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Appetite and Destruction: Issues of Consumption and Containment in Seasons 2 and 3 of
Buffy the Vampire Slayer

As a Fan/Scholar of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and as an English professor who has taught Women's Studies classes which analyzed media images of women, I am continually disturbed when I watch the show by the spectacle of the amazing shrinking Buffy/Sarah Michelle Gellar throughout the course of the series. By season seven, Buffy looked so fragile, it was hard to buy in to her slayer strength and my willing suspension of disbelief was often disrupted by an urge to go make the Slayer a sandwich. Because of these observations and urges, I began to notice food on the show and to watch for references to and consumption of food. What I found, particularly in the first three seasons, was that Buffy rarely ate or drank and that when she did, there were usually some sort of extenuating circumstances or there were consequences. She frequently refuses food offered to her because she is "not hungry,"¹ is often interrupted before beginning to eat the food in front of her², and often has diet food or no food in scenes where others are eating³. On a couple of occasions, her food is taken away from her or

¹ 2.11 Ted; 2.12 Bad Eggs ; 2.14 Innocence; 3.14 Bad Girls;

² 1.4 Teacher's Pet; 1.5 Never Kill a Boy on the First Date ; 2.19 I Only Have Eyes for You; 3.18 Earshot

³ 1.1 Welcome to the Hellmouth; 1.3 Witch; 2.1 When She Was Bad; 2.2 Some Assembly Required; 2.3 School Hard; 2.6 Halloween; 2.11 Ted; 2.17 Passion; 2.19 I Only Have Eyes For You; 2.21 Becoming Pt. 1; 3.3 Faith Hope, and Trick; 3.4 Beauty and the Beasts; 3.6 Band Candy; 3.11 Gingerbread

eaten by others⁴. While she talks about food and makes food for others, she rarely consumes it. When she does, it is often explicitly because she is bewitched as in “Witch” (1.3) and “Beer Bad” (4.5) or is using food to compensate for emotional pain as in “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered,” (2.16). While one of my colleagues argued that this might be because the actress Sarah Michelle Gellar refuses to eat and while I myself have noted it would be difficult for a lead actor to do a lot of eating while acting, I think there is more at stake here than issues of actor’s preference and practicality. In the high school episodes of the show, Buffy’s ability to be a righteous slayer, to make good choices and to win battles is often linked to her refusal to consume food and drink and to engage in sexualized behavior—to her denial of her appetites, her fasting.

The link between Buffy’s fasting and her moral authority are most obvious in two episodes, “Ted” from season 2 and “Band Candy” from season 3. In these two episodes, Buffy’s refusal to eat is directly linked to her ability to see and battle evil of which others are unaware or dismissive. Joyce Summers, Xander, and Willow are all smitten with Joyce’s new boyfriend Ted and particularly with the yummy treats he prepares. Buffy is resistant to both Ted’s charms and his mini-pizzas and cookies, and it appears at first as if she is just being petulant about her mother dating. Eventually, however, it becomes clear that there is something very wrong with Ted, but Buffy is the only one who recognizes it. In fact, her friends initially refuse to validate Buffy’s negative feelings about Ted, diagnosing her with “parental issues.” When Ted threatens to slap Buffy’s face after she cheats at miniature golf, her mother denies her version of the story and insists upon Ted’s. However, when Buffy inadvertently kills Ted after he has invaded her privacy and slapped her, Joyce tries to protect her by lying to police and Xander assumes that she had

⁴ 1.6 The Pack; 1.11 Out of Mind, Out of Sight

been right all along and that Ted is “a demon, a giant bug, some kind of dark god with the secrets of nouvelle cuisine.” Even after Buffy says that he was human and that she “had no right to hit him like that,” Xander has faith in her, exhorting the Scoobies to research Ted with, “No way, no how does Buffy put the hurt on an innocent man. Nice Uncle Ted was dirty.” Insisting upon taking responsibility for her actions and filled with remorse for killing a human—even in self-defense—Buffy turns herself in to the police. While she is struggling with her despair and her mother’s distance, the Scooby gang discovers that Ted’s yummy cookies are filled with tranquilizers and that he is a serial killer who keeps the bodies of his four wives in a closet. He is also a robot and, recovering from Buffy’s attack, he tries to kill both her and Joyce, and is, of course defeated by Buffy. Her triumph over Ted validates Buffy’s moral authority and preserves the Summers’ household as a matriarchal space. Ted himself is a pretty obvious symbol for the white capitalist patriarchy. A financially successful salesman whose early platitudes about family and love are soon replaced by rage, threats, violence, and statements to Joyce such as “Don’t I always tell you what to do?” and “I don’t take orders from women,” Ted shows his cooking and sensitivity were lures to get Joyce back to his fifties time-warp apartment and a “traditional” marriage, complete with prayers before dinner. Buffy saves her mother from this fate and then they sit on the front porch and eat celery together—the triumph of feminism over patriarchy, but only at the price of renouncing yummy food.

In “Band Candy,” food—specifically chocolate bars bewitched by Ethan Rayne—is the medium through which adults lose their moral authority and their sense of responsibility, returning to teenage behavior and attitudes. Rayne has been subcontracted by Mr. Trick to render inattentive the adults of Sunnydale while the Mayor pays tribute to

a demon. Despite the fact that the candy has no effect on those who are already teenagers, witnessed by its lack of effect on Xander, Buffy eats no candy. Unlike Willow and Xander, she also shows no excitement about candy or surprise that as, Willow says, it can be used “for evil.” Very clearly, eating “unhealthy” candy is linked to both moral laxity and sexuality in the criminal behavior and “hooking up” of Joyce and Giles, the ankle sex of Xander and Willow, and Cordy’s father retreating to the restroom with a bunch of old *Esquires*. Buffy’s abstention from the candy and from sexualized behavior distinguishes her in this episode, and is part of the narrative arc in which she moves from being “immature” for lying to Joyce and Giles about her whereabouts to a position of moral authority and heroism. She lies in order to be able to visit the recovering Angel, whom she is clearly sexually attracted to, but acting responsibly, neither she nor he act on this attraction. Angel also abstains from drinking the pig’s blood Buffy has brought him in front of her. When Buffy solves the mystery of the mysterious second childhood of Sunnydale’s adults, she switches roles with the adults who were scolding her at the beginning of the episode by correcting and directing them in order to stop the distribution of the candy, kill the demon, and rescue the babies who are to be the tribute. While they are all teenagers, she is clearly the leader and the hero. Even after the adults have returned to their normal states, Buffy is in a more dominant position than she was at the beginning of the episode, reminding Joyce and Giles that she is responsible for stopping them from “doing anything” while under the influence of the candy.

Just as Buffy’s abstinence is linked to her moral authority, her indulgence of her appetites is linked to impaired judgment in three episodes from seasons two and three: “Reptile Boy,” “Faith, Hope, and Trick,” and “Bad Girls.” In “Reptile Boy,” Buffy,

upset at Angel's standoffishness, lies to Giles and goes to a fraternity party with Cordelia despite the disapproval of Xander and Willow. The fraternity brothers plan to use Cordelia, Buffy, and another high school girl as sacrifices to a reptile demon who ensures their worldly success. Buffy, fully aware that she is shirking her responsibilities, wavers in her decision to attend the party, to drink, and to flirt with Tom, an attractive fraternity man. Seduced by Tom's argument that she is "too mature" and should have more fun, Buffy takes a proffered drink which is drugged and ends up chained in the basement with Cordy and another girl. With the help of the Scoobies, she kills the demon. She confesses to Giles "I told one lie. I had one drink." And he replies, Yes, and you were very nearly devoured by a giant demon snake. The words let that be a lesson are a tad redundant at this juncture." Unfortunately, Buffy doesn't learn the lesson. It takes Faith for her to do so.

In Season Three, Buffy's foil, the dark slayer Faith, is introduced. Immediately attractive to Xander, Giles, and Joyce, Faith, like Kendra before her, is at first an object of jealousy for Buffy. The contrasts between them are drawn very clearly in the episode in which Faith first appears, "Faith, Hope, and Trick." Whereas Faith is hyper-sexualized and both slays and eats with pleasurable abandon⁵, Buffy is celibate and controlled. This contrast is seen quite clearly in the following exchange:

Faith: God, I could eat a horse. Isn't it crazy, how slaying just always make you hungry and horny?

Buffy: Well, sometimes I crave a non-fat yogurt afterwards.

⁵ See Karl Shudt, "Also Sprach Faith" in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* for a discussion of "Faith as Nietzschean Ideal" which includes a discussion of her differences from Buffy.

The dinner scene at Buffy's house also highlights Buffy's jealousy of Faith and their differences. Joyce is filling Faith's plate and ignoring Buffy's desire for food. Buffy puts some fries on her plate and eats one, looking sickened. When Buffy and Joyce go to the kitchen to talk, Faith can be seen through the doorway eating Buffy's fries and other food on the table with her hands. As Buffy bonds with Faith as a fellow slayer, she begins to try on some of Faith's characteristics. At the end of the episode, after the two have defeated Kakistos, Faith asks Buffy, "You hungry?" and Buffy replies "Starved."

After this episode, Buffy begins to give in to her appetites and to resist her identity as the good slayer. In Episode 11, "Gingerbread," Joyce brings Buffy a large grocery bag full of food as a "snack" when she is on patrol. In Episode 12, "Helpless," Buffy tells Giles in a conversation about Faith, "I hate being the good one" as she makes huge stacks of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. In Episode 13, "The Zeppo," Willow tells Giles Buffy has eaten three jelly donuts. Buffy becomes Faith's mini-me in Episode 14, "Bad Girls," dressing like her, skipping school, challenging Wesley, taunting boys at the Bronze, and adopting her mantra of "Want, Take, Have." Interestingly, Buffy doesn't eat in this episode, refusing Joyce's offer of breakfast: "Admit it, some days don't you want to just wake up and say to hell with the diet. Want to make waffles? Big Saturday brunch?" and not responding to Faith's invitation to get ribs after they finish slaying. Of course, Buffy soon sees the dangers of Faith's way when her reckless abandon in slaying results in the death of Deputy Mayor Finch. Appalled at Faith's lack of remorse and insistence upon a slayer's exemption from societal laws, Buffy embraces her own identity once again, urging Faith to go to the police.

In the first three seasons, Buffy is differentiated from Faith, and from the female vampire Darla, in her ability to suppress and deny her appetites. Her role as moral authority, as the Chosen One, is linked to her ability to abstain, and her slips from abstinence lead to tragedy--Angel's curse and Deputy Mayor Finch's death--and remorse. These observations seem critical to examinations of Buffy's role as feminist icon and to discussions of morality, ethics, and religion in the series. Is Buffy's disputed role as feminist icon undermined by the fact that her moral authority and heroism are dependent upon her adherence to societal constructs of female purity and attractiveness—chastity or monogamy, a thin body? Do the ties between fasting and being able to recognize and defeat evil of which others are unaware suggest she is a saint or a religious mystic? Obviously, questions of morality become much more complex when Buffy goes to college. Just as good and evil become more ambiguous, Buffy's identity as the “good” one does as well.

As she becomes an adult, she is allowed an adult sexuality and that sexuality is explicitly linked with food. When rejected by Parker in Episode 4, “Fear Itself,” she first loses her appetite and then gorges on chocolate. Buffy and Riley's relationship is inaugurated with a picnic and Willow directly links Buffy's appetite for food to their relationship in the following exchange over breakfast in Episode 12, “A New Man.”

Buffy: I like pancakes because they're stackable and oh waffles because you can put things in the little holes if you want to.

Willow: You should always have a new boyfriend. You're so much fun right now.

And, I'm going to end there—with Buffy happily eating.