

“My emotions give me power”:

Radcliffean Sensibility and Female Gothic Anxieties in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

By Isabelle Laskari

[1] In “Halloween” (B2006), the world of Sunnydale is turned upside down when a great portion of the town takes on the persona and physical nature implied by his or her costume. The biggest threat is that Buffy, resident Slayer, has been turned into an 18th century noble woman. By this stage, the show has firmly established the character of Buffy as the savior – and it is no surprise that the first thing her friend Willow does when she realizes the town is in chaos is ask Buffy what they should do. Buffy’s response is to faint. When she recovers, her loss of agency becomes a running joke, as when she observes, “Well, it’s not our place to fight.... Surely some men will protect us.” Xander’s deference puzzles her, “You would take orders from a woman? Are you feeble in some way?” Buffy has effectively become the pretty, blonde girl whose helplessness Joss Whedon wanted to subvert as the premise of the series. She is utterly incapable of fighting back, so her friends must find a way to restore her to her usual self or risk countless lives. Victory comes when they succeed in the nick of time, just as Spike is closing in around the helpless Buffy. The spell is broken and Buffy becomes herself again, greeting Spike with a dose of her usual quick-witted sarcasm – “Hi honey, I’m home.” After punching Spike several times, she follows this up with “You know what? It’s good to be me.” The subtext here rapidly becomes text – it’s good to be Buffy, a modern heroine who is able to save the day. It *isn’t* good to be the helpless female victim that faints at the sight of danger and expects to be saved.

[2] Many critics have viewed *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* through a feminist lens, particularly because of the way Buffy unequivocally takes up the role of savior and

protector; a role granted to her because of the physical strength, traditionally granted to male characters on screen. Yet while “Halloween” may poke fun at older narratives which portray women as passive victims by juxtaposing her with the show’s progressive modern heroine, what remains fascinating is how the character of Buffy can be read as a descendant of the noble woman found in 18th century works of Gothic fiction. Claire Knowles discovered this connection when she compared Buffy to the heroines of Ann Radcliffe’s novels. In her article, “Sensibility Gone Mad: or, Drusilla, Buffy and the (D)evolution of the Heroine of Sensibility”, Knowles suggests that Buffy is a heroine of sensibility for the twenty-first century – a young woman with powerful emotional responses to the world who must retain rationality to ultimately triumph over a patriarchal system of oppression, like the Radcliffean heroine before her. In light of Knowles’ article, this paper will examine what Buffy has in common with Ellena di Rosalba, the heroine of Ann Radcliffe’s final novel, *The Italian* (1797), to demonstrate how Female Gothic anxieties particularly regarding sexual relationships and patriarchal forces are explored in this modern text. As is to be expected, Buffy, as a modern heroine, has been gifted with a lot more physical agency than Ellena. Yet while passivity is replaced by activity in *BtVS*, a comparison of the two heroines reveals that they still have much in common.

[3] Apart from Knowles, several other critics have also explored *BtVS* as a Gothic text. Bernice M. Murphy termed it “Suburban Gothic”, while Catherine Siemann notes that the show adheres to the psychology of the Gothic by examining common fears and apprehensions (128). Michelle Callander compares Buffy’s twentieth century narrative to that of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and suggests that they contain a number of similarities apart from their use of Gothic conventions: “Both texts recognize the limits of choices and freedoms placed on women; both express an

ambivalence towards modern technologies; both seem to, at one and the same time, fear yet sympathize with the foreign and the monstrous, seeing their angst as deeply human, and their persecution as one of the more violent aspects of human nature” (27). Meanwhile, Ananya Mukherjea finds classic Gothic elements – “death and danger and the undead, a clash between what is premodern and what is (post)modern” (14) – within the bright world of Sunnydale, analysing Tara, Anya and Oz’s character arcs as decidedly Gothic narratives about identity. Finally, Katie Saulnier suggests that Buffy “is a cross between the traditional gothic heroine – beautiful, pure of heart, and resourceful – and the traditionally male role of knight in shining armour” (3) and that the show itself is akin to the Gothic genre in its exploration of moral ambiguity, patriarchal oppression and the changing roles of women.

[4] According to G. J. Barker-Benfield, eighteenth-century fiction created a culture of sensibility whose heroines championed “sympathy, compassion, benevolence, humanity and pity – against selfishness” (215). Sensibility itself, as described by Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard, “came to stand for a disposition of being easily and strongly affected – physiologically as well as psychologically – by emotional influences” (7). Radcliffe is renowned for bestowing characteristics of sensibility on her heroines, although, as Nelson C. Smith notes, she was not averse to criticising the excess of sensibility that can lead one away from the rational and into the irrational (577). Typically, Radcliffe’s heroines use rationality and reason to overcome the terror of the situations they are forced into by powers beyond their control. Terror, according to Radcliffe herself, “expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life” and is distinct from horror, which “contracts, freezes and annihilates them.” In the Radcliffean gothic, when a heroine is not able to remain rational in the face of terror, she typically faints – just as Buffy does in “Halloween”.

What the Radcliffean heroine must learn is how to remain calm in even the most trying of situations. This poise is demonstrated in *The Italian* when Ellena is confronted with the Sublime landscape. In his “Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful”, philosopher Edmund Burke defines the Sublime as:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger... or is analogous to terror is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling (Vermeir & Deckard 195).

[5] While Ellena is trapped in the convent, she discovers a secret room whereupon she can look out onto the “landscape spread below, whose grandeur awakened all her heart” (105). This landscape calms Ellena who is “capable of being highly elevated, or sweetly soothed, by scenes of nature” and thus “gazing upon the stupendous imagery around her” she looks “beyond the awful veil which obscures the features of the Deity, and conceals Him from the eyes of his creatures” to realize “how insignificant... the transactions, and the sufferings of this world [are]” (106). As Eugenia DeLamotte notes, such instances indicate “conscious worth defends the heroine simply by constituting her claim on the protection of Providence, which will intervene to rescue her in the end” (34). A prisoner who is unable to break free of her constraints, Ellena is thus able to use her sensibility as her greatest weapon; an escape from her troubles which calms her due to a belief that her virtue and goodness will be enough to overcome her enemies (which of course it is). This is a great help to Ellena when she is alone, as she often is throughout the novel, as she is kept apart from her lover Vivaldi. However, Radcliffe also suggests that sensibility can also help the

heroine when she is not consciously aware of it. When Schedoni enters Ellena's room with the intention of murdering her while she sleeps, he stalls, gazing "upon her innocent countenance", his "agitation and repugnance to strike [increasing] with every moment of delay... [but] a shuddering horror restrained him" (271). As Dana Wight infers, "the villain is momentarily paralysed by the sight of the passive, vulnerable heroine" (122). Thus Ellena's innocence and virtue – both characteristics linked to sensibility – are hard at work to protect her from harm, even in her unconscious state, providing the unknowing heroine with an almost supernatural protective shield.

[6] Being inherently emotional and capable of being moved by compassion are traits demonstrated by Buffy several times throughout the series. Due to the nature of her Slayer duties, which often involve making difficult moral decisions, she must also learn to keep her emotions in check to ensure that she is acting rationally. She demonstrates this balance when she kills Angel, whom she loves, in order to save the world, and when she sacrifices herself to save her sister's life and save the world. Michael J. Richardson and Douglas J. Rabb have noted that feelings and emotions are relevant to moral judgements for Buffy (51) and this is perhaps best demonstrated when Buffy becomes emotional over Faith's accidental murder of an innocent bystander. Not only does Buffy grieve for the loss, but also she accuses Faith of "shutting off [her] emotions" and attempts to support her by referencing their shared emotional experience – "I know what you're feeling because I feel it too" ("Bad Girls", B3014). When Faith dismisses her emotional response to the unfortunate situation, noting that nobody is going to cry about the death of a random bystander that got caught in the crossfire, Buffy adamantly notes, "I am" ("Consequences", B3015). Emotions are such an integral aspect of Buffy's character that her weakest point – Season 6 – is shown to be as a result of the lack of feeling that she's

experiencing after being brought back from Heaven. Season 6 is arguably the only season where the worst villain Buffy has to face is, in fact, herself. She suffers because, for Buffy, not feeling is akin to depression. Emotions are such an important part of who she is that when she can't feel anything she falls into a desperate hate of herself. In "Once More with Feeling" (B6007), when a musical spell hits Sunnydale and causes its inhabitants to reveal their feelings through song, Buffy sings about wanting "to feel." Furthermore, it isn't hard to assess that her desperate attack on Spike in "Dead Things" (B6013) where she repeatedly screams at him – "There's nothing good or clean in you. That's why you can't understand! You're dead inside! You can't feel anything real" – is actually an attack on herself for not being able to "feel anything real."

[7] By the laws created in Radcliffe's Gothic, no permanent harm will befall her because good, moral and worthy heroines of sensibility will always break out of their prison and, although they must suffer, they remain morally undamaged. In *BtVS*, a similar immunity is in place because while Buffy suffers immensely, she never loses her moral integrity. Despite her suffering, she does not experience a fall from grace the way characters like Faith and Willow do, both of whom go dark throughout the series. In her book, *Gothic Feminism: The professionalization of gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontes*, Diane Long Hoeveler writes about what she calls "Gothic Feminism". She notes an important distinction between early Gothic novels in that the enemy for women is external rather than internal (8-9). It is no surprise then, that most of the enemies Buffy faces are external and male. While Faith and Willow must fight internal battles against their dark side, Buffy, like a true Radcliffean heroine, continues to fight external battles. As Giles points out when he murders the innocent human Ben, Buffy is a "hero" because she "wouldn't take a

human life” (“The Gift”, B5022). “She’s not like us,” he tells Ben before he kills him for the greater good, in what is perhaps the best expression of how Buffy is more moral than any other character on the show due to her capacity for feeling for others. Her strong belief in redemption and forgiveness also allows her to welcome back those who have hurt her before. When Principal Wood persuades Giles to join his plot to kill Spike in “Lies My Parents Told Me” (B7017), Wood quips that “[Spike] will prove to be [Buffy’s] undoing” because of her emotional attachment to him and belief in his redemption. Giles agrees, telling Buffy that she must allow Spike to be murdered “for the greater good.” Ultimately, Wood’s statement is proven false and Buffy once again is proven to know best due to her acute sensibility. Spike is not her undoing; her belief in him and her compassion for him pays off when he sacrifices his life to save the world in the series finale.

[8] Another important connection shared between Ellena and Buffy is their femininity. Despite Buffy’s role as an action hero, the show firmly grounds her with stereotypically feminine traits. Apart from sharing a similar feminine appearance – as Knowles points out, the Radcliffean heroine and Buffy are both blonde, pretty and slim – Buffy is also shown to be very interested in clothes, romantic relationships, and being prom queen. She is the quintessential teenage girl, and does not have to compromise her feminine traits due to the stereotypically masculine physical power that she has been imbued with. Her femininity is further emphasized by the fact that the Slayer lineage is always female – “one girl in all the world.”

[9] As Ann B. Tracy notes, “Romance in the popular sense, the pursuit of love... is less of a presence [in gothic novels] than one would suppose, in part because the plots stress separation and isolation” (106). Although a product of the Romantic era, it is

true that Vivaldi and Ellena's love story is given little credence in *The Italian*, due to the plot's insistence on keeping them apart. As Ellena is devoid of friend or family for much of the novel, it is necessary to consider what it is about Vivaldi that Radcliffe assures us will make him a perfect match for her heroine. Apart from popularizing the Gothic genre, Radcliffe has also been credited with creating the feminine gothic – a form of the novel that favored rationality and sensibility, and explained away the supernatural. Angela Wright discusses the romance aspect of the feminine gothic in *The Italian* when she notes that the novel “effectively ‘feminizes’ its hero” (72). Furthermore, Hoeveler also notes that the Radcliffean gothic ensures that “a hero is not safe or marriageable until he has been made as feminine as possible” (65). At first glance, it may seem like Buffy has a penchant for “bad boys”, considering that her two most important romantic involvements are with vampires. “You like men who hurt you,” Spike tells Buffy at one point in the series. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that Buffy's actual penchant is for bad boys who can be tamed into the feminized males that Radcliffe also created for her own heroines. Buffy's first sexual encounter with her vampire boyfriend Angel goes terribly awry when he loses his soul and transforms into the evil Angelus. Yet, as Jessica Price points out, it becomes clear that her relationship with Angelus could never work “not only because he is ‘evil’, but because he embodies stereotypical masculinity, clashing with Buffy's established role. When he regains his soul, he is able to submit to his role as feminine” (220). Even more interesting is Buffy's subsequent relationship with the vampire Spike. When Buffy and Spike first embark on their volatile physical relationship in Season 6, Buffy repeatedly informs Spike that he is not good enough for her. The season's culmination of their relationship ends with his attempted rape of her, again forcing her to point out that she could never be with him. As Hoeveler notes, “Radcliffe makes certain that each one of her heroes faces a life-threatening wound before he is ever

allowed to be alone with any of the virginal heroines” (65). Vivaldi’s capture and questioning by the Inquisition reflects his need to suffer before he is delivered to Ellena. Similarly, Spike must endure several trials to get his soul back (a feat which leads him into temporary madness), and he also faces his own form of Inquisition at the hands of The First Evil, which imprisons him and psychologically tortures him by appearing in the form of people who have died. Spike’s strongly feminine nature is expressed through his capacity for empathy, sensitivity, and tenderness. He is ultimately feminized further by the addition of his soul – which, in the Buffyverse, is intrinsically linked to an ability to feel compassion for others. Jowett describes Spike as a “self-aware new man” (161) – thus continuing the tradition of pairing the gothic heroine with a feminized male counterpart. It is only once Spike has won his soul back that Buffy accepts their feelings for each other and even ends the series with a declaration of love for him.

[10] Despite the fact that Ellena’s story ends with her marriage to the unthreatening Vivaldi, who has been deemed of marriageable quality, *The Italian* still manages to explore the notion of sexual anxiety. Hoeveler interprets Ellena and Vivaldi’s interrupted marriage scene as “the intense female fear of male sexuality”, noting that “it is as if the heroine can barely summon the courage to get herself to the altar, but then, praise the lord, there is an impediment that makes the marriage, both desired and dreaded, impossible” (217). *BtVS* explores the consequences of sexual relationships to emphasize this same anxiety hinted at in Radcliffe’s fiction. In the Buffyverse, despite the physical power of Buffy herself, male sexuality is still a powerfully frightening force. It is further significant that it is Buffy who suffers from her decisions to engage in sexual relationships more than any other character. Her sexual relationship with Angel ends in devastation and suffering. Her next sexual encounter is with a boy in

college, Parker, who sleeps with her once and then wants nothing more to do with her. Her voracious and toxic sexual relationship with Spike ends in him attempting to rape her. Such consequences arising from three out of four of Buffy's sexual relationships cannot be ignored, especially when noted that no other character in the series suffers such consequences simply as a result of having sex. In "Losing It: The Construction of Virginity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*", Sara Swain points out that sex in Sunnydale is risky but that Whedon does not preach about the dangers of unprotected sex and promiscuity (182). Yet Faith – the antithesis to Buffy – is shown to be very sexual and is thus unsurprisingly evil for much of the series. Faith, in effect, plays into the old stereotype of the Gothic madwoman who is too sexual for her own good, akin to Bertha Mason, the crazy wife locked in the attic in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Her promiscuity is shown in contrast to Buffy, who is the Good Slayer, the pure one, yet it is not shown as a good thing. When Faith switches bodies with Buffy in "Who Are You" (B4016) and has sex with Buffy's then-boyfriend, Riley, we see how emotionally intimate sex frightens her because she has never experienced it before. Being in Buffy's body is the catalyst for her redemption and therefore her sexual encounter with Riley critiques her promiscuity. In Radcliffe's time, sex was frightening because it signified the end of the heroine's freedom and her transition from the paternal home to the marriage bed. It was also dangerous because childbirth was so dangerous for women. Like Ellena, whose body is captured and imprisoned, Buffy also endures many bodily violations throughout the series. Her body becomes the catalyst that turns Angel into Angelus, it is used and abandoned by Parker, torn out of Heaven by her friends, and almost sexually violated by Spike. Unsurprisingly, Buffy does not end the series with a safe, marriageable partner but the show's insistence on portraying sexual relationships as, more often than not, resulting in

consequences for its heroine suggests that this anxiety remains very real even for a modern heroine like Buffy.

[11] Having now discussed the similarities between the two heroines, it is logical to view what has changed – largely due to the periods in which these texts have been produced. Passivity is a staple of the Radcliffean heroine and Ellena is no exception. She is rewarded for remaining passive, for accepting her fate at all costs and passively believing that fate will intervene to save her in the end because of her inherent goodness. As discussed previously, it is her passive, sleeping form that stops the evil villain in his tracks. However, passivity is not a characteristic that Buffy is ever rewarded for. As demonstrated in “Halloween”, passivity is something that must be fixed because it can only lead to death. In “The Weight of the World” (B5021), Buffy falls into a catatonic state of grief when she realizes that she cannot save her sister. Rendered entirely hopeless in the upcoming fight, the episode mirrors “Halloween” as Buffy’s friends have to find a way to restore her to her former self in order to continue the fight. Ultimately, Buffy is a symbol of action and succeeds when she takes control of her own life, as evidenced by her decision to break away from the Watcher’s Council and her answer to saving the world in “Chosen” (B7022) by turning all the Potentials into Slayers.

[12] Far from the isolated Ellena alone in her tower, Buffy doesn’t fight alone. As Spike realizes in Season 4, Buffy is weaker when isolated from her friends. The best example of their combined power can be seen when they defeat the military-created robot Adam by combining Willow’s spirit, Xander’s heart, Giles’ mind, and Buffy’s hand. Importantly, none of the Scooby members come from a close-knit family. Willow’s mother is career-obsessed and non-observant; her only appearance

culminates with her almost burning Willow at the stake. Xander frequently sleeps outside on Christmas Eve so as to avoid his family's "drunken Christmas fights." Buffy herself has an absentee father and a mother who dies in Season 5. While Ellena is ultimately delivered triumphantly back into the hands of her long-lost mother, restored to her aristocratic roots, and made ready to begin a family with Vivaldi, *BtVS* indicates that the paternal family is no longer a necessity for a heroine's happiness or strength. Instead, these things can be found in an inclusive friendship group. The inclusivity of this group is best illustrated in the episode "Family" (B5006), which begins with Xander and Buffy admitting that they don't feel they have much in common with Willow's girlfriend, Tara. By the end of the episode, Buffy proclaims Tara to be the Scooby gang's 'family' after Tara's father attempts to take her away by falsely claiming that she has a demon inside her. Essentially, this episode symbolizes the official initiation of a new member to the Scooby gang, born out of the fact that her biological family is no good. Tara has a tyrannical family manipulating her in an attempt to control her – as Spike notes "Just a bit of spin to keep the ladies in line." It is especially fitting that Buffy should be the one to save Tara, not just because it highlights her role as key protector of the Scooby gang, but also because Buffy spends much time saving girls from forces that are attempting to control them.

[13] Despite the abundance of Gothic conventions present within the show – vampires, demons and countless supernatural occurrences - Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider argue that the text does not have a "substantive connection with the great gothic themes present in *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, or other masterpieces of gothic literature" (296) and that there is no real horror in the show (297). My intention is not to consider whether this is true or not, although David Kociemba strongly rebuts this argument in his work "Over-identify much?": Passion, "Passion," and the

Author-Audience Feedback Loop in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*”. However, this claim does raise an interesting thought regarding the show’s true concern. Unlike the Radcliffean gothic, supernatural occurrences are abundant in *BtVS* – yet horrifying as some of them may be, Buffy (mostly) manages to fight them off with flexible ease. It is not these monsters that frustrate Buffy, but the patriarchal system in place that demands her to be the only one to fight them. If we view Buffy’s journey from pilot to finale, we see that she overcomes this notion of female entrapment that has been countless explored in Radcliffe’s works. Buffy, like Ellena, is similarly trapped within her own body – albeit the strong, capable body that marks her as the Chosen One. Her final choice is to share her power with the other Potential slayers of the world, and by so doing, she lifts the sole responsibility of slaying from herself, and her own body. Moreover, she, like Ellena, ends her journey by overthrowing a patriarchal figure – the misogynistic preacher, Caleb. Her defeat is through activity, not passivity, but it remains significant that the final villain of the series is incarnated through a corrupt Christian figure, akin to the morally corrupt monk Schedoni who terrorizes Ellena. Buffy takes this one step further, however, by not only defeating the enemy but also changing the system that oppresses her. By gifting all the Potentials with Slayer power, Buffy ensures that no Slayer will have to fight alone and, as mentioned previously, fighting alone is not a notion championed in the Buffyverse. Buffy’s story ends with the promise that she has survived in a world pitted against her, and that she has created a wider community to help and support her. Ellena’s story is also one of survival in a Gothic world, and hers too, ends with a similar promise through her marriage to Vivaldi, and her reunion with a mother she supposed dead. Ultimately, both heroines share a triumph in having defeated a significant patriarchal force, and both are rewarded with a promise of protection.

[14] At the beginning of “Halloween”, Buffy naively looks upon the 18th century with awe, day-dreamingly lamenting that “It must have been wonderful To put on some fantabulous gown and go to a ball, like a princess... have servants and horses and yet more gowns...” After she’s had a taste of the 18th century, however, she notes, “It’s good to be me.” Like Ellena, Buffy is feminine, emotional, and sensible and despite being a product of an era 200 years later, her battle continues to be represented as an external one, imposed on her by male forces. She may face a host of supernatural creatures and happenings, but the true horror of the text remains rooted in the fear of male oppression, thus making it more akin to the concerns of Radcliffe’s feminine gothic. When Buffy says, “It’s good to be me”, she acknowledges that her physical strength gives her immeasurable power, a power that – due to the time period it was created – Ellena, and all 18th century noble women, do not possess. As a Gothic heroine for the modern era, Buffy therefore combines her sensibility with activity, not passivity, in order to overcome her entrapment.

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