender manipulation" discussed above, effectively blurring gender boundaries. In addition, the series protagonists play with and subvert the concept of "gendered" heroism, melding elements of the traditional archetypal hero (most notably described and analyzed by mythologist Joseph Campbell) and what might be called a distinctly feminine or feminized heroic journey pattern (most notably proposed by Pearson and Pope). The series discussed in this article are *Relic Hunter*, a syndicated show which ran for three seasons (1999-2002), now airing in re-runs in some markets, and available in a special DVD collection; the SciFi Channel's original series *Farscape*, which ran for four seasons (1999-2003), now airs in re-runs on the same channel, has all seasons available on DVD packages, and premiered a much anticipated and critically well-received follow-up four hour mini-series in October 2004; ABC's hit series *Alias*, going into its fourth season in January 2005, and which offers its first three seasons on special DVD packages; and *Crossing Jordan*, airing on NBC, returning for a fourth season in fall 2004, and in syndication on the A&E channel four nights a week. The strong female characters of these four series, along with others like *Xena (The Warrior Princess)*, *Buffy (The Vampire Slayer)*, *Nikita (of La Femme Nikita)*, *Witchblade's Sara Pezzini*, the new *Charlie's Angels* trio, *Tomb Raider's Lara Croft*, *Daredevil's Electra*, *The Matrix* trilogy's *Trinity*, *X-Men* and *X2's Storm* and *Jean Grey*, and even Halle Berry's *Catwoman* are a testament to the popularity of what many fans and critics alike call "kick-butt babes," a trend that seems to be multiplying exponentially in both television and film, as well as several fantasy, romance, and mystery book series.

Aside from their strong female protagonists, the four series in question are notable because they depict circumstances grounded in reasonably plausible reality and increasingly open to women's participation. None of the main characters analyzed in this article is a true "super" hero with unrealistic powers. It is true that *Farscape* falls into the category of science fiction, which often implies settings or plots too futuristic to be realistic, and the character of Aeryn Sun is an alien Sebacean, bringing up the concept of the "other" that, therefore, possesses "supernatural" abilities compared to humans. However, the show has made it clear that Sebaceans and humans are genetically related, negating or at least minimizing the "other" factor. In addition, current advances in technology and genetic research, as well as the strides women have made in occupations and activities long held exclusively by men (military, crime fighting, flying commercial and combat aircraft, and even piloting space shuttles), make the situations

depicted in even this "speculative" series not out of the realm of possibility, even today. Therefore, women (and men) watching *Farscape* do not have to suspend disbelief to identify with or accept Aeryn Sun and the circumstances in which she finds herself involved. On the other end of the spectrum, some might argue that *Crossing Jordan's* Jordan Cavanaugh is not truly an "action" hero; she does not, like the others, use overtly physical means of fighting, nor does she use lethal weapons. In fact, she fits into the category of the "scientific" or "brainy" heroine, alongside the female forensic scientist characters of shows like *CSI* and its two sibling series (CBS), *Law and Order: SVU's* female detective Olivia Benson, and *Medical Investigation's* Dr. Natalie Durant, both on NBC, the home of *Crossing Jordan*. However, Jordan Cavanaugh (unlike her more scientific counterparts) exhibits the hallmark traits of the more "traditional" female action hero: she is tenacious, tough-talking, puts herself into dangerous situations, and breaks the "normal" rules that society imposes on females - and can deliver a swift, effective kick, elbow, or even punch when the occasion calls for it. She is, in essence, the "action hero" for the rest of us.

To begin the discussion of gender-blurring that appears in these four series, it is notable that each protagonist has a first name traditionally given to a male, although they are names that have since become gender-flexible: Sydney Fox (played by Tia Carrere, *Relic Hunter*), Aeryn Sun (Claudia Black, *Farscape*), Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner, *Alias*), and Jordan Cavanaugh (Jill Hennessy, *Crossing Jordan*). Additionally, all have occupations or perform activities traditionally labeled as masculine. Sydney Fox of *Relic Hunter* is an Indiana Jones-type of antiquities hunter and professor of ancient studies well versed in martial arts and weapons use (she is television's version of Lara Croft before the film versions of the popular computer game emerged with Angelina Jolie in the title role). Aeryn Sun of *Farscape* is a Sebacean Peacekeeper, a soldier trained to kill without mercy or emotion, who runs afoul of her commanders and finds herself labeled a traitor and on the run with a group of escaped prisoners. In season one and half of season two, *Alias's* Sydney Bristow is a secret double agent, working for a corrupt organization, SD-6, passing itself off as a division of the CIA, but also working with the real CIA to expose and destroy SD-6 from within. By the end of season two, SD-6 is destroyed, and she is a CIA agent exclusively, not a double agent. Jordan Cavanaugh of *Crossing Jordan* is a tough talking, street-savvy Boston medical examiner who has had trouble holding down a job or staying in a relationship because of her outspokenness, her habit of getting involved in unofficial police work, and her fear of commitment.

The women often find themselves performing duties that also, traditionally, are seen as masculine. They use weapons like guns, knives, crossbows, laser blasters; they fight brutally using kicks, fists, martial arts moves, and even head butts; and they put themselves in extremely dangerous and precarious situations, including dismantling nuclear weapons, climbing into dark caverns and secret crypts, breaking into highly guarded military compounds, piloting advanced space transports through unknown reaches of space, walking down dangerous, dark

alleys or into dark buildings alone, and confronting (and sometimes killing) villains and criminals, both human and alien. These attributes - names, occupations, and activities - can be read as modern variations of Gilligan's statement about adopting literal male disguises (13).

However, in spite of their seemingly "masculine" trappings, none of the protagonists could ever be mistaken for a male or be considered androgynous (as, for instance, Sigourney Weaver's character, Ellen Ripley, could be in *Alien3*, the third film in the *Alien* franchise). Each show seems to take great pains to present the protagonists as what Elizabeth Wurtzel, in her book *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*, calls the "overeager hypersexualized female body" (25). The women often wear leather (a traditional "bad-girl" uniform) or clothes that expose flesh, especially cleavage, which makes one wonder how practical these "working" outfits could really be. Wurtzel says: "as much as women may try to be seen not as sex objects there is a countervailing force, in which many women collaborate - mostly out of financial need - to turn women into nothing but sex objects" (25).

This hyper-female persona is intended, no doubt, to attract a male audience who might otherwise be uncomfortable with a strong female protagonist; the weekly prospect of seeing a hot babe in tight clothes (or barely-there clothes) who also happens to "kick butt," certainly works on - shall we say - certain prurient interests. But, while the hot babe camouflage may seem like an ingenious piece of sexist manipulation, because the hyper-female is often a deliberate disguise or accepted without comment by the other characters, the audience, especially women, cannot escape the knowledge that, in these cases, the "clothes do not make the woman." In a rare twist on the theory of marketing to male fantasies, *Farscape* and, especially, *Relic Hunter*, seem to operate on the concept that women need "eye-candy," too. Both series regularly feature scenes in which the camera lingers on male characters' bodies, achieving a sense of gender equity when it comes to "looking." John Crichton and Ka D'Argo, the two main male characters on *Farscape*, wear clothes that highlight their muscular chests and biceps. *Relic Hunter*, meanwhile, takes the concept of the equal opportunity "gaze" even further by often having the camera focus on Sydney's face as she gazes at an attractive man, then switching the angle to show the audience what she is looking at, with the camera often lingering on the male character's more attractive features the way Sydney's eyes might - and the way the camera often "fetishizes" the female body. Even *Crossing Jordan* plays to this double standard with its character of Woodrow (Woody) Hoyt, Jordan's "sort of" romantic interest, whose muscular chest and biceps are often on display.

Additionally, the women in the series make it clear that they can take care of themselves in countless ways, and exude an attitude of confidence and self-reliance that conveys to audiences they are more than just their bodies. Claire Bickley, in her *Toronto Sun* article reviewing *Relic Hunter* at the start of its second season (2000), comments that she is pleased, in fact, by the image Tia

Carrere's Sydney Fox presents: [Carrere is] herself a fine example of what [producer Jonathan] Hackett calls the show's "believable fantasy." She's tall and strong and curvy and doesn't even come close to provoking my "For God's sake, eat a sandwich" reflex. . . .which makes [Carrere] and her character decent role models for the 'tween girls who are among the show's most avid audience. Especially when compared to, for instance, Pamela Anderson on V.I.P., a show Relic Hunter got lumped in with before it premiered. By contrast, Sydney Fox is eminently capable, smart, resourceful and courageous.

Amy Benfer, in her Salon.com review of the 2000 film *Charlie's Angels*, explains the appeal the new breed of female action heroes has for women, in spite of the external sexualization: [They] demonstrate their pussy power by vamping, mocking and altering their femininity at will. They wear wigs and makeup, serve up cleavage like a meal and display their asses like plumage. They wake up in men's beds. And this in no way diminishes their credibility as crime fighters or their likeability as characters. They play to an audience that gets it, that understands that straight women appreciate other women's bodies and that there is nothing wrong with being a sex object if your objective is to have sex.

In his article "Warrior Women on Screen," Douglas Eby quotes Dr. Kathleen Noble, whose description of what it means to be an authentic female hero succinctly describes each of the four protagonists discussed in this article: "A woman to live heroically must belong to herself alone. . . .She must be the center of her own life to pursue a wholeness or integrity that is fluid, inclusive and interconnected... a female hero must insist upon herself, something that most women are neither taught nor encouraged to do." This self-reliant attitude is conveyed in an episode of *Farscape*, when Aeryn Sun, on a visit to earth, borrows clothes from John Crichton's sister so she will fit in with earth fashions; she returns the clothes before the episode's end and dons her own black leather Peacekeeper uniform - pants, vest, and long duster coat. When asked why, she simply replies: "I feel more comfortable in these [her own clothes]. It's who I am" ("Terra Firma").

Not surprisingly, however, the issue of these strong, independent, self-sufficient women also adhering to the "eye-candy" or "cheesecake" premise of television and Hollywood has many critics worried, both feminists and conservatives alike. As Mary Spicuzza of Silicon Valley's Metro News relates, critics worry that the message being conveyed, especially to girls and young women, is that, if a woman is to be assertive, strong, and "butt-kicking," she also better be sexually available and attractive. Spicuzza states: "Critics say the trouble is plenty of butt-kicking women on the screen are ultimately most concerned with being sexy, finding a man who can make their lives complete, and settling down. They say that women heroines are less concerned with achieving female liberation than satisfying male fantasy." However, these four series depict women who, while not set against having a loving, long-term relationship, are not portrayed as desperately seeking Mr. Right in order to "complete" their lives, and none of the

women shows any sign that she regards her career and current life as unsatisfying, empty, or lonely. All of them have highly developed senses of self and strong beliefs that what they do can help make the world a better place. They are highly motivated in their chosen careers or causes, and accept that, often, they must make sacrifices, which sometimes includes foregoing a "normal" relationship, but - and this is key - they don't whine or brood endlessly about not having "the one" in their lives. They are depicted as complex and conflicted, but already "whole," as Noble claims women living a heroic life must be (Eby). As critic Susan Isaacs states: "[B]utt-kicking babes have provided a portrayal of strong, sexy women who fight for good rather than use all their energy to win the object of their affections, or obsessions" (qtd. in Picuzza).

I would argue, in fact, that these series are on the cutting edge in terms of how they deal with the issues of sex, romance, and, especially, love. None of the protagonists has given up on love and sex, in spite of her devotion to her career or cause, and none is portrayed as a bed-hopper or sexual "predator." Establishing trusting, long-term relationships with others, romantic or not, is as much a part of her overall character as is each woman's drive for success. While each has or has had relationships that seem fraught with countless obstacles, those problems are incorporated plausibly into the story lines. On one level, the problem-laden relationship is a marketing and ratings ploy; the history of television series is littered with countless shows whose ratings have plummeted when the sexual tension between main characters is resolved successfully: *Moonlighting*, *Remington Steele* and *Cheers* are three famous examples (once Diane and Sam came together, ratings dropped, until their relationship broke up again). On a more symbolic level, however, the obstacles can be viewed as a reflection of the reality that many modern women face. Even in the most "normal" of circumstances, truly honest, equal relationships are difficult to achieve; women who possess or must exhibit strength and aggressiveness face greater challenges when it comes to romantic relationships.

Farscape and *Alias* both feature an important relationship between the protagonist and one specific male character - Michael Vaughn in *Alias* and John Crichton in *Farscape*. An important element in the relationships depicted in these two shows is that neither of the women was specifically looking for a romantic relationship, and, in fact, had strong motivations for avoiding them at all cost. Circumstances that throw the couples together constantly and their work toward a common goal create, first, friendship and empathy, then, romantic and sexual attraction that becomes love for both partners in each relationship. In the *Farscape* mini-series *The Peacekeeper Wars*, Aeryn Sun and John Crichton even get married, and Aeryn gives birth to the child they conceived during the fourth season of the series - in the midst of their efforts at saving their particular section of the universe (*Peacekeeper Wars*, Part II). *Farscape*, in fact, takes the idea of gender equality the furthest of all four shows, having at its core what might be called a traditional romance that ends in marriage, but a marriage between characters who consider each other fully equal in terms of abilities,

strength, and, most importantly, emotional vulnerability. Aeryn directly explains this to another character who questions why she "allows" herself to love someone beneath her - as a Peacekeeper, she is considered genetically and socially superior to Crichton's human species (Peacekeeper Wars, Part I). Also interesting is the fact that both Vaughn and Crichton fully accept all aspects of Sydney's and Aeryn's personality, including the fact that they are physically strong, psychologically conflicted, and almost obsessively committed to their causes or occupations. In addition, both men also must deal with their own demons - double or secretive lives, dangerous occupations, and conflicted past relationships - and understand that the women with whom they are involved accept, trust, and love them in spite of those demons.

Crossing Jordan and Relic Hunter are groundbreaking in a different way in the manner in which they deal with their protagonists' romantic involvements. Although part of Jordan Cavanaugh's psychological complexity is her fear of commitment, she does not obsess over her lack of a permanent relationship in her life, and the show's writers take great pains not to make her a stereotype of a neurotic woman constantly seeking love in the wrong places in order to "fill a void." She does not forgo dating or even the occasional sexual liaison, and, most importantly, the other characters do not pass judgment on her single and sexually-active status, nor are they depicted as matchmakers - it seems to be simply "status quo." In the pilot episode, Jordan admits to the boyfriend with whom she has recently broken up that she has commitment issues. Throughout each season, viewers have watched Jordan come to terms with those issues, finally confronting the reasons for her fear of commitment in the episode "Intruded," aired October 10, 2004, when she realizes the loss of her mother when she was twelve has made her afraid to form attachments. Notably, throughout the first three seasons when she finally begins to establish trusting relationships with her co-workers, friends (several who are male), and her father, the series creators did not immediately launch her into an evolving romantic relationship. Instead, Jordan deepens her friendships with certain co-workers and a male police detective, Woody Hoyt, with whom she goes out occasionally during the second season (2002-03), with whom she establishes a deeper level of trust and friendship during the third season (2003-04), and, finally, with whom she begins a "weird kind of courtship dance," as her character describes it in the opening episode of the fourth season ("After Dark"). The series takes pains, in fact, to show that, while she is deeply committed to her career, she enjoys an active social life, but seems to be in no hurry to find a permanent "significant other."

More revolutionary, however, is the portrayal of Sydney Fox in Relic Hunter. Although the series makes no effort to hide that she has had both sexual and romantic relationships - with several of her "old flames" reappearing from time to time to ask for her relic hunting expertise - Sydney is portrayed as neither afraid of commitment nor troubled by her currently unattached status - and also not judged by others in the show. Of the four protagonists discussed here, Sydney

Fox appears as the most comfortable with her sexuality, her femininity (even out in the field, she rarely hides her femaleness), her physical and intellectual strength, and her single status. As Bickley states: "[S]he's no Ally McArcheologist, mooning around about not having someone to play Indiana Jones to her Indiana Jane." In one episode, she teams up for a relic hunt with a man, Lucas, to whom she is sexually attracted, but is disappointed when she finds that he has lied consistently about his occupation and purpose for searching for the relic. Sydney's secretary, Karen, who is infatuated with Lucas, asks Sydney to admit that she was tempted to pursue a relationship with him. Sydney responds that she is looking for a man "who is who he says he is; who doesn't lie or pretend to be something else." Karen retorts: "Now who's dreaming?" ("Vampire's Kiss"). Sydney first looks at Karen with a thoughtful expression, but then smiles and shakes her head, implying that she doesn't subscribe to Karen's cynicism. She is unwilling to compromise her standards just for the sake of having a man in her life. What *Crossing Jordan* and *Relic Hunter* impart to viewers, especially young women, is the notion of a single woman for whom being single is not a deficiency or a curse. Both are passionate about their jobs, have active friendships and social lives, and, most importantly, are comfortable and content (at least Sydney Fox is) with their singleness and sexuality, a message too rarely conveyed in the popular media.

The four protagonists do, on occasion, don stereotypical disguises in the tradition of heroines of old who want to avoid being punished for being outside the norm (Pearson and Pope 10). However, they powerfully challenge that original premise because they are, instead, heeding Luce Irigaray's call for consciously "using" the stereotype, not just to survive in the world, but to begin to subvert the status quo. Irigaray states in her article "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine.": "One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and then begin to thwart [the tendency to make the feminine inferior]" (76). Although they often dress in a provocative manner, what we might call the "bimbo" stereotype, they all invalidate the stereotype by making it clear they can take care of themselves. In the pilot episode of *Crossing Jordan*, Jordan uses the promise of sex to lure into a bedroom the man she suspects murdered the victim in her current case, including dangling handcuffs in front of him as he lies in bed, enticing him with the prospect of an S&M session. Once handcuffed to the bedpost, Jordan walks away from him, calling him a "slime-bucket," and promises to call the police to release him from his bondage ("Pilot").

Most importantly, in all four series, even the male protagonists rarely question or condemn the women's ability to take care of themselves or to do the rescuing. In fact, those men who do try to act like knights in shining armor find that the damsels they are trying to save often are better trained and more efficient than they are. In *Farscape* and *Alias*, especially, the protagonists are teamed with efficient and self-confident male counterparts, who, refreshingly, take the abilities of their female partners for granted, seem comfortable with the idea of

exceptionally strong women, and rarely exhibit the traits of the "macho" male who feels he needs to rescue the "maiden." For instance, John Crichton, on *Farscape*, a hotshot pilot on earth, regularly admits that Aeryn is a better pilot than he is. All four of the protagonists do, however, occasionally use the stereotype of the "helpless female" in order to gain the advantage in a fight - psychologically disarm the more physically powerful male, lure him into a complacent attitude, then hit or use a weapon in the most effective way. Kate Muir, in her 1992 book *Arms and the Woman*, counters the long entrenched idea that women are "naturally" more peace-loving and passive, and will shun violence at all costs: "As much as possible, women avoid physical confrontation, because they know they will come off worst against a man, but that does not mean that as a last resort, when completely cornered, they will not resort to violence, and often effective violence" (99). Moreover, if, as is the case in three of these series (*Relic Hunter*, *Farscape*, and *Alias*), a woman is trained to fight and even kill efficiently, physical confrontation is simply another possibility to plan for. The disguise motif is taken one step further in all four of these series, adding yet another layer to the issue of stretching gender parameters and playing with gender assumptions. All either lead literal double lives or hide important aspects of their lives to all but their closest friends or allies. Additionally, the people closest to all four protagonists are people without much authority - low-level employees, outcasts in some form or another, or members of minority groups that have little power in society. On one level, this leaves room for the protagonist to be the strongest character in the group, a leader around whom the others gravitate. However, each of the protagonists, while certainly a forceful personality, treats these friends and allies as equals, including those in technically subordinate positions; this is especially obvious in *Relic Hunter*, *Alias*, and *Crossing Jordan*. Another way of looking at this aspect, then, might be that, because each woman suffers a certain amount of discrimination or patronization from those with authority over her, she refuses to treat others with that kind of disdain. Instead, she saves the disdain for (and often works against) the people in power who discount the importance or value of those "in the trenches." This particular character point is in line with the specifically feminist and non-elitist image of the female hero proposed by Pearson and Pope: "Others are both actually and potentially her equals, and she encourages them to undertake their own journeys" (14).

Sydney Fox of *Relic Hunter* is a professor of ancient studies, but there are subtle hints that her colleagues patronize her because she is not only a woman, but also a young, attractive, single woman who is popular with her students. There is also the implication that her relic hunting is tolerated only because of the funds it brings to the college. It is doubtful, too, that her academic colleagues truly know what those activities entail and would probably not approve of the characters she often consorts with during her adventures - thieves, mercenaries, and con artists. Only her graduate teaching assistant Nigel, one of her most trusted friends and a frequent participant in her relic hunts, and her secretary (Claudia in seasons one and two; Karen in season three) are aware of exactly what her expeditions

involve. While her renown as a relic hunter is quite extensive out in the field, because her academic colleagues and superiors do not inhabit that world, her field reputation is relegated to her "double" life. An interesting aspect of Sydney's double life is that romantic opportunities most often occur in her adventurous, relic-hunting existence, with men who understand living on the edge and who seem to accept her unconventionality and self-sufficiency, a hint, perhaps, that a relationship arising out of her more traditional world of academia would not survive the disparate aspects of her life.

On *Farscape*, Aeryn Sun's multiple lives are not so much a case of synchronous life paths, like Sydney Fox or Sydney Bristow (below), as it is a case of distancing herself from a previous life she no longer believes in and about which she develops deep regrets. Once an elite and trusted member of the ruthless Peacekeepers, when she is separated from her unit in an attempt to recapture escaped prisoners, and then taken prisoner herself, she is deemed by her superiors as too contaminated by her exposure to the prisoners to be efficient as a Peacekeeper, and is targeted for termination by those she called her family for most of her life. On the new ship - a Leviathan, a bio-technical spacecraft known as Moya - Aeryn must learn to suppress her Peacekeeper instincts and gain the trust of the escaped prisoners, who have formed an uneasy alliance among themselves in their fight to survive against the Peacekeeper forces intent on capturing or killing them. Among the prisoners is John Crichton, a human catapulted into this part of the universe when his ship came through a wormhole, with whom Aeryn eventually shares a romantic relationship - something prohibited among the Peacekeepers. The constant struggle that Aeryn faces between the life she used to know and the new life she must forge for herself makes for conflicted situations - including learning to trust and depend upon those she used to consider criminals, enemies, or expendable entities. This struggle includes confronting the consequences of activities she engaged in previously without question, as well as revealing to her new colleagues elements of her past that have the potential to destroy the tenuous relationships she has established with them. Often, aspects of her previous life intrude into her new existence in violent and unexpected ways, forcing Aeryn to find ways to reconcile the two sides of her personality.

Sydney Bristow leads a two-layered double life in the first season and half of the second season of *Alias*. To her friends, she is an international banker and graduate student with a very hectic and demanding work schedule that often entails sudden and far-flung travel destinations. In her "true" occupation, she is also leading a double life, for she is a CIA agent posing as an SD-6 agent. Besides her CIA "handler," Michael Vaughn, only three other people know all aspects of her life: her estranged father, who also happens to be a CIA agent posing as an SD-6 agent; her long-thought dead, recently resurfaced mother, a former KGB agent who turned herself into the CIA and is helping them (during season two; in season three, she escapes but helps her daughter and ex-husband secretly); and her best friend Will, a journalist who unwittingly becomes

involved in one of her cases and has to be saved by Sydney and her father from sure death. After the dismantling of SD-6 halfway through season two, Sydney's double life as CIA operative and graduate student/international banker continues for those she associates with outside of her CIA colleagues. This show most blatantly makes use of the "sex-kitten" or "bimbo" stereotype, as in almost every episode Sydney dresses the part of the seductive, provocative "nymph." As in the other series, her closest friends and allies are either students or junior-level employees in their respective jobs - including her primary CIA contact, Vaughn, who, rather than simply seeing her as an impersonal operative, develops deep concern for Sydney on a more friendly and romantic level, which turns into love, and they begin an intimate relationship by the end of season two. Complications in the relationship arise in season three when it is revealed at the start of that season that Sydney was missing for two years, and thought dead, and Vaughn marries someone else. When Sydney returns, she begins working with Vaughn once more, and together they uncover a plot to destroy the CIA that involves Vaughn's new wife, who turns out to have been a double agent herself, planted in the CIA after Sydney's disappearance. Much of the "sleuthing" that Sydney and Vaughn engage in is beyond the bounds of authority figures, and they often rely on other low-level employees that they count as their trusted friends to help them in their activities. Rather than painting Sydney and Vaughn as rogue and worthy of censure, their actions cast them in the roles of the heroic moral center of the series, for it is clear that their actions are undertaken for a greater cause - a cause that the authority figures often refuse to believe is legitimate or worth the trouble. A few higher level characters are shown to be part of the corruption or in league with the enemy, making it even more imperative that Sydney and Vaughn root out the corruption.

Jordan Cavanaugh, on *Crossing Jordan*, does not lead a double life as much as she tries to hide a traumatic emotional early life (her mother was murdered when she was twelve years old), which has left her uneasy about trusting others, nervous about making commitments of any kind, and highly confrontational with authority figures. Her tough, "I-don't-care" exterior is often a disguise, which only those she has become closest to can see through. Her sometimes obsessive desire to pursue certain cases that come into the morgue reveals that she has deep empathy for victims and survivors, as well as a strong conviction that truth and justice are tantamount, which all stem from the anger she feels about her mother's unsolved murder. One striking element is that one of the closest, but not romantic, relationships she has is with her direct superior, Garret Macy, a bond that allows them to share secrets and emotional confessions with each other that they cannot share with anyone else. Although he is her boss, he rarely truly pulls rank to stop her unofficial detective activities; instead, he relies on their close friendship to request that she drop her investigations, often pleading "for me, Jordan; just do it for me." In an interesting twist, Jordan often coaxes Macy into "slightly illegal" activities in order to solve a case, a move that works to equalize their positions; the line between supervisor and employee is often blurred in this series. Additionally, Macy's relationship with Jordan is a catalyst for the less

formal relationships he has established with the rest of his employees, further blurring those lines. She has also made friends with Woody Hoyt, a relationship that is obviously headed, eventually, for a serious romance, but that the series creators seem to be cautiously evolving, given Jordan's conflicted psychology. A remarkable aspect of this deepening relationship is that Woody makes it clear he trusts and values Jordan's "hunches" on the cases he works with her, rather than feeling insulted or belittled when she seems to have more investigative insight in many instances. The fact that their relationship is built on a strong friendship bond will, no doubt, make it all that more satisfying for series fans when it finally does become intimate - and, perhaps, reflective of the kind of relationships "real" women have or would like to have? This series (like the others) makes a point of featuring strong male characters depicted as able to accept a strong woman as an equal in intellect, and not as needing to engage in ego-boosting power plays. It is also notable that a series featuring such a strong female lead does not fall prey to the assumption that other women will naturally resent her and try to tear her down. She is equally as collegial and cooperative with her female co-workers as she is with her male colleagues, in spite of Jordan's stubborn tenacity and sometimes abrasive and competitive attitude. Because this series is the most rooted in reality, it serves as the most optimistic example of what is possible for capable, intellectually tough, "kick-butt babes."

Besides the more explicit instances of gender manipulations discussed above, on a deeper and more psychological level, all four series play with and subvert the concept of "gendered" heroism. Long touted as one of the primary tools for archetypal and myth criticism, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* analyzes heroic myths and legends across many different cultures and periods and finds important similarities among and across the tales. This "hero cycle," as developed by Campbell, can be explained as follows:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passageA hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30, original emphasis)

Two crucial stages of Campbell's heroic journey can be detected in all four series: "the road of trials" and a complex relationship with a father figure that eventually leads to "atonement." In the road of trials, the hero must travel a "long and perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination. Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed - again, again, and again. Meanwhile there will be a multitude of preliminary victories" (109). Traditionally, this kind of active "dragon-slaying" has been relegated to male protagonists; however, as all four of these female heroes use physicality when fighting their enemies and/or retrieving their "treasures," the "road of trials" becomes distinctly gender-flexible in these cases. That Campbell's hero myth sets the tone for the journey each of these female characters undertakes is attested to by the

following comment by Charles Eglee, co-creator with James Cameron of *Dark Angel* (another "kick-butt babe"), cancelled in 2002 after two seasons on the Fox Network: "Traditionally the kind of Grail quests like the one our character [Max(ine) Guevara, played by Jessica Alba] is on are done from the male point of view, but we've seen that for a thousand years. That's *Beowulf*" (qtd. in Goodwin). Christopher Goodwin, in his UK *Sunday Times* article, adds that these new "kick-butt" female heroes are reflections of a growing trend of athleticism and assertiveness in reality: The new heroines are mirrored by the new breed of no-nonsense female sports stars, Venus Williams and the Olympic track goddess Marion Jones. "These movies are giving positive role models to women," says the kung fu master Paul Koh, half of whose classes are now composed of women. "You're not the damsel in distress any more, you're the hero."

Additionally, all four characters lack a nurturing mother figure (through death or betrayal) and have strained, complicated relationships with a father with whom they seek some kind of reconciliation or "atonement," both considered crucial aspects of the male hero's pattern (and many classic fairy tales). This stage forces the hero to confront resentment, fear, or even hatred of a "father" in order to allow understanding and forgiveness to happen, what Campbell calls at-one-ment, and, in doing so, the hero confronts and resolves conflicts in his/her own psychological makeup, helping the hero complete his/her journey successfully (Campbell 126-148). All four protagonists confront uncomfortable truths about their own personalities as they learn to accept their fathers as only human (or in the case of Aeryn Sun on *Farscape*, only Sebacean) and not one-dimensional evil ogres or infallible, unapproachable idols. Notably, all four protagonists are following their fathers' examples when it comes to their chosen careers, and reconciliation and acceptance of their fathers helps them accept a major part of themselves, as well. Aeryn Sun and Jordan Cavanaugh must learn to come to terms with the concept that the fathers they idolized and regarded as almost infallible are (were in the case of Aeryn) vulnerable and imperfect. Sydney Fox and Sydney Bristow, on the other hand, are given the opportunity to reconcile with fathers they considered for most of their lives as treacherous, unloving, and uncaring. While both these fathers do continue to retain some of their darker qualities, both find common ground on which they can meet their daughters. In the case of Sydney Bristow of *Alias*, her father, Jack Bristow, becomes an important ally in both SD-6 and the CIA, and often is involved in saving Sydney from tight spots. The fourth season, however, promises to reveal new, harmful secrets in Jack's past as regards his daughter. The same holds true for *Crossing Jordan*, as viewers have been given hints that there is more to know about Max Cavanaugh's (Jordan's father) involvement in the circumstances surrounding his wife's death (Jordan's mother). True atonement with the father is yet to be achieved on these two series, which will allow for the completion of the heroic cycle. Conversely, however, all four series also feature elements of a distinctly feminine or feminized heroic journey pattern, which includes as one of its most important stages a reconciliation or at-one-ment with a mother or mother figure. Pearson and Pope are the strongest proponents of such a feminist heroic cycle.

They state: "The traditional quest is a search for the father, who will initiate the hero into the world. Through the discovery of the father, the hero finds an appropriate identity and place in society" (177). However, for the feminist or female hero, that quest has another component: "Having discovered the powerful father [and initially rejected the mother early in the quest], she reconsiders her original repudiation of the mother. Her quest becomes a search for her true, powerful female parent" (177). All four protagonists must not only come to terms with either their idol-worship or hate/distrust of their fathers, but also come to terms with traumatic relationships with/memories of their mothers.

Aeryn's confrontation and reconciliation with her mother Xhalax Sun (just before Xhalax dies) helps them re-establish the unusual loving bond they had when Aeryn was a child, who was born of a loving union between two Peacekeepers, prohibited among the Sebacean race, who procreate only to "restock" the Peacekeeper forces ("The Choice"). The knowledge of this love gives Aeryn a new understanding of herself and propels her on the rest of her journey, which culminates in her marriage to Crichton, giving birth to their son, and helping to bring peace between the Peacekeepers and their enemies the Scarrens (Peacekeeper Wars, Part II). Sydney Bristow confronts a mother who not only abandoned her when she was a child, but who was a KGB spy using her marriage to Sydney's father to gather secrets. In spite of her distrust, throughout season two, Sydney finds herself wanting to reconnect with her mother (in CIA custody) on an emotional level, creating more conflict but also allowing for growth. During season three, after having had a reconciliation of sorts with her mother just before Irina (the mother) escapes from CIA custody, Sydney finds out from her father that he is in secret contact with Irina, and that Irina has been helping him, first, to find Sydney during her two-year absence, and, subsequently, to cover Sydney's and Vaughn's tracks during their personal missions outside of official CIA sanction.

For Jordan Cavanaugh, the situation is more difficult, as she must confront the anger, not only about her mother's murder, but also at her mother for "abandoning" her (when she died). By the end of season two, Jordan uncovers disturbing truths about her mother - she was mentally unstable, had an affair that produced a child, a brother Jordan never knew she had because Jordan's father placed the child with another family when it was clear his wife's mental state was becoming more fragile, and that her mother may have been murdered by someone with knowledge of the affair and resulting son. She also learns that her father kept it all from Jordan to protect her, something she must come to terms with as she finally realizes the fallibility and fragility of both her mother and father. Although season three does not return to this story line directly (it has been rumored that the producers wish to leave final resolution of this story line until much later in the series), subtle references imply that Jordan has come to uneasy terms with all these revelations and has found a way to move on with her life for the moment, relying on the help of her friends and colleagues (especially Lily Lebowski, the grief counselor at the Medical Examiner's office and Jordan's

friend, and Garrett Macy, who has the longest history with Jordan, from the time she worked with him several years before her current stint at the ME's office).

While *Relic Hunter* does not reveal to its viewers how or when Sydney's Fox's mother disappeared from her life, it is intimated several times that she lost her mother at an early age, and that this resulted in a distant relationship with her father - also a relic hunter, although one with more mercenary traits than his daughter - with whom she does reconcile in one episode ("Three Rivers to Cross"). In that same episode, Sydney meets her father's new fiancée, who is about the same age as Sydney. Sydney at first resents the new woman in her father's life, telling Nigel, her assistant, that she thinks she is the "typical bimbo" her father would be associated with ("Three Rivers"). By the end of the episode, however, Sydney has come to realize that Jenny, the fiancée, has a sensible head on her shoulders, really loves Sydney's father, and does not want Sydney to consider her a "replacement" for her mother, but, rather, a friend ("Three Rivers"). By coming to some kind of atonement with her father through this new "mother" figure, Sydney has, in effect, achieved atonement with the mother, as well. Another episode features Sydney's mentor (and maternal figure), archaeologist Kate Trotter, who has allowed herself to be seduced by a corporation's greed; Sydney helps her regain her passion for "true" archaeology, as opposed to relic-hunting "for hire." This reconnection with her mentor revitalizes her own flagging passion as she faces stressful forces to become more responsible in her academic career - i.e. less eager to follow her "whims" in relic hunting ("Eyes of Toklamanee").

Pearson and Pope describe the stage of atonement with the mother as a re-enactment of the Demeter and Persephone myth (183). In order for Persephone to fully realize her potential and heal the wounds inflicted on her by her abduction and forced separation from her mother, she must reunite with the mother that scoured the land to regain her. I would argue that these four series, rather than re-enacting the Demeter and Persephone myth in their mother-daughter story lines, actually reverse the myth, for it is the daughters that bring the "mothers" out of the darkness and pain of "death" into the land of the living again. It is notable that in all of the episodes featuring the "mother-daughter" reconciliations or atonements, the mother figures emerge from a dark space into a lighter or lighted space, including Jordan Cavanaugh's dead mother, who appears in an old black and white 8mm home movie that Jordan watches in a darkened room. Her mother suddenly appears in a flash of white light after the darkness of the damaged frames that came before it ("Secrets & Lies, Part I").

In addition to this feminine reconnection to the mother, each protagonist also clearly exhibits what proponents of a feminist heroic cycle claim is the higher moral character of a truly feminist hero. In *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*, Nadya Aisenberg defines this feminist hero as more egalitarian and morally committed to improving, rather than conquering, the world (13). For Pearson and Pope, the feminine heroic ideal is an androgynous whole that "does

not presume to kill dragons for others" and learns to accommodate "the best qualities associated with men and with women" (15). All four series place their heroes at the moral center of their worlds, including Farscape's Aeryn Sun, who, because of her past, is intent on righting wrongs she herself may have caused (much like that other "bad" girl-gone good, Xena, Warrior Princess). Relic Hunter's Sydney Fox cannot be bribed or seduced into selling the relics she finds for personal gain (unlike many of the rival treasure hunters she encounters during her adventures), she often helps or sides with the powerless against ruthless or greedy characters, and she makes sure criminals and villains are punished appropriately. On Alias, Sydney Bristow's entire existence is geared toward making a better world, as her primary goal is, first, to destroy SD-6, and, later, to thwart enemies of the CIA and the United States. Alias's premise is clearly conveyed in a scene midway in the first season when her two friends Will and Francie, who don't know she is an agent (Will only finds out at the end of season two, and Francie is killed in that season), complain that her job is too demanding, and she should quit. Her emphatic and emotional reply surprises them: "If you knew what I deal with every day, you'd thank me for doing my job so well" ("Spirit"). Jordan Cavanaugh's overwhelming drive on Crossing Jordan is to make sure justice is done and the truth revealed for the sake of the victims and their loved ones, especially for those victims others regard as "unimportant."

Taken on its own, however, the feminist-based heroic pattern seems to have no room for female heroes who do kill "dragons" for others, as these four protagonists constantly must do in their careers or adventures. Further, the feminist heroes proposed by Pearson and Pope and Aisenberg imply that some kind of singular essence of nurturing and gentle femaleness exists, leaving no space for the more aggressive and psychologically-conflicted nature each of the protagonists exhibits. Even Pearson and Pope's model of the androgynous whole falls short of what these characters suggest because it implies some kind of universal standard for all humans, denying gender individuality. Rather than symbolizing androgyny, with its implication of transcending or erasing gender categories, the four characters expand the parameters of what it means to be female, and demand a redefinition of femininity - one that has room for both dragon slayers and tender nurturers. The four series, therefore, challenge the traditionally exclusive male domain of the hero, as well as combine the elements of the traditional (male) hero myth with the new feminist vision of the hero cycle, in much the same way that the protagonists combine elements of the classic male action hero with aspects of the newer, tougher "kick-butt babe" - a hero who can be simultaneously aggressive, rough, tough, tender, and sex-kittenish, as well as possess a healthy dose of compassionate morality that actively strives for a better world. Benfer comments in her article on Charlie's Angels that the new female action hero is a blend of "the male action hero and the Hollywood vixen. It's like fusing GI Joe and Barbie." She goes on to say that today's women - those she calls the "daughters of Second Wave feminists" - "had parents who encouraged us to play with boys' toys. It's just that we couldn't get the boys to play with ours. So we learned both parts."

This new breed of female action hero gives credence to Jennifer Coates's words in her essay "'Thank God I'm a Woman': The Construction of Differing Femininities": "[T]he woman we perform is not the same woman in all circumstances" (295). In one particularly remarkable episode of *Relic Hunter*, Jamie, an old female acquaintance of Sydney Fox, reveals that she is envious of Sydney's independent life: "Look at you; you've made your own life; no man owns you, and it is filled with action [and] adventure," to which Sydney answers: "Everything comes at a cost; it's just a matter of whether you can live with it or not" ("Treasure Island"). Eventually Sydney says: "I love my life, but it's not without its regrets." "Really?" asks Jamie. Sydney's reply is, perhaps, the perfect anthem of the new "kick butt" female hero who is comfortable with the many roles she must and, more importantly, often wants to play: "No, but I just wanted to make you feel better" ("Treasure Island"). The continuing popularity of the "kick-butt" babe, in both television and film and in a growing number of fantasy, mystery, and even romance book series, provides hope that, finally, society will accept that a woman can be many things: "kick ass," smart, independent, dangerous, sexy, flirty, caring, committed, conflicted, nurturing, and heroic - and she no longer has to apologize for any of it.

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