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**By Beholding, We Become Changed:
Narrative Transubstantiation and the
Whedonverses^{1, 2}**



[1] I was born into a Christian family in northeast Georgia. The narratives I knew best as a child were Bible stories, moral lessons collected in a series of books called *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*, and radio dramas narrated by Uncle Dan and Aunt Sue. I preferred the heroic story of Queen Esther to the heavy-handed tales and radio shows of little boys and girls always getting their just comeuppance for being selfish or lying to their parents. As I grew older, became a more critical thinker, and began consuming a much wider range of narratives, the declaration I had heard much of my life, one too often used as a warning to avoid the mesmerism of fiction rather than an invitation to wrestle with ideas, meant more to me than ever before. My mother, my parochial school teachers, my church community—at various turns, they all reminded me and each other that “by beholding we become changed.”³ It is not surprising, then, that one day in the distant future I would, as a scholar, be deeply curious about the impact of stories on human thoughts and behaviors. Because I also grew up as a (secret) fan of everything from My Little Pony to Michael Jackson to *Days of Our Lives* (1965-) to *Magnum P.I.* (1980-88), it is also not surprising that I would, as a researcher, be deeply curious about fan cultures. Most recently, I have become interested in the intersection of both narratives and fandom—how stories move fans to action, particularly social justice activism.

[2] After years of personal experiences, rhetorical theory education, and studying fandom scholarship, my curiosities and interests have resulted in a research question that drives much of my current academic work: how might the metaphor of transubstantiation—the process of one substance becoming another substance—contribute to our understanding of narrative persuasion and fandoms? To begin answering this question, in the space of this article I first provide a summary of some of the dominant metaphors used by scholars to explain narrative impact. Into that discussion I then introduce the metaphor of transubstantiation as a novel means for understanding how stories affect us. Next, I offer examples of narrative transubstantiation as they manifest among the fans of media auteur Joss Whedon and his many storyworlds before concluding by speaking to the significance of narrative persuasion, specifically for fans of the Whedonverses. Ultimately, I argue that

rather than being devotees or worshippers or pretenders, as some media scholars have suggested, some of us fans become our own narratives in the world—stories in the flesh. By being beheld, narrative becomes changed. By beholding, we become changed.

Narrative Persuasion as Symbolic Pilgrimage, Simulation, and Transportation

[3] Literary theorists, narratologists, cognitive psychologists, and other researchers who study story use a variety of metaphors to attempt to capture how narratives work on and within human beings. For example, Roger C. Aden, in *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages*, describes audience engagement with preferred texts—whether books, television shows, or sporting events—as **symbolic pilgrimage**. According to Aden, when you and I choose to invest our attention in a story, we embark on a journey in our minds; we ascend, by way of our imagination, to a plane where we can exist outside of our everyday lives, a space in which we can experiment and learn something new. Like the Campbellian hero of the monomyth, our journey is a challenge—in some cases, a refining in fire—as well as an education, one that may affect us physically, morally, and spiritually. Eventually, a story hero secures an elixir, a sought-after object, or piece of knowledge, and that boon is used to save and/or heal both the hero and the hero’s community. This symbolic pilgrimage is exactly what happens to each of us when we read, watch, listen to, or play a narrative, suggests Aden, a proposal he buttresses with three major concepts: habitus, grand narratives, and promised lands.

[4] In every culture, humans live by certain unwritten and invisible “rules,” assumptions and expectations about how life works, that we refer to as “common sense.” For instance, in the United States a dominant rule is “that if we work hard, we’ll experience success and fulfillment. This sentiment,” states Aden, “reflects a normative narrative . . . that [is called] ‘the American dream’” (2-3). In a word, that dream is *progress*—linear, forward movement. Because most Americans, whether wittingly or unwittingly, accept the dream as common sense or, put more strongly, fact, they live it out through their thoughts and actions. Belief in this accepted fact is exhibited in everyday living, a space Pierre Bourdieu identifies as a culture’s habitus⁴ (Aden 3) and Michel de Certeau defines as “*assumed reality*” (58, original emphasis). This space has been shaped not only by individual American’s desires and aspirations, but also by U.S. history, a collective history of colonization, Manifest Destiny, immigration, boom and bust economics, and more. Along the progress path, the stories Americans repeatedly tell themselves about who they were, are, and will be—their mythologies or “grand narratives,” in Jean-François Lyotard’s words—help them “make sense of, and . . . [sometimes] transcend, the seemingly invisible boundaries

of [their] habitus" (Aden 3). Progress, the longing and search for an ever-better location, argues Aden, "suggests [Americans] have a need to find places that matter," and the places that matter the most are "promised lands . . . where dreams of progress come true" (3). Sometimes promised lands are literal: a young person leaves a small, rural town to pursue higher education or a wider array of career opportunities. Sometimes promised lands are symbolic: a viewer uses the romantic and sexual experiences of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* (1997-2003) main character Buffy Summers to make sense of her own, real-world romantic and sexual experiences. These are the promised lands Aden is interested in: symbolic ones.

[5] Scholars sometimes critique grand narratives for reinforcing and reproducing the status quo, a state of being that mostly if not entirely benefits the powerful elite of a society. For this reason, cultural mythologies often bear a negative label. Yet Aden is convinced that the stories we tell and engage with—especially popular ones—need not solely be limiting or debilitating. Rather, they can be at once limiting *and* "enabling" (9). As a whole, *Popular Stories and Promised Lands* provides readers with a theoretical foundation for and examples of such a proposition. Underpinning Aden's proposal—and most relevant to my own argument—is the notion of symbolic pilgrimage as it is intentionally taken by particular people: those of us who consider ourselves fans. Aden explains his position as one that assumes being a fan can be empowering; therefore, he concentrates on "understanding how we enact [through stories] a personal sense of power while negotiating the rules of the habitus" (9). In other words, he is interested in how fans embark on symbolic pilgrimages and use those mental journeys as "purposeful play" (10). His distinction that the imagining of fans is purposeful—or productive—is essential to note because stories, specifically fictional ones, can suffer the abuse of being branded "*mere* escapist 'trash'" (7, original emphasis). Connotatively, the term *escapist* marks any story as low-brow, a waste of time, unproductive, even counterproductive. The adjective need not be understood as inherently negative, though. Stories-as-escape can provide a means of coping with everyday life, solutions for immediate problems, and a sense of hope about the future. "Getting away from it all" through popular narratives can, believes Aden, "[represent] the beginnings of evolutionary changes in our habitus" (7). The television series finale of *Buffy* and fan response to it demonstrate this point.

[6] In "Chosen" (7.22), Buffy orchestrates a plan to rewrite the ancient, men-made, "one-girl-in-all-the-world" mythology, a plan she later explains to her friends and the Potential Slayers they have assembled to help them fight the First Evil, the source of all other Big Bads:

So here's the part where you make a choice. What if you could have that power? Now. In every generation one Slayer is born because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. This woman [Willow] is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule. I say my power should be our power. Tomorrow, Willow will use the essence of this scythe to change our destiny. From now on, every girl in the world who *might* be a Slayer, *will* be a Slayer. Every girl who *could* have the power, *will* have the power. *Can* stand up, *will* stand up. Slayers. Every one of us. Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?

Buffy's speech and her ultimate question resonated with viewers all over the globe. In "There Is Only One Thing on This Earth More Powerful Than Evil—and That's Us," Everything I Know about Radical Politics I Learned from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," Decca Muldowney explains how watching and rewatching the series has influenced her activist commitments over the years and has provided wisdom for how to engage in the world:

When things got tough, I frequently turned to the immensely comforting world of *Buffy*, complete with kick-ass female heroine who overcomes demons and destroys evil. More recently, I've been thinking about the lessons I've learned over the last few years as an activist, and realized that many of [the] tensions and questions are ones that are explored and teased out in the *Buffyverse*.

Among the five lessons she lists, Muldowney includes "You'll never win if you fight alone," a lesson learned from "Chosen":

Any serious political work requires us to struggle collectively, to build bridges with those fighting different battles, to embrace the complexities of solidarity. . . . Only with this diffusion of responsibility and power are the good guys able to win in the end. Of course, there are casualties along the way. But it is only the strength and dedication of the collective, working together in non-hierarchical manner that even has a hope of standing up to evil.

Muldowney expresses what Aden describes as pilgrimage, a deliberate and productive imaginative "escape" or journey, that can "[represent] the beginnings of evolutionary

changes in our habitus" (7). For Muldowney, and many others, the *Buffy* narrative shows us how we too might change our world.

[7] The pilgrimage Aden posits, while symbolic, feels real; in many ways, it *is* real. As scholars such as Keith Oatley have argued, the emotions that a reader of any type of narrative text experiences are not characters' emotions. An author may describe characters' actions or feelings in realistic ways, but the actual emotions being experienced while a text is being consumed are the emotions of the individual audience member. To give an example from the fifth season of *Buffy*, when Buffy walks into her home and finds her mother Joyce lying lifeless on the living room sofa, the emotions that I felt the first time I watched that scene and the emotions I am feeling in this very moment as I engage my memory—these emotions are not Buffy's. These emotions are mine. Certainly, the character Buffy also feels a barrage of emotions in that moment of discovery; her facial and bodily expressions confirm as much. What I feel, though, is not what Buffy feels. I have my own emotional response, one that *parallels* Buffy's. This parallel emotional response is called *empathy*. Empathy, Oatley explains, results from mimesis, but he is quick to suggest that translations of the Ancient Greek word are misleading (48). Mimesis has been interpreted to mean imitation, copy, or representation. A more accurate term, claims Oatley, would be **simulation**: "What a play, novel, or film does is not to offer an empirical description that is inevitably flawed. It offers a parallel, a model. Narrative, especially fictional narrative, is a simulation, like a computer simulation, but one that runs on minds" (48). Sometimes, these simulations are so powerful, says Oatley, that they "affect a person's whole identity" (39). Again, both *Buffy* and its fans validate this point.

[8] In "A New Version of You," Kim O'Connor argues that among its teen television contemporaries—for example, *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003) and *Felicity* (1998-2002)—*Buffy* presents an atypical model of identity construction. Whereas other teen series of the time offered viewers "coming of age" arcs that inevitably bent toward finding one's one true self, "*Buffy* wasn't a narrative about finding an identity; it was always about having a lot of them." The finding-my-one-true-self model oversimplifies what real life feels and look like, says O'Connor. We do not "become" in a linear progression of growth towards a singular self. Rather, we are constantly in flux, changing as a result of what we choose to do or what is done—by our choice or not—to us. Becoming is messy, and "our task is to make sure that some semblance of self stays intact as we age" (O'Connor). *Buffy* helps with that task through the lives of Buffy, Willow, Xander and other characters who

juggled multiple versions of themselves *all the time*, constantly grappling with the contradictions, anxiety, and consequences surrounding who they had been, who they were, and who they would become . . . After floundering for a time, most of Buffy's contemporaries (Felicity, Rory from *Gilmore Girls*) found themselves by the time they graduated college. However much I loved those shows, their journeys did not speak to me. The life of a vampire slayer—gritty and exhausting, with bouts of immaturity, ill-advised romantic entanglements, and the occasional need to kill an evil bug—is the one that I actually recognize, the one that maps onto some semblance of life. It's a model that makes just as much sense when you're 15 as when you're 35, because who ever actually figures it out, really? (O'Connor, original emphasis)

At least one *Buffy* fan could not agree more. As a response to O'Connor's piece, Vanessa penned the blog post "What I Learned from *Buffy* about All the Versions of My Queer Girl Self." In that post, Vanessa talks about her love for the television series and main character and expresses her wish that she had had O'Connor's insight years ago when coming out as queer. Even now, though, the insight proves essential to understanding and accepting her various selves:

O'Connor suggests that *Buffy's* brilliance lies in the fact that "unlike most teen dramas, *Buffy* wasn't a narrative about finding an identity; it was always about having a lot of them." This speaks to me, as someone who never fit comfortably into any one of the high school stereotypes pop culture insists we must slot ourselves into from a very early age. I never had one group of friends in high school . . . the truth is that most of my peers—even the jerks, even the insufferable ones—were similarly three dimensional human beings, not thin slices of personalities that fit easily into one tired trope or another. I've never thought about Buffy's acceptance of this basic human truth, but O'Connor's essay argues it clearly and convincingly, showing me yet another layer of the show that makes it so consistently enjoyable and so consistently heartbreaking at the same time. . . . Buffy and the gang were actually keeping shit really real.

Oatley would draw our attention to Vanessa's choice of the word *real*. The series, then, is not a copy or imitation of life; it is a simulation run on human minds through imagination.

O'Connor's and Vanessa's responses to watching *Buffy*, despite the show's fantastical trappings (and perhaps because of them), demonstrate how narratives can parallel, and thus affect, the personal lives and identities of some viewers.

[9] In addition to pilgrimage and simulation, some researchers use the metaphor of **transportation** to comprehend the impact of stories. For instance, cognitive psychologists Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock have developed the Transportation-Imagery Model to examine narrative persuasion, to assist in explaining why viewers and readers often use expressions such as "I got caught up in my TV show" and "I got lost in my book." Their model consists of five postulates (316-17).

[10] In the first, Green and Brock distinguish between narrative and rhetorical persuasion. They argue that most of the latter "consists of arguments, reasoning, claims, evidence, and so forth" (320). In other words, narrative is distinct from rhetoric.⁵ As a result, we humans process an episode of *Firefly* (2002-2003) differently than we process a televised presidential debate. One of the ways we mentally process narratives differently is through imagery. Green and Brock maintain that to be persuasive, stories must evoke powerful images or mental pictures for us, and these mental pictures must also link in some way to our personal beliefs (316). To be clear, it is not necessary for a story to explicitly advocate a particular belief or opinion to be influential; however, some connection between our own thoughts on a subject and a story's exploration of the same subject creates a situation in which persuasion is more likely to occur (323). Postulates I and II, then, are inextricable as the second states that beliefs about a subject can change, "*other things equal*, to the extent that the evoked images are activated by psychological *transportation*, defined . . . as a state in which a reader [or viewer] becomes absorbed in the narrative world, leaving the real world, at least momentarily, behind" (317, original emphasis). Postulates III, IV, and V address factors that influence one's proclivity to be transported. Green and Brock hypothesize that we readers or viewers are more likely to experience narrative transportation if we have pronounced abilities to create vivid mental images and to become absorbed by a story. In addition to personal attributes, the two scholars argue that the likelihood of experiencing narrative transportation is affected by the qualities of the text itself, including but not limited to "the level of artistic craftsmanship" (317). Finally, the context or medium of a story influences our sense of being transported. For example, some stories facilitate while others impede transportation by, respectively, encouraging or discouraging "imaginative investment and participatory responses" (317). A fan who identifies as QuoterGal talks about her personal, real-world commitments and their connection to *Buffy* as a whole series:

I will be a feminist until the day I die . . . a fiercely protective person [of] anyone and anything abused by power. . . . Not coincidentally, one of the things that has given me the greatest hope has been the creation and popularity of *Buffy*. I know it's fiction—which is, by the way, part of our crucial and defining mythologies—and I know it was limited in its reach—but it was popular culture and it has clearly had an important impact . . . Nothing has ever hit me quite . . . the way “Are you ready to be strong?” [has] and the young girl [raising] her hand to stop her father hitting her—that was me, thirty-five years ago, actually raising my hand against my own father, and that was the first time I had seen my face on TV.

QuoterGal recalls the moment when Buffy's plan to activate every Potential Slayer all at once is realized. From one locale to another—all around the world—viewers witness power being shared: a young woman leans against a set of lockers in the hall of her high school as she feels a surge of power run through her body, a Little League player smiles and gets a twinkle in her eye as she hunkers down at home plate ready to swing harder at the next pitch than she ever has before, a young woman intercepts the open hand of her abuser and rises up to push him back as he approaches to slap her yet again. This latter scene is the one QuoterGal refers to, a response that could be situated under the umbrella of either of the metaphors *pilgrimage* or *simulation* as both describe her reaction to some degree. I place it here, though, because it demonstrates both the concept of transportation (“that was me . . . my face on TV”) and provides a segue into my proposition that for some deeply absorbed readers and viewers—perhaps fans are the most deeply absorbed of all—transportation falls short of capturing what happens within us when we participate in certain storyworlds.

Narrative Persuasion as Transubstantiation

[11] These metaphors for narrative persuasion—pilgrimage, simulation, transportation—prove enlightening, giving us various angles and, therefore, distinctive perspectives on the subject. Still, because understanding how stories “mean” in the hearts and minds of human beings is an extremely complex endeavor, no *one* angle or perspective suffices. To this list of metaphors, then, I propose adding another: **transubstantiation**. Transubstantiation is a process whereby one element becomes another. It is related to the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, the blood and body of Jesus Christ as symbolized by wine

and bread. Whereas Protestantism teaches spiritual transubstantiation of the emblems, meaning Christ is present for the act of Holy Communion in spirit only, Catholicism teaches literal transubstantiation, meaning Christ is physically present—the wine becomes his blood and the bread becomes his body in the mouth of the believer, though both are unseen to the naked eye. Due to its religious or nonrational nature, this metaphor may be uncomfortable for those of us academics unfamiliar or unassociated with a body of Christians. Religion, however, does not own it, as Douglas Burnham and Enrico Giaccherini's collection *The Poetics of Transubstantiation: From Theology to Metaphor* demonstrates.⁶ On the other hand, there is something important to be learned from the religious-ness of the metaphor; transubstantiation can offer scholars, just as the other working metaphors do, a fresh angle on what occurs when humans read, watch, listen to, or play stories. Scholars of media studies (a discipline within which the metaphor of consumption pervades discourse) as well as scholars of audience and fan studies should be particularly interested in this process. In fact, Cornel Sandvoss, explicating Jackie Stacey's work, partly captures the concept of transubstantiation when he notes that "it is not only the fan who shapes her object of fandom, but the object of fandom which shapes its fans" (81). Both Sandvoss and Stacey have aided me in articulating narrative transubstantiation as I conceive of it.

[12] In the chapter "The Inner Fan" in *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, Sandvoss argues that whereas much fandom scholarship focuses on the social or *interpersonal* aspects of being a fan, the psychoanalytic or *intrapersonal* aspects must also be investigated (67-68). He himself performs this task with the aid of post-Freudian object relations theorist Melanie Klein, specifically her explication of the processes of introjection, projection, and object splitting. Although these terms do not have stable, precise definitions even among the experts who use them (cf. Conklin; Knapp; Murstein and Pryer), a basic understanding of each informs the idea of narrative transubstantiation.

[13] In general, introjection refers to the ways we regard ourselves as a result of how others regard us (Henry, Schacht, and Strupp 768-69). This conscious and unconscious repertoire is significantly impacted by our earliest caregivers and "includes self-appraisals, verbal and motor behaviors directed at the self, and cultivation of various images of the self" (769). Healthy introjects are kind—accepting, nurturing, and supportive, whereas unhealthy ones are unkind or even cruel—rejecting, disparaging, and undermining. Interestingly, introjects or "hypothesized personality structure[s]" do not cease to change at the end of childhood or when our bodies stop growing; they continue to develop throughout our lives (769).

[14] Projection, on the other hand, is a process of seeing others as we see ourselves. Most of us are familiar with the Freudian definition: recognizing our own "bad" traits in others while not identifying them in ourselves. According to Freud, projection serves as a defense mechanism. Contemporary research challenges such an assertion, suggesting instead that identifying an undesirable trait such as arrogance in someone else can actually strengthen our ability to identify it in ourselves (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1092). Indeed, a preponderance of evidence confirms that how we see ourselves in both unhealthy and healthy ways influences how we see others, but our sight is limited, not always accurate, and not necessarily or at all used as a defense mechanism. Therefore, projection results from our attempts to suppress what we clearly or vaguely recognize in ourselves.

[15] Finally, object splitting refers to infants' experience of objects outside their bodies and the subsequent experience of their egos. Klein argues that typically the earliest and most immediate object an infant encounters is the mother's body in general and her breast in particular (Klein 20; Sandvoss 80). Furthermore, the breast becomes to the infant "a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast; this splitting results in a severance of love and hate" (Klein 20). Once the breast is experienced in this way, the anxiety-producing struggle between desiring the good or whole breast ("the libidinal forces of Eros" and rejecting the bad or fragmented breast ("the inherent death drive, Thanatos" [Sandvoss 80]) may result not only in the splitting of the object but also in the splitting of the infant's ego (Klein 24-25). If the infant stays fixed on the good object through this early stage, that object can "[counteract] the processes of splitting and dispersal," allowing the ego to develop a sense of cohesion (24-25). If the infant does not do so, both good and bad objects may be experienced as falling to pieces; in turn, the object-relation and the ego also fall to pieces, a disintegration that can produce disorders later in life (25). However, the likelihood of this pathology is unusual. Instead, children with "normal personalit[ies]" eventually move beyond this phase because they are able to successfully balance how they regard themselves in relation to others (29-30). Put another way, they find equilibrium between their introjects and their projections.

[16] Basic comprehension of introjection, projection, and healthy object-splitting can illuminate what it means to be a fan (Sandvoss 79-82; Stacey 227-32) and provide scholars "a meaningful alternative to Freudian conceptualizations" of spectatorship (Sandvoss 80). For example, Sandvoss observes the concepts in Jackie Stacey's study of British women who were regular cinema-goers in the 1940s. In interviews, the research participants gave responses that demonstrated how they made "choices between competing definitions of desirable femininity in relation to their feelings about themselves and about particular stars

who embody such definitions” (qtd. in Sandvoss 81). Additionally, “Stacey identifies *devotion/adoration, worship, transcendence, aspiration/inspiration* as the main cinematic ‘identificatory fantasies’” of the women (81, emphasis added). Outside the physical space of the cinema and alongside the internal fantasies formed in that context, Stacey also discusses the ways in which the female spectators practiced or externalized their imaginings. These ways included pretending to be a star by “playing Hollywood” in the spectators’ own home space, noting a physical resemblance between themselves and their favorite celebrity, imitating a preferred star’s mannerisms or talents, copying or recreating a celebrity’s appearance through hairstyle, cosmetics, and clothing (Stacey 159-70). These various interactions between the fan and her cherished object represent projection and introjection, a form of communication—sending and receiving messages—with(in) herself, says Sandvoss (80). Stacey, explaining the extra-cinematic practice of copying, uses similar phrasing: “This process involves an intersection of self and other, subject and object” (167), a negotiation that transforms one’s identity (126). In sum, the object of affection forms the spectator even as the spectator forms the object of her affection (Sandvoss 81).

[17] I find remarkable the language with which Sandvoss and Stacey capture the processes of introjection, projection, and object splitting as they relate to spectatorship and fandom, language steeped in religious connotation: devotion, adoration, worship, transcendence, aspiration, inspiration. The metaphors of shaping (Sandvoss’s word choice) and forming (my word choice) also relate to narrative transubstantiation as they echo the biblical story of creation. In Genesis 2.7 (*New American Standard Bible*, we read that “the LORD God *formed* [the first human] of dust from the ground, and breathed into [the human’s] nostrils the breath of life; and [the person] became a living being” (emphasis added). One might accurately understand this creative act as *transformative*. However, to see the act as *transubstantial* would be just as if not more precise because, according to the passage, one substance—dust or soil—becomes another substance—a human being. This is exactly what I propose: for not all but for some fans, the narratives we invest in and engage with become a part of who we are and what we do in the real world. One element becomes another; narrative transubstantiates. Stories become embodied by fans, echoing the communicative processes of projection and, especially, introjection. If transubstantiation works as a metaphor in relation to fans and fan practices, it has the potential to push the edges of understanding about fandom beyond the observations that fans pretend, resemble, imitate, and copy—all of which fans do. This novel take on the subject provides a vision of fans *not* as devotees or worshippers but as personal narratives in the world—stories in the flesh. By being beheld by fans, narrative changes. By beholding narrative, fans change.

Transubstantiation and the Whedonverses

[18] Readers of *Slayage*, the main audience for this essay, are likely familiar with the May 20, 2007, *WHEDONesque* blog post titled "Let's Watch a Girl Get Beaten to Death," a post written by Joss Whedon and elicited, he explains, by the juxtaposition of the "honor killing" or murder of Du'a Khalil Aswad in Bashika, Iraq, and the advertising campaign for *Captivity* (2007), a so-called "torture porn"⁷ directed by Roland Joffé. As a refresher for those familiar with the incident and an introduction for those unfamiliar, here is a snapshot of the post's content which can still be read in its entirety online:

What is wrong with women?

I mean wrong. Physically. Spiritually. Something unnatural, something destructive, something that needs to be corrected.

How did more than half the people in the world come out incorrectly? I have spent a good part of my life trying to do that math, and I'm no closer to a viable equation. And I have yet to find a culture that doesn't buy into it. Women's inferiority—in fact, their malevolence—is as ingrained in American popular culture as it is anywhere they're sporting burkhas. I find it in movies, I hear it in the jokes of colleagues, I see it plastered on billboards, and not just the ones for horror movies. Women are weak. Women are manipulative. Women are somehow morally unfinished. . . . And the logical extension of this line of thinking is that women are, at the very least, expendable. . . .

In the case of this upcoming torture-porn, fictional. In the case of Dua Khalil, mundanely, unthinkably real. And both available for your viewing pleasure.

Whedon ends with a call to action: "All I ask is this: Do something. Try something. Speaking out, showing up, writing a letter, a check, a strongly worded e-mail. Pick a cause—there are few unworthy ones. And nudge yourself past the brink of tacit support to action."⁸ Any admirer of Whedon's texts is not surprised by this plea. As the character Angel tells us, "If nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do. . . . Because, if there is no bigger meaning, then the smallest act of kindness is the greatest thing in the world" (*Angel*, "Epiphany" 2.16).⁹ Why do our actions matter? Perhaps one answer is this: at least in part, what we *do* is who we *are*. As K. Dale Koontz contends, "Whedon reminds us again and again, it's not what we carry in our blood that makes us worthwhile. It's what we choose to do" (189). In other words, as Marshall Gregory explores at length in *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives*, our actions exhibit our character, and our character is heavily if

not primarily influenced by the stories we consume and the stories that consume us (90)—the stories that we become. In response to Whedon’s post, a fan with the username MySerenity demonstrates what I mean:

Before I discovered . . . [Whedon’s] work, I was blind to the violence against women . . . The only thing I was completely convinced of at the age of 14 was that I hated myself because I was a woman. I hated everything about it. As a result of the media-influenced culture I grew up in, I was ashamed of my own sex and desperately wished for a hero to come and save me . . . And then I found Buffy . . . And then I found Joss Whedon . . . And then I found Equality Now . . . And then I found myself. And I never turned back.

This reply and many other replies to the blog post suggest narrative transubstantiation has occurred. The story has become more than a story; the story has become something else entirely: “And then I found Buffy . . . And then I found myself.” Another, more recent example of an *Angel* (1999-2004) fan also comes to mind. During the XXII Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, *The Daily Show’s* Jason Jones interviewed Russians about the country’s oppressive stance toward people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. One anti-government activist talked about why she protests even when so few others do:

JONES. Are you hopeful Russia can change?

ACTIVIST. I have to hope, because otherwise it’s too depressive.

JONES. [Nodding.] It is really . . . depressing. Seriously.

ACTIVIST. Yes, unfortunately. I really do it [protest] just to not be ashamed of me, of my way of living. I want to look [into] the eyes of my children and my grandchildren and say that I did all I could. I’ll say a quote from an American TV show. It’s called *Angel*. There is a wonderful phrase there: “If nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do.”

JONES. Boy, it sounds so much better coming out of your mouth than *Angel’s*. This is one of those points where I don’t have any irony. I just wanna kinda give you a hug. Is that good? Alright. [They hug.] (“Jason Jones”)

The woman’s explanation for protesting and her linking of the decision to act with the television narrative once again demonstrate that narrative moves across and through various mediums, making its way from creator to page to screen to receiver, transubstantiating as it goes.

[19] At the fifth biennial *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses held in Vancouver, BC, in July 2012, I presented an early version of this idea. Because my thoughts about narrative transubstantiation were only emerging at that time and, thus, not yet clearly articulated, conference reviewers AmiJo Comeford, Ian Klein, and Elizabeth Rambo, in their assessment of my presentation, noted that perhaps *theosis* rather than *transubstantiation* was the more appropriate term. That response has helped me clarify my thoughts and argument. Theosis is the process of deification, of becoming divine—god or one with god. I am *not* suggesting that Joss Whedon (or the body of his creative works) is a god, though some fans may treat him as a sort of deity; I will let scholars of celebrity culture work that one out. I am *not* suggesting that audience members become one with Whedon through his narratives, though that could be an intriguing proposition. In fact, I am also *not* suggesting that Whedon—or any other storyteller—plays an omnipotent role in the process of narrative transubstantiation. Of course, a creator, writer, director, and/or producer of a narrative has a certain kind of control over a text, an aesthetic control that if highly skilled might significantly contribute to a text’s probability of transubstantiating.¹⁰ For the moment, though, I am drawing attention away from the artist to the art itself. What transubstantiates, I posit, is the narrative: the word becomes flesh. Appropriate to the use of this metaphor, then, one thoroughly imbued with religious connotation, is the biblical allusion to the Gospel of John 1.1, 14 (*NASB*): “In the beginning was the Word . . . [and] the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The *Word* in English, which is understood in this passage to refer to the Messiah or Christ, is *Logos* in Ancient Greek. Intriguingly, *logos* and *mythos* were once used interchangeably (cf. Bottici; Lowe; Wilson), both meaning speech, discourse, narration. Whereas today the terms are understood in opposition to each other to mean, respectively, fact and fiction, this opposition has not always been the case. In other words, John 1.1, 14 might just as easily read this way: “In the beginning was the [Mythos] . . . [and the Mythos] became flesh and dwelt among us.” A contemporary version of the passage, then, could be rendered as follows: “In the beginning was the [Narrative] . . . [and the Narrative] became flesh and dwelt among us.” The process of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, becoming human is traditionally called the Incarnation. However, the process might also be understood as the Transubstantiation: Word becoming Flesh—one substance becoming another substance.

Why Metaphor and Story Matter

[20] In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson make a distinction between conventional and unconventional, “ordinary” and “imaginative” metaphors (139).

Both can simultaneously clarify as well as obscure meaning; however, unusual metaphors do “[give] us a new understanding of our experience” (139). A new understanding of narrative persuasion is what I have begun to provide by suggesting that the metaphor of transubstantiation be included among pilgrimage, simulation, and transportation. This novel way of thinking about story can help us better understand what we mean when we say that a book, a film, a game, an album, a television series such as *Buffy* or *Angel* or *Firefly* “really spoke to me.” Those who study narrative persuasion confirm over and over again that stories directly and significantly shape us. Stories help us grow emotionally, ethically, and particularly develop our empathy for others. In other words, narratives are our sustenance—our bread and wine—and when we take part in the very human communion of storytelling, a transubstantiation occurs. The words truly become flesh—our flesh. By being beheld, narrative changes. By beholding, we become changed.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the many colleague-friends who have offered feedback and advice as I have been developing the concept of narrative transubstantiation. Particularly, I thank Robin Anne Reid and Benjamin Tyner for investing a significant amount of time in helping me hone my ideas and Meghan K. Winchell for responding astutely to a near-final draft of this particular essay. My work is stronger as a result of collaborating with peers.
2. In 2013, earlier versions of this essay were presented at Joss in June in Shelby, NC, and the Popular and American Culture Association in the South in Savannah, GA.
3. Both this exact phrase and the principle it represents can be found throughout the writings of Protestant reformer Ellen G White, a 19th-century founder and leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For example, White writes, “Looking unto Jesus we obtain brighter and more distinct views of God, and *by beholding we become changed*. Goodness, love for our fellow [human beings], becomes our natural instinct. We develop a character which is the counterpart of the divine character” (*Christ’s Object Lessons* 355, emphasis added). Conversely, “The mind of a man or woman does not come down in a moment from purity and holiness to depravity, corruption, and crime. It takes time to transform the human to the divine, or to degrade those formed in the image of God to the brutal or the satanic. *By beholding we become changed*” (*The Adventist Home* 330, emphasis added).
4. The term *habitus*, while adapted by Bourdieu, did not originate with him. The concept has been traced as far back as Aristotle, and the term’s contemporary use can be found

in the early 20th-century writings of sociologists Marcel Mauss and Norbet Elias. Still, among even more recent authors, Bourdieu's adaptation is one of the most widely known and referenced.

5. As a rhetorician, I have some trouble with Green and Brock's seemingly binaristic construction of narrative and rhetoric; however, I can agree that stories do not necessarily impact audiences in the same manner as, for example, a political speech does. I also concede that audiences mentally process narratives differently than they do arguments. Nevertheless, I maintain that a story is, in fact, a form of rhetoric, or "how we use language and how language uses us" (Ratcliffe).
6. Ashgate, publisher of Burnham and Giaccherini's *The Poetics of Transubstantiation*, best captures the broad nature of the text:

The essays in this collection explore the concept of "transubstantiation," its adaptations and transformations in English and European culture from the Elizabethans to the twentieth century. Favoring an interartistic and comparative perspective, a wide range of critical approaches, from the philosophical to the semiological, from cultural materialism to gender and queer studies, are brought to bear on authors ranging from Descartes, Shakespeare and Joyce, to Macpherson, Madox Ford, and Winterson, as well as on contemporary sculpture and an Italian adaptation of Conrad for the screen in an unusually comic vein. The volume . . . will be of interest to those concerned with the cultural history of Christianity and with the remarkable critical and theoretical insights generated by contemporary approaches to this traditional theme.

As this description indicates, the metaphor of transubstantiation can be widely applied and employed.

7. The phrase *torture porn* is, as Kristopher Woofter and Jasie Stokes point out, "a hotly debated term by scholars" (par. 11). See Woofter and Stokes for a discussion regarding the phrase and how it relates to Whedon and Drew Goddard's film *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012). Woofter and Stokes' treatment offers insight into Whedon's use of the same phrase in his blog post "Let's Watch a Girl Get Beaten to Death."
8. I explore Whedon's post and fan reaction to it in greater detail in "'Past the Brink of Tacit Support': Fan Activism and the Whedonverses," an article that appeared in the online journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*, volume 10 (2012).
9. Joss Whedon is often referred to as an auteur. As result, his many talented co-creators are sometimes subsumed within singular, possessive phrasing such as "Whedon's texts."

Though I myself have followed the practice of using these phrases, it is essential to note that Whedon never works in an artistic vacuum. For example, "Epiphany" was written by regular Whedon collaborator Tim Minear and directed by Thomas J. Wright. Though the character Angel expresses a sentiment I and other scholars have connected with Whedon's many storyworlds as well as his personal commitments, it must be remembered that the dialogue of "Epiphany" was penned by Minear.

10. As noted above, Green and Brock posit that a reader's or viewer's tendency to be transported by a text—i.e., to feel immersed—partly depends on the artistry of the text. Put another way, the quality of the text itself might affect one's sense of narrative transportation. Yet they note that they are not aware of any empirical evidence that supports such a claim. What they have demonstrated in other research, however, is that there are "striking differences in self-ratings of transportation in response to texts that differed widely in how well their artistic merit had been acclaimed" (328). In other words, texts that receive high praise for their aesthetics and craft are rated by participants as more able to transport them than texts that do not receive high praise. As a parallel to their postulate, I suggest, too, that an artistically acclaimed narrative is more likely to transubstantiate than a less artistically notable narrative.

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