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# Aeneas the Vampire Slayer: A Roman Model for Why Giles Kills Ben

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*Author's Note: the following contains spoilers both for the fifth season of* Buffy the Vampire Slayer *and for Virgil's* Aeneid.

[1] At the end of season five of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in the television show's 100th episode, the main character dies. Buffy's self-sacrifice saves the world, averts an apocalypse, and defeats a god ("The Gift," 5022, written and directed by Joss Whedon). Her death is the gift she can offer, saving her sister, her friends, and the world from destruction. Greater love hath no man than this, clearly. This final episode of the season closed with the camera lingering on a gravestone that reads "Buffy Anne Summers | 1981-2001 | Beloved Sister | Devoted Friend | She Saved the World | A Lot." A pretty effective cliffhanger, really, which sent many fans to the internet for more information, even leading some to suggest that rumors of the show's move from one network to another (WB to UPN) were in fact a hoax.[1] Was this the end of the series? If so, the sense of closure was magisterial. As it turns out, the imagery of the Christ-like sacrifice of the main character continued the following September with a resurrection, as *Buffy* was brought back to life for two more seasons.[2]

[2] Popular culture today can easily appropriate Christian *topoi*, so that, for many viewers, Buffy's self-sacrifice was clearly The Right Choice: "it is in line with our sensibilities" (Held 238)[3] Though it involves loss for her, for the other characters (the image of the vampire Spike weeping when he realizes that Buffy is dead was particularly moving, unexpectedly), and—at the time—for many fans, it was, in its way, inevitable. Which is why another death in the same episode is as problematic as it is. Glorificus ("Glory", the "Big Bad" of season 5) is a minor deity that exists inside a human host, a young doctor named Ben who has also served as a possible love interest for Buffy throughout the season. The hypostatic union of Glory and Ben means that only one of the two can appear at a time, and Glorificus has power only in Glory-form, not in Ben-form. Glory is seeking a mystical "Key" that she needs to wreak hell on earth. The Key is Buffy's sister Dawn, a character introduced at the beginning of the season, though the narrative establishes that from Buffy's perspective she has always had a sister, and that this is her closest blood relative[4] (Buffy's mother, Joyce Summers, had died earlier in the season, in "The Body," 5016). Both Ben and Dawn are vessels for a greater power, and "The Gift" emphasizes that connection, as well as their respective innocence. Xander directly compares the two as he contemplates killing Ben: "What about Ben? He can be

killed, right? I mean, I know he's an innocent, but, you know, not, like 'Dawn' innocent. We could kill a ... a regular guy... God." The link between Ben and Dawn at the human level directly mirrors the link between Glory and the Key at the non-human level, so that any interruption at the human level (such as by killing Ben or Dawn) will prevent Glory from attaining the Key. Buffy's self-sacrifice interrupts this pattern, substituting herself for Dawn in the equation.

[3] The climactic duel features some particularly tight scripting. Lighter episodes from the season, seemingly introduced as respite from the increasingly dark principal story arc, contribute elements that are recapitulated in the fight with Glory: the Buffybot, Xander's job as a construction worker, and Olaf the troll's enchanted hammer all become instrumental in the defeat of Glory. In the final battle, Buffy slams the hammer into Glory repeatedly, until, bleeding and exhausted, Glory morphs into the human Ben. Then Buffy hesitates. She clearly has the ability to kill Ben, and with him Glory, but she refuses. She tells Ben/Glory to stay away from "me and mine," drops the hammer, and leaves to rescue her sister.

[4] Then Giles appears. Rupert Giles, Buffy's Watcher and surrogate father-figure, asks in his quiet English accent, "Can you move?" Ben, defeated and prostrate, says haltingly, "Need a minute. She could have killed me." Giles pauses, then answers: "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." The speech is delivered calmly: he takes out his glasses and puts them on while speaking. The heroism of the Vampire Slayer is defined in Christian terms, with mercy and self-sacrifice as cardinal virtues. Ben doesn't understand what Giles is saying—"Us?" he asks— whereupon Giles calmly suffocates Ben until he no longer breathes.

[5] Giles eschews mercy and takes a human life, an act not without consequence in the Buffyverse. His words deny this is an act of heroism, but in that he is, arguably, wrong. His murder of Ben serves a greater good—Glory is finally stopped—and it protects those he loves, particularly Buffy. His solution has been considered as a possible course of action previously in the episode, but it was rejected outright by Buffy. It has been argued "Buffy Should've Killed Ben" but she fails to do so because of her (implicit) retributivistic sense of justice (Held 236-38). Contrasting this with Giles's utilitarianism does provide a "hard case" that allows intellectual exploration of justice and justification. However, the hard case is premised on some assumptions that are not necessarily valid for a decision made by a character in the series. For example, justice is defined in terms of the relationship between an individual's act and the state, and the discussion is framed in terms of state justice. Buffy is not a representative or agent of the state (whatever that might mean in this context), and makes her decisions based on individual values (perceptions of sisterhood, blood ties). So, indeed, does Giles, who is motivated by his duty ("I've sworn to protect this sorry world") and concern to maintain Buffy's heroic status ("She's a hero, you see").[5] The act will have repercussions for Giles (he will return to England early in season 6, recognizing that Buffy no longer needs his guiding example), but it does serve to lessen the Slayer's burden, if only slightly and (in the minutes before her death) momentarily.[6] Indeed, there is no indication that Buffy ever discovers what happens to Ben. Giles exhibits a pre-Christian heroism, and it is in fact very similar to the situation in which Aeneas finds himself at the end of Virgil's *Aeneid*, book 12, lines 919-52.[7]

[6] In making this association, I am not requiring there to be a causal relationship

between the two works. Certainly, many of the writers and producers associated with *Buffy* may have read the *Aeneid* in translation. At the level of the characters within the series, it is more certain that we should expect Giles to have read the *Aeneid* in Latin. Not only does the poem remain a fundamental text in Latin pedagogy in England, but in addition the depiction of the Underworld in *Aeneid* 6 may be imagined to be a basic component of Giles's training as a Watcher, alongside other works of Latin epic, such as the Necromancy in book 6 of Lucan's *Civil War* (*Pharsalia*), if such a hypothetical bibliobiography may be constructed for a fictional character. The connection I am suggesting instead operates for the modern audience of both works, whereby the knowledge of one enriches and amplifies the ethical context of the other. Does the literary representation of an ethical choice in Virgil allow for a better understanding of why Giles kills Ben?

[7] Like Aeneas, Giles feels an obligation to those institutions larger than himself: the Watchers' Council, the Slayer, and those supernatural powers of Good with whom he is allied in the fight against Evil. This cosmic dimension assures us that what he feels is *pietas* in the Roman sense. Aeneas is paradigmatically *pius*—it is his standard epithet in Virgil, occurring e.g. at *Aeneid* 1. 305—and this characterizes him throughout the poem. His sense of duty to the gods and his destiny motivates much of his action of the poem, and serves to keep him in many ways distant from much of the poem's readership. Further, Giles's paternal concern for Buffy can profitably be read against Aeneas' guardianship of Evander's son Pallas, granted at *Aeneid* 8. 514-19, though the analogy is not perfect: while younger like Pallas, Buffy remains the central character whose existence is necessary within the dramatic world to maintain cosmic balance. Giles does not appear to act out of passion—at least not any more. Previous episodes in the series (particularly "The Dark Age," 2008, and "Band Candy," 3006) have made clear that in his youth Giles had been wild. "Ripper" Giles was impulsive, aggressive, and much more traditionally masculine than the tweed-wearing Watcher the series presents. He was also more committed to direct action in his past, and thus in several ways evokes the guts-for-glory attitude of Aeneas in the Trojan War, which exists in the back-story of the *Aeneid*. Recalling his conduct as Troy was attacked, Aeneas recounts, "I went where I was driven [. . .] into the fighting and the flames, where the grim Fury of war called me" (*Aeneid* 2. 337); "like wolves foraging blindly on a misty night, driven out of their lairs by a ravening hunger that gives them no rest and leaving behind their young to wait for them with their throats all dry, we ran the gauntlet of the enemy to certain death" (*Aeneid* 2. 355-59). Both Giles and Aeneas have matured in their travels, but the sense remains that obligation is a coat covering a passionate tumult beneath. Aeneas usually keeps his passion repressed, but it does break through to the surface when Turnus kills Pallas and exults over the corpse, taking Pallas' baldric as a spoil (10. 474-509). Once the news reaches Aeneas, "Everything that stood before him he harvested with the sword, cutting a broad swathe through the enemy ranks, and burning with rage as he looked for this Turnus flushed with slaughter" (10. 513-15). The *furor* is always there, and it can surface as it does at the end of the *Aeneid*, or at the beginning of "The Gift" ("Yes we bloody well are [talking about this]!" Giles yells at Buffy). This brings us to each man's moment of decision.

[8] For Aeneas, the slaying of Turnus is an act during wartime against an enemy inscribed in the context of the poem with historical and literary precedents so that their combat and Turnus' death could have been completely unproblematic. Aeneas will not be going to the Hague anytime soon for killing Turnus. The difficulty comes in intention. Virgil lets us know something that would only be evident to Aeneas and Turnus in their final moment: that Aeneas is thinking of Pallas as his sword strikes home. This moment of anger, in which Aeneas' behavior evokes the *furor* of his

opponent Turnus, has been much studied,[8] but its deliberate ambiguity is what is relevant here. Multiple and conflicting motivations inform the series of specific moments leading up to the climactic duel. Defeated, Turnus supplicates for mercy and even begins to persuade Aeneas to spare his life (12. 938-41). Then Aeneas sees Pallas' baldric now worn by Turnus. This introduces a new motive, one that is completely intimate. The glance evokes "a whole nexus of feelings [which] may be seen working on Aeneas" (Lyne 225) privately and instantly that serve to remove any certainty from an understanding of the work. Virgil's reluctance to tease out implications means that Aeneas cannot be censured within the poem. The *Aeneid* masterfully has anticipated for its readership all that will follow from this act, from the marriage to Lavinia and the birth of Silvius to the founding of Alba Longa and Rome, down to the day of Augustus and beyond (see especially *Aeneid* 6. 756-66, 6. 788-97, 8. 47-48, 8. 626-29, 8. 675-81, 12. 937). There is a darkness present in the future, too. It will not be filled with *res laetae* ("happy times," *Aeneid* 2. 783), as future Romans will have to fight Carthaginians (*Aeneid* 4. 622-29). Aeneas himself will have a short life (*Aeneid* 1. 263-66), but will be deified (*Aeneid* 1. 259-60, 12. 794-95). A safe and prosperous future for his people is guaranteed in the slaying of Turnus, but there are contradictions that remove certainty that Aeneas' action is "justified." [9] Similarly, the complex emotions fostered by Aeneas' glance at Pallas' baldric makes it difficult for us to see this action in its unmitigated glory.

[9] So it is with Giles. In killing Ben Giles recognizes his own culpability: "She's not like us." Ben himself may be innocent, and the audience may like him—just as it is hard not to enjoy the wall-leaping heroics of Turnus (*Aeneid* 9.691-818), who in turn may evoke historical figures such as Coriolanus (see Plutarch, *Coriolanus* 8; Scott-Kilvert 20-21.) But within Ben is the power to destroy the sense of order for which the Slayer strives. We do not see rage in Giles—his detachment instead evokes Aeneas from most other parts of the poem—but we do have his recognition of the ethical problem he faces. When he kills Ben, he acts quickly, deliberately, and, unlike Aeneas, never looks away. Earlier in the episode, Giles and Buffy had articulated their relationship to the coming events: "This is how many apocalypses for us now?" asks Buffy; "Oh, uh, well..." says Giles, sitting and taking off his glasses, "Six, at least. Feels like a hundred." Giles has concluded that once Glory's ritual sacrifice of Dawn begins, the only resolution is to kill Dawn in order to prevent the ritual's completion. This Buffy refuses to do. She also says she will stop Giles if he acts on this intention. In the end the alternative is to give her own life, which is in a way easier—it is the culturally sanctioned "Christian" answer.[10] Giles' view is different: "I've sworn to protect this sorry world, and sometimes that means saying and doing what other people can't. What they shouldn't have to." He is talking about sacrificing Dawn, but the statement plays itself out in the decision to kill Ben, who is not a friend, not among the Slayer's inner circle of Scoobies, and consequently more easily classified as an enemy, despite his lack of agency in Glory's actions. Ben's threat exists only in potential. Neither he nor Dawn choose to be active in the situation, and so the audience reasonably expects the story to avoid both deaths.

[10] Rather than problematizing the situation as in the *Aeneid*, "The Gift" presents a moral dilemma apparently simplified from the one anticipated, which can be read against the principal heroic model the episode and series presents, that of Buffy the Slayer. That doesn't make Giles's decision unproblematic. Giles' calm does not provide the explanation of motivation that Aeneas' glance at Pallas's baldric does for readers of the *Aeneid*. But it does remain a private act, lost in the confusion of the season-ending apocalypse, which the show and its characters are unwilling to judge. An earlier invocation of the St. Crispin's Day speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (IV. iii.20-67) by Giles and Spike provides a further ironic distance between the nature of

the battle they expect to fight and the one they do. The difference between Buffy and Giles resides in the presumed default morality of the situation: that is, in what ethical framework each member of the audience brings to the episode. The moral positions staked out by the characters will not correspond to that of a given audience member, in most cases. The conflict does provide an opportunity for the audience to evaluate the differences between a "Christian" decision in a post-Christian context and a "Roman" decision in a post-classical context, and this in turn echoes with a larger debate about the inherited values a culture possesses. That the killing might have been excusable if it were not completely tied up with personal emotions should make the audience less comfortable with Giles' action and not more. The choices made by Aeneas and Giles both recognize the ambiguities of the human condition, drawing contrasts between the expression of private emotions and the public face of leadership. Virgil encourages us to be wary of any direct evaluation of another's ethical choice. Even given the intimate details not available to us in life, uncertainty will always exist. Both "The Gift" and the *Aeneid* are profound human explorations of the excuses we provide under the guise of ethics. Neither allows the audience easily to put aside the concerns of morality, but it is only in making choices that we have a chance for heroism.

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[1] See Millman.

[2] Christian symbolism is a central component to the series, beyond the trappings that might be expected in a vampire story, and about this there have been some valuable discussions. Wendy Anderson concentrates on "Amends" (3010), an episode in which Whedon himself acknowledges "it's hard to ignore the idea of a 'Christmas miracle' here" (cited in Anderson, "Prophecy" 213); Anderson (225-26) and Hertz see Christological associations in "Grave" (6021), the final episode of season six. Erickson connects the series' religious perspective particularly to the postmodern (some would say post-Christian) expressions of Christianity in America.

[3] Held criticizes Buffy's choice, however, as discussed in paragraph 5.

[4] One online magazine, awarding Buffy the title "Theologian of the Year," compares the relationship between Buffy and Dawn in this episode with Christ and the Church (Skippy R).

[5] All of these motives are open to examination, and from the perspective of state-imposed justice both characters might be culpable. I would argue that neither is concerned about Held's questions, however. Whatever measure they use to justify their own actions, the scale is simultaneously individual and cosmological; it is not concerned with society or the state (Giles is not concerned that he might go to jail if he kills Ben, for example). This is why Held's

concern about whether an action is “justified” (e.g on 238) sits somewhat uneasily with me. In the absence of an absolute scale by which to measure these things, both Buffy and Giles can believe themselves to be justified in their decisions.

[6] Petrova diminishes the moral implications of Giles’s decision in three ways. First, she perceives the consequences of murder in purely psychological terms (“…whoever does it will be incurring feelings of guilt otherwise he would have left Buffy to do it”). Second, since the guilt is not evident, she concludes, “Giles objectifies the evil [. . .] it is not in him, but he is merely the carrier” (this then parallels Giles with Ben). Both of these assumptions seem incompatible with a cosmology where Good and Evil are locked in a timeless battle across dimensions. Third, she later claims “We cannot say that Giles is evil when he kills Ben, because he doesn’t seem to have any choice about it.” This effectively removes even the possibility of heroism from Giles. Of course he has a choice: it may be a crummy choice, but it is a choice nonetheless. Buffy chose to leave Ben alive and face the risk of Glory’s return to spare a human life. Giles chooses to eliminate that possibility. Right or wrong, it is a choice. I would instead argue that both choices are heroic, but by different standards of heroism.

[7] All Virgil references are to the Latin text; lineation in translations may vary. West is cited here.

[8] Representative views from different perspectives can be found in Anderson, *The Art of the Aeneid* 91-100, Burnell, Galinsky , Horsfall 192-216, Little, Lyne, Putnam, West.

[9] O’Hara 88-122, argues that the prophecies of the *Aeneid* deliberately mislead Aeneas, and that the fulfillment is consistently bleaker than the prediction.

[10] While mercy (Latin *clementia*) is a virtue in Stoic ethics and clearly informs the ethical choices of the *Aeneid* (see Lyne), it does not extend to self-sacrifice.