

“You Can Be More”: *Farscape*, Melodrama, and Space Opera Revisited

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Abstract: The science fiction television series *Farscape* (Syfy, 1999–2003) was notable for its subversive blend of science fiction and soap opera conventions, which allowed the series to present as a complex study of gender and sexuality. However, small but overt elements serve to undermine the subtler feminist or queer potential of *Farscape*'s overall structures. This article examines the series, specifically in light of later-season episodes and the two-part conclusion, *The Peacekeeper Wars*, in examining whether *Farscape* successfully maintains its position as groundbreaking cult television.

Keywords: *Farscape*; television; science fiction; gender; popular culture; space opera

The science fiction television series *Farscape* (Syfy, 1999–2003) has been read as a Cold War metaphor (Guffey, 2013), a study of female community (Ginn, 2013b), and a meditation on the complexities of human (and alien) nature (Telotte, 2013). The series was also notable for its subversive blend of science fiction and melodrama, its challenge to gender and sexuality binaries, and its many muppets. Although its genre-bending accomplishments are now arguably overshadowed by the adventurousness of more recent series like *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy, 2004–09) or *Fringe* (Fox, 2008–12), *Farscape* presented a uniquely complex study of gender and sexuality within an overall milieu of aliens, guns, and outer space; it could be read as both science fiction and soap opera, incorporating and challenging the tropes common to both (Lavigne, 2005). This reading, however, applies primarily to earlier episodes, as later installments witnessed the addition of several minor but conspicuous elements—particularly in the final (fourth) season and the concluding miniseries *The Peacekeeper Wars* (Hallmark, 2004)—that serve to undermine the subtler feminist or queer potential of *Farscape*'s initial seasons. This article is intended as a revisitation and significant revision of research I first published in 2005—work which had been written before the release of *The Peacekeeper Wars*. The nature of the series' conclusion, as well as a decade of additional consideration on my part, has altered many of my original arguments. *Farscape* does both incorporate and subvert traditional soap opera elements, but many of its advances were rendered

problematic by the formulaic nature of later episodes. *Farscape* follows John Crichton (Ben Browder), an astronaut from Earth who accidentally pilots an experimental shuttle through a wormhole to the far reaches of the galaxy, where a fascist regime of human-like “Peacekeeper” soldiers is at war with the equally violent, brutal, and visibly alien Scarran Imperium. There, Crichton encounters a group of escaped prisoners: exiled Peacekeeper soldier Aeryn Sun (Claudia Black), tentacled Luxan warrior D'Argo (Anthony Simcoe), priestess and Delvian living plant Zhaan (Virginia Hey), and deposed Hynarian dictator Rygel XVI (voiced by Jonathan Hardy). They are soon joined by the rebellious Nebari thief Chiana (Gigi Edgley). On the living ship Moya, the group attempts to escape pursuit by both the Peacekeepers and the Scarrans, most notably those forces led by the Scarran-Peacekeeper hybrid Scorpious (Wayne Pygram), who seeks the wormhole technology that Crichton alone possesses. As Crichton struggles to maintain his freedom, win Aeryn's love, and find his way home, he learns intergalactic survival skills through encounters with a series of alien planets, new life forms, enemies, and allies.

Farscape's progressiveness was always limited; any discussion regarding the subversive potential of Crichton's journey must acknowledge that he is yet another heterosexual white male adventurer within a genre (and culture) already suffused with too many of the same, and that the series may play with gender and genre expectations, but its lack of human racial diversity leaves much to be desired. Further, the

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early seasons were much more experimental than latter parts of the narrative. After *Farscape*'s unexpected cancellation left a newly engaged Crichton and Aeryn reduced to a collapsing pile of tiny crystals, forever suspended in the "might have been" of a sudden cliffhanger (4.22, "Bad Timing"), the *Peacekeeper Wars* miniseries offered a follow-up (airing in two 90-minute segments) that both concluded the series and ultimately reinscribed traditional, heteronormative binaries in what had initially been a gender-progressive space opera adventure.

Space Opera

When I first referred to *Farscape* as a "space opera" in 2005, I did so in a positive sense; while the term has been used derisively elsewhere, to describe "juvenile programs [that] presented self-righteous and square-jawed heroes championing conformity and conservation through a range of clear-cut morality tales" (Feasey, 2004, p.57), it can also highlight *Farscape*'s liminal position as a space-based action/adventure that is also a soap opera, and the ways in which the series' soap opera elements have successfully been blended with science fiction action tropes to create a compelling, character-driven science fiction narrative. In this respect, the series is part of an acknowledged trend in science fiction readership circles:

Space opera is a subgenre of speculative fiction or science fiction that emphasizes romantic, often melodramatic adventure, set mainly or entirely in space, generally involving conflict between opponents possessing powerful (and sometimes quite fanciful) technologies and abilities. Perhaps the most significant trait of space opera is that settings, characters, battles, powers, and themes tend to be very large-scale. (Goodreads, n.d.)

Farscape's complicated narrative arcs may draw comparisons with other serialized 1990s and early 2000s-era science fiction television programs like *The X-Files* (1993–2002), *Babylon 5* (1994–98), and *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007). The series' emergence synchronizes with an overall rise in complex television writing that may trace back to the 1980s suc-

cesses of prime-time soap operas *Dallas* (1978–91) and *Dynasty* (1981–89), which helped to popularize the type of serialized narratives that demanded viewer attention across multiple episodes and seasons (rather than allowing audiences to tune in for a single-episode procedural "case of the week").

Some of the series' narrative twists specifically reflect common historical soap opera tropes:

- the evil woman
 - the great sacrifice
 - the winning back of an estranged lover/spouse
 - marrying her for her money, respectability, etc.
 - the unwed mother
 - deceptions about the paternity of children
 - career vs. housewife
 - the alcoholic woman (and occasionally man)
- (Weibel, cited Modleski, 1982, p.86, Lavigne, 2005, p.60)

In *Farscape*, we see duplicitous women exemplified by the villainous Commandant Grayza (Rebecca Riggs) and the perennially deceptive Sikozu (Raelee Hill). Zhaan (Virginia Hey) sacrifices herself to save Aeryn's life (3.01, "Season of Death"). Crichton fights to win Aeryn; Aeryn fights to win Crichton; D'Argo and Chiana break up and make up. Crichton marries an alien princess in order to provide his unborn child with a father (3.13, "Look at the Princess, Part 3: The Maltese Crichton"); Aeryn insists on being married before her child is born (*The Peacekeeper Wars*). She also allows Crichton to believe the child is his, even when she herself isn't sure (4.06, "Natural Election"). Finally, Crichton cannot reconcile his domestic fantasies of Aeryn with the reality (3.22, "Dog With Two Bones"; 4.01, "Crichton Kicks"), and he turns to drugs in order to forget her (4.05, "Promises").

All of these narrative twists are commonly employed by soap operas, which maintain loyal viewerships by focusing on dramatic, never-ending domestic tensions; in *Farscape*, intergalactic warfare may threaten all life in the universe, but the interpersonal relationships between Crichton and his new-found family are what ultimately provide the plot. Dramatic

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tensions are based equally in interstellar conflict and domestic family fractures, as Moya's crew must avert war while also learning to reconcile their interpersonal differences. As Modleski has noted of soap operas,

They present the viewer with a picture of a family which, though it is always in the process of breaking down, stays together no matter how intolerable its situation may get. Or, perhaps more accurately, the family remains close perpetually because it is perpetually in a chaotic state. The unhappiness generated by the family can only be solved in the family. Misery becomes not . . . the consequence and sign of the family's breakdown, but the very means of its functioning and perpetuation. (1982, p.90, cited Lavigne, 2005, p.58)

Moya's hallways are repeatedly the set pieces where domestic drama plays out—the same halls, seen over and over, as the actors pace through the same set episode after episode. The repetition reinforces the series' domestic basis: characters may explore a multitude of new ships and new planets—Aeryn may fly off at the toss of a coin, or Crichton may even return to Earth—but ultimately, everyone comes back home to Moya. The ship herself is often the source or site of conflict, as she is frequently under attack or wounded (e.g. 3.03, "Self-Inflicted Wounds, Part 1: Could'a, Would'a, Should'a"); she, too, is a character, with wants and desires of her own, and she perhaps best exemplifies *Farscape's* "space operatic" nature, as the interstellar ship that serves as the home base for interplanetary adventure is simultaneously mother and friend. The crew is composed of escaped prisoners thrown together by happenstance, but once thrown there, they are stuck with each other; the friendships and romances they form (and the schisms between them) are vital plot points throughout the series.

If "soap opera can be understood at its most basic level as a serialised drama that focuses on a range of family affairs, personal relationships and friendships" (Feasey, 2004, p.8), then *Farscape* is in many ways a perfect fit. This "space opera" combination of inter-

galactic adventure and soapy melodrama arguably granted *Farscape* much of its appeal to female audiences in particular. While historically, hard science fiction and its communities have often been seen as unwelcoming to female fans (Lefanu, 1988, p.4), soaps have been marketed to—and popular with—women (Kuhn, 1984; Modleski, 1982). *Farscape* is not "hard" science fiction, based in scientific research and detail, but its basic premise—an astronaut scientist shot into space via his own wormhole physics experiment—arguably reads as such. On one level, the show's production (and its incorporation of Aeryn Sun) followed a science fiction/fantasy genre trend that saw big-screen 1980s action heroines like Ellen Ripley and Sarah Connor followed by televised 1990s female leads like *Buffy* and *Xena* (Helford, 2000, p.4), which increased attention from female viewers and highlighted changes in the genre. However, *Farscape's* use of soap opera tropes further allowed it to attract a substantial female viewership (Crew, 2003; see also Ginn, 2013a, pp.24-25). This observation is not meant to encourage stereotypes about male and female viewers, but, instead, is meant to comment on *Farscape's* successful blend of masculinized and feminized approaches (such as action/adventure and serialized domestic drama, respectively).

Examining the aesthetics of this blend can also provide us with an initial look at *Farscape's* limitations. The question of gendered spectatorship has long suffused both film theory and soap opera studies (Kunst, 1984); within such an argument, most visual media is constructed by and for a heterosexual male subject position, containing images of female forms that cultivate the male gaze—a gaze that soap operas may thwart by privileging female narratives and resisting any primary, single-protagonist point of view (Joyrich, 1988; Kuhn, 1984; Modleski, 1982). *Farscape* makes use of this disruptive potential by combining the close-up, multi-character facial shots so common to soap operas (Modleski, 1982, p.99) with aliens, action sequences, and firefights (Lavigne, 2005, p.57). However, such aesthetic hybridity also ultimately plays to science fiction's assumed male spectator. While there are exceptions, such as

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Noranti or Ahkna, most of the women on the series are young and slender, their costumes decidedly revealing; Chiana's grey alien makeup uses dark lines to outline her cleavage, while Jool, Sikozu, and Aeryn frequently bare their midriffs for the camera. Zhaan is shown naked from behind in the series pilot (1.01, "Premiere"), while Chiana and Aeryn are both shown with naked backs and shoulders during sex scenes (2.10, "Look at the Princess, Part 1: A Kiss is But a Kiss"; 3.08, "Green-Eyed Monster"). *Farscape* is an adventurous, genre-bending series—within certain limits—and those limits include the sexualization of female bodies (Scodari, 2003, p.119). While Crichton may wear tight-fitting t-shirts or appear shirtless from time to time (1.14, "Jeremiah Crichton"), *Farscape* skews toward the male gaze. Further examination of its narratives reveals that its patriarchal frameworks become more apparent as the series progresses.

Gender Performances

While *Farscape* is centered on the adventures of Crichton, the heterosexual white male lead, it also introduces an array of multi-layered, individualized female protagonists. It hints at a sympathetic villainess, focuses on a sex-positive female character, and plays with gender performance binaries. The last of these, in particular, became more restricted by season 4, when specific episodes also raised questions about women's rights. The series' original playfulness, however, is notable.

In soap terms, *Farscape*'s disruptive potential is particularly noticeable in the series' treatment of the "evil woman." This soap opera villainess is typically distinguished by her agency; in a world of disempowered victims, she seeks to take control, and as a result of her machinations she may become the focus of the audience's (women's) anger (Modleski, 1982, p.98). Grayza, the over-sexualized, half-clothed femme fatale whom Crichton dubs "Commander Cleavage," is a highly placed Peacekeeper officer who commands squadrons of soldiers. She also unabashedly uses her sexuality to advance her professional status. She has a pheromone gland between her breasts that she uses to rape Crichton (4.02,

"What Was Lost, Part 1: Sacrifice") and chemically brainwash Lieutenant Braca (David Franklin) (3.07, "Thanks for Sharing"). In many ways, she is the prototypical villainess; her seductions are coldly calculated. "Would you have a weapon in your arsenal," she asks, "and leave it unused out of squeamish good taste?" (4.16, "Bringing Home the Beacon").

While Grayza has agency within the narrative, however, she is only one amongst a broad array of empowered female characters that do—differentiating her from soap situations where the villainous woman is the only one with independence and control. *Farscape* features a number of different female characters, all of whom demonstrate various forms of agency: Aeryn, the soldier; Zhaan, the priestess; Chiana, the thief; Jool (Tammy MacIntosh), the scientist; Sikozu, the spy; War Minister Ahkna (Francesca Buller), the Scarran military leader; and Noranti (Melissa Jaffer), the herbalist. Chiana is the most direct foil to Grayza; she, too, uses her sexuality as a tool. She flirts routinely with Crichton (i.e. 1.15, "Durka Returns") and engages quite vocally in sex with D'Argo (2.10, "Look at the Princess, Part 1: A Kiss is But a Kiss"); she is also openly willing to barter sexual favors in exchange for discounts on needed merchandise (4.16, "Bringing Home the Beacon"). Unlike Grayza, she takes pleasure in her sexual activities and does not engage with others without their consent. She is, nevertheless, a valued member of the crew; though she is slut-shamed by others (in *Farscape* terms, called a "tralk") and her shipmates may disdain her early in the series, they defend her by the end. Chiana and Grayza balance one another, but even they compose only a small part of a diverse array of strong female characters; the series thus branches out from classical soap opera tropes. In its earlier seasons, *Farscape* is further marked by its frequent play with gender binaries:

The *Farscape* universe is not a world without gender, but it is a world in which gender is constructed in a much wider range of ways than a traditional human gender-role structure allows. It is not a monstrous world but a playful one. (Christopher, 2004, p.277)

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No one on *Farscape* is completely masculine or feminine. Crichton and D'Argo are consistently the most domestically-oriented (“feminine”) characters, as they both ultimately want to have families and live in peace. Crichton’s fantasies of a domestic Earth-Aeryn never work out, however (3.22, “Dog With Two Bones”; Christopher, 2004, p.276), and D'Argo’s dream of settling down with Chiana and his son Jothee (Matthew Newton) is shattered when Chiana rebels by seducing Jothee (see 3.01, “Season of Death”; 3.03, “Self-Inflicted Wounds, Part 1: Could’a, Would’a, Should’a”). Even when Chiana relents, D'Argo is soon to die, his desire for a quiet farm life forever unfulfilled (*The Peacekeeper Wars*). Crichton and D'Argo are prone to discussing their feelings with each other (e.g. 4.06, “Natural Election”); they are among the more emotionally sensitive of the series’ main characters. Further, as Christopher (2004) observes, the primary romance between Crichton and Aeryn consists of dual arcs of gender transformation, as the feminized Crichton becomes more of a masculine action hero, while the masculinized Aeryn learns to experience and express emotion. Neither arc is a complete reversal; Aeryn remains the physically superior partner, able to fire a weapon while giving birth or defeat Crichton in hand-to-hand combat, while Crichton is an eccentric, “radically unstable” force throughout the series, vacillating between action-hero competence and emotional vulnerability as required (Christopher, 2004, p. 268; see also Feasey, 2004, p.63).

Unfortunately, by season 4 and *The Peacekeeper Wars*, the Crichton/Aeryn relationship—as well as Aeryn’s character more broadly— becomes increasingly gender-stereotyped and heteronormative. Suddenly, she is the one who expresses vulnerability and chases after Crichton, while he distances himself with the help of Noranti’s emotion-numbing drugs. When a pregnant Aeryn is captured by Scarran forces, all she can do is (rather uncharacteristically) pray (4.18, “Prayer”) while she waits for Crichton and her other shipmates to rescue her (4.19, “We’re So Screwed, Part 1: Fetal Attraction”). While early in the season, a virtual reality Aeryn is cast as a princess in a tower—ringleted and simpering, highlighting the ridiculous-

ness of this role for the character (4.07, “John Quixote”)—later-season Aeryn assumes the damsel role in truth, during which time her hair is longer and she wears noticeably more makeup (Ginn, 2005, p.99). The relationship culminates, predictably, with marriage and childbirth—the marriage just barely coming first as Aeryn insists on a mid-labor wedding reminiscent of *Lethal Weapon IV* (Warner Bros., 1998). Her sudden desire for a wedding (an event previously cast as primarily Crichton’s idea, and marked by Aeryn’s discomfort in trying white dresses) ensures that the baby will be born within traditional wedlock, thus enforcing a comforting Western nuclear family narrative. *The Peacekeeper Wars* reconfigures Aeryn as the partner more fixated on domestic tradition, thus reinscribing stricter gender boundaries.

Several episodes in season 4 also raise questions about women’s issues and feminist politics. First, a group of militant women’s rights activists endangers Moya’s crew in an episode that depicts disenfranchised feminists as merciless terrorists (4.10, “Coup by Clam”). Then, a sympathetic Chiana rescues a supposed rape victim who turns out to be a deadly predator, in a plot that draws disturbing parallels to stories about women who lie about rape in order to manipulate sympathy or power. Chiana, her good intentions betrayed, apologizes to the shipmates she’s endangered: “This is all my fault. I’m sorry about this. I’ll kill that talk myself” (4.14, “Twice Shy”).

The most disturbing single episode may be “Mental As Anything” (4.15), in which D'Argo explores suppressed memories and the question of whether he might have killed his former wife, Lo'Laan (Rachel Gordon), in a fit of “Luxan hyperrage.” We learn that although D'Argo was not Lo'Laan’s murderer, he did physically abuse her. Lo'Laan was Sebacean (i.e. Peacekeeper, visibly appearing human), and unable to defend herself against the hyper-aggressive, blackout fits of violence attributed to D'Argo’s Luxan species. D'Argo is thus exonerated through amnesia and a physical inability to control himself, while Lo'Laan’s injuries are implied to be her own fault, as she kept them hidden (“Why didn’t you tell me?”

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mourns D'Argo. "Don't you know how much I loved you?"). The audience is apparently meant to sympathize with D'Argo, whose character has been built over four seasons, rather than the thinly-sketched Lo'Laan, who appears here (for the first and last time) in flashback, and who exists literally as an object, a body to be beaten. D'Argo's masculine aggression, an indelible and uncontrollable part of his identity, is excused; his victim is blamed for not speaking up, and his status as series protagonist is unaltered as the narrative moves onward.

Farscape's approach to gender politics is ultimately ambiguous; it plays with soap stereotypes about femmes fatales, advances the narrative of a sex-positive female character, and presents multiple characters whose behavior subverts gender binaries. However, examining later episodes in more detail reveals specific narratives that are ultimately regressive, reinforcing heteronormative, patriarchal stereotypes.

Motherhood and Reproduction

Farscape also incorporates the parental narratives so important to soap operas (Weibel, cited Modleski, 1982, p.86, Lavigne, 2005, p.60; Modleski, 1982, p.92)—from Zhaan, the "good mother" in seasons 1-3 who cares for everyone aboard the ship (and ultimately sacrifices her life for Aeryn), to Moya (the "mother" ship whose unexpected pregnancy is a pivotal plot point in season 1), to Aeryn (whose pregnancy serves as a driving force in season 4), or even Xhalax Sun (Linda Cropper; Aeryn's murderous mother) and Commandant Grayza (whose pregnancy was written into *The Peacekeeper Wars* because actor Rebecca Riggs was in her third trimester during filming). Rebecca Feasey has suggested that mysteries (and subsequent anguish) surrounding paternity are key to male characters in soaps, bringing men into the domestic sphere while simultaneously challenging their control (2004, p.17); this narrative, too, is present in *Farscape*, as Crichton initially doesn't know who fathered Aeryn's child (4.06, "Natural Election")—and, ultimately, the father is a clone Crichton, now dead. All of these storylines serve to focus on the domestic (and melodramatic) aspects of ship life.

Here, too, there are signs of subversiveness; *Farscape* at times emphasizes the agency and power of pregnant women (or females, in the case of Moya). Grayza snaps to a subordinate in *The Peacekeeper Wars*, "Don't let the belly fool you"; likewise, Aeryn states, "I'm pregnant, not incapacitated," when defending her ability to participate in team missions against a typically infantilizing view of pregnancy. As the ranking officer, Grayza commands the extensive Peacekeeper forces during the miniseries; meanwhile, Aeryn gives birth during a firefight, barely pausing her gun play in the process and emerging soon thereafter with a pulse pistol in one hand and her newborn child cradled in the other.

Notably, however, *Farscape's* treatment of reproductive technologies predominantly removes female agency from the equation; this, too, becomes more noticeable toward the end of the series. The Peacekeepers, as a wholly masculinized military force (Christopher, 2004, p.257), make little adjustment for female requirements. This is alluded to in season 1 when Moya is the victim of medical experimentation; she is not permitted to mate, but rather is artificially inseminated as Peacekeeper scientists (her captors) work to create a weaponized hybrid ship (her son Tallyn). Such female disenfranchisement becomes more pronounced when Aeryn becomes pregnant in season 4; as a former Peacekeeper soldier, she has been biologically modified to hold a zygote in stasis for up to seven years, until it can be "released" at a time convenient to any potential military campaign. She has no control over this process; first, she must visit a Peacekeeper ship in order to have the pregnancy activated (4.21, "We're So Screwed, Part 3: La Bomba"). She is then captured by the Scarrans, who hold her captive with a group of other pregnant alien women, torturing her in an experimental breeding facility. Again, Aeryn is remade in season 4 as the damsel in distress, rendered passive and weak as her pregnancy makes her both a target and a victim of masculinized, militarized forces.

Once Aeryn is rescued and the zygote is released from stasis, she again loses control of her pregnancy. When she and Crichton are reduced to their compo-

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ment crystalline pieces (4.22, “Bad Timing”), efforts to reconstruct the two protagonists in *The Peacekeeper Wars* are only mostly successful, as the fertilized egg ends up gestating in the body of the amphibious Dominar Rygel XVI. It is necessary to transfer the fetus back quickly, as the pregnancy is “geometric” and the gestation will only last a period of solar days—a narrative affectation that both preserves Aeryn’s athletic body as long as possible onscreen, and allows the birth to take place at the end of *The Peacekeeper Wars* instead of what presumably would have been the curtailed season 5.

It’s likely a coincidence that *The Peacekeeper Wars* contrasts Aeryn’s pregnancy with Grayza’s, since the first is the scripted conclusion of a long-running story (artificially sped up for the purposes of the miniseries) while the second is the expedient result of an actor clearly carrying a very nonfictional child. The onscreen result, however, suggests a clear class distinction in the way that reproductive technologies are accessed, as Grayza’s pregnancy is not “geometric” (she retains her gravid figure throughout the series) and does not appear to be under any external controls; she seems to have deliberately conceived her child with a superior officer (whom she then murders, as she remains the femme fatale). Aeryn, in contrast, is the grunt soldier—a member of the Peacekeeper working class—whose pregnancy can proceed only with authorized medical intervention, and whose accelerated term is artificially imposed in order to leave her more time for active duty. In fact, were Aeryn still a Peacekeeper commando in the series, her child would be taken from her and raised in group dormitories, as she herself was taken from Xhalax (3.08, “Green-Eyed Monster”); it is not clear whether Grayza’s child would be subject to the same regulations. While both science fiction and feminist theory have long imagined artificial wombs, accelerated gestation periods, or other reproductive technologies that would free women from the physical travails of pregnancy and childbirth, or “the tyranny of their reproductive biology” (Firestone, 1971, p. 206), *Farscape* presents a regressive system wherein these technologies serve

to disenfranchise women (or female aliens) such as Aeryn Sun, Xhalax Sun, and Moya. Only Grayza, as a member of Peacekeeper command, retains control—making “natural” pregnancy the domain of the privileged and powerful, rather than the disenfranchised infantry who serve, and breed, at their commanders’ pleasure.

In soaps, narratives of women’s pregnancy center the domestic drama and reinforce the importance of women’s stories and spaces; in *Farscape*, pregnant women may have power in dramatic moments, but their bodies are ultimately in service to the military-industrial complex that controls them.

Queerness in Space

Finally, in many ways, *Farscape* may be read as a queer series, notable for its characters’ varied performances of sexuality and gender. Both soaps and science fiction programs have incorporated diverse mixes of queer characters and themes, and this is less a specific soap opera trope than a symptom of the series’ latent subversiveness; while *Farscape*’s canon lacks overtly same-sex pairings, the homoerotic undertones between characters like Crichton and Scorpius are marked. Battis has commented on their “very sexy blood vow” (2010, p. 106) in “Prayer” (4.18) and argued that “*Farscape*’s covert queer-feminist potential lies in its exploration of the links between sexuality and kinship . . . Moya’s crew enjoys complex and durable ties with one another, limned with sexuality but not necessarily limited to carnal expression” (p.107). Further, the series routinely questions traditional notions of sexuality and sexual desirability through its non-standard depictions of both alien and human figures. *Farscape* is as likely to clothe a puppet in black fetish gear (2.14, “Won’t Get Fooled Again”) or emphasize an older woman’s orgasm (e.g. Noranti in 4.10, “Coup by Clam”) as to focus on the young, svelte, normatively sexualized bodies so often emphasized in Hollywood. Its characters vomit and fart; its world is visceral, and thus so are its sexual relationships. It is within this context of pragmatic eroticism that Chiana’s “proud iden-

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tity as a sexual nonconformist” (Battis, 2010, p.105) or Zhaan’s pansexual “unity” rituals are normalized.

Admittedly, such readings are limited. While the overall series may be interpreted as possessing queer themes or imagery (Battis, 2010, p.107), and many elements of *Farscape* do challenge associated gender binaries, specific episodes undermine this interpretation with transphobic jokes. For example, we see Crais in high heels (2.15, “Won’t Get Fooled Again”), Crichton and Rygel in drag (4.10, “Coup by Clam”), or Anthony Simcoe (D’Argo’s actor) made up as Jool (4.11, “Unrealized Reality”; 4.18, “Prayer”); all are played for laughs, which become more overt as the series progresses. By season 4, Simcoe-dressed-as-Jool leads to one of *Farscape*’s most transphobic exchanges:

SCORPIUS: Shoot him.
CRICHTON: Technically, it’s a she.
SCORPIUS: Shoot it. (4.18, “Prayer”)

Trans activists have struggled to have their voices heard in feminist circles (Koyama, 2006), and analyses by white cisgender feminists in particular may have read such material as adventurous or playful; at the time, I myself interpreted Crais’s heels as a lightly disruptive and progressive interrogation of the male gaze and masculine gender performance (Lavigne, 2005). However, such a reading fails to acknowledge the series’ use of transphobic stereotypes—an issue endemic to wider Western popular culture, part of decades of “man in a dress” “humour” that has included transmisogynist “jokes” disguised as “celebration” (St. Patrick, 2015). This repetitive *Farscape* “gag” has not aged well, and it ultimately restricts any queer-friendly interpretation of the series.

Conclusion

On a broad scale, *Farscape*’s blend of soap opera and science fiction lends it a subversive potential particularly receptive to feminist or queer elements. At least in its earlier seasons, *Farscape* combines and subsequently subverts the conventions and limitations of both soap operas and science fiction, cultivating a more feminized point of view than that

assumed by earlier, more episodic science fiction television programs. *Farscape*’s inclusion of soap elements—a musical score, close-up shots, family conflict, and a long-running serial narrative—creates a more feminized (i.e. domestic) text, and thus may have appealed to a wider audience than a pure science fiction series. Its focus on character-driven stories and interpersonal conflicts, while part of a larger trend in television programming, broke away from more episodic paradigms like that of *Stargate SG-1* and created a long-running story that developed a devoted fan base of both women and men. While the series failed to include same-sex pairings (or much in the way of multiracial human elements), it did include multiple types of gender performance; Crichton and Aeryn, in particular, presented gender inversions and behavioral blends at various points throughout each season. *Farscape* is a hybrid text with hybrid characters; its eccentricities are unique and bold.

Moreover, while pure soaps may be critiqued for directing female anger at female power (Modleski, 1982, p.98) or cultivating a sense of helplessness in the viewer (Modleski, 1982, p.91), *Farscape* suffers from neither of these issues. Aeryn in particular, as the violent, masculinized science fiction heroine (à la Ripley or Sarah Connor), presents an androgynous blend of behaviors that makes her appealing to both male and female viewers (Christopher, 2004, p.258) and counters any assertion that the villainess is the only woman who isn’t a victim. Also, *Farscape*’s viewers are (or were) far from helpless; when the series was cancelled in 2003, fans deluged the Sci Fi Network switchboards, embarked on a massive letter-writing campaign, took out a full-page ad in *Variety*, aired a 30-second television spot, arranged to send DVD sets to American soldiers overseas, and eventually convinced Hallmark to co-fund *The Peacekeeper Wars* in order to give the series a proper ending. Again, the science fiction tradition inflects the series; while soap fans may write messages to characters (Joyrich, 1988; Modleski, 1982), there are also roots here in the voracious letter-writing campaign that met the threatened cancellation of *Star Trek* in 1969. Having acknowledged the subversive potential of the space opera, however, on a micro level, the series’

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adventurousness is at times undermined by conservative details in its own narratives. This is particularly evident in season 4 and *The Peacekeeper Wars*. Specific episodes problematize feminist movements, rape narratives, and domestic violence, while intermittent transphobic jokes compromise any gender flexibility. Aeryn's feminization leads to damseling and the reinscription of a nuclear-family dream, while her pregnancy highlights the series' focus on reproductive technologies and the way that patriarchal authority is used to control female bodies. Considering *Farscape's* progressive beginnings, the ending is in many ways a distinct disappointment.

Granted, some of this later-series conservatism may be due to the series ending at all—particularly as the Hallmark Channel-produced *Peacekeeper Wars* aired on a channel known for its plethora of heteronormative, Christian-inflected, made-for-TV romances. Part of *Farscape's* regression may have occurred via its association with the Hallmark brand. It could also be that the series' conclusion marked a change of genre, from soap/space opera's ongoing domestic drama to romance's obligatory happily-ever-after (which, again according to the Hallmark brand, means a wedding). While the series 4 cliffhanger may have held Crichton and Aeryn in perpetual, crystallized stasis, providing a never-ending realm of melodramatic possibility in which the domestic remained unresolved (save in fan fiction), *The Peacekeeper Wars* re-established a more traditional conclusion.

But *Farscape* is a difficult creature to define; one might argue that its melodramatic undertones also serve to subvert its more conservative details, or that the adventurousness of earlier seasons outweighs the ponderous regression of the end. I was a fan of the series when I first watched it; on many levels, I still am. While my capacity to enjoy a text in no way renders it less problematic, I must acknowledge, and have tried to retain, some of that initial enthusiasm. On many levels, *Farscape* remains a "marvellous and whacky 'lost in space' story" (Johnson-Smith, 2005, p.161) and a potential stepping-stone to se-

ries that further challenge genre boundaries. If, as seems perpetually rumored (e.g. Asher-Perrin, 2019), a sequel is ever produced, hopefully it returns with the subversive promise of its first years.

Notes:

¹The term "muppets" is deliberate here, and not a generic reference to puppetry. *Farscape* was produced by the Jim Henson Company and Hallmark Entertainment.

²*Stargate SG-1* later recruited both Browder and Black after *Farscape* was off the air. Financial and scheduling conflicts between the two series (both were on the Sci Fi Network, now Syfy) may be partially credited for *Farscape's* cancellation (Crew, 2003).

³A plot point made possible by her alien nature; it also marks her as a victim of abuse. When Grayza was a concubine to Peacekeeper officers, the gland was surgically implanted, removing years from her lifespan (4.02, "What Was Lost, Part 1: Sacrifice").

⁴See Feasey, 2004, p.10 regarding the importance of men sharing intimate confidences in contemporary soap operas.

⁵Since *Farscape* is generally notable for the complex agency of its female characters, the rescue scene in "We're So Screwed, Part 1: Fetal Attraction" (4.19) is particularly regressive, as Crichton and D'Argo simultaneously and manfully carry their half-conscious love interests Aeryn and Chiana to safety.

⁶This is evident when watching the miniseries, though Riggs's pregnancy is confirmed in articles such as Harrisson, J. (2013, August 8). Revisiting *Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars*. *Den of Geek*. Retrieved from <http://www.denofgeek.com/tv/farscape/26794/revisiting-farscape-the-peacekeeper-wars>.



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⁷Many of these details are from personal recollection and the now-defunct Save Farscape website run by Nina Lumpp and Julie Rayhanabad, formerly at www.watchfarscape.com; for more, see Cochran, 2013.

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