

“Those whom the powers wish to destroy, they first make mad”:

the classical roots of madness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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A classroom. Schoolgirl Willow Rosenberg stands at the front of the class in a shapeless dress, about to deliver a book report. In the front row, Anya the ex-demon comments: “It’s exactly like a Greek tragedy. There should only be Greeks.”

This is a dream – part of the episode *Restless*¹ which is constructed almost entirely of dreams – but, as ever in *Buffy* this dream is more than just nonsense. So what does Anya’s comment mean? Why, and how, is Willow’s story a Greek tragedy? We’ll come back to this question, after taking a look at the way *Buffy* plays with some themes from Greek tragedy and, specifically, with the theme of Greek tragic madness.

To begin by defining terms. This discussion of madness in the Buffyverse excludes some related conditions: confusion caused by magic, possession, or the state of just-having-returned-from-the-dead. When the Scoobies fail to react to the presence of several demons in the episode *Family*², they are not mad, but are acting consistently, based on having only partial information due to a magic spell, cast by Tara. When Xander in *The Pack*³, or Angel and Buffy in *I only have eyes for you*⁴, act in uncharacteristic ways, they are not mad, but have been possessed by another personality which behaves in its own, rational, way. And when Angel, Darla and Buffy, after returning from, respectively, Hell,

¹ Buffy (4:22)

² Buffy (5:6)

³ Buffy (1.6)

⁴ Buffy (2.19)

presumably Hell and Heaven, act in a disoriented, savage way, they are not mad, simply suffering the effects of a long journey. As Anya points out, “jet-lag from hell has gotta be, you know, jet-lag from hell.”⁵

So, looking at the characters who are *described* as mad in the show, I’d like to suggest that madness in the Buffyverse consists in almost exactly the same things that it consists of in Greek tragedy. By looking at Glory and those she sends mad in Season 5, I’ll explore how madness in Buffy, like Greek tragic madness, is generally both externally-caused and temporary. Examining the character of Drusilla, and drawing out the parallels between her and the Greek heroine Cassandra, will highlight the links between madness and altered vision. And the character journey of Spike, among others, will show the links between madness, murder and death: links which would have been very familiar to an ancient Greek audience. Finally, I’ll take a detailed look at *Normal Again*⁶, an episode which plays with the show’s classical conception of madness by interweaving it with a madness which takes its inspiration from more modern and Gothic sources.

Like Greek tragic madness, madness in Buffy is invariably externally-caused, and is almost always temporary. This is demonstrated most clearly in Season 5, a season dominated by Glory, a ‘god’ who both is mad and causes madness. Glory describes this madness in the following terms:

“It doesn't kill you. What it does ... is make you feel like you're in a noisy little dark room ... naked and ashamed ... and there are things in the dark that need to hurt you because

⁵ *Afterlife* Buffy (6.3)

⁶ Buffy (6:17)

you're bad ... little pinching things that go in your ears ... and crawl on the inside of your skull. And you know ... that if the noise and the crawling would stop ... that you could remember how to get out. But you never, ever will.”⁷

Throughout the season, Glory regularly “brain-sucks” human beings – including, most notably, Tara – driving her fingers into their heads to draw out the “energies that bind the human mind into a cohesive whole⁸” and thus prevent her own mental collapse.

Interestingly, in *The Gift*, Willow is able to “brain-suck” Glory. She takes from her what she had removed, gives it back to Tara, and thus restores Tara to sanity. The image of madness as the *removal* of something from the brain is striking. Glory’s fingers do not simply wiggle in her victims heads, they move something from those heads to Glory’s own. This idea of madness as removal, as mind-damage is so skillfully constructed that it is important to underline how different it is from our own understandings. What Glory produces is *mystical* madness. It is in no way specific to the people it affects. It does not arise from circumstances, character or brain chemistry. No human being is any more susceptible than another. Glory-madness comes from the outside to attack its victim’s mind, sending them mad. If the attack can be reversed, the victim will become sane once more, with no lasting mind-damage except, perhaps, the distress of remembering how it felt to be mad. What this is, in fact, is an aspect of *ate*, the Greek notion of, among other things, mind damage.

⁷ *Tough Love* Buffy (5:19)

⁸ *Blood Ties* Buffy (5:13)

Greek tragic madness comes from the outside, and is often sent by a god. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, Ajax is "struck blind with madness in the night" by Athena, but once that madness is lifted he is perfectly sane once more. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra tells us that: "madness came upon [her], a god dulled [her] mind and [she] fell"⁹. As Ruth Padel explains in *Whom Gods Destroy*, "Madness [in Greek tragedy] is something done to you, painfully, by outside forces, not something you do to yourself."¹⁰ "If someone in a Greek tragedy said, "Then I knew X was mad" it would be because madness had suddenly attacked. There would be no implications of a long-term condition. The words would simply refer to what had happened, a madness only present when apparent."¹¹

Glory herself has certain parallels with the Greek gods most strongly linked to madness. Like Dionysus, the god of madness, wine and theatre, she is gender-ambiguous. Glory shares a body with Ben, a man, while Dionysus was raised as a girl. Like the Furies, three goddesses who struck their victims with madness, Glory was one of three gods. We learn that she ruled a demon dimension in a "triumvirate of suffering and despair"¹². In addition, the Furies were: "embodiments of murderous madness, rising from the relationships between people bound by... family blood."¹³ That interest in family blood is intriguing, given that Glory's aim is to use the blood of Dawn – the human embodiment of a mystical 'key' – to open a gateway between dimensions. Dawn's blood has been the subject of some earlier discussion, with Buffy assuring her that it is

⁹ trans. Davie, J (2003) *Medea and other plays*. Penguin, London.

¹⁰ Padel, R (1995) *Whom Gods Destroy: elements of Greek and tragic madness*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey. p105

¹¹ Ibid p31

¹² *The Weight of the World* Buffy (5:21)

¹³ Padel, op cit, p10

“Summers blood. It’s just like mine.”¹⁴ The link with the Furies’ interest in family blood is not a direct one, but there is a thematic parallel.

Of course, Glory is a creation in her own right, and can’t be directly identified with any of the classical pantheon, but these parallels do point up the classical ‘feel’ to Glory. And, like Greek tragic madness, Glory-madness is not only external and temporary, but also connected to sight, both in the blackness of vision Glory describes as a “noisy little dark room” and also in that it confers a form of true-seeing. The Glory-mad can detect that something is awry with Dawn. “There’s no data, there’s no pictures on this one,” one of them declares¹⁵. And in *Tough Love* Tara catastrophically identifies Dawn as “pure green energy¹⁶”. The mad, of course, are right. Dawn *isn’t* really there, she *is* really green energy. This theme of madness as a form of ‘twisted vision’ is helpfully explored by looking at another character struck by madness: Drusilla.

Drusilla is a vampire seer, sometime paramour of Spike, whose madness is closely linked to aspects of altered vision. In Greek tragic madness, these elements are strongly related. In madness, ‘straight’ or normal sight is replaced with twisted or dark sight. With twisted sight, mystical ‘reality’ may be visible, but more prosaic reality will be confused. An example is Pentheus in Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, who is able to perceive Dionysus as a bull – one of the god’s forms – but cannot see the folly of his own plan to spy on all-female Bacchic rites.

¹⁴ *Blood Ties*, Buffy (5:13)

¹⁵ *Listening to Fear*, Buffy (5:9)

¹⁶ *Tough Love*, Buffy (5:19)

Drusilla's twisted sight manifests in three ways. In the first place, Drusilla, who, interestingly, often carries a blindfolded doll, is frequently confused about what she can see and what she cannot, as the following exchange with Spike shows:¹⁷

“Drusilla: I'm naming all the stars.

Spike: You can't see the stars, love. That's the ceiling. Also, it's day.

Drusilla: I can see them. But I've named them all the same name and there's terrible confusion.”

This exchange is rather reminiscent of Agave in *The Bacchae*, who, when she is mad, also sees the sky as changed.

In the second place, Drusilla has the power to cause others to see “crooked”. In *Becoming*¹⁸, she is able to hypnotise Kendra with the words “Be in my eyes. Be in me.” Later, she is able to make Giles see her as Jenny Calendar, whom Angel had murdered earlier in the season, telling him to “see with [his] heart”¹⁹. This power again brings to mind the actions of the mad god Dionysus, who can, for example, cause Agave to see her dead son's head as that of a slain lion.

Finally and most importantly, Drusilla has the ability to see the future. In this she is closely aligned with that most famous Greek prophetess: Cassandra. The similarities between the two women's stories are striking. Both Drusilla and Cassandra were consecrated virgins. Cassandra is the priestess of Apollo, who wooed her and gave her

¹⁷ *Innocence* (2:14)

¹⁸ *Buffy* (2:21)

¹⁹ *Buffy* (2:22)

the gift of prophecy. Drusilla becomes a nun. Cassandra is raped by Ajax in her temple precinct and given as a concubine to Agamemnon, men who destroyed her home and killed her father. Drusilla is turned into a vampire by Angel, after he has killed her family and fellow nuns²⁰. And, like Cassandra, and in contrast to other victims of madness in either *Buffy* or Greek tragedy, Drusilla's madness is permanent. For Cassandra, it is not the gift of prophecy which makes her mad, nor the misfortunes that befall her, but the conjunction of the two. Cassandra is given the gift of prophecy by Apollo and promises sex to him in return; she breaks her promise and he curses her. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Poseidon describes how Apollo "filled her with prophetic madness"²¹. It is that tangled relation with Apollo which makes Cassandra's madness permanent: Apollo will neither die nor relent, Cassandra cannot lose her prophetic power once it has been given. Cassandra's madness, prophecy and life must end together. In a similar way, I would suggest, the permanence of Drusilla's madness is sealed by the immortality of her sire, Angel, and by her own immortality. In the Angel episode *Dear Boy*, we learn in a flashback that Drusilla was able to see in advance that Angel would turn her into a vampire, and that, in the moment that her visions became reality, she went mad. Drusilla is, in a sense, continuously poised in that sanity-destroying moment of being 'turned'. Because she will not die, because she will always be a vampire, that maddening experience of being "struck" from the outside is constantly with her. For Drusilla, like Cassandra, the end of her madness would mean the end of her life.

²⁰ *Dear Boy* Angel 2.5

²¹ trans. Davie, J (1999) *Electra and other plays*. Penguin, London.

Death and madness are even more strongly linked elsewhere in *Buffy*. For in the show, as in Greek tragic drama, madness almost invariably begins a process which ends in death, either for the afflicted character or for those close to them. Phaedra and Ajax both kill themselves after their mad fits, Pentheus dies at the hand of his mother, Agave, Heracles survives, but has killed his own children. Similarly, not only does the mad god Glory die, but so too do Joyce – who suffered from madness brought on by a brain tumour – and Tara, whom Glory made mad. Not only that, but Tara’s madness inspires Willow to attack Glory with dark magic, an important step on her path toward evil and, ultimately, murder²². In the case of Spike, the link between madness and death is even clearer. In Season 7, Spike’s madness causes him to kill without knowing or remembering that he has done so. He kills over and over again, even though he has both a soul and a chip. And when he remembers what he has done, he is mentally broken, like Heracles, Phaedra and Ajax, not by the madness itself but by the knowledge of what he did under its influence. And, at the end of Season 7, the logical conclusion to this trajectory is reached when he allows himself to be killed in battle. Just as for the ancient Greeks, madness in *Buffy* is almost always a foreshadowing of death, either for the mad or for those closest to them.

Which brings us to *Normal Again*²³, an episode which delves into what Foucault called: “the confused communication between fantastic invention and the fascinations of delirium”²⁴. *Normal Again* contains a madness within a madness. In the episode, Buffy

²² *Tough Love*, *Buffy* (5:19)

²³ *Buffy* (6:17)

²⁴ Foucault, M (1961) *Madness and Civilization*. Trans Howard, R (2001). Routledge, London. pp25-26

goes mad and, in a complex set of delusions, begins to believe that Sunnydale and her life as a slayer are, themselves, nothing but insane figments.

If we extract, for a moment, the actual *content* of Buffy's madness in the episode and concentrate on its outward manifestations, its classical roots become clear. Buffy – like Heracles or Ajax a hero, a mighty warrior – has incurred the wrath of an enemy. (In fact, a rather classically-allusive triumvirate.) This enemy sends Madness to her, in the form of an actual physical presence in the story – a demon which pierces her arm. As soon as Madness strikes, Buffy begins to experience delusional visions. Her companions are concerned. One of them, a witch, concocts a potion to cure her but she rejects it.

(Incidentally, the black potion Willow brews is rather reminiscent of black hellebore – a cure for madness recommended by Hippocrates.) Still insane, Buffy resolves to kill her companions by tying them up and losing a demon on them. Of course, if this really were a Greek tragedy Buffy would succeed in killing her surrogate family and, like Heracles, Agave and Ajax, would understand only too late what she has done. As it is, Buffy manages to shed her madness and experiences no further attacks. With the exception of this ending, however, the Greeks would have had no difficulty in recognizing this story. In *Heracles Furens*, Heracles is sent mad by an attack from Madness itself and kills his wife and sons, thinking that they are his enemies. It's exactly like a Greek tragedy, in fact.

And yet, threaded through this story is a different kind of madness: a madness with the modern accoutrements of doctors and asylums, restraints and anti-psychotic drugs.

Heracles' madness is fairly simple: his family appears to him an enemy. Buffy's is more complex. When Madness strikes, she experiences a delusion that her adventures as a vampire slayer have been the inventions of a disordered mind. In a self-reflexive twist, Buffy goes mad, and the content of her madness is that she imagines herself to be mad.

So now we have a second story of madness to place alongside the first. In this alternative world, Buffy is a mentally disturbed young woman. As she enters adolescence, she begins to imagine that she is a superhero, she sees demons and vampires. She is confined to an asylum and retreats further into her fantasy. Eventually, this invented world becomes so convincing and attractive that she is lost altogether to reality. Taking *this* story on its own merits, the parallels between it and gothic madness are interesting. Gothic literature, which flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries, took madness as one of its central themes; examples of the gothic mad are Mrs Rochester in *Jane Eyre* – the original madwoman in the attic – and the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. *Normal Again*'s alternative history for Buffy has many similarities to this gothic madness. Gothic madness tends to afflict vulnerable women (as opposed to Greek tragic madness which is more likely to strike heroic men). Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time for its onset. The Gothic mad are typically confined – in the attic, in an asylum – while the Greek mad can rarely be restrained. In the Gothic paradigm, cures for madness are often attempted but rarely succeed. In the Greek world, there is rarely opportunity for a cure: the mad fit is brief, lasting only long enough for damage to be wrought in the world. And, in some feminist readings, Gothic madness is often a way for women to escape from the narrow lives laid down for them. Buffy's

fantasy of being strong and powerful, of fighting demons and vampires, would be a perfect example of this.

In *Normal Again*, these two stories – of Gothic madness and Greek tragic madness – are wound around each other in a tight nexus. We, the viewers, follow Buffy through them. We actually enter Buffy’s mad visions with her, rather than simply hearing them reported. This is unique in the show – we never *see* with Drusilla’s prophetic sight, never perceive Dawn as a source of green energy, never enter Glory’s black, insane room. This is, of course, because Buffy is the hero. Her status enables us to take that journey with her, just as it allows us to see the figure of Madness on the stage attacking Heracles. We journey with her because she is the hero. Or, as Warren might say: “Because it’s [Buffy’s] book, you moron!”²⁵

But going on that journey with Buffy is unsettling. As we travel with her we are forced, like her, to question what is “real” and what is “mad”. Of course, we know which one she will choose. The true Buffy world is the classical one, the world in which seeing gods and demons may mean that one is mad not because gods and demons are *not* real, but because they are. It comes as no surprise to us that Buffy eventually realizes this. And yet the episode is also, as it were, winking at the audience. Because, while we know which world is real for Buffy, we also know that Buffy’s ‘real’ world, is not real at all. If we believed what Buffy believes – if we thought that demons, vampires, werewolves and witches actually existed – we *would* be mad. By watching Buffy, *Normal Again* points out, we are

²⁵ Buffy: Gone (6.11)

participating in voluntary theatrical madness. Which leads us back to the Greeks, for this is the realm of Dionysus, the god of wine, of theatre and of madness.

It shouldn't really come as a surprise to find elements of Greek tragic madness in a modern television show. Greek tragedy casts a long shadow – its influence on portrayals of madness can be found in *Hamlet* and *Lear*, through to 18th century melancholics to other modern imaginings, such as Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series. And while the Buffyverse spins between cultures and systems, drawing from many different sources in a way that is not, nor does it seek to be, particularly coherent, classical signifiers abound, from the Sapphic ode Willow writes on Tara's back in *Restless*²⁶ to Willow, Xander and Buffy's painful performance of *Oedipus Rex* in *Puppet Show*²⁷. These traces are particularly important because, for all the wisecracks, *Buffy* is constructed as a tragedy.

Far from ending, as so many TV shows do, with multiple weddings and promises of a bright future, *Buffy* and *Angel* have left us with several comrades dead, and more who will never be the same. These stories are tragedies. And where there is tragedy, because of, among other things, its pain, its violence, its essential arbitrariness and its capacity for culpability, there will be tragic madness. Buffy madness: external, temporary, black, associated with twisted vision, with destruction and with death is a powerful modern example of this ancient narrative.

²⁶ Buffy (4:22)

²⁷ Buffy (1:9)

So we return again to Willow. What was it that happened to Willow? The show flirted with several explanations: addiction to magic, the inexperience of a “rank, arrogant amateur”²⁸, perhaps manipulation by an outside power. But the Greeks would have recognized her fate without difficulty: she is arrogant and does not give proper honour to the gods. In consequence, her vision becomes black, she is no longer herself. She attacks those whom she once held dear, she acts in dishonorable ways toward her enemies. And, unlike Buffy, but very like a Greek hero, her restoration to herself comes too late. Once she understands what she has done she cannot put it right. This is Greek tragic madness in its purest form: dark, damaging, a punishment for hubris. It’s exactly like a Greek tragedy. There should only be Greeks.

²⁸ *Flooded*, Buffy (6:4)