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“Queen C” in Boys’ Town: Killing the Angel in Angel’s House



You, Sweet, his Mistress, Wife, and Muse,
Were you for mortal woman meant?
Your praises give a hundred clues
To mythological intent! (Coventry Patmore, “The Angel in the House”)

[1] Cordelia Chase begins her fictional life in the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the world of girl power. In Sunnydale, Cordelia’s vanity license plate read, “QUEEN C,” and she was—“Cordy, you reign,” gushes Harmony (“The Wish” B3009). Although Cordelia’s character initially appears as a leader of the popular cliques that exclude Buffy, Xander, and Willow, nevertheless, she fits well with *Buffy*’s avowed feminist agenda: her bitchiness and her general self-involvement contribute a valuable antithesis to the self-sacrificing heroics of the Scooby gang: Cordelia is not a people pleaser. Things change, however, when Cordelia joins the cast of *Angel*, a show with a male hero and a largely male regular cast. Within a very short time, Cordelia’s role on *Angel* falls into an ancient pattern. In the early 20th century, Coventry Patmore’s elaborate nineteenth-century poem on courtship and marriage, “The Angel in the House,” would give Virginia Woolf the model of exactly what she could *not* be, if she were going to succeed in her chosen profession: “I will describe her as shortly as I can,” wrote Woolf in “Professions for Women”: “She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. . . . Above all—I need not say it—she was pure” (2215). Despite a good deal of lip-service identifying Cordy as a “champion,” particularly in *Angel* season 3, and as an essential member of the team, in *Angel*’s town the independent “queen” Cordelia is progressively reduced to a conventionally supportive woman, the angel in the *Angel*’s house. Naturally, she must be killed, but not before she has sacrificed herself completely, and *not* for the same reasons Virginia Woolf found she had to kill her own inner “angel.”

[2] In Sunnydale, Cordelia is first presented as “a superficial rich girl . . . with a high-school following of popular girls called the ‘Cordettes’” (Harrison 125). “Queen C” (“The Wish” B3009) is the equivalent of the teenage “Queen Bees” described in Rosalind Wiseman’s *Queen Bees and Wannabees* and popularized in the film *Mean Girls*. Thus, in season one, Cordelia is initially a realistic representation of the “monstrous” forces of high school hell that Buffy, Willow, and Xander must contend with—snobbery, cliques, exclusion. By the end of season one, however, Cordelia begins to gain some ability to identify with the suffering of others through experiencing her own very personal trauma—a threat to her vanity regarding her personal appearance by invisible girl Marcy (“Out of Sight, Out of Mind” B1011). Confronted with another’s suffering in a setting without consumable distractions or fawning fans, Cordy confesses to Buffy, “Hey! You think I’m never lonely because I’m so cute and

popular? I can be surrounded by people and be completely alone. It's not like any of them really know me. I don't even know if they like me half the time. People just want to be in a popular zone. Sometimes when I talk, everyone's so busy agreeing with me, they don't hear a word I say." Cordelia later thanks the Scoobies, but when her popular friends see her with "those losers," she quickly retreats again from the "social leper colony" ("Out of Sight" B1011).

[3] After being saved repeatedly by Buffy, Xander, and Willow in *Buffy* seasons 2 and 3, and falling into a reluctant yet passionate relationship with Xander, Cordelia eventually rejects the "Cordettes" as "sheep" ("Bewitched" B2016) and effectively allies herself with Buffy. She remains "homerically insensitive" ("Killed by Death" B2018), but she is willing to use her powers of beauty and seduction for good, distracting a hospital security guard ("Killed" B2018), for example, or wearing "something trashy—er" to act as Xander's girlfriend while he borrows a rocket launcher for Buffy to use against the Judge ("Innocence" B2014).

[4] Nevertheless, Cordelia's self-centeredness remains essential to her character. When Buffy is infected with a demonic ability to read minds in season 3's "Earshot" (B3018), Cordelia's thoughts are exactly the same as her spoken words:

CORDELIA: (V.O.) I don't see what this has to do with me.

CORDELIA: I don't see what this has to do with me.

. . .

CORDELIA: (V.O.) Whatever. I wonder when I can go.

CORDELIA: Whatever. Can I go?

She is completely untroubled by the angst-producing or existential concerns of the other characters which begin to overwhelm the suddenly psychic Buffy; in this case, argues Jennifer Crusie, Cordelia's "lack of depth becomes a strength" (189). Similarly, and perhaps ironically foreshadowing this theme, when everyone else in town is transformed by enchanted costumes in Halloween (B2006), Cordelia wears a cat costume that reflects her personality—slinky and predatory—rather than a fantasy or desire, the "come as you aren't" aspect Buffy says is the essence of Halloween. Thus, although her costume does not transform her because it wasn't rented from Ethan Rayne's shop, it also doesn't have the metaphorical import carried by the other characters' costumes: Willow's sexiness shrouded by the ghost, Buffy's power disguised by the helpless 18th century damsel, Xander's anxious adolescent masculinity masked by super-competent GI Joe.

[5] Cordelia's unshakable conviction that she exists to be adored is also her vulnerability. Thus, her discovery of Xander and Willow's betrayal in "Lover's Walk" (B3008) is, for Cordy, emotionally apocalyptic, leading to her own death in the alternate universe of her revenge in "The Wish," the very next episode (B3009). Two factors reconcile her with the Scoobies: first, the attractive prospect of "Pierce Brosnan-y" new Watcher Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, who is virtually struck speechless by her charms, despite Faith's succinct warning: "First word: jail; second word: bait" ("Consequences" B3015); and ultimately, Xander's kindest conciliatory gesture—his redemption of her layaway prom dress ("The Prom" B3020). Cordelia and Wesley soon learn that they have no physical chemistry at all, but Queen C's place among those who fight evil is secure as she finally stakes a vampire in the graduation-day battle of the Mayor's ascension ("Graduation Day 2" B3022). That Cordette Harmony's "You reign," is spoken in the alternate universe of "The Wish" does not make it less valid. As Crusie notes, "Cordy's solipsism . . . comes coupled with a keen intelligence and a fixity of purpose that makes her almost invincible" (188). She earned excellent SAT scores, even if her father's tax evasion meant she won't be able to attend any of the good colleges that accepted her applications; Cordelia's status as arbiter of taste and fashion never changes in her own mind, and through the end of *Buffy* season three, she still holds a significant role as an active member the Scooby gang.

[6] When Cordelia joins the spin-off *Angel*, her character in season one is initially very much the same as in Sunnydale—self-centered, snarky, concerned with fashion and celebrity. In five years (or TV seasons) in *Angel*'s Los Angeles, her character goes through a failed acting career, no less than three impregnations by demonic powers ("Expecting" A1012; "Epiphany" A2016; most of season four), involuntarily receives the gift of prophetic visions that nearly destroy her mind and body ("Parting Gifts" A1010, "That Vision Thing" A3002), and accepts yet another gift of becoming partly demonic in order to endure the visionary side-effects ("Birthday" A3011). Cordelia then becomes a higher being in a glowy fog where she apparently has almost nothing to do ("Tomorrow" A3022; "Deep Down" A4001), and is overtaken or perhaps, subsumed by the godlike Jasmine, to whom she eventually gives birth, leaving her body comatose, unseen, through the first half of *Angel* season five, until she awakens to give Angel some much needed advice and encouragement. Then, we learn, her appearance has been an angelic visitation—Cordelia is dead ("You're Welcome" A5012). Scholars and scholar-fans have offered several possible explanations for the character's narrative arc.

[7] Phil Colvin and others^[1] have noted the identification of Los Angeles with Angel, a definitively male space as opposed to Sunnydale, identified with Buffy. Even in the first episode of season one, significantly entitled, "City of...", Angel's conduit to the "Powers That Be," Doyle, approves Cordy's addition to the team, not because of her talents or skills, but because, "She'll provide a connection to the world. She's got a very—humanizing influence." In other words, because she possesses traits traditionally coded feminine, she balances Angel's stoic, masculine character. Janice Harrison argues in "Gender Politics in Angel," that because the "corporate structure" of Angel Investigations is "circular," with an "androgynous management style," Cordelia "grows into a compassionate, capable woman" (125). However, there is no Angel Investigations without Angel, who increasingly is referred to as the champion. If the intended paradigm for *Buffy* is one of female empowerment, the paradigms of Angel seem heavily informed by superhero narratives, film noir (Abbott "Kicking," Stoy) and Richard Slotkin's regeneration through violence view of the American frontier, extrapolated more recently by Jewett and Lawrence in *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Women's places in these genres are primarily supporters or temptresses, though there are certainly exceptions. Because the frameworks of *Angel* are these types of "male imaginaries," it seems difficult to make a case for *Angel* as a feminist series, and I have not tried to do so. Nevertheless, as Crusie comments in her analysis, throughout season one, Cordelia's character continues to be portrayed as essentially motivated by "enlightened practicality . . . the perfect balance of self-centeredness and responsibility" (192).

[8] However, considering the strong and unconventional female characters in Whedon's other series (e.g., Buffy, Willow, Zoe, River), it seems a little surprising and perhaps disappointing that the *Angel* writers could not think of anything for a smart woman with keen fashion sense and a head for finance to do as the seasons progressed except fall in love, get herself knocked up—twice, before they hit the jackpot with the devastating Jasmine—and progressively manifest such a super-human mix of maternal and erotic compassion that she would become a supernatural being—the angel in Angel's house. The origins and influence of Coventry Patmore's metaphorical feminine inspiration are traced by Elaine Hartnell her article in *Victorian Poetry*, "'Nothing but sweet and womanly': A Hagiography of Patmore's Angel." According to Hartnell, Patmore's "angel" depends on a worldview which insists on "the existence of two separate spheres—the public or worldly sphere which is the province of men and the domestic or private sphere of the home which is presided over, and legislated for, by women" (458). As *Angel* season 3 progresses, Cordelia relinquishes her delusions—or ambitions—of an acting career in the public sphere outside the domestic or private sphere of the home or family space—as the Hyperion Hotel is coded—while at the same time she is also less frequently shown actively managing Angel Investigations. Instead she is shown mothering baby Connor, comforting, inspiring, and advising. Women in "The Angel in the House" "keep the [man] entertained, look after his domestic comfort, minister to his ego, and point him toward heaven" (Hartnell 461), just as Cordy makes waffles for Angel after he forces Wolfram and Hart to lift the torturing physical side-effects of her visions ("That Vision

Thing" A3002). Or consider this almost unbearably cute domestic scene:

(Cordelia and Angel are falling asleep lying on top of Angel's bed with Connor in between them, feeding from a bottle.)

CORDELIA: (singing) Go to sleep, my baby peep... (to Angel) I'm just saying a boat.

ANGEL: No. College fund.

CORDELIA: Yes. College fund - and pay our bills - and put a down payment on a boat.

ANGEL: We're not getting a boat.

CORDELIA: Hmm, they're fun.

ANGEL: They're expensive. And when would I go on this boat, hmm?

CORDELIA: Moonlight sails. - Okay. - College fund - pay our bills - and rent a ski condo in Aspen.

ANGEL: Ski condo?

CORDELIA: There's got to be some fun in our lives.

ANGEL: Hmm - I like a ski condo.

CORDELIA: Sure. Snow. Trees. Chipmunk robots on ice...

ANGEL: Chipmunk robots... - on ice... ("Provider" (A3012)

[9] Of course, we might ask, what about Virginia Woolf's comment that in "above all—I need not say it—[the angel] was pure"? Cordelia, the material girl who can be won back to Angel's side with gifts of new clothes ("Disharmony" A2017) and forfeits her escape from Castle Pylea because she insists on taking armfuls of booty ("Through the Looking Glass" A2021)? Cordelia, the woman who disappears for a three-week sexcapade with the Groosalugg, the handsome champion from demon dimension Pylea (*Angel* 3014-3017)? But let us consider another perspective on purity, and the placement of these incidents in the series narrative arc. The first two are from season two, and are quite consistent with Sunnydale or *Angel* season 1 Cordelia. The Cordelia/Groo affair is from season three. In this season, the writers begin building up the possibility of an Angel/Cordelia romance, although Angel, as has been established of old, can never achieve perfect happiness because he will lose his soul. This makes romance, and sex, risky, though not impossible.^[2] In addition, Cordelia's prescient visions are transmitted from one being to another by means of a kiss or other intimate contact—including sex or "comshuk"—so she can only make love with Groo after they obtain "a paranormal prophylactic" ("Couplet" A3014), thus, maintaining a kind of purity.

[10] The Angel/Cordelia romance, complicated by the return of troubled teen Connor from the Quortoth hell-dimension, seems to have either led the writers to make implied domestic angel Cordelia explicit, or else, as Jennifer Crusie bluntly states, "the [Mutant Enemy] writers evidently lost their minds" (193). The process follows: First, Cordelia is once again placed in the damsel in distress role in "Birthday," as the staggering pain of the visions put her in a coma. Demon Skip—already shown to be unreliable in a previous encounter with Angel—guides her to an alternate vision of her life without Angel, a life she willingly sacrifices, "noble and heroic," in order to take on the burden of the visions again by allowing herself to be made partly demonic, whatever the consequences may be, rather than allow Angel to suffer. This is Cordelia as the "intensely sympathetic . . . utterly unselfish" angel in the Angel's house.

[11] Cordelia's demonization has no results one would conventionally recognize as demonic. "No horns. . . . No tail," nor any other outward physical changes. Instead, she manifests abilities more conventionally associated with angels: she involuntarily floats (flies?) when experiencing a vision ("Birthday" A3011), glows with a blinding light that

(apparently) purges evil intent but leaves everything else unharmed ("The Price" A3019, "Benediction" (A3022).

[12] Finally, on her way to exchange love declarations with Angel, Cordelia, dressed in a flowing white gown, is highjacked by Skip (whose motives still remain unclear) and informed that she's being promoted:

SKIP: You're a great warrior, Cordelia. The battle that we're all a part of is fought on many different planes and dimensions. You've outgrown this one. You've become - a higher being.

CORDELIA: Me?

SKIP: You. You took on the visions, and even when you could have traded them in for a happy, normal life, even when they were killing you, you wouldn't let them go. The big test came when the Powers made you part demon. They bet the farm on you. Power corrupts. And they gave you a lot of power.

CORDELIA: The glowy thing.

SKIP: Which you used well - to fight evil, and heal Connor.

CORDELIA: And only that one time as a night light.—Bad dreams.—Skip, I don't understand.

SKIP: I think you do.

CORDELIA: It's ridiculous. - I'm just a somewhat normal girl—who—has visions, glows, and occasionally blows things up with her crazy new power. (Skip looks at her) I'm a higher being.

SKIP: Yes. . . . There is work to be done in the higher realms. ("Tomorrow" A3022)

For the most part, this is vintage Cordelia—Skip flatters her vanity and she falls for it. In fact there is nothing at all to do in the higher realms, and Cordy is so bored in the first two episodes of season four ("Deep Down" A4001) as she watches her friends from above that she begs, "What are you? Deficient? Get me out of here!" ("Ground State" A4002). Yet the response of the other characters, particularly Angel, seems to suggest that Cordelia's elevation is, to some extent, intended to be taken seriously.

ANGEL: . . . it doesn't surprise me. In some small way, maybe it even makes it easier, knowing the good she's doing up there. Even if I can't see her or talk to her, it's like . . . she's still on my side. All those months, under the water, I kept thinking to myself I gotta get home... to Cordelia. I get back and I find out that she's gone. I keep thinking, I gotta get Cordy back home. Finally I find her, and I realize she already is home. Where she belongs. ("Ground State" A4002)

[13] They are mistaken. Angelic Cordelia has served her purpose as inspiration, guide, and comfort, so she is returned to earth with amnesia ("Slouching" A4004). Now the "angel" is first metaphorically murdered by transforming Cordelia into a "monstrous mother," as described by Jes Battis in "Demonic Maternities, Complex Motherhoods" and by Matt Hills and Rebecca Williams in "*Angel's* Monstrous Mothers and Vampires with Souls: Investigating the Abject in 'Television Horror'." Hills and Williams' description of the birth of Jasmine is worth noting here, however, as it also fits with the angelic purity trope:

Although Cordelia is repeatedly figured as a monstrous womb, on the one occasion where she brings her offspring to term ("Inside Out"), any possible imagery of bloodied and viscous abjection is entirely removed from the episode's visual representation of birthing. Instead the climactic birth scene depicts cosmic radiance and a "star-child" type of SFX, as Jasmine appears haloed by bright, white, supernatural light. (207)

Giving birth to Jasmine sends Cordelia into yet another coma, a more explicit figurative death. She remains unseen throughout most of season five, returning once again in episode twelve, "You're Welcome."^[3] Now all traces of monster Cordy are gone; snippy yet compassionate Cordelia is back, once more with inspiration, to recall Angel to his mission: "The Powers That Be owed me one, and I didn't waste it. I got my guy back on track." She also passes one important vision to Angel with her parting kiss. And then, really, finally, she "softly and suddenly vanishes away"^[4] and Cordelia, the angel in Angel's house, is dead. Why? Narratively, because her work is done, of course. But also, evidently, the writers could think of nothing else for her to do. Now and then Cordy would be given a sword or a stake, but in the end, she had become princess, beloved, mother—angel. Self-sacrifice is the angel's middle name—even unto death.

[14] Male characters in *Angel* certainly have their nurturing and self-sacrificing aspects: Angel goes ga-ga over baby Connor ("Dad" A3010), Wesley sits with dying Fred and reads her favorite book ("A Hole in the World" A5015), etc., but these actions or qualities do not become their primary characteristics or *raison d'être*, and if a male character dies—as Wesley does—it is in active combat, not as a victim of overwhelming forces. Gunn subjects himself to (apparently) eternal torment in the Wolfram and Hart suburban hell primarily to atone for his own transgression in releasing Illyria, not so much for the secondary result of releasing Lindsey.

[15] Of course, an analysis of one character throughout five seasons of a complex television series must inevitably be only a part of a much longer conversation. Cordelia the self-sacrificing angel is only one example of difficulties faced by female characters in the series: Winifred "Fred" Burkle, seemingly a more obviously frail feminine flower, is robust enough to ultimately survive her own death (which she fights all the way) but is weirdly transmuted into the androgynous Illyria. Lilah Morgan, after relentlessly climbing to the top of her division of Wolfram & Hart, literally over her supervisor's dead body ("Deep Down" A4001), is killed by possessed-Cordy, then revived as another paradoxical savior figure, as Jennifer Stoy notes:

Lilah (who is not-so-coincidentally dressed in white) [is discovered] in the courtyard of the Hyperion Hotel. This is after her side wound in 'Habeas Corpses' is revealed to be stigmatic in 'Calvary' (4:12), when she admits to Wesley 'I can't make it stop' as her bloodied hands fall outward from her stomach. Of course one also notes that the death in the provocatively named 'Calvary' is not Angel, Connor, nor any of the potential saviors; it's Lilah who dies . . . (170-71)

although she does not actually provide salvation—thus, the paradox. Another paradoxical self-sacrificing "angel" is Darla, the vampire mother of Connor, who stakes herself in order that her son may be born, and who later appears as a vision in white, urging him to follow his heart because, "I feel the good in you and no matter how much you're beaten or twisted or lied to, it's still there in your heart. I know it, and deep down, you know it, too" ("Inside Out" A4017)—an ultimately ineffective plea. Killing them does not seem to strengthen them^[5]—unlike Buffy's deaths and resurrections ("Prophecy Girl" B1012, "The Gift" B5022, and all of season 6). It is also unlike Virginia Woolf's metaphorical murder of her mental "angel in the house," which would enable her to become the writer she knew she could be, wanted to be. Although the angelic Cordelia who makes her final appearance in "You're Welcome" is stronger and more effective in almost every way than before, she is also only present and active for one day. And ultimately, all these female or feminine angels, effective or ineffective, appear to minister to Angel, in Angel's house, Angel's town—but then, it's Angel's show.

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[1] Fitzpatrick, "Monsters and Mean Streets;" Jacob, "Los Angelus: The City of Angel;" Sayer, "'It Wasn't Our World Anymore. They Made it Theirs': Reading Space and Place."

[2] In season 5, Angel will finally meet a nice, uncomplicated werewolf girl, Nina, and enjoy one night of romance without losing his soul before sending her away to escape the "Circle of the Black Thorn" apocalypse (5021).

[3] Significantly, "You're Welcome" was also *Angel's* 100th episode and the series'

cancellation had not yet been announced (Ritchie).

[4] Yes, that is a quote from "The Hunting of the Snark," by Lewis Carroll. Draw your own conclusions.

[5] Except perhaps in the problematic case of Fred/Illyria. Jes Battis' commentary on Fred/Illyria in *Blood Relations* (124-32) is excellent.