

**The Vampire Spike in Text and Fandom: Unsettling Oppositions in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – a special edition of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* to be published in August 2005**

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**[Extracts from the Introduction]**

This special edition journal examines a number of key issues in cultural theory through the development of, and reaction to the vampire Spike from the cult TV success *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As the latest in a long line of sympathetic vampires, Spike's textual construction rearticulates the dualities which fictional vampires have long embodied: the simultaneous expression of erotic repulsion and attraction; a fear of and desire for the 'other'; the ambivalences of a troubling ontology figured through a creature that is neither dead nor alive. ... Spike, like his fictional ancestors, blurs boundaries and raises ambiguities, but he does so in a manner firmly located in today's cultural landscape. ... Spike's character also raises important questions about the boundaries of the text. Our understanding of Spike depends upon a number of extra-textual factors: inter-textual pop culture references; allusions to musical subcultures; and knowledge of the actor James Marsters, who plays him. Spike has spawned a huge fan culture and his audience appeal suggests that he articulates a number of themes. This journal examines several of these issues in depth.

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[Milly] Williamson opens this special edition by exploring what Spike has in common with a much longer tradition of sympathetic vampires and, drawing on empirical research, she examines the appeal of this figure to fans of the vampire. Offering an historical overview of the evolution of the sympathetic vampire, she explores how this figure entered the twentieth century as one of empathy whose 'otherness' does not provoke fear, but rather is often that which we recognise in ourselves. Williamson suggests that Spike is both constructed and read through these historical and intertextual modes, but that he updates the appeal of otherness in significant ways. For instance, unlike previous incarnations of the vampire, the cult TV text from which Spike emerges deliberately encourages audiences to acknowledge and play with its many intertextual references to previous vampires; it encourages a fannish immersion in the text by constructing the text as subtext, with deliberate textual winks and nods, and extended plot lines which dwell on their own convoluted construction. The intertextual and sub-textual nature of the show is most revealed through Spike's construction and is clearly identifiable in the relationship between Spike and Buffy which draws on the 'sub-textual' conventions of the 'slash fiction' written by fans. In this sense the text offers the polymorphous sexuality (through Spike) that is usually the realm of erotic fan fiction.

In the second piece in this volume, [Dee] Amy-Chinn argues that this polymorphous sexuality is one of the many ways in which Spike transgresses boundaries. She contends that Spike does not simply subvert gender norms or sexual norms, but that

Spike is 'queer'. Amy-Chinn deconstructs the artificial boundary between gender and sexuality through which transgression has previously been theorised in order to demonstrate that Spike's 'queerness' operates through his erotic mobility. Spike's sexuality and gender are simultaneously intertwined and fluid – he performs excessive masculinity and active femininity. Yet while his biological maleness is never in doubt, what it signifies is endlessly shifting. Amy-Chinn examines not only the ways that Spike switches between male and female, but also his ability to accommodate 'vanilla' sex and erotic variation. ... Amy-Chinn suggests that ... the depiction of Spike is one that contributes to the breakdown of gender oppositions, and to the visibility of unconventional erotic practices, thus unsettling the prevailing heteronormative matrix and contributing to the 'thinkability' of traditionally taboo practices.

In the third article, [Stacey] Abbott elaborates upon the way in which Spike updates the conventions associated with the reluctant vampire by focussing on the depiction of moral ambiguity. Abbott argues that while previous vampires walk a fine line between good and evil, Spike inhabits a far more fractured self that over reaches this binary opposition. Through an analysis of the narrative structure and *mise-en-scène* of the final series of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Abbott demonstrates that Spike undergoes the most dramatic character development of any of the characters in the show, and that this is effected through the presentation of multiple Spikes, a self that is looking for unity, but that has been exponentially fragmented. ... Abbott examines in detail the manner in which Spike's multiplicity is overtly addressed within the narrative and dialogue of the show. She relates this to the deconstruction of Spike's leather-clad bad-boy biker image in Season Seven, each of Spike's multiple selves being depicted through a different visual look. Abbott examines how these multiple selves operate to push the narrative forward in the final Season, arguing that it is only Spike's recognition and acceptance of his own fractured nature that enable him to acquire the strength he needs to sacrifice himself in the Season finale. Only this way can Spike contribute to the show's ultimate lesson, which abjures the privileging of uniqueness (of himself or even the Slayer) in favour of celebrating the power of collective action.

[Matt] Hills and [Rebecca] Williams' piece shifts the discussion from one which concentrates on the textual construction of, and the fannish engagements with, the character Spike, to one which examines the relationship between the character and the meanings attached to him by the actor who plays him, James Marsters. Hills and Williams argue that Marsters' impact on our understanding of his character is 'situated'. By this they mean that Marsters' does have agency in terms of interpreting Spike (both on screen and off), but that this is tempered by his role in the hierarchy of production (wracked as it is with internal struggles) in which he does not have an entirely 'free hand' in the performance of his star persona. Hills and Williams consider Marsters to be a 'subcultural celebrity', by which they mean a celebrity specific to the audience and fandom surrounding *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, rather than a general star recognition. There is an overlapping between Marsters and Spike in a number of secondary texts that circulate around the show, which Hills and Williams consider not only to merge actor and character, but also makes Marsters appear 'fan-like' and they suggest that this disrupts the distance between 'fan' and 'celebrity'. Key to this intervention is Marsters self-styled accessibility to his fans. His positive encounters with fans having been perfected, he manages to perform the

role of accessible nice-guy and enigmatic persona simultaneously. In addition, rather than seeing celebrity as only a product of institutional forces, Hills and Williams suggest that Marsters' celebrity indicates a need to examine more closely the way actors participate in industry forms of promotion.

This special issue then moves on to a shorter piece by [Sue] Turnbull that develops Hills and Williams contribution by offering a personal meditation on the way in which Marsters performs Spike, and the affect that this has on the author. Turnbull explores the way in which performance can become part of our own lived experience – inspiring and transforming the viewer - and suggesting that watching television can, indeed, impact on the way in which we experience the world.

This special edition closes with a commentary by [Viv] Burr on the 2004 *Slayage* Conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* held in Nashville in May 2004, and combines ethnographic analysis with reflection on the fan-scholar divide that has been the subject of much academic attention. ... She notes, in particular that emotions ran high on the subject of Spike. ... Burr does not attempt to address the reasons why Spike is such a site of contention among fan-scholars and scholar-fans and we were intrigued, although not surprised, that this was the case. Rather, it confirmed to us that there was indeed something about Spike that resonated with fans and scholars of the show in a way not found in the other supporting characters and that warranted an in-depth analysis.

As far as we are aware, despite the huge volume of *Buffy* and *Angel* scholarship available in print and on the Internet, this is the first time a single, supporting, character of the shows has been the focus of an academic endeavour. We hope that the articles in this volume convince the reader that Spike is worth both the accolade and the effort.

Milly Williamson & Dee Amy-Chinn