

"Can The *Buffy* Comics Be Feminist?"
Transmedia Adaptation and Representation

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University of Queensland, Australia.

[1] Joss Whedon's cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* rose to critical acclaim from critics and fans alike during its run from 1999 to 2004 with its unique portrayal of female characters who were not slayed by conventional gender tropes such as sexualization, objectification and passivity (Campbell). *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (abbreviated to *Buffy*) presented characters such as Buffy Summers and Willow Rosenberg who were sexual rather than sexualized, empowered by their own strength, intelligence and decisions, as well as the stakes they ran through vampires. Whedon's feminist ideological underpinnings, mixed with Buffy's image as a superhero-like heroine, firmly cemented the show and protagonist into cult media. This cult status then naturally lent to adaptation from television to comic book series: as of 2014, there have been three seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* continued in comic book form with auteur Whedon at the helm. Despite a surface doubling of the show's characterisation, the empowerment of its female characters has been repositioned from the work the fans know, the television show, and the work they are experiencing of the comic books. In many cases, the comic series renders the female characters passive and sexualized by conforming to conventions of comic book illustration, format, tradition and receivership that have plagued female heroines since comic books dawned. This raises a difficult question, then: Can the *Buffy* comic book series be seen as feminist, and therefore a true adaptation of the hit television show?

[2] Adapting and continuing the Buffy fandom through comic books was an intelligent venture on behalf of auteur Joss Whedon. Comic books have always been targeted towards a young adult demographic, one which Whedon's series also had drawn in (Gabilliet xviii). Adaptation of comic books into television shows or films began in the late 1970s with figures such as Wonder Woman - *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* represents a new interest in a reverse adaptation as the cult status and critical acclaim of the comic book or graphic novel form has risen in recent years (Gabilliet 79). Beginning with Season Eight, the *Buffy* comics aesthetically and canonically follow the events of the television show, almost seamlessly despite the transition of media form. The *Buffy* texts are examples of transmedia adaptation, a process through which a narrative is too big to fit into one medium, and thus must be expanded across many (Beddows). Linda Hutcheon's comprehensive work on adaptation theory centrally argues that adaptations can be autonomous, but a "conceptual flipping back and forth" between hypotext and hypertext can make for a richer experience, enhancing the hypertext and at the same time never diminishing the hypotext (Hutcheon 143; 173). In this case, *Buffy* the television show is the hypotext, and *Buffy* the comic book series is the hypertext which creators and readers move between. Comparison between hypotext and hypertext is therefore undeniable. This essay will focus mainly on the first comic season,

Season Eight's "The Long Way Home" Arc, interspersed with examples from across the series' issues.

[3] Transmedia adaptation engages with the idea of many texts translating key themes, characterizations, aesthetics and even auteur/creator to form a harmonious adaptive relationship (Beddows). Linda Hutcheon posits that adaptation is an "interpretive doubling" of "the work we know and the work we are experiencing" (Hutcheon 139). Interpretive doubling means a careful selection, removal and addition of aspects of the series that have already been touched upon. Through understanding interpretive doubling, the specific ideological and physical elements which been doubled, removed or created in the comic books can be seen. These tenets of transmedia adaptation are seen in the close relationship between *Buffy* the television show and *Buffy* the comic book series. *Buffy*'s status as a cult fandom allowed this harmonious adaptation to take place. As Stadler and McWilliam note, cult fandoms "often feature 'campy humour, insider gags, a coherent and well-populated fictional world, deep backstory, offbeat and charismatic major characters, metatextuality, 'mythic' themes and plots and the extension of the cult fiction across a full range of media", a definition that *Buffy* fits into very well (Stadler, McWilliam 279). Fans follow the story of a young, witty woman chosen as the Slayer who has to save the world from vampires (and the occasional apocalypse or two) with the help from her eccentric friends. This, the integral concept of *Buffy*, follows all fan media, as does its creator, Joss Whedon, an auteur with his own strong cult following, allowing the concept to move back and forth within transmedia.

[4] From its inception, the world of comic books, and its fandom, placed female characters as second, other and sexual to their male counterparts. Comics were not set out to be sexist, but rather were simply reflective of the social ideas of females, femininity and heteronormativity of their times. A look back through the annals of comic books shows how female characters have been represented and received over time. Beginning in 1940, the most successful females were Sheena, Queen of the Jungle; Lady Luck; The Woman in Red, the first female costumed crime fighter; Mary Marvel, a female equivalent of Captain Marvel; and lastly Wonder Woman (Danziger-Russell; Gabilliet 24, 31). These female superheroes were few and far in between the hundreds of male superheroes and protagonists at the time. Gabilliet posits that this was due to a combination of female readers not wanting costumed female crime fighters and males that did not want to read anything "girly" (Gabilliet 31). This is a somewhat problematic assumption to make about gendered preferences from Gabilliet as later in his work *Of Comics and Men* he acknowledges that data about comic book readership is inconsistent and unreliable (Gabilliet 191). However, it does give reason for why female superheroes, with the exception of Wonder Woman, were only moderately successful.

[5] Female characters have always been a minority in the mainstream comic book world, much less feminist comic books - feminist media of this nature can mostly be seen in the underground movement 'comix' of the 70s, 80s and 90s (Gabilliet 81). The 1990s witnessed the rise of another form of drawing the female figure - 'bad girl art' comics - that arguably corresponded with the 'tough girl' and 'girl power' television shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena the Warrior Princess* (Gabilliet 103). Figures that fell under the

banner of ‘bad girl art’ were Elektra, Catwoman, and Lady Shiva, all created with “the anatomical exaggerations of the masculine and feminine form” that Gabilliet calls “commercial solicitation pure and simple...aiming for the broadest possible public.” Much of mainstream comics’ success has come from reader identification with characters (McCloud). The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comic book series are published by successful publisher *Dark Horse*, and conform to mainstream design elements of many superhero or fantasy comic books (Whedon). *Buffy*, a feminist television text at its core, is informed by a long history of women in comic books in this adaptation, design and publishing process (Campbell). *Buffy* neatly assumes the design elements of a mainstream comic book appealing to a wider, different audience that expects alternative – rather, sexualized - representation that was made popular through the financial success of Wonder Woman and ‘bad girl art’.

[6] Vampires and other supernatural creatures have long been a part of comics, starting in the 1960s with titles such as *Vampirella* and the *Tomb of Dracula* (Gabilliet 77). However, *Buffy* as a character fits more neatly into the parameters of the superhero genre. Correspondingly, Joss Whedon’s own passion for comic book superheroes is worth exploring as an influence on the decision to transform *Buffy* from a Final Girl to a Superhero (Burkhead, Lavery; Kaveney). The superhero genre began during the Second World War, created from the desire for patriotic figures who fought against the United States’ enemies (Gabilliet 22). Countless heroines in the post-war period were created, including in the 1970s when minority characters took the stage with the creation of Spider Woman and Ms Marvel, but none had the sustained popularity or influence of Wonder Woman (Gabilliet 76).

[7] Wonder Woman is arguably the most successful female comic book character and is iconic for both her empowered nature and sexual appeal. The way *Buffy* has been designed, published and received in comic book form has been influenced greatly by Wonder Woman (DiPaolo 168). She is portrayed as an Amazonian warrior princess who travels to America to fight crime (Lepore). Wonder Woman herself has gone through many illustrative reincarnations, with changes to her traditionally sexy and revealing costuming ranging from a more conservative look to moving towards bad girl art territory over the years (DiPaolo 179). Generally, Wonder Woman is dressed in “a golden tiara, a red bustier, blue underpants and knee-high, red leather boots (Lepore).” Despite her revealing costume, Wonder Woman is a legendary feminist comic book character whose strength and tenacity is on par with male counterparts such as Superman and Batman (Yabroff). There is an inherent tension between the subject matter and design elements of Wonder Woman – female sexualization and female empowerment - and due to her success it is fair to say that many mainstream comics after Wonder Woman’s publication were influenced by this tension (DiPaolo). Reconciling the feminist aspects of the television series with the comic book version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reflects these tensions.

[8] Questions that cannot be easily answered arise from the idea that a female comic book character can be portrayed in a feminist manner. What makes a comic book feminist? What does a feminist character look like? What qualities make a comic book character drawn in a sexist manner?

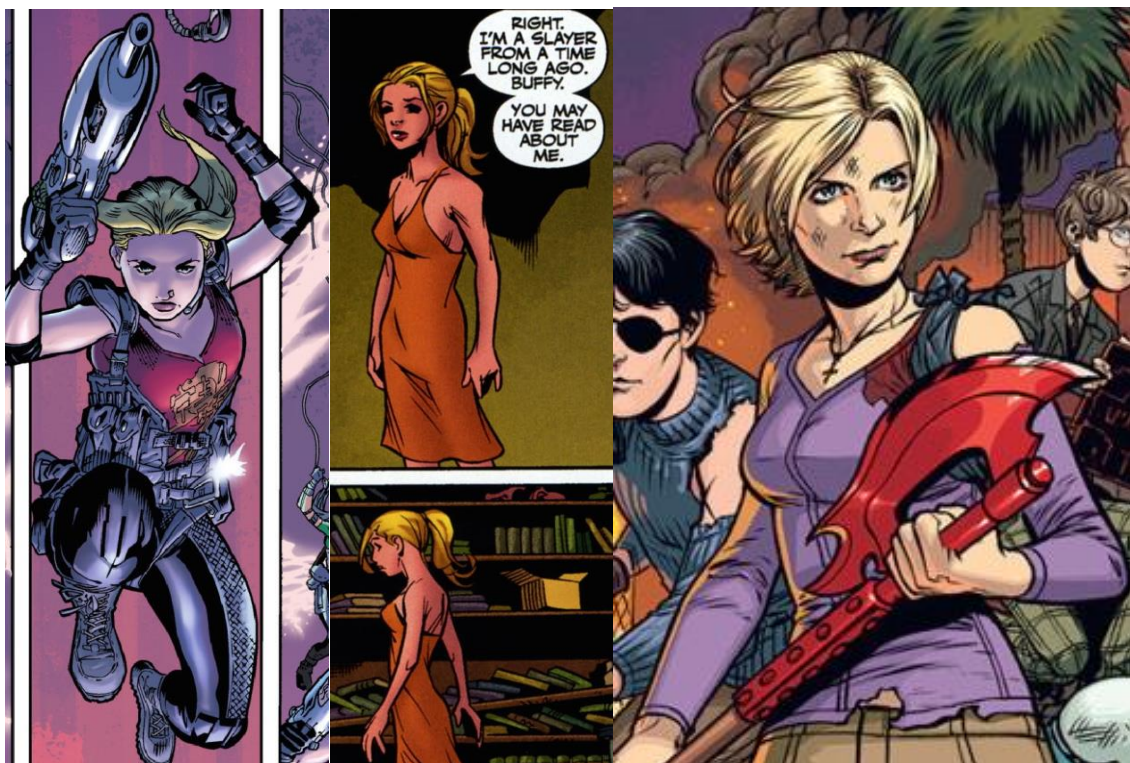
[9] ‘Feminist versus sexist’ is a simple and reductive dichotomy that does not allow for the complex way in which females in reality live: a combination of dominant, submissive, aggressive, passive, good, bad, pure, sinful and more importantly, the space in between (Innes). Namely, one cannot simply argue that if Buffy wore more clothing, the comics would be more feminist. Strength in women comes more from just their appearance; it comes from their actions, thoughts and beliefs, too (Innes). “Objectification, as we understand it, is reprehensible. Being attracted to somebody is necessary. And there’s somewhere in between there that’s where we’re going to live,” Whedon himself noted about female representation in media in a 2012 interview (Rogers). It is clear in the comics that Buffy’s personality, beliefs and fiercely feminist actions have not changed - but her appearance, along with other female characters such as Willow, has. This change is unfortunately an example of the systematic complications of female representation in comics (Innes).



[10] In the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comic book series, Buffy and other characters have been doubled aesthetically to match their television show counterparts (Schumacher). The physical appearance of *Buffy* actress Sarah Michelle Gellar is being doubled *interpretively* to mold to comic book conventions as a result of both the medium and the illustrators’ design. Sarah Michelle Gellar’s physical appearance “can be situated within a network of fan orientated media that includes comic books, collectables, and fan magazines” and the repetition of her appearance across the media can be seen to help form its cultic imagery (Middleton 146). Buffy the comic book character shares similarities with Gellar, but also marks a departure on behalf of the comics’ illustrators.

[11] As shown above, Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy on the television series, whose appearance hardly changed over seven seasons, is at first glance similar to firstly the cover image of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season Eight* #1: “The Long Way Home, part one” and the first image readers receive of Buffy in the comic book narrative. Buffy becomes advanced as per the rules of transmedia adaptation, as Schumacher notes of the cover image, with “much broader shoulders, much thinner hips, much longer torso, larger breasts and a thinner waist” (Beddows 149; Schumacher 8). Schumacher, in her analysis of the differences between the character Buffy’s aesthetics across different adaptations, argues that Sarah

Michelle Gellar’s likeness is used as a marketing tool, especially on covers, but that the traditional ‘perfect’ model of the supernatural female form in comic books - females with larger breasts, thinner waists, more muscles, less clothing and more sexually evocative poses - is also used to sell the comics (Schumacher). She argues that bigger breasts and larger hips reshape Buffy towards the convention of bustier, curvier female comic book characters, including fellow feminist superheroes such as Wonder Woman (Schumacher). This is contrast to the Buffy of the television series, whose smaller breasts are not emphasized as a marketing tool (see the title emphasizing Buffy’s breasts in the comic cover image). This is no doubt the case as the comics are illustrated by two different illustrators, namely Jo Chen for the covers and George Jeanty for the panels in “The Long Way Home” and Karl Moline for “Willow”, with Scott Allie serving as editor and Joss Whedon as creator across Season Eight; it is not just one illustrators’ style, but a whole creative teams’ decision. In all seasons of the television series, Buffy’s appearance was petite – actress Gellar lost weight during filming to appear more teenage-like. This small-breasted and framed appearance continued even after Buffy left high school and cared for her little sister Dawn all the way into Season Seven: therefore, this transformation is solely appealing to comic book tropes.



[Buffy’s body as drawn by different artists, left to right: Season Eight, Season Nine, Season Ten].

[12] Another aesthetic departure from the television series takes shape in the character of Willow who was sexualized in the show three times, notably when she became ‘evil’, with tight black leather clothing and dark make up. These instances arguably had reasons within the plot of each episode to mark a difference between the Willow of extreme evilness or anger compared to the sweet, consistent Willow of dorkiness, friendliness and in the end, grief (Middleton). Unlike Buffy, Willow was never shown naked in a sexual act in the

television show. However, she is given explicit sexuality on the cover of a special Season Eight issue, as shown in the images below. Her appearance in the comic is decidedly different from Willow actress Alyson Hannigan, arguably to a more ‘conventionally beautiful’ look that befits such explicit sexualization, to the point that it is pornographic. As an already established queer character, Willow is repositioned in the comic book Season Eight to be both pleasurable to a heterosexual and queer audience while ‘good’ rather than ‘evil’.



[13] Sex scenes and sexuality within the comic books also mark a departure from the television show. Buffy has sex with another woman, Satsu, for the first time in Season Eight. Buffy’s sexual experience in Season Eight, unlike Willow’s, follows the ideals from the television show, as presenting love, trust and desire between two females firstly for character development, and then for a queer audience. Buffy’s sexual experience has been seen as a positive portrayal of heteroflexibility, aligned with the revolutionary queer representation in the television series by some readers; however, creative team members Joss Whedon and Scott Allie have used comments about Buffy’s heteroflexibility to draw readers in, exemplifying that it is in fact exploitative in a way that would not have been seen in the television series (Frohard-Dourlent). Willow’s lesbian relationships with her two girlfriends in the series certainly were far from exploitative. In contrast, both the cover image of Willow and a panel inside the comic show her naked with exaggerated bodily proportions befitting a comic book female. The large sizing of both cover and panel reveals the purpose of Willow’s character: namely to be pleasurable to readers rather than to portray her feeling pleasure (Chute). Overall, the Buffy comic book covers are far more sexualized than the actual content, which varies from artist to artist. Even Dawn does not escape being sexualized, evidently to sell comics and appeal to a mainstream audience.

[14] *Buffy* scholar Middleton asserts that because comic books incorporate images similar to that of a pin up - images that are highly sexualized and targeted towards a heterosexual male audience - these adaptive decisions create a source of tension for fans who want Buffy to be demarcated from fetishized female characters in other comics, as evidenced by letters to the editor (“Slay the Critics”) published in the back of the Season Eight “Willow” issue (Middleton 151). Character consistency is a key concern of fans of the hypotext, for whom most certainly the adaptation is marketed towards (Beddows). “Am I supposed to be thankful that they at least fight in pants?” *Buffy* fan Morgan Stewart wrote. “If this were just any comic book I would just put it down and move on, but it’s *Buffy!*” (Whedon, Chen, Moline 26). In the same issue, illustrator Georges Jeanty responded that the *Buffy* comics feature diversity that is not regularly seen in comics, and that he makes a conscious effort to not objectify the characters (Whedon, Chen, Jeanty). There is a central idea across the fandom, and among the creators, that *Buffy* comics are meant to be more progressive than other comics. Clearly this is not how these images are being received.

[15] However, as Middleton notes, the editor Scott Allie argues that the *Buffy* characters are not sexualized, but then they use the characters’ sexuality or sexual exploits to hook the reader into buying the next issue at the end of each *Slay the Critics* segment. “Comic Book *Buffy* can be (and has been) hijacked by illustrators who depict her, indulgently, in their own uninfluenced style,” argues Schumacher (Schumacher 10). The characters then become a sort of pastiche, a tense interpretative double, stuck between television and comic portrayal, while the concept of *Buffy* itself flows fluidly between works (Dyer). Buffy and Willow – and even Dawn - now resemble Faith in sexual appearance. Both characters were highly contrasted with Faith’s appearance on the television series, due to class background and sexual behavior. Buffy in the television show was formally constructed as to resist and challenge the limits of the male pleasurable gaze due to its feminist underpinnings - underpinnings that Whedon, and many scholars, have never failed to emphasize (Levine).

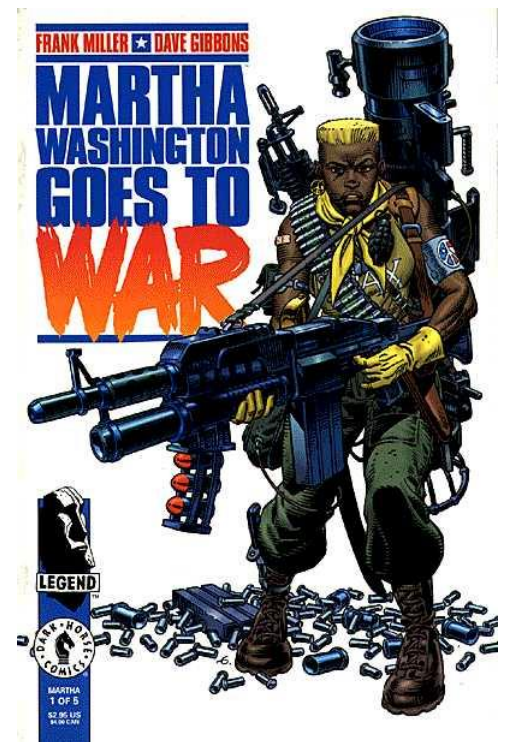
[16] This is then, unfortunately, in direct contrast with Whedon’s comics despite his authorial intent to not have Buffy “running around...half naked (Whedon, Ervin-Gore).” His acknowledgment that this is how women are portrayed in comics does not only refer to the early comics, but more recent series, too. It is undoubtable that comics have a bad track record with the portrayal of women: one only has to peruse the list of the *Women in Refrigerators* trope, coined by artist Gail Simone in the wake of so many female characters being brutalized or murdered in order to evoke an emotional turning point of a male protagonist (Yabroff). In the television show, Buffy’s costuming was not overtly sexualized, and her physicality was never altered. Close ups of Buffy’s face when she is talking, and long shots focused on fights during fight sequences, replaced any close ups of Buffy’s body parts that one would expect from a typical network female fight scene. The camera’s deliberate, planned angles, unlike the deliberate and planned panels of a comic, did not sexualize Buffy. As exemplified by Season Six of the television show, Buffy in particular as a character could be *sexual* without being *sexualized*: the superhero protagonist, as were all female characters,

were sexual on their terms and never passively presented visually or narratively. Television shows are afforded more space for plot in a single episode due to a long running time, more camera shots, and a larger amount of dialogue and response from the actor in order to convey sexuality without sexualization. Comic books, with their limited number of panels and pages, are not afforded this space (Mcloud, Cocca). Medium perhaps then can be justified as why fans have received the hypertext as sexualized rather than feminist (Freedman). But ultimately, it is not the inherent nature of comics, but rather tired tropes and thematic concerns that are never challenged that have asked super heroines to do their jobs but also be hyper-feminized (Madrid). Sherrie Innes argues,

The woman hero serves as a bold, new role model for women and girls. Her appearance provides one visual clue to a culture is gradually becoming more open to non stereotypical gender roles and to women tough roles. At the same time, her peripheral position in comic books, which are doubly marginalized as both popular literature and a genre marketed in the past principally to children, suggests the ways that tough women are still controversial in our society (143).

And perhaps in turning a cult fantasy television show into a mainstream-appealing comic book that is drawn with a conservative style of older superhero representation, creating a feminist comic book might have been too financially controversial for Whedon.

[17] The *Buffy* comics' female characters occupy a space much like that of Wonder Woman: complex and contradictory in representation though drawn by feminist and often non-male artists. Historically, there has been a pattern wherein female superhero's powers are often undercut by the sexualized way they have been drawn (Madrid). In contrast, the character most like Buffy of the television series and of a less sexualized and objectified nature can be seen in Martha Washington, created by artist Frank Miller who has a history of both racist and sexualized comic book representations (Reid). A focus on Martha's representation is worthwhile. Martha was not drawn with the hyper-feminine traits that are seen as identifiers for many female superheroes. Indeed, she is tough in appearance, with muscles, a closely-shaven head and army clothes – as shown to the right (Innes). Yet Martha shares a dominant, striking similarity with Buffy in that her emotions, her love for others, does not diminish or rule over her superhero powers: she can control them, and they are advantageous. This notion goes against the grain of previous female comic leads such as Elektra. Martha Washington is an icon who has the complexity of a real woman, to be both tough and moral (Innes).



[18] Hutcheon proposes that adaptations are “repetition but without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and

novelty” (Hutcheon 173). The familiarity of Buffy’s characterization from television show to comic, through witty banter with villains, dry observations and the same fellow characters, creates enough ritualistic recognition for fans; intriguingly, a disconnect between the aesthetics of Buffy from the television show and Buffy from the comics now brings that delight of surprise. Beddows comments that transmedia calls for each medium to offer a unique style of storytelling - in this case, the way the characters are portrayed (Beddows 145). In variation, therefore, the adaptation process of *Buffy* transmedia comes alive; like many other adaptations, the continuation of the *Buffy* series through this comic book Season Eight, keeps the original work alive, giving it an ‘afterlife’ instead of being ‘slayed’ (Hutcheon 176). Bolton further argues that the fidelity model cannot account for a comics’ dual narrative, hybrid form (Bolton 1). While the iconography of the *Buffy* comics is at odds with its hypotext and feminist ideologies, the narration and dialogue in “The Long Way Home” and “Willow”, and all the issues in Season Eight, are true to characterisation and story world and indeed expands upon them. Cover artist Jo Chen states, “If girls can't identify with it [the comics], then they won't buy it” (Mata, 2009). More so than using the actresses’ likeness to adapt fan identification with the characters, creator Whedon and his fellow comic writers successfully adapted the cult aspects that helped girls and other fans identify, relate and become passionate about *Buffy*. These elements are seen in the translated poignant and humorous moments within the narrative of both “The Long Way Home” arc and the “Willow” issue, as evidenced through text and non-sexualized panels. Seasons Eight, Nine and Ten showcased plots that stay true to Buffy’s fantasy world, expanding it even while still tackling female-centric issues such as abortion, in a sensitive, feminist manner (Whedon).



[19] Vint notes in her influential essay on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that, “the multiple and contradictory readings are also a place where young women might begin to develop a critical consciousness about the construction of the female identity and sexuality” (Vint 5). By Vint’s assertion, while the sexualization of female characters in the *Buffy* comics goes against the feminist ideals underpinning the Buffyverse, this marked difference also becomes a way, through conceptually flipping back and forth between the Buffy of the television show and the Buffy of the comics, that readers can engage with feminism by casting a critical eye on this sexualization. As part of the ‘knowing audience’ fans can reject this sexualization in favor of the stylistic choices of narrative and dialogue that are also traditional in comic books by focusing on text

rather than iconography (Bolton). This moves what once could be seen as sexually exploitative images of Buffy and Willow as an exercise in slaying sexism.

[20] There is tension between the interpreted aesthetics of the *Buffy* comics and the feminist ideological underpinnings of the fandom. Many, including creator Joss Whedon, feel that the comics, for all their exciting and innovative ways of showing new characterisation and stories, “lost a little bit of that thing of ‘what was sacred’” (Anders). “Objectification and identification are at war,” Whedon has stated of female representation, “but they’re at war in the way that people are, that narrative is, that creates art and humanity and life” (Rogers). This sacredness and humanity came from the series’ innovative portrayals of love, gender, sex and violence that did not victimize or sexualize its female characters. The television show was known for its sexualization and objectification of Buffy’s male sexual partners, a twist on sexism that is not displayed in arcs such as “The Long Way Home”, thus representing a source of tension because females are not portrayed as they were, making the flipping back and forth between works a fractured process (Heinecken). Buffy in particular always had erotic power because the nature of television was an engaged, interactive work, showing a multitude of character reactions and intents (Call). Frozen in a panel, much of Buffy’s erotic power is transferred to the reader. However, Symonds argues that Whedon’s premise for *Buffy*, where the Final Girl of the horror movie genre trounces the monster and lives to tell the tale, is a marker for the show as it cultivates and explores the tensions of transcending sexism and instilling empowerment while presenting realistic moments of exploitation, emotion and weakness (Symonds). The comic books unequivocally also cultivate such dichotomies, once again entrenching that integral concepts are clearly adapted rather than equally important aesthetics.

[21] There has been a strong push in recent years for a change in the representation of female bodies in media, in particularly superhero narratives (Collier). Following the design of Martha Washington, a handful of current female mainstream superheroes or protagonists now are drawn in a way that reflects the confident, proactive nature of their plot lines and dialogue, such as the new Ms Marvel and female Thor (Opam; Wilson). Comic books, like the *Buffy* fandom, have the potential to influence female readers with positive role models, going against the male-dominated stereotypes of the genre (Danziger-Russell). In order for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer’s* female characters to both hold true to the anti-passive, anti-sexualized portrayal that was seen in the television series, and to lead the way as it did so many years ago into the realm of ‘girl power’, the comic book creative team at *Dark Horse* need to firmly drive a stake through their sexualized and sometimes passive representations to give *Buffy*, and Buffy new life.

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