



Frances Early Staking Her Claim: Buffy the Vampire Slayer as Transgressive Woman Warrior



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(1) When Susan Faludi published her fiery polemic, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), she noted the rise of “tough-guy films” and the marginalization or banishment of women from the screen and pointed out that many male film heroes of the 1980s headed off to “all-male war zones or the Wild West” (138). Three years later, in 1994, James William Gibson, in his engaged study, *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America*, made the same point, reinforcing Faludi’s observation that a “new war culture” was developing that idealized the violent and misogynous male warrior and that ignored or denigrated women or presented them in conventionally feminine roles. This assumption of a male-dominant binary representation of gender in popular culture has not gone unchallenged, however, as Sherrie Inness demonstrates in her recently published study, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. Inness argues compellingly that physically and mentally strong women heroes have populated films, television series, and comic books from the 1960s and 1970s.

(2) In the last several years, the rise of the indomitable tough woman has become an especially pronounced feature of television “episodics.” The age of the tough-gal action show seems at hand, and women warriors such as Xena, the Warrior Princess, La Femme Nikita, and Buffy, the Vampire Slayer have become wildly popular, especially among young North Americans. These glamorous larger-than-life yet also disarmingly recognizable women battle evil on a daily basis and, without much fanfare, repeatedly save the world from untold horror. “Western storytelling,” a writer for *Psychology Today* portentously insists, “hasn’t seen their ilk since the legendary female fighters of the Celts” (Ventura, 62; as well, Kingwell, 77-78).

(3) The shifting nature of gender representation in popular culture which Xena, Nikita, and Buffy seem to portend invites critical study. In this essay, I take up this

theme through the lens of one woman warrior episodic, the critically acclaimed *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. 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 values and institutions in society. As a women's historian, I comprehend that part of the struggle of maintaining an active voice for women in history concerns image-making. My intent here is to argue that *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* is preeminently a narrative of the disorderly rebellious female as well as an effective experiment in generating what literary scholar Sharon MacDonald has termed "open images." MacDonald notes that "imagery is by no means a purely superficial phenomenon [but is rather] the means through which we articulate and define the social order and nature." She identifies closed images as analogous to symbols and ideals or stereotypes that appear fixed in public consciousness. Open images, in contrast, "are to be interpreted, read and to an extent repopulated [and] the form of condensation that they employ [is] not meant to reflect or define the social life itself" (22-23). In other words, open images are inherently unsettling to the way things are. Significantly, MacDonald argues, utilization of open images permits their creators to focus on human agency and the potential for intentional social change.

(4) Before taking up my textual analysis of the *Buffy* series in light of my notion of Buffy (the character) as an "open image" transgressive woman warrior figure, a brief introduction to the genesis, vision, plotline, and character development of this innovative program are in order.

(5) The much quoted creator of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, thirty-five-year old Joss Whedon, is the son and grandson of screenwriters. Whedon's grandfather wrote for *Donna Reed* and *Leave It to Beaver* in the 1950s and his father wrote for *Alice* in the 1970s. Thus, Whedon represents the third generation of men creating influential (and white, middle-class) female T.V. figures. Further, Whedon makes much of the fact that he was raised by his "hardworking" mother who taught European history in New York City's Riverdale School while her son, a self-declared outsider, was growing up. Not surprisingly, Whedon studied film and gender and feminist theory at Wesleyan University. *Buffy's* creator is a feminist and avers that he has "always found strong women interesting because they are not overly represented in the cinema," adding provocatively that "there are a lot of ways to break new ground without having original thoughts" (quoted in Lippert, 15).

(6) Whedon's *Buffy* character first appeared in the 1992 high-camp film, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, reflecting both the screenwriter's attraction to gothic horror stories and film and his anger at the omnipresent reality of male violence against women: "This movie was my response to all the horror movies I had ever seen where some girl walks into a dark room and gets killed. So I decided to make a movie where a blonde girl walks into a dark room and kicks butt instead" (quoted in Tracy, 6). While Whedon and executive producer of the T.V. series, Gail Berman, see their program as supplying role models for young women, Whedon is also attempting to reach young men: "If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening," Whedon insists, "it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism" (quoted in Bellafante, 83).

(7) Genre, vision and plot are inextricably intertwined in *Buffy*. In T.V. parlance, *Buffy* represents a fantasy-based female action program, but for Whedon it is much more: "I invoke about five genres. I love superheroes. I was a comic-book boy. I tend to create universes with the kind of sophomoric emotional bigness that really exists only in comic books and TV. I am very old-fashioned about heart and

story The show is about disenfranchisement, about the people nobody takes seriously" (quoted in Lippert, 25).

(8) *Buffy* has evolved into a witty, wildly dark camp action and adventure series that is leavened with offbeat comedy. At the center is Buffy herself, an improbable hero in a program that underneath the fantasy, horror, and humor offers a fresh version of the classic quest myth in Western culture. In the first *Buffy* season in 1997, its protagonist (played by Sarah Michelle Gellar) is a perky and winsome but marginalized new student in Sunnydale High School. Fate has a special place in this attractive and superficially normal sixteen-year-old's life. Buffy is destined to fight evil in the form of demons that have stalked the earth since the dawn of humanity. Rupert Giles (Anthony Stewart Head), the British-born, erudite, tweedy, refined, and kindly librarian at Sunnydale High is Buffy's designated "Watcher," a teacher and guide who must help her accept her special calling. On more than one occasion, Giles must remind Buffy: "As long as there have been demons, there has been the Slayer. One girl in all the world, a Chosen One, born with the strength and skill to hunt vampires and other deadly creatures . . . to stop the spread of their evil" (quoted in Tracy, 1). When she arrives in Sunnydale, an ostensibly sober and safe community in southern California, Buffy's identity as Slayer is known only to Giles and an authoritarian but distant "Watcher's Council" located in Great Britain. But Sunnydale High School is located atop a "Hellmouth," out of which various demons emerge nightly to terrorize the community. Buffy stalks and kills demons by night and, by day, at high school, makes friends with two other alienated high school students. Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan), is a socially introverted, sensitive, gentle, and brilliant math/computer whiz, and Xander Harris (Nicholas Brendon), a charming and loyal fellow and Willow's friend from childhood. They become "the Slayerettes" (aka Scooby gang). The group meets regularly in the elegant school library which is brimming with weighty books, many of which concern the occult and vampire lore. In this Victorian-appointed haven with its dark wood paneling, large oak table, and cosy study lamps, Buffy and her friends study through many evenings as they seek answers in books to the monsters that threaten them and Sunnydale citizens at every turn.

(9) In the meantime, the horror that is high school—the nasty cliques, the imprisoning concept of "coolness," the anti-intellectualism of most students, and unfathomable adult authority structures—also prey upon Buffy and her friends. Family life is askew in Sunnydale, too. Buffy, for instance, is an only child whose father has deserted her—he rarely visits or contacts her--and she lives with her affectionate and well-meaning but largely "clueless" mother. As Buffy and the Slayerettes negotiate the borders between the menacing worlds of high school and the Hellmouth, plot and character development reflect the twin themes of idealism and nihilism in contemporary youth culture. A zany and ironic humor infuses dialog and a nuanced and, at times, steamy exploration of sexuality issues is woven into each *Buffy* episode. Additional central characters appear during the first season, including the gorgeous but catty, empty-headed, and consumer-obsessed Cordelia Chase (Charisma Carpenter) who changes—somewhat—and becomes, in due course, a Slayerette, and Buffy's ill-fated brooding first love, the 244-year-old vampire, Angel (David Boreanaz), who, in complex plot twists, is at one time the Slayer's nemesis and at another her valiant protector and ardent lover. Other colorful regulars to appear over the course of three seasons include Oz (Seth Green), Willow's genial, musically-talented boyfriend who is also a werewolf ; Spike (James Marsters), an extraordinarily spiteful and clever vampire who combines a Bill Sykes menace with a Billy Idol sense of style; and two Slayers-manqué, Kendra (Bianca Lawson) and Faith (Eliza Dushku).

(10) At the end of the third season (spring 1999), Buffy and her friends and classmates graduate from Sunnydale High, albeit not without a dramatic confrontation with the town mayor who transforms into a towering reptilian figure of apocalyptic evil only to be defeated in a pitched battle led by Buffy which destroys the school and a number of students as well. The stage is thus cleared for Buffy to become a somewhat reluctant university freshman at the University of California at Sunnydale (UCS).

(11) In the fourth season (beginning autumn 1999) Buffy and Willow are ensconced at UCS campus, while Giles lives close to the university in a modest book-filled townhouse. Angel has departed Sunnydale and so has Cordelia.^[1] Oz is around, at first, but leaves town after the first few episodes; Xander has a variety of jobs, including bartending and driving an ice-cream truck, and lives in the basement at home.

(12) The Hellmouth survives, but as the fourth season unfolds, the gothic horror theme has receded. Setting and plot are less surreal than in the high-school episodes, and the main characters have become more mature and reflective. Monsters still spew forth from the underworld, and Buffy still patrols for demons at night on UCS campus. However, there are fewer vampires to eliminate because an elite military special force, "The Initiative," located beneath the university, is apprehending, studying, and neutralizing the demons that plague Sunnydale. The young men of the Initiative have been trained and controlled with drugs to do the bidding of Professor Maggie Walsh (Lindsay Crouse), who masquerades as Buffy's psychology professor and is herself a formidable tough gal. All-American Iowa-bred Initiative "just warrior" Riley Finn (Marc Blucas) has become Buffy's love interest. Things get really interesting when from behind room 314 in Initiative quarters Adam emerges, a made-to-measure cyborg monster whose first act is to kill his creator and "Mama," Professor Walsh. Adam is the ultimate threat: his purpose is to kill all life.

(13) **By the close of its fourth season**, *Buffy* had won the respect of culture critics and media spokespersons. Beginning its sixth season in the fall of 2001, the program retains a loyal following; girls and young women up to age 34 provide the majority of *Buffy* viewers and, to a lesser extent, a significant number of young men watch the show regularly, as well (Huff, K3813; "Limping Buffy," BI and B 11; Rogers, 60-61; and Allemang, C3). Marketers have jumped aboard, and a plethora of consumer goods has become available, including a Buffy line of clothing, Buffy figures, Buffy book guides, C.D. musical scores, and a Buffy fan club magazine series; an official Buffy website as well as hundreds of unofficial ones also exist.

(14) Why does this program resonate with critics? Media pundits like *Buffy's* slick and clever presentation (through season three) of the "high school is hell" theme and Joss Whedon's ingenious plot devices, special effects, and protagonists. They see the program as a shrewd way to reach a new generation of youth, particularly girls, in a manner that does not patronize them. John L. Allen, Jr., writing for the *National Catholic Reporter*, notes presciently that T.V. shows about teens have tended to reflect adult fears and stereotypes of young people and teen culture rather than how teenagers actually act and feel. He points out that "anti-teen hysteria has never been more pronounced" than in today's culture and argues that young people are often portrayed in popular culture as violent and nasty. Allen urges parents and other adults to watch *Buffy*, asserting that its protagonist "is actually among the more realistic and appealing teenagers on T.V. She struggles to do the right thing, and even when she fails, it's for the right reasons" (17). In a similar vein, journalist

Ken Tucker underlines the realism of Buffy's character: she "takes on heavy-duty, life-and-death responsibilities, giving the lie to the current cliché of adolescents as self-absorbed, work-phobic louts" (22). And Tucker's 17-year-old daughter, Hannah, speaks for many young women when she articulates why she likes Buffy: "The basic truth about Buffy herself is known to all who appreciate her: she is the intelligent, youthful hope that anyone, when confronted with life's little ghouls (metaphorical or otherwise), will be able to—as Willow put it—kick some serious demon ass" (23).

(15) It is difficult, at times, to separate critics from audience. For instance, Hannah Tucker writes critically but also as an avid viewer. Similarly Graceanne A. DeCandido, a *Buffy* fan, has published an analysis of the program from the perspective of librarianship. In a lighthearted but perspicacious essay, DeCandido extols the character of librarian Giles "who lives the faith that answers can be found, and most often found in the pages of a book." Indeed, DeCandido insists that books "form the matrix and latticework for the "pow! kick! stake! stuff that happens later." DeCandido quotes from the show to make her point. In "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date" (3/31/97), Xander comments that Giles is "like SuperLibrarian. Everyone forgets, Willow, that knowledge is the ultimate weapon."^[2] In "Amends" (12/15/98), Willy, a seedy male bartender, queries Xander: "So, what can I do for you? Couple of drinks?" Xander responds, "Yeah. Let me get a double shot, of, um . . . of information, pal." Buffy and her comrades will come to understand themselves better as they work to uncover the forces of darkness and to name them, DeCandido asserts. Knowledge leads to truth about oneself and about the world (46).

(16) *Buffy* critics cite and discuss youth empowerment and self-knowledge as the central leitmotifs in the program. Viewers revel in the unfolding quest narrative that atypically finds a personable and responsible young woman cast as hero. The phrase "woman warrior" is bandied about frequently, too, but treatment of the woman warrior as a theme in its own right has been slight. It is a concept rich in interpretive possibility in relation to the *Buffy* show, as I hope to demonstrate in the following discussion.

(17) Heraclitus, the ancient Greek scholar, called war "the father of all things." Certainly, in Western history, war has always served as the dominant narrative with the male warrior/hero holding pride of place. The male "just warrior" fights and dies for the greater good, while the female "beautiful soul" epitomizes the maternal war-support figure in need of male protection (Elshtain). The few women who have achieved warrior status in this hegemonic war chronicle have been portrayed as exceptional "armed maidens of righteousness," as illustrated in the mythologized stories of the Celtic Queen Boadicea, the Old Testament avenging Judith, and Joan of Arc (Warner, 1985 and 1987; Stocker; McLaughlin; and Davis). Such female heroes have not been permitted to form a tradition of their own except as temporary warrior transgressors, another example being the cross-dressing female soldier of seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century European society (DuGaw). Further, while honored as virtuous viragos, women warriors have also been viewed as inherently unsettling to the patriarchal social order; often their stories have been denigrated in or erased from the historical record. Concurrently, negative images of women warriors have served as a foil to the male "just warrior" tradition with the man-hating Amazon providing a case in point.

(18) Thanks to the recent and burgeoning scholarship on women's historic relation to war, we now have the means to develop an alternative reading of the woman warrior tradition. Following in the footsteps of Mary Beard's classic 1946 work, *Woman as*

Force in History, historians are uncovering the substantial role of women as warrior/ heroes and soldiers across time and place (see, for example, De Pauw). As historians of women bring to light this largely buried story of women warriors, feminist theorists in a wide range of fields are benefiting from the empirical findings of historians and are attempting to generate new meanings from this enlarged historical legacy. However, this project is like the effort required to swim against a strong current. Feminist political theorist Jean Elshtain states that "the woman fighter is, for us, an identity *in extremis*, not an expectation." She also identifies an uphill struggle to bring history's "Ferocious Few" to visibility: "Functioning as compensatory fantasy or unattainable ideal, tales of women warriors and fighters are easily buried by standard repetitions. Framed by the dominant narrative of bellicose men/pacific women, our reflections often lack sufficient force to break out, remaining at the level of fragile intimations. As representation, the Ferocious Few are routinely eclipsed by the enormous shadow cast as the Noncombatant Many step into the light" (180).

(19) In addition to the problem of "breakthrough," danger lurks once the tales of the Ferocious Few come into play. Art historian and critic Marina Warner, who has studied the image of the female form in Western culture and has authored a book about Joan of Arc, contends that women in contemporary society are drawn to and thereby trapped in a "phallogentric" warrior's world: "The armed maidens of righteousness and their present day dramatizers . . . remain prisoners of the fantasy [of the male warrior-hero] even in the midst of trying to turn it upside down" (1987; p. 176). Making this pessimistic pronouncement in the 1980s, Warner observes that "the symbolic order possesses the power to generate reality" (175). Warner's statement echoes Michel Foucault's warning in his influential study, *The History of Sexuality*, volume I, that marginalized people can be drawn to the power of "reverse discourse," whereby they find themselves seeking legitimacy "in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which [they were] disqualified" (101).

(20) Heeding Warner's and Foucault's insights, one might be tempted to dismiss Buffy, the character, as a compensatory fantasy for young women, and, by extension, as a protagonist whose persona reinforces rather than transgresses conventional gender expectations. However, instead, I would like to suggest that the woman warrior theme in *Buffy*—as presented through the mixed genre of fantasy/horror/adventure—represents an attempt to demystify the closed image of the male warrior-hero not merely by parodying through comedic means this powerful stereotype but also by offering a subversive open image of a just warrior. As well, although Buffy is male-identified, she and her friends also partake of traditionally perceived female-gendered ways of thinking and behaving. Paradoxically, although Buffy and the Scooby gang, a mixed-gender group, "slay" monsters, they also often resolve conflict non-violently, through rationality, tactfulness, compassion, and empathy. At the same time, Buffy and her friends sometimes heap scorn upon behavior deemed weak or vacillating by labeling it feminine.

(21) From the first episode of *Buffy*, viewers are led to apprehend the Slayer as a special kind of just warrior: Buffy has a "calling" and is honor-bound to protect humanity and to sacrifice her own ego gratification and personal life for the greater cause of fighting evil. She fights hand-to-hand and is powerful like a man, but Buffy also has an acrobatic agility and grace that cannot be easily categorized as either conventionally masculine or feminine. Further, she maintains an ironic distance from her warrior role even as she embraces it: "Destructo-Girl, that's me," Buffy declares, and, in another context, "I kill vampires; that's my job" ("When she Was Bad," 10/15/97, and "Ted," 12/8/97). Buffy's warrior role represents a lifetime

commitment. Fortunately, she has a supportive surrogate family: a paternalist Watcher-Guide and loyal friends, helpmeets in the battle to save the world time and again. Although Buffy struggles with her fate, in contrast to her male friends and lovers, Buffy (almost) always knows who she is and what she must do. In the first double episode of the series, "Welcome to the Hellmouth/the Harvest" (3/10/97), Buffy notes that the inept police force is a kind of army and remarks that its members cannot handle vampires: "They'd only come in with guns." Xander brings up the masculine western fighter-hero motif, and he hopes to join Buffy in battle:

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

Buffy: [No.] I'm the Slayer and you're not Xander, this is deeply dangerous.

Xander: I'm inadequate. I'm less than a man.

Willow [to Xander]: Buffy doesn't want you getting hurt.

Meanwhile, in this double episode, Angel comments that he is "scared" to go against the Master of a particular family of demons, and soon thereafter Xander declares: "Buffy's a superhero." In another example (season three), Angel compliments Buffy for being "a real soldier," and she retorts pithily: "That's me, just one of the troops" ("Enemies," 3/16/99). In the fourth season, Riley, Buffy's new love, comes to doubt himself as a soldier and confesses to Buffy in "This Year's Girl" (2/22/00): "I was trained to follow orders." Buffy responds that perhaps Riley needs to distance himself from the Initiative (the Army) and fight evil in his own way: "You can choose."

(22) Buffy's character as a woman warrior and hero is counterpoised not only against male characters but also against rebellious or nonconformist female characters. For instance, Faith, bad girl extraordinaire who becomes a rogue slayer and represents the fearful "disorderly woman" of history, myth, and popular culture, is introduced in season three to represent Buffy's darker self. Buffy is drawn for a time to Faith's self-destructive tendencies and her eroticized joy in violence. They rob a sporting goods store to procure weapons, with Faith instructing Buffy that she should work on the principle "want, take, have." In "Bad Girls" (2/19/99), Buffy tells herself that she is justified in breaking the law because she has to "save the world." However, Buffy changes her mind when Faith inadvertently kills a human being, and the following exchange takes place between Buffy and Faith in "Consequences" (1/16/99):

Buffy: We help people, it doesn't mean we can do whatever we want.

Faith: Why not? Something made us different. We're warriors, we're built to kill.

Buffy: To kill demons. But that does not mean we can pass judgement on people, like we're better than anyone else.

Faith: We are better. That's right, better. People need us to survive. And in the balance, nobody's going to cry over some random bystander who got caught in the crossfire.

Buffy: I am.

Faith: That's your loss.

At the end of season three, Faith lies in a coma; she reappears briefly in season four but leaves Sunnydale in a shaken state after a confrontation with Buffy. Buffy has not been tempted by her heart of darkness in this instance, but Faith will return, and the Chosen One will face another test. Life is filled with uncertainty and holds no final answers as the following exchange between Buffy and Giles during season two

("Lie to Me," 11/3/97) makes clear:

Buffy: You know, it's just, like, nothing's simple. I'm constantly trying to work it out, who to hate or love . . . who to trust It's like the more I know, the more confused I get.

Giles: I believe that's called "growing up."

Buffy: I'd like to stop now then, okay? Does it ever get easy?

Giles: You mean life?

Buffy: Yeah. Does it get easy?

Giles: What do you want me to say?

Buffy: Lie to me.

(23) Life does not become easier but rather more difficult as Buffy matures; nonetheless, as she moves on to college, she becomes more self-directed, as do her close friends. Willow, for instance, unlike Buffy who is predestined to save the world as often as necessary, chooses her fate: she remains at Buffy's side to fight evil rather than attend a prestigious university. Willow insists that she is "not just [Buffy's] sidekick," and to symbolize her new status as a warrior woman whose weapon of choice is witchcraft--although she occasionally "kicks some demon ass"--she dresses up as Joan of Arc for Halloween ("Fear Itself," 10/26/99). Willow faces disappointment in love with dignity when Oz leaves Sunnydale, and she takes some personal risks as she enters a rewarding, erotically-charged lesbian relationship with Tara, a sister Wicca university student.

(24) The *Buffy* series pushes forward with the "pow, slam, bang" special effects of surreal Slayer/demon encounters, but a recurrent theme that serves to sunder the Slayer from a male warrior tradition in popular culture is the tendency of the Chosen One and her surrogate family to eschew killing when possible and to solve problems non-violently.^[3] In one episode, for example, Buffy and her friends decide that a human rather than a demon is responsible for a girl's death, and they work to bring the murderer before the justice system ("The Puppet Show," 5/5/97). In another situation, a telepathic Buffy discovers a plot to kill high school students. The Slayer saves the day when she apprehends a lonely and confused high school student who has ascended the school tower room: "I came up here to kill myself," he explains. Buffy speaks gently to this young man, empathizing with his pain and convincing him to put down his gun. She is pleased with the outcome, remarking after the danger has passed, "It's nice to be able to help someone in a non-Slaying capacity" ("Earshot," 10/21/99).^[4]

(25) In *Buffy's* fourth season, non-slayage becomes a stronger theme. Plots accentuate the private/public split in Buffy's life as issues focusing on intimacy and trust in personal relationships are set against the Slayer's civic responsibility to keep evil at bay in the context of ambiguous ethical situations. The shape of evil shifts, too. Demons are no longer the unproblematic enemy or "other." Spike, for instance, has been victimized--surgically modified--by the Initiative. He has been cast out by other vampires, and though he hovers around the Scooby Gang and even occasionally comes to their aid, he is not a Slayerette and still professes to be their sworn enemy. His predicament accentuates the lockstep authority structure of the Initiative and its overriding of civil liberties. Buffy's unique Slayer role is set against that of the all-male commando squad which takes orders from Maggie Walsh, the intimidating civilian leader who oversees their work and symbolizes the male-identified woman par excellence. Riley Finn, the young military head of the squad, and, eventually, Buffy's lover, is gradually drawn into the Slayerette group as he comes to realize that his leader, Professor Walsh and, by extension, the military

system in which he has placed his trust, has betrayed his ideals. In contrast to Riley, who is a nurturing and caring New Age man as well as an efficient soldier, his commando buddies are shown to be insensitive misogynists, suggesting that such values run deep in military institutions.

(26) The interrogation of patriarchal institutional arrangements in society becomes a dominant theme in season four, but an exploration of the relationship between gender systems and institutional relations of power in society has been present since *Buffy's* inception. In a crucial episode in season three, "Helpless" (1/19/99), Giles, under orders from the British-based Watcher's Council, is forced to drug Buffy without her knowledge to effect a temporary weakening of her Slayer physical prowess; in such circumstances Buffy's demon-fighting spiritual and mental powers can be tested. Under duress, Giles does as he is told, and Buffy is put through a frightening rite of passage every Slayer must experience on her eighteenth birthday. Buffy passes the ordeal, and Giles is so ashamed of his act of betrayal that he tells Buffy what he has done. Further, Giles breaks with the Watcher tradition of following orders with blind faith, telling the elderly Council member who comes to check up on him, "You are waging a war; she [Buffy] is fighting it." Giles is summarily fired as Watcher because, as the Council representative notes, Giles now has "a father's love for the child." In addition to the incipient critique of warmaking with its allusion to the Vietnam War—it is the old men who send the young out to fight under false pretenses—a gendered pacifist-oriented message has been introduced: a man can reject war and soldiering in specific contexts, and he can serve in a nurturing parental role to protect a young person from being victimized by the war system, as such. Although the Council attempts to replace Giles with another Watcher, Buffy rejects him. It is soon apparent that while Giles will continue to serve as a mentor and friend, Buffy will no longer accept uncritically authoritarian patriarchal rule as symbolized by the Watcher's Council.

(27) In season four, Buffy continues to question male-dominant authority structures, although she is also, not surprisingly, at times somewhat dazzled by them. In one program, Riley brings Buffy into Initiative headquarters, and Professor Walsh seems to accept the Slayer as a kind of advisor for the demon-control program she heads. Buffy walks through a cavernous room and appears unmoved by the sight of monsters on trolleys who are being operated upon for unknown reasons. The Slayer maintains her own path but seems willing to help the Initiative and to take some direction from Maggie Walsh, a person she first encountered in another position of authority as her psychology professor. However, Walsh has her own agenda and when the Slayer begins to ask too many questions, she tries to have Buffy killed. Thus, Buffy must face squarely--at a personal level--the destructive potential of militarized authority systems. This assassination attempt throws Riley into crisis: "I don't know which team I'm on, who the bad guys are. Maybe I'm the bad guy. Maybe I'm the one you should kill" ("Goodbye Iowa," 1/15/00). In these circumstances, Buffy begins to help Riley work through his naiveté about the Initiative and the military as an institution. In "This Year's Girl" (2/22/00) Buffy utilizes her developing nurturing skills, and The Chosen One and the Scooby Gang help Riley emerge from his Initiative-structured world:

Riley: That's what I do, isn't it? Follow orders?

Buffy: You don't have to.

Riley: Don't I? All my life that's what I've been groomed to do . . . I just don't know if it's the right job anymore.

Buffy: I know how you feel. Giles used to be part of this Council and for years all they ever did was give me orders.

Riley: Ever obey them?

Buffy: Sure. The ones I was going to do anyway. The point is, I quit the Council. I was scared but it's OK now.

In a reversal of the male protector scenario, Buffy then tells Riley reassuringly: "You've been strong long enough . . . I am going to help you."

(28) In the next episode, in an interesting twist, Buffy must challenge the Watcher's Council, which now resembles a Mafia of the occult. Unlike Riley, Buffy is comfortable resisting a para-military force (the Watcher's Council) run amok; she represents the discerning and ethical citizen's ability to take a stand against evil wherever it is found. As the fourth season draws to a close, Buffy's subjectivity has developed well beyond that preordained for the Chosen One. She is a complex individual with strong moral authority.

(29) **From its beginnings, *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*** has been engaged in developing both a playful and a serious consideration of gendered relations of power in contemporary North American society. And as the series has evolved, its central theme has become the danger of ignorance and of oppressive patriarchal power structures. The woman warrior leitmotif has served the aims of the program well. This recognizable symbol of female agency in the world has permitted Joss Whedon to explore in innovative ways how gender identities are imposed and resisted in contemporary culture, for boys and men as well as girls and women. The program picks up on the current fascination with tough women in popular culture, but it goes further. At one level Buffy's martial arts prowess affirms rather than subverts patriarchal mores; at a more subtle level, the non-combat strategies that the Slayer and Slayerettes often employ to defeat evil serve as a method to re-vision or reconstitute warrior hero material and even to weave a pacifist thread into plot structures. In other words, Buffy as an open-image hero and *Buffy* (the program) as unfolding dramatic narrative, expose stereotypes and coded symbols that shore up a rigid war-influenced gender system in an attempt to chart new meanings for womanliness and manliness.

(30) Seen from the perspective that I have suggested in this essay, *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* can be understood as a rebel warrior narrative that harkens back to the mythic and historic tradition of the disruptive woman warrior hero at the same time that it beckons us forward, urging viewers to contemplate a refashioned humanitarian and partly androgynous citizen ideal for the twenty-first century, one that might inspire youth to be risk-takers in the ongoing and never-ending struggle to make the world a more secure and less violent place. Despite the whiteness and privilege of its protagonists, the program can be viewed as possessing subversive elements, notably in its portrayal of the Slayer as a transgressive warrior. The aura of unremitting evil "out there" as parodied through the horror/gothic genre and the need for responsible individuals to combat injustice and oppression with disciplined intelligence, compassionate understanding, and a cooperative spirit are important messages in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

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Notes

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[1] Angel and Cordelia play themselves in a spinoff series, *Angel*, which commenced fall 1999.

[2] All dates for *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* programs indicated in this essay refer to the original U.S. airdate.

[3] Joss Whedon has remarked that "*Buffy* vampires" crumble into dust because he does not want Buffy to be killing beings that look like humans every week. Interview with Joss Whedon preceding *Angel* episode, 4/14/97. It is also interesting that Buffy and her friends do not always slay monsters; sometimes demons cause their own deaths by inadvertently falling against a spiked fence or landing against a high-voltage electrical outlet or from some other misadventure while battling the Slayer and her helpers.

[4] Ironically, "Earshot" was one of the two episodes delayed by the T.V. networks in the wake of the Columbine tragedy because of its perceived violent content and possible negative influence on youth. "Earshot" was initially scheduled to be shown in May 1999. For a thoughtful scholarly exploration the problem posed by the Columbine massacre in relation to the *Buffy* program, see Kathleen McConnell, "Chaos at the Mouth of Hell: Why the Columbine High School Massacre Had Repercussions for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," *Gothic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000): 119-35.