



Maids and Masters: The Distribution of Power in *Doctor Who* Series Three

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What's so compelling about the Doctor? Why do so many different kinds of people jump in the TARDIS to travel with him? Is it his boyish charm, his goodness, his sense of humor?

I would argue that for most of the companions in the new series, the most attractive part of the Time Lord is his power. To convince Rose to leave her life for adventure, the ninth Doctor expands on the power he has: "Did I mention that it travels in time?" Later, Martha says to the crowd in the tenement in *Last of the Time Lords*, "I know what he can do." That's her vote of confidence for the Doctor, how she convinces the people of the Doctor's importance: *what he can do*, not how good or brave he is. The adventure the Doctor offers his companion is inseparable from his power, from his ability to manipulate space and time, from his ability to threaten and fight enemies unimaginably evil and powerful.

Power impacts every relationship the Doctor has, but it's not something *Who* fans talk about often. We like to pretend, I think, that the Doctor's extraordinary power isn't important. We like to think that it doesn't affect him or his relationships with others. We like to think that if companions are "strong" enough, sassy enough, smart enough, they are his equals. But no matter how many times a companion saves the Doctor, or how many times a companion stands up to him, they don't have his power. The Doctor can manipulate space and time, travel through them in a manner even the humans of the future could only

imagine. He can fix practically anything with his magic sonic screwdriver. He can hold the knowledge of infinite lifetimes in his head. He can read minds. He can (and does) force his will on others: he takes away Donna's memory; he disables Jack's ability to time travel; he traps a girl in a mirror. His power outstrips any possible capabilities of his companions.

The disproportionate power dynamic in the Doctor/companion relationships is something each companion in the new series²⁸ struggles with at some point or another. When Rose protests in *School Reunion*, "I'm not his assistant," she voices the frustration that many of the companions have felt with the Doctor. The truth is, they know that they are small next to the Doctor, who is practically a demigod. But they, along with most of the audience, resist that reality, insisting that they are as good as, as clever as, as important as the Doctor. And perhaps they are all those things. But they are not as powerful as him. And this crucial fact is never more evident than it is in Series Three, where it seems that unequal power distribution in close relationships becomes a near-constant theme.

It's interesting that this is the series where the writers explore power so thoroughly, since Martha is the only companion in the Russell T Davies era with much power in her own world. Rose is relatively poor and Donna is stuck in a series of dead-end temp jobs; both lack connections, opportunities, and the hope of social mobility. Martha and her family, however, enjoy a marked level of affluence. Before she meets the Doctor, she's no aristocrat (like Lucy Saxon), and she has no extraordinary institutional power, like a government seat or a position as a high-ranking judge. But she is preparing to be a doctor and wields much more power over her life than the other companions. She has chosen a fairly well-paid and prestigious career and isn't stuck being a temp or a shop girl, with little ability to change her situation. After leaving the Doctor, Martha gets an officer position at UNIT (on the Doctor's recommendation), exercising a significant amount of military power for one so young and inexperienced. She's also the only companion to put the Doctor on a leash, effectively controlling when he shows up in her life again. And by leaving the Doctor, a moment many have pointed out as Martha's strongest, Martha does exercise the power she has and walks away. But all of this means only that Martha is more powerful than past (and some future) companions in the new series, not that she is as powerful as the

²⁸ I am only analyzing the issues of Series Three in the context of the new *Doctor Who* series that began in 2005.

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Doctor.²⁹

The Doctor frequently fails to acknowledge the difference in power between him and Martha. In these moments, it's difficult to know if he is being willfully obtuse. For example, in *The Shakespeare Code*, Martha reminds the Doctor that she doesn't have the same amount of privilege and power that he does when walking willy-nilly into the past:

Martha: Oh, but hold on. Am I all right? I'm not going to get carted off as a slave, am I?

The Doctor (looking genuinely confused): Why would they do that?

Martha (pointing at her face): Not exactly white, in case you haven't noticed.

The Doctor: I'm not even human. Just walk about like you own the place. Works for me.

This set of dialogue is a handy example of the Doctor refusing to acknowledge even the small ways (compared to say, mind reading and time travel) in which he is more powerful than his companions. Martha recognizes that history is not necessarily a safe place for her, since she doesn't have the same privilege and power there that she does in her present. And the Doctor assures her that *he has less power and privilege* ("I'm not even human!"), which is a blatant misrepresentation of what is happening here. The Doctor has white privilege (and, more relevantly in Elizabethan England, male privilege), even if he isn't actually a human. It's easy for him to act like he owns the place, because in the vast majority of human history, *he could actually own the place*, while Martha couldn't. The Doctor's dismissal of her concern may be warranted in this situation, but he also refuses to acknowledge that there is a power differential between them. Not only does Martha not have the same power as a white man would have historically, she is also not as capable of getting herself out of trouble. If she was "carted off as a slave," she would not be able to sonic screwdriver her way out of physical restraints. She might be able to run to the TARDIS, but without the Doctor, she couldn't use it to escape. She doesn't have the extraordinary knowledge of the Doctor to help her if she's trapped or threat-

29 Note that I don't complicate her class privilege with her lack of race privilege; this is because the show refuses to do this in her present. The only times the show acknowledges her race, and the ways in which her race diminishes her power because of racial oppression, are in the past, as with *Human Nature*/ *The Family of Blood*. This suggests that the writers problematically believed racial oppression to be a problem of history, not something Martha has to face in the present.

ened. This kind of exchange is echoed in other parts of the new series, like when the Doctor assures Astrid Peth that he doesn't "have a penny" in *Voyage of the Damned*, and it is fundamentally dishonest. By looking like a white man and by being an alien with special abilities, the Doctor has more power and influence than Martha. When the Doctor refuses to recognize the role power plays in his relationships, he risks exploiting that power difference.

Even as a human, in *Human Nature/ The Family of Blood*, the Doctor has an uneven power relationship with Martha. Martha as John Smith's housemaid is not *that* different from Martha as the Doctor's companion. When we see Martha in a maid uniform, it's a visual amplification of her relationship to the Doctor, not a deviation from it.

Okay, I know that claim isn't going to go over well. But Martha has no actual power in the TARDIS or in their adventures. Her frustrated powerlessness as she watches John Smith fall in love with Nurse Redfern mimics the powerlessness that she feels while trapped in a car in *Gridlock* or in the escape pod in *42*. In the TARDIS, the Doctor is in charge; he makes the decisions. And, crucially, Martha's job in the TARDIS is to tend to the Doctor's emotional needs. She is there because he is lonely, and to keep him from misusing his power. ("I think you need someone to stop you" Donna tells the Doctor in *The Runaway Bride*.) That maid uniform signals to us not only her lack of power in comparison to him, but also her servile role in his life. (It's an exaggeration of that servile role, obviously.) She's a companion, a caretaker, a therapist. She is not a partner. I mean, you can be friends with your maid, and you might even pretend that makes you equals, but she's still your maid.

The relationship between the Master and Lucy Saxon makes it clear what can happen when a Time Lord pretends an equal relationship with a human. In modern Western culture, the ideal heterosexual romantic pairing is *the* relationship of equality. We like to think we've moved beyond the sexism of the past, where marriages were exchanges of women-property, and that marriages based in love are equal partnerships. So the fact that the Master marries Lucy is significant. What's interesting is that we never see the Master as purposefully manipulative with Lucy in *The Sound of Drums*. He seems to have, at least, a certain affection for her. Their body language in this episode is not that different from a couple in love. He doesn't lie to her about his plans, and they both seem to think that she is entering this relationship with her eyes open. Neither the Master nor Lucy acknowledge the extraordinary

power imbalance in their relationship, which is why it's easy for him to end up abusing that power with her.

The relationship that the Master has with Lucy Saxon is horrifying, but it acts as a foil to the relationship the Doctor has with his companions, and specifically with Martha. It's an exaggeration of the Doctor/Martha relationship, not a departure. In the new series, both the Master and the Doctor choose their companions because they need something from them (connections for an election, companionship to counter loneliness). Both are in charge of their companion's adventures. The Master takes Lucy to places that will shape her into what he wants: a person with little sympathy for human life. And while the Doctor often elicits and obliges his companions' requests, the number of times the companions ask "Where are we going now?" makes it clear that the decision of "where" and "when" to go is ultimately up to him. Finally, both the Master and the Doctor have an extraordinary amount of power over their companions, and both fail to acknowledge this, often pretending their companions are on equal footing with them.

In the Master/Lucy relationship, we see the exaggerated possible future of the Doctor and any of his companions. One year after the Master releases the Toclafane, his relationship with Lucy has altered irreparably. When we first see Lucy in *Last of the Time Lords*, she has a bruised eye and walks with a limp, indicating physical abuse from the Master. She is dressed in a low-cut red satin dress, obviously chosen by the Master. The dress sexualizes her, and signals possible sexual abuse. Her haunted and empty look also suggests emotional abuse. After all, the Master seems to have gotten bored of her, flirting with his masseuse Tanya in front of Lucy, promising Tanya he would take her traveling in the TARDIS. Lucy's ability to resist has been worn down by the Master's treatment of her. Even as she shoots the Master, she almost looks like it happened by accident, like she's in shock.

It's not a pretty picture; with the Master, Lucy has gone from a powerful agent (with wealth and connections) to a powerless victim. Could something like this happen with the Doctor and his companions? Doubtful. But the Doctor is not above taking advantage of his companions' lack of power. He removes Donna's memory, despite her resistance and clear *no*. He dumps the Doctor clone onto Rose, and Rose back in her alternate universe, despite her reservations about whether that's what she wants. He disables Jack's time travel device, knowing that Jack has no way to fix it. He doesn't do these things often, but he is always in a position to do them. His companions have few ways to fight back

when the Doctor decides to do something “for their own good.”

And the relationship between the Master and Lucy is not the only way in which the series finale draws clear parallels between the Master and the Doctor. The Master disables the Doctor in *The Sound of Drums*, taking away his sonic screwdriver and aging him so that he is physically weak. In the next episode, we see the Doctor crawl out of a tent, with a bowl reading “dog” outside of it. The Master delights in stripping the Doctor of his power and humiliating him. When the Master is disabled at the end of the episode, and the Doctor is at full strength, the Doctor says that he will keep the Master “safe” in the TARDIS. The Master is horrified; “You mean you’re just going to... *keep me?*” he asks. The Doctor responds, “Maybe I’ve been wandering for too long. Now I’ve got someone to care for.” While what the Doctor wants to do with the Master is far kinder than what the Master did to the Doctor, the comparison is unavoidable. Neither of these men enjoys seeing the other as an equal. The Master wants to keep the Doctor as a pet, humiliated and weak. The Doctor’s plan to “keep” the Master sounds no less humiliating, and is predicated on the fact that the Doctor will be able to overpower the Master for the foreseeable future. Their relationship is a power struggle.

The Master functions as the Doctor’s foil in this season, an exaggeration of the ways in which the Doctor often has the most power in his relationships. Like the Master, the Doctor wants a fairly equal relationship with his human companions, and this desire leads the Master to corrupt his wife. While the Doctor doesn’t deliberately take advantage of his power like the Master does, the Master is an object lesson for the Doctor. He is a warning of what could happen if the Doctor continues to deny the difference of power with his companions, and Lucy Saxon serves as a reminder of how much harm the Doctor is capable of doing to his companions.

Think of all the relationships in your life where someone more powerful than you pretends you’re equals. Your mother, telling you that you should treat her just like a friend, and tell her everything, without acknowledging that you could tell her something that gets you grounded. Your boss, encouraging you to treat her like an equal, despite the fact that she could fire you at the drop of a hat. Your teacher, the one who wears jeans and has you call her by her first name, who wants you to act like she doesn’t give you your grades. All of these instances are dangerous, because by denying their power over you, these people leave you open to exploitation. Your mom may want you to tell her everything,

but when you tell her about that time you went drinking after prom, she swiftly takes away your car. Your boss may want to take you out, like friends, but if you accidentally tell her you steal pencils from the office, you're fired. But what are you supposed to do? Tell your mom and your boss that you don't want to be friends with them? Because they hold so much power over you, you *have* to at least pretend closeness and friendliness. And that simply isn't fair. It's important in relationships to recognize the power we do or don't hold over our fellow human beings. The only character, and prospective companion, who really seems to recognize this in Series Three is Joan Redfern.

Joan Redfern is one of the only prospective companions in the new series to turn the Doctor down, and she does so because of power. At the end of *The Family of Blood*, Joan is coming to terms with the fact that the human John Smith no longer exists. In one of his more oblivious moments, the Doctor invites her to travel with him as his companion. "But that's not fair," she says sadly, "What must I look like to you, Doctor? I must seem so very small." In this scene, she recognizes that she will never be the Doctor's equal, and that she is "small" and powerless next to him, even though he denies it. She doesn't want to replace a relationship with John Smith, based on companionship and mutual understanding, with a relationship with the Doctor, the demigod who brought death and destruction to her home. Joan is more perceptive than a lot of the other characters who comes in contact with the Doctor, and she doesn't seem to buy the Doctor's denial that she is small next to him. She recognizes that a relationship with the Doctor will never be "fair," no more than a "friendship" with your mom can be fair.

So what does all this mean? Is the Doctor despicable? Are the companions powerless? Well, no. The Doctor's intentions are good; he wants to connect with his companions. He wants to be equal partners with them, and that's admirable. But his solution, to gloss over the power he has, is dangerous. It leaves his companions open to exploitation; if he doesn't acknowledge his power, he can't be aware of how it affects his treatment of his companions. What I like about Series Three is that it tackles this inequity, from Donna to Martha to Joan to Lucy Saxon. In the climax of the series, we see a distorted and corrupted Master, who serves as a warning to the Doctor. His abuse of Lucy, of Martha's family, of the human race, is an admonition: *Don't ignore the power you have. Don't ignore how that affects your relationship with humans. Don't use it to manipulate and exploit others.*

Does the Doctor learn this lesson? Not exactly. The closest we see

him to grappling with the amount of power he holds is in *The Waters of Mars*, but he doesn't radically change his behavior afterwards. He also comes face-to-face (again) with the power of the Time Lords in *The End of Time*, but seems to reflect very little on how this is related to his relationship with humans. And by the time we see the eleventh Doctor, bumbling into the home of the young Amelia Pond, the theme of power distribution seems to have evaporated. We're encouraged to see Amelia and the eleventh Doctor as the same - adventurous and childlike - rather than what they actually are: a small and vulnerable child and a powerful alien.

I keep watching, hoping that we'll see again an exploration of power distribution in the Doctor's relationship, of vulnerable companions and other humans, of the possibility of abuse and exploitation in relationship like this. Particularly while the Doctor is played by an actor in so many privileged categories (white, cisgendered male, abled, young) that hold power in our world, it's important for the writers and fans to grapple with the role power plays in *Doctor Who*. After all, why haven't we had a female Doctor or a Doctor of color? Is it because s/ he would lose all that power associated with being a white man? Does he need the power to strut through Earth history and the rest of the universe without a worry, the power to command and control, even if he doesn't use it? Are we fans as attracted to the Doctor's power as his companions are? If so, then it's even more important that this theme resurface in the show, and that fans have a conversation about it.

And I, for one, look forward to that conversation.