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**Whedon and the Fall of Man:  
How Joss Whedon Subverts the Myths  
of Masculinity**



“The thing about changing the world: once you do it, the world's all different.”

Buffy Summers

[1] Writer-director Joss Whedon is likely the most studied of this generation's male feminists. His groundbreaking series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, based on the feature film of the same name, became the flagship of the Warner Bros. television network. Whedon parlayed that success into the spinoff *Angel* and two short-lived television series for the Fox network, *Firefly* and *Dollhouse*. In addition, Whedon lent his talents to comic books and graphic novels, continuing Buffy Summers's adventures with *Buffy: Season 8* (from whose first issue this essay's epigraph comes) and taking the reins of *Astonishing X-Men*. Whedon's familiarity with comic book characters led to his directing the smash hit film *Marvel's The Avengers* in 2012. As we examine Whedon's work from the advent of *Buffy* in 1997 to today, we begin to see a pattern of shattering the myths of hypermasculinity that are so pervasive in “geek” culture. While his fictional ingénue-with-a-twist Buffy Summers may save the world repeatedly throughout her series, Whedon is busy destroying the real world in the hopes of rebuilding a more egalitarian model.

**Masculinities**

[2] Because there is no “outside” of culture, one must establish the cultural framework that Whedon both revered and is trying to tear down. Given the intense male domination in the writing, inking, illustration, and production of superheroes, portrayals of male and female superhero characters began to display deeply masculine, even misogynistic biases. Mulvey (1975) first identified the concept of the “male gaze,” the theoretical camera through which the world is lensed and, therefore, conceptualized. Media produced by men for men reinforces the ideals of masculine behavior. As Mulvey (1975) states:

There is an obvious interest in this analysis for feminists, a beauty in its exact rendering of the frustration experienced under the phallogocentric order. It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings an articulation of the problem closer, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy (6-7).

[3] It is this hegemonic masculinity that encourages (and, in many cases, requires) the male hero to dominate other males and to subordinate females (Connell, 2005). This domination, both in narrative and subtext, often takes the form of *hypermasculinity*. Hypermasculinity, as defined by Mosher & Sirkin (1984), includes three components: 1) violence as manly, 2) callous sexual attitudes toward women, and 3) the experience of danger as exciting. While these three aspects certainly do not encompass the broad and complex spectrum of masculine behavior, they dominate our American (and, to a lesser extent, Western) media culture to such a great extent that masculinity has become almost synonymous with hypermasculinity. This is problematic, both on a personal and societal scale, because the three aspects of hypermasculinity are also closely correlated with antisocial behavior and incarceration (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984). Hyperfemininity, which goes hand-in-hand with hypermasculinity, is a strong adherence to the traditionally feminine social roles and expectations of a culture (McKelvie & Gold, 1994; Murnen & Byrne, 1994). Hyperfemininity is marked by a preference for traditional masculine behavior in sex partners and a higher tolerance for male sexual aggression and coercion (Maybach & Gold, 1994). The depiction of these extreme gender roles on film serves a self-reinforcing purpose for the hegemonic structures. The paradox is that both hypermasculine and hyperfeminine roles reinforce masculine dominance. Despite American culture's disdain for the real-world outcomes of hypermasculinity, our media, both in entertainment and advertising, have reinforced these hypermasculine tropes as desirable.

[4] We most commonly think of patriarchal, controlling males such as James Stewart's 'Scottie Ferguson' in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1955), a man so pathologically obsessed with control that he forces his newfound lover to dress in his old lover's suit and dye her hair to match. In the end, his compulsive need for control destroys her, but the audience is left with only Scottie's sense of loss. From *Psycho* (1960), in which Norman Bates is so cowed by his "clinging, demanding" mother that he lets "her" take over his body whenever a woman excites him sexually, to *Marnie* (1964), which sees Sean Connery "raping" his catatonic wife played by Tippi Hedren, Hitchcock's brand of misogyny

transcended popular film into art – the misogyny often masked by beautiful imagery and complex emotional upheaval in the characters (Spoto, 1983).<sup>1</sup> Hitchcock was not alone in the misogynistic portrayal of women. Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) sees its female lead showing ambiguous joy at being raped by one of the construction workers working on their house. Further, the film portrays Dustin Hoffman's milquetoast lead as weak and ineffectual until he embraces violence and becomes “more of a man.” Violence, in the world of Peckinpah (and his many contemporaries, including Paul Schrader, John Schlesinger and Don Siegel), is symbolic of manhood. Pacifism is antithetical to the essential nature of man. It is in *Straw Dogs* that Peckinpah introduces an important ancestral character that will resound over the next four decades – the Beta Male Misogynist.

[5] In *Straw Dogs*, Peckinpah uses the protagonist David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman) as a symbol of the snobbery and insecurity of the intellectual male. The moral ambiguity of the film is what makes *Straw Dogs* one of the seminal films of the 1970s. Peckinpah himself saw David as the villain of the piece, hiring his wife's ex-boyfriend as a laborer to put him in his place and, in the third act of the film, eschewing the justice system and protection of his home in favor of revenge and bloodshed. The implicit reason for David's actions is that he feels threatened by the overtly masculine laborers working on his house. They fill the traditional male roles of working with their hands while David has renounced such menial tasks in favor of intellectual pursuits. It is also important to note that David is very much “the other” in this paradigm. He is an intellectual who has moved to a pastoral community. In the culture to which David has relocated, the traditional male is king. They have no use for a theoretical mathematician. This extra level of intellectualism has not made David more progressive. He insists that his wife Amy fulfill the traditional female roles of cooking, cleaning, and satisfying him in the bedroom. Amy counters that he must then fulfill the traditional male role of fixing household appliances. Despite his intellectual superiority, David finds that he cannot master this task, a basic symbol of manhood. When he has trouble confronting the loud and brash laborers after the Sumner's cat is killed and hung in the closet, David is symbolically castrated. In fact, when Amy wants to have sex, David finds himself distracted and unable to satisfy her – perhaps the most basic cultural test of manhood. David's character arc is a “progress” from *hypomascularity* (the absence of traditional male traits) to *hypermasculinity* (the adoption of those traits). In the beginning of the film, he shows a lack of interest in sex, an aversion to violence, and an aversion to conflict - all polar opposites of hypermasculinity. By the end of the film, with his marriage a shambles, the house destroyed, and many of the laborers dead at David's own hands, he exudes a sense of relief and accomplishment. “Jesus, I got 'em all,” he says. The Beta male

has bested the Alpha males at their own game of hypermasculinity and become the new Alpha male. Violence, confrontation, domination – these are the marks of a man, according to Peckinpah, and they are expressed through David's symbolic failures with the toaster and laborers and later success at beating his tormentors to death.

[6] Conversely, David's wife Amy fulfills a complex symbolism of womanhood. From the first image of her, which is nothing more than her nipples poking through a sweater, Amy is calculated to be a submissive sex doll for the men to tussle over. When David upsets her during a fight, she lingers naked in front of the window for her ex-boyfriend to see. At the film's pivotal moment, Amy invites her ex-boyfriend in and offers him a drink. He rips her blouse and strikes her, although Peckinpah creates a moral ambiguity when Amy seems to enjoy the forcefulness and familiarity of the act – especially considering David is unwilling to fulfill his “husbandly duties.” In the final act, it is her ex-boyfriend Charlie whom Amy calls to for help, not David. Peckinpah's film is, in many ways, maddeningly opaque, but the viewer is left with the impression that Amy would prefer her husband were rougher, less effete, and more masculine. As Maybach & Gold (1994) state, hyperfeminine women are marked by an attraction to traditional masculine traits as well as a higher tolerance for sexual aggression and coercion. Amy overtly expresses her desire for David to become more traditionally masculine and tacitly entices her ex-boyfriend's aggressive sexual advances later on. Amy, then, is the personification of hyperfemininity. She is soft, passive, sensitive and deferent to her husband's wishes. Although she forces him to strike a bargain with her in order to fulfill her traditional role of “wife,” the bargain is that David adopts more traditionally masculine traits. The didactic lesson of the film is that, while women may say they prefer the educated, refined man, they secretly wish to be dominated, submissive, and objectified. *Straw Dogs* adds many things to cinematic discourse, chief among them the idea that the Beta male can enter the paradigm of the Alpha male hypermasculinity (confront him on his own turf, as it were) and conquer him. For many filmmakers, this represents a shattering of the paradigm itself. However, because the outsider/Beta male is entering the existing paradigm and merely supplanting the Alpha male (in other words, becoming the Alpha male himself) according to the existing rules, the paradigm is still intact.

[7] Other portrayals of hypermasculinity as a reaction to empowered women are not nearly so complex. One need only look at the character of James Bond to see the trope in action. Bond has become synonymous with violence, womanizing, and thrill-seeking. The same is true of Captain James Kirk from the original *Star Trek* series. The trope reached its zenith with *Die Hard's* John McClane and the scores of imitators spawned by the success of

that film franchise. McClane became the symbol of masculinity for a generation of action-hungry filmgoers. As film blogger Edel Henry describes:

From the moment we are introduced to John McClane his class and masculinity are defining traits of his character and are quickly established as the 'proper' male ideal. Unlike the rich men in suits that pervade his wife's workplace, McClane is the working class cop whose unassuming demeanor and basic vest-and-no-shoes ensemble set him up as the antithesis of the wealth and privilege that surrounds him.

[8] Not only is John McClane the symbol of masculinity, he is a new kind of a masculinity – masculinity coupled with a reaction against the effete snobbery of the intellectual and economic upper class. Gone are the days of heroes in tuxedos sipping dry martinis or even the dapper Madison Avenue fish-out-of-water antihero established by Cary Grant in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). McClane tapped into angst among white, middle-class males who saw the feminism of the late 1970s as domestication of men into lap dog status. *Die Hard* (directed by John McTiernan) tied together the fear of a new feminist world with fears of creeping globalism. McClane, as a middle-class police officer, finds it difficult to communicate with his wife's Japanese boss, her lecherous Rolex-gifting coworker, and even his own wife. An early argument sees John blaming his wife for the breakup of their marriage because she pursued her own career goals. "My job and my title and my salary did nothing to our marriage except change your idea of what it should be," Holly explains at one point, and that sums up the crux of the threat to John McClane's masculinity. Gone were the days when women would focus primarily (and even solely) on raising a family. A new era of female equality of power, upper-class excess and foreign economic and cultural dominance (Holly's boss quips that the Japanese will take over America with tape recorders since Pearl Harbor didn't work out) is the new normal. This "new normal" quickly became a contested space in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the period in which Joss Whedon began to break into the entertainment business. Teen comedies of the eighties, such as *The Goonies* (1985), *The Last American Virgin* (1982), and *Just One of the Guys* (1985) were filled with underdog heroes whose masculine dominance was challenged, usually by a macho jock who went to the same school. The genre was ripe for challenging the hypermasculine order established in fare for older viewers in the films of Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Clint Eastwood. Instead, though, because male writers dominated most films and television shows, the contested space was not about hypermasculinity versus feminism. The contested space was over *which males* got to participate in the hypermasculinist culture. *Porky's* (1982), *Losin' It* (1983), *Risky Business*

(1983), *The Karate Kid* (1984), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Better Off Dead* (1985) and scores of other teen-oriented films saw their heroes desperately trying to achieve one, two, or all three of the aspects of hypermasculinity. Near the end of *The Karate Kid* (Avildsen, 1984), young protagonist Daniel Laruso (who has been assaulted numerous times by the antagonists) tells his trainer, Mr. Miyagi, "I'll never have balance [without beating the Cobra Kai]; not with them, not with Ali, not with me." Daniel quite literally implies that he will not be able to maintain a romantic relationship with his girlfriend unless he is able to dominate physically his opponent, Johnny Lawrence, in an upcoming fight. Daniel Laruso does not defeat Johnny Lawrence so much as he *becomes* Johnny Lawrence, establishing his dominance at karate. After Daniel establishes his dominance, he gets the girl and the acceptance of Johnny Lawrence – but only after Daniel establishes his physical dominance.

### **Semiotics**

[9] Most theorists assert that film is primarily experienced through *scopophilia*, the joy of looking (Braudy & Cohen, 1999). Therefore, it is important to note the actual images on the screen that are giving the audience pleasure. Metz (1991) proposes a "Grande Syntagmatique" to categorize scenes in a narrative structure. However, syntagmatic analysis can prove difficult to apply to every film (Hodge & Tripp, 1986). A paradigmatic analysis allows us to focus on the underlying thematic structures that inform our culture by focusing on the *absence* of a text's aspects (Storey, 1996). In addition, paradigmatic analysis positions the subject; that is, it adopts the position of the subject in order to experience the signs as they relate to the subject (Johnson, 1983). Signs are only able to be interpreted in orientation to the subject that experiences them (Johnson, 1983). It is important to note when discussing subjects that a "subject" does not equate to an "individual. An individual may adopt several subject roles over the course of a lifetime (father, son, brother, worker, student, consumer), so the individual experience may vary while the subject changes only through time and culture (Belsey, 1980). The hypothetical subject is a construct of the social mores from which the subject draws its ideology (Althusser, 1971). A hypothetical iconoclast, for example, may describe him or herself as a free thinker, unencumbered by the social norms of the society in which the thinker resides, but her or his rebellion is defined by those same social norms. Choices, then, are not truly free but limited to a series of compartmentalized roles predetermined by the culture (Althusser, 1971). Often, this takes the form of gender, race, class, and cultural discrimination. Both men and women, then, can also be reduced to signs because they are a

collection of a culture's thoughts (Peirce, Weiss, & Hartshorne 1931). This need not be an actively malevolent discrimination but the creation of a limiting paradigm. As filmmaker Budd Boetticher surmises:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself, the woman has not the slightest importance (Erens, 1990).

[10] In this sense, the love interest is nothing more than a prop or MacGuffin. Compare Boetticher's quote in Erens with Alfred Hitchcock's definition of the MacGuffin: "[The MacGuffin] is what everybody on the screen is looking for – but the audience don't [sic] care," (Spoto, 1983). The woman, then, is often cast as the prize, a reward to be attained when the hero has finished his quest. She is no more or less important than the Maltese Falcon or "Rosebud," and she is no more or less powerful than those inanimate objects. Mulvey (1975) points out that the scopophilic aspect of cinema and the medium's traditional male-dominance creates a "male gaze" through which women exist only as passive objects whose sole purpose is to bear meaning for the hero, not provide it. In this, the viewer's motive, or subjectiveness, then becomes key (Freeland, 2000).

[11] The role of woman-as-object is what Joss Whedon has been reacting to throughout his career. "Because you keep asking me that question," is Whedon's pat answer when (repeatedly) asked why he writes strong female characters (2006). In examining the thematic destruction of hypermasculine hegemony in Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, it is helpful to look at each season as a thematic arc unto itself. In each season, Whedon attacks a specific notion of manhood/masculinity with his narrative that ultimately leaves the "Buffyverse" on a different plane than it started.

### **The Deconstruction of the American Superhero Myth**

[12] Perhaps not surprisingly, it was not a hypermasculine alpha male who established the American superhero. Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were both "nerds" and outcasts as young men. Superman represented an ego ideal for both men, but especially for Siegel. Siegel once explained:

I had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn't know I existed or didn't care I existed. So it occurred to me: What if I was really terrific? What if I had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings or

throwing cars around or something like that?... The heroine, who I figured would be some kind of girl reporter, would think he was some kind of worm; yet she would be crazy about this Superman character who could do all sorts of fabulous things. In fact, she was real wild about him, and a big inside joke was that the fellow she was crazy about was also the fellow whom she loathed (Kroopnik, 2003).

[13] From the beginning, the progenitor of the American Superhero Myth began as a joke on women who had no interest in Jerry Siegel. It would seem, then, that some of Whedon's target audience for *Buffy* was quite skeptical, maybe even hostile, toward the idea of a strong female lead. This fantasy identification continued with many of the major Golden and Silver Age comic book heroes. Steve Rogers was so wafer-thin and weak that he did not qualify for army service, but when science gave him the strength, speed, and agility, he became Captain America. Peter Parker was a bullied "science nerd" until a bite from a radioactive spider turned him into the physically amazing Spider-Man. For young boys (comic books' primary audience) who felt marginalized by a rigidly hegemonic school system that favored hypermasculinity, athletic achievement, and physical beauty above academic skills and creativity, comic book superheroes provided a fictional social identity group that invited the outsiders to belong. Superheroes, by circumstance outsiders themselves, represented the Butterfly Myth – the changing from something ugly or derided to something beautiful and desired – to millions of readers and allowed them to engage in heroic behavior through experience-taking. The result, while empowering many comic book readers on an individual level, reinforces the rigid social strata, cementing the target audience firmly on the side of "hypermasculinity-is-good."

[14] The two-part *Buffy* pilot, "Welcome to the Hellmouth/The Harvest," immediately puts Buffy Summers in the traditional role of reluctant superhero while necessarily reducing all of her male cohorts to sidekicks. "A slayer slays; a watcher (watches)" Rupert Giles and Buffy explain. Whedon leaves the audience no doubt Buffy will assume the mantle of traditional hero and with it the burdens of power and responsibility (Whedon & Smith, 1997). Immediately, the men in her life have trouble adjusting to their roles as subordinates. Superheroes, like screen actors, are ego ideals for the men in the audience (Kaplan, 1983). What happens, then, when an author reduces the male characters to supporting roles? The fantasy of a male's ultimate control, both sexually and over his environment, disappears. Whedon subverts this trope thoroughly: implicitly and explicitly, generally and specifically, in text and in subtext. Male characters are not only expected to assume a subordinate role to Buffy Summers, but Whedon creates key, specific situations in



which certain aspects of masculine behavior are expected from the male characters but cannot be fulfilled due to the male characters' weaknesses.

[15] Xander Harris, Buffy's first male friend in Sunnydale, struggles desperately to fill the traditional male role society has told him he is *supposed* to fill. Traditionally, the audience expects the male character to fulfill an active role while the female remains passive (Mulvey, 1975). Xander strives to fulfill this role prescribed to him by his culture. That Xander is unable to fulfill that role causes him to struggle with his self-perception as a failure through most of the first three seasons. (Editors' note: On Xander and gender, see also Jowett [2005] and Camron [2007].) Particularly in the first season, Whedon uses Xander as both an autobiographical stand-in and subversion of the Nice Guy trope. In their first encounter, Xander sees Buffy as nothing more than a sexual object, and his attempt at forging a romantic connection is awkward and humiliating. He even admonishes himself for his failure to fill the role as irresistible sexual dynamo. "Very suave. Very not pathetic," he sarcastically self-critiques after she hurries away (Whedon & Smith, 1997). While Bruce Wayne routinely carries a supermodel on his arm as casually as he does a Rolex watch; while Tony Stark protects his heart literally with armor and metaphorically with womanizing; while Peter Parker's dalliances with models and highly sexualized antiheroes helped coin the term "Parker luck"; and while James Bond takes the seduction of disposable women to the depths of near-parody, Xander is laughably inept when it comes to the opposite sex. The fourth episode, "Teacher's Pet" opens with a fantasy sequence in which a helpless Buffy is cornered by a vampire in the Bronze (Sunnydale's lone night club). Xander swoops in, saves a thankful, breathless Buffy, and kills the vampire in time to finish his guitar solo. In reality, Xander has nodded off in class, drooling onto his desk (Greenwalt & Green, 1997). Xander-as-Lothario exists, quite literally, only in his dreams. The plot of the episode sees Xander achieving what he thinks is a modicum of success when the new substitute teacher, Miss French, takes an intense and seductive interest in him. The irony, however, is that Miss French is a *kleptes-virgo*, or virgin thief. Her deadly interest in Xander is only due to his lack of experience with women, a fact that is exposed to the Scooby Gang by the end of the episode. Even his best friend Willow, who spent much of the first season pining for Xander, rejects being his "second choice" after Buffy, too, rejects his prom offer. In the first season, Whedon is exposing the "Nice Guy" to be just as clueless – and often just as misogynistic – as the alpha-male jocks from the teen comedies of the 1980s. While Xander's attempts to seduce women go horribly awry, Xander finds himself even more out of his depth in trying to be the traditional hero. Compelled by a sense of duty and helplessness when his friend Jesse is captured by a horde of vampires, Xander tags along with Buffy on an underground

patrol. "I couldn't just sit around doing nothing... Jesse's my bud, okay? If I can help him, then that's what I gotta do" (Whedon & Kretchmer, 1997). As with his struggle to fulfill the role of heartthrob, Xander strains to fulfill the hypermasculine, action-hero role he has been told that he must play even as he finds himself ill-equipped to do so in a new supernatural environment. When confronted by Jesse at the Bronze, Xander can neither fight him nor give him the merciful death the archetypical stoic hero metes out to fallen comrades. Only happenstance – a fleeing victim accidentally knocking Jesse onto Xander's stake – saves Xander from certain doom.

[16] More starkly, we see the traditional superhero figure of Angel feminized in both text and subtext. "Pretty name," Buffy says, assigning his name a more feminine adjective the second time they meet. When asked why he does not take a more active (read: traditional) role in fighting the Master, Angel chuckles, "Because I'm afraid" (Whedon & Kretchmer, 1997). Whedon even remarks in the script notes that Buffy is taken aback by Angel's "unashamed openness" in admitting his fear. Over the course of the first season, Angel evolves into a more active role, but it is *always* in a supporting role to Buffy. Even in the episode "Angel," in which Angel must confront his sire Darla, Buffy is the prime actor. Angel provides intelligence and muscle on occasion but in such a directed way that he is Buffy's tool rather than a traditional superhero. The superhero paradigm established by Batman/Catwoman, Spider-Man/Black Cat, Daredevil/Elektra and countless others is gender-inverted in the very first season of *Buffy*, and it remains so when Angel departs the show and is replaced by Riley Finn and later Spike. Like Xander, Angel does not fit the traditional male superhero role in this series (versus the spin-off series named for him). Nowhere is this more apparent than at a crucial point in the season finale, "Prophecy Girl," in which Buffy has been drowned by the Master and needs CPR. As a vampire himself, Angel does not breathe and cannot perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In the end, Xander must save the day by reviving Buffy while Angel looks on helplessly. Through much of the first two seasons, Whedon toys with the expectations of a viewer who still has a clear image of the nerd defeating the jock and earning the hand of the head cheerleader. We see Xander repeatedly voice insecurities about Angel, but we also see Angel expressing insecurities about Xander. Xander, after all, is someone who could grow old with Buffy. Not coincidentally, the Angel/Xander dynamic repeats in the first season of Whedon's television series *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013 – present) as tech-expert Agent Fitz's insecurities surface when he compares himself to action-oriented Agent Ward.

[17] As Buffy moves away from home and on to college, Whedon folds in new characters to the mix. Riley Finn, a mild-mannered graduate student who also happens to

be a government super soldier, becomes Buffy's new love interest and sidekick. Like Angel and Xander before him, Riley finds it difficult to adjust to life as just a part of the gang. If Angel is Whedon's stand-in for Batman/Bruce Wayne, Riley is Whedon's stand-in for Captain America, right down to the similar origin. In his world, Riley was the leader. He commands a unit of super soldier fraternity brothers who capture demons for experimentation and weaponization. Once he sides with Buffy, though, he finds himself in an unspoken competition with her. He compares his strength, speed, and stamina to hers and finds himself lacking. In essence, Buffy and Riley's relationship is the inverse of the Lois Lane/Clark Kent/Superman triangle. Riley falls for Buffy long before he finds out she is the Slayer. It is the Slayer part of Buffy's personality that keeps Riley at arm's length. Having been abandoned by the men she loved (or at least allowed herself to be vulnerable with) – first her father, then Angel, and finally Parker Abrams – Buffy is reluctant to let herself be fully in love with Riley. Part of this is the fear that, given her enemies, Riley is a weakness that can be exploited. In fact, in the episode “Who Are You?” rogue slayer Faith Lehane rapes Riley by having sex with him while in Buffy's body, a move that exploits Buffy's personal insecurities about her sexual experience as well as her newfound vulnerability to enemies.

### **Faith Lehane: Commutation Test**

[18] Barthes (1968) describes a commutation test as a tool to isolate and identify cultural codes through substitution, transposition, addition, or deletion of certain signs that form that code. Eco (1976) defines a sign as “everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else” (7). In that sense, Faith Lehane's existence in season three is one large commutation test. One could sum up Whedon's unspoken research question thusly: Are aspects of hypermasculinity destructive only in the hands of men? Whedon's answer is decidedly “no,” and his proof is the development (and ultimate self-destruction) of Faith's character over the course of the season. When Faith first arrives in Sunnydale in “Faith, Hope and Trick,” replacing the deceased Kendra from season two, many of the Scoobies welcome her outgoing personality as a contrast to Buffy's relatively stoic approach to slaying. Faith is the embodiment and subversion of hypermasculine traits. “Now the vamps, they better get their asses to defcon one, the two of us around. We're gonna have some fun you and me, Watcher-less and fancy free,” she gleefully tells Buffy, demonstrating the view of life-threatening danger as a form of entertainment rather than an unavoidable aspect of the job (Greenwalt & Contner, 1998). After slaying a vamp in the alley, Faith asks

Buffy "Isn't it crazy how slaying just always makes you hungry and horny?" (Greenwalt & Contner, 1998). In this instance, Faith is not associating violence with 'manliness,' but she is incorporating the violence into her sexual identity, something she will take to extremes with both Xander and Angel later in the season. After Xander loses his virginity to her, he assumes that they have a connection. However, Buffy explains, "She doesn't take the guys she... 'has a connection with' very seriously. They're kind of a big joke with her" (Noxon & Gershman, 1999). The callous attitude toward sex completes Faith's embodiment of hypermasculine tropes and makes her the perfect commutation test for Whedon's theory. As Faith's behavior becomes more antisocial (stemming almost entirely from a combination of the hypermasculine tropes), she begins to alienate herself from the more feminized Scooby gang. In many ways, the struggle Faith Lehane has with feminism is similar to John McClane's. She is unable to deal with the new world in which her gender-role expectations and social values make her the minority. By the end of the season, she aligns with the patriarchal Mayor who not only does not judge her behavior, he endorses it.

### **Geek Culture: The Last Frontier of Misogyny**

[19] Like David Sumner, the villains of season six, Warren, Jonathan and Andrew, see themselves as victims whose actions are justified because fortune took away the women and fame that life owed them. These are the epitome of the Beta Male Misogynists who believe they are Nietzschean supermen to whom the laws and rules do not apply. Instead of transcending morality, though, they use a combination of their own intellectual superiority and a sense that life was not fair to them to justify their actions. Their initial actions are benign, play-acting as supervillains in their basement lair. Buffy and the Scooby gang are more irritated than afraid of them. In season four's "Superstar," Jonathan shows initial signs of grandiose behavior, robbing his friends of their free will in order to make himself the center of the universe. It appears that he does not use his reality-bending power for an overtly malevolent purpose, though. It is not until "Dead Things," in which Warren tries to use his technology to force his ex-girlfriend Katrina to have sex with him and later kills her in a panic that Warren escalates to true villain. The members of the Trio (the adopted name of the villains) are shocked to hear Katrina accusing them of rape when they tried to have sex with her against her will. All three of them, but Warren in particular, view women as a means to an end – sexual playthings, status symbols, or intransigent "bitches" if they refuse to cooperate. Denmark and Paludi (1993) apply Freud's Madonna/Whore complex to social and cultural constructs that inform the sexual politics at play here. The members of the Trio

dehumanize women by deriding women who do not conform to their ideals and canonizing the women who do conform to their sexual ideals. The weak, picked-on beta male is one of the few remaining areas of society where misogyny is accepted and encouraged. Part of the reason seems to be the very excuses Warren and his cohorts cite. Life is unfair to those without the charisma, strength, or presence to make an impression. They are bullied and alienated, which society rightly tells them is wrong, so when they do have the power, they feel all actions are justified. Season six is Whedon and showrunner Marti Noxon's rhetorical response to giving the Beta Male Misogynist a pass for their behavior.

### **Empowerment**

[20] In the seventh and final season of *Buffy*, Whedon tackles what he views as the root of misogyny – organized religion. An avowed atheist, Whedon uses the show's final season to critique the way false prophets like Caleb perpetuate their own misogyny. "You were born dirty. Born without a soul, born with that gaping maw that wants to open up and suck out a man's marrow. Makes me puke to think too hard on it," he says of women in "Dirty Girls" (Goddard & Gershman, 2003). Like Warren, Caleb justifies his actions by painting himself as the good guy:

I know what you're thinking: "Crazy Preacher Man, spoutin' off about the Whore of Babylon" or some such. That ain't me. I'm not here to lecture you. What's the point? My words just curdle in your ears, you don't take in a thing. So much filth inside your head, ain't no room for the words of truth. (Goddard & Gershman, 2003)

[21] Throughout the seventh season, Caleb reiterates his hatred for women, something that puts him at odds with everything Buffy (and, by proxy, Whedon) stands for. Caleb is enacting a plan by the First Evil to eliminate all of the potential Slayers. In what is likely Whedon's least veiled metaphor, Buffy slices Caleb in two, starting at the crotch. With the First's enforcer dispatched, Buffy, Willow and Faith use their combined strength to empower all potential Slayers (read: young women):

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. [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?" (Whedon 2003)

[22] Through *Buffy*, Whedon is commenting on the power of the portrayal of strong female characters in media to overturn the damage done by generations of hyperfeminine portrayals. The series finale of *Buffy* is Whedon reminding us that public pedagogy and experience-taking work both ways and that efforts to show empowered women in fiction will result in empowered women in reality.

[23] While *Buffy* may be Whedon's most complete feminist work, it is hardly his final word on the subject. Whedon continued to use fiction as a commentary on real-life feminist issues in *Dollhouse*. The series finds Eliza Dushku, who as Faith portrayed the perils of hypermasculinity in *Buffy*, as Echo of the *Dollhouse*, a woman who becomes a fantasy figure (or Active) for a cryptic corporate group called the Rossum Corporation. The Actives are the epitome of the disempowered, allowing their bodies to be imprinted with foreign personalities by the corporation. As in *Buffy*, most of the antagonists early in *Dollhouse* are those who exhibit aspects of hypermasculinity. Echo's first client uses her for sex and shows her off to his friends before returning her to the *Dollhouse*. Echo's second client finds a thrill in hunting Echo for sport. Echo, however, creates problems for Rossum when she retains fragments of her previous personae. Echo's empowerment becomes her ability to retain a piece of herself rather than having it created by Rossum – a metaphorical stand-in for all of the hegemonic forces that prescribe roles for us to play. It is here where we get our first taste of the apocalypse. In *Buffy*, Buffy Summers was constantly averting the apocalypse through her strength and confidence. In the *Dollhouse* finale, we see a world that has collapsed because it lacked empowered individuals. At the end of the series, Echo, who is now fully restored to power and sanity, restores order to the world by giving everyone their personalities back and destroying the device that took them.

[24] While *Buffy* and *Dollhouse* show Whedon's tendency to go for bittersweet-but-satisfying resolutions when women find empowerment, Whedon can provide downbeat endings when that empowerment fails. In *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008), Penny dies when Captain Hammer causes Dr. Horrible's death ray to malfunction. Penny is Whedon's least empowered major female character. (Editors' note: On Penny, see Buckman.) She exists, like so many 1980s love interests, to be fought over. She dates Captain Hammer

because everyone thinks he is amazing (even though she thinks he's just "pretty okay"). She supports Billy/Dr. Horrible and feels genuine affection for him, but she does not act on it. Unlike so many Whedon characters, Penny is a "Mary Sue," a character who lacks complexity and depth and is idealized to such an extent as to be dehumanized. This is by design. Penny's fate is a clear and direct message: Women cannot exist solely as objects to be fought over by men. Women are complex human beings with flaws and feelings, not ideal objects to be obtained.

[25] The downbeat endings continue in *The Cabin in the Woods* (Goddard, 2012), produced and co-written by Whedon. The film plays with many horror tropes, including the division of people into compartmentalized roles – the Athlete, the Fool, the Whore, the Scholar, and the Virgin. As in *Dollhouse*, the characters are made to assume specific roles by a cryptic group of puppetmasters. While each character begins with individual traits and depth, a combination of drugs and manipulation turns them into one-dimensional dolls for the amusement of the Elder Gods. "We're not the only ones watching, kid," Hadley tells the new security guard in a meta-textual moment. Of course, the horror audience, with our expectations of drugs, nudity, and one-dimensional characters to be dispatched in a precise order, are the Elder Gods. (Editors' note: See the *Slayage* special issue on *The Cabin in the Woods*, published earlier this year.) If we do not like what we see, we change the channel or leave the theater, destroying the fictionalized world. In *Cabin*, the world refuses to change. The individual characters, the Fool and the Virgin, survive, and their survival upsets the natural order in which people lack individuality or power to make their own decisions. "Then it's fixed," Truman the guard admonishes the puppetmasters. Sitterson, one of the puppetmasters, replies:

No, they have to make the choice of their own free will. Otherwise the system doesn't work. Just like the Harbinger. He's this creepy old fuck, practically wears a sign saying "You will die." Why do we put him there? The system. They have to choose to ignore him and they have to choose what happens in the cellar. Yeah, we rig the game as much as we need to, but in the end, . . . [they'll] transgress.

[26] It is this Morton's Fork of 'choices' that Whedon rails against throughout his work. Choosing between the Madonna and the Whore is not a real choice. Choosing between the evil person who wants to possess you and the superhero who wants to possess you is not a real choice. Accepting these roles is destructive to women, but it is also destructive to the hypermasculine male. In response to why he writes strong female characters, Whedon

responds, “[Equality is] not something we should be striving for. It’s a *necessity*. Equality is like gravity, we need it to stand on this earth as men and women...” (Whedon, 2006). Empowerment means being able to make real choices, not pick the least objectionable option given to you, and certainly not to be a trophy controlled by the choices of *other* people, Whedon is telling us. Any world that does not allow for true empowerment deserves an apocalypse.

### Notes

1. When Connery forcibly beds Hedren in *Marnie*, the act was not what would have been considered rape in the legal sense at the time, since a wife gave consent at the point of marriage and could not legally retract this consent (Russell, 1990).

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