"I Want to be a Macho Man": Examining Rape Culture, Adolescent Female Sexuality, and the Destabilisation of Gender Binaries in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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Abstract:
Oppressive, essentialist models of gender identity - whereby women are routinely positioned as helpless victims, and men are antithetically characterised as strong, heroic saviour figures – routinely dominate the action and horror genres of screen media. This polarisation functions as an ideological tool for reinforcing patriarchal dominance, by aligning the masculine role with that of powerful agent, and the feminine with weakness and passivity, thereby deeming men's governance as a necessity for women's safety, due to women's seemingly 'natural' role as victim. However, this article investigates how the first two seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) destabilise this repressive polarisation through its courageous, commanding female protagonist, who subverts genre norms by adopting the – traditionally male – role of Vampire Slayer. Through examining this characterisation, and its explicit challenge to the active/male passive/female gender dichotomies that are frequently interwoven into the tropes of the horror and action genres, the investigative foci of this article will demonstrate how *Buffy* dismisses socially-prescribed hierarchies of power between masculinity and femininity, and empowers women in a role where they have routinely been victimised and diminished. I will illuminate how Buffy's relationship with Angel destabilises traditional heterosexual power relations, and liberates Buffy from the oppressive heterosexual matrix in which female characters, and representations of female sexuality, are routinely confined – most notably, through the series' treatment of virginity and first sexual experience. Finally, this essay will examine the centrality of rape culture in *Buffy*, and express how the television series empowers its female characters through rewriting Sharon Marcus' theory of the 'rape script'.

> *What would happen…to the order of the world…*
> *if the rock upon which they founded this church should crumble?*
> - Hélène Cixous, *Sorties*

> *How can I be without border?*
> - Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

1 The narrative impetus of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)[1] centres on the deconstruction and subversion of the binary notions of gender identity on which the horror and action genres are frequently based ─ whereby women are routinely positioned as helpless victims, and men are antithetically characterised as their strong, heroic saviours. This polarisation functions as an ideological tool for reinforcing patriarchal dominance, by aligning the masculine role with that of powerful agent, and the feminine with weakness and

[1] Hereafter *BtVS*

passivity, thereby deeming men's governance as a necessity for women's safety, due to women's seemingly 'natural' role as victim. Indeed, as Judith Butler contends, the construction of gender identity through this oppressive dualism is an attempt to conceal the constructed nature of gender roles within an essentialist biological origin, since "the binary framework for […] sex and gender are […] regulatory fictions that […] naturalise the […] power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression" (46). However, *BtVS* reverses this polarisation through its eponymous protagonist, Buffy Summers, whom creator Joss Whedon envisages as a courageous, commanding heroine, who adopts the active – and traditionally male[2] – role of the Vampire Slayer.

2 Through examining Buffy's characterisation, I will express how the television series engages with and challenges the prevalent gender binary of active/male and passive/female ─ a dialectical structure that Hélène Cixous cites as the fundamental hierarchical order of gender identities and relations (578). Indeed, Laura Mulvey argues that this gender dichotomy is routinely present in screen media narratives, with male characters advancing the narrative, whilst women adopt a peripheral role, typically that of passive love interest or helpless damsel in need of rescue (11). Conversely, I will display how Whedon's narrative concentration on Buffy's (female) experience destabilises and reverses the traditional gender binaries of the horror and action genres, most notably, through the male characters frequently passively relying on her to save *them*. Indeed, Whedon states that his specific aim was to subvert the conventional horror trope of "the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed" (DVD commentary). Through this subversion, Whedon aimed to create "someone who was a hero […] where she had always been a victim," and subsequently empower women in a character role in which they have commonly been diminished (ibid).[3]

3 The investigative foci of this essay will centre on discussions of episodes from Seasons One and Two of *BtVS*. Through a close examination of these seasons, I will explore how Buffy's characterisation is immediately showcased to explicitly subvert the traditional alignment of active heroism and strength with male characters in screen media, and to destabilise the gender binaries of activity/passivity and victim/saviour that are frequently interwoven into the tropes of the horror and action genres. In addition to establishing Buffy's identity as the Slayer, Whedon also employs these seasons to depict the growth of Buffy's

[2] For further discussion of the history of the Vampire Slayer figure, see Bruce A. McClelland.

[3] Sarah Michelle Gellar's casting as Buffy Summers highlights the genre conventions that Whedon aimed to subvert, since the same year that *BtVS* was released (1997), Gellar also played Helen Shivers – a screaming feeble blonde girl who is brutally murdered in an alley – in the Slasher movie *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, positioning her role in *BtVS* as especially subversive of audience genre expectations in light of this (a character contrast that is illuminated through a comparison of Figures 1 and 2).

relationship with Angel. Although this relationship is conservative in its heterosexual basis, I will consider how it is a narrative thread that is in fact implemented to destabilise traditional heterosexual power relations, since Whedon attempts to liberate Buffy from the oppressive heterosexual matrix in which female characters, and representations of female sexuality, are routinely confined – most notably, through examination of the series' treatment of first sexual experience. My final area of investigation will be the allegorical function of Buffy's supernatural opponents as representations of the very real threat of sexual violence that many women face. Through this discussion, I will illuminate how Buffy explicitly defies and destabilises conventional genre and gender norms, and is used by Whedon to revise audience expectations of the horror and action genres: as her Watcher, Giles, tells her – and advises the audience – "the handbook would be of no use in your case" ('What's My Line? Part Two').

Fig.1 Gellar as victim in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997)

Fig.2 Gellar as powerful hero in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)

Rewriting the Female Victim

4 A central narrative preoccupation in *BtVS* is the destabilisation and subversion of the male attacker/female victim dualism, which is routinely employed in the horror and action genres to code the female body with weakness and vulnerability. This subversion is immediately established in the opening scene of the show's pilot episode, 'Welcome to the Hellmouth,' which overtly draws upon audience expectations and knowledge of generic conventions in order to subvert them, and rewrite narrative tropes. Here, a young girl sneaks into school at night with an older boy, with his predatory body language – as he closes in on her, blocking her exit – and the dark, shadowy mise-en-scène of the visibly empty school corridors suggesting that he intends to attack her while they are alone. For audience members who are familiar with the tropes of the horror genre, she is presented as the traditional victim ─ blonde, innocent-looking, and visibly nervous; underscored through her stuttering "I…I…I don't want to." However, at the moment when the boy attempts to trap her, she is revealed to be a vampire, and *she* instead attacks *him*. This reverses not only the usual victim/attacker scenario, but also cements Whedon's central binary dissolution, and narrative thread that in *BtVS* "nothing is as it seems," since Whedon explicitly utilises the visual codes of the horror genre, and draws upon audience expectations of generic gender roles, only to continually destabilise and subvert these conventions (DVD commentary). This opening scene also immediately demystifies the commonly employed gendered horror convention of what Whedon refers to as the "helpless little blonde girl" as perpetual victim, which Buffy will defy for the following seven seasons ─ crucially, the show's first victim is *male*, not female, and this opening scene cements the series' narrative centrality of powerful female characters (ibid).

5 The central narrative destabilisation of the traditional horror and action trope of the female victim helplessly relying on her strong male peers for rescue is evident throughout the first two seasons of the series. Instead of relying upon this overworked narrative stereotype, Whedon depicts women actively protecting and saving themselves, other women, and, most notably, the men.[4] Rather than fulfilling what Carol Clover establishes as the lone 'Final Girl' role ─ as showcased by such 'slasher' movies as *Scream* (1996) ─ in *BtVS*, women work together to save themselves and each other. This is achieved through physical battles, but also via intellectual problem-solving, with many of the young women being described as having "first-rate mind[s]" ('Teacher's Pet'). This collective female strength is significant since

[4] A trope also explored – albeit to a lesser extent – in *True Blood* (2008-2014), wherein the (blonde) heroine Sookie Stackhouse comes to the aid of vampire Bill Compton in the series' first episode.

rather than portraying one anomalous 'strong girl', *BtVS* depicts many powerful women, thereby showcasing Sharon Inness' claim that "toughness in women does not have to be antithetical to friendship" (168). Indeed, Buffy is not encumbered by her friendships, but instead, as Sharon Ross has argued, the 'Slayerettes' strengthen her through physical and emotional support, and form a collective offence against the patriarchal conventions that attempt to limit and control them – a collective female action that is essential to feminist advancement.

6 Whedon frequently employs this reversal of the conventional victim/saviour gender dichotomy humorously. This is most apparent in the first two seasons with the character of Xander, who regularly adopts the traditionally female 'damsel in distress' role. He routinely relies on Buffy for protection, while also comically parodying conventionally 'macho' masculine action ─ for example, when he declares: "It's time for me to act like a man ─ and hide!" ('Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered'). However, this gendered victim/saviour reversal also facilitates an investigation into negative male reactions to Buffy's assertions of power, since many male characters feel threatened and emasculated by her strength ─ most notably, Xander in season one, whom Buffy's actions initially make feel "inadequate and less than a man" ('The Harvest'). These feelings of emasculation engage with Mulvey's argument that women's screen presence induces castration anxiety in men, due to women's "absence of a penis" – yet conversely, this absence also serves to highlight men's possession, and socially-prescribed phallic power (6). However, Buffy destabilises this binary of absence/possession through her portrayal as a phallocised female ─ wielding phallic weapons such as stakes, which she uses to destroy (usually) male opponents. Clover considers this "symbolic phallocisation" as proceeding "from the need to bring her in line with […] laws of the Western narrative tradition […] of the literal representation of heroism in male form," (60-1) and therefore it diminishes Buffy's transgressive characterisation, since rather than being a powerful female, she is instead a symbolic male, and is only imbued with power through phallocentric means, as a member of what Cixous terms the "Phallocentric Performing Theatre" (582). Indeed, this emphasis on female power through phallocentric means has been highlighted by bell hooks as a fundamental flaw of such narratives as *BtVS*, which she contends showcase, "phallocentric girls doing everything the boys do," since rather than illuminating ontological female strength, and strength in femininity in its own right, such narratives instead portray powerful female characters as mere "dicks in drag" (22).

7 Whilst these arguments present a considerable contention to Buffy's transgressive characterisation, this phallocentric power is not the only form of power that Buffy demonstrates in the series ─ as I have argued, Buffy draws considerable strength and power from her friendships, especially those with other young women. Furthermore, Whedon arguably succeeds in representing this phallocisation as a subversive element of Buffy's characterisation. Indeed, through these weapons – and the symbolic phallic power they represent – Buffy destabilises the gender binary of absence/possession and reverses the traditional heterosexual power dynamic by being depicted as the penetrat*or* rather than the penetrat*ed*. This characterisation is troubling for male characters – and viewers ─ since it implies that phallic power is transferable, and can be possessed by either sex, thereby destabilising men's ingrained feelings of 'natural' superiority. Whedon explores these male desires for superiority over women in 'Teacher's Pet,' when Xander fantasises that Buffy is the helpless victim of a vampire attack, and he is her rescuer ─ subsequently allowing Xander to display the socially designated 'ideal' masculine attributes as her heroic saviour. However, later in this episode, Xander's fantasy fails to materialise in reality, when he is instead placed in the feminised victim role, relying on Buffy to rescue him when he is almost raped by a monster. Through Xander's saviour/victim reversal, Xander could be considered as being rebuked for his fantasy, since Whedon routinely punishes macho masculine fantasies and behaviour in *BtVS* when they centre on diminishing women to inflate male illusions of power. Indeed, this punishment is usually expressed through humiliating male characters, or turning men into victims, and thus weakening their physical and symbolic power in the diegesis.

'I May be Dead, But I'm Still Pretty' - Destabilising the Male Gaze

8 A criticism that is frequently aimed at the show by such scholars as Sherryl Vint is that Buffy is presented in a sexualised manner, and that this undermines her progressive representation by placing her in the traditionally female role in screen media of what Mulvey terms "fetishised commodity" (47). Buffy's hyper-feminine appearance also concurs with the dominance of the male gaze in screen media, and signifies Mulvey's assertion of how "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is stylised accordingly," since Buffy's appearance may be considered as an attempt to "circumvent her threat" by portraying her as a sexualised feminine object, which can be governed by the controlling (male) voyeuristic gaze (11-17).

9 However, her hyper-feminine fashion choices – as well as portraying Buffy as a typical 1990s teenager – in fact arguably aid Whedon's destabilisation of gender binaries. Buffy is frequently underestimated by her opponents because of her feminine clothing and petite physical size (and hyper-feminine name), which do not concur with the traditionally muscular, combat gear-clad body that conventionally signifies a character's heroic, powerful status[5] – as Angel observes, "I thought you'd be taller, or bigger, [with] muscles and all that" ('Welcome to the Hellmouth'). Indeed, Buffy is repeatedly patronisingly referred to as "little lady," ('Teacher's Pet') and frequently receives sexist comments about her abilities as the Slayer ─ for example, when she meets werewolf hunter Kane in 'Phases,' he doubts her capability because, "well, you're a girl."

10 In actuality, Buffy's appearance conversely functions to destabilise typical associations of femininity with weakness, and exposes the artificiality of the essentialist binary model of biologically-determined and fixed gender roles. Instead, her characterisation reveals the fluidity of gender identity as what Butler terms a "free-floating artifice," since Buffy displays both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits ─ visually emphasised through the conjunction between her 'feminine' outfits, and 'masculine' combat skills and weapons (fig.3) (9). Furthermore, by visually coding Buffy as hyper-feminine, Whedon foregrounds Mary Ann Doane's notion of the "female masquerade" in screen media, since excessive femininity reveals the active construction of gender identity, and alerts the (particularly female) audience to gender's status as an actively-fashioned and continuous performance (235).

[5] As commonly witnessed in the action genre – most notably, Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (1984)

Fig.3 Conjunction of femininity and masculinity

11 In addition to Buffy's appearance, a further focus for binary destabilisation is the gendered experiences of the gaze. Mulvey's psychoanalytical approach to the gaze and screen spectatorship maintains that historically in screen media, patriarchal ideology and screen apparatus have positioned women as the passive, sexual objects of the active, controlling male gaze, which commands authority over the narrative, as women's images are filtered and fashioned through the male hero's gaze (11).

12 However, *BtVS* revises Mulvey's notions by conversely imbuing women with optic agency, ergo rewriting and liberating women from their traditional role as passively awaiting inscription through the male gaze. Instead, *BtVS* places men in this passive role, as women assert their presence as screen *subjects*, not objects. Through foregrounding the subjective gaze of the female protagonists, *BtVS* revises Mulvey's suggestion of the classical gaze of the (male) audience onto the female onscreen, since instead, the audience looks *with*, rather than *at*, women. This focus on female subjectivity subsequently rewrites women's typical inscription within what Christian Metz terms the male "scopic regime" in screen media (703).

13 Although Buffy's body is frequently admired by men in the show, Whedon attempts to destabilise Mulvey's observations of the gendered conventions of the gaze, by allowing the female characters to escape their traditional roles as passive objects. Instead, women actively assert their optic agency, as the female gaze is wielded to appraise the male body in *BtVS*. Indeed, significantly, it is not Buffy, but the male characters whose bodies are explicitly eroticised and objectified by the camera, as is most notably witnessed with Angel. He is frequently displayed as a source of scopophilic pleasure for the (female) audience and Buffy alike. He repeatedly appears in various states of undress, with his body expressing Mulvey's notions of being "stylised and fragmented by close-ups," as the camera regularly lingers on his bare torso in close-up and medium shots, when in the same scene Buffy is fully clothed (14).[6] This is first notable in 'Angel,' when he passively stands shirtless, as Buffy – who remains fully clothed ─ inspects his wounds (fig.4). Buffy explicitly and voyeuristically admires his body when he is not looking, as she watches him undress, thus reversing Mulvey's observations of the typical male/female "active/looking, passive/looked-at" binary of the gaze (16). Furthermore, the soft lighting in this scene is specifically focused on Angel's body, which therefore purposefully directs the audience's attention towards it, and eroticises his body through emphasising his muscular torso, and enhances his status as an object to be, "looked at and displayed" (Mulvey: 11).

14 As well as reversing the gendered gaze by highlighting women as the, "active controllers of the look," and designating men as the passive, eroticised recipients, this scene – and many others when Angel appears shirtless and wounded ─ also displays the vulnerability of the male body to penetration and wounding (Mulvey: 13). This thereby reverses the typical focus in the horror and action genres on the vulnerability of the female body, and instead illustrates the 'feminisation' of Angel's body. This vulnerability thus further destabilises notions of a unified gender identity because, even though Angel's body is visually coded as displaying the muscles and strength that conventionally signify masculinity, he is also 'feminised' through his apparent physical vulnerability, and subsequently represents a non-dichotomous gender identity. Indeed, through his 'open' and leaking body, Angel becomes the "bearer of the bleeding wound," a traditionally female role in the horror genre, and in wider socio-cultural iconography (Mulvey: 1). Furthermore, this scene - similarly to Xander's eroticised torso in 'Go Fish' ─ highlights the constructed nature of masculinity. As Richard Dyer contends, hegemonic masculinity, as frequently visually defined through a focus on

[6] Significantly, none of the female characters appear partially undressed in these seasons – only the male characters do so.

muscular physique and physical prowess, acts to underline the constructed nature of this gender identity, since defined muscles such as Angel displays are an "achieved," rather than natural physical state (274). Therefore, similarly to Doane's theory of the female masquerade, the focus on masculinity as construction – a central paradox of hegemonic masculinity that Dyer refers to as the "masculine mystique" ─ furthers Whedon's intention to undermine ideas of 'natural' gender roles and characterisations (276).

Fig.4 Angel's eroticised body

'You Made Me The Man I Am Today' – Challenging Patriarchal Discourses of Virginity

15 Although the first two seasons of *BtVS* are conservative in their focus on heterosexuality, the relationship between Angel and Buffy is a key narrative thread wherein gender binaries are destabilised. In traditional heterosexual narratives, Mulvey asserts that the male role is that of, "the active one […] forwarding the story, making things happen" (12). However, here it is Buffy who adopts this role, with the narrative revolving around her endeavours, while Angel maintains what Susan Owen cites as the traditionally female role of the passive "plot enabler," since he functions to allow the narrative to explore certain key adolescent events for Buffy ─ for example, first sexual experience (27). Mulvey argues that

the traditional female role in screen media is to "fall in love with the […] male protagonist and become his property" (13). However, *BtVS* explicitly rejects this narrative trajectory, and a traditional heteronormative narrative closure, when Buffy kills Angel at the end of season two ('Becoming: Part Two'). Buffy thereby literally kills this narrative option, and again underscores Angel's role as a passive character, since she decides both his and her own destiny in this act, thus emphasising Susan Hopkins' contention that Buffy's narrative trajectory involves "not the pursuit of romantic love, but of personal destiny" (214).

16 Whilst much has been written on gender identities in *BtVS*, there has been relatively little scholarly analysis of the series' treatment and representation of virginity. Buffy's first sexual experience with Angel explicitly destabilises traditional heterosexual power dynamics. After their encounter, due to a curse, Angel loses his soul, and transforms into his evil alter ego, Angelus. This incident may be considered to exemplify Clover's argument that those who have sex in a horror film are punished (usually through being the first characters to be killed), as Angel is punished through losing his soul – and later being killed because of this – and Buffy experiences the emotional punishment of losing him (33-4). Therefore, this narrative incident may be considered to transmit a conservative message, which underlines warnings about the dangers and negative consequences of sex that are often transmitted to young adults through screen media – an argument that is especially apparent when one considers Angel's 'dangerous' status as an older man, and as a vampire.[7] However, although Buffy experiences emotional distress, it is Angel who is explicitly punished here, not Buffy, therefore challenging and reversing the usually female-focused punishment for sexual activity.

17 The subversive nature of this incident is especially apparent when one considers that after a first sexual encounter, it is traditionally the female who is considered to 'lose' something – patriarchal discourse portrays her as being changed, diminished, and often made impure through the experience. However, here it is the male, Angel, who loses something (his soul), and who changes for the worse ─ becoming the evil, 'impure' Angelus, with the change in name explicitly underscoring this transformation. Therefore, this places Angel in the conventionally female, feminine role, as the one who experiences change – rather than the typical 'fallen woman' figure; he is the 'fallen Angel'. Significantly, Buffy is assigned the ─ usually male ─ agency and power of bringing about this change, as Angel tells her mockingly, "you *made me* the man I am today" ('Innocence').

[7] A punishment exemplified in *It Follows* (2014).

18 Most importantly for Whedon's rewriting of the gendered virginity script, is the naming of the episode after their sexual encounter: 'Innocence.' Whedon was adamant that Buffy was still to be seen as "an innocent: she hasn't lost anything of herself […] that's why her mum says, 'you don't look any different to me'" (DVD commentary). Indeed, as Rhonda Wilcox has noted, Buffy's white clothing at the end of this episode underlines her fundamental innocence, and destabilises the longstanding association of white with virginity, and the traditional innocence/experience dichotomy that typically governs depictions of female sexuality (127). Through this episode, the show explicitly rewrites patriarchal notions of loss of virginity as inexorably changing girls and making them impure or damaged, since instead, Buffy remains exactly as she was before the sexual encounter – she is in no way altered. Therefore, through engaging with the conventional discourse surrounding virginity – which is commonly used as a patriarchal method of attempting to control the female body and female sexuality ─ *BtVS* empowers women through assigning them agency, and revising the patriarchal ideology which promotes the diminishing effects of sex on women.

'All Monsters are Human' – Everyday Threat and Rape Culture in Sunnydale

19 Buffy frequently faces monsters that are symbolic of patriarchal control, most notably, the vampires of the (almost entirely male) Hellmouth, which represent the patriarchal social structures that repress and control women ─ underscored through its governance by the male figurehead, the 'Master,' who is Buffy's main enemy in season one. Their impending showdown represents what Lorna Jowett cites as the central tension in *BtVS* ─ "between young female power and old patriarchal structures designed to keep women under control" (41-2). Therefore, when Buffy defeats the Master, she is directly attacking the social and institutional discrimination and oppression that attempts to contain her. She slays not only supernatural demons, but in the process destroys the patriarchal ideology that attempts to keep women in a subordinate position, and that has previously suppressed women in cinematic and televisual depictions.

20 As well as facing supernatural demons, Buffy also encounters opponents who represent 'real world' dangers – most notably, the threat of rape and sexual assault. The threat of rape has historically lurked in the shadows of many female-centred narratives, with such fairy tales as *Red Riding Hood* warning young women from straying too far from social norms.[8] Indeed, Susan Brownmiller considers the threat of rape to be the fundamental tactic

[8] A narrative theme explored extensively by Jack Zipes.

"by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear" (15). Similarly, Sharon Marcus maintains that rape and sexual harassment are patriarchal "micro-strategies of oppression" that attempt to control women through instilling fear, and perpetuating gendered concepts of women as perennial victims (391). Marcus' term "rape script" expresses how "social structures *inscribe* on men's and women's embodied selves and psyches the misogynistic inequalities which enable rape to occur," since rape is part of a "*gendered grammar* of *violence,*" which assigns power roles – women the passive victim role, and men that of active attacker – resulting in women being predicated as "the objects of violence and the subjects of fear" (391-3). Marcus suggests that violent acts against women often succeed because women are taught that the safest thing to do is to passively allow it to happen, since men could hurt them even more if they retaliate in defence. However, Marcus calls for the rewriting of this "script" that assigns women vulnerability and powerlessness, and to instead empower women, and grant them agency through depicting them refusing to passively accept the victim role – as she maintains, "since we are solicited to help create this power, we can act to destroy it," which Buffy does through defending herself and other women against (often explicitly sexual) threat and attack (392).

21 This threat of sexual assault is overtly witnessed in the episode 'Go Fish,' which portrays the threat of rape from (initially) human males on the Sunnydale swim team. One of the team members, Cameron, tries to assault Buffy in his car – attempting to place her in the passive, helpless victim role by telling her, "relax, *I'm* not going to hurt *you,*" while he tries to kiss her. However, Buffy refuses to allow him to force her into this victim role, as she replies, "oh, it's not *me* I'm worried about," and then breaks his nose against the steering wheel in self-defence. Similar to earlier discussions of the opening scene of *BtVS*, Whedon again employs the show's central binary reversal of the would-be male attacker instead becoming the victim ─ here of female defensive violence ─ a formula that *BtVS* repeatedly employs to empower women and destabilise audience expectations. This scene also acts to emphasise Marcus's argument that women need to learn "strategies which will enable [them] to sabotage men's power to rape, which will empower women to take the ability to rape completely out of men's hands," since Buffy's move was one which 'normal' women could imitate, not one that was reliant on her supernatural Slayer strength (388).

22 *BtVS*'s encouragement of the training of women in self-defence is expressed in 'Phases', when the students of Sunnydale High School take part in defence classes as part of the curriculum. Here, Buffy is partnered with Larry, who is presented as a hyper-masculine sexist student who, when practising a defence move, attempts to sexually assault her.

However, Buffy quickly responds by flipping him over her shoulder ─ a defensive move that she has been taught during the class, and therefore one that women may imitate in real life. Indeed, Willow jokes with her, "don't forget, you're supposed to be a meek little girly girl," highlighting how Buffy is rewriting the 'rape script' by defending herself, rather than allowing men to place her in the role of the "meek" and passive victim – something which any woman can learn and train towards imitating.

23 Later in 'Go Fish,' due to a drug the swimmers are using to enhance their performance ─ and thus to make them more conventionally 'macho' ─ the sexually aggressive male swimmers mutate into demons, thereby overtly exemplifying the notion of their aggressive behaviour making them not just metaphorically, but literally, monstrous. This episode concludes with the swimmers (in monster form) being banished from Sunnydale – an ending that signifies how their behaviour has no place in society. This destabilisation of the boundaries between monster and human in *BtVS* underscores the capacity of everyday humans for evil and monstrous behaviour, as Suzy McKee Charnas notes, *BtVS* emphasises "the discovery that the monstrous is and always has been located primarily not […] in mythical creatures, but in our human neighbours […] and sometimes in ourselves" (59).

24 Through her defeat of such monsters, Buffy offers (especially female) viewers the fantasy of invincibility, in a society that teaches women to be constantly fearful for their safety, especially from male threat. Instead of being fearful of male predators, Buffy and the other women of the show confront, attack and defeat them. This leads to a central point of contention, as to whether or not *BtVS*'s status as a supernatural show detracts from its subversive aims. Whedon's adoption of the fantasy genre could be considered to place Buffy in a world that is too far removed from our own, and therefore a 'safe' environment in which to explore her transgressive characterisation, as it is not directly threatening 'real world' social gender norms. As Ien Ang suggests, fantasy provides an, "unconstrained space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions […] can be adopted. In real life, the choice for […] that subject position is never without consequences" (243). Buffy's defeat of monsters in the show is also depicted as relying heavily upon her superhuman strength and combat skills. Therefore, this suggests that few women could accomplish these feats in reality. Thus, Buffy's threat to patriarchal control may be circumvented by setting the standards of her heroism, bravery and toughness at an unattainable level.

25 Nevertheless, whilst Buffy does possess superhuman strength, hers is not the only form of female heroism depicted in the series. The other female characters, notably Willow and Cordelia, are 'normal' teenage girls, but still defend themselves and others, and are

arguably as heroic as Buffy. For example, Willow regularly saves her friends through intellectual problem-solving, whilst Cordelia defends herself from a vampire attack by biting the vampire's hand, exclaiming, "let's see how you like it!" ('Prophesy Girl'). Therefore, they are very real role models for viewers; as Whedon frequently emphasises throughout the show, there is more than one type of heroism, and many of the characters on the show exhibit as much heroism in everyday life – for example, confronting school bullies ─ as Buffy does in her supernatural battles and displays of strength. As Wilcox observes, Sunnydale in many ways directly resembles the 'real world,' since Buffy and her friends experience the same problems of adolescence and high school life as teenagers across the world do ─ from homework trouble to the dangers of internet predators ─ all of which are manifested in the form of supernatural demons, which Buffy and her friends can defeat and conquer. Thus Buffy can still be considered a heroine of the real world – as Whedon conceives the series as "real life, just a little bit wonkier" (DVD commentary).

26 Buffy faces many negative consequences for being the Slayer, most notably, she is positioned as a social outcast, and when she learns of her identity as the Slayer, she describes how she was "kicked out of school […] losing all of my friends," ('Welcome to the Hellmouth') ─ in the same way that Butler expresses how those who do not adhere to normative gender roles are "punished" through being shunned in society (190). However, rather than punishing and ostracising Buffy, Whedon instead celebrates outsiderdom, and allows Buffy and the Scooby Gang to draw strength from and celebrate their roles as outcasts by forming a community through their friendship. Arguably, *BtVS* therefore offers viewers, particularly young women, pleasure through their identification with Buffy, and the other strong women on the show, who may inspire viewers to become their own heroes, by teaching them that they do not have to be the "meek little girly girl," ('Phases') that the horror and action genres typically position young women as, but instead can assert their agency, strength and independence. As Susan Hopkins argues, the popularity of female-fronted television shows such as *BtVS*[9] indicate that girls respond to and enjoy displays of female heroism, especially in the wake of the 1990s 'Girl Power' movement, as she claims, "today's girls don't just want the tough action hero – they want to *be* the tough action hero" (140).

[9] Especially during the 1990s, with the extreme popularity of such television shows as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Charmed* (1998-2006), and *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003)

Conclusion

27 Overall, through its destabilisation of many of the traditional gender binaries of the horror and action genres ─ most notably, its challenge to the attacker/victim dualism, and its dismantling of the 'rape script' ─ *BtVS* challenges, destabilises and discounts patriarchal myths of female weakness and vulnerability. Instead, I have demonstrated how Whedon assigns power and narrative agency to women, with Buffy's characterisation deconstructing essentialist binary gender models through her simultaneous exhibitions of masculine and feminine traits, thereby exemplifying gender identity as a fluid, liminal Hegelian "transitional" dialectic, as opposed to distinct categories that are dependent on one's biological sex, and are in "fixed opposition" (243). Through what Hegel describes as the "abolishing and transcending of the contradiction" of gender identity, Whedon liberates his protagonist – and female viewers – from the restrictive, diminishing patriarchal binary models of gender identity, and instead the series depicts its female characters asserting their own agency and desires, and acting as their own heroes (245).

28 The employment of the supernatural genre is especially important for the show's subversive aims ─ as Rosemary Jackson maintains, fantasy explores "the unsaid and […] unseen of culture: that which has been silenced […] covered over […] made 'absent'" (4). *BtVS* uncovers and showcases women's potential for heroism, and subsequently empowers its female characters, who physically and symbolically fight against the restrictive, oppressive and misogynistic images of women that the horror and action genres routinely present. Indeed, as Nina Auerbach argues, vampire genres are regularly utilised to express and explore the contemporary concerns and debates of each generation that engages with the genre. In *BtVS,* the supernatural vampire genre is employed to highlight third-wave feminist concerns regarding the rise of rape culture, the misogynistic backlash against feminism in the 1990s, and contemporary challenges to normative notions of gender identities through the rise of queer theory towards the end of the twentieth century. Although the series is not subversive in all areas of its narrative – most notably, its lack of racial diversity, and its sole focus on 'young women's feminism'[10] ─ almost two decades since its first episode aired, it still stands as one of the most transgressive female character portrayals in television history, and its sustained focus on female heroism, and the importance of female friendships and collective female action, continues to inspire and rally a new generation of millennial 'Slayerettes'.

[10] As explored by Renee St. Louis and Miriam Riggs

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