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Coyote in the Black:

The Evolution of Malcolm Reynolds the Trickster-Shaman



[1] There are few things more satisfying than a good story, a ripping yarn told by a master storyteller. *Firefly* was a storyteller's show, crafted by one of the great storytellers in the medium of television. It was Joss Whedon's attempt at capturing the spirit of the American Western, playing with the tropes of the genre, and setting them against the backdrop of space. And few things are more tied to the Western than the concept of the "Big Damn Hero," the larger-than-life figure who follows his own code amidst the danger and mystery of life on the frontier. For Joss Whedon, the character of Malcolm Reynolds, the former Independent soldier turned starship captain, is this heroic figure.

[2] However, in the creation of Malcolm Reynolds, Whedon has gone beyond the traditional hero of the Western genre and created a figure of much greater complexity and depth. Through his actions and attitude, Mal bucks the traditional notion of the action hero popular in film and television and embraces as well an older and richer archetype from the storyteller's vault: the Trickster. The Trickster is the breaker-of-rules and changer-of-ways who manifests in the mythology and literature of cultures around the world and now appears on the bridge of the ship *Serenity*.

[3] But those of us used to the way things usually work out in the Black for the crew of *Serenity* know that nothing is ever simple, and Whedon's construction of the character of Malcolm Reynolds is no exception. Throughout the course of both the series *Firefly* and the film *Serenity*, Joss Whedon pushes his characters, growing them, changing them, and as an audience we see the evolution of Malcolm Reynolds the Trickster into an even greater and decidedly more powerful form: Mal Reynolds, Shaman.

[4] Malcolm Reynolds' character evolves in terms of the three corresponding archetypal representations that Mal comes to embody. This evolution begins on the barren battlefield of Serenity Valley, with Sgt. Malcolm Reynolds, the unconventional soldier breaking rules to stay alive, but ultimately having victory torn from him as his superiors surrender and the Alliance descends. This moment of betrayal takes the basic natural aspects of Mal the rebel,

the Independent, and forges him into something more. In this fire and resentment is the creation of Mal the Trickster.

[5] Captain Reynolds of the transport ship *Serenity*, the Mal we see throughout the majority of that one brilliant half-season of *Firefly*, embodies the major criteria ascribed to a traditional Trickster figure. The term *Trickster* was first used in reference to the Cree Indian mythological figure Wisakketjak, when Father Albert Lacombe translated the name as meaning “the trickster, the deceiver.” Since then, “the term Trickster [has been] embraced as a character type widely applicable in Native American mythology. Although the term seems to denote only the prankster element, it frequently identifies a character with anomalous and contradictory roles” (Gill and Sullivan 308). In the course of the series, Mal demonstrates all the major aspects of traditional Trickster archetypes: the mischievous pranks, the protean nature, the constant breaking of social rules and laws, and the inherent contradictions of a character that is, by his very nature, a creature of opposites. Mal’s marginalized status in the series is a hallmark of the Trickster figure as well, for it is in the liminal state that these figures achieve power and freedom. It is in this role as marginalized Trickster that Mal is most familiar to us as an audience: the shady dealer and thief who follows his own code that we see in “*Serenity*” (1001), “*The Train Job*” (1002), “*Ariel*” (1009), and more.

[6] However it is the events of the film *Serenity* that push Mal beyond the traditional Trickster archetype and into a specific cultural role often held by the Trickster: the role of the Shaman. The Shaman as defined by Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* is “one who, as a consequence of a personal psychological crisis, has gained a certain power of his own . . . the one who had this psychological experience, this traumatic experience . . . would become the interpreter for others of things not seen” (88). For Campbell, the Shaman can heal because he has been wounded himself. The events of *Serenity* are in truth a Shamanistic journey and a ritual of healing, and it is Malcolm Reynolds, evolved and transformed, who presides over this ceremony.

“We’ve done the impossible, and that makes us mighty.”

Betrayal of *Themis* and Psychological Wounding as Catalyst for Change

[7] The first intended glimpse of Mal Reynolds comes for us as he dodges fire amid the dark, dusty plains of Serenity Valley.¹ This is Sgt. Mal Reynolds of the 57th Overlanders Brigade, or the “Balls and Bayonets Brigade.” From information given to us in both the series and the film, we can piece together a bit of Mal’s background. He was born on the planet Shadow and raised on a ranch by his mother and “about forty hands” (“*Our Mrs. Reynolds*,” 1006). While we are not given much information on Shadow, the fact that he grew up on a ranch does identify his home as one of the rim worlds as opposed to the higher technology coreworlds like Ariel. This frontier life establishes the streak of independence that runs so deeply in Mal and that leads him to volunteer for the Independents during the Unification War (“*Serenity*,” 1001).

[8] Amidst the chaos and friction of war, it is often the unconventional soldier who is best able to navigate the madness of the situation, and here we see how the Trickster aspects of Mal are already being shaped. As the series opens with the Battle of Serenity Valley, Mal leaps for cover behind his own lines, demanding air support to deal with a menacing Alliance attack skiff. When he is told that the chain of command must be followed and that nothing

will mobilize without a lieutenant's authorization code, Mal reaches over to an officer's corpse and rips the rank insignia free from the uniform. Handing it to the radio operator, Mal barks, "Here, here's your code. You're Lieutenant Baker. Congratulations on your promotion. Now get me some air support!" ("Serenity," 1001). This disregard for the established rules and regulations is what allows Mal to stay alive. Mal as the unconventional soldier is taken further when, in order to deal with the Alliance aircraft, Mal captures an enemy gun emplacement, turning the Alliance's own weapon against them. Seeking a solution to his dilemmas, Mal is not hindered by the established rules and expectations of the battlefield, and this brings him success. Yet this success will be fleeting.

[9] The Battle of Serenity Valley is ultimately what takes Mal the Independent, the unconventional soldier, and drives him to become the Trickster figure we see in the series. The fighting on Hera, in Serenity Valley, has been brutal and bloody, yet despite overwhelming odds, Mal and his fellow Browncoats have held the Alliance off. Speaking to the soldiers huddled by him, Mal says,

The Alliance said they were gonna waltz through Serenity Valley, and we choked 'em with those words. We've done the impossible, and that makes us mighty. Just a little while longer, our angels are gonna be soaring overhead raining fire on those arrogant cod, so you hold! ("Serenity," 1001)

He then backs up his words with action, taking out the Alliance skiff and returning to his lines. The thrill of this moment is further enhanced by the sound of incoming ships, which Mal calls "angels" coming to blow the Alliance straight to hell. However, it is not his angels, but the ships of the Alliance that have arrived. He is told by Zoe that Command has ordered them to lay down their arms and surrender. In utter disbelief, Mal watches the large ships land and the Independent cause die before his eyes. This is the defining moment in the forging of the new Malcolm Reynolds. In *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, trauma specialist Judith Lewis Herman explains, "Every instance of severe traumatic psychological injury is a standing challenge to the rightness of the social order" (qtd. in Shay 3). Here is the heart of Mal's initial change.

[10] For Mal, he and his Browncoats have done the impossible, and yet, the Alliance has come anyway. The Independent command has surrendered, and Mal and his soldiers have been betrayed. Jonathan Shay, author of *Achilles in Vietnam*, asserts that for us to grasp the significance of betrayal, we must consider both what is at stake and then what *themis* (the concept of what is right) has been violated (9). For Mal, the stakes in jeopardy include his life, and more significantly to him, his freedom. But the *themis* that has been shattered is his trust in authority and his own sense of victory. As the glow from explosions lights his face, Mal's expression is one of utter shock and horror.

[11] Shay's work with Vietnam veterans provides a very real parallel to this moment and allows us a glimpse into Mal's state of mind in this moment. Shay writes, "Once or twice I have tried to explore with veterans these concepts of victory and defeat. I have abandoned these discussions because the sense of betrayal is still too great and the equation of defeat with abandonment by God and personal devaluation still too vivid" (8). These words are telling and undeniably resonant with the Malcolm Reynolds we see in those brief scenes in Serenity Valley. A veteran speaking to Shay in a group therapy session tells him, "I won my war. It's you who f*&%ing lost!" (8). For Mal, this is what he takes away from the battlefield. He and his did the impossible, and mighty though it may have made them, victory was denied them because of the actions of others.

[12] This betrayal of *themis* will scar Mal and trigger deep changes in his personality. Serenity Valley will be the last time Mal seeks the big victory for years to come. In the moments before the arrival of the Alliance, we see Mal kissing a cross worn around his neck, a simple and powerful statement of faith. This contrasts strongly with the iconoclastic, anti-religion figure we see later in the very same episode, verbally sparring with Shepherd Book. His goal throughout *Firefly* is simply survival, to get by, to “keep flying.” To accomplish this, Mal will alter and change. He will live his life out in the Black, along the fringe and away from the meddling of the Alliance. Here, on the margins of society, Sergeant Malcolm Reynolds, soldier, becomes Captain Mal Reynolds, Trickster.

“Take me out to the Black. Tell them I ain’t coming back.”

The Trickster in the Black

[13] To advance this discussion then, we need a common understanding of the Trickster folklore archetype. This figure appears in the mythological structure of cultures all around the world: mischievous Coyote of the Plains and Southwest Nations of the United States, Anansi the Spider from West Africa, the Greek Hermes, the Norse Loki, and Hinduism’s Krishna the Butter Thief. The Trickster is defined as “a complex character type known for his trickery, buffoonery, and crude behavior, but also as a creator, culture hero, and teacher” (Gill and Sullivan 308). The Trickster is often a clown or buffoon, leading by example of what not to do. The Trickster is chaotic, the spirit of disorder in an ordered world. A violator of taboos, a questioner of ways, the Trickster lives a life of trial and error, but a lesson is learned, regardless of success or failure. Anthropologist Franz Boas explained this concept of the “creature of opposites” that this simultaneous success and failure points to by arguing that the Trickster was the embodiment of both the basic elements of human character and also the divine figures of the culture hero and creator figure. The “anomalous and contradictory nature of Trickster figures [reflects] a stage of development where these character traits have not yet become separate” (309). As the spirit of disorder, this contradictory character naturally finds itself at odds with the established power structure. The Trickster is marginalized in society, segregated from the center of social and political power by his (or her) own capacity for rebellion and chaos.

[14] However, the Trickster is marginalized to such a degree that this liminal state brings power and freedom from the operating structure. The Trickster as an archetypal figure, common in the mythology and folklore of cultures the world over and made well-known by the work of anthropologist Paul Radin, and psychologist Carl Jung, is given form once more, now in Captain Mal Reynolds.

[15] Throughout the events of the series, Mal embodies all the specific traits inherent in a classic Trickster archetype. We will look at his marginalized status and the freedom he gains from this status. We will see the various tricks and deceptions he pulls to achieve his goals. We will see Mal break rules and established traditions, going against the notion of what a “hero” should be and how one should behave. It is in these examples that Mal’s status as a Trickster archetype is made manifest.

[16] Mal and the crew of Serenity operate in the perfect embodiment of the marginalized. They drift through “the Black” working along “the frontier,” far away from the influence of the Alliance, the central power-base. Their few interactions with Alliance ships, personnel,

and planets see them acting as criminals. The events of the intended pilot episode of *Firefly* demonstrate this clearly. As the scene shifts from the battlefield of Serenity Valley to the blackness of space, Mal Reynolds is hard at work performing an illegal salvage operation on a derelict ship. As they are transferring their ill-gotten gains, an Alliance cruiser arrives and moves to intercept. Mal orders the use of the "cry-baby," a device that mimics the emergency transmission of a transport ship. It is this ruse that draws the Alliance cruiser away and allows Serenity to escape. Here we have Mal as the criminal, not only working on the fringe and against the established Alliance power-base, but also using his cunning and deception in classic Trickster style to escape from the authority.

[17] Beyond this trick with the "cry-baby," there is another great deception in this first episode. Having taken on the Tam siblings, Mal has found himself constantly at odds with the young doctor, Simon. The young ship's mechanic, Kaylee, has been injured by an errant shot. Desperate to save the life of his sister River, Simon barter's his skill to save Kaylee in exchange for passage on Serenity. Mal agrees but promises that he and the doctor are not yet finished on this topic. After visiting the badly injured Kaylee, Mal confronts Simon and bluntly informs him that Kaylee is dead. Simon, in a panic, rushes to his patient, only to find little Kaylee smiling and resting comfortably. In total disbelief, Simon mutters that Mal is psychotic. The scene immediately cuts to Mal and the rest of the crew laughing uproariously on the bridge. In explanation to the chortling crew, Mal admits that he "is a mean old man." We not only see the trick he plays on Simon, but also the ready violation of taboos as he lies about the death of Kaylee, the youngest and most innocent member of his crew. Pateman, in his work on mortality and morality in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, refers to him as "the instigator of the lie, the purveyor of false despair." Mal is indeed all those things in this moment, but he also is the quintessential Trickster. He has reversed the power dynamic in his relationship with the doctor and crafted a trick so devious that it not only fools Simon, but the television audience as well.

[18] It is this penchant for going against the expected behavior of a television hero that further distinguishes Mal Reynolds. The violation of taboo is one of the most important aspects of the Trickster in a cultural mythology, and this disregard for the established conventions of the hero distinguishes Mal. As "Serenity" (1001) comes to a close, an Alliance marshall holds River at gunpoint. The crew is in a classic stand-off, a staple of television drama for decades. Yet as soon as Mal walks into the ship, he shoots the lawman in the head without a moment's hesitation. This moment is shocking, violent, and completely against the audience's expectations. Here, we see that Mal is not going to conform to the established expectations we have for our television heroes.

[19] Mal as nonconformist is further illustrated at the end of "The Train Job" (1002), when he explains to the burly henchman of crime boss Niska how the job did not turn out the way they expected. In his work on the role of chivalry in *Firefly*, "Just Shove Him in the Engine," John C. Wright describes this scene perfectly:

In "The Train Job," Captain Mal has captured Crow, Niska's henchman. Crow is on his knees, bound, and answers Mal's request that they be let out of their contract with Niska with a bloodthirsty threat: "Keep the money. Use it to buy a funeral. It doesn't matter where you go, or how far you fly. I will hunt you down, and the last thing you see will be my blade." Without further ado, Mal kicks Crow into the engine, where he dies a swift and ghastly death, chopped to red splatter in an instant by the rotors.
(165)

Mal then turns to the next member of Niska's crew, who is more than happy to deliver the message to his employer. Mal's actions here are shocking to an audience. Wright uses this scene to illustrate the nature of Mal's particular brand of chivalry (or perhaps the lack thereof). The man is a prisoner, bound and helpless, and Mal Reynolds puts him through the engine. While not the most chivalrous of behavior, it is, however very appropriate as the unconventional behavior of the Trickster. Not only do Crow's cohorts get the message, but we as an audience do as well. Mal Reynolds is not going to play by the rules.

[20] As the run of *Firefly's* first and only season continues, Mal comes fully into his own as a Trickster, the coyote in the black. One of the most interesting and occasionally confusing aspects of Trickster scholarship is that the figure is often referred to as a "creature of opposites," embodying two opposing concepts simultaneously. Jung referred to this as "his dual nature, half animal, half divine" (195). This "dual nature is expressed also in the idea that the Trickster will be both a success and a failure at the same time. In a traditional Zuni story, Coyote steals the sun and moon from the Kachinas, god-like figures who protect these sacred objects. The sun and moon are kept in boxes, and it is these boxes that Coyote spirits away from the Kachinas. However, his curiosity overcomes him and Coyote opens the box, allowing the sun and moon to escape (Erdoes and Ortiz 4).

[21] This construction is very common in Trickster stories. Coyote successfully steals the objects, but ultimately fails to keep them. The parallels to Mal are unmistakable. Every dose of success is followed by a degree of failure. The hospital heist in the episode "Ariel" (1009) provides an example. With the help of new passenger Simon Tam, Mal and his crew are able to steal a large supply of medical drugs from the hospital, putting them in comfortable wealth for the first time in a good, long while. However, before they can capitalize on this affluence, Mal and Wash are captured by the vengeful crime lord, Niska, and the crew turns over the money in an effort to free the two men. The heist was undoubtedly a success, yet they do not keep the spoils.

[22] Throughout *Firefly*, Mal embodies the aspects of a traditional Trickster figure. However, it is the events of the film *Serenity* that will refine his Trickster characteristics into the cultural role of the Trickster-Shaman.

"They won't see this coming": The Trickster-Shaman as Healer and the Theft of Fire

[23] In the role of the Shaman, the Trickster figure evolves, refining the specific characteristics of the figure on a cultural scale. It is the Shaman who will bring healing to those most damaged because he has been damaged himself. It is the Shaman who is the changer-of-ways, the violator of taboos that will alter the course of a society with their actions. It is in this that we see the Mal Reynolds of the film *Serenity*.

[24] As the film begins, Mal is the familiar figure seen in the episodes of the series. Here is our Trickster, marginalized out on the raggedy edge and in the process of pulling a heist. However, the film will alter this status quo with the introduction of a foil for Mal. In particular, the interaction with this opposite, The Operative, drives Mal's eventual transformation. The Operative is the perfect agent of the Alliance, the warrior of Order, utterly devoted to the cause. His own description of himself as a monster is especially telling: he explains that the world he is willing to kill to create will have no place in it for men like him. He is a true believer of the most frightening caliber.

[25] The Operative pursues Mal and the crew of *Serenity* because of River Tam's presence on the ship. River, the psychologically broken and scarred young girl who has suffered so horribly at the hands of the Alliance is this man's prey. Since she is under Mal's protection, the inevitable collision between these two opposites is the focus of the first part of the film. As Jung states in his essay "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," "Anyone who belongs to a sphere of culture that seeks the perfect state . . . must feel very queerly indeed when confronted by the figure of the Trickster" (203). A culture that "seeks the perfect state" is an apt description of the Alliance. These two men confront each other for the first time in Inara's room at the Companion Training House; the agent of Order and the Trickster meet face to face. The two banter, and the discussion represents their two very distinct natures:

Mal: No, no, you're working this deal all crabbed. You got to open with payment. Make a flush offer and then we'll see where this conversation goes.

The Operative (shaking his head): That's a trap. I offer you money you'll play the man of honor and take umbrage. I ask you to do what's right, you'll play the brigand. I've no stomach for games; I already know you'll not see reason.

Mal: Alliance wanted to show me reason, they shouldn't have sent an assassin.

The Operative: I have a warship in deep orbit, Captain. We locked on to *Serenity's* pulse beacon the moment you hit atmo. I can speak a word and send a missile to that exact location inside of three minutes.

(Mal pulls a small device, clipped wires sticking out all around it, and tosses it to the Operative.)

Mal: You do that, best make peace with your dear and fluffy lord.

The Operative: Pulse beacon.

[26] Though outclassed by the skill and technology of the professional killer, it is still Mal Reynolds who comes out on top in this scene. This victory is made all the more delightful when Inara, who has been a bystander through the conversation and the ensuing brawl, ends the confrontation at the close of the scene by stunning the Operative with a flash bomb; the damsel in distress saves her would-be rescuer in a perfect Trickster reversal.

[27] As the pursuit intensifies, however, Mal finds that the Operative will go to great lengths to bring his "quarry . . . to ground." The aptly named Haven, which has often provided a refuge for Mal and the crew of *Serenity*, is destroyed, its people slaughtered, and its leader, Shepherd Book, dies in Mal's arms. It is this act of barbarism committed by the Operative, and by extension the Alliance, that will push Mal into the role of the Shaman.

[28] The Shaman is defined by Joseph Campbell in *Primitive Mythology* as "one who, as a consequence of a personal psychological crisis, has gained a certain power of his own" (231). For Campbell, the Shaman was able to heal others because of the wounds and experiences that he had suffered. It is because of this experience that the Shaman becomes the "interpreter of the unseen" that Moyers and Campbell discuss (Moyers 88), and it is Mal, so deeply wounded in spirit by the Alliance at the battle of *Serenity Valley* and now offended and enraged by the actions of the Alliance Operative, who can act as this healer. It will be Mal, the wounded and betrayed, who is the one person who may be able to help River Tam.

[29] River is the key to the film's mystery and the target of the Operative's relentless hunt.

River was operated on by the Alliance, who used her mind as the proving ground for new technologies. Pushed to the brink of madness, River has been rescued by her brother Simon and has sought refuge on Serenity. However, River's madness is growing, and her capacity for violence is increasing. In her time as an Alliance experiment, River was exposed to information that the Alliance will gladly kill to keep buried. Knowing that the key to everything lies with River, and determined to end this situation before more innocent lives are lost to the Operative, Mal makes the decision to bring the traumatized girl to the destination she has become so obsessed with: the planet Miranda. However, Miranda is deep in the heart of dangerous space, home to the nightmarish Reavers. Though the journey will be dangerous, Mal, the Trickster-Shaman comes up with a ruse to lead them through safely. However, it is a plan that his friends find horrific: He disguises Serenity as a Reaver ship.

[30] It is in this act, viewed by some of the crew as an utter desecration of their home, that Mal the Shaman begins to emerge. Zoe says to Mal, "Sir. Do you really mean to turn our home into an abomination so we can make a suicidal attempt at passing through Reaver space?" And Mal replies, "I mean to live. I mean for us to live. The Alliance won't have that so we go where they won't follow." One of the key elements of the Trickster-Shaman is being the violator of taboos, what Jung refers to as the "shadow . . . the countertendencies in the unconscious," and is one who "Although he is not really evil . . . does the most atrocious things" (202). It is in the breaking of rules, the violation of that which is forbidden, that the Shaman gains his power to change the world around him. Campbell explains,

In a profound sense, then, the shaman stands against the group and necessarily so, since the whole realm of interests and anxieties of the group is for him secondary. And yet, because he has gone through-in some way, in some sense- to the heart of the world of which the group and its ranges of concern are but manifestations, he can help and harm his fellows in ways that amaze them. (254)

Mal Reynolds, standing before his mourning and angry crew, tells them that he will defile their ship, their home, and journey into the very heart of darkness and danger. They will find the answers they seek on Miranda.

[31] The deception, the masterful trick of the Trickster-Shaman, works, and Serenity passes in safety to the planet Miranda. There beside their friends and shipmates, Mal and River, two people grievously injured by the Alliance, discover the fate of the population of the planet. A holographic recording by an Alliance scientist reveals that the Alliance, in its quest for compliance, had tested a gas upon the populace. Called "the Pax," the gas worked too well. Some of the people responded by simply going to sleep and never waking again, but others had the opposite reaction, the Pax unleashing their most savage and barbaric side. As the scientist in the recording relates this nightmarish truth, she is set upon by these affected inhabitants, these first Reavers, and is slaughtered. In confronting the horror firsthand, River is able to purge the images from her mind at last. She vomits, and when she has finished, she is different. The familiar madness is gone, and it has been replaced with a new clarity.

[32] By forcing this confrontation, bringing River through the black of space to stand on the blighted surface of Miranda and witness the truth behind her madness, Mal has acted as the Shaman for her. He brings healing to her through this action. As Campbell describes, "the healing of the Shaman is achieved through art: i.e., mythology and song . . . And the practice of the Shaman also is by way of art: an imitation or presentation in the field of time and space" (265). For Mal, this imitation is his masquerade of Serenity as a Reaver ship. The

healing of River is achieved through the sharing of story; Mal brings the psychologically wounded River through the haunted streets of Miranda and plays the recording of the scientist's confession. Upon hearing the tale of Miranda's fall, River drops to her knees and vomits. Rising, the young girl is lucid, healed of the madness and pain that has haunted her. Mal achieves the Shamanistic healing of River through the imitation of the Reavers and the sharing of the story of the doomed scientist.

[33] However, that is not the end for our Shaman. Just as Mal has helped heal River, so now must he fulfill his purpose as Shaman and bring this healing to the rest of his society. The Reavers, the psychologically mutilated victims of the Alliance, need to be avenged and the truth of their victimization shared.

[34] The Trickster as Shaman is the changer-of-ways, the one who will bring about a new order by destroying the old. The Trickster-Shaman is "the archetype for the hero, the giver of all great boons—the fire-bringer and the teacher of mankind" (Campbell 274). The Theft of Fire is a Trickster story common to cultures all over the world. From the titan Prometheus of ancient Greece to the revered figure of Raven among the native nations of the Pacific Northwest, the fire-thief is one of the first hero figures of any culture. They are the changer-of-ways, casting aside the darkness as they act as the bringer of the light of knowledge.

[35] The Shasta Nation of Southern Oregon tells a story of Coyote's theft of fire that is one of these archetypal stories. In the tale, the people are without fire. They are cold and lost in the dark. They come to Coyote and tell him, "'there is fire over there. Where Pain lives there is fire.' So Coyote went, and came to the house where Pain lived" (Ramsey 216). Coyote disguises himself and sneaks into the home, fooling the children of Pain into thinking he is one of them. Using his blankets, he catches a corner on fire and jumps up, running from the house, the fire singeing his tail. "Now Coyote ran out of the house; he stole Pain's fire. He seized it and ran with it. Pain's Children ran after him" (216-17). Coyote is able to outrun the children of Pain and pass the fire on to Chicken-Hawk, Grouse, Quail, and Turtle, who spread the fire all about. "Now everybody came and got fire. Now we have got fire. Coyote was the first to get it, at Pain's that way" (217). This story provides a step-by-step parallel account for Mal's own "fire-theft." For the sake of River, he disguises himself and enters a strange and dangerous land, Reaver space. The "children of Pain" from the story is an appropriate name for the Reavers, and it is disguised as one of them that Mal gains passage onto the planet. He sneaks onto the surface of Miranda and discovers the message revealing the truth of Miranda's fate and the origin of the Reavers themselves. He has stolen fire from the monsters and now will share it with all people. Mal decides that this knowledge must be shared with the rest of the universe:

You all got on this boat for different reasons, but you all come to the same place. So now I'm asking more of you than I have before. Maybe all. `Cause as I know anything I know this: They will try again. Maybe on another world, maybe on this very ground, swept clean. A year from now, ten, they'll swing back to the belief that they can make people. . .better. And I do not hold to that. So no more running. I aim to misbehave.
(*Serenity*)

[36] After Mal explains his plan to get the information out and broadcast it, Zoe comments that the Alliance will know what they are trying to do. They will anticipate this. Mal replies, "They're not gonna see this coming." Serenity takes off and fires on the nearby Reaver ships as they pass. Mal therefore escapes from Miranda, with the angry Reavers in pursuit.

[37] However this is part of the grand plan, the final, great trick of the Trickster-Shaman. When Mal and Serenity arrive at the home of Mr. Universe, looking for a way to broadcast the transmission to the rest of the 'verse, they are immediately confronted by an Alliance blockade. But Serenity has not come alone. Emerging from the cloud behind them is an entire fleet of Reavers. The Reavers tear into the Alliance fleet, earning a small measure of vengeance for the horror of their creation. As the Reavers and Alliance battle in the clouds, Serenity is able to land in an attempt to get the doomed scientist's final message to the broadcast equipment. This is Mal's grand trick, unleashing upon the Alliance the very monsters they created, and, with transmission of the message, bringing the light and fire of the truth to the universe. This is Mal Reynolds the Trickster as fire-thief and Shaman, bringing knowledge and spiritual healing to the people around him.

[38] Mal, the Trickster-Shaman, violates the ultimate taboo, disguising Serenity as a Reaver ship. He makes his way to Miranda, taking River there to confront her demons. In the traditional Shamanistic way, Mal, the man so deeply wounded by the alliance, brings healing to others who have suffered at the same hands. His journey to Miranda not only heals River, but, with the discovery of the message, gives Mal the ability to restore some sense of right to the universe. He pulls off the ultimate trick, using the Reavers themselves as instruments of their own vengeance against the Alliance, and much like the ubiquitous Trickster story of the theft of fire, Mal steals the message and shares it with the `verse. The Shaman is the Trickster as healer, as changer-of-ways, working with story and narrative, sharing pain and healing wounds and it is in this role that we see the evolution of Malcolm Reynolds, Trickster and Shaman.

Notes

[1] For this discussion, I will be using Whedon's intended sequence of episodes, as well as the series' own narrative chronology, as indicated by the series DVD and Whedon's commentary on the pilot.

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