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Friday, 28 July 2017

Reversing the Polarity of the Gender Flow: on reactions to Jodie Whittaker as the Doctor

Ivan Phillips

There has been no shortage of opinions in the days since the [announcement of Jodie Whittaker's casting](#) as the 13th lead actor in the BBC's science fiction drama *Doctor Who*. However people have responded to the imminent arrival of the first female Doctor, one thing is clear: it has got them *excited*, in the truest sense of the word, with few remaining entirely neutral on the subject.



Overall, the reaction has been [enthusiastic](#), with parents posting tales of ecstatic daughters, the previously *Who*-phobic suddenly deciding that they are going to tune in, and the majority of fans welcoming either a sharply appropriate piece of casting (the best actor for the job), a long-overdue redressing of the balance (at last, a woman) or a necessarily radical shake-up of the format (a change is better than a rest). Nervousness among some, however, has escalated into profound and toxic fury among a minority. At the limits of negative opinion, there were *ad hominem* attacks, plangent howls of disbelief and a TARDIS-load of bad old-fashioned chauvinism. The angry bottom line for the savagely righteous and the frankly appalled seems to have been a belief, a gut instinct perhaps, that a 54-year-old institution had been destroyed in a moment of SJW madness.



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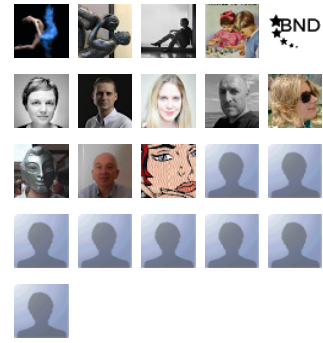
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Not surprisingly, some of the most vitriolic resistance could be traced to those with a culturally conservative agenda, whether professional media goblin Katie Hopkins (@KTHopkins) – who jibed about the Doctor going on maternity leave - or US evangelicals like James Huckabee (@Hucksworld): ‘#DoctorWho died today. He didn’t die nobly as you might expect. He was murdered by Political Correctness.’ At times, the bitter aggression of those reacting against the news was terrifying in its barely-suppressed misogyny. ‘Not really a DW fan,’ raved Felix Ulrich (@BlackParagon), ‘but female DW can suck my D ffs – stupid ideology bullshit infesting everything’.



Given the ferocity of such outbursts, it seems glib to reach for the no-publicity-is-bad-publicity argument but the revelation of Peter Capaldi's successor has certainly generated discussion in a way that hasn't been seen since the [announcement in September 2003](#) that *Doctor Who* was to be resurrected by Russell T. Davies after years in the museum of TV relics. Despite Capaldi's often astonishing performances, [ratings have fallen](#) over the last three years, as have sales of the all-important merchandise, and a cynic might be tempted to see the casting of a female Doctor as a last-ditch, all-or-nothing, kill-or-cure publicity stunt on the part of the BBC. The temptation is to be resisted, though, because it reduces a complex cultural moment to a petulant tabloid spasm, doing a disservice to all involved, and to the richness of the *Doctor Who* mythology itself.

Accusations of 'political correctness', whether 'gone mad' or otherwise, are really too lazy to dignify with a response. There have been enough critiques of *Doctor Who*'s inherent conservatism over the years – from [John Fiske](#) in the early 1980s to [Lorna Jowett](#) more recently – to justify a suspicion that, even if it did simply respond to the dreaded feminist-liberal-lefty agenda, Whittaker's casting would still be a very correct correction. As it happens, my own view is that *Doctor Who* has never been as reactionary or paternalistic as its reputation suggests – indeed, I feel that it embodies what [Paul Ricoeur](#) identifies as myth's ability to be 'the bearer of other, *possible* worlds'. Does the fact that, until Christmas Day 2017, the main character will always have been played by a white man, pose a problem to this reading of *Doctor Who* as a radical imaginative utopia? Well, yes, of course it does. It is worth remembering, though, as many have in the last week or so, that the first producer of *Doctor Who* in 1963 was a 27-year-old woman called [Verity Lambert](#) and that the first director was a gay Asian man, [Waris Hussein](#), also in his twenties. It has been pointed out, too, that [Sidney Newman](#), the Canadian TV pioneer who probably has a better claim than anyone to be the originator of *Doctor Who*, commented in 1986 that the lead character should one day be played by a woman. So much for any PC betrayal of the show's heritage...

In an ideal world, the casting of Whittaker would not have caused any kind of fuss, whether appreciative or censorious. Or, at least, it would have caused no more of a fuss than any previous casting of the Doctor, since there is always a period of unease, resistance, questioning, excitement, nostalgia, hope and fear. In an ideal world, Whittaker's gender would not be an issue in the context of her successful audition for what she has called '[the ultimate character](#)'. But this is *not* an ideal world, which is why a narrative like *Doctor Who* – on television, in novels, in comics, in games, in fan fiction, and in millions of playgrounds around the world – is needed, to be one of those fantastical bearers of other, possible worlds. The current distance from the ideal (and who am I to say that it is [the definite article](#)?) can be measured not only by the extremes of joy and despair that have greeted the casting of Whittaker, but also by the ugliness of some of the events that have occurred. The prurience and shabby moral hypocrisy of tabloid newspapers publishing decontextualised nude stills from the actor's previous screen roles, for example.

Then there was the sorry spectacle of the 5th and 6th Doctors, Peter Davison and Colin Baker, being [pitched against each other](#) as representatives of the anti- and pro-Whittaker camps respectively. Again, context was everything and, again, context was lost, leading to Davison – a generous and tireless ambassador for Doctor Who for over 30 years – being [trolled off Twitter](#).

Davison's concern that boy's might have lost a role model was widely reported – 'If I feel any doubts about it, it's the loss of a role model for boys' (note the 'if') – but his enthusiasm for Whittaker was less prominent: 'I understand the argument that you've got to open it up, so she has my best wishes and full confidence, I'm sure she'll do a wonderful job.' Colin Baker was surely right to argue that a role model is not intrinsically tied to gender – how many boys growing up in the 1990s had [Buffy](#) as an icon? – but Davison's mild qualms that a non-violent, cerebral hero-figure for non-violent, cerebral boys might be slipping from view was not, in its qualified context, entirely unreasonable. Even so, those non-violent, cerebral boys (and men) will now discover that a female Doctor can be just as fantastic at saving the universe as a male Doctor. A female Doctor a bit like their mum, or their sister, or their girlfriend, or their wife. Or, come to think of it, their teacher, their pilot, their doctor...

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A recent story in the *Daily Mail* reports the ‘news’ of Whittaker [shopping for groceries in ripped jeans](#): ‘She will be expected to smarten up when she emerges from the TARDIS.’ This is to bring her in line, presumably, with those sartorially elegant Doctors played by, say, Patrick Troughton and Christopher Eccleston (both shown above). Such ludicrous journalism gives an indication of why the casting of Whittaker is a risk for the series, although the risk has nothing to do with the quality or gender of the lead actor. Nor is it to do with the sanctity of the canon (the canon, in this case, being a remarkably flexible thing) or the supposed volatility of fans (who, as [Miles Booy recognises](#), have sometimes loved the series ‘in monstrous ways’). It is to do with the concurrent inertia and sensationalism of the surrounding culture, a temporal paradox if ever there was one. Outgoing show-runner Steven Moffat, [speaking at San Diego Comic Con](#) last week, was surely right to insist that the ‘backlash’ against a female Doctor was largely a media invention: ‘so many people want to pretend there’s a problem – there isn’t.’ Moffat, who has received a lot of criticism (some of it justified) for his depiction of female characters during his time in charge of the show, should be credited with establishing the groundwork for Whittaker’s Doctor in his casting of Michelle Gomez as [Missy](#), a brilliantly witty female incarnation of the Master, and in his shaping of Capaldi’s final season. ‘[Is the future going to be all girl?](#)’ sneered John Simm’s Master in the recent finale, ‘The Doctor Falls’, to which our hero retorted: ‘We can only hope.’

As many have pointed out over the last fortnight, *Doctor Who* is a fiction, a story, with a modern mythic protagonist who – like Frankenstein’s Creature, Sherlock Holmes and Miss Marple – will always be bigger than the actor who plays the part. (And, for the record, I see no reason why Holmes should not be played by a woman or Marple by a man, or either of them by a transgender or nonbinary actor: qualities of imaginative vision, writing and performance are the keys here, not predetermined gender categories.) *Doctor Who* is a fiction, a story, but it is a mistake to think of it as *only* a fiction, *only* a story: there is no *only* about it. Fictions are acts of make-believe but that does not mean that they are not real. They tell stories that have a reality –

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that [reality of 'poetic faith'](#) described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge [200 years ago](#) – that is fundamental to the experience of being human. Whether gritty realism or extraordinary fantasy, the stories we tell are always, ultimately, about ourselves. As Matt Smith's Doctor said to a sleeping Amelia Pond in 2010's 'The Big Bang': '[We're all stories in the end](#). Just make it a good one, eh?'

This is why the casting of Jodie Whittaker as the Doctor – and the reactions to her casting – are so important. They extend the story, and they challenge it. If, in the process, as [Jon Elledge](#) has suggested, 'the right people' become agitated, then that is a price worth paying and a gain to be made for the mythology. As *Doctor Who* writer Paul Cornell tweeted on the day of the casting announcement: 'This is what Doctor Who has always been there to do. This is what Doctor Who is *for*.'

Jodie Whittaker understands this aspect of the show when [she comments](#) that '*Doctor Who* represents everything that's exciting about change'. She, along with Chris Chibnall (and let it be said, Steven Moffat), has seen the future and it works; the past and the present too, as Capaldi's festive swansong, '[Twice Upon A Time](#)', promises to show. The *Doctor Who* story will continue to be a good one – in the view of this writer, one of the very best.

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