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# Staking Out Gender: A Poststructuralist Analysis of Gender Roles and Identity in Buffy the Vampire Slayer

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STAKING OUT GENDER: A POSTSTRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS OF GENDER  
ROLES AND IDENTITY IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
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## Abstract

My aim in writing this thesis was to show that, contrary to the underlying themes of most critical approaches to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, there is more to be gained by approaching the series from a poststructuralist, postmodern feminist perspective, an approach that is aligned with the works of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. From this approach, one can see that the show's rhetoric suggests gender is an unfixed, discursively constructed phenomenon, rather than a static oppositional masculine/feminine binary. The show's subversive rhetoric is indicative of its agency, which can also be identified by the impact *BtVS* has had on the popular culture landscape. In my thesis, I first analyze the poststructuralist aspects of the show's content, such as the nontraditional gender and sexual performances of the characters Buffy, Willow, and Xander, before then tracing the agency of the show. This includes an analysis of the agency within the content of the rhetoric, such as a subversion of traditional rhetorical binaries, as well as the agency of the form of the series, whose long-form serial narrative nature and subversive character work create a novel discursive structure that is still used today. Ultimately, the rhetoric of the show creates space in society for traditionally marginalized performances of identity, subtly pushing society towards a greater acceptance of diversity.

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## INTRODUCTION

The shot opens on a long, dark alley. We hear soft footsteps and see a shadowy form emerge. It is a young woman, slight build, obviously tense as she steps into the darkness. Then we hear another noise, separate from her steps – a rustling noise that tells us she is not alone. The scene is a familiar one, and from the context it is fairly easy for the audience to guess what will happen next. Anyone who has ever watched a horror movie could tell you – the pretty young woman always dies first. That is, until Joss Whedon decided to turn the cliché on its head with his character Buffy The Vampire Slayer. Its first incarnation, the 1992 movie by the same name, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, was unsuccessful. As Joss Whedon has put it, “I had written this scary film about an empowered woman, and they turned it into a broad comedy. It was crushing” (Havens, 2003, p. 23). Luckily, Whedon was not to be stopped. What followed was practically unheard of in Hollywood – just five years after the failed movie, Whedon was able to resurrect the franchise in the form of a television show, itself a midseason replacement that almost never saw the light of day. But the juggernaut was launched. By the second season, the show had accumulated a strong following, jumping up to 5.3 million viewers from the 3.7 million viewers it found in its first season, and was well on its way to becoming a cult sensation (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). The show’s success was marked by its seven-year run, the success of its spin-off series *Angel*, and its evolution into other forms of media – notably novels, comic books, and video games.

This success makes the show incredibly accessible to public and scholastic audiences alike, partially because it is easy to find (both in syndication and on internet sites such as Netflix), but also because it has significant relevance to modern popular

culture. As most scholars stick mainly to the text of the television incarnation, I will do the same. The show focuses on Buffy Summers, a normal teenage girl until the day she is told she is The Chosen One, also known as The Vampire Slayer. With this title comes the responsibility to protect the world from demons and other creatures of the night. Unlike the long line of Slayers that came before her, Buffy is reliant upon her relationships with her friends (collectively referred to as The Scooby Gang) as well as her mentor, The Watcher named Giles. The show often features tensions that arise between Buffy's calling and her desire to be an ordinary girl with ordinary relationships, but frames these tensions in the context of a "monster of the week" serial format, with novel long-form narrative arcs. The series ran for seven seasons, each season featuring a distinctive emotional arch for the characters, allowing the writers and production team to create fully realized, three-dimensional characters.

No matter what form it takes, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* continues to be a story about "one girl in all the world, a chosen one. She alone will wield the strength and skill to fight the vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness; to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their number. She is the Slayer" (*BtVS*, various episodes). Not unreasonably, this framing has led many scholars to explore Buffy as a feminist icon – embodying at once the feminine ideal as well as using her strength and power to subvert the view of the female as weak and without any personal power. Indeed, Whedon has revealed "the very first mission statement of the show, which was the joy of female power: having it, using it, sharing it" (Gottlieb, 2002). Though I feel that more can be gained by examining *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* from a postmodern, poststructuralist feminist perspective, it is nevertheless essential to establish some grounding in early

feminist and poststructuralist critical theories before exploring the full nature of the work. And in order to do that, we must begin with the most basic social concepts distinguishing males and females: sex and gender.

Historically, sex and gender have had fairly rigid social and structural definitions. Many of these views sprang from biological notions of identity, an approach with certain inherent weaknesses, in that it

tends to establish operational definitions of gender through inherently reductionist and essentializing theoretical and methodological strategies and practices...

[situating] gender differences in a static bipolar opposition of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine.’ (Lengel & Martin, 2009, p. 4)

This is, at best, a flawed view of gender and identity. There certainly tend to be physical and biological differences between men and women, but these disparities do not preclude women exhibiting the strength and power traditionally associated with the male, nor do they preclude men from utilizing nurturing, care-based methods of interaction as is commonly identified among females. In fact, “many writers in cultural studies and other humanities have argued for the complete plasticity of sex and gender... [and for] understanding masculinity and femininity as cultural constructions” (Barker, 2003, p. 285). Though this revised understanding of gender will be critical in my analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (hereafter *BtVS*), the distinction between male and female is grounded in very real biological fact.

Since “biochemical evidences suggests that we are not blank sheets at birth... [and] cannot remake ourselves into anything we want to,” it would be irresponsible to completely ignore the intrinsic differences between men and women (Barker, 2003, p.



287). Modern advances in medicine, such as plastic surgery and gender re-modification, challenge the idea that we cannot remake ourselves into what we wish, but there is still some division, if only on the genetic level, that distinguishes men from women. For this reason, I will maintain a distinction throughout this paper between sex, which I will define as the discursively constructed biological aspects of an individual, and gender, which I will treat as a social construct and “an unfixed, fluid variable that (re)positions [itself] given varied circumstances, situations, and frameworks” (Lengel & Martin, 2009, p. 4). It is worth noting that though sex is based in the biology of an individual, many scholars have challenged the static binary construction of sex as male/female – saying instead that these notions of sex are themselves discursively constructed and are no more an inherent trait than is gender (Butler, 2004). But still this operational view allows me to analyze the characters of *BtVS* not only within the context of their own discursively constructed sexes but also the ways they enact and construct their own genders and identities.

Though considerable work has been done in feminist criticism to suggest that there are “multiple modes of femininity (and masculinity),” most critical views of *BtVS* still adhere to feminist structures aligned with the second wave of feminism, meant to highlight the struggle associated with identifying as a woman and the cultural subordination this entails (Barker, 2003, p. 291). This is, of course, prompted by the character Buffy herself, being an amalgam of an average teenage girl and a bearer of supernatural powers and abilities. This traditional feminist approach is further bolstered by Joss Whedon’s own views as a feminist. In an interview that appears in the Australian newspaper *The Age*, Joss is quoted as saying:

It was only when I got to college that I realized that the rest of the world didn't run the way my world was run and that there was a need for feminism. I'd thought it was all solved. There are people like my mom, clearly everyone is equal and it's all fine. Then I get into the world and I hear the things people are saying. Then I get to Hollywood and hear the very casual, almost insidious misogyny that just runs through so much of the fiction. It was just staggering to me. (Benedictus, 2005, ¶ 18)

It seems evident that Joss himself has a great respect for feminist ideals, and so it is unsurprising that the series has garnered so much attention from feminist critics. Certainly, there is a lot that can be gained by looking at *BtVS* from a second-wave feminist perspective. The show has incited debate amongst feminist scholars from a diverse array of backgrounds. Frances Early (2001) has this to say about *BtVS*: “As a feminist scholar, I appreciate the power of stories that bring women out of the shadows to center stage and permit protagonists to be disruptive and to challenge patriarchal views and institutions in society” (p. 12). *BtVS* meets these criteria. Though females don't comprise the entire cast, there are a number of strong females represented, not including Buffy herself (though she certainly counts). More important than the amount of female characters is the quality of them – the characters are fully realized, written as individuals in their own right, not as mere foils to their male counterparts. This full realization of character challenges traditional patriarchal views that would keep women out of the spotlight, and is epitomized in the character of Buffy Summers – who is at once an embodiment of the ideal feminine form as well as an arbiter of great strength and courage, traditionally more masculine traits. By bringing the story of the females into the

foreground, and emphasizing their strength as individuals, the show *BtVS* holds weight in terms of being a feminist text.

It is notable, however, that other feminist scholars argue against it being viewed even as a traditional feminist text. From this perspective, Buffy's femininity ultimately denies the show this distinction. Jason Middleton (2007) claims, "certain formal elements of *Buffy* promote a voyeuristic and/or fetishistic male gaze" (p. 145). Though he supports some feminist interpretations of the work, he goes on to explore the ways the show emphasizes Buffy as a sexual icon before allowing her the privileges inherent to the role of the hero. That is to say, that Buffy being sexually identified as a female is paramount to the subversive work of her gender performance. When viewed in this context, it is the male audience member who has the ultimate position of power – enjoying the sexualized aspects of Buffy without acknowledging her true complexity of character. Or, as feminist scholar Gwyneth Bolger (2003) puts it, "it is my contention that women in the series are all portrayed in stereotypical ways which have been generated by patriarchy throughout the ages, and all of which serve to empty femininity, leaving the women as functional (fantasy) symbols only" (¶ 4). Though hardly conclusive, Middleton's and Bolger's work illustrate a weakness inherent in earlier critical approaches: the desire to focus solely on the bodied aspects of individuals, rather than to examine how those bodies are shaped and defined by the manner in which the characters perform themselves.

Rather than discredit the show, these problems suggest the need for a different framework to view the series within. The show undeniably promotes some feminist principles, so it is unreasonable to fault it for going beyond these parameters or for falling short of them in some manner. As Allie Gottlieb (2002) concludes, "whether or not those

fans especially like to see skinny and cute Buffy in a skirt doesn't really matter. What matters is that the show conveys an excellent message--that girls and women can fight and plan and star on TV, and boys and men can emote and be sidekicks and still contribute" (§ 17). Gottlieb's comment is suggestive of an alternative context that *BtVS* can be placed into – that of the poststructuralist feminist and postmodernist scholars who argue for a deconstructed view of gender, ultimately suggesting identity as a fluid and socially constructed phenomenon.

Postmodern feminism has historically been ill defined, but generally is seen as a departure from the first and second wave of feminism's attempts to equalize the distinct genders, placing more focus on the nature of gender and identity as a construction or performance. I will also be drawing from some third wave feminist theory, which deconstructs sex, gender, and the creation of identity. Poststructuralism is a separate perspective in itself, though it makes use of several similar ideas. Poststructuralists believe that no text has any one given meaning, but rather meaning is made anew each time someone interacts with the text. In this way, poststructuralists also arrive at the idea that there is no such thing as an inherent sexual or gender identity; rather the identity is constructed as the individual interacts with different signifying practices within popular texts.

Although early feminist criticism was instrumental in shaping many postmodern critical theories, establishing an oppositional framework between men and women has become a contentious point for traditional feminist theory. Media studies scholar Thompson (2003) notes:

Feminism aims to subvert the 'traditional' roles that masculine and feminine play within the modernist dichotomy of subject/object. Historically, women have been prescribed the category of the object. In regards to the masculine subject, this works to further weaken the agency of the object by labeling the object as 'other.'

(p. 2)

This rhetoric suggests a binary opposition exists between “masculine” and “feminine” identities in patriarchal texts, as well as in early feminist criticisms. Because our views of society and culture are shaped within a strong context of patriarchy, it is not surprising that many women felt that their voices were not being heard, and that they were representative of a socially subjugated “Other” form of gender. Feminist criticism sought to break down these barriers, but the earliest forms still failed to account not only for the diversity of “sex” beyond just the typical XX or XY chromosome pairing, but also failed to account for the ways members of different sexes are similar, or act similarly.

Essentially, traditional feminist criticism falls into the same reductionist trap that faces all texts concerned with sex and gender: that of the binary opposition between male/female, masculine/feminine. Poststructuralist theories build off this work, but incorporate more postmodern approaches such as deconstruction. Rather than view the male/female as a static binary, a postmodern approach would deconstruct the manner in which sexual and gender identities are formed, showing how signs and texts work to influence the construction of identity. So, “while feminism acts to subvert the male/female dichotomy and appropriate the power of the former for its own, postmodernism strives to deconstruct both terms to reveal the hidden machinations of each one” (Thompson, 2003, p. 6). Both frameworks are worthy approaches to the series, but studying *BtVS* from the latter context

yields a richer analysis of the rhetoric of the series, which subverts traditional gender roles in order to promote a view of identity as socially constructed and variable.

So, though I do not deny that *BtVS* acts in some ways as a traditional feminist text, I believe this is an incomplete view. By placing *BtVS* in a more appropriate context, alongside postmodernist and poststructuralist theory, we can begin to analyze the ways the rhetoric and semiotics of the show promote a view of identity as socially constructed and fluid. As Elana Levine (2007) states, “*Buffy* has become part of the discussion around television and feminism in a specific historical context, one in which the meanings of feminism and femininity are in tension with earlier meanings” (p. 169). Placing *BtVS* in the context of postmodern and poststructuralist theory also enables us to distinguish Buffy’s sexual aspects from the importance of her performance of gender as a fluid, variable trait rather than a static characteristic.

The implications of this approach to analyzing the text are further reaching than may initially be evident. By arguing for a view of identity as malleable and changing, the show eschews the need for a hierarchical ordering of masculine and feminine gender roles. If women are capable of taking on traditionally male gender roles, and men are capable of taking on those of the women, then there is no need to distinguish either type of gender role as being dominant. This view of gender identity as performative is most closely aligned with Judith Butler’s (2006) work on gender performance and performativity as well as Foucault’s work (1990) with ‘docile bodies.’ Both scholars believe that popular texts use signifiatory practices, which discursively construct normative gender roles and performances, and it is the novel signifiatory practices of the series that are the main reason *BtVS*, as a subversive popular primetime show, is such an

important text to study. Most popular culture texts work only to promote traditionally distinct, rigid gender roles and their major effect is that the population learns to recreate this traditional, stereotypical view of sex and gender. The rhetoric used to support the status quo is so pervasive it is sometimes easy to forget it is there. But when a show comes along that challenges this rhetoric, it stands out. This is why *BtVS* gained such popularity – not merely because of an attractive female lead, or because it features martial arts and fight sequences, but because of the subversive ways in which the characters perform their own identities, which are constantly shifting and evolving throughout the course of the show.

Ultimately, by encouraging others to acknowledge gender as unfixed and socially constructed, the rhetoric of the show pushes towards an egalitarian society, where individuals are not judged based on their performances of gender or sexual identity. In a country still divided by homophobia and sexism, shows like *BtVS*, with rhetoric that challenges the traditional, fixed roles of gender, sexuality, and identity, are incredibly powerful and important texts. Rather than reinforce the ideals of our traditionally patriarchal society, with its embedded view of heteronormativity, shows like *BtVS* give a voice to those who are normally cast into shadow, not just women but anyone who performs gender, sexuality, or identity in a subversive way. The rhetoric of the show manifests itself in a number of different forms. It would be an impossible task to provide a thorough analysis of every aspect of the show, so I have instead decided to focus my work on just a few: (1) the ways Buffy and the other characters of the show use both traditional and non-traditional gender performances in establishing their own genders and identity; (2) the promotion of an ability to express power through a set of actions,

accessible to all individuals, regardless of how they perform their own identities; (3) the use of a combination of disparate genre elements to subvert the “Other”-ness inherent in such oppositional binaries as male/female, human/monster, and good/evil; and throughout these distinct chapters, I will also be placing *BtVS* in the context of other popular culture texts, showing how *BtVS* exhibits an agency that is evidenced by its transformative effect on our popular culture landscape. This intertextual analysis allows me to show not only the ways that the rhetoric of *BtVS* subverts traditional structures, but also how texts after *BtVS* have begun adopting similar rhetorical devices. This further promotes the view of *BtVS* as a worthy text for study, as its work is not merely important, but also effective as a symbol of a specific moment of cultural transformation.

My first analysis chapter will explore how historical views of gender have informed our society’s modern patriarchy, a rhetoric that is echoed in many movies, shows, and other texts. I draw connections to the structure of popular superhero films to show how Buffy’s role as the Slayer transforms the notion of a superhero and subverts the ideas surrounding femininity as weak and in need of protection. Though she shares many of the same concerns that are traditionally associated with the stereotypical teenage girl, such as an interest in cheerleading and a taste for fashion, Buffy also bears the mantle of the Slayer – forced to stand tall and fight the forces of evil (roles that are more traditionally aligned with masculine traits of strength and independence). Rather than being distinct and mutually exclusive aspects of her personality, the two aspects are merged, a demonstration that Buffy does not prescribe to patriarchal definitions of gender roles. By contrasting Buffy with the paradigmatic structures of popular hero films, and tracing the manner in which she enacts and performs her own identity, I’ll depict how



*BtVS* not only creates an empowered view of femininity but also eschews the need for hierarchical organizations of power. This rhetoric is echoed in the plasticity of gender and identity that is performed by the other characters, aspects that I will explore later in my thesis.

Though my first analysis chapter will tackle the way in which Buffy performs and comes to terms with her own identity, there is still more work to be done in exploring how the other characters utilize both subversive and traditional gender and identity performances. One way I will do this is to explore how the rhetoric of the text promotes novel expressions of power, tied to specific actions such as exhibiting self-confidence and courage, fighting demons, protecting others, and the act of sexual intercourse. This reconceptualization of power is drawn from Foucault's work (1990) and is disruptive of the masculine hegemony that rules a majority of popular culture texts. As Joss Whedon said in an Equality Now Tribute Address, "When I created Buffy, I wanted to create a female icon, but I also wanted to be very careful to surround her with men who not only had no problem with the idea of a female leader, but, were in fact, engaged and even attracted to the idea" (Whedon, 2006). One major example of a male who is not afraid of the strong female is Buffy's friend, Xander. Xander is one of the main characters, and is also one of the few male characters that is un-supernatural in every way.

By using Xander as a basic model of what the show suggests is the "average" male, it is possible to see how males act and interact, both with themselves and with females. By exploring Xander from this perspective, one can see that the males are not prioritized over the females in the show, nor are they relegated to obscurity in the face of a strong female. Further, comparing Xander with the other male characters yields an

interesting view of a new masculinity within the show, contrasting in some ways with the views of patriarchal masculinity prevalent in society while still promoting the idea that identity is constructed and performed rather than static. I will spend the rest of my second chapter exploring how “sexed bodies are always already represented as the production of regulatory discourses” through an analysis of another main character, Willow Rosenberg (Barker, 2003, p. 290).

By exploring traditionally defined modes of femininity and masculinity, such as the female care-based relationships, or the competitive relationships of men, I will illuminate the ways in which *BtVS* subverts these traditional stereotypes by featuring characters of diverse sexes and sexualities, even characters whose sexual preferences change. One example is the major character Willow who dated only men in high school but eventually becomes one of the first openly lesbian women on primetime television. This lack of rigidity in sexual roles further challenges the idea that identity is fixed and unchanging, showing instead that “there are multiple modes of femininity (and masculinity) which are enacted not only by different women, but, potentially, by the same woman under different circumstances” (Barker, 2003, p. 291). By viewing not only gender, but sex and sexuality as mere performative aspects of identity, the show challenges the distinctions that grant some subject positions power and denies others. Further, by reframing personal expressions of power as a set of actions available to all individuals, regardless of how they perform their identities, *BtVS* interrupts the rhetoric of traditional patriarchal texts and so exhibits its own poststructuralist agency.

In the third analysis chapter, I move beyond sex and gender to explore the nature and effects of the agency of *BtVS*. The rules of the *Buffiverse* state that it will be the

Slayer, and the Slayer alone, who will be responsible for ridding the world of demons and other evil creatures. But with hundreds of species of demon, some who are demonstrably nonviolent, and not to mention humans who sometimes act more evil than the demons, the show immediately begins undermining the oppositional binaries that are prevalent in the majority of traditional texts. This section explores how the show subverts the sense of “Other”-ness that pervades traditional oppositional binaries such as male/female, human/monster, and good/evil. As there are not just humans, but vampires and even demons that Buffy associates with and befriends, the show suggests alternative “acceptable” identity performances, even non-traditional performances.

In my fourth analytical chapter, I explore the way *BtVS* experiments with traditional genre conventions to present novel, and sometimes surprising, narrative forms. The show makes use of specific elements from comedy, horror, action, romance, and even musical genres to create a hybridity of elements, which is further indicative of the show’s poststructuralist agency. This agency, and the novelty of *BtVS*’s rhetoric, acts as an indication of a specific cultural moment of shifting social values and is especially evident when contrasting those shows that came before *BtVS* to those that came after. I will spend a portion of my fourth analysis chapter demonstrating how *BtVS* has changed the landscape of popular culture and how its subversive rhetoric creates a new discursive structure that has been incorporated into many of the popular shows that followed after it.

In my conclusion, I will return again to the historical notions of feminist criticism and the reasons why many scholars have studied *BtVS* from these well-established perspectives. I suggest that though earlier feminist critiques were accurate in so far as they went, the show attempts to portray a sense of identity not based on masculine or

feminine precepts, but as a shifting means of performing oneself to others, suggesting the need for a poststructuralist feminist framework; through this rhetoric, the show creates new discursive structures that allow and encourage novel performances of gender identity. This makes *BtVS* a text of extreme importance, as it challenges traditional patriarchal rhetoric that denies privilege to subversive performances of identity. This is again reminiscent of Judith Butler's work on gender and sexuality, which "is particularly concerned with the abjection of gay and lesbian sexuality by this heterosexual 'imperative'" (Barker, 2003, p. 299). Though *BtVS*'s scope extends beyond the gender gap, Butler's work provides a strong basis from which to begin an analysis.

The larger culture's appropriation and assimilation of the show's precepts are indicative of the community's growing support of the rhetoric of the show. The implications of this suggest a growing tolerance and support of those we label "Other" – for if we can recognize identity to be fluid within ourselves, we can overcome any differences we might find in our neighbors. Though many argue that the show predominantly works to empower females, I believe the rhetoric suggests that it is designed to empower anyone who feels as if they have been denied a voice. In his public address, Whedon promotes this idea further by acknowledging his audience:

[Is] not just women, its men, and I think there is something particular about a female protagonist that allows a man to identify with her that opens up something, that he might -- an aspect of himself -- that he might be unable to express -- hopes and desires -- he might be uncomfortable expressing through a male identification figure." (Whedon, 2006, ¶ 5)

I will also use this final chapter to trace the ways the rhetoric of the show can be seen to be in line with postmodernist, poststructuralist theory. By reviewing my analysis of the key themes of performative gender roles, as well as sex and sexuality, and the agential impact of *BtVS*'s rhetoric, I will show how this rhetoric works in positive ways to suggest a more egalitarian society that doesn't promote a gendered hierarchy. Of course, as with all texts, *BtVS* is far from perfect and so I will also use my concluding chapter as a way to discuss some of the show's weaknesses, and how they impact the rhetoric of the series. Notable among these is the show's adherence to a traditionally white, middle-class view of society, making its exploration of racial or social inequalities rather lacking. However, because *BtVS* is such a deep and complex show, it would be impossible to provide a complete and thorough analysis of all aspects of the series, and so I will reserve a section of the conclusion to suggest further alleys of study that could arise from the work. Ultimately, though the show is imperfect in many ways, it presents a powerfully subversive rhetoric that is indicative of its poststructuralist form of agency and which arises from the show's treatment of gender as a fluid, socially constructed phenomenon rather than a static, oppositional binary.

CHAPTER 1  
“I’m Like A Superhero or Something”  
(*BtVS*, 6.8, “*Tabula Rasa*”)

My aim in this chapter is to establish how certain gender roles and performances have i.) become associated and embedded in our cultural view of gender and sex as binary opposites and ii.) been used by the character of Buffy Summers to form her own identity, an identity which is at once feminine and imbued with great personal strength, depicting the malleability of gender identity. As an individual, Buffy Summers is drawn to be reminiscent of classic superhero stories – she is referred to as “The Chosen One” and has to split her time between maintaining an ordinary life as a young woman and a secret life as a fighter of evil. Her femininity is what sets her apart from other superheroes, but is in no way a weakness; indeed, Buffy often draws from her deeply relational interactions with others to gain the strength to continue her fight. This has often been taken by other scholars as indicative of the traditionally feminist nature of the text, but I believe that is merely the most noticeable aspect of the show’s rhetoric. It is my opinion, as I will show throughout this chapter, that the manner in which Buffy performs and creates her own identity goes beyond overcoming the inherent patriarchy in our society and this rhetoric is better viewed in line with the poststructuralist concepts of identity as being malleable and discursively constructed rather than a static binary based on the masculine/feminine precepts. This presentation of gender is disruptive of traditional patriarchal discourse and grants the show an agential impact that can be traced by its transformative effect on the popular culture landscape, an aspect I explore later in my thesis.

### A Brief History of Traditional Gender Roles

Before I begin tracking the rhetoric of *BtVS* and the effects it provides, it is important to take a brief detour through historical views of gender and the “norms” that have arisen out of these views. By establishing these patterns, and looking at their prevalence in a number of popular culture texts that preceded *BtVS*, one is able to gain a much clearer view of the impact and importance of *BtVS*’s rhetoric. Further, by familiarizing oneself with the ways gender has been enacted in the past, it is possible to see that what we view as gender “norms” are no more than socially and discursively constructed features, with no inherent ties to specific sexes or genders. The patriarchal structuration of our society has led to an association of masculine gender identities with positions of power and independence, relegating female gender identities to less active and more passive roles. But these “norms” grew out of social customs and practices, not out of any aspects inherent to either males or females. Lengel and Martin (2009) note the connection between the patriarchy of today to the sexual mores of Victorian England, which encouraged “female chastity until marriage and fidelity thereafter as hallmarks of ‘natural’ feminine modesty... [but] also tolerated male promiscuity and infidelity as reflections of innate vigor and appetite” (p. 11). These constructions of what is proper and appropriate for one sex, but not for the other, create an opposition between masculine and feminine gender roles and identities, allowing more freedom and independence for men while ostracizing any women who might attempt to claim their own freedoms.

The patriarchy of Europe and the Western world followed the early immigrants into the New World as they were settling the America’s. The social precepts that were so ingrained in European thought and tradition put these early settlers at odds with the

completely disparate views of the Native Americans.

The English believed that men should do the heavy physical labor of clearing the land, farming, and constructing shelter. Women, by contrast, should tend the fireside, prepare food, and raise children. The Native American division of labor shocked and dismayed them. Though Native men pursued hunting and warfare with energy and exuberance, they spent much time in any given day lounging around their villages, eating, smoking and discussing their martial exploits. Native women planted crops, tended the fields, and brought in the harvest, in addition to other duties necessary to the maintenance of the village. This arrangement seemed barbaric and unnatural to the English, whose notions of female delicacy prohibited women laboring while men lazed about. (Lengel & Martin, 2009, pp. 15-16)

The ascendancy of the Europeans in America meant that other views of gender and gender roles, such as those utilized by Native Americans were replaced with the traditional forms of patriarchy that are still prevalent today.

Interestingly, the division of labor, or at least division of types of labor, often seems to be split along gender lines, regardless of which society is being analyzed. This task ordering can be necessary to the proper functioning of society and so cannot be viewed as intrinsically wrong in itself. It only becomes problematic when the disparate gender work creates a hierarchy that denies a given group the freedoms that are afforded the dominant members of society. It is then easy to see how problematic modern patriarchy has become: the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which protects women's suffrage, wasn't ratified until 1920 and even today women are paid less than their male counterparts for



the same work. Social forms and constructs that were initially meant to protect women have instead denied them the freedom and equality they deserve.

The rise of Hollywood and the film industry in America made it possible for our society to enact and perform our own views of what gender roles are and should be to a much larger audience. It is, therefore, not surprising that many cinematic texts, whether they be films or television shows, are still inundated with aggressive and independent male characters and comparatively few strong female characters. The problem is perhaps compounded by the patriarchy of the system itself – as with many forms of business, more (and better) job positions in Hollywood go to males rather than to females – one study states that only 18 percent of jobs on top Hollywood films go to females (McKay, 2013). And a quick scan of the top grossing directors of all time shows no female directors whatsoever in the top 50 (Box Office Mojo, 2013) – in fact you have to go all the way down to number 81 on the list until you find a female director at all, Betty Thomas (I am excluding Lana Wachowski, who places at number 61, not because she was born as a man, but because she only works in tandem with her brother Andy Wachowski).

The control of the industry by males is certainly reflected in the movies and shows that are produced, meaning that many of our most influential popular culture texts work only to further promote the prevalent views of the industry – that is, traditional patriarchal views of gender and identity. Indeed, the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century gave rise to a vast number of male-centric action and war movies – so many that scholars even “noted the rise of ‘tough guy films’ and the marginalization or banishment of women from the screen and pointed out that many... [texts] idealized the violent and misogynous

male warrior and that ignored or denigrated women” (Early, 2001, p.11). Though this comment was originally specifically tied to the war and western movies that were so prevalent in the 1980’s through the 1990’s, it is just as applicable and relevant to the superhero or “protector” movies that dominate Hollywood today.

As one scholar puts it, “*Batman, X-Men, Fantastic Four, Spiderman, Hellboy 1 and 2, Hulk, Ironman,* and a host of other ‘men’ have flown, stomped, fallen, and swung across screens” (Stabile, 2009, p. 86). Certainly there have been movies starring female superheroes as well, though these are few and far between and generally fare much worse at the box office than their male-centric peers. A journalist with *Time Magazine* writes, “we have yet to see a good *superheroine* movie. (Emphasis on ‘good;’ we aren’t counting Halle Berry as *Catwoman* in 2004 and Jennifer Garner as *Elektra* the following year, not to mention last year’s abortive TV *Wonder Woman* reboot.)” (Alexander, 2012, ¶ 5). Though perhaps unnecessarily dismissive of these attempts to put women in the foreground of superhero movies, the fact remains that these movies fall short of other superhero films both critically and in terms of monetary return. Part of this, too, seems to be that Hollywood doesn’t have faith that the female-centric action genre can even work.

Whedon himself has shown the falsity of this sentiment with his show *BtVS*, but the studios waylaid him when he tried to bring that same rhetoric to the big screen. After Whedon spent two years developing a *Wonder Woman* reboot for Warner Bros., the studio pulled the plug with little to no reason as to why it wouldn’t work. This might be because historically “the central premise of superhero lore is that someone out there needs to be protected... and, as feminist critics have long observed in regard to US culture in general, the someone in need of protection is invariably female or feminized” (Stabile,

2009, 87). To Hollywood, reversing the roles of these characters is challenging and seemingly risky. With the number of remakes and reboots coming out of Hollywood, it seems evident that many major studios follow the logic of safety – they attempt to minimize losses by only green lighting those films or shows that already have a built in audience, meaning that many studios are unwilling to dedicate their money to what they see as risky projects. And to a system run and dominated by males, what could be more risky than producing texts that question the hierarchy of gender roles, especially the hegemony of masculinity? There are very few superhero movies that manage to escape this patriarchal trap, which makes those texts that subvert the hierarchical ordering of gender and sex even more important.

Of course, one of the major examples of this, the one I will primarily be focusing on for the remainder of my thesis, is the rhetoric of *BtVS*. With her designated role as “The Chosen One,” Buffy Summers bears many similarities to other superheroes, with the notable difference being her gender – a difference which “fractures and reinvents the gendered identity of the warrior-hero” (Buttsworth, 2002, p. 185). Throughout the next section of this chapter, I will be exploring how Buffy’s personal identity is managed and constructed. As a character in her own right, Buffy is feminist in that she represents the ideal feminine as well as being a strong, independent, and resourceful individual – indicating that she is not drawn from traditional patriarchal views of what “feminine” norms are. This new model of “femininity” is interruptive of traditional patriarchal texts that link “femininity” to weakness and passivity, and is just one aspect of the show’s disruptive agency, which creates new discursive structures for popular texts, something that I trace in later chapters. Though various facets of the show are evidence of this

impact, I will first turn to the ways in which Buffy overcomes traditional patriarchal forms in order to demonstrate that women can be “feminine” as well as be strong and independent.

### Feminine and Feisty

Though strong, independent females are becoming more prevalent in popular culture today, they were few and far between when *BtVS* made its first appearance on television in 1997. In his remarks about the genesis of the character that later became Buffy Summers, Joss Whedon has been quoted as saying:

I'd seen a lot of horror movies which I'd loved very much, with blonde girls getting themselves killed in dark alleys and I just germinated this idea about how much I'd like to see a blonde girl go into a dark alley, get attacked by a big monster and then kill it! (Quoted in Buttsworth, 2002, p. 185)

I found this concept immediately compelling – with just this one character Whedon had turned the modern horror genre completely on its head. The innovation came not merely from introducing a strong female in a horror movie, but by framing the character in such a way that her strength never came at the expense of her femininity. Though horror movies generally feature a female protagonist, often referred to as The Final Girl, who eventually beats the monstrous antagonist, many prior horror movies suggest that The Final Girl's lack of femininity is what imbues her with a strength and agency more generally associated with male characters. As Jason Middleton (2007) puts it, the Final Girl is different from other females “in several important ways, all of which serve to ‘masculinize’ her. She is represented as less conventionally sexually attractive... she is not sexually promiscuous; she possesses a detective-like curiosity; and she has an

ambiguously gendered name” (p. 161). Though she is also a girl, Buffy Summers is not bound by the archetypal restrictions of the Final Girl. She is both attractive and strong, and is not afraid to act on her sexual impulses. Further, though ironic, the name Buffy is not ambiguously gendered. Rather than be made to appear masculine as an extrinsic symbol of strength, Buffy’s strength comes from her own identity as an independent, beautiful woman. This rhetoric ultimately subverts the traditional patriarchal discourse that correlates “feminine” concepts of identity to passivity and weakness, and is just one aspect of *BtVS*’s agency, an agency I further elaborate on in later chapters.

However, in 1992, when the movie *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was released, it became apparent that director Fran Rubel Kuzui did not share Whedon’s vision. Rather than create a taut thriller with a strong, feminine female lead, the whole concept was turned into a comedy – weakening not just the movie as a whole, but also the very idea of a strong, independent female. Luckily, Whedon was given complete creative control over the television show of the same name, a change reflected in the quality and popularity of the series. The long narrative form of a television show had added benefits: not only did it allow for the introduction of a wide range of new characters, it gave these characters room to grow and develop. The lengthy run of the show allowed the audience to see how these characters constructed and enacted their own identities, and central to this was the character of Buffy Summers.

It’s important to note that though Buffy was designed as a challenge to traditional patriarchal views of gender performance, she doesn’t define herself in terms of this same patriarchy. That is to say, she views herself as a strong, independent woman and the idea that women can’t be strong or independent holds no bearing in her own mind. She enjoys

using and expressing her femininity, but never once believes that this is at odds with her ability to exhibit strength or power. Buffy initially tries to deny her mantle of the Slayer, not because she doesn't believe she is capable, but because she disagrees with the strictures and limitations that this role places on her own personal independence. Though her growth throughout the series is markedly visible in a number of different aspects, I continue this analysis by exploring the ways in which she comes to terms with her own identity as The Slayer, and frees herself from the outside limitations placed on this role by others, notably The Watcher's Council.

From the very first episode of *BtVS*, entitled "Welcome to the Hellmouth," Buffy Summers is at once secure in her femininity yet also strong and independent. The pilot episode of the show finds her relocated from her home and school in Los Angeles after getting expelled for burning down the school gym, which she did to kill the vampires that had been attacking the students. Though this scene appeared in the original script for the movie, it was never shown in the film and was only mentioned once in the TV show, yet nevertheless still serves as a metric of Buffy's strength and courage. Her femininity is also immediately evident as she appears to her first day at her new school wearing a low cut v-neck shirt and a skirt that accentuates her calf-high boots. This outfit embraces the feminine body it adorns without appearing overtly promiscuous or risqué. Her appearance gains her immediate acceptance with popular girl Cordelia Chase, who offers to show Buffy around and get her acquainted with her new surroundings. Though this friendship

isn't long to last, their first conversation serves as yet another reminder of Buffy's femininity<sup>1</sup>.

**Cordelia:** Well, you'll be okay here. If you hang with me and mine, you'll be accepted in no time. Of course, we do have to test your coolness factor. You're from L.A., so you can skip the written, but let's see. Vamp nail polish?

**Buffy Summers:** Um, over?

**Cordelia:** So over. James Spader?

**Buffy Summers:** He needs to call me.

**Cordelia:** Frappuccinos?

**Buffy Summers:** Trendy, but tasty.

**Cordelia:** John Tesh?

**Buffy Summers:** The Devil.

**Cordelia:** That was pretty much a gimme, but... you passed.

**Buffy Summers:** Oh, goody.

From this early exchange, we can see that Buffy performs her own identity in much the same way “normal” teenage girls do. Though she has strength and independence, she is also deeply relational and is excited at the prospect of being accepted and gaining friends. Moreover, she seems aware of current popular trends and fashion styles, a prerequisite of the popular crowd that Cordelia represents.

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<sup>1</sup> The transcriptions I make use of (including dialogue, stage direction, and specific formatting techniques) are my own, and were created by watching and listening to each of the scenes numerous times to ensure fidelity (I used Netflix to access the episodes themselves). Unless otherwise noted, punctuation is used to indicate patterns of speech (for example, in my transcriptions, an ellipsis is used to denote falling inflection, or a character trailing off; it is not meant to represent missing or omitted dialogue or screen action).

But unlike Cordelia, who can see only the value in attaining popularity and following trends, Buffy has no qualms about setting herself at odds with these ideals, even if it means risking her own acceptance. This is evident by Buffy's reaction to Cordelia's casual dismissal of the character Willow Rosenberg in the same scene. After Cordelia announces that Buffy has "passed" her test, she notices Willow drinking from a nearby water fountain. Unlike Cordelia and Buffy, Willow is dressed conservatively in an unfashionable green plaid dress, long-sleeved white shirt, and white stockings.

**Cordelia:** Willow! Nice dress. Good to know you've seen the softer side of Sears.

**Willow:** Oh, uh, well, my mom picked it out.

**Cordelia:** No wonder you're such a guy magnet. Are you done?

**Willow:** Oh...

**Cordelia** (to Buffy): If you want to fit in here, the first rule is: know your losers. Once you can identify them all by sight, they're a lot easier to avoid.

Throughout this exchange, Buffy's initial pleasure about being accepted by Cordelia is replaced as she begins to realize just how shallow and conceited Cordelia truly is. She alternates between looks of shock at what Cordelia is saying to looks of concern about how obviously hurt Willow is. Buffy forces a smile at Cordelia's idea of a joke, but it is apparent that she is uncomfortable with this entire transaction. Buffy is faced with a choice: abide by the shallow restrictions of the popular crowd and be accepted openly at her new school, or refute these constrictions and follow her own moral compass, realizing that it will cost her friendships and acceptance.

As I've mentioned, Buffy is at once feminine and also highly independent, so it is not surprising that, rather than submit to the norms of a high school's social hierarchy,



she chooses to befriend instead those so called “losers” that Cordelia has warned her about. Buffy’s decision is evident when she tracks down Willow at lunch.

**Buffy Summers:** Uh, Hi! Willow, right?

**Willow Rosenberg:** Why? I-I mean, hi! Uh, did you want me to move?

**Buffy Summers:** Why don't we start with, 'Hi, I'm Buffy,' and, uh, then let's segue directly into me asking you for a favor. It doesn't involve moving, but it does involve hanging out with me for a while.

**Willow Rosenberg:** But aren't you hanging out with Cordelia?

**Buffy Summers:** I can't do both?

**Willow Rosenberg:** Not legally.

Though Buffy is surely aware by Cordelia’s prior treatment of Willow that befriending Willow runs the risk of ostracization, she refuses to acknowledge that there is any inherent rule or code that should prevent her from doing what she feels to be appropriate. All of this occurs within the first fifteen minutes of the first episode of the series, but the audience can already see that Buffy is at once representative not only of the epitome of femininity, but also of the strength and independence typically only given to male characters. This strength and resolve is repeated again and again throughout the series, but is especially noticeable when Buffy is overcoming patriarchal influences such as The Watcher’s Council (or its related subsidiaries, such as Giles, who works for them, or the Shadow Men, who were the primogenitors of the modern Council), the governing body responsible for training and controlling The Slayer in her fight against evil. Buffy’s subversion of patriarchal influences is indicative of a new discursive structure promoted

by the show, one that allows women to be strong and independent without diminishing their “femininity.”

### Overcoming Patriarchy

Buffy’s conflict with patriarchal forces is evident from her very first encounter with her own Watcher, Rupert Giles. In the early seasons, Giles acts as a mentor to Buffy and has been placed by The Council as the librarian in her high school, allowing him to stay in close contact with her. His age and position of influence over her is suggestive of his alignment with patriarchal forms, as is his engagement with the hyper-traditional Watcher’s Council. Though his presence in Sunnydale is undoubtedly supposed to come as a welcome surprise to the Slayer, this is anything but the truth. When Buffy goes to the library in the series’ opening episode to get some textbooks, the last thing she is expecting is to find is someone who knows that she is The Slayer, never mind someone who is supposed to act as an authority figure over her.

**Giles:** Can I help you?

**Buffy:** I was looking for some, well, books. I’m new.

**Giles:** Ms. Summers?

**Buffy:** Uh, good call. Guess I’m the only new kid, huh?

**Giles:** I’m Mr. Giles... the librarian. I was told you were coming.

**Buffy:** Um, great. So I’m going to need “Perspectives on Twentieth Century...

**Giles:** I know what you’re after.

With this, Giles pulls a large tome out from behind the circulation desk and drops it on the counter in front of her. It is apparent that the book is incredibly old, with large metal clasps and the embossed title “VAMPYR” inscribed on the cover. Buffy stares at it

momentarily and her response, “That’s not what I’m looking for,” cues the audience that despite her past experiences, Buffy is not willing to cast herself again into the subservient role of The Slayer, a woman destined to follow The Watcher’s Council’s orders and never allowed any independence. Canonically, potential Slayers were traditionally raised from a young age, constantly being tutored and trained by a Watcher, a relationship that both prepared her for her duties and established The Watcher’s Council’s position of power in their hierarchical relationship. Buffy was unique in that she wasn’t discovered as a potential Slayer until she was a teenager and therefore was surprised when she was called upon to take up the fight against evil. Rather than this lack of preparation becoming a burden in Buffy’s assuming the position, her late discovery proved to be instrumental in forming her own independent identity, and also informs her relationship with The Watcher’s Council in that she doesn’t immediately acknowledge their right to rule over her. In this next exchange with Giles, it is evident that he does not expect her willfulness and independence, and cannot just call upon her sense of duty as a means of forcing her to do something she is unwilling to do, especially if it means sacrificing other aspects of her life and identity that are just as important to her.

**Giles:** You really have no idea what’s going on, do you? You think it’s coincidence your being here? That boy was just the beginning.

**Buffy:** Why can’t you people just leave me alone?

**Giles:** Because you are The Slayer. One girl in all the world, a chosen one. One born with the...

**Giles, Buffy:** -the strength and skill to hunt the vampires...

**Buffy:** To stop the spread of their evil blah, blah, blah, I’ve heard it, okay?

**Giles:** I really don't understand this attitude. You, you've accepted your duty, you've slain vampires before?

**Buffy:** Yeah, and I've both been there and done that and I'm moving on

Buffy's independent nature is also evident in the next part of their conversation, where she questions the need for a Slayer if the Watcher's Council is actually the one in control.

**Buffy:** Ok, first of all, I'm a Vampire Slayer. And secondly, I'm retired. Hey, I know, why don't you kill 'em?

**Giles:** I-I'm a Watcher, I h-haven't the skill.

**Buffy:** Oh, come on. Stake through the heart, a little sunlight – it's like falling off a log.

**Giles:** A, a Slayer slays, a Watcher –

**Buffy:** Watches?

**Giles:** Yes! Well, no! He, he trains her, he - he, he prepares her –

**Buffy:** Prepares me for what? For getting kicked out of school? For losing all of my friends? For having to spend all of my time fighting for my life and never getting to tell anyone because I might endanger them? Go ahead, prepare me.

This conversation illuminates a number of things about the dynamic between Buffy and The Watcher's Council beyond just the fact that Buffy is unwilling to follow their ancient rules and customs blindly. When Buffy suggests that Giles go kill vampires, it isn't merely an idle joke. Though he is not imbued with the same supernatural strength that a Slayer has, it becomes clear throughout the rest of the series that it is possible to hunt and kill vampires even without being the Slayer. Giles kills a number himself, as do Buffy's other friends Willow and Xander. So in this initial interaction, it is not that Giles is

strictly incapable of killing vampires, but is incapable of considering that it should ever even be required of him. Though it is Buffy who is expected to do the physical fighting, task-ordering which is itself subversive of traditional rhetoric, the dynamic of her relationship with Giles is nevertheless immediately indicative of his patriarchal role, one that grants him a position of power over her as her Watcher.

Also, it is interesting to note that Giles speaks of the relationship between a Watcher and a Slayer in purely scholastic terms. Never does he invoke a personal understanding of the role, insisting upon referring to the Slayer as “her” rather than directly addressing Buffy with “you.” Buffy, however, has first hand experience of what it means to actually go out and fight the forces of darkness and so challenges his right to dictate her actions. This is evident when she forces Giles to realize that being a Slayer is not just an academically abstract concept, but something with real bearing and impact on her own life. It is evident by the look of shock on his face when she describes her own experiences that he has never considered the weight of the role he is attempting to force upon her and is uncomfortable being reminded of just how ignorant he truly is. Her initial denial of her birthright as The Slayer is not because she opposes the fight against evil, but rather that she opposes the inherently patriarchal institutions that feel entitled to dictate her actions and deny her independence. By the end of the episode Buffy has once again accepted the role and responsibility of being a Vampire Slayer, but her feminine strength and independence continue to put her at odds with patriarchal institutions and forms. The patriarchal presence in the show is limited not only to the Watcher’s Council at large, but also their progenitors the Shadow Men, and even The First Evil, whose allies include a misogynist preacher. The more Buffy overcomes these patriarchal restrictions, the greater

her own sense of strength and independence become. This rhetoric is a subversion of traditional popular culture rhetoric and establishes a new discursive structure that allows women to be at once “feminine” as well as strong and independent. I continue this analysis of the rhetoric by tracing Giles’s reformation from traditional patriarchal ideals to more progressive views that allow Buffy her own independence and strength.

*Giles – From Patriarch to Compatriot*

Throughout the first two seasons, Rupert Giles remains a relatively benevolent, if traditionally patriarchal, influence on Buffy’s life. Though he is responsible for training and directing her in the fight against evil, granting him a position of authority over her, he is also supportive of her efforts and generally tolerant of her intractable manner. This dynamic changes upon the arrival of The Watcher’s Council in the Season 3 episode “Helpless.” The Council’s presence represents both a challenge of Buffy’s independence as well as a resurgence of the patriarchal strictures and conventions that place The Slayer below them in their organization’s hierarchy of power. In this episode, Buffy Summers is getting ready for her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday – an age not all Slayers live to see. Unbeknownst to her, The Watcher’s Council has a traditional rite of passage that they use to test any Slayer, should she live to see her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The test, known as the *Tento di Cruciamentum*, requires the acting Watcher to drug the Slayer with a compound that robs her of her supernatural Slayer strength. She is then locked in an enclosed building with a vampire and is expected to use her training and knowledge rather than her physical strength to overcome her adversary. This test is hazardous not only physically, but mentally as well – stripped of the powers that she relies on, and not even allowed to know how or why she has lost them, Buffy is tormented by the fear this sudden change instills.

After narrowly escaping an encounter with a different vampire while she is out on a routine patrol, Buffy turns to Giles – who merely suggests she has come down with a strong flu. This doesn't allay her fears, however, and when she is again overpowered, this time by a regular high school jock, she shares her growing concern with Giles once more.

**Buffy:** Ok, I just got swatted down by some no-neck, and rescued by Cordelia.

What the hell is happening?

**Giles:** I'm sure it'll sort itself out.

**Buffy:** Look, you're not getting the big picture here. I have no strength. I have no coordination. I throw knives like –

**Giles:** A girl?

**Buffy:** Like I'm not The Slayer.

Though this situation is horrible for Buffy, it is not as horrible as it could be; she does not yet know that it is Giles's betrayal that has robbed her of her powers. However, as an audience member, we are already aware of his complicity and are capable of seeing the depth of pain that will come with her realization of the truth. In the absence of her father, who has divorced her mother and maintains a separation from Buffy herself, Giles has taken on the role of substitute father figure. Her trust and love for him are complete and until this moment it was inconceivable that he would ever unduly risk her life. But just as he sees her as duty-bound to her role as Slayer, he also feels his responsibilities to The Watcher's Council must be lived up to, even if he disagrees with them.

This tacit acceptance of The Council's methods, as well as his position as surrogate father figure, makes Giles representative of the patriarchy that is constricting Buffy's actions. This is echoed in his sentiment that she throws knives like "a girl" –

notable also because she does not agree with this term, stating instead that she doesn't feel like The Slayer. This is an interesting distinction in that it shows Giles, like most men and especially like many members of The Watcher's Council, apparently does not view those girls who have not been 'chosen' as having the capacity for strength. Buffy denies this assertion by refusing to admit that a lack of strength or coordination is an intrinsically feminine characteristic, merely a characteristic of anyone who isn't The Slayer – whether they be male or female is inconsequential. Though Giles goes along with his duty and secretly poisons Buffy to remove her powers, it is obvious that he does not approve of the ritual. His disapproval does not initially move him to break the Council's rules and customs, but he does debate their merit with Quentin Travers, the head of The Watcher's Council.

**Travers:** You're having doubts. The Cruciamentum is not easy for Slayer or Watcher... but it's been done this way for a dozen centuries. Whenever a Slayer turns 18, it is a time-honored rite of passage.

**Giles:** It is an archaic exercise in cruelty. To lock her in this... tomb... weakened, defenseless. And to unleash that on her. If any one of The Council still had actual contact with The Slayer, they would see – but I'm the one in the thick of it.

**Travers:** Which is why you're not qualified to make this decision, you're too close.

**Giles:** That's not true.

**Travers:** The Slayer's not just physical prowess. She must have cunning, imagination, a confidence derived from self-reliance. And believe me, once this is all over, your Buffy will be stronger for it.



**Giles:** Or she'll be dead for it.

Giles is not yet willing to openly defy The Council's views or the male-centric patriarchy that they represent, but neither is he willing to accept the wisdom of blindly following certain traditions, no matter how ancient a custom they may be. Quentin Travers, however, is not in direct contact with The Slayer and still views her as a mere instrument of The Watcher's Council, not as an independent individual in her own right. Though he claims that a Slayer must be smart and self-reliant, he is incapable of seeing that asserting his own power by forcing her blindly into this test denies her the very freedom and independence he is trying to instill.

This willful ignorance of the true nature of The Slayer/Watcher dynamic is made all the more evident by the complete collapse of Quentin Travers's carefully laid plans. Kralik, the vampire that is to serve as Buffy's test, breaks free from his restraints and kills the other members of The Council that had accompanied Quentin from England. When Giles finds that Kralik has killed the other two members of The Council and escaped his imprisonment, he decides that things have gone too far. It is at this point that he finally decides to trust his own morality and breaks tradition by informing Buffy of what is happening.

**Buffy:** I can't be just a person. I can't be helpless like that. Giles, please, we have to figure out what's happening to me.

**Giles:** ... It's an organic compound, of muscle relaxants and adrenal suppressors. The effect is temporary. You'll be yourself again in a few days.

**Buffy:** You?

**Giles:** It's a test, Buffy. It's given to The Slayer when... if she reaches her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Slayer is... disabled and then entrapped with a vampire foe who she must defeat in order to pass the test. The vampire you were to face has escaped. His name is Zachary Kralik. As a mortal, he murdered – um, tortured – more than a dozen women before he was committed to an asylum for the criminally insane. When a vampi-

**Buffy:** You bastard. All this time you saw what it was doing to me. All this time, and you didn't say a word.

**Giles:** I wanted to.

**Buffy:** Liar.

**Giles:** In matters of tradition and protocol, I must answer to The Council. My role in this was very specific. I was to administer the injections, and to direct you to the old boarding house on Prescott Lane.

**Buffy:** I can't – I can't hear this.

**Giles:** Buffy, please.

**Buffy:** Who are you? How could you do this to me?

**Giles (moves to console her):** I am deeply sorry, Buffy, and you have to understand –

**Buffy:** If you touch me, I'll kill you.

**Giles:** You have to listen to me. Because I've told you this, the test is invalidated. You will be safe now, I promise you. And whatever I have to do, to deal with Kralik, and to win back your trust –

**Buffy:** You stuck a needle in me. You poisoned me.

This is a pivotal moment in *BtVS* as it is the first time Buffy realizes just how detrimental the rule of The Watcher's Council can be in her life. Giles's actions cement this viewpoint more than any theoretical debate could –until this point The Council has been a shadow government, solely represented by Giles, and Buffy was able to disregard any of their rules or regulations if necessary without ever once jeopardizing the trust between her and her Watcher. But when The Council uses Giles against her, it securely places them in the opposition, a patriarchal entity that is wholly inconsiderate of her as a unique individual. The fact that Giles was acting on their orders does not spare him her resentment, but rather amplifies it, since he of all people should have known never to casually disregard Buffy's personal identity. Further, the fact that they've robbed her of her powers (and note that Buffy never denigrates her gender by saying her lack of strength makes her a mere girl, but rather "just a person") shows that The Council has no respect or understanding of the nature of her duty. This is especially evident by Giles's assertion that she is "safe now," ostensibly implying that she is safe from physical harm. But he never considers that the damage he's wreaked on her emotionally could be far more scarring than any physical injury. Moreover, the fact that he expects her to do nothing but go home and rest implies even he hasn't fully grasped how much the concept of duty and responsibility have become intrinsically tied to Buffy's identity.

But the audience has seen this time and time again, so when it is revealed that the escaped vampire, Kralik, has kidnapped Buffy's mother, we know we can expect only one outcome: powerless or not, Buffy will face the vampire and attempt to fulfill her obligations not just as a Slayer but as a daughter. And she does manage to kill Kralik and

save her mother. Her eventual success in the face of these horrible odds also mean she has successfully passed the *Tento di Cruciamantum*, but Buffy is beyond caring.

**Travers:** Congratulations, you passed. You exhibited extraordinary courage and clear-headedness in battle. The Council is very pleased.

**Buffy:** Do I get a gold star?

**Travers:** I understand that you're upset –

**Buffy:** You understand nothing. You set that monster lose and he came after my mother.

**Travers:** You think the test was unfair.

**Buffy:** I think you'd better leave town before I get my strength back.

**Travers:** We're not in the business of fair, Ms. Summers, we're fighting a war.

**Giles:** You're waging a war, she's fighting it. There is a difference.

**Travers:** Mr. Giles, if you don't mind.

**Giles:** The test is done, we're finished.

**Travers:** Not quite. She passed, you didn't. The Slayer is not the only one who must perform in this situation. I've recommended to The Council, and they've agreed, that you be relieved of your duties as Watcher immediately. You're fired.

**Giles:** On what grounds?

**Travers:** Your affection for your charge has rendered you incapable of clear and impartial judgment. You have a father's love for the child and that is useless to the cause. It would be best if you had no further contact with The Slayer.

**Giles:** I'm not going anywhere.

As Quentin Travers states, Buffy has passed their test. But the self-reliance that the test is intended to imbue has given Buffy an added edge that The Council never expected, solidifying her strength and independence – an independence that will prove essential in her struggle to rid herself of The Council’s machinations in the future.

The Council’s cavalier dismissal of Giles distances him from their patriarchy and at once redeems him in Buffy’s eyes, putting her further at odds with The Council. Giles’s actions in defying his masters also act as an acknowledgment of Buffy’s own individual strength and value; just as her performance of identity subverts Giles’s traditional patriarchal sentiments, so too does the show’s rhetoric subvert the traditional rhetoric of patriarchal texts. This subversion creates a new discursive structure that allows females to be both “feminine” and strong, and is just one indication of the show’s agency. The tension between Buffy and The Council continues throughout the series and it is Buffy’s separation from their ancient patriarchal system that allows her to grow into an even stronger and more independent woman, an aspect of her identity formation I turn to next.

### *Overcoming The Council*

As if the *Tento di Cruciamantum* weren’t enough, The Council insists on further subjugating Buffy in an attempt to deny her independence, as evidenced when they foist a pompous, inexperienced Watcher on her as a replacement for Giles. This character, Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, is highly officious and insists on following the letter of the rule, characteristics which further establish the ignorance and traditionalism with which The Council approaches their duties. Buffy’s tension with The Council comes to a head at the end of Season 3 when Faith, a Slayer that was called after Buffy’s death in Season 1,

goes rogue; rather than try to help her or rehabilitate her as Buffy and her friends attempt to do, Wesley Wyndam-Pryce sabotages their plans and attempts to capture her instead. Disgusted by this, and by the complete disregard for The Slayer's individuality that The Council routinely shows, Buffy states in no uncertain terms that she quits. This is not to say that she gives up her duties, rather that she denies that her duties must be guided by so corrupt and incompetent an organization; she will continue fighting the forces of evil, but only on her own terms.

This break from the strictures of The Watcher's Council certainly serves as a metaphor for a break from the archaic constraints and limitations of any patriarchal society, but within the context of the show it also demarcates Buffy's reaffirmation of a choice she made in the beginning of the season: that she will commit herself wholeheartedly to upholding the duties and responsibilities of her own identity, an identity that is not just Slayer or merely female, but is a combination of both. Though her physical strength comes from her privileged position as The Slayer, her courage and resolve are uniquely her own. They are indicative of a strength that rises out of her relational sense, and the fact that this strength is informed by her femininity does not make it any less potent or real. Her growth through Season 3 depicts her acceptance of her own identity as being multi-faceted, comprising both her responsibilities and abilities as a Slayer along with her obligations and duties as a young woman. By coming to terms with her own strength and the disparate aspects of her identity, Buffy is able to break free from the constrictions of The Watcher's Council, an act that shows her growing independence and places her outside the control of their patriarchal machinations. This

independence is tested again in Season 5 by the return of The Watcher's Council to Sunnydale, and along with it the return of the patriarchy that The Council represents.

Despite Buffy's growth in the earlier seasons, she must develop still further if she is to be in complete control of her future. She has officially denied The Watcher's Council from having an active presence in her life, an act that is also symbolic of an escape from their patriarchal restrictions. And though she was successful in removing herself from their structured practices, The Watcher's Council still exists, reminding her and the audience that the patriarchal system has merely been denied ascendancy in Buffy's own life, it hasn't been eliminated entirely. So despite the progress Buffy has made as a character, she still works within boundaries established by the old system; she no longer reports to The Watcher's Council, yet she still trains and patrols according to the structures she's used to. As with any good character, Buffy is constantly performing and redefining her identity, continually growing as an individual. This growth is significant in that it leads Buffy to fully exert her independence and deny The Watcher's Council's patriarchy for good.

As I've noted, one of the more significant aspects of the later seasons is the further development of Buffy's independence in Season 5. This season finds Buffy faced with a number of new challenges, embodied specifically by the introduction of a new character, her sister Dawn. Dawn is not technically her biological sister, but rather a mystical energy, animated in the form of a young girl, and placed within Buffy's family as a means of ensuring her protection against the Hell goddess, Glory, who is bent on destroying her. The spell that gave Dawn a human life also altered the memories of all the characters so that Buffy would truly believe that Dawn is her own sister, and would

protect her as such. This season also sees the sickness and eventual death of Buffy's mother, casting Buffy firmly into the role of family protector and provider. At this point, Buffy knows little to nothing about her opponent, Glory, except that Glory is nearly invincible, and has focused all her strength and energy on the one goal of finding Dawn and using her to regain power over Hell. Buffy rises to the challenges of her new identity, and does all she can to protect Dawn from Glory – even if it means turning back to The Watcher's Council for information and aid.

The Watcher's Council, seeing this sense of relational duty as a weakness, rather than a strength, decides that the time is right to start exerting their own influence and power again. So when The Council returns to Sunnydale, it is not with an aim to helping The Slayer, but with an aim to subdue her yet again. This conflict comes to a head in the Season 5 episode, "Checkpoint." When The Council again shows up they immediately begin trying to restructure the lives of Buffy and those around her to more closely fit with their own ideals. They assert that they cannot be sure Buffy is ready to face Glory, and state that they are unwilling to help until they have examined and tested her and her friends.

**Travers:** You used to respect us, Giles. You used to be one of us.

**Giles:** You used to pay me. If you recall, firing me was not my idea.

**Travers:** Touché. But you were on the inside once, you know what sort of resources we command. We've discovered information about this creature, your Glory – some of it is clearly vital, the rest... merely extremely disturbing. And it won't be handed over until we are convinced you and your Slayer are prepared for it. Thus the review.



**Giles:** I'm not having you put her through another one of your insane tests.

**Travers:** It's not a test; it's a check of her methods. We need to know that this information is safe.

**Giles:** You can trust her. Buffy's come very far recently, she's acquired a remarkable focus.

Understanding the nature of The Council, Giles knows that Quentin Travers is not making idle threats – The Council can and will deny The Slayer aid if they feel it will ensure the continuation of their history and tradition. To them, The Slayer is expendable – in fact, they probably wish that Buffy had died far sooner and allowed them to start training a new Slayer, one more willing to comply with their antiquated forms and rules. And despite her growth and strength, their attitude and conviction shakes Buffy's confidence – no act of heroism on her part has ever proved enough for The Council, and the self-reliance they've forcibly instilled in her means she does not trust them to help her save her sister. Though Giles is now assuredly on Buffy's side, even his knowledge and skills cannot help her combat the obstinacy of this old organization. This is especially evident when Buffy herself first faces The Council again, interrupting Giles's attempts to convince them not to go forward with their review.

**Giles:** We've been developing a, uh, sort of hybrid fighting style. Let me outline her progress for you, and I think you'll see that, uh, your review isn't strictly needed.

**Buffy (entering, she spots The Council and tries to leave):** Bad day, bad, bad, bad...

**Travers:** Ms. Summers! Good to see you again.

**Buffy:** Mr. Travers.

**Travers:** Giles has just been telling us of your training regimen, perhaps you'll favor us with a demonstration while we're here.

**Buffy:** Right now?

**Travers:** No need to rush you.

**Giles:** They're... staying a little longer than I'd anticipated.

**Travers:** We've already laid out our project for Mr. Giles. Nigel.

**Nigel:** It's an exhaustive examination of your procedures and abilities. We'll observe your training, talk to your friends –

**Buffy:** Talk to my friends?

**Travers:** Yes, we understand you're still taking civilians out on your patrols.

**Buffy:** Oh, you've gotta be kidding me.

**Travers:** Buffy, I can sense your resistance – I don't blame you. But I think your Watcher hasn't reminded you lately of the ranks and status of the players of our little game. The Council fights evil – The Slayer is the instrument by which we fight. The Council remains, The Slayers change. Been that way from the beginning.

**Giles:** Well that's a very comforting, bloodless way of looking at it, isn't it?

**Travers:** Giles. Let me talk to Buffy, because I think she's understanding me.

Glory is stronger than you. She's a more powerful instrument, if you will. We can help you, we have information that will help. Pass the review, and we give it to you without reservation. Fail the review, either through incompetence or by resisting our recommendations –

**Giles:** Resisting your recommendations? She fails if we don't do whatever you say. How much under your thumb do you think we are?

**Travers:** How much do you want our help?

**Giles:** She's not your bloody instrument, and you have no right to do any of this!

**Buffy:** Giles!

From the very beginning of this scene, it is possible to see how The Council's presence has upset Buffy's equilibrium. Though she has renounced them in the past, they have risen again to try to exert their power in place of hers. As I stated previously, they do not care about her as an individual – as evidenced by the fact that they repeatedly refer to her as “an instrument.” Buffy knows that what they are doing is blinded by their own adherence to the patriarchal customs they are used to, but her need for their help and resources makes her believe that she needs to sacrifice her own hard-earned independence to do so. The Council preys on her relationships – noted when they comment on her bringing her friends, or “civilians,” with her when she patrols – in order to induce her into reaffirming their own hierarchical position above her. After this exchange, Travers also goes on to mention that if she doesn't comply, The Council will be forced to exert its power and have Giles deported.

In this episode, Giles is a metaphor for the converted – once a symbol of patriarchy himself, he is now firmly defined by his relational importance to Buffy, not by his position over her. Though Buffy's own strength and power give her the ability to wage war against evil, it is significantly harder to battle the willful ignorance and officiousness of The Council. Moreover, Buffy's sense of obligation to her friends and peers rivals even the sense of duty instilled in her as a Slayer, and so the majority of the

episode finds her attempting to meet all of The Council's demands and prove herself to them once and for all. But after she is physically assaulted by Glory within her own home, and then again by a member of a cult who is seeking to kill Dawn in order to prevent Glory's ascension, Buffy realizes that it is she alone who must face these foes. No matter what their intentions, The Council's attempt at subduing her can and does not change the fact that they are not the ones fighting the battles. So when Buffy returns to face the final stage of The Council's review, carrying a sword she won in battle from the cult member who attacked her, she no longer seems uncertain or even afraid of The Council at all. She has once again been reminded of her own strength and independence, and is unwilling to let The Watchers try to break her in the name of fighting evil.

**Travers:** You're late.

**Buffy:** Yeah.

**Giles (noticing her appearance and the sword she carries):** Was, was there an attack?

**Buffy:** Yeah.

**Travers:** We can begin the review at last. We'll skip the more obvious questions, but –

**Buffy (laying the sword in front of Travers):** There isn't going to be a review.

**Travers:** I'm sorry?

**Buffy:** No review. No interrogation. No questions you know I can't answer. No hoops, no jumps –

**(Nigel goes to interrupt)**

**Buffy:** And no interruptions. See, I've had a lot of people talking at me the last few days - everyone just lining up to tell me how unimportant I am. And I finally figured out why. Power. I have it; they don't. This bothers them. Glory came to my home today.

**Giles:** Buffy, are you all –

**Buffy:** Just to talk. She told me I'm a bug, I'm a flea. She could squash me in a second. Only she didn't. She came into my home, and we talked. We had what in her warped brain probably passes for a civilized conversation. Why? Because she needs something from me. Because I have power over her. You guys didn't come all the way over from England to determine whether I was good enough to be let back in. You came to beg me to let you back in. To give your jobs – your lives – some semblance of meaning.

**Nigel:** This is beyond insolence!

**(Buffy grabs the sword from the table and throws it at him, the tip embeds in the wall beside him and it quivers as he eyes it with fear)**

**Buffy:** I'm fairly certain I said no interruptions.

**Xander:** That was excellent.

**Buffy:** You're Watchers. Without a Slayer, you're pretty much just watchin' Masterpiece Theater. You can't stop Glory. You can't do anything with the information you have except maybe publish it in the "Everyone Thinks We're Insane-O's Home Journal." So here's how it's gonna work. You're gonna tell me everything you know. Then you're gonna go away. You'll contact me if and when

you have any further information about Glory. The magic shop will remain open.  
Mr. Giles will stay here as my official Watcher, reinstated at full salary...

**Giles (coughs):** Retroactively.

**Buffy:** ... to be paid retroactively from the month he was fired. I will continue my work with the help of my friends.

Buffy's realization that she is the one who truly has the strength to wage their war allows her to turn the restrictions of The Watcher's Council back on those who tried to use them against her. For centuries, The Watchers have ruled over The Slayer because that was tradition – content to let The Slayer use her powers and abilities until she was either unfit or killed in the line of duty, never once risking themselves or their institution in the very war they claimed to be fighting. By realizing that they are, in essence, powerless without her, Buffy re-establishes the hierarchy of power, placing herself at its apex. Further, her concern not only for Giles's continued well being, but her assertion that she will continue to do her work with the help of her friends, firmly re-establishes her deeply relational self and the responsibilities that she feels she owes her peers. This is a major turning point in Season 5, displaying a growth in ability and understanding within Buffy that grants her more maturity as well as greater strength and independence. This growth is mirrored by the growth of her relational self, discovering that she can act not only as a daughter and a sister, but also as a mother and a caregiver. She is no longer torn between these disparate aspects of her identity, but rather uses them both to the best of her abilities as a friend and a protector. The depiction of Buffy as a “feminine” woman who is also strong and independent is indicative of the new discursive structures used by the show, ones that disrupt the patriarchal rhetoric that only grants strength and positions of power to

“masculine” characters. This subversion of traditional rhetoric is borne out even further when Buffy overcomes the patriarchal influences of The First Evil, the primary source of all forms of evil in the world.

*Fighting the Un-fightable – Buffy’s Battle Against The First Evil*

Though Buffy faces a number of challenges to her independence and strength throughout the series, her toughest foe might be the “Big Bad” of the final season (a term that Buffy and her friends have come to use to refer to their main nemeses), The First Evil – the source of all evil and hate in the world. This enemy proves to be more omnipotent and devious than even the Hell goddess Glory, as it is an incorporeal entity that can take on the shape of anyone who has died. Unfortunately for The Scooby Gang, The First Evil has decided that it is time to claim its own ascendancy, and has launched a war against The Council, The Slayer, and all of the women in the world who could potentially be called to replace The Slayer (known, fittingly, as Potentials). The odds seem insurmountable; The First Evil has legions of minions the world over, has killed every active member of The Watcher’s Council besides Giles, and is especially concentrating its focus on Sunnydale in an attempt to open the Hellmouth and finally unleash Hell upon the entire world. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the entire season is The First Evil’s close alliance with another traditionally patriarchal character, a misogynist preacher named Caleb. Though The First Evil is unsexed (it takes on the form of both male and female characters), it becomes associated with traditional patriarchal rhetoric by its alignment with the character of Caleb, as evidenced here by their interaction in the Season 7 episode “Dirty Girls”

**The First Evil, appearing as Buffy (indicates her body):** How do you like what I'm wearing?

**Caleb:** Just another dirty girl. And since you only dress up in dead folk, I'm guessing one who's already been paid her wage.

**The First/Buffy:** Look hard. What do you see?

**Caleb (looks):** Strength. And the loneliness that comes with real strength.

**The First/Buffy:** Nothing about my pert and bouncy hair-do?

**Caleb:** You're her.

**The First/Buffy:** The Slayer.

**Caleb (reaches out to touch her, his hand passes through):** At long last. All this time, all the work I've done for you – blowing up The Council, organizing the Ray Charles Brigade [a reference to his league of blind minions known as Harbingers], and sticking all them splits [a rather disgusting description of murdering the potential Slayers, all of whom were female], you never showed me.

**The First/Buffy:** Well, you've earned it. And you'll be meeting her soon, am I right?

**Caleb:** Oh yeah, yeah, she'll get the message.

**The First/Buffy:** And what makes you so sure she'll come?

**Caleb:** Curiosity. Woman's first sin – I offer her an apple, what can she do but take it?

This episode is the audience's first introduction to the character of Caleb, and it is his misogyny and alignment with traditional patriarchal forms that are immediately evident. Not only does he display a blatant animosity towards women, his words are given more



impact by an incident earlier in the episode where he picked up a girl who was under assault only to brand her and stab her in the stomach. His dominant and aggressive personality is a tool utilized by The First Evil for its own ends, which serves to align it with traditional patriarchal forms. It is about this point in the season that Buffy begins training The Potentials, hoping that she can use them as support in her fight against The First Evil.

Buffy also begins exploring the history of The Slayer in an attempt to see where her power comes from and how it can be most effectively used. What she discovers fits naturally within the context of the series, yet surprises even her. In episode 15 of Season 7, entitled “Get it Done,” Buffy is transported to another realm where she encounters the Shadow Men, the progenitors of The Watcher’s Council, who created and instilled The First Slayer with her power. Note that it was men who initially created The Slayer, using a girl as a template because they believed it would make her easier to direct and control. This again shows the patriarchy inherent in The Slayer’s origins, epitomized by the Shadow Men’s magical penetration of The First Slayer. Though The First Slayer has appeared before in the series, mainly as a vision guide to Buffy, this is the first time we see the genesis of The Slayer and the power she holds – and what we witness isn’t pretty. In order for Buffy to see how this genesis transpired, she takes on the role of The First Slayer in the ritual that imbues her with her strength. The ritual is an exercise in terror – The First Slayer, just like all of The Slayers that follow, started life as a mere mortal. But then a group of tribal chieftains – precursors of The Watcher’s Council – kidnap her and chain her in a cave as they summon a demon.

This demon isn't meant to kill her – instead it is forced into her against her will, bound within her body until the day that she dies and the next Slayer inherits its essence. With obvious implications of rape and abuse, it is no wonder that Buffy takes issue with the way these early Watchers shaped and informed the creation of The Slayer. The Shadow Men offer to give Buffy even greater strength, but after witnessing the great cost that comes attached, she exerts her independence and overpowers these chieftains in order to return home. Her discovery of The Slayer's origin is important in another regard as well – it leads her to the discovery of a weapon known as The Scythe, which was itself forged with the same demonic essence that imbued The First Slayer. Buffy uses this Scythe to kill Caleb, and it is instrumental in her final victory over The First Evil. This victory is subversive in a number of ways, not only because Buffy overcomes the patriarchal restrictions of both The First Evil as well as the Shadow Men. Her ultimate use of The Scythe is to share her power as The Slayer with all of The Potentials, allowing her to overcome The First Evil and rebuild The Watcher's Council, which is indicative of her dismissal of a traditional gender hierarchy and her attempts to distribute power more evenly amongst the sexes. This action demonstrates the novel nature of *BtVS*'s rhetoric, and the new discursive structures it promotes.

*Shared Strength – Subversion of the Patriarchal Gender Hierarchy*

Though Buffy's triumph over The Watcher's Council and the Shadow Men is emblematic of a young woman's rise above the patriarchal restrictions that have bound her (and leads to her victory over the patriarchal forms of The First Evil), her domination of the position of power is also somewhat problematic in its own right. As I've stated before, I believe that the rhetoric of *BtVS* goes beyond arguing the need for female

equality and argues instead for the dissolution of gendered hierarchical strictures, granting freedom to all individuals, regardless of how they perform their sex or gender. Buffy's successes in escaping the constrictions of patriarchy are laudable, but they also put her in the locus of power, an act that merely reforms this hierarchy without ever breaking it. The break away from traditional structures didn't occur until after the UPN snatched up the rights for another two seasons – seasons in which Buffy discards the need for a hierarchical ordering of power and decides instead to share her strength with those around her.

Her experiences with the Shadow Men, mere mortals who were able to create The Slayer, make her question the very structural organization that she continues to abide by; though we know, from Buffy's death and the calling of Kendra and then Faith to fulfill the mantle of Slayer, that more than one Slayer can exist at the same time, it has never occurred to Buffy that the rule that there "be only one" was itself a construction – designated not out of necessity, but out of a desire to control The Slayer like a tool or weapon. Buffy's understanding that she, as The Slayer, is ultimately the only one who is called upon to battle the forces of evil grants her a deeper sense of independence, but it also stagnates her growth. Upon finding The Scythe and beating the Shadow Men, Buffy realizes she can overcome the inherent hierarchy they built into the Slayer lineage by sharing her strength with all Potentials the world over. It is this realization that gives Buffy a new resolve, one that enables her to completely discard the hierarchy enforced by the centuries-long tradition of The Watchers. These final pieces come together in the last episode of Season 7, "Chosen," when she describes to the Potentials what her own plans entail. Though it has taken the course of seven years for Buffy to fully embrace the nature

of her own powers and identity, in this final episode she firmly displays her strength not by consolidating her own power, but by sharing it.

**Buffy:** I hate this. I hate being here. I hate that you have to be here. I hate that there's evil and that I was chosen to fight it. I wish a whole lot of the time that I hadn't been. I know a lot of you wish I hadn't been, either. This isn't about wishes. This is about choices. I believe we can beat this evil. Not when it comes. Not when its army is ready. Now. Tomorrow morning, I'm opening the seal. I'm going down into the Hellmouth and I am finishing this once and for all. Right now, you're asking yourself what makes this different. What makes us anything more than a bunch of girls being picked off one by one? It's true. None of you have the power that Faith and I do. So here's the part where you make a choice. What if you could have that power, now? In every generation, one Slayer is born, because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. **(Gestures at Willow)** This woman is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule. I say my power, should be *our* power. Tomorrow, Willow will use the essence of this scythe to change our destiny. From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer, will be a Slayer. Every girl who could have the power, will have the power. Can stand up, will stand up. Slayers, every one of us. Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?

Rather than continue to abide by the historical constructions of the role that has been given to her, she chooses to redefine it, forever breaking the hierarchy that has defined The Slayer's role and position for centuries. She realizes that there is no need for her to

be the sole arbiter of strength in the fight against evil – a realization that flies in the face of all that has come before. These final actions are something more, a continuation of her fight against oppression, yet distinct in that they are no longer defined by the rules and strictures that embody this oppression. Also, her pledge to rebuild The Watcher’s Council from the ground up (and her eventual success in this task in the 8<sup>th</sup> season graphic novel adaptation of the show) are indicative of her desire to eschew the need for a gender hierarchy, suggesting instead that novel performances of identity can still have strength and independence, even if they aren’t aligned with the traditionally “masculine” performances of patriarchal texts. Buffy’s characterization as a strong, independent yet still “feminine” woman is indicative of the show’s use of the fluidity of gender to create new discursive structures that disrupt traditional patriarchal rhetoric.

#### Buffy’s Identity Formation and Growth

Throughout the series, it is evident that Buffy is at once highly feminine and also incredibly strong and independent. This sets her at odds with the traditional patriarchy of The Watcher’s Council, as well as their predecessors the Shadow Men, and the formidable First Evil, and it is a long time before she is able to not only overcome their patriarchy, but to eschew entirely the need for their traditional structures or gendered hierarchy. As I stated earlier, though Buffy’s fight is largely against patriarchy, she never views herself in the limited terms that spring from this patriarchy and so is able to view possibilities beyond it. Through her attempts to equalize the distribution of power, and the personal fortitude that comes with her resolve, she has enabled Potentials the world over to share in her birthright and to take up the fight against evil if they so choose. The fact that she even gives them a choice is also telling; as a distributor of this power it could

have been argued that she was no different or better in forcing it upon others than were The Watchers, but by giving them this strength and then allowing them to choose individually what they will do with it, she sets herself apart from those who created the original system. Further, Buffy's devotion to reforming The Watcher's Council as a more progressive organization is indicative of her desire to share her strength universally rather than place herself or the other Slayers at the apex of a new gendered hierarchy.

This rhetoric is in keeping with the rhetoric of the rest of the series, which promotes a view not just of the strength of females, but of the inherent strength in humanity. By sharing her own strength Buffy has shown that she is not just an exception to the view of women as weak and without power, but rather a leader in the fight to acknowledge that both men and women can be powerful, if they so choose. Further, by eschewing the need for a hierarchy of power, Buffy shows that she is not just interested in overcoming patriarchy for the sake of putting herself in a privileged position, but as a means of demonstrating that power and strength can be shared mutually. This rhetoric is echoed throughout the rest of the series, evident in the ways that other characters establish and perform their own genders and sexualities.

I contend that, unlike the majority of popular culture shows, which promote patriarchy and the heteronormativity that it entails, every aspect of *BtVS* calls for us to view gender as malleable and fluid, socially constructed rather than inherently characterized by any biological features. From this context, Buffy's identity development and eventual deconstruction of the patriarchal organization governing her can be read as a metaphor for the need to do away with hierarchical gender ordering in general. If gender is not an oppositional binary, but rather a gradient of different gender performances, then

there is no intrinsic difference in value between genders and thus no need for traditional gender norms or hierarchies. Defining gender and identity in static terms serves only to limit the number of ways they can be manifested or displayed “appropriately,” and the show’s continued portrayal of tolerance and acceptance of a diverse range of identity and gender performances can be further tracked by the changing ways in which the other characters enact and perform their own identities. It is to these other characters that I turn in my second chapter, with an aim to explore how they use action to consolidate their own ability to wield power, as well as exhibit various manifestations of gender and sexual identity performances that further promote the need to view each as a discursively constructed phenomenon. In the following chapters I also explore in greater depth the agency of *BtVS* and how its subversive rhetoric presents new discursive structures that are echoed by those popular culture texts that came after *BtVS*.

## CHAPTER 2

“Power. I have it; they don’t. This bothers them.”  
(*BtVS*, 5.12, “Checkpoint”)

The rhetoric of *BtVS* promotes a poststructuralist view of gender: one that is not tied to a static binary based on biological predetermination, but is rather discursively constructed. By studying the manner in which the show’s characters enact and perform their own genders, it is possible to see that *BtVS*’s strength is in eschewing the idea of gender as a fixed, static concept. Further, by treating gender as something discursively constructed and variable, *BtVS* becomes one of the first genre shows to ever challenge the need for the strict structuring of gender that is so prevalent in society today. Indeed, the rhetoric of the show is in line with Judith Butler’s (2004) assertion that “gender is complexly produced through identificatory and performative practices, and that gender is not as clear or as univocal as we are sometimes led to believe” (p. 212). There are an inordinate number of ways in which it is possible to perform gender, so to limit the number of “appropriate” performances exacerbates the problems inherent in a gendered hierarchy. These restrictions ensure that those who are unprivileged cannot earn the same status as the privileged, even if they perform themselves in the same way. By punishing nontraditional gender or identity performances, it is possible to ensure the continuation of the social hierarchy. This concept is also aligned with Foucault’s work on docile bodies, which suggests that “modern individuals are members of the ‘disciplinary society’ within which identities are constituted in a process of discursive subjectification. Here, subjectification – or, the making of subjects and subjectivities – occurs not through physical coercion, but through ‘disciplinary coercion’” (Cited in Green, 2010, p. 319, from Foucault, 1977). By rewarding certain gender performances and punishing others,



our society continues to inform the ways certain performances and identities are considered normal and some are considered unnatural. But the social customs and practices that define which group can exercise power and which gender performances are acceptable have no inherent ties to sex, gender, or any other axis of identity. Because sex and gender are both discursively constructed, the categories of male/female and masculine/feminine are also mere constructs – meaning that none of these categories have any more inherent worth than any other, even if social customs, like modern patriarchy, place one set of gender performances above another.

As I described in Chapter 1, traditional Western societies often view gender as a static oppositional binary between masculine and feminine precepts. Our modern society follows the patriarchal customs and practices of our European forebears and, as such, much of the rhetoric of popular culture also approaches gender as a static binary. This is problematic in that the rhetoric supports the hegemony of masculine identity, and punishes females who perform their own identities outside the passive, subservient roles demanded by traditional patriarchal views of femininity. This analysis of the effects of traditional patriarchal rhetoric draws from Foucault's (1977) notion of discipline as a means of producing identity; by punishing those who perform themselves atypically, especially females who deny their implicit relegation to a passive role, the current patriarchal power dynamic is upheld, allowing males to maintain ascendancy.

The predominance of patriarchal rhetoric in modern media makes those texts that subvert this rhetoric an essential point of study. Even beyond the character of Buffy, much of the rhetoric of *BtVS* serves to suggest that gender is not static in any way but is instead fluid and shifting. And though it can be argued that sexual identity is just as

discursively constructed as gender identity, many of the characters of *BtVS* firmly associate themselves with either a male or female sexual identity. This does not, however, preclude them from performing their own genders and sexualities in both traditional and nontraditional ways, suggesting there is no fixed, essential nature that underlies gender or sex, merely the cultural customs that we have been inculcated with. By interrupting our accustomed view of the heroic “masculine” performances that patriarchal texts provide, the rhetoric of *BtVS* exhibits its own form of agency, by presenting novel views of sex and gender roles.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will explore the concept of agency, especially the poststructuralist views of agency in line with Judith Butler’s (2006) assertion that, “all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (p. 198). That is to say, agency can be found in any rhetoric or discourse that interrupts the omnipresent influence of traditional or normative social and cultural ideologies. In this way, the show *BtVS* expresses its own agency through a subversion of the hegemonic masculinity of traditional patriarchal rhetoric. By presenting characters that eschew the need for “masculine” hegemony, *BtVS* interrupts our normative experiences and expectations of the traditional popular culture rhetoric that suggests a static oppositional binary exists between the genders, effectively empowering men and barring women from acting with strength or power. Interestingly, the agency that *BtVS* exhibits comes from the show’s depiction of a set of certain actions that re-distribute power equally amongst individuals, regardless of how they perform their gender or sexual identity, and so disrupts normative patriarchal rhetoric that allows only male characters to exercise

power. It should be noted that this view of power is drawn from Foucault's concept of power as a complex arrangement of forces within society, and on the individual level implies an ability to influence or exert control in relationships with others or the surrounding environment.

Following Foucault's (1990) tradition, it would be incorrect to state that the characters are imbued with power, rather that certain characters are capable of performing power. The show's rhetoric portrays a certain ability to exercise power inherent in specific sets of actions that are accessible to all the characters, not just to the traditional patriarchal "male" figures. By tracing the actions in the show associated with an ability to exercise power, including expressions of self-confidence and courage, fighting and killing demons, the protection of others, and the power of sexual intercourse, it is possible to see how all characters are capable of performing these actions, suggesting that strength and power are not tied to traditionally patriarchal "masculine" performances, as many popular culture texts suggest, nor are they tied to any other specific performances of gender, traditional or non-traditional. I will restrict my focus to a number of examples from a select group of male and female characters as they enact and perform their own identities. Both Xander and Willow are specifically examined as they, along with Buffy and Giles, form the core group of The Scooby Gang and so share the most amount of screen time. Xander and Willow are also excellent examples of characters that enact their own gender identities through both traditional and non-traditional performances, but are still allowed the same access to action as any other characters. This promotion of a form of active power that is accessible to all characters, regardless of how they enact or perform their own sex or gender, interrupts the normative

cultural rhetoric suggesting only traditionally patriarchal “masculine” performances and characters can exercise any sense of personal power through strength or courage. First I’ll clarify the various forms of agency, starting with its historical origins.

### Exploring Agency

As with sex or gender, the notion of agency is a mere construct, created from a history of cultural practices and beliefs, not any inherent essential quality. Historically, agency was thought of as the ability or possibility to *do*, a certain aspect that allowed an individual to affect or shape the world around them. This is a traditional, humanist view of agency and implies that agency can exist within a bodied individual, making their corporeal form the locus of power. As Judith Butler (2006) puts it, “A great deal of feminist theory and literature has nevertheless assumed that there is a ‘doer’ behind the deed. Without an agent, it is argued, there can be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a transformation of relations of domination within society” (p. 34). This traditional view of agency held sway for many years, but due in large part to Butler and scholars like her, a poststructuralist view of agency has developed, reshaping agency as the ability to influence social customs from the micro- to the macro-cultural level; ideas like social praxis and the discursive inculcation of ideologies demonstrate a sense of something having been done and being repeatedly done time and again to inform how people act, think, and perform themselves, suggesting the powerful influence of their own inculcated ideologies on their identities. This definition of agency then is disassociated from identity and is found instead within the possibility to interrupt the cycle of various social pressures that shape and form said identity. As I’ve stated before, *BtVS* is a great example of a popular culture show that subverts and interrupts our culturally

preconceived notions of what gender is and can be, and so exhibits its own form of poststructuralist agency. Interestingly, the show achieves this through a promotion of a sense of power that is inherent in specific actions accessible to individuals aligned with both non-traditional and traditional gender performances, and so further subverts the masculine hegemony of most popular culture rhetoric.

One of the major problems inherent in the concept of power in patriarchal rhetoric is an association between said power and the traditional, stereotypical “masculine” gender performances. This association serves to promote the ascendant male and denies femininity the capacity and independence that is present in their masculine counterparts. However, this association is also predicated upon outmoded views of power that treat it as an inherent, bodied phenomenon, an extension of traditionally “male” characteristics like physical strength, stoicism, and independence. It is these characteristics that are relished in the heroic, “protector” roles prevalent in many modern movies, notably the blockbuster superhero and war films of the last few decades. Since the vast majority of these characters are male, the rhetoric of popular culture continually reconstructs and re-instills traditional patriarchal views of the all-powerful male. However, this concept of power is an incomplete view. Foucault (1990) defines his notion of power thusly:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunction and contradictions which isolate them

from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied. . . in the various social hegemonies. (p. 92-93)

Foucault's view of power is on the macro-cultural level, understood as the various pressures and forces acting within any society, and not as an inherent physical characteristic or aspect of individuals. Individuals are incapable of having power, they can only be capable of exercising it by utilizing a discourse that exerts influence or control in a performance with others; this distinction is made to ensure that the concept of power cannot be viewed as an individual or human capability, but rather as the relationship of all discursive forces on the socio-cultural level. The dynamics of these forces can be changed and altered, but those groups who benefit from certain power relationships actively try to maintain them. It is for this reason that a great deal of the male-dominated Hollywood system promotes traditional patriarchal views of gender within a majority of popular culture texts. But just as traditional texts can reinforce stereotypical beliefs, those texts that disrupt normative rhetoric can also change the dynamics of power within a society. One such show, is, of course, *BtVS*, whose rhetoric challenges the hierarchy of gender all together, and thereby questions the promotion of a correlation between personal power and traditional "masculine" precepts of gender identity within patriarchal rhetoric. *BtVS*, like Foucault, moves away from the concept of power as an innate characteristic, and presents it instead as a set of actions available to all individuals, which allows them to exercise power by utilizing these discursive force relationships in novel ways. These actions include expressions of self-confidence and courage, fighting demons, protecting others, and the power created through sexual

intercourse. Since these actions can be committed by anyone, regardless of how they perform their gender or identity, the show promotes a form of power that can be exercised by all, especially minority figures, not just by people aligned with traditional masculine identities. This rhetoric reshapes the discursive structure of sex and gender, further evidence of the agency of *BtVS*.

In creating this show, Joss Whedon stated that he would not depict strong females at the expense of realistic male characters. Rather, as I've stated before, Whedon (2006) "wanted to be very careful to surround [Buffy] with men who not only had no problem with the idea of a female leader, but, were in fact, engaged and even attracted to the idea" (¶ 5). In this way, Whedon circumvents the need for an oppositional binary between "masculine" and "feminine" attributes, allowing all performances of gender identity, even nontraditional performances, to be capable of discursive power. Indeed, the show's rhetoric even goes so far as to implicitly suggest a redefinition of our modern view of power, disassociating it from traditional, stereotypically "masculine" performances of power as pure physical domination. Instead, like Foucault (1990), the rhetoric demonstrates power to be distributed throughout society, an interweaving of forces that exists amongst and affects all the characters. Uniquely, the rhetoric of *BtVS* allows all performances of identity, whether they're traditional or not, to act with discursive power, further disrupting the norms of traditional patriarchal rhetoric. This reconceptualization of power is echoed in Lorna Jowett's (2005) assertion that there are both old and new forms of masculinity present in *BtVS*.

Old masculinity is macho, violent, strong, and monstrous, while new masculinity is ‘feminized,’ passive, emotional, weak, and human. Many male characters on *Buffy* display both at once, a kind of split personality. (p. 95)

Jowett uses this distinction to trace the ways in which older masculinity is reminiscent of classical characteristics of movie “villains.” I note some of these associations in my own analysis, but find it particularly interesting that she also comments on the duality of personal identity found within the show; often the characters express themselves in both traditional and nontraditional manners, once again suggesting that identity is unfixed, and variable.

By empowering the feminine and by “feminizing” the modern man, while still granting him a position of power and independence, *BtVS* attempts to further distance current concepts of power from the stereotypical “masculine” characteristics of strength and physical coercion it has become associated with. This rhetoric serves another purpose too – by framing the ability to exercise power within a set of actions, it allows more traditionally “feminine” performances as well as nontraditional performances to utilize power the same as any traditionally “masculine” characters from other popular texts, meaning that females and any who perform themselves in nontraditional manners can gain and wield their own influence on the world around them, further subverting the traditional patriarchal rhetoric of most popular culture texts. I continue my analysis by tracing the set of actions the show indicates are tied to an ability to utilize discursive power.



### Power In Action

As I've stated, the ways *BtVS* questions and subverts traditional patriarchal rhetoric grant it a form of agency associated with poststructuralist concepts of agency as the ability to interrupt our traditionally constructed ideologies. The interesting thing, however, is that the show achieves this by extending the ability to exercise power, a sense of the bodied ability to affect and influence other people and the surrounding environment, beyond just traditionally male characters. Many popular culture texts make use of a mistaken definition of power as being associated with traditionally "masculine" performances, but the difference between the view of power used by *BtVS* and the power performed in many popular texts is that *BtVS* is interested in how all the characters affect and influence each other, thus allowing all characters, not just traditionally "masculine" characters, to inhabit a position of power. The show's rhetoric does this by presenting a concept of power as separate from any specific biological characteristics and as achievable by anybody, regardless of how they perform their sex or gender.

This sharing of power suggests a subversion of traditional patriarchal rhetoric, disrupting our culturally conditioned view of gender as a binary opposition that grants "masculine" identities power and dominance over "feminine" identities. I argue the characters of *BtVS*, regardless of the manner in which they perform their gender or sex, can gain and perform power through four common actions: (1) expressing self-confidence and courage, (2) fighting/killing demons, (3) protecting others, and (4) sexual intercourse; this subversive promotion of a position of power accessible to all individuals through a set of actions is indicative of the agency of the show *BtVS*, which I trace by

turning first to the use or expression of self-confidence and courage as a way to exercise power.

### *Self-Confidence & Courage*

Here I will explore the ways in which Xander and Willow first learn to exhibit an ability to utilize power by improving their self-confidence and acting out of courage. The characters in the show, both male and female, use a combination of traditional and non-traditional performances of gender identity, which further evidences the view of gender as unfixed, and the development of their self-confidence, courage, and independence is indicative of their own ability to understand and exercise power. The ways the characters attain this ability are at once subversive of patriarchal norms and also empowering for any who perform their own identities in nontraditional manners. My analysis focuses mainly on the characters of Xander and Willow as they use both traditional and non-traditional gender performances to establish their own identities and sense of power, and because they are two of the more important characters of the show, meaning that they have more time to thoroughly establish said identities. Both characters begin the series as unconfident, physically weak individuals in positions of limited power, but progress to be self-assured, strong, and independent.

Xander is framed as a progressive individual who recognizes feminine strength, and even performs his own gender in both traditional and nontraditional ways, though he identifies himself as male. This outlook, plus his exceedingly average abilities and temperament cast him in the role of the “everyman,” a role that provides a good entry into the ways the male characters of this show perform and enact their gender and sexual identities. Willow, who was Xander’s childhood friend and grew up harboring secret

feelings for him, begins the series within the same position of limited power as Xander. She starts the show as meek and insecure, but her eventual growth and development into a confident, self-identified “gay” witch is evidence of the show’s employment of power being accessible through a set of actions, a commodity that can be utilized by anybody, regardless of how they perform their gender or sexuality.

In the pilot episode, “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” the audience is introduced to the characters in such a way that their lack of confidence and courage is immediately evident. Xander is initially depicted skateboarding to school on what turns out to be Buffy’s first day there. He is approaching the high school just as Buffy walks by him, distracting his gaze and causing him to skate into a nearby railing and tumble over. Buffy is oblivious to this, but we see Xander look up from his position on the ground only to notice his friend Willow is standing over him. In this scene Xander is much like any other male: he does not deny his voyeuristic male gaze, but rather enjoys the subliminal sexuality of ogling Buffy as she walks past. The threat is removed from this view, however, as he is immediately made into a punch line when he hits the railing and knocks himself over.

By depicting him as uncoordinated and unsmooth, the show suggests that Xander is without the strength or position of power inherent in traditional male figures. Further, by placing him on the ground “below” Willow, as well as his subsequent request for her help on the assigned math homework, the rhetoric suggests that he is also lacking in independence. Xander might view himself as a male, and certainly attempts to perform his gender in a masculine manner, but it is also evident that he is not representative of the confident, powerful, “tough guy” male characters that populate many modern media

texts. This rhetoric also emphasizes the need to see gender as shifting, variable and fluid rather than static and unchanging. Within this context, Xander is distinguished from traditional “masculine” gender performances, and his lack of self-confidence, independence, and courage are indicative of his inability to exercise power.

It is this same lack of self-confidence and courage that initially limit Willow Rosenberg’s utility and access to power. In the early seasons, Willow is framed as meek and insecure, a constant victim incapable of displaying any modicum of an ability to affect her surroundings. As I mentioned in my first chapter, Willow is routinely mocked by Cordelia and the majority of Sunnydale High, and views and enacts herself as passive and inferior. She is romantically obsessed with Xander, but can’t bring herself to pursue any sexual relationship; her nerves and anxiety make it nearly impossible for her to maintain a conversation with an attractive male, and so she is stuck in a cycle that reinforces her own insecurities about her sex and identity. This is first portrayed by Willow’s interactions with Buffy in the pilot episode, “Welcome to the Hellmouth.” Though I’ve already described the way in which they are first introduced, one of their first meaningful conversations comes later during Buffy’s first night in town, when she finds Willow sitting by herself at The Bronze, the local nightclub.

**Buffy:** Hey!

**Willow:** Oh, hi. Hi!

**Buffy:** So, are you here with someone?

**Willow:** No, I’m just here. I thought Xander was going to show up.

**Buffy:** Oh... are you guys, going out?

**Willow:** No, we’re just friends. We used to go out, but we broke up.

**Buffy:** How come?

**Willow:** He stole my Barbie – uh, we were five.

**Buffy:** Oh.

**Willow:** Yeah, I don't actually date a whole lot. Lately.

**Buffy:** Why not?

**Willow:** Well, when I'm with a boy I like, it's hard for me to say anything cool or witty or at all. I can usually make a few vowel sounds, and then I have to go away.

**Buffy (laughs):** It's not that bad.

**Willow:** No, it – it is. I think, boys are more interested in a girl who can talk.

**Buffy:** You really haven't been dating lately.

**Willow:** It's probably easy for you. I – I mean, you don't seem too shy.

When she is first introduced, Willow presents herself as meek and shy; in this later scene with Buffy, it becomes clear how deep that shyness runs. At this time Willow is still in love with her best friend, Xander, but she lacks the courage to pursue him. She mentions that the last time they dated was when they were five, and her lack of progress with other men indicates that Willow has limited relationship experience in general. Though she and Xander are close, Willow states that she is incapable of talking to other guys, suggesting that she has very little self-confidence, perhaps because of a lack of sexual experience (as noted later in this chapter, sexual activity within the *Buffyverse* seems to grant an individual a position of power as well). Further, in the early episodes Willow identifies as a computer nerd and has not yet begun exploring magic, meaning she has very little physical strength or magical ability, and thus is generally incapable of exerting any level

of control upon her surroundings. Her belief that traditionally “masculine” concepts of strength are synonymous with power has limited her to performing herself in normative “feminine” ways, and it is this lack of self-confidence that inhibits her from realizing her own ability to exercise power.

The above scene from the first episode ends with Willow nervously deciding to approach a guy, only to have it be a vampire who decides to kidnap her. In the early episodes, she is often placed in the role of the victim, constantly in need of being rescued. Much like Xander, she starts the show limited by her lack of power, and therefore relegated to a role of passivity. As Jessica Ford (2012) puts it, “She is a weak individual in a show dominated by characters with supernatural powers. Xander is Willow’s equal in terms of agency, because they both lack the ability to alter events around them” (p.95). Willow identifies as a female within a patriarchal society and initially is limited to purely traditional performances of her own gender identity. This limitation is so severe that she frequently is forced into the role of the victim, not only making her passive, but also impotent. But Willow’s introduction to Buffy allows her to understand that power can be exercised by all, so long as one is willing to break away from traditional, stereotypical performances of gender and identity. And so Willow gets up the nerve to start talking with a strange boy at the nightclub, a sign that she is at least beginning to explore her own self-confidence. Unfortunately, it turns out that he is a vampire who kidnaps her, forcing Buffy to rescue her and reveal the truth about vampires and her own identity as The Slayer. Buffy’s inclusion of Willow into her circle of trust marks the beginning of Willow’s own self-confidence, power and courage.

Even by the second episode of Season 1, “The Harvest,” both Xander and Willow already display a marked increase in ability to utilize power from their initial performances of identity in episode one. Willow is still nerdy and de-sexualized in nature, but when she learns the truth about Buffy and her fight against vampires, she is compelled to help. Also, though Buffy was able to save Xander and Willow from a vampire attack, she wasn’t able to help their mutual friend Jesse, who was attacked and dragged into the sewers by minions of The Master. Buffy wants to go save Jesse, but is unsure of how to find her way into, or around in, the local sewers. Willow says she knows a way it could be done, a contribution that further suggests she is beginning to gain more self-confidence, and is increasingly capable of affecting events around her. The scene cuts to her sitting in front of a computer monitor, poring over what looks like blueprints of a complex tunnel system. The rest of the Scooby Gang is crowded around her, watching as she works. This scene is indicative of Willow and Xander’s growing sense of self-confidence, growth which is necessary for them to learn how to utilize power through other actions.

**Buffy:** There it is.

**Willow:** That runs under the graveyard.

**Xander:** I don’t see any access.

**Giles:** So, all the city plans are just – open to the public?

**Willow:** Um, well, in – in a way. I sort of stumbled onto them when I accidentally decrypted the city council’s security system.

**Xander:** Someone’s been naughty.

**Buffy:** There’s nothing here; this is useless!

**Giles:** I think you're being a bit hard on yourself.

**Buffy:** You're the one that told me I wasn't prepared enough. Understatement. Eh – I thought I was on top of everything and then that monster Luke came out of nowhere.

**(Buffy flashes back to Luke grabbing hold of her from behind the throat)**

**Xander:** What?

**Buffy:** He didn't come out of nowhere. He came from behind me. I was facing the entrance, he came from behind me and he didn't follow me out. The access to the tunnels is in the mausoleum. The girl must have doubled back with Jesse after I got out. God, I am so mentally challenged!

**Xander:** So what's the plan, we saddle up, right?

**Buffy:** There's no we, okay? I'm The Slayer and you're not.

**Xander:** I knew you'd throw that back in my face.

**Buffy:** Xander, this is deeply dangerous.

**Xander:** I'm inadequate. That's fine; I'm less than a man.

**Willow:** Buffy, I'm not anxious to go into a dark place full of monsters, but I do want to help. I need to.

**Giles:** Well then help me. I've been researching this Harvest affair. It seems to be some sort of preordained massacre, rivers of blood, Hell on Earth, quite charmless. I'm a bit fuzzy, however, on the details; it may be that you can wrest some information from that dread machine. **(Nods at computer, then, off their looks)** That was a bit, um, British, wasn't it?

**Buffy:** Welcome to the New World.



**Giles (to Willow):** I want you to go on The Net.

**Willow:** Oh, sure, I can do that.

In the first episode, Willow exhibited little power; she was mocked and ridiculed by her peers at school and was constantly portrayed as meek and unappealing sexually, making her appear to lack self-confidence, courage, and strength. Though she is still portrayed as a nerdy outcast, Willow's performance of her identity since meeting Buffy and being brought into her world has grown as she becomes emotionally stronger and more confident. She does not have great physical strength or a full position of power by this point, but her intellect and technological ability grant her self-confidence and a sense of ability in this scene that was unnoticeable in the way she behaved in the first episode. Further, not only has Willow provided the means to search for Jesse, she has demonstrated a willingness to break laws and rules – a courageous act of defiance that goes against her standard strait-laced demeanor.

Also interesting to note here is the disparate reactions that Xander and Willow have to Buffy's assertion that she is The Slayer and thus the only one who can do anything. Xander, performing himself as a stereotypical male, initially finds this to be an affront to his own position of power. This is not because he does not think Buffy is incapable of going into the sewers on her own, but because Jesse was his best friend and Xander feels responsible for what happened to him. Xander's determination to go in her stead suggests a self-confidence and courage that he lacked in the previous episode. It does, however, also suggest that he is still used to the idea of power as a traditionally "masculine" position, and wants to act in place of Buffy, who is apparently "feminine." Willow, on the other hand, knows that she is not strong enough to take on a nest of

vampires on her own, but has enough self-confidence and courage to request to be included in some manner, suggestive of her ability to exercise power. What she lacks in brute strength, she makes up for in intelligence and so is the perfect aid to Giles's research work. By interacting with Buffy, Willow has seen what it means to be both a female and an arbiter of strength and courage, and her performance of her own identity has started to change to reflect this novel form of power.

Xander eventually stops acting like a traditionally "masculine" man and goes to help Buffy, suggesting that he has stopped trying to deny her "feminine" power and has instead gained the self-confidence necessary to begin establishing his strength and courage, a strength which is tapped again later in the episode when he is forced to kill Jesse. Both of these actions suggest Xander acts with courage and fortitude, and is capable of expressions of power, despite his use of both nontraditional as well as traditional performances of gender identity. Even still, both Xander and Willow have a far ways to go before they mirror the position of power and strength of one of the characters with supernatural abilities, like Buffy. But it is the development of their own self-confidence and courage that can aid them in gaining an ability to utilize power, and their actions even in just these first two episodes suggest a growing understanding of how they can each do just that. *BtVS* promotes a view of power that can be exercised through a set of specific actions, making it accessible and possible for all individuals to enact power, regardless of the manner in which they perform their sex or gender. These actions go beyond just learning to act courageously and with a sense of self-confidence. I turn next to the ways characters exercise power by killing demons and fighting the forces of darkness.

*Killing Demons and Fighting the Forces of Darkness*

Being The Slayer, Buffy is tasked with the duty of fighting the forces of evil; as the original opening narrative intones, “She alone will wield the strength and skill to fight the vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness; to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their number” (*BtVS*, various episodes). Her ability to effectively fight evil and save the world depicts a position of power that is seemingly tied specifically to her mantle as The Chosen One. But as the other characters demonstrate, the action of fighting evil can be learned and utilized by people other than The Slayer, a rhetoric that reframes power as inherent to certain forms of action, all of which are accessible to anyone, regardless of the way they perform their sex or gender. Killing demons and fighting evil is just one possible action that allows an individual power, and by allowing anybody to exercise this specific action, regardless of their performances of sex and gender, the show further interrupts our culturally conditioned belief in a male-dominant oppositional gender binary.

This rhetoric is supported by the actions of the rest of The Scooby Gang as they help Buffy in her fight against evil. A great example comes from the first episode of Season 6, “Bargaining: Part 1,” which finds The Scooby Gang acting in a concerted effort to slay vampires in Sunnydale following the events of Buffy’s death and self-sacrifice at the end of Season 5. As Buffy has been dead and buried for a couple of months, the rest of the group find that it is up to them to take up the fight against evil, and their actions signal a growth of their own power. The Scooby Gang has realized that the mythic status of The Slayer is part of the reason demons are afraid of Sunnydale and so try to conceal her death by utilizing a robotic replica of her (known as “the Buffybot”) as a tool in their

fight against evil. But robotic replacement or no, Buffy's death means the ultimate responsibility of slaying demons and killing monsters now falls on the rest of the group, not The Slayer. Though they are not as talented as she is, their actions suggest a certain amount of personal strength and power, regardless of how the characters align their identities.

The episode opens on a shot of an overweight vampire sprinting through a cemetery, dodging between gravestones. Out of the shadows Spike comes running, chasing him, and Tara and Giles follow a short distance behind, all of them carrying weapons. The overweight vampire evades them, leading them to a dead end by the cemetery fence. Here the camera pans out, showing a wider view of the graveyard. Willow is far away from the others; we see her standing on top of a mausoleum and watching the events unfold below her. She is using her magical abilities to speak telepathically to the others and guides them on what to do. Her talent and ability are suggestive of a position of power, an ability to shape and change the events around her, evidenced here by her ability to lead a concerted effort to fight evil and kill vampires.

**Willow (speaking telepathically):** The vampire's circling back towards you, six o'clock. Try to drive him towards the Van Alton crypt.

**Giles:** Van Alton?

**Tara:** Is that the one with the cute little gargoyles?

Xander and Anya head around the tomb just as another vampire nearby throws Spike and Tara off of him before tossing the Buffybot into a wall. Giles picks up his axe and swings to attack, but the vampire catches him and forces him up against the fence, using the axe handle to choke him. Spike kills the vampire holding Giles and they all rush off to help

Xander and Anya dispatch the last vampire, distracting it before the Buffybot slays it. Their coordinated efforts, and especially Willow's ability to magically network with all of them, demonstrate an effective power and ability to hunt and kill vampires, even if it is not quite as efficient as the supernatural abilities of The Slayer. Nevertheless, the group members are self-confident and courageous as they kill these demi-demons in an effort to continue providing protection for the town of Sunnydale. Their actions are indicative of their expressions of power that spring from their ability to provide protection for others by killing demons. However, the act of slaying is just a physical manifestation, a metaphor representing the fight against evil. And, just as the show suggests that gender is socially constructed and varied, it also promotes multiple versions of evil, and multiple ways to combat it beyond mere methods of physical assault.

A great example of alternative methods to fighting evil besides just killing demons comes from the events of the last few episodes of Season 6, where Willow turns to black magic and reverts to an antagonistic set of gender performances most closely aligned with traditional "masculine" performances after one of Buffy's enemies comes to their home and fires a gun into the air, killing her girlfriend Tara with a stray bullet. Willow is determined to get her vengeance on the trio of nerdy bad guys who were responsible for Tara's death, ultimately killing one of them, actions suggesting that she is aligned with traditionally "masculine" performances such as hyper-aggression and independence, which represent a specific, outmoded notion of power as domination. Ultimately, it is Xander who stops Willow from destroying the world (in Season 6, Episode 22, "Grave") – not by fighting her, but by being there for her, demonstrating a means of fighting evil beyond just killing demons.

**Dark Willow (scoffing):** Is this the master plan? You're going to stop me by telling me you love me?

**Xander:** Well, I was going to walk you off a cliff and hand you an anvil, but, eh, it seemed kinda cartoony.

**Dark Willow:** Still making jokes.

**Xander:** I'm not joking. I know you're in pain – I can't imagine the pain you're in. And I know you're about to do something apocalyptically evil, and stupid, and hey, I still wanna hang. You're Willow.

**Dark Willow:** Don't call me that.

**Xander:** The first day of kindergarten. You cried because you broke the yellow crayon, and you were too afraid to tell anyone. You've come pretty far, ending the world, not a terrific notion. But the thing is? Yeah. I love you. I loved crayon-breaky Willow and I love ... scary veiny Willow. So if I'm going out, it's here. If you wanna kill the world? Well, then start with me. I've earned that.

Xander repeats his assertion that he loves her, braving a number of magical attacks as he approaches her. The more he repeats his love for her, the weaker her attacks grow, until eventually he is holding her, and she sobs in his arms as her black hair fades back to red and her eyes return to their normal color. Xander's ability to fight evil, even though it is through a method that does not necessitate the physical fighting or killing of demons, suggests that Xander is every bit as capable of exercising power as anybody else, even though he is not aligned with traditionally "masculine" gender traits of aggression and dominance. Indeed, the rhetoric of the show suggests that power is available to all characters through a specific set of actions, including fighting against and killing the

forces of darkness. Power, then, is not dependent on any inherent physical characteristic; power is the accumulated effects of the multiplicity of social forces that act upon our culture, and can merely be exercised by individuals, not possessed by them. Xander's actions are not physical or combative, but they nevertheless help save the world and suggest his own exhibition of an ability to exercise power to control and shape the world around him. And though Willow has become evil from the pain of her grief, her demonstrated ability to destroy the entire world suggests a strength and position of power unmatched by any other member of the Scooby Gang. This strength is finally put to good use in Season 7, when Willow uses her magical talent to share the power of The Slayer amongst all The Potentials, eradicating the established hierarchy and limitations placed on these roles by the original Watcher's Council.

Willow's growth, both as an agent of courage, self-confidence, and in her ability to aid in the fight against evil as a sexually and magically empowered woman, is not fully realized until she moves away from traditionally "masculine" gender performances and the outmoded concepts of patriarchal power they represent. The rhetoric of *BtVS* ultimately implies a need for us all to view power as being separate from physical identities, but available to all members of society, regardless of their social position or the manner in which they perform their own identity. The show promotes a view of power inherent within a set of actions, specifically the ability to express self-confidence and courage, killing demons/fighting evil, the protection of others, and the act of having sex. There is certainly some variation and some overlap between these actions and how the characters perform them, but it is the mere act of performing them that allows an individual to exercise a power that is free from any strict relationships to specific

performances of gender or identity. In this way, *BtVS* interrupts the standard popular culture rhetoric of patriarchal, male-dominant ideologies and so demonstrates its own form of agency, one aligned specifically with poststructuralist notions of agency as the ability to disrupt our discursively constructed frames of thought. I next analyze how the ability to act as a “protector” is indicative of positions of personal power.

### *Protecting Others*

By framing power as an inherent aspect of a specific set of actions, one that includes expressing self-confidence and courage, along with fighting and killing demons, the rhetoric of *BtVS* promotes an expression of power that can be exercised by all individuals, even those not aligned with traditional gender performances. But it is Buffy’s continual self-sacrifice in the name of protecting others that makes her truly heroic, and grants her a strength and power often only aligned in other texts with “masculine” protector roles. In joining her camp of compatriots, The Scooby Gang, the other characters begin acting as protectors themselves, modeling themselves after the Slayer. This is further evidence of the impact of Buffy’s demonstrative use of discursive power, and indicates that power isn’t tied to any specific gender identities or performances, but can be shared by all.

I will turn here to the Season 3 episode “The Zeppo,” an episode that truly displays how an ability to protect others indicates a certain position of power. At this point of the series, Buffy has come to terms with the disparate aspects of her own identity and has become incredibly strong and independent. Willow, too, has grown over the seasons, progressing from a shy computer nerd to a talented, if inexperienced, witch. But the introduction of Faith, a Slayer who was called after Buffy’s death in Season 1 and



then the Slayer Kendra's death in Season 2 (and who eventually goes rogue), means that Xander is constantly surrounded by individuals who are stronger, more talented, and more capable of acting as "protectors" than he is. His average strength and skill set dictate that he often be relegated to more passive roles than the other members of the Scooby Gang, which occasionally causes tension between his own view of himself as a man and his inability to protect others, a signal of his own seeming lack of power. Xander's feelings of inadequacy are exacerbated by the way the other characters all try to defend and protect him, which at once weakens his self-confidence and casts him into the role of the *protected* not the *protector*. This is epitomized in the introductory scene from "The Zeppo."

This episode opens with a shot of a dark chamber, shrouded in mist. The camera pans to reveal a female demon of some kind, stalking through the fog and shadows. A series of jump cuts shows that Giles, Buffy, and Faith, who hasn't yet turned rogue, are all along the outskirts of the chamber, watching as the demon attempts to track them through the mist. Willow appears, holding a candle, but Xander is nowhere in sight. Willow chants something in Latin and blows the candle out, simultaneously causing the fog to disappear, which startles and disorients the nearby demon. Buffy and Giles grab hold of her and pin her to the wall while Faith stabs her through the chest with a broadsword. Giles, who got knocked over during the final skirmish, speaks from the floor:

**Giles:** I think that was the last.

**Buffy:** Will, are you okay?

**Willow:** Yeah, I'm fine. The – the shaking is – is a side effect of the fear.

**Giles (As Buffy helps him up):** Thank you.

**Buffy:** Well, if it wasn't for that clouding spell.

**Willow:** Yeah, it went good! Nothing melted like last time.

**Faith:** These babes were wicked rowdy. What's their deal?

**Giles (Examining the demon):** I wish I knew. Most of my sources have dried up since the Council has relieved me of my duties. I was aware that there was a nest here, but quite frankly, I expected it to be vampires. These – these are new.

**Buffy:** And improved.

**Giles:** Yes, well, I – I'm sorry; I should have had you better prepared. I should never have allowed Willow and um, uh... And, uh...

**(A nearby pile of trash begins to rustle as a woozy, disheveled, and out of breath Xander crawls from underneath it)**

**Xander:** I'm good. We're fine. Just a little bit dirty. Good show, everyone. Just great. I think we have a hit.

**Willow:** Are you okay?

**Xander:** Tip top. Really. If anyone sees my spine laying around, just try not to step on it.

**Buffy:** Xander, one of these days you're going to get yourself hurt.

**Faith:** Or killed.

**Buffy:** Or both. And you know, with the pain and then the death, maybe you shouldn't be leaping into the fray like that. Maybe you should be fray adjacent.

**Xander:** Excuse me? Who in a crucial moment distracted the lead demon by allowing her to pummel him about the head?

**Faith:** Yeah, that was real manly – how you shrieked and all.

**Xander:** I think you’ll find that was more of a bellow.

One thing immediately noticeable about this scene is that the three female characters occupied the most powerful positions, expressing self-confidence and courage while they used their abilities to protect the others and subdue the demon. The male characters were less present, and indeed all together less helpful. Giles did help grab the last demon, but he was also knocked to the ground, leaving Buffy and Faith to finish the demon without him. Willow, too, shows her increased utilization of power by helping distract the demon with a clouding spell.

Interestingly, the demons are depicted as even stronger than most varieties, and they are also all gendered and referred to as females. But despite the fact that it was the female characters that were more closely aligned with expressions of power, the male characters, Xander specifically, still expressed the potential to exercise power, even despite their consignment to a more passive role. Though he wasn’t physically strong enough to be effective in the battle, Xander did stand bravely against a creature that was far more aggressive than him, and was willing to be hurt while doing it. His lack of supernatural strength doesn’t preclude him from also wanting to fill the role of protector, and so it is evident that he is hurt when Buffy recommend he remain “fray adjacent.” And even though Faith might mock him for yelling in combat, the fact that he continues to fight despite his own personal fears suggests that he is just as capable of the courage and self-confidence necessary for a sense of power as the female characters in this scene are, even if his diminished physical strength relegates him to a more passive role here.

However, it would be a mistake to suggest the female characters enacted themselves in solely masculine ways; this is not the case. Traditional gender views maintain that women employ a more relational self than men do, being more emotive and caring rather than independent and stoic. While the three female characters do protect the others and express themselves in independent, courageous ways, this does not mean they do not also exhibit more traditionally feminine gender performances as well. In fact, the first thing Buffy thinks of after slaying the demon is her best friend Willow's safety. This is both because she wants to insure that the spell didn't backfire and hurt Willow, but also because she knows that Willow doesn't enjoy battles and so might be nerve wracked. Though traditional male "protector" characters would act similarly in Buffy's position, it is Willow's response that emphasizes a strong, relational and emotive performance. By admitting that she is shaking from fear and that she has failed in her spell-casting before, Willow shows an emotive, relational aspect of her identity that informs the courage, self-confidence and utilization of power she is practicing as a burgeoning witch. Buffy's concern for Willow comes out of her own sense of the importance of friendships and relationships, and it is later obvious that Willow shares this same communal spirit. When Xander emerges from the trash pile, filthy and dazed, Willow immediately makes certain that he is okay, portraying again her emotive and caring characteristics.

From this short five-minute introduction, we are given a precise example of *BtVS*'s view of gender as a malleable and fluid construct. Though Xander performs himself as masculine, he is relegated to a more passive, traditionally "feminine" role in this scene, while the female characters are granted the strength and positions of power of the "protector" roles often associated with "masculine" performances in traditional

rhetorical texts. Because the male characters as well as the female characters are simultaneously taking on traditional and nontraditional gender roles, it seems fairly evident that *BtVS* does not suggest that any set of actions or performances are specifically coded to certain gender roles, or should be fundamentally associated with strength or with an ability to exercise power.

Indeed, my reading of the rhetoric of the series is that it portrays gender as being unfixed, discursively constructed, and not inherently tied to any innate abilities or handicaps. Further, the rhetoric promotes a view of power as discursive social forces that affect and alter the nature of social hierarchies. The show presents an ability to utilize power through a set of certain actions such as exhibiting courage and self-confidence, having sex, fighting/killing demons, and protecting others. Both Xander and Willow began the series as lacking in power, and they both subscribed to the idea that power was tied to specific, traditionally “masculine” identities. They did not have the self-confidence or courage necessary to act powerfully until their introduction to Buffy Summers allowed them to realize their own potential ability to exercise this new power, unshackled from previous associations to specific gender performances. Their growing self-confidence and courage is indicative of their own growing personal positions of power. But they still lack the supernatural physical strength of most of their enemies and hold a liminal position of being both protectors and in need of being protected, at once desirous of protecting others but not always physically capable of doing so. Willow has already begun using magic to amplify her own strength, allowing her to act along with Buffy and Faith in protecting others, but Xander has yet to be given a chance to prove his own ability to protect others.

Xander begins to obsess over ways to further “masculinize” himself in an attempt to solidify his personal power position. This is made all the worse when he finds out the female demons from the night before are planning on starting an apocalypse, and the other members of the Scooby Gang won’t let him pitch in to help. Frustrated by his forced inability to act as a “protector”, Xander decides he needs to find some extrinsic symbol of masculinity to aid him in attaining respect. Ultimately, he settles on borrowing a classic car from his alcoholic uncle, only to later crash it into a car that local troublemaker Jack O’Toole is sitting in. Jack gets out and threatens him with a knife. Because Xander is both scared of O’Toole, and also actively trying to enhance his own masculinity, he agrees to drive O’Toole around and run some chores. These errands turn out to be a little out of the ordinary – first, O’Toole visits a number of graveyards, resurrecting all of his friends, who happen to be dead. Though they are all reanimated corpses, even these other men are more “masculine” than Xander – some wear varsity letter jackets, and they greet each other with hard punches on the shoulder, demonstratively telling us that they are at once athletic, aggressive, and strong. Xander, meanwhile, remains nervous and continuously cracks jokes, a visual cue that he is not like, and not comfortable being with, these other men. Once they’ve all been resurrected, the gang decides to break into a hardware store to get supplies to build a bomb, yet another depiction of the aggression traditionally associated with masculine gender performances. Xander manages to evade the group, and drives away as fast as he can, eventually meeting up with Faith, who he loses his virginity to. This sexual act, which I explore later, reinstates Xander’s own sense of self-confidence and ability to exercise power, causing him to once again go to the aid of others in an attempt to protect them.

Xander gets the perfect opportunity to protect people later in the episode when he discovers that the gang of undead men is planning on using their bomb supplies to blow up the high school. He eventually discovers the bomb, and the bomb's maker, Jack O'Toole, down in the basement's boiler room. Xander blocks O'Toole from escaping the high school, and corners him in the room with the bomb, whose timer is slowly ticking down to zero. Here is where Xander finally gets the chance to show that he has just as much power as any of the other men or women who surround him, even if he lacks their physical strength or ability.

**O'Toole:** You've pissed me off, boy. Now you pay the price. First the eyes, then the tongue, then I'll break every one of your fingers.

**Xander:** You're going to do all that in 49 seconds? I know what you're thinking: Can I get by him? Get up the stairs, out of the building, seconds ticking away. I don't love your chances.

**O'Toole:** Then you'll die too.

**Xander:** Yeah, looks like. So I guess the question really is, who has less fear?

**O'Toole:** I'm not afraid to die – I'm already dead.

**Xander:** Yeah, but this is different. Being blowed up isn't walking around drinking with your buddies dead. It's little bits being swept up by a janitor dead, and I don't think you're ready for that.

**O'Toole:** Are you?

**Xander:** I like the quiet.

**(The bomb's counter is at 11 seconds, and Jack O'Toole stares around, weighing his odds while Xander just stands there, tense but relatively calm.)**

**O'Toole's anxiety is apparent – he reaches out and disconnects the bomb just as the timer gets down to 3)**

**Xander:** Good boy. I don't think I want to be seeing you on campus anymore, Jack.

Until this moment, Xander has shown courage and a will to fight, but was always clearly outclassed in terms of physical strength. This led others to think of him as being weak or inferior, relegating him to a more passive role that would often traditionally be associated with feminine gender “norms.” His lack of sexual experience as well as his reliance on extrinsic symbols of masculinity serve to further “feminize” him, again suggesting that *BtVS* views gender identity not as a static oppositional binary or a biological pre-conclusion, but as a multiple and varied, discursively constructed phenomenon. A sense of fluidity of identity is displayed again in this final scene, where Xander enacts himself in as strong and independent a manner as any hero from a popular culture text would.

Though Xander is physically weaker than his opponent, and is afraid of being blown up, he does not let his fear dictate his actions. Rather, he stands his ground and talks O'Toole into disarming the bomb. And O'Toole, who had previously been portrayed as fiercer and more confident than Xander, stands in front of him sweating and shaking with fear. Xander didn't use his physical strength to overcome the bad guy, but his bravery and determination save all of their lives and this reversal of roles is just as suggestive of heroic power and a capacity to protect others as are the feats of the rest of the Scooby Gang, battling demons in the hallways above. It is important to note that this power is evident regardless of the fact that Xander uses both traditional and



nontraditional performances— he lacks the aggression and brute strength associated with older masculinity “norms,” but he still acts with self-confidence, courage and an independent sense of purpose while protecting others. I now turn to the final action that is aligned with an ability to exercise discursive power, the act of sexual intercourse.

*Sexual Activity as Power Inducing*

I’ve noted that, within *BtVS*, there seem to be a variety of actions specifically tied to the ability to express power, notably the act of having sex. Many characters seem to be granted power after growing and exploring sexually, but I will begin here with the character of Xander. Each season of *BtVS* has a number of installments that focus on characters besides Buffy, and “The Zeppo” is one of the best Xander-centric episodes. It is notable for a number of reasons, especially in that it is the episode where Xander loses his virginity, an act that bolsters his courage and self-confidence and allows him to further exercise discursive power. The connection between sexual activity and power is echoed in a number of other episodes, but this episode from Season 3 focuses specifically on Xander’s sense of inadequacy as he finds himself surrounded by a number of characters, including two Slayers, a werewolf, and a witch, that emphasize his own lack of physical strength.

In an early scene from the episode, Cordelia Chase, one of the popular girls at the high school, sums Xander’s sentiments up perfectly. Until recently, she and Xander were dating; their relationship ended miserably when Cordelia caught Xander and Willow making out, and so it is not surprising that Cordelia makes a point of rubbing Xander’s humiliation in his face. She knows him well enough to see all of his insecurities below his blustering, evident when she tells him, “It must be hard when your friends have, like,

superpowers: Slayer, werewolf, witches, vampires, and you're like this little nothing.”

Xander's wounded reaction indicates that this is exactly what is bothering him: he views

himself as strong and courageous, but compared to his friends he is physically weak and

relegated to a powerless position. The episode finds Xander stuck on the sidelines as the

rest of the Scooby Gang fights a group of female demons that are planning on opening

the Hellmouth and destroying the world. Buffy forces him, against his will, to sit out the

planning and the battle, because she feels he isn't strong enough and needs protecting.

This makes him feel even more inferior, and it isn't until he loses his virginity to Faith

that his self-confidence and sense of power are restored, suggesting a connection between

the physical act of sex and the ability to exhibit personal power.

As Xander is driving around, he comes upon Faith, who is getting attacked by one

of the female demons. He runs the demon over with his car, stunning her, and offers Faith

a ride back to her apartment before the demon can renew the attack. It is at Faith's

apartment that we are reminded yet again of Xander's lack of traditionally masculine

traits, in a scene where he loses his virginity to the sexually experienced Slayer.

**Faith:** She got me really wound up. A fight like that and no kill... I'm about ready to pop.

**Xander:** Really? Pop?

**Faith:** You up for it?

**Xander:** Oh, I'm up. I'm suddenly very up. It's just, um – I've never been up with people before.

**Faith:** Just relax. Take your pants off.

**Xander:** Those two concepts are antithetical.

**(Faith pushes him down onto the bed and climbs atop of him).**

**Faith:** Don't worry, I'll steer you around the curves.

**(We see a brief interlude of Faith on top of Xander, and then they are cuddling side by side, Xander staring deep into Faith's eyes. The next shot is of Faith kicking Xander out of her apartment, he is naked with clothes in hand)**

**Faith:** That was great, I've gotta shower.

From the beginning of this scene, it is clear that the show is deliberately using traditional, cliché masculine and feminine gender performances, but innovatively has Faith perform the masculine identity, while Xander enacts the traditional feminine identity. In the first instance, we witness Faith actively fighting a demon, alone but confident in her strength and power. Though she is slightly outmatched, Faith doesn't back down, but continues to fight and stand her ground, much as any traditionally masculine character would do in other popular culture texts. Xander, on the other hand, is incapable of going up against the demon with his bare hands, and so is again forced to hide behind extrinsic markers of masculinity, i.e. the car. He saves Faith's life, which is suggestive of his own power, but then is once again feminized in the following scene as Faith seduces him.

The fact that Faith is the one who instigates the sexual encounter is also telling: traditionally, males are the more sexually aggressive, and are almost invariably shown in texts as having little emotional connection during or after intercourse. But in this scene, it is just the opposite. Faith is the one who is sexually experienced and therefore in a position of power, acting as the instigator of this liaison. Here, Xander is nervous and unsure of himself, even anxiously admitting that he had "never been up with people

before.” This trope is reminiscent of any number of popular culture texts where, as a man is beginning to undress a female character, she tells him that she has never had sex before. This time, it is Faith, not Xander, who is sure of herself, which is made even more clear when she climbs on top of him, a sexual position that gives her power and limits his own. Further, it is shown that Xander is the one who is invested in cuddling with Faith after they have sex, suggesting that he is more emotionally connected to the events than she is, another reversal of traditional gender “norms.” The final shot, where Faith kicks a disrobed Xander out of her apartment, is also in reference to many popular culture texts where the traditionally male characters evict women from their beds in a display of their own strength and independence.

By framing Faith as the “masculine” character in this scene, *BtVS* creates a humorous re-imagining of traditional sexual performances, with the effect of once again showing that gender is not actually fixed to any set of coded performances, but is rather discursively and culturally constructed. Further, her sexual ability is strongly correlated to a sense of power. Xander, who until this point of the episode has expressed little personal power, is shown to be the sexually less experienced individual. But even though he is depicted in this scene as representative of “feminized” gender roles, Xander’s loss of virginity also signals the inception of his own sense of empowerment, further associating the act of sex with an ability to exercise power. It is after he has sex with Faith that his self-confidence and courage are restored, allowing him to return to the battle, where he stops a bomb from destroying the high school, a scene I explored earlier. By having sex, Xander gains the courage and confidence needed to alter the flow of

events around him, diverting catastrophe before it can occur. Another example of a character that is transformed through the act of sex is the vampire with a soul, Angel.

Angel is Buffy's first love interest in the series, but in the first few episodes it is unclear who or what he is. Eventually, after inviting him into her home and kissing him, Buffy finds out that he is a vampire – though she doesn't yet know that he's been cursed by the return of his soul, obsessed with atoning for all the horrible acts he caused as a demon. Her initial research tells her only that he is Angelus, the demonic soulless vampire who wreaked havoc in Europe for over a century. This all happens in the Season 1 episode "Angel," an episode in which he later gets a chance to explain that he was cursed after killing a Romany princess, by the elder gypsies of the tribe.

**Angel:** The elders conjured the most perfect punishment for me. They restored my soul.

**Buffy:** What, they were all out of boils and blinding torment?

**Angel:** When you become a vampire, the demon takes your body, but it doesn't get your soul; that's gone. No conscience, no remorse, it's an easy way to live. You have no idea what it's like to have done the things I've done...and *care*. I haven't fed on a human being since that day.

This admission at once makes Angel more sympathetic to Buffy, and also shows that Angel no longer truly cares if he lives or dies – he has been alive for over two centuries, and has spent the majority of his time killing and torturing innocents. Though Buffy is initially inclined to distrust him, he eventually saves her life by killing Darla, the vampire that sired him. After killing Darla, Angel offers Buffy the opportunity to kill him, too. Because he now has a soul, he hopes for a chance to make up for what he's done in the

past, but he is willing, perhaps even hoping in some dim way to let Buffy kill him and end his bitter anguish once and for all. This willingness to step down from a fight is not a sign of weakness in him, but a passivity grown from an understanding of the horrible things that come from the over use of brute strength and physical domination. Though he retains the supernatural strength and desires of a vampire, Angel has evolved to the point where he is capable of overriding his own innate urges and instincts, distinguishing him from the base aggressiveness of many traditionally masculine characters. He is capable of acting within a position of great strength, but his self-isolation and withdrawal from the rest of the world means that he has little impact on the world around him. It isn't until he starts associating with Buffy that he is given a new purpose, one that returns his sense of power. His romantic relationship with her marks the growth of his ability to exercise power, but it is their first sexual encounter that marks this change most explicitly.

The gypsy curse that returned Angel's soul was intended to curse him with misery for the rest of his immortal life, but there was one way to break it. If he were ever to experience a moment of pure happiness, it would nullify the intent of the curse and thus the curse itself. Just such a moment comes halfway through Season 2, in a two-part episode ("Surprise"/"Innocence") that takes place on the evening of Buffy's birthday, and finds vampire couple Spike and Drusilla resurrecting an indestructible demon to lay waste to The Slayer and the town of Sunnydale once and for all. Angel and Buffy escape an encounter with some vampire henchmen and return to Angel's apartment, where they finally consummate their love. Though this is Buffy's first time, the scene doesn't frame this behavior as promiscuous, but rather enacts it as a tender, passionate moment between two individuals in love. Unfortunately for the couple, this moment is one of pure

happiness for Angel. As Buffy falls asleep in the bed beside him, Angel is wracked with physical pain. He runs out into the street, where he falls down and convulses. A woman smoking a cigarette soon approaches him.

**Angel:** Buffy... oh no ...

**Woman:** Hey! You okay? You want me to call 911?

**Angel (rising to his feet, a change has come over him):** No – the pain is gone.

**Woman (taking a drag from her cigarette):** Are you sure?

**Angel (turns, fangs extended, and bites her neck. He speaks, exhaling her cigarette smoke):** I feel just fine.

In this scene at the beginning of the second installment, “Innocence,” Angel has changed, reverting to his vampiric self before he had a soul. No longer does he appear docile or gentle, but aggressive and angry. The demon Angelus has returned, and begins enacting himself in ways that evoke older forms of masculinity. This performance is connected to a specific patriarchal view of power as domination through embodying physical strength, aggression, competitiveness, stoicism, and independence – an outdated view that relegates nontraditional performances of gender to inferior, impotent expressions of identity. And because Angel is changed into Angelus after having sex with Buffy, we find again a connection between the act of sex and the inception of power, in this case a reversion to traditional patriarchal forms of power. This reversion serves as an opportunity for the show to suggest that traditional patriarchal precepts lead to hyper-aggressive, antagonistic performances of “masculine” power in an effort to dominate the “feminine”, and so the rhetoric encourages us to leave behind these outmoded, static concepts of gender.

Angelus's first act is to seek out Spike and Drusilla, who have succeeded in reawakening the indestructible demon known as The Judge. This demon is also capable of destroying any creature that has even a spark of humanity with just a single touch. Not only is this an impressive ability, it makes it all the easier for Angelus to prove to Spike and Drusilla that he has returned to his wicked ways.

**Judge:** This one ... cannot be burnt. He is clean.

**Spike:** Clean? You mean, he's –

**Judge:** There's no humanity in him.

**Angelus:** I couldn't have said it better myself.

**Drusilla:** Angelus.

**Angelus:** Yeah, baby. I'm back.

[OMITTED]

**Spike:** No more of this 'I've got a soul' crap?

**Angelus:** What can I say, hmm? I was going through a phase.

[OMITTED]

**Spike:** You've really got a yen to hurt this girl, haven't you?

**Angelus:** She made me feel like a human being. That's not the kind of thing you just forgive.

No longer is Angel interested in connecting with Buffy on an emotional level – the fact that she ever made him feel loved or human while he had his soul is now a repugnant concept to him. Now, rather than share himself with her on a relational level, he seeks only to physically dominate and punish Buffy for her own “feminine” exhibition of power and relational sense. This performance of his identity shares very little in common



with how he performs himself as Angel, suggesting that he has returned to older methods of enacting his own gender. Many older views of masculinity suggest that men are sex-driven, strong, aggressive, willful, and independent. Angelus is all of these things, taken to such an extreme that he is unstable and dangerous.

Angelus's actions here show that these old masculine performances are antagonistic and not desirable for a progressive society. As a vampire, not only was he responsible for slowly torturing and killing all the members of his own family, he also routinely preyed on young women, even sometimes going so far as to drive them mad before finally slaughtering them. These actions are hardly heroic or worthy of imitation, and his treatment of his friends is no better, as indicated by his manipulative treatment of Spike and Drusilla.

The show's correlation between an ability to exercise power and the act of sex is somewhat controversial. In a world where STD's and STI's are very real and debilitating concerns, it is important to be responsible when advocating sexual activity. Though *BtVS* presents sex as an act that allows an individual to exercise power, it is also careful to present cautionary depictions of sex. Certainly, the loss of Angel's soul after Buffy gives her virginity to him suggests that there can be unintended consequences as a result of sexual intercourse. This warning is repeated in Season 4 when Buffy has sex with Parker Abrams, a boy she meets at UC Sunnydale. Though he leads her to believe that he was interested in dating her exclusively, it was just a ploy to get her to sleep with him. After she does, he stops talking to her all together, treating her callously and again showing that sexual activity can also have negative consequences. Later that season, in the episode "Where the Wild Things Are," Buffy and her new boyfriend, Riley, awaken a mystical

force while having sex; this force traps them in their sexual encounter, using their energy as sustenance. Eventually, they break free, but the rhetoric demonstrates again that, powerful though it may be, sexual activity can have unexpected consequences. Buffy gets over the pain of these episodes, growing in strength and independence while doing so. This signifies that although it is important to acknowledge the potential risks inherent in sexual activity, it is nevertheless an action that can allow an individual to exercise power.

This rhetoric also depicts the power accessible through a specific set of actions, actions that are attainable by all individuals, no matter how they perform their own genders and sexes. In this way, *BtVS* promotes the equalization of all gender identities by creating male and female characters that enact themselves in both “masculine” and “feminine” ways. Further, the reformulation of power as an ability to change or influence surroundings through a set of actions that are attainable by all, not just by traditionally patriarchal “masculine” roles, interrupts our normative experiences with popular culture rhetoric, and is indicative of the show’s agency. *BtVS* continues to use this view of power encoded in action and marks it as a power that is distinct from the traditionally “masculine” patriarchal performances it has become associated with in the majority of popular culture texts; in fact, the show suggests that a purely “masculine” sense of power as physical strength or domination is outmoded and antagonistic to progressive individuals. This rhetoric also means that the correlation between the act of sex and a sense of power is not limited to “masculine” characters as would be the case in traditional patriarchal rhetoric; indeed, even characters that align themselves with “feminine” performances, such as Willow, seem to deduce power from sex.

Despite her inauspicious beginnings, Willow goes on to become one of the most powerful members of the Scooby Gang, and perhaps one of the most powerful witches in the whole world. Her use of magic mirrors her own growth, both as a woman and a sexually active individual. As Ford (2012) puts it, “Willow’s exploration of her sexuality coincides with her evolution from nerdy sidekick to powerful witch. Willow is simultaneously empowered by her evolving magical abilities and her sexuality” (p.95). By tracking Willow’s growth both magically and sexually, we are given a great portrayal of how performances of identity change and shift over time as well as a view of how sex and the ability to exercise power are correlated. As we saw, Willow starts off as a shy outcast, limited by her own adherence to traditional feminine gender “norms.” But by Season 2, Willow has started to explore herself both as a sexually active young woman and as a self-confident, burgeoning witch.

The second season finds Willow dating Oz, the cool guitarist who also happens to be a werewolf. It is here that Willow starts to shed her geeky appearance: she cuts her hair into a short, attractive, more adult style and begins wearing clothes that are trendier and conform more to her body’s natural curves. She begins believing in her own sex appeal and even has a short affair with her long-time crush, Xander, in Season 3. After this affair ended, Willow became more seriously involved with Oz, and also became increasingly proficient at magic. By the end of Season 2 and throughout Season 3, Willow is regularly practicing new spells and different conjurings. At the end of Season 3, Willow is associating with other practitioners of witchcraft and around the same time she has her first sexual experience with Oz. Although Oz’s love and support help her find self-confidence and a sense of herself as a sexual being, it is after Oz leaves in Season 4

that Willow begins exploring and performing her identity in less traditional ways, an exploration that grants her an even greater understanding of her ability to wield power.

Through Season 4, Willow has begun to show a growth in self-confidence and courage that suggest a development of strength and character, but she still finds herself representative of a disempowered female in a patriarchal society. She has grown in many ways and has started to explore herself sexually, but she has not fully realized her own nascent ability to exercise power. After Oz leaves, Willow is granted the freedom to explore her identity and perform it in the ways she chooses, not the ways society dictates. It is once again her exploration and use of magic that demarcate her growth as a sexual, strong woman. Feeling the need for support after Oz breaks up with her, Willow turns to a Wiccan group she finds at her college, UC Sunnydale. She is hoping for a sisterhood that can teach her and help her exercise power. As it turns out, the group is not interested in improving or developing their talents, but more in acting as a sharing community of traditional, passive “feminine” values. This scene, depicted in the Season 4 episode, “Hush,” demonstrates Willow’s desire to break away from these traditional forms of “femininity,” and is also the scene where she meets her future girlfriend, Tara.

**Wiccan 1:** We come together, Daughters of Gaia, Sisters to the Moon. We walk with the darkness, the wolf at our side, through the waterfall of power to the blackest heart of eternity... I think we should have a bake sale.

**Wiccan 2:** I don’t know.

**Wiccan 1:** You guys like a bake sale, right? I mean, we need money for the dance recital. And you know I do an empowering lemon bundt.

**Wiccan 2:** The *most* important thing is the Gaian Newsletter. We need to get the message of blessing out to the sisters. Also, who left their scented candles dripping all over my woman-power shrine?

**Willow (obviously getting bored):** Well, this is good. I mean, this is all fun, you know. But there's also other stuff that we might show an interest in as a Wicca group.

**Wiccan 1:** Like what?

**Willow:** Well, there's the wacky notion of spells.

**(At this Tara, who has remained silent, looks up at Willow)**

**Willow (continuing):** You know, conjuring, transmutation.

**Wiccan 2:** Oh, yeah! Then we could all get on our broomsticks and fly around on our broomsticks.

**(The other girls all laugh)**

**Wiccan 1:** You know, certain stereotypes are not very empowering.

**Tara:** I – I think that –

**Wiccan 2:** One person's energy can suck the power from an entire circle. No offense.

**Tara:** Well, maybe we could – could –

**Wiccan 2:** Yeah? Tara? Guys, quiet. Do you have a suggestion?

**(Tara, obviously incredibly shy, looks at everyone staring at her and shakes her head, refusing to say anymore)**

**Wiccan 2:** Okay, let's talk about the theme for the Bacchanal.

In this scene, the Wiccans who Willow was hoping would show a similar interest in expanding their strength and sense of power, instead turn out to be a model of clichéd normative “feminine” performances. Rather than explore their abilities and strengths, these Wiccans enact their genders in ways that seem very forced and fake. One of them suggests a bake sale, which is evocative of the stereotypical view of women as passive, domestically inclined individuals. And when Willow suggests that they move beyond these outmoded “norms,” rather than hear her out, the rest of the girls deride and mock her. This is indicative of their adherence to the traditional gender roles assigned them by our society’s heteronormative patriarchy and their part in the continual recreation of these hierarchical gender roles and identities. By antagonizing Willow for performing herself as a progressive modern female, these girls also depict the manner in which traditional gender roles serve to limit the autonomy and power that is granted by viewing and enacting gender as a discursively constructed, variable phenomenon.

The only member of the Wiccan group who shows any interest in Willow’s proposition is the extremely shy Tara Maclay. In fact, Tara takes so much notice of Willow that, when Tara’s dorm room is attacked by a group of demons known as The Gentlemen, it is to Willow that Tara turns. The Gentlemen chase Tara across campus to Willow’s dorm and the two ladies end up stuck in a stairwell, with The Gentlemen closing in. Willow has injured her foot and so cannot create a barrier using her physical strength, but she focuses her energy instead on magically moving a vending machine to blockade the door. Tara sees what Willow is trying to do and reaches out to grab Willow’s hand, joining in the spell and allowing them to create the barricade. This is Tara and Willow’s first encounter, and the instant connection they share is just the beginning

of a relationship that finds each of them growing together sexually as well as in expressions of personal power, all while also enacting and performing their own identities as unfixed and variable. Their relationship marks Willow's departure from the heteronormativity instilled in her by her adherence to traditional "feminine" gender roles and also further suggests a connection between the act of sex and the ability to exercise power.

As the season progresses, Willow and Tara continue to explore and practice witchcraft together, a connection that also serves as a metaphor for their burgeoning sexual relationship. They form a quick bond, a bond that is tested when Oz returns in the nineteenth episode of the season, "New Moon Rising." Oz, who had left town to find a way to control his inner werewolf after having an affair with another werewolf named Veruca, has returned, convinced that he is now in control of his inner beast and hoping to reunite with Willow. When Buffy questions Willow about her feelings on Oz's return, Willow finally finds the opportunity to tell Buffy about the changes she's been going through in her view and performance of her sexual identity.

**Buffy:** Hey.

**Willow:** Hey. You okay?

**Buffy:** Yeah, I just... I don't want to talk about it. I wanna hear about you and Oz. You saw him, right?

**(Buffy sits on the edge of the bed Willow is lying in)**

**Willow:** I was with him all night.

**Buffy:** All night? Oh my God! Wait, last night was a wolf-moon, right?

**Willow:** Yep.

**Buffy:** Either you're about to tell me something incredibly kinky or –

**Willow (laughs):** No kink. He didn't change, Buffy. He said he was going to find a cure and he did. In Tibet.

**Buffy:** Oh my God! I can't believe it. Okay, I'm all with the woo-hoo here, and you're not.

**Willow:** No, there's woo, and hoo. But there's uh-oh and why now? And it's complicated.

**Buffy:** Why complicated?

**Willow:** It's complicated... because of Tara.

**Buffy:** You mean Tara has a crush on Oz? No, you – oh!

**(Buffy stands up off the bed, obviously unsure of what to do)**

**Buffy (continued):** Oh, um... well, that's great. You know, I mean, I think Tara's a really great girl, Will.

**Willow (hopeful):** She is! And there's something between us. I-it wasn't something I was looking for - it's just powerful. And it's totally different from what Oz and I have.

**Buffy:** Well, there you go. I mean, you know, you have to – you have to follow your heart, Will. I mean, that's what's important, Will.

**Willow:** Why do you keep saying my name like that?

**Buffy:** Like what, Will?

**Willow:** Are you freaked?

**Buffy:** What? No, Will, don't – No. No, absolutely, no to that question. I'm glad you told me. What'd you say to Oz?



**Willow:** I was... going to tell him. But then we started hanging out and I could just feel everything coming back. He's Oz, you know?

**Buffy:** Yeah. I know.

**Willow:** I don't want to hurt anyone, Buffy.

**Buffy:** No matter what, somebody's going to get hurt. The important thing is, you just have to be honest or it's going to be a lot worse.

At first, Buffy is convinced that Willow is going to immediately reconnect with Oz. When she finds out that Willow has since fallen in love with Tara, she is shocked and lets her surprise alter the way she treats Willow. When she reverts to the shorthand "Will" while talking to Willow, Buffy seems to be suggesting that she is realigning her view of Willow's identity to reflect more masculine identity performances or perhaps even attempting to subtly punish Willow for performing herself in a non-traditional manner. Willow calls Buffy on her sudden awkwardness, reminding Buffy that the manner in which she performs her sexuality shouldn't diminish her worth.

Further, when Willow discusses how she still has feelings for Oz and does not want to hurt anyone, it shows that she is capable of performing herself in more than one manner at once, more evidence that sex, gender, and sexuality are all variable and disconnected from any specific biological precepts or concerns. Willow cares for both Tara and Oz, emblematic of her view of the importance of relationships, yet she also does not know what to make of her developing sexuality and its associations with her growing ability to exercise power. This tension is resolved when she decides to stay with Tara, who has constantly supported her and helped her grow in ways that Oz never could. Over

the next few years, Willow and Tara continue to nurture and support each other, exploring their sexual identities and ability to exercise power.

Interestingly, *BtVS*'s portrayal of a fully realized queer couple was so progressive that Joss Whedon wasn't even allowed to show them kissing on screen. As Whedon puts it in an interview he did with David Bianculli of the National Public Radio show *Fresh Air*:

The network obviously has issues. They don't want any kissing -- that's one thing that they've stipulated -- and they're a little nervous about it. They haven't interfered at all with what we've tried to do and yet they've raised a caution about it. And at the same time you have people, the moment Tara appeared on the scene, saying, 'Why aren't they gay enough? They're not gay enough! You need to make them more gay.' They want to make a statement, they want to turn it into an issue right away. So you have forces buffeting you and you're trying to come up with both what is emotionally correct as a progression. (9 May 2000)

It is obvious from what Whedon says here that his decision to have Willow shift from a traditional straight, female gender performance is not a shallow move meant to shock and cause controversy, but rather a realistic depiction of an alternative, but no less important, performance of sexual identity. Willow's love for Tara grows organically, following their interactions over the course of ten episodes before they announce their relationship. But despite the fact that their relationship is demonstrative of a form of love that is just as true as traditional, heteronormative displays of love, Willow's shift to a queer performance of identity met with initial resistance from both the fans and the network.

It is this sort of reaction that epitomizes the need for the rhetoric of *BtVS* and shows like *BtVS*: the disruption of traditional rhetoric, and its socially inculcated ideologies, can be uncomfortable, but is nevertheless necessary for us to develop and grow as a culture. By providing an alternative to the view of gender as a static, oppositional binary, the show interrupts our preconceived notions and suggests a new power dynamic that allows for a variety of different, valid performances of gender and sexual identity, rhetoric that is indicative of the show's agency. By framing power as inherent to a specific set of actions that can be exercised by all individuals, regardless of how they perform their sex and gender, the show demonstrates its own agency, by presenting a possibility for a change or alteration in traditional rhetoric. I have traced four actions that *BtVS* suggests allow an individual to exercise power, including expressing a sense of self-confidence and courage, fighting/killing demons, the protection of others, and the act of sexual intercourse. In this way, all genders and sexes become equalized and so the rhetoric suggests the desirability of eradicating the hierarchical ordering of gender to distribute power fairly and equally.

This new sense of an ability to exercise power that is inherent in specific actions is something that can be shared by anybody, regardless of how they perform their own sex or gender. This also fits well with my belief that the show argues against the hierarchical ordering of gender, in that it suggests gender is discursively constructed and fluid. This rhetoric demonstrates the agency of *BtVS*, by creating a space within popular culture rhetoric for all performances of identity, not just culturally accepted ones. Since all performances of identity are equally capable of committing the actions that constitute a sense of personal power, such as expressing self-confidence and courage, having sex,

killing demons and fighting evil, and protecting others, it is possible to see that these actions are accessible and utilized by all the characters, not just those aligned with traditional “masculine” gender performances. Again the rhetoric is serving to equalize the genders, promoting a view of gender as discursively constructed and variable, rather than static and oppositional. Interestingly it is the show’s use of a novel sense of power (my argument being informed by Foucault’s (1990) work with power) that can be exercised by all individuals, regardless of how they perform their individual identities, that is subversive of classic beliefs and allows *BtVS* to disrupt our culturally conditioned precepts and mores. This is indicative of the show’s agency, an aspect I explore more thoroughly in my next chapter.

#### Equalizing Gender

*BtVS* presents a view of power as the amalgamation of the omnipresent socially discursive forces that shape and define our cultural reality. This notion of power is expressed in the show as being accessible through a specific set of actions, such as exhibiting self-confidence and courage, killing demons and fighting evil, protecting others, and having sexual intercourse. It is unique from the concepts of power utilized in other popular culture texts in that it advocates a possibility for both male and female characters, regardless of how they perform their sex or gender, to exercise discursive power. This rhetoric again suggests that there is no inherent difference in value between “masculinity” and “femininity,” because the two concepts are discursively constructed and not tied to any inherent physical or biological traits. This ability for personal positions of power is shown in a number of characters, notably Xander, Willow, and Angel.

By suggesting an equalization of all performances of sex and gender, even subversive gender roles or performances, the show implicitly argues for an eradication of the hierarchical classification of gender. It also calls for a new view of power as being an ability to use discursive structures that exert influence or control, and in the rhetoric of the series is tied to specific actions (such as expressions of confidence and courage, killing demons and fighting evil, protecting others, and sexual activity) that can be distributed amongst all performances of gender identity, not just traditionally “masculine” performances. This rhetoric is important as it challenges and disrupts the pervasive patriarchal rhetoric prevalent in much of today’s popular media. Rather than reinforce patriarchy, with its heteronormative restrictions and boundaries, the rhetoric of *BtVS* argues for a new context from which to view gender – a context that is closely aligned with postmodern feminist work such as that presented by Judith Butler. Indeed, the manner in which the rhetoric of *BtVS* disrupts the ideologies inherent in the majority of our patriarchal popular media suggests that the show has its own form of agency, one associated with Butler’s (2006) belief that agency comes from the possibility of altering or disrupting our socially inculcated beliefs. In my next chapter, I will explore this poststructuralist sense of agency, tracing the ways in which this rhetoric has affected modern social norms and also how its incorporation into many popular culture texts since its inception suggests a shift in the ways we view and enact gender and identity as a society.

## CHAPTER 3

“You know, certain stereotypes are not very empowering”  
*(BtVS, 4.10, “Hush”)*

As I’ve noted previously, *BtVS* distinguishes itself from the majority of patriarchal popular culture rhetoric by presenting gender as a socially constructed phenomenon that is not tied to any inherent physical or biological aspects of an individual. The characters of *BtVS* support this view by enacting and performing their genders as changing and unfixed, utilizing both traditional and non-traditional gender performances. This presentation of gender is in line with the works of such scholars as Butler and Foucault, who believe that performances of gender and identity are discursively constructed, socially inculcated ideologies owing more to cultural pressures and social mores than to any biological predetermination.

I am by no means the first to approach *BtVS* from the realm of gender studies (see Lorna Jowett’s excellent *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*, 2005), but previous study has gone only so far as to explore how the characters deny or uphold traditional gender roles and performances. Though this provides a good foothold into the world of the *Buffyverse* and the characters that inhabit it, it falls short of exploring the ways in which this rhetoric affects and changes prevalent social norms. I mentioned in my last chapter that this show promotes a specific notion of power, one that portrays power as an ability to utilize discursive structures that exert social influence, and is presented in the show’s rhetoric as connected to a set of actions accessible to all individuals, regardless of how they perform their own genders or sexualities. By demonstrating the multiplicity of gender identity and extending this ability to exercise power beyond just the traditionally “masculine” roles that patriarchal shows associate it

with, *BtVS* interrupts popular culture's previously conceived notions of what constitutes "acceptable" performances of identity. Not only does this rhetoric redistribute the power dynamic amongst all performances of gender and sexual identity, it demonstrates the show's agency, one most closely aligned with the concept of agency as an ability to disrupt or alter our preconceptions of what is and isn't appropriate in our own performances of identity.

It is this agency that I turn to in this chapter. I have already noted that the show's use of a reformation of the popular concept of power interrupts our preconceptions of gender and identity, but this is not the only means by which the show achieves this end. By using oppositional framing to first establish a sense of the "Other," and then weakening this sense by depicting even these oppositional forces as mere social constructions, the rhetoric criticizes and reconstructs traditional popular culture mores, encouraging the viewer to notice and question the impact of traditional rhetoric on their own lives. I analyze three traditional oppositional binaries that the rhetoric of *BtVS* subverts, including the binaries of masculine/feminine, human/monster, and good/evil. This will by no means be a comprehensive examination of the ways in which *BtVS* exhibits its own agency, but it serves as a fair demonstration of how a show can interrupt and reframe social conceptions and constructs.

#### Agency As Disruption – A Poststructuralist Form of Agency

As noted, the agency I explore in this chapter is a poststructuralist form in line with the conceptual notions that Judith Butler makes use of. Butler's work explores how cultural practices and media rhetoric affect and inform the ways we perform ourselves. The discursive construction of identity is done through a cyclical process of repetition in

which individuals encounter certain “acceptable” gender/identity performances and then internalize them in such a way as to make it appear wholly natural. As Butler (2006) puts it:

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. (p. 198, italics from original text)

This is to say that social beliefs do not dictate an individual’s identity, but rather inform the ways individuals are disciplined into performing themselves. In our patriarchal society, men are rewarded for acting as strong, independent, (hetero-)sexually aggressive individuals. Any performances by men that do not align with these notions of “masculinity” are punished and so the concept of “male” becomes associated with these performances. Further, this male hegemony casts men firmly into the role of the primary subject of society, relegating females to the space of the “Other” – an implicit effect that supports and promulgates the binary oppositions of sex and gender and serves to devalue “feminine” precepts such as interdependence and a caring, relational self. These beliefs become socially inculcated and their repetition through social media and our day-to-day lives ensures the continuation of a traditionally male-dominant patriarchal society. However, this process of signification and re-signification carries with it the possibility of a subversion or alteration of normative values. This disruption of what we view as “natural” performances is an enactment of agency by its very possibility to change the social norms. Butler (2006) notes this same possibility for change and argues:



If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.

(pp. 198-199, italics from original text)

This can be taken to indicate that, since our lives and performances of identity are informed and constructed by our exposure to the repetition of popular signifying practices in traditional rhetoric, any alteration of these practices can lead to new and disparate ways of identifying and performing ourselves.

Thus, texts that present a subversion of popular rhetoric become important for their ability to critique or change prevalent social norms. *BtVS* is certainly one such text; I've already traced some aspects of the ways the show subverts the masculine/feminine binary, but this is not the full extent of the effect of the show's rhetoric. *BtVS* makes use of a number of binaries (including masculine/feminine, human/monster, and good/evil) to suggest a sense of the "Other" – but then subverts this sense by drawing parallels between our own identity performances and these performances of the "Other." By first acknowledging the normative pressures that inform our identity and then subverting them with novel expressions and performances of identity, the show disrupts our expectations and so exhibits its own agency. I now turn to the ways *BtVS* makes use of the binaries of masculine/feminine, human/monster, and good/evil to suggest a sense of the "Other," a sense that it then subverts in order to show the commonalities we share with those we view as "Other."

### Us and Them – Subversion of the “Other” in *BtVS*

One of the greatest aspects of *BtVS* is its ability to make the audience empathize with the characters, even those characters we view as “unnatural” or different from ourselves. Certainly the show is not perfect in this regard; for instance, the show has received criticism for presenting a limited view of racial identity, tending to preference middle class, white characters. As Jowett (2005), states, “Buffy’s white, middle-class... ‘norm’ is rarely named and remains largely invisible even as it influences constructions of identity and gender” (p. 13). Also, there is little depiction of non-Christian religious viewpoints; though the character Willow Rosenberg states that she is Jewish on a couple different occasions, the show draws more heavily from Christian traditions and symbols (such as the recurring use of crucifixes or holy water, which appear frequently as a weapon against vampires) than it does from Judaism. Indeed, Willow’s religion and ancestry are so invisible as to even be forgotten by other characters. In the Season 3 Christmas episode, “Amends,” Buffy even asks Willow what her plans for Christmas are. Willow’s response, “Being Jewish. Remember, people? Not everybody worships Santa,” is an effective way of reminding the audience as well as the other characters of her heritage, but the lack of any deep exploration of the importance of the traditions of Judaism serves only to reiterate the ascendancy of Christian values. This indicates that there are some axes of identity that are not questioned or challenged by the rhetoric of the show, but despite these weaknesses, the show has the overall effect of subverting the sense of the “Other” that comes from diverse performances of identity.

Though the term “Other” has been used and defined in many forms, here it is used to express a discursively constructed sense of performances and ideals that are foreign or

different from the norm. This construction of the “Other” constitutes an oppositional binary, where the “Other” signifies the antithesis of normative values. *BtVS* makes use of a number of binaries, each with an inherent sense of the “Other,” but then subverts them in order to show the commonalities between what we view as normative and what we view as “Other.” In patriarchal rhetoric, the implicit subject is the “male” or “masculinity,” relegating the oppositional “feminine” qualities to the space of the “Other.” *BtVS* certainly subverts the masculine/feminine binary, which I’ve explored in the last two chapters and will turn to again briefly here, but it also subverts the binaries of human/monster and good/evil, which I will also cover in this chapter. As Lorna Jowett (2005), puts it:

The show attempts to destabilize binaries through ambivalence and ambiguity and through the multiple intersections of its generic hybridity. In reversing, subverting, or blurring boundaries between these binaries, *Buffy* potentially opens up an arena for alternative representations of gender [and identity]. (p.12)

This subversion of the “Other” further disrupts our expectations of popular culture rhetoric and so also acts as evidence of the poststructuralist agency that *BtVS* exhibits. I will first turn briefly to the subversion of a sense of the “Other” within the masculine/feminine binary before analyzing the subversion of the binaries of human/monster and good/evil.

### *Masculine/Feminine*

A significant portion of the last couple chapters has been spent examining the way in which *BtVS* subverts the masculine/feminine binary and presents gender as an unfixed, socially constructed phenomenon. It is not my intent to fully rehash that here, but it is

necessary to return briefly to this concept in order to show how the rhetoric disrupts the power dynamic that grants “masculine” precepts more freedom than “feminine” ones and so subverts the sense of the “Other” that patriarchal texts associate with “femininity.” In many patriarchal texts, the male characters are the only ones who are fully developed; female characters tend to be two-dimensional and serve as eye-candy or as a foil to a specific male character. In this way, much of popular rhetoric propagates the view of “masculinity” as the norm, and “femininity” as being a distinct, secondary (and inferior) expression of identity. In *BtVS*, this is not the case. Though it has been noted that the female characters in the show are generally attractive and “feminine,” these attributes do not preclude them from being similarly developed characters in their own right. They are not defined by their juxtaposition with the male characters, but are rather treated as equal members of society. Indeed, the ways in which the characters of the show, both male and female, use a combination of traditional and non-traditional performances while enacting their own identities suggest that gender is a mere social construct and neither “masculine” nor “feminine” values should have preference.

A great example of the show’s attempt to bridge the gap between “feminine” and “masculine” attributes and so subvert the patriarchal association between “femininity” and a sense of the “Other” comes from the nineteenth episode of Season 2, entitled “I Only Have Eyes For You.” This episode occurs during Angelus’s reign of terror, after he has lost his soul and killed Giles’s love interest, Jenny Calendar, in order to keep her from casting a spell that would return his soul to him. Angelus is now stalking Buffy and her friends, instilling a torturous sense of fear in them before enacting his plan to kill them and destroy the world. The crux of this specific episode focuses on a pair of ghosts

haunting Sunnydale High School. These ghosts, one a former student and one a former teacher from Sunnydale High circa 1955, re-enact the circumstances surrounding their deaths by possessing the current inhabitants of the school. These possessions are so powerful that the reenactments lead to further deaths and Buffy and the Scooby Gang find themselves forced to intervene.

Their research uncovers the original story of the student, James, and the teacher, Grace Newman, who had been having an illicit affair. As Grace realizes the impropriety of their actions, she breaks off the affair with James, even though she cares for him deeply. Broken-hearted and enraged, James pulls a gun and shoots her, causing her to tumble off a balcony to her death. When he realizes what he's done, James decides to commit suicide and so goes to the band room where he shoots himself. The violent nature of these deaths cause the ghosts to become stuck in a perpetual loop, constantly re-enacting their death scene in an attempt to alter its ending. Unfortunately, the individuals that the ghosts possess are just as mortal as James and Grace were, and so the outcome is always the same: the person possessed by Grace gets shot and dies before the person possessed by James kills himself out of remorse.

It isn't until Angelus stalks and corners Buffy in the high school alone that the poltergeists have an opportunity to set things right. In all their previous re-enactments, the ghost of James inhabits a nearby male while the ghost of Grace occupies a female body. But when James inhabits Buffy's body and Grace possesses Angelus, their association with differently gendered bodies allows for a novel outcome.

**Buffy/James:** You can't make me disappear just because you say it's over.

**Angelus:** Actually, I can. In fact . . . **(Grace possesses him)** I just want you to be able to have some kind of normal life. We can never have that, don't you see?

**Buffy/James:** I don't give a damn about a normal life! I'm going crazy not seeing you. I think about you every minute.

**Angelus/Grace:** I know. But it's over – it has to be.

**Buffy/James:** Come back here! We're not finished! You don't care anymore, is that it?

**Angelus/Grace:** It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter what I feel.

**Buffy/James:** Then tell me you don't love me! Say it!

**Angelus/Grace:** Is that what you need to hear? Will that help? I don't. I don't. Now let me go.

**Buffy/James:** No! A person doesn't just wake up and stop loving somebody.

**(Draws a gun, aims it at Angelus/Grace)** Love is forever. I'm not afraid to use it, I swear. If I can't be with you –

**Angelus/Grace:** Oh my god! **(Turns to run)**

**Buffy/James:** Don't walk away from me, bitch!

**(Angelus/Grace runs out onto the balcony above the courtyard. Buffy/James follows)**

**Buffy/James:** Stop it! Stop it, don't make me –

**Angelus/Grace:** All right, just – you know you don't want to do this. Let's both just calm down. Now give me the gun.

**Buffy/James:** Don't – don't do that, dammit! Don't talk to me like I'm some stupid – (**Buffy/James accidentally squeezes the trigger, shooting**

**Angelus/Grace**)

**Angelus/Grace:** James? (**Angelus/Grace step back, falling off the balcony onto the stairs far below**)

Until this point in the episode, various people in the school have enacted this same scene, culminating in the death of Grace (and the woman she possesses) followed by James's suicide. As Buffy and Angel enact the same situation with reversed genders, a change in the dynamic can be sensed, yet tension still arises as we realize Buffy/James will inevitably be drawn to the band room to commit suicide. Luckily, Grace has chosen to inhabit Angelus in this scene, and not Buffy herself. Though possessed by a ghost, Angelus is still a vampire and so is not harmed by the gunshot or by a fall off the balcony. This allows Angelus/Grace to follow Buffy/James to the band room and prevent the suicide that marks the completion of this ritualized reenactment. Angelus/Grace comes into the room and grabs the gun from Buffy/James just before the trigger is pulled.

**Buffy/James:** Grace?

**Angelus/Grace:** Don't do this.

**Buffy/James:** But – but I killed you.

**Angelus/Grace:** It was an accident. It wasn't your fault.

**Buffy/James:** It *is* my fault, how could I –

**Angelus/Grace:** Shh. I'm the one who should be sorry, James. You thought I stopped loving you, but I never did. I loved you with my last breath. Shh, no more tears.

The entire exchange is not only demonstrative of the tragic story of James and Grace, but also parallels aspects of the relationship between Angel and Buffy; Buffy feels guilty for Angel's transformation into Angelus and blames herself for the loss of his soul. This, combined with the knowledge that she may be forced to kill Angelus, has made it hard for her to move on and forgive herself. Angel/Grace's understanding and forgiveness are necessary before Buffy/James can move on, and so this scene marks the point where Buffy/James are freed from their guilt.

However, the most interesting aspect of this episode is the reversal of gender roles that allow for this progression. The use of dramatic conventions in this scene rather than comedic ones frames these juxtaposed gender roles in a serious light, further supporting their emotional weight and normalcy. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Angelus (when he isn't possessed) is strong, aggressive and competitive, representing powerful patriarchal character traits that are said to embody "masculinity" in much of today's popular culture rhetoric. But then, when Grace possesses him, he is imbued with an emotional, relational sense that would be traditionally aligned with "feminine" gender roles – all of this without his physical body or presence being altered in any way. Buffy, though always strong and independent, gains a certain patriarchal aggression when James possesses her, and it is only the forgiveness from Angelus/Grace that allows her to overcome it. This is made possible because Angelus was "feminized," and so the rhetoric subverts the purported "Other"-ness of "femininity" and suggests that progressive gender roles and performances can be just as valid and rewarding, and perhaps more freeing, than stereotypical views of gender as a static masculine/feminine binary.



Shows like *BtVS* question the outmoded ideals of patriarchal rhetoric and the male hegemony it espouses, evident here by the subversion of the view of “feminine” values as being inferior to, and other than, those of masculinity. This rhetoric is notable in other places throughout the series. Of course, Buffy is a prime example of a character who deconstructs patriarchy’s gendered hierarchy, but so too do characters such as Larry Blaisdell, the hyper-masculine athlete who was known for objectifying women before changing his attitude and his actions after he came out as openly gay in Season 2, or the character Anne, who starts out as a vampire-worshipping cultist going by the name of ‘Chanterelle’ in *BtVS*’s second season, before growing into a strong, independent woman in charge of shelters for at risk teens in *Angel*’s fifth season. Since gender is a constructed phenomenon, there is no true “masculine” or “feminine” identity but rather a set of coded performances that have discursively become associated with specific genders. The rhetoric here suggests that a combination of performances, both traditional and non-traditional, is just as acceptable, and perhaps even better, than stereotypical gender roles espoused by patriarchal texts. This disruption of traditional patriarchal rhetoric is an example of the agency of *BtVS*, which is also evident by tracing the subversion of “Other”-ness across more binaries within the series. The next binary I turn to is that of human/monster.

### *Human/Monster*

As the introduction to the early episodes intones, “[The Slayer] alone will wield the strength and skill to fight the vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness” (*BtVS*, *various*). The show’s framing presents Buffy as the savior of humankind; it is she who must go out and fight the monsters and the forces of darkness. Because she is charged

with protecting humanity, the rhetoric suggests an opposition exists between what is human and what is “Other” than human; those that are not human, such as vampires and demons, are categorized as “monsters” and it is The Slayer’s duty to vanquish them. This, of course, proves to be an oversimplification of the category. We’ve already seen how some vampires and demons within the text (such as Angel, when he has a soul) fight for the cause of good, and anyone familiar with the history of humanity knows that our species has bred more than a few “monsters,” so it seems evident that the distinction between the two is less clear cut than would initially be apparent. Further analysis of the rhetoric of the show makes the delineation between humans and monsters even more ambiguous; this subversion of the “Other”-ness of monsters forces us to examine our actions and roles in society, disrupting our traditional view of the privileged position of humanity. By reminding ourselves that we are not automatically granted a heroic position simply by the virtue of being human, it forces us to strive to do better, both for ourselves and for society.

Though Angel (when he has a soul) certainly represents the ambiguity of the human/monster binary, he is an imperfect example in that he is still capable of reverting to a monstrous form. The character of Spike serves as a much better example of a “monster” that learns to express his “humanity.” Spike, like Angel, is a vampire, but unlike Angel, Spike starts the show without a soul and with no sense of remorse. After hearing rumors of a Slayer living in Sunnydale, he travels there with his girlfriend/sire, Drusilla. His initial attempts to kill Buffy and her friends fail, despite the fact that he’s personally killed two Slayers in the past. His continued presence in Sunnydale throughout the entirety of Season 2, and his friendship with the demonic Angelus, suggests he is

going to play a large part in Buffy's final battle at the end of the season. But when it comes time for Angelus to destroy the world, it is Spike who tells Buffy of the plan and how to thwart it; ostensibly this is because Spike enjoys living in a world with so many ripe humans for him to hunt, but his alliance with Buffy also signifies a lack of the truly "monstrous" characteristics that other vampires, such as Angelus, display (as these true "monsters" would never dream of allying themselves with their scourge, The Slayer).

Spike's return to Sunnydale in Season 4 comes at a time when a military organization known as The Initiative is doing experiments on local demons. The Initiative manages to catch him and put a computer chip in his brain that sends a shock of debilitating pain through his body whenever he tries to attack a human. Though he escapes from The Initiative's compound, he can no longer hunt or attack people and so finds himself a "neutered" vampire. He eventually discovers that he can still fight other demons without being wracked with pain. This, combined with his desire to get revenge on The Initiative for experimenting on him, brings him back into alliance with Buffy and the Scooby Gang (who hold their own reservations about The Initiative's morally dubious experiments). He fights on their side for a number of seasons, but it isn't until Season 6 that he realizes he wants to be more than just a vampire with an electronic leash.

Though he tries to be a better "man," his nature still drives him to commit evil acts. Throughout the season, he has an aggressive sexual relationship with Buffy, who feels isolated and cut off after coming back from the grave. Eventually Spike goes too far and almost rapes Buffy. Disgusted with himself, he leaves Sunnydale in search of a powerful demon that can restore his soul. In doing this, he states, "Make me what I was so Buffy can get what she deserves" (*BtVS*, 6.22, "Grave"). This moment, along with his

unwavering support for Buffy and her fight against evil in Season 7, act as a depiction of a return to “humanity.” Though he is not the first vampire to have his soul returned to him, he is the first vampire who has specifically gone out and fought for the restoration of his soul. This indication of a strive to improve, to attain greater than what he is, certainly undermines his classification as a “monster.” Moreover, the fact that he is one of the most popular characters of the show (initially the character was meant to appear in only 2-3 episodes, but his popularity with the fans as well as the writers ensured a long stay on the series *BtVS* as well as its spinoff series, *Angel*) indicates that the very “human” audience of *BtVS* enjoys and appreciates his struggle to make himself a better man.

Spike’s story presents a richer subversion of the human/monster hybrid than that of Angelus, in that Spike was a “monster” trying to gain his “humanity,” (here taking the form of an immortal soul) whereas Angel/Angelus was a “monster” who had “humanity” forced upon him. But these stories are not the only aspects of the show that subvert the human/monster binary. Just as there are demons, or “monsters,” that act more “humanely” than others, there are also “humans” who act in malicious, “monstrous” ways. A chief example of this is the “Big Bad” of Season 3, Mayor Richard Wilkins III.

In the second season of *BtVS*, vague hints and allusions are made to the fact that the Principal of Sunnydale High School, Principal Snyder, is aware of the presence of vampires and demons in Sunnydale and the Hellmouth located under the high school library. In the third episode of Season 2, “School Hard,” Spike and his gang of vampires attack the school on a Parent-Teacher night. Buffy manages to defend everyone and drive off the attack, but the violent altercation leaves the parents and students wondering what happened. Outside the school, Principal Snyder is seen talking with a police detective.

**Detective:** I need to say something to the media people.

**Snyder:** So?

**Detective:** So, you want the usual story? “Gang-related, PCP?”

**Snyder:** What’d you have in mind, the truth?

**Detective.** Right. Gang-related. PCP.

Though Snyder never specifically names them as vampires, it is evident that he and at least one member of the local police are aware of the endemic evil in Sunnydale.

However, it isn’t until Season 3 and the introduction of “The Mayor,” as Richard Wilkins is referred to, that the audience gets to see how thoroughly entrenched the local Sunnydale government is in the demonic aspects of the town. As it turns out, Richard Wilkins III was also Richard Wilkins I and Richard Wilkins II; he has been living in Sunnydale and acting as Mayor for over a century. Unlike vampires such as Spike and Angel, who are immortal because they have died once already, Richard Wilkins began as a mere human and owes his longevity to shady dealings with various demonic forces that live around and under Sunnydale. By the end of the season he is not only immortal but also impervious to harm. The Scooby Gang soon discover that his century of work has all lead to his imminent “Ascension,” an ancient rite that allows a mortal human to metamorphose into a demon.

The Mayor’s lifelong goal of changing from a human into a demon subverts the human/monster binary and is made all the more interesting by the fact that the Mayor masks his corruption with a gentile facade. He is undoubtedly evil, but his mannerisms are exaggeratedly mild; he is germophobic, and does not tolerate any profane language within his presence. Moreover, his role is associated with traditionally conservative

patriarchal values, and he presents himself as a family man, in this case, evocating a traditional patriarchal family with a dominant father figure. As Mayor, he also acts as patriarch of the town, and keeps a close watch on what is happening in Sunnydale. The audience's first on screen introduction to the Mayor comes in episode 5 of Season 3, "Homecoming," and is a great example of his schizoid personality. The Mayor is in his office when his Deputy Mayor, Allen Finch, obviously nervous to interrupt, seeks admittance.

**Secretary:** The Mayor will see you now.

**(Allen, the Deputy Mayor, draws a deep, shuddering breath and approaches the office. He opens the door and steps inside. Framed in the foreground are the Mayor's hands. The Mayor is using an antibacterial wipe to clean them off.)**

**Allen:** I'm sorry to bother you, sir.

**Mayor (In a soft, unassuming voice):** I'm not bothered, Allen.

**Allen (Presenting a manila folder containing photos of two individuals):** Well, I - I - I'm not sure how serious this is, but uh, they were spotted in town three days ago, I've just been informed. Frederik and Hans Grouenstahler, eh, wanted in Germany for capital murder, terrorism, bombing of Flight 1402. I should've brought it to your attention sooner, but I - I'd wanted to confirm...

**(Throughout Allen's speech, the Mayor has been examining the pages in the manila folder. He now begins sniffing them and Allen trails off in bemusement)**

**Mayor:** Would you show me your hands please?

**Allen:** Sir?

**Mayor:** Your hands.

**(The Mayor moves the manila folder from the desk, clearing a space that he points at. Allen, looking nervous, diligently holds out his hands while the Mayor examines them.)**

**Mayor:** I think they could be cleaner.

**Allen:** Of course, sir – I mean I - I washed them, but –

**Mayor:** After every meal and under your fingernails. Dirt gets trapped there. And germs. And mayonnaise. My dear mother said, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness,” and I believed her – she never caught a cold **(He laughs. Then, gesturing at the folder)**. I’d like these two to be put under surveillance. And I’d like to know if any other colorful characters have come to town.

**Allen (relieved that his reprimand wasn’t worse):** I’ll take care of it.

**Mayor:** You have all my faith.

Throughout this exchange, the Mayor presents himself in stereotypically “human” ways. Though at this point in his life he is immortal, and nearly impervious, he still insists on cleanliness and decorum. His fear of germs and his softspoken espousal of moral clichés frame him as a kind, fatherly figure – all while he is blithely ignoring the presence of two vicious terrorists in his town. This framing once again aligns him with traditional patriarchal concepts, but disrupts traditional patriarchal rhetoric by exposing the “monstrous” nature that his “human” facade belies. Though the Mayor gets increasingly sinister as the season progresses, his affable personality hides his devious machinations, which remain hidden from the majority of Sunnydale’s citizens.

Fortunately, Buffy and the Scooby Gang become aware of his plans and of his recruitment of the rogue Slayer, Faith, to his cause. Buffy finds herself against nearly insurmountable odds and decides to enlist the rest of the senior class to help in their fight against the Mayor. But it isn't until the high school graduation ceremony at the end of Season 3 that the rest of the town learns of his true nature, as evidenced in the twenty-second and final episode of Season 3, "Graduation Day: Part 2." As Buffy and the other members of her graduating class take their seats, Principal Snyder is facing them impatiently from behind a podium.

**Snyder:** Congratulations to the Class of 1999, you all proved more or less adequate. This is a time of celebration so sit still and be quiet. **(To a kid in attendance)** Spit out that gum. Please welcome our distinguished guest speaker, Richard Wilkins III. **(To another student)** I saw that gesture, you see me after graduation.

**(Snyder puts his hands together in applause as Richard Wilkins steps up to the podium)**

**Mayor (Pulls some index cards from his pocket and clears his throat):** Well, what a day this is. A special day. Today is our centennial, the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Sunnydale, and I know what that means to all you kids: Not a darn thing. Because today, something much more important happens. Today, you all graduate from high school. Today, all the pain, all the work, all the excitement, is finally over. Now what's a hundred years of history compared to that?

**Buffy (to Willow, realizing):** My god. He's going to do the entire speech.



**Willow:** Man, just ascend already.

**Buffy:** Evil.

As the Mayor continues talking, it becomes obvious that a change is coming over him. The sky begins to grow darker, casting a shadow over his face as the sun is eclipsed. The members of the crowd stare, shocked, as he morphs into a humongous, green serpent. He completes his “Ascension,” and the parents in the audience run away, screaming. The students, however, remain; they are here at Buffy’s request, trained and ready to oppose the Mayor and his various henchmen, an army hiding in plain sight. Buffy, of course, is the general of this army. She catches the demonic Mayor’s attention, brandishing the long blade she’d used to stab Faith during a battle to save Angel’s life (the blade itself was Faith’s, given to her as a gift from the Mayor when she first started killing for him).

**(An extreme high to low shot shows Buffy brandishing Faith’s old knife up at the now demonic Mayor, catching his attention)**

**Buffy:** Hey! You remember this? I took it from Faith. Stuck it in her gut. It just slid in her like she was butter. Do you want to get it back from me – Dick?

**(Buffy runs off through the high school, leading the gigantic demon on a serpentine chase through the empty hallways towards the school library where she has assembled a large number of chemical explosives.)**

Unlike Faith and the Mayor, who kill for pleasure, Buffy only slays those that provide a threat to humanity. Her cold, calculating words to the Mayor might suggest a certain enjoyment derived from stabbing Faith, but they are also carefully chosen and designed to enrage the Mayor and lead him into a trap. Though it eventually turns out that Faith survived the encounter, Buffy truly believes that she had killed her – and that she had to

do it, for the sake of humanity. Her remorse over her actions shows that, though her duty as the Slayer sometimes requires her to do “monstrous” deeds, she is far more “human” than the Mayor will ever be. His initial beginnings as a “human” are nullified by his desire to “Ascend” into a demonic form. In short, he becomes the opposite of Spike and Angel – he is a “human” who strives to identify as a “monster.” The Mayor serves as a further example of the subversion of the human/monster binary, and in so doing disrupts the sense of the “Other” that pervades most traditional patriarchal rhetoric. This disruption of the normatively espoused values of most popular culture texts grants the show *BtVS* a poststructuralist agency that is further evidenced by its subversion of the binary of good/evil.

#### *Good/Evil*

In writing about the human/monster binary as well as the good/evil binary, it becomes evident that the categories suggest a certain overlap and I understand why some may at first even think them redundant. However, in talking about the human/monster binary I strove to highlight the actions and physical aspects of individuals as “humans,” “monsters,” or an ambiguous combination of the two. In discussing the good/evil binary, it is my aim to analyze the moral alignment of characters. In traditional genre texts prior to *BtVS*, it would be mostly “humans” who could be labeled as “good,” relegating monsters to the category of “evil.” Of course, *BtVS* is not bounded by the restrictions of traditional rhetoric and so makes space for what could be deemed “good monsters” as well as “evil humans.”

The distinction between human/monster and good/evil is made more explicit by the inclusion of a number of characters that provide novel combinations of these two

binaries. Though their features and physiognomy relegate them to either the category of “human” or “monster,” these classifications do not demand a traditional alignment with either “good” or “evil.” One example of a “good monster” is Clem. Clem first appeared in Season 6, and was a Loose-Skinned Demon (though he looked vaguely “human,” he was actually a demon or “monster” covered in rolls of loose, wrinkly skin). It is mentioned that he occasionally passes as a “human” with an “extreme skin condition,” though Clem is decidedly not a member of the human species and thus can be labeled as a “monster” (noted also by his appetite for kittens). Despite all this, Clem is decidedly “good:” he is a reliable friend and is even utilized by Buffy as a babysitter for her sister, Dawn. Further, though he is a demon, his species of demon doesn’t kill people, as they prefer to feed off of human emotions rather than human flesh. Though he never escapes the classification of “monster,” Clem is also never relegated to the realm of “evil.” This is in contrast to some other characters that could be labeled “evil humans,” such as Ethan Rayne.

Ethan Rayne is a warlock (and former adolescent friend of Giles), who, despite his “humanity,” is never associated with the forces of “good.” He appears numerous times throughout the series, each time seeking new ways to create chaos. His introduction in the show comes in the Season 2 episode “Halloween,” when he opens a Halloween store whose costumes are enchanted to transform everyone wearing them into whatever they are dressed as. He continues working with black magic throughout the rest of the series, returning in the Season 3 episode “Band Candy” with a company that sells a chocolate which makes all the adults in town revert to their teenage selves. Rayne did this as a service to The Mayor, who was looking for a way of distracting the townsfolk from

realizing that he was going to use all the babies in the hospital as a tribute to a local demon. Rayne appears again in Season 4, this time determined to get vengeance on Buffy and his old friend Giles for continually stopping his nefarious plans. In this episode, Ethan transforms Giles into a Fyarl Demon, nearly causing Buffy to slay her own mentor. Rayne's continued interest in the dark arts, along with his desire to bring the world down into anarchic chaos, is suggestive of an "evil" nature unadulterated by his "humanity." Though there is, of course, some overlap between the binaries of human/monster and good/evil, the two categories are not so redundant as may initially be assumed. The show's subversion of the good/evil binary further disrupts the sense of the "Other" that is inherent in traditional patriarchal texts and is thus demonstrative of the agency of *BtVS*.

Of course, it should be noted that not even the heroes of the show are immune from exhibiting an "evil" nature. In an earlier chapter I noted Willow's descent into "evil" in Season 6; her restoration to the "good" side in the next season certainly indicates that the good/evil binary is not as clearly delineated as we so often presume. However, Willow is not the only member of the Scooby Gang to display an "evil" nature. Oddly enough, out of all the major members of the Scooby Gang, it is Giles, the stalwart Watcher, who is most often associated with "evil." In episode eight of Season 2, "The Dark Age," we learn of Giles's rebellious youth and his association with Ethan Rayne: Rayne and the rest of the group nicknamed Giles "Ripper" (a play on his first name, Rupert) and they routinely summoned the demon Eigon to possess their bodies, providing them with a supernatural rush. They believed it was all fun and games, until the demon took too strong a hold inside one of their fellows. Unable to exorcise the demon, Giles

and the rest of the group couldn't do anything but watch as their friend slowly decayed from inside out.

Though Giles is fundamentally “good,” his acceptance of a purely “evil” presence into his body suggests that he is capable of both identities. Further, it puts his friends and loved ones in danger, hardly a sign of a “good” man. The adult Giles initially believes he can hide his past from Buffy and the rest of the gang, but his secrecy is selfish, meant to protect him more than it is the others. This is evident when Eigon comes to Sunnydale in search of Giles and the only other surviving member of his group, the warlock Ethan Rayne. It turns out that Eigon has been hunting down and possessing each member of their group, killing them one at a time. But when Eigon goes after Giles, it is instead accidentally transferred into his girlfriend Jenny Calendar, the high school computer science teacher. She is eventually saved from Eigon's influence, but Giles's deception costs him her trust. He tries to apologize to her in the hallway at school, but she remains reticent to renew their relationship.

**(Giles spots Jenny in the hallway, runs to catch up to her)**

**Giles:** Jenny – Jenny!

**Jenny (sighing):** Rupert. Hi.

**Giles:** Uh, I – I tried to call you last night, see how you were.

**Jenny:** Yeah, I – I um, left the phone off the hook. Seem to need a lot of sleep lately.

**Giles:** But – but, you're all right? Is – is there anything you need?

**Jenny:** No, I'm fine. I mean, I'm not, running around, wind in my hair, “the hills are alive with the sound of music” fine, but... I'm coping.

**Giles:** I would like to help.

**Jenny:** I know.

**Giles:** Perhaps we could, um, talk sometime. Um, dinner? Or a drink? When you're feeling stronger.

**Jenny:** Sure. Sometime.

**(Giles goes to touch her shoulder, and she pulls away from him, obviously unwilling to let him touch her)**

**Jenny:** Yeah. Sometime. I better get to class.

Giles's transgression has cost him his untarnished "good" reputation, allowing the other characters to see for the first time his own capacity for "evil." However, it is evident from his remorse and his continued guidance of Buffy, that, despite his potential to do otherwise, he is committed to the cause of "good." He is an ambiguous individual, neither fully "good" nor "evil," disparate from the polarization that is used to define characters in traditional popular culture texts. Giles's dichotomous nature is evident again in the final episode of Season 5, "The Gift."

This episode finds Buffy and the gang battling the Hell-God, Glory. Glory herself is an interesting combination of "good" and "evil" attributes in that she was supernaturally bonded and imprisoned within a male human's body. The male counterpart, Ben, is "good" and acts as a nurse and caretaker for others, but Glory's growing strength means that she can take control over his body almost at will. Glory, unlike Ben, is representative of "evil." She is the opposite of a nurturing, caring individual; when she grows too weak to maintain control of Ben's body for long periods at a time, she begins sucking the strength and energy out of the brains of nearby mortals,

giving her a boost of power while leaving her victims brain-dead. They share a body, but when Glory is dominant, she is invincible and indestructible. However, when Ben is dominant, he is just as mortal as the next human. And so in the climactic episode of Season 5, when Buffy beats Glory, forcing her to revert back into Ben, Giles realizes what he must do to put an end to their reign of terror once and for all.

**(Buffy, in an attempt to save her sister, Dawn's life, is repeatedly bludgeoning Glory in the head with a magical Troll-God's hammer, one of the few weapons that can actually injure Glory. After taking a sustained beating, Glory morphs back into Ben.)**

**Ben:** I'm sorry.

**Buffy:** Tell her it's over. She missed her shot. She goes. If she ever, ever comes near me and mine again –

**Ben:** We won't. I swear.

**(Buffy drops the hammer and goes off to rescue Dawn, leaving Ben coughing and in pain on the ground behind her.)**

**Ben (speaking to himself/Glory):** I guess we're stuck with each other, huh, baby?

**(Ben goes to sit up, but is struggling. Giles appears over top of him)**

**Giles:** Can you move?

**Ben:** I need a – a minute. She could've killed me.

**Giles:** No, she couldn't. Never. And sooner or later, Glory will re-emerge and make Buffy pay for that mercy, and the world with her. Buffy even knows that, and still she couldn't take a human life. She's a hero, you see. She's not like us.

**Ben:** Us?

**(Giles darts his hand forward, grabbing Ben around the nose and mouth. He holds on firmly as Ben suffocates, watching to make sure he really dies).**

Though Giles's intention here is to save Buffy and the world from the remaining threat of Glory, his assertion that he is not like the heroic Slayer suggests he knows that what he is doing is "evil." His checkered past also indicates that he is an ambiguous blend of both "evil" and "good" traits. Though he often believes himself to be acting for the greater "good," some of his duties necessitate an alignment with traditionally "evil" methods of response. The subversion of the good/evil binary, both within the show's rhetoric at large, and Giles's performance in specific, are calculated messages meant to disrupt the view of good and evil as being mutually exclusive. As Nandini Ramachandran (2012) puts it, "What makes the [Buffy] world run is neither good nor evil, but rather the balance between them" (p. 76). This quote suggests that good and evil aren't necessarily mutually exclusive or distinct characteristics, rather that they act in tandem, sometimes even within the same individual. This rhetoric subverts normative popular culture tenets, and disrupts the notion of the "Other" that forms within the good/evil binary. In this way, *BtVS* exhibits agency, one aligned with the ability to change or alter society, which can be further traced through the character of Faith, the rogue vampire Slayer who also subverts the good/evil binary.

Faith was first introduced in Season 3. After Buffy's brief death in Season 1, a new Slayer, named Kendra, was called. Then when Kendra died in Season 2, it was unsurprising to find yet another Slayer had been activated. The new Slayer, Faith, arrives in Sunnydale after her own Watcher was killed at the hands of a powerful vampire. It is



apparent from Faith's first interaction with Buffy and the Scoobies that Faith was drawn to be the antithesis of Buffy. Where Buffy is responsible, Faith is irresponsible, Buffy is blond while Faith is a brunette, and Buffy comes from a middle-class background while it is evident that Faith grew up in a lower class household<sup>2</sup>. And, just as Buffy can be seen as "good," Faith can be viewed as "evil." There are, however, strong similarities between the two girls, and it is suggested that it is Faith's background that kept her from being as "good" as Buffy. Buffy, in regards to Faith, states in "Doppelgangland," the sixteenth episode of Season 3, "Different circumstances, that could be me." This quote suggests Buffy is aware of her own internal darkness, but she strives to put all her efforts towards a "good" cause, rather than using her powers for "evil." Ultimately, however, it is Faith's redemption and return to the side of "good" that further subverts the notion that all characters must be one or the other, either "good" or "evil," not a combination of both.

Her redemption, however, is not an easy one to come by. Throughout the entirety of Season 3, we find Faith growing more and more estranged from Buffy and the rest of the gang. In an attempt to reconnect with and guide Faith, Buffy continually reaches out to her, inviting her over for supper and including her in the nightly patrols she goes on. At first it seems like Faith is coming around, learning more responsibility and morality from Buffy. However this all changes in episode fourteen of Season 3, "Bad Girls," when Faith and Buffy go on what should have been a routine mission to recover an amulet from a demon and his hoard of vampire minions. While Faith and Buffy are locked in battle with the minions, the Deputy Mayor appears out of the shadows, trying to get their attention. Startled, Faith believes him to be another vampire and so stakes him in the

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<sup>2</sup> Faith also had an absentee father like Buffy, but unlike Buffy, Faith's mother was an alcoholic and not a stable parental figure

chest, killing him. Though Faith immediately shows remorse for this action, suggesting the presence of some “good” within her, it also marks the beginning of her association with the forces of “evil.” When Buffy appears at Faith’s apartment later in the same episode, Faith’s reaction shows a certain cold callousness that the heroic Buffy could never depict.

**(There is a knock at the door. When Faith opens it, she finds Buffy standing there. Faith walks back into the kitchen without a word. She is washing the blood out of her shirt.)**

**Buffy:** So, I uh – **(She cuts off as she sees the bloody shirt.)** How ya doing?

**Faith:** I’m all right, you know me.

**Buffy:** Faith, we need to talk about what we’re going to do.

**Faith:** There’s nothing to talk about. I was doing my job.

**Buffy:** Being a Slayer is not the same as being a killer.

**(Faith doesn’t respond.)**

**Buffy:** Faith, please don’t shut me out here. Look, sooner or later, we’re both going to have to deal.

**Faith:** Wrong.

**Buffy:** We can help each other.

**Faith:** I don’t need it.

**Buffy:** Yeah? Who’s wrong now? Faith, you can shut off all the emotions that you want, but eventually they’re going to find a body.

**Faith:** Okay, this is the last time we're going to have this conversation, and we're not even having it now, you understand me? There is no body. I took it, weighted it, and dumped it. The body doesn't exist.

**Buffy:** Getting rid of the evidence doesn't make the problem go away!

**Faith:** It does for me.

**Buffy:** Faith, you don't get it – you killed a man.

**Faith:** No, *you* don't get it – I don't care.

Faith's earlier regret suggests that she does actually care, if only somewhere deep down. But her proclamations that she doesn't, as well as her attempt to cover up her actions, suggest that she is quickly leaving "good" behind for "evil." This is further evidenced when she eventually fills the Deputy Mayor's role and becomes one of the chief fighters and assassins in the Mayor's employ. She kills for him for a number of months and is instrumental in assisting with his "Ascension." The relationship is made all the more believable by the chemistry between the two; the Mayor, who has already been conceptualized as a patriarch, strengthens this image by treating Faith like his own daughter. Faith, who never had a caring father figure before, is quickly won over by his affections.

Her allegiance to the Mayor is so strong that she attempts to kill both Buffy and Angel. Buffy, however, is the better fighter and uses Faith's own knife to stab her. Though Buffy believes she killed Faith, we learn that Faith was merely in a coma. She awakens in Season 4 and, finding her beloved Mayor to be dead, attempts again to sabotage Buffy's life. This time, she switches bodies with Buffy, and turns Buffy (now in Faith's body) over to the Watcher's Council for judgment. The ruse is eventually

discovered, and Faith and Buffy switch back to their normal bodies. This leaves Faith in the hands of the Watcher's Council, but she soon finds a way to escape them.

Faith runs away to Los Angeles, where she meets up with Angel (on the television spin-off of the same name, *Angel*). Angel, who understands what it is to be a killer, becomes one of the few people who continuously try to help Faith redeem herself. He eventually gets through to her and she turns herself over to the police, this time determined to serve a sentence for her misdeeds, suggesting she is trying to give up her "evil" ways and realign herself with the forces of "good." Faith remains in prison of her own volition for three years until Angel's friends break her out of jail to help return Angel's soul to him once again. After aiding Angel and company in Los Angeles, Faith returns to Sunnydale and the cast of *BtVS* just in time for the last four episodes of the seventh and final season. Upon her return in the episode "Dirty Girls," she goes patrolling in one of the local graveyards. She comes upon Spike, who is seen chasing a young female across the cemetery. Faith, unaware of Spike's own reformation, believes him to be attacking an innocent girl.

**(Spike goes to approach the Potential he knocked down. Before he can reach her, he is lifted and tossed into a nearby tombstone by Faith)**

**Faith:** Whatcha wanna do to her vamp? Huh? Something like this?

**(Faith punches Spike hard in the face twice in a row, knocking him to the ground. He jumps back up to his feet quickly, turning to face his assailant.)**

**Spike:** Nice punch you got there. Let me guess: leather pants, nice right cross, doe eyes, holier than thou glower – you must be Faith.

**Faith:** Oh goody, I'm famous.

**Spike (shakes his head):** Told you were coming. Bit of a misunderstanding here.

I'm –

**Faith:** Spike. Yeah, we've met before.

**Spike:** We have? I don't think we have –

**(Faith kicks him hard in the abdomen, he grunts and doubles over briefly).**

**Spike:** Ow! Bloody hell, what are you doing? I'm on your side.

**Faith:** Yeah? Maybe you haven't heard, I've reformed.

**(Faith tries to hit him in the head, but Spike catches her arm and punches her instead)**

**Spike:** So have I. I reformed way before you did.

**(Faith renews her attack, pressing harder than before)**

**Spike:** Stop. Hitting. Me! We're on the same side.

**Faith:** Please, do you think I'm stupid?

**Spike (grinning):** Well, yeah.

**Faith:** You were attacking that girl.

**(Faith hits Spike in the face again, but is unprepared when Buffy shows up and punches her right back, knocking Faith to the ground).**

**Buffy:** Sorry Faith, I didn't realize that was you.

**Faith (gripping her jaw):** It's all right, B. Luckily you still punch like you used to.

**Buffy (to Spike):** You okay?

**Spike:** Yeah. Terrific.

**Faith:** Are you protecting vampires? Are you the bad Slayer now? Am I the good Slayer now?

**Buffy:** He's with me. He has a soul.

**Faith:** What, he's like Angel?

**Spike:** No!

**Buffy:** Sort of.

**Spike:** I'm nothing like Angel.

**Buffy (to Faith):** He fights on my side. Which is more than I can say for some of us.

**Faith:** Yeah, well if he's so good, what's he doing chasing down defenseless –

**(Just then, the girl Spike was chasing earlier tackles Faith to the ground. We see that it is no mere girl, but a vampire)**

**Buffy:** That's one of the bad guys.

**Faith:** They should make 'em wear signs!

Faith's return to Sunnydale also marks her return to the cause of "good." This humorous exchange shows how ambiguous "good" and "evil" can be; despite her own reformation, Faith is incapable of believing Spike's story of redemption. Buffy's protection of Spike causes Faith to wonder which of them is the "good" Slayer these days, implicitly acknowledging that she, herself, used to be the bad or "evil" Slayer. It isn't until Buffy convinces Faith that she and Spike both fight for the cause of "good" that Faith is able to trust him. Further, the woman that Faith believed to be an "innocent girl," turns out to be a vampire, an agent of "evil." This whole scene is indicative of the ambiguity of the good/evil binary. By subverting standard rhetorical devices that mark a clear distinction

between “good” and “evil” characters, *BtVS* is able to depict a more realistic combination of both “good” and “evil,” often within the same character. In fact, the good/evil binary is so ambiguous in the show, that even the qualities “good” and “evil” are not static.

The variability of “good” and “evil” is especially evident when looking at the differences between the finales of Season 2 and Season 5. I mentioned in my last chapter that the end of Season 2 finds Angelus opening a magical rift into Hell. Though Willow is able to return his soul before the portal destroys the world, Buffy is still left with the choice of protecting the Earth by sacrificing Angel to close the gateway or saving Angel and potentially destroying the world. Fortunately for the rest of the world, Buffy knows that the greater “good” calls for her to sacrifice Angel, and so she kills him to close the portal and save everyone else. This is in direct contrast to the finale of Season 5, which finds Buffy facing a similar dilemma. After the Hell-Goddess Glory uses Dawn’s blood to open a new portal into Hell, Buffy knows that she could once again sacrifice her loved one to save the planet in the name of the greater “good.” In fact, Giles maintains that Dawn’s death might become a necessity if everyone else is to be saved. But as Buffy tells Giles, she is no longer sure that the sacrifice of her loved ones is actually a “good” deed; this scene from the Season 5 finale “The Gift” indicates the variable nature of “good” and “evil” within the rhetoric of the series.

**Giles:** I imagine you hate me right now – I love Dawn.

**Buffy:** I know.

**Giles:** But I’ve sworn to protect this sorry world and sometimes that means saying and doing things other people can’t. That they shouldn’t have to.

**Buffy:** You try and hurt her and you know I’ll stop you.

**Giles:** I know.

**Buffy:** This is how many apocalypses for us now?

**Giles:** Uh, well... six? At least? Feels like a hundred.

**Buffy:** I've always stopped them, always won.

**Giles:** Yes.

**Buffy:** I sacrificed Angel to save the world. I loved him so much. But I knew - what was right. I don't have that anymore. I don't understand. I don't know how to live in this world if these are the choices. If everything just gets stripped away. I don't see the point. I just wish – I just wish my mom was here. Spirit guide told me that death is my gift. I guess that means a Slayer really is just a killer after all.

**Giles:** I think you're wrong about that.

**Buffy:** Doesn't matter, if Dawn dies, I'm done with it. I'm quitting.

Though Buffy is a hero and still aligned with “good,” her words here indicate that, even within the realm of the show, “good” and “evil” are not as clearly demarcated as traditional rhetoric suggests. In Season 2 when she was forced to kill Angel, it caused her great emotional pain but never once did she doubt that it was the “right” or “good” thing to do. Here in Season 5, however, Buffy is unwilling to sacrifice her sister for the same reasons, even though she knows that Dawn is not fully human but rather a mystical energy placed in her care by an ancient order of monks. At the end of the episode, Buffy chooses to save Dawn's life, rather than use the energy in Dawn's blood to close the rift that Glory opened. Instead of sacrificing Dawn, Buffy risks the security of the rest of the world when she attempts to use her own blood to close the rift, though she is not certain that it will be successful. The difference between these two season finales shows that



Buffy's understanding of what is "good" and what is "evil" has undergone a fundamental shift since the beginning of the series, indicating the instability of the good/evil binary that is utilized by many traditional popular culture texts.

This disruption of the prevalent rhetoric of most popular culture texts is indicative of *BtVS*'s agency, one associated with its ability to create novel frameworks that subvert the sense of an "Other" that often arises from such binaries as masculine/feminine, human/monster, or good/evil. This agency presents novel conceptions of gender and identity roles by forcing the audience to notice and critique the socially inculcating forces of traditional popular culture rhetoric. Though in this chapter I explored the agency of the show from within the context of the series itself, it is also possible to trace the show's agency by comparing and contrasting its form to that of other popular culture texts. In my next chapter, I continue my analysis of the agency of *BtVS*, by looking at its subversion of genre conventions as well as its effect on the popular culture landscape.

## CHAPTER 4

“This Is The Real World Now. This Is The World We Made. Isn't It Wonderful?”  
(*BtVS*, 3.9, “*The Wish*”)

From the time Joss Whedon first came up with the concept of *BtVS* in the early 1990's, it was always meant to subvert normative genre conventions. Indeed, even the title can be viewed as subversive. Jowett (2005) notes “From the outset the show's title... suggests an unsettling of generic conventions and unexpected juxtapositions” (pp. 9-10). The term “vampire slayer,” for instance, connotes action and horror, while the unusual name “Buffy” is taken to be feminine but also comedic in its absurdity. This was true for the 1992 movie as well as for the 1997 series, but it was the move to television that allowed Whedon to experiment with and disrupt traditional genre conventions. This is further indication of the agency of the show, though in this chapter I approach it somewhat differently than I did previously. Where before I was delineating how this agency is evidenced within the *content* of the show, I paid little heed to the *form* of the series. In this chapter, I aim to rectify that in two ways: (i) by analyzing how the agency of the show is also evident in the novel forms it takes, specifically its utilization of clichéd genre elements and situations in new and surprising ways, and (ii) by mapping the agential impact of the show by providing a look at the nature of popular culture texts before *BtVS*, and how different they are from those that came post-*BtVS*. After analyzing how the show uses novel forms of genre, the remainder of this chapter will be spent exploring how the rhetoric of *BtVS* has altered the landscape of U.S. popular culture. Even in the limited time sense the show's initial run, depictions of gender and sexuality in popular media have begun to expand beyond the heteronormative patriarchal forms that dominated popular rhetoric in the last century. And though *BtVS* is certainly not solely

responsible for these changes, the numerous amounts of popular texts that reference or allude to Whedon's work suggest that the show's popularity places it in a certain position of power and influence within our cultural landscape. I now turn to the ways in which the show was structured to subvert normative genre conventions, as evidenced in the episodes "Welcome to the Hellmouth," "Hush," "The Body," and "Once More, With Feeling."

### Buffy the Genre Slayer

An important aspect of the agency of *BtVS* is its disruption of normative genre elements to promote new discursive structures alternative to the homogeneity of genre conventions in traditional texts. Whedon's original concept of the character called for a re-imagining of the powerless blond female from countless horror movies; by making this woman a hero instead of a victim, Whedon disrupted the normative conventions of the horror genre. This disruption is just as apparent in the television show as it was in the movie, and is indicative of the show's agency through presenting an alternative to traditional rhetoric. The first episode of the show, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," puts a unique spin on the "helpless" blond cliché. The first scene of the episode finds a young blond girl, Darla, breaking into Sunnydale high school with a boy named Thomas in the middle of the night.

**(Thomas breaks a window in the high school and unlatches it.)**

**Darla:** Are you sure this is a good idea?

**Thomas:** It's a great idea, now come on.

**(Thomas hoists himself up into the window. Darla follows him and they are soon walking down the empty hallways of the school.)**

**Darla:** Do you go to school here?

**Thomas:** I used to. On top of the gym is so cool, you can see the whole town.

**Darla:** I – I – I don't want to go up there.

**Thomas:** Oh, you can't wait, huh?

**Darla:** We're just going to get in trouble.

**Thomas:** Yeah, you can count on it.

**(Thomas moves in to kiss her. Suddenly, Darla starts and looks back over her shoulder, pulling away from Thomas)**

**Darla:** What was that?

**Thomas:** What was what?

**Darla:** I heard a noise.

**Thomas:** It's nothing.

**Darla:** And maybe it's something.

**Thomas:** Or maybe it's some *thing*.

**Darla:** Ug, that's not funny.

**(Thomas goes to look down the hallway)**

**Thomas:** Hellooo! **(Turns back to Darla)** There's nobody here.

**Darla (still scanning the darkness):** Are you sure?

**Thomas:** Yes, I'm sure.

**Darla:** Okay.

**(Suddenly, Darla turns back towards Thomas and we see her face has changed; she is a vampire. She pulls Thomas to the ground, draining his blood)**

The lighting and music in this scene create an omnipresent tension, cuing the audience that something nasty is about to happen. And any audience familiar with the traditional elements of the horror genre also knows that it will be the cute, blond girl who somehow falls victim to the menacing man. But in *BtVS*, this is not the case. Here, it is ultimately the blond girl who becomes the threat, overpowering her male counterpart. Whedon has always had a knack for drawing from multiple genres at once in creating his worlds. In fact, many of the best episodes of *BtVS* were the ones that disrupted normative genre conventions, and no one was better at doing that than Joss Whedon. Indeed, three of the best examples of genre-breaking episodes were written and directed by Whedon himself: Season 4's "Hush," Season 5's "The Body," and Season 6's "Once More, With Feeling."

Halfway through the fourth season, Whedon decided that his characters needed to find new ways to connect to each other beyond just words. And so in the tenth episode of Season 4, "Hush," he introduces a sinister group of demons known as "The Gentlemen." These creatures only have one weakness: the sound of a human voice. When they attack a town, their first offensive is to steal everyone's voices. Over half of the episode is performed with absolutely no dialogue, an unparalleled feat in genre television. Joss Whedon's nuanced writing keeps the episode perpetually engaging<sup>3</sup>, and allows the characters to express themselves through actions rather than through speeches. The episode deftly combines horror and comedy to create a compelling examination of a town in peril. Also, as I mentioned in a previous chapter, it is the episode "Hush" that brings Tara and Willow together, marking the inception of one of the first openly gay couples in primetime television. Few other shows would be willing to take such a risk, but *BtVS* was

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<sup>3</sup> As evidenced by its 2000 Emmy nomination for best writing in a Drama Series

never afraid to experiment with genre. The juxtaposition of a terrifying enemy alongside the humorous antics of individuals trying to learn to communicate without speech yields an interesting combination of genres. This depiction of an alternative to typical comedy or horror styles is indicative of the show's agential affect on popular culture, which is further developed in the Season 5 episode, "The Body."

Though *BtVS* draws heavily from the conventions of horror as well as comedy, it is also often placed in the genre of teen soap opera, indicative of its (melo-)dramatic moments. A good example of *Buffy* as drama comes from the sixteenth episode of Season 5, "The Body." This episode is a rich portrayal of loss and grief, depicting the death of Joyce Summers and its effect on those closest to her. Until *BtVS*, there were few television shows that would be willing to kill off a main character, never mind devote an entire episode to the personal anguish and turmoil caused by the character's death.

Killing popular characters is always risky, but Whedon was always able to make it work. As Kristin Barton (2012) states, "In the world of TV and film, Whedon has gone against conventional thinking and killed off numerous beloved characters, and with great success" (p. 153). Indeed, fans of *BtVS* discovered early on that none of their favorite characters were safe; after the death of Jesse in the very first episode, and the murder of Jenny Calendar in Season 2, the audience began to realize that being a main character was no sort of protection within the *Buffyverse*. So in the early episodes of Season 5, when Joyce Summers first began showing symptoms of declining health, many fans waited with bated breath to see if she would survive or not. But even those fans that surmised that she would die could never guess how personal and poignant "The Body"

would be. From the first teaser scene, the audience is cued that this episode of *BtVS* is going to be unique.

**(Buffy walks into the house, past a bouquet of flowers near the door.)**

**Buffy:** Hey, mom!

**(She turns and spots the bouquet; it has a tag that reads, “Thank you for a lovely evening. See you soon? – Brian”)**

**Buffy:** Ooh. Still a couple of guys getting that right.

**(Buffy takes off her coat and crosses to call up the stairs. As she moves, the camera pans to reveal Joyce laying motionless on a couch in the out of focus background of the shot.)**

**Buffy:** Hey, flower-getting lady, you want me to pick Dawn up from school?

**(No one answers; Buffy cranes her neck to try to look past the staircase into the kitchen, still unaware of Joyce behind her)**

**Buffy:** Mom?

**(Buffy turns around, finally spots Joyce on the couch. Begins to walk towards her)**

**Buffy:** What’re you doin’?

**(Buffy stops as she sees that Joyce isn’t moving, her eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling)**

**Buffy:** Mom? Mom? Mommy?

Unlike the majority of popular culture texts, *BtVS* isn’t afraid of experimenting with standard television conventions or with traditional genre elements, as evidenced here by the death of a central figure, Joyce Summers. What’s more, Joyce died a completely

natural death; none of the vampires, demons, or supernatural forces that Buffy faces in her day-to-day life was responsible. In fact, the only supernatural element in the entire episode is the presence of a single vampire that appears within the last five minutes. Traditional genre shows of this ilk would never consider departing from their supernatural mythos to paint a realistic depiction of personal grief and loss, which makes this episode all the more important. It stands as an example of the show's ability to break through traditional genre restrictions to create intense, powerful moments that are made all the more lasting because of their novelty.

The episode further distinguishes itself by creating a tense atmosphere of sorrow and remorse, all without having any underlying score or music. It is hard to imagine how much of an impact the score or soundtrack can have on the tone of a text such as this, but Whedon proves here that the lack of a score or soundtrack can be just as impacting. Rather than have rising and falling music to guide and cushion our emotions, Whedon leaves the episode spare and haunting, forcing the emotions of the characters to carry the tone throughout the piece. Though this decision could have proved highly unsuccessful, "The Body" still remains one of the most popular episodes of the entire series. The blending of a variety of genre elements including drama, suspense, and some fantasy elements is indicative of the show's disruption of normative genre conventions. By interrupting traditional rhetoric with alternative expressions of genre elements, *BtVS* exhibits an agency that is also evident when analyzing the Season 6 episode, "Once More, With Feeling."

Where "The Body" had no music, "Once More, With Feeling" is practically all music. Joss Whedon was raised in the traditions of musical theater and from the first



season of the series, he always intended to make a musical episode. But it wasn't until episode seven of Season 6 that he finally got his opportunity. Interestingly, "Once More, With Feeling" is thematically a sort of sister episode to Season 4's "Hush," in that both were designed to progress the characters and their relationships without the need to rely on spoken communication. And so, in the long tradition of grandiose emotions expressed in song form, "Once More, With Feeling," finds the characters making their confessions melodically. The songs range from funny (there's one about a dry cleaner who "got the mustard out") to morose, such as when Buffy finally admits to the rest of her friends that she was pulled out of Heaven after they cast the spell to bring her back to life. Musical episodes weren't entirely uncommon in primetime television, but few others have achieved the same popularity and critical appreciation as did "Once More, With Feeling," and none represent such a brilliant combination of disparate genre elements in one text.

Though the episode is framed as a traditional musical, many of the characters and songs are specifically drawn to highlight and exaggerate musical conventions. Notable among these is Xander's girlfriend, the ex-vengeance demon, Anya. Throughout the episode, she shows an interest in everyone's songs, often wondering if any could become "a break-away pop hit." Her casual dismissals of certain songs, even deriding one of her own as "a retro-pastiche that's never going to be a break-away pop hit," serve as a sort of Brechtian distancing effect; her references to the stylings and conventions of traditional musical texts remind the audience that they are also watching a musical, one that is deconstructing itself. The self-referential finale further establishes this distancing from the text, by proclaiming

The curtains close/

On a kiss, God knows/

We can tell the end is near

These final lines come just as Buffy and Spike share their first on-screen kiss, again reminding the audience that they are watching a show with a specific structure, a structure predicated upon the norms of musical theater. Indeed, the climax of the episode is so stereotypically drawn from musical conventions, that many found it anticlimactic. In theater, many early musicals found it easier to use a *deus ex machina* to conclude their tales; rather than think up a logical resolution to all the conflicts of the story, a simple, nearly magical solution is contrived which fixes everything in one fell swoop. *Deus ex machina* is seen these days mostly as evidence of sloppy writing, but Joss Whedon used it to great effect in “Once More, With Feeling,” to conclude his musical as many traditional musicals had ended before.

In order to understand how Whedon makes use of *deus ex machina*, we must first turn to the major conflict of the episode, which comes when the demon, Sweet, arrives in town. He was called to Sunnydale when someone activated his amulet, and it is his presence that is the cause of all the spontaneous singing and dancing in the episode. We see early on in the episode that Dawn (who is known in the series to have a problem with kleptomania) is the one in possession of the amulet, and so it is not surprising when Sweet kidnaps her and tries to make her his bride. But at the end of “Once More, With Feeling,” despite no hints or clues throughout the episode, it is revealed that Xander was the one who activated the amulet, and Dawn merely stole it from the magic shop where Xander found it. Sweet decides to waive the clause that states the activator of the amulet

has to be his queen, and so leaves Xander and the rest of Sunnydale behind. The end doesn't really seem to fit logically, but it feels natural because it is so similar to the *deus ex machinae* used in traditional plays and musicals. By the end of the episode, things are back to normal – except now, everybody has shared their deepest secrets and they have to learn to deal with the fallout of some of those revelations.

This is a novel way (within the form of series television) to move the plot forward and is indicative of the show's ability to meld and blend different genres within the same text. By utilizing such disparate genres as musicals, horror, comedy, and drama, often in various combinations and sometimes all in the same scene, the show disrupts the normative conventions of traditional genre shows. This disruption creates an agential impact that is also evidenced by the show's disruption of the sense of "Other"-ness that traditionally pervades such oppositional binaries as masculine/feminine, human/monster, and good/evil. The show's promotion of a new view of a personal ability to exercise power through a set of actions available to all individuals, not just those aligned with traditional patriarchal gender roles, acts as a further interruption of standard popular culture rhetoric. By disrupting these aspects of traditional rhetoric, *BtVS* suggests the possibility of a change within social texts allowing for alternative expressions of identity. And indeed, the rhetoric of *BtVS* helped alter the landscape of popular rhetoric, an aspect that is indicative of the strength of *BtVS*'s agential impact and is where I turn next.

#### "The Weight of The World" – Buffy's Impact on Popular Culture

The reason *BtVS* has drawn such academic interest is in some part due to its transformative effect on the rhetoric of popular culture. The agency exhibited by the

show's subversion of the sense of the "Other" that traditionally arises from such oppositional binaries as masculine/feminine, human/monster, and good/evil and is further evidenced by the show's ability to use an amalgam of various genre elements to present novel, and sometimes surprising, depictions of genre forms. The show changes, or alters, normative views of gender and identity. In fact, the series proved to be part of a specific cultural moment that saw a distinct change in popular conceptions of gender and identity, which is evidenced by comparing the rhetoric of popular culture texts that came before *BtVS* to the rhetoric of texts that came after it. As Robert Moore (2012) states

It was post-*Buffy* that the entire culture of TV changed. Today it is inconceivable that a team of heroic individuals on a series would consist exclusively of males who are expected to take care of a group of helpless females. (p. 145)

This quote suggests that *BtVS* is a specific incident within a cultural movement, serving as the demarcation between previous shows that depicted traditional performances of gender and identity from current shows, which exhibit a greater diversity of "acceptable" performances of identity and gender. Though *BtVS* is not singularly responsible for this change in popular rhetoric<sup>4</sup>, it is the most fully realized and critically acclaimed of the shows of its moment. In order to delineate this cultural moment, I analyze a number of series both pre- and post- *BtVS*, exploring how those texts that came after *BtVS* mirror or mimic its novel and unique approaches to gender, sexuality, and narrative structure in general. I chose these series based on their popularity<sup>5</sup> as well as accessibility<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Concurrent shows like 1995's *Xena*, 1998's *Sex and the City* and 1998's *Charmed* also featured strong and courageous female leads.

<sup>5</sup> As evidenced by the length of the series, the ratings and reviews, and/or because the series is still a part of our cultural memory.

Just a decade and a half before the shows of *BtVS*'s ilk gained popularity, the majority of shows on television espoused a traditionally patriarchal rhetoric that supported male hegemony and subjugated the feminine. The action shows that were popular, such as *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979) and *The A Team* (1983), featured strong, charismatic male leads and relegated female characters to lesser positions, often sexualized. Even the most popular prime time soap opera of the 1980's, *Dallas*, featured a strong patriarch in the form of J.R. Ewing, and comparatively weak female characters. Interestingly enough, the actor who portrays J.R. Ewing, Larry Hagman, also starred in *I Dream of Jeannie* during the 60's and 70's, another popular television show that grants power to "masculine" performances of identity and limits the power of "feminine" performances. As Moore (2012) notes, "While Jeannie was literally a genie . . . capable of doing virtually anything merely by thinking it . . . she completely and willingly subordinated her will to serving the whims of her master, Maj. Nelson," indicative of the unflexible, uncompromising views of patriarchal rhetoric (p. 142). Unfortunately, despite the strides that such shows as *BtVS* have made towards diversifying roles and performances on television, many of these classical patriarchal texts continue to hold great weight even today. Indeed, even after the advent of *BtVS*, both *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *The A Team* were made into big budget films (in 2005 and 2010, respectively) and even *Dallas* returned as a primetime television series in 2012. Evidently our long history of patriarchy is hard to overcome, and so shows like *BtVS*, with an agential impact that can shift traditional views of gender and identity, become all the more important.

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<sup>6</sup> Many of the series I analyze are syndicated on various networks and/or are available online or through various social media outlets.

At best, shows that came prior to *BtVS* presented female characters in novel (if not entirely flattering) ways, such as Angela Bower in 1984's *Who's The Boss?* In this show, it is Angela Bower who works (as an advertising executive, no less) to bring in money for her family, and hires retired baseball player Tony Micelli as her housekeeper. This show was one of the first to question standard gender roles, but the rhetoric is undermined in the eighth and final season when the character of Angela Bower, who until this point was independent and unsubordinated, falls in love with Tony Micelli simply for the sake of a ratings boost. Her sudden change in this season is indicative of the continued patriarchy of the television and studio system, in that it suggests female characters aren't strong enough on their own without the presence of a man in their life.

Other shows of the era did a better job of laying the groundwork for a change in popular rhetoric. An example of one such show is 1982's *Cagney and Lacey*, a female buddy cop show. This show featured two female leads, intelligent and strong, yet disparate enough in personality to allow for an interesting dynamic. Though this show never garnered great reviews, its popularity with the fans saved it from an early planned cancellation halfway through the run of the series (it went on to run for a total of seven seasons). Then, just as *Cagney and Lacey* was ending for good, American television found another strong female lead in the popular sitcom *Roseanne* (1988). Unlike *Cagney and Lacey*, which mostly focused on middle-class characters and situations, the characters in *Roseanne* were clearly working-class. This show explored the dynamics of family relationships and the struggles of trying to provide for one's family. Interestingly, it was on *Roseanne* that Joss Whedon was given his first chance as a screenwriter; Roseanne Barr, the star of the sitcom, read some of his work and was impressed with his

ability to write realistic female characters. This ability has served him well in his career, and proved instrumental in creating the show *BtVS*. It is the quality of *BtVS*'s writing that is most often remarked upon by critics and it is this quality that is responsible for the steadfast nature of the show's fans. The show's agency comes from the transformative nature of its rhetoric, which is evident by the distinct contrast between the shows that came after *BtVS* from those that came before it.

It wasn't until after the success of *BtVS* that popular media texts such as television shows began to display a divergence from traditional patriarchal rhetoric. Just as the show's success had created a space for alternative performances of gender and identity, so too did the show's novel framing impact the nature of normative conventions of storytelling on television. Prior to *BtVS*, many texts were framed as a series of stand-alone episodes, each providing their own climaxes and conclusions; Whedon's work, however, draws heavily from the longer-form narratives of traditional horror and science fiction serials, presenting expansive character and story arcs that cover multiple episodes and sometimes even multiple seasons. This progression allows for more fully realized characters, with fluid and shifting performances of sex and gender, as well as novel long-form story elements, an aspect that other shows were quick to notice. The shows that came after *BtVS* indicate a shift in social and cultural views of gender and identity as well as a change in the dynamic of storytelling on TV.

One of the first popular television series that came after *BtVS* and demonstrated a rhetoric in line with that of *BtVS* was J.J. Abrams's spy show, *Alias*. This show focuses on C.I.A. operative Sydney Bristow (played by Jennifer Garner), a character that is both strong and distinctly "feminine," just as Buffy was. Not only was this show one of the

first post-*BtVS* shows to utilize this new discursive structure for strong, “feminine” female characters, it was also one of the first to experiment with traditional narrative structure. The first two seasons demonstrate longer-form narrative arcs reminiscent of those found in *BtVS* and Whedon’s other works. Abrams takes this disruption of traditional narrative storytelling on television to a whole new level; the first episode of Season 3 takes place two years after the events of Season 2, and finds an amnesiac Sydney Bristow, who had been missing and presumed dead, is trying to re-integrate into a world that is no longer the same as the one she remembers. Her confusion and turmoil was echoed by the mixed fan reactions at this surprising incongruity in the narrative; those fans used to a traditionally linear progression of events, or to a series whose episodes are all self-contained, were not sure how to react to this sudden jump into the future. The ways in which *Alias* disrupts traditional popular culture rhetoric owe a lot to its primogenitor, *BtVS*. Both shows depict alternative gender and identity performances, as well as an ability to subvert traditional narrative structures and conventions. This disruptive rhetoric is emblematic of a new discursive structure that was developed by *BtVS* and its contemporaries and marks *BtVS* as a turning point in popular culture rhetoric. The strength of *BtVS*’s agency is further evidenced by other shows that have been influenced by it, such as *Veronica Mars*.

*Veronica Mars* is yet another example of a post-*BtVS* show with a strong, yet “feminine” lead character. The eponymous character of this series is the daughter of the local private eye, a man who was recently demoted from county sheriff after accusing one of the town patriarchs of killing his own daughter, Lily Kane. Despite being ridiculed, Veronica sides with her father and follows in his footsteps. In fact, she often



takes on investigations of her own. She is shown to be both intelligent, as well as physically and emotionally strong. The series also presents a longer-arc narrative format as does *BtVS*; the entire first season finds Veronica investigating Lily Kane's murder as well as her own rape. This internal emotional courage and strength grant Veronica many of the same virtues that make Buffy so memorable as a character. Veronica Mars portrays traditionally "masculine" characteristics such as strength and independence while also being drawn to be acutely "feminine," suggestive of the new discursive structures developed by *BtVS* and its contemporaries. This rhetoric is reminiscent of that of *BtVS*, and indeed the show *Veronica Mars* even pays tribute to its predecessor. Throughout *Veronica Mars*, actors from *BtVS*<sup>7</sup> continually appear in recurring guest roles, a knowing wink to their involvement in the show that paved the way for new forms of acceptable gender and identity performances. The influence of the subversive rhetoric of *BtVS* is indicative of a specific moment of shifting cultural values, and the creation of a new discursive structure, which can be evidenced by comparing the prevailing rhetoric of popular culture texts that came before *BtVS* to those that came after. Also notable is the impact of *BtVS*'s subversion of the heteronormative imperative of traditional patriarchal texts, an aspect I examine next.

#### The New "Normal"

Another change that was made possible by the different performances of *BtVS*, which indicate alternative means of expressing and performing gender and identity, was the subversion of the "heteronormative" imperative espoused by traditional patriarchal rhetoric. Of course, there were gay and lesbian characters on television before Willow

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<sup>7</sup> Notably Alyson Hannigan, who played Willow, and Charisma Carpenter, who played Cordelia.

Rosenberg. In fact, Willow wasn't even the first openly queer character on *BtVS*; Larry Blaisdell, a recurring character in the early seasons, came out of the closet and was openly gay until his death at the hands of the Mayor in Season 3. But it wasn't until the relationship between Willow and Tara that a primetime television show dared to make a main character, rather than just a recurring character, come out as a lesbian; I noted earlier how hesitant the studios were to even allow the characters to kiss romantically in the first season of their relationship.

Now, just a decade after the last season of *BtVS*, merely thirteen years after the inception of Tara and Willow's relationship, a steady stream of popular series have continued this legacy of subverting "heteronormative" rhetoric by exploring diverse expressions of gender and identity. To name a few, these texts include *Queer as Folk* (2000), *The L Word* (2004), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), *Glee* (2009), *Modern Family* (2009), and *The New Normal* (2012), all of which have characters that utilize non-traditional performances of gender, subverting the "heteronormative" ideals of traditional patriarchal texts and further demonstrating gender to be a socially and discursively constructed phenomenon. By subverting traditional gender conventions, and interrupting the "heteronormative" rhetoric of patriarchal texts, these shows demonstrate the discursive restructuring that is the result of *BtVS*. All of these series present non-traditional performances and expressions of gender identity, and their popularity has been instrumental in shifting current popular texts towards more accepting, tolerant views of non-traditional performances.

*BtVS* was in the vanguard of shows that presented a novel conception of gender performances and identities. By displaying the fluid and variable nature of gender, as

opposed to the static, oppositional binary of masculine/feminine gender attributes that are depicted in traditional patriarchal texts, *BtVS* disrupts the prevalent rhetoric regarding gender displays its own agency. This agency is aligned with poststructuralist concepts used by Judith Butler and is indicative of *BtVS*'s ability to change social norms. The agential impact of *BtVS* is further strengthened by its use of multiple and disparate genre elements to create new and surprising methods of narrative storytelling. The show itself marks a specific moment in our shifting cultural consciousness, and the influence of its rhetoric can be traced by comparing those shows that came before *BtVS* to those shows that came after. The shows that aired prior to *BtVS* were marked by an adherence to the "heteronormative" precepts of male hegemony, which also relegated female characters to subservient, shallow positions that served as little more than eye-candy. However, the shows that came after *BtVS* were influenced by and aligned with its novel discursive structures, further showing the impact of its agency. From the strong females and novel long-form narrative arcs of *Alias* and *Veronica Mars*, to the alternative representations of gender in such texts as *The New Normal* or *Modern Family*, many current popular culture texts owe their own popularity and discursive structure to the subversive work of *BtVS*.

## CONCLUSION

“Where Do We Go From Here?”  
(*BtVS*, 6.7, “*Once More, With Feeling*”)

When I first became interested in *BtVS* as a potential text to study, I wasn't fully aware of how much academic interest the show had already engendered. But when I reviewed the literature already available, it struck me how the majority of scholars had approached *BtVS* from traditional perspectives, often aligned with the first and second waves of feminism, which strove to diminish the social differences between men and women. These scholars often focused specifically on the character of Buffy Summers, a Vampire Slayer known as The Chosen One; they found her unique mixture of distinctly “feminine” qualities alongside more traditionally “masculine” characteristics to be indicative of the show's ability to equalize the genders, rhetoric which is in line with the concepts of second-wave feminism. Though this approach yields some interesting analyses, I find it to be an incomplete assessment of the depth and breadth of *BtVS*'s rhetoric. Certainly the series is feminist in many regards, but by approaching *BtVS* as a poststructuralist, postmodern feminist text, it is possible to see that the series represents gender and sexual identity as a socially and discursively constructed phenomenon, not the static, oppositional binary that traditional patriarchal texts promote. I have noted how this poststructuralist view of gender is in line with the concepts used by Judith Butler (2006) in her work with gender performances and performativity, as well as Michel Foucault's (1990) work with docile bodies. I first explored the ways certain performances of identity were historically tied to specific genders before I then turned to the character of Buffy Summers, analyzing her from a postmodern, poststructuralist perspective that highlights

her novel use of traditionally “masculine” as well as “feminine” performances of her gender.

In my analysis of Buffy, I highlighted her nature as a subversion of the traditional patriarchal “protector” roles that were prevalent in the war movies of the 80’s and 90’s up through the superhero movies of today. Buffy uses a combination of traditional and non-traditional gender performances to come to terms with her own dichotomous nature as both an ordinary young girl and a defender of the world. I traced her interactions with the stereotypically patriarchal Watcher’s Council, an ancient order of men who use The Slayer as an instrument in their battle against evil. Buffy’s use of both traditional and non-traditional gender performances, combined with her refusal to live under the strictures of a traditionally patriarchal organization, showed a need to break away from the traditional rhetorical conventions that dictate the course of most popular culture texts. Instead, by seeing Buffy as representative of the malleability and fluidity of gender, the show questions the need for any oppositional or hierarchical structuration of gender or identity within society. This subversion of popular rhetoric is surprising in a genre show of its kind and is indicative of *BtVS*’s agential impact. This agency is in line with the concept of agency as an ability to alter or change traditional social mores through the enactment of novel rhetoric, and is further evidenced by the show’s promotion of a new view of power as being exercised through a specific set of actions, an aspect I trace in my second analytical chapter.

The other characters in the show, beyond Buffy herself, also express themselves through a variety of both traditional and non-traditional gender performances and identities. These performances are fluid and shifting, often changing as the characters

grow and develop. I specifically traced the characters of Xander and Willow, whose development further suggested an attainment of a personal ability to exercise power. This view of power draws from Foucault's (1990) work on power, and is tied to a specific set of actions available to all individuals, such as expressing self-confidence and courage, fighting/killing demons, protecting others, and sexual intercourse; all of these actions can be performed by any individual, regardless of how they perform their own gender or sex. In this way, *BtVS* disassociates positions of power from the traditionally "masculine" gender performances that it has been tied to in normative patriarchal texts, and so disrupts the standard rhetoric of popular culture. This disruption is further evidence of the agency of *BtVS*, an agency that I further explored and analyzed in my third analytical chapter.

In my third analytical chapter, I continued my study of *BtVS* from a postmodern, poststructuralist perspective, focusing specifically on the agency that the show exhibits, which is further established by the show's subversion of the sense of "Other"-ness that pervades the oppositional binaries prevalent in traditional texts, such as the masculine/feminine binary, human/monster binary, and the good/evil binary. By exploring specific instances of the subversion of these binaries, it is possible to see how the show promotes a concept of identity as socially and discursively constructed, rather than a strict set of inherent behaviors, and in so doing denies the rhetoric of traditional patriarchal texts. This analysis of the show's agency focused heavily on the *content* of the show, and so in my fourth analytical chapter I turned to the agential impact of the novel *form* of the series.

Unlike the majority of popular shows, which demonstrated homogeneity of genre conventions, *BtVS* was never afraid to experiment or subvert stereotypical genre clichés.

The show's popularity grants its disruptive rhetoric a great amount of influence on the landscape of popular culture, making *BtVS* one of the leaders in a specific moment of change within popular culture rhetoric. This change is evidenced by a comparison of those shows that came before the time of *BtVS*, which promoted traditional patriarchal and "heteronormative" gender and identity performances, to those shows that came after *BtVS*, many of which embrace a wider diversity of "acceptable" performances of gender and identity, and is indicative of the new discursive structure that has resulted from the impact of *BtVS*'s agency.

In the span of a few short decades, society has found popular television shows move away from the hyper-aggressive patriarchs of such shows as *Dukes of Hazzard* (1979), *Knight Rider* (1982), and *The A Team* (1983), to the softer, more "feminized" men of such shows as *Glee* (2009), *Modern Family* (2009), and *The New Normal* (2012). The shift in popular culture rhetoric towards a greater acceptance of non-traditional performances of gender and identity owes a great deal to the subversive effect of *BtVS* and the other texts of its moment, and is indicative of the strength of the agency that *BtVS* exhibits. Ultimately the show acts as a positive influence on society, by treating gender and sexual identity as socially and discursively constructed phenomena, and by embracing alternative "acceptable" performances of gender and sexuality, while at the same time subverting the sense of the "Other" implicit in the non-traditionally aligned characters found in patriarchal rhetoric. This does not mean, however, that *BtVS* is a perfect or wholly inclusive text.

Though the rhetoric of *BtVS* subverts the traditional tenets of popular culture rhetoric that promote static, oppositional binaries of gender and sexual identity, and in so

doing *BtVS* allows for more progressive performances of gender and sexual identity, it is not a perfect argument for equality. There are whole other axes of identity, such as race, religion, or ethnicity, which scarcely get a mention within the show. As Jowett (2005), states:

Some difference on *Buff*y is given a subject position and point of view [sexuality] but other differences are not [race and class]. (p. 13, parentheses in original text)

There are few lower-class characters and even fewer non-white characters on *BtVS*, suggesting that the show is specifically aligned or targeted towards a specifically white, middle-class audience. Many of the characters that do break through these boundaries, such as the black vampire Mr. Trick in Season 3, and the lower-class rogue Slayer Faith who initially appeared in the same season, are either subjugated or forced to redeem themselves from an initial alignment with a sense of the “Other.” Though the later seasons showed some interest in addressing the lack of racial and class diversity within Sunnydale, they were ultimately unsuccessful. Season 7 was notable for this, where many of the Potential Slayers were drawn from disparate areas around the world and the series introduced the strong and courageous Principal Wood, Sunnydale High School’s first black principal. Despite these attempts, however, the show fails in presenting anything other than a stereotypically white, middle-class society. Though it is unsuccessful in exploring the full diversity of the ways we construct various axes of our identities, *BtVS* nevertheless provides an excellent look at how gender and sexuality are a socially and discursively constructed phenomenon and not tied to any inherent aspects of character or biological predetermination as is suggested by traditional patriarchal rhetoric.



Throughout my analysis I traced the characters' use of both traditional and non-traditional performances of gender in establishing their own identity, and how this unique portrayal of performances is demonstrative of the show's agency. Throughout my work, I also found myself positing other potential avenues of discourse regarding this approach to the show's rhetoric. Chief among these was that of an ethical exploration of the actions of Buffy and the other characters in the series, analyzing whether the ends justified their means. Because Buffy's main task is to prevent evil by slaying, or killing, demons, it is critical to determine if her violent actions are morally justified. Feminist scholar Mimi Marinucci explores this concept, ultimately concluding that, "Given the sexualized nature of so much of the violence that she faces, her mission is symbolic of the fight against sexual violence, for example, rape" (Marinucci, 2003, p. 69). In this context, Buffy's violence is justified by the heinous wrongs it opposes. Rather than being a murderer, she is a hero. Another ethical philosopher, Jason Kawal, explores her role as the hero, noting that, "her entire life is devoted to protecting others – she risks her life and sacrifices her own interests night after night, year after year" (Kawal, 2003, p. 152). This supports ethical philosopher Jessica Miller's argument that Buffy's view of ethics is embedded in her relational self, aligning her with feminist ethics and the "care perspective" (Miller, 2003), though it would be interesting to see, in light of the discursive nature of gender, if this perspective is solely "feminine." The moral ambiguity of the actions of many of the characters is itself subversive of traditional rhetorical structures, and could provide the groundwork for another interesting avenue of discussion.

Despite some weaknesses (such as a lack of racial or class diversity) within the text, I suspect that further analyses will benefit as much as I did approaching the series

and working from a postmodern, poststructuralist perspective. In this way it is possible to see how *BtVS* exhibits its own agency, one tied specifically to its ability to present alternative views and representations of gender and sexual identity. *BtVS*'s popularity ensured that its subversive rhetoric had a great impact on the popular culture texts of today and serves as further validation of why the show merits so much academic study.

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APPENDIX A – Referenced/Cited Episodes of *BtVS*

## SEASON 1

- BtVS 1.01 “Welcome to the Hellmouth”* (Pg. 25-32, 70-74, 151-153)
- BtVS 1.02 “The Harvest”* (Pg. 74-77)
- BtVS 1.07 “Angel”* (Pg. 96-98)

## SEASON 2

- BtVS 2.03 “School Hard”* (Pg. 128-129)
- BtVS 2.06 “Halloween”* (Pg. 135)
- BtVS 2.08 “The Dark Age”* (Pg. 136-138)
- BtVS 2.13 “Surprise”* (Pg. 98)
- BtVS 2.14 “Innocence”* (Pg. 98-100)
- BtVS 2.19 “I Only Have Eyes For You”* (Pg. 120-124)

## SEASON 3

- BtVS 3.05 “Homecoming”* (Pg. 130-131)
- BtVS 3.06 “Band Candy”* (Pg. 135)
- BtVS 3.09 “The Wish”* (Pg. 150)
- BtVS 3.10 “Amends”* (Pg. 118)
- BtVS 3.12 “Helpless”* (Pg. 33-40)
- BtVS 3.13 “The Zeppo”* (Pg. 84-96)
- BtVS 3.14 “Bad Girls”* (Pg. 141-143)
- BtVS 3.16 “Dopplegangeland”* (Pg. 141)
- BtVS 3.22 “Graduation Day: Part 2”* (Pg. 132-134)

## SEASON 4

*BtVS 4.10 "Hush"* (Pg. 83-85, 104-106, 114, 151, 153-154)

*BtVS, 4.18 "Where the Wild Things Are"* (Pg. 101)

*BtVS 4.19 "New Moon Rising"* (Pg. 106-109)

## SEASON 5

*BtVS 5.12 "Checkpoint"* (Pg. 43-50, 59)

*BtVS 5.16 "The Body"* (Pg. 151, 153-156)

*BtVS 5.22 "The Gift"* (Pg. 138-140, 147-149)

## SEASON 6

*BtVS 6.01 "Bargaining: Part 1"* (Pg. 79-80)

*BtVS 6.07 "Once More, With Feeling"* (Pg. 151, 153, 157-159, 168)

*BtVS 6.08 "Tabula Rasa"* (Pg. 17)

*BtVS 6.22 "Grave"* (Pg. 81-82, 127)

## SEASON 7

*BtVS 7.01 "Lessons"* (Pg. 106)

*BtVS 7.05 "Selfless"* (Pg. 48)

*BtVS 7.15 "Get it Done"* (Pg. 52)

*BtVS 7.18 "Dirty Girls"* (Pg. 50-52, 144-147)

*BtVS 7.22 "Chosen"* (Pg. 54-56)



APPENDIX B – A Chronology for the Confused, the *BtVS* Timeline

## SEASON 1

The first season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* finds Buffy Summers as a new arrival high school sophomore in the small town of Sunnydale, CA (which, unfortunately for her, is located directly on top of a dimensional portal known as the Hellmouth). She is soon introduced to the supernatural aspects of the town as she fights against the local vampire gang, ruled by an ancient vampire known as The Master. The Master spends the length of the season planning assaults on the Slayer in an attempt to break free from his magical prison and open the Hellmouth, releasing all the demons of Hell onto the Earth. Buffy enlists with fellow classmates Willow and Xander, under the tutelage of her mentor Watcher Giles, and with the help of vampire-with-a-soul Angel, to fight these monsters, and eventually faces off against The Master once and for all in the season finale. The Master hypnotizes and drowns her, fulfilling an ancient prophecy that she would die at his hands. Luckily, Xander is there to resuscitate her just after her heart stops, and she is able to kill The Master once and for all.

## SEASON 2

Buffy returns to Sunnydale in the beginning of Season 2 after having spent the summer with her father in Los Angeles, though it is apparent that she is still affected from her brief death at The Master's hand in the previous season. She gets her catharsis by destroying the remaining minions of The Master who try to use his bones to magically resurrect him. Her relief is short-lived, however, when Angel's ex-allies Spike and Drusilla arrive in town, eager to hunt and kill the Slayer. Things get even more complicated when the new Vampire Slayer, Kendra, appears. It turns out that Buffy was dead long enough in the first season for a new Slayer to be called, upsetting an ancient tradition of only one Slayer existing at a time. And, if this isn't enough, Buffy's loss of virginity to her boyfriend Angel nullifies the curse that returned his soul, causing him to revert to his evil vampiric form, known as Angelus. In a surprising twist of events, Buffy teams up with Spike to halt Angelus from opening another Hell dimension that could consume the world. Though Willow's growing magical ability proved strong enough to return Angel's soul to him, it wasn't in time to stop him from opening the dimensional gateway. Buffy is forced to kill him to close the portal, even as he is reaching out to her for help and support. Sadly, Drusilla manages to kill Kendra and torture Giles, before she and Spike escape. Buffy, devastated by having to slay Angel, decides to leave her friends behind and takes a bus to Los Angeles.

## SEASON 3

Buffy lives and works in Los Angeles as a waitress for some time before discovering and destroying a prison dimension run by demons that have enslaved the homeless kids and street urchins of LA. She is brought out of her depression and returns to Sunnydale, where she finds that the rest of the Scooby Gang has continued to kill vampires in her absence. The First Evil, making an early appearance, brings Angel back

to life, though he has turned feral from his time in a hell dimension; Buffy secretly nurses him back to sanity and health, causing tension with Giles when her secret is revealed. This tension is brought to a head when Giles betrays Buffy by poisoning her for The Watcher's Council, though his loss of tenure with the Council after defending her redeems him in her eyes. This season also features the arrival of Faith, and her eventual alignment with the evil Mayor as well as the beginnings of Xander's relationship with Anya. Eventually Buffy is forced to stab Faith, who lapses into a coma, before enlisting the help of the rest of the senior class to kill the Mayor by blowing up the high school with him inside it.

#### SEASON 4

Season 4 finds the Scooby Gang graduated from high school and moving on with their lives. Angel and Cordelia have moved to Los Angeles (where they continue to appear in the series *Angel*). Xander has decided not to attend college and so begins looking for a job, but feels separated from Willow and Buffy, who are attending UC Sunnydale. At the university, both Willow and Buffy begin dating more. Willow meets Tara after Oz's departure, marking the beginning of their long-term relationship. Faith wakes up from her coma, and after attempting to get vengeance upon Buffy, runs away to Los Angeles where she meets Angel and is eventually convinced to go to prison for her crimes. Meanwhile, Buffy meets and starts dating Riley, who she eventually discovers is a member of a covert military organization known as The Initiative. The Initiative has come to Sunnydale to study and wage war and experiment on the local demon population. Spike, who has returned to town to plan an attack on Buffy, falls victim to their experiments when they put a chip in his head that stops him from harming humans. Initially, Buffy finds herself aligned with The Initiative's interests and so fights alongside them. However, when she discovers that they are experimenting not just on demons, but on supernaturally endowed humans, she begins to question their motives. In an attempt to learn more about The Initiative's plans, she breaks into their facility, only to find that they have been doing secret experiments combining technological devices with human and demon flesh in an attempt to create a super soldier. The prototype creature, Adam, rebels, and it is up to Buffy to kill him. She and the Scooby Gang cast a spell that allows Buffy to access the primal power of the First Slayer, and so she uses her new strength to kill Adam. The season finale finds Buffy and the rest of the Scooby Gang being haunted in their dreams by the ghost of the First Slayer.

#### SEASON 5

The fifth season of *BtVS* opens with Buffy meeting and fighting the infamous Count Dracula. Though even Buffy isn't capable of killing him, she does beat him and kick him out of town. When she returns home, she finds a girl in her room, a girl she refers to as her sister, Dawn. The mystery of this sudden appearance of a sister is solved when we learn that Dawn is actually a mystical energy known as The Key, and has been placed under Buffy's care for protection against the Hell-Goddess Glory. Then, when Buffy nearly gets killed in a fight against a single vampire, she seeks Spike's advice on how he killed two previous Slayers and how she can increase her chances of survival.

Buffy then catches Riley letting vampire junkies drink his blood, and so she breaks up with him. Meanwhile, Giles, who has spent the last year growing increasingly bored with retirement, decides to purchase and open a magic shop. The Watcher's Council arrives in town and scrutinizes every aspect of his life, demanding to conduct a review on The Slayer and her friends. Buffy turns the tables on them when she realizes their organization is meaningless without her, freeing her from their patriarchal constrictions. Tragically, Buffy isn't able to stop Glory from using Dawn to open a gateway to Hell, but Buffy successfully manages to close it by sacrificing herself instead of her sister.

## SEASON 6

Though Buffy's death at the end of Season 5 closed the portal to Hell, it also opened Sunnydale up to attack from other fronts. The Scooby Gang uses a Buffy robot to convince the rest of the world that the Slayer is still alive and well while they work on a plan to raise Buffy from the dead. When they manage to bring her back to life, she reveals to Spike that they pulled her out of Heaven. She doesn't share this with the rest of the group until the musical episode "Once More, With Feeling," an episode where everyone's deepest secrets are revealed through song and dance. This episode also marks the beginning of Buffy's sexual relationship with Spike, though she keeps it secret from the rest of her friends. This season also finds the dissolution of Tara and Willow's relationship as well as Xander and Anya's relationship. Tara and Willow do get back together, but just when they do Tara is killed from a stray bullet fired by one of Buffy's enemies. Willow kills the man who shot Tara, though she is stopped from killing the other two members of his nerdy trio. She then attempts to destroy the world, but is saved when Xander appears to talk to her. When Buffy tries to break things off with Spike, he goes berserk and tries to rape her. He cannot live with his actions and so goes off in search of a powerful demon in Africa who can restore his soul, so he can give Buffy what she deserves.

## SEASON 7

The final season finds The First Evil laying siege on The Watcher's Council and The Slayer, going so far as to order the execution of all Potential Slayers. After the majority of the Council is destroyed, Giles sends out the word that all surviving Potentials should make their way to Buffy's house in Sunnydale for protection and training. Buffy also begins working as a guidance counselor at the newly reopened high school as a way of keeping an eye on the Hellmouth below it. It turns out that she is not the only one with this plan: Principal Robin Wood, the son of one of Spike's victims, a previous Slayer named Nikki Wood, has arrived in town to keep his eye on the Hellmouth as well. Spike, meanwhile, has had his soul restored and is suffering from the grief this entails. When Principal Wood tries to kill Spike for revenge, Buffy comes to Spike's rescue and convinces Wood that Spike has changed and is a useful ally. When Buffy discovers more about the history of the Slayer and locates the ancient lost scythe designed to be a Slayer's ideal weapon, she realizes she can use the magic of the scythe to share her power with all the Potential Slayers. Both Faith and Angel also return to town in this season, albeit on separate occasions. Faith returns to make amends and help

Buffy, after she redeems herself in the companion series *Angel*. Angel, however, returns in the final episode to bring an amulet that can cleanse the town. When the Hellmouth is opened, Buffy leads the Potentials (now Slayers themselves, thanks to Willow's spellcasting) into battle with a breed of über-vampires that live there. Spike uses the amulet to focus the rays of the sun into a cleansing beam of fire that consumes the whole town, sacrificing himself to kill the über-vampires and save the world. Anya and a number of Potentials die as well, though the rest of the gang survives to find that the entire town has collapsed, leaving behind a giant crater.

### Author's Biography

Patrick Pittis started at the University of Maine in the fall of 2007. After three years studying Theatre and Secondary Education, he was alerted to the cancellation of the Theatre Major at UMaine Orono, and so decided to take a year's leave of absence to live and work in Southern California. He returned to school after a year, with a new sense of purpose and motivation, ultimately choosing to further his education by turning to the study of Communication. This in turn led to the thesis you are now holding, itself a combination of his interests in theater and popular culture studies. After graduating with Highest Honors in 2013, Patrick Pittis intends to return to California where he will pursue a career in television production.